

## MORAL CERTAINTY IN TOLSTOY

## I

ONE OF THE utilitarian functions of literature is to enlarge the domain of our experience. Actual episodes, played out in “real time,” with all the preparation, uncertainty, movement, waiting, adjustment and fatigue that they involve, are massive entries in the book of a life, and the number any of us can undergo (or afford to undergo) is limited. With a novel, however, we can race through from inception to denouement, with all the appropriate emotions, in an evening—in the case of Tolstoy a rather long evening, say in St. Petersburg at midsummer when it might stretch into the following day. What happens in the novel might have happened to us (as Aristotle says of poetry, it describes a kind of thing that might happen), but, fortunately or unfortunately for us, it didn’t.

In this use literature exploits the function of language that I call “theory construction,” the other main exponent of which is science. Scientific theories enable us to simulate and test physical or sometimes social objects and events, changing the variables and doing other “thought experiments” so as to anticipate and avoid (or more efficiently seek) the consequences of real actions. If in theory the bridge collapses then in practice we’d better not build it until the design has been modified. Literature has these capacities too, but with some differences. In the scientific case the ideal is to have laws that are experimentally confirmed, perhaps in the laboratory, and to base explanations and predictions upon them, but the laws of complex human behavior are not easy to establish, in or out of laboratories (whatever form these might be thought of as taking), and in any case the literary interest of making fictional actions conform to them exactly would be minimal.

Also scientific explanation characteristically deals with only one aspect of the phenomenon under study, abstracting it from all the rest, whereas literary representation renders phenomena with some degree of fullness.

Nevertheless it is worth remembering that these differences of degree do not prevent us from thinking of literature and science as belonging on the same continuum, widely separated as they may be, as exercising similar powers of the imagination and as sparing us in comparable ways the risk of tentative and uncertain action in the real world. A special case of the kind of vicarious experience literature, and especially fiction, offers is the confrontation of moral difficulties. There but for the grace of God, we think, as awful temptations or perplexities or responsibilities overwhelm the characters. What would we have done? What ought they to have done? What ought one to do?

“What ought I to do?” was one of the four questions that Kant thought philosophically fundamental. It was also the one to which he offered a categorical answer, although not a particularly helpful answer. In fact it seems odd to ask the question out of context, as though there were a sort of floating state of obligation accompanying the “I think” in all its manifestations (to adapt a formula from another Kantian text), independently of the practical conditions in which it may find itself. Yet just such an uneasy sense of non-specific moral requirement is a familiar ingredient of modern life, especially in the Christian West. Pietists like Kant have been especially liable to it. Tolstoy is another obvious case. In this article I want to look at the problem of moral perplexity in the three major novels, *War and Peace*, *Anna Karenina*, and *Resurrection*, and to consider Tolstoy’s solution to it as an exercise in a theory of literature as (among other things) a source of vicarious moral experience.

In each of these novels there is one leading character—Pierre Bezuhov, Levin, and Nekhlyudov respectively—who bears an obvious relation to the novelist himself. Their trademark is on the one hand a kind of perplexed serenity, a state of calm surprise, sometimes bewildered, sometimes amused, at the oddity or outrage of the ways of the world—and on the other a periodical and progressive experience of moral certainty, which comes to them from circumstances to be sure but with the mark of revelation. My main purpose here is not to insist on the question of Tolstoy’s own moral experience (of which he has given, in *Confession*, an account up to the crisis that followed the completion of *Anna Karenina*); it is rather to invite the participation of

the reader as the (temporary) embodiment of Tolstoy's characters and the animator of their moral reflection.

I have suggested elsewhere that subjectivity as the animation of structure borrows the latter where it can, finding in literature the richest deposits of what I call the "signiferous."<sup>1</sup> I want to suggest here that in the case of the greatest literature this borrowing can generate experiences no different in kind, and frequently close in degree, to those the subject finds in its own world, especially when those experiences are moral ones. If this is the case, then an obvious next question is what moral theory best throws explanatory light on the experiences. An obvious further question is whether that theory is in fact the one the author meant to exemplify, assuming (as is manifestly the case with Tolstoy) that he or she actually held such a theory. And an obvious subsequent question is whether either theory is a theory worth holding.

It is tempting in the case of Tolstoy to begin with the last question, since he was so openly and persistently theoretical in and out of his novels. I shall resist this temptation but at the same time take the opportunity it offers to acknowledge Isaiah Berlin's well-known characterization of Tolstoy as theoretician, although of history rather than of morality, in "The Hedgehog and the Fox."<sup>2</sup> Berlin as everyone knows takes the text of Archilocus, "the fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing," as the starting-point of a brilliant essay on types of authors, the foxes (like Shakespeare, Molière, Balzac, etc.) representing scope and variety, a lively interest in many kinds of things and people, and the hedgehogs (like Dante, Ibsen, Proust, etc.) representing depth and unity, a single-minded concentration on a limited object, whether a type of character, a society, or an epoch. He introduces this classification at the beginning of an essay on Tolstoy in order to make the point that Tolstoy will not fit into it; he was, Berlin says, a fox who wanted to be a hedgehog. My own view is that Tolstoy was as good a hedgehog as any of them, but I will qualify it with an aphoristic claim that I hope to make plausible by the end of this article: Foxes make the best hedgehogs.

## II

The moral dilemmas that confront Tolstoy's characters, as far as the action of the novels is concerned, are of two main kinds, social and sexual. There are problematic relations between the nobility and the peasants (and in *War and Peace* also between officers and soldiers, as

well as between Russia and Napoleon, although I shall not be much concerned with these) and between men and women. The only *interesting* case of the latter occurs in *Resurrection*, where Nekhlyudov confronts his responsibility to the fallen Maslova. The reason for the comparative lack of moral interest in this most notorious of moral domains is just that the issues are so clear, so that the good characters, the ones who are rewarded with certainty in the end—Prince Andrei, Pierre, Levin—are never in doubt about them and behave like gentlemen from the start. But in addition to these outward dilemmas there are also inward ones, involving problematic relations between the self and God, as well as, reflexively, between the self and itself. The resolution of the dilemmas consists in the establishment of some sort of conscious harmony between the conflicting partners in these relationships. The three protagonists with whom I shall mainly be concerned are all at some point ill at ease with themselves, and they all worry about this. It seems reasonable therefore to begin with the last, or reflexive, case.

It is to be noted that without it the other problems would not arise; there are characters who manage not to feel it—Napoleon, military people in general, Kuragin, Rostopchin, Vronsky, Maslova—and although with the exception of Maslova, more sinned against than sinning, they are a bad lot; they seem at least to be relatively untroubled. Such are the rewards of self-deception. These cases are instructive because they show the underside of the solution and because Tolstoy allows himself in some of them to make judgments in the light of conventional moral theories.

Thus Kuragin and Vronsky are immoral on consequentialist grounds, as having no scruples: Kuragin “was always very well satisfied with his position, with himself and with the rest of the world. He was instinctively and thoroughly convinced that he could not possibly live otherwise than in the way he did live, and that he had never in his life done anything evil. He was incapable of considering how his behavior might affect others, or what the consequences of this or that action of his might be,”<sup>3</sup> and “Vronsky saw nothing and no one. He felt like a king, not because he believed that he had made an impression on Anna—he did not believe that yet—but because the impression she had made on him filled him with happiness and pride. What would come of it all he did not know and did not even consider. He felt that all his powers, hitherto dissipated and wasted, were now concentrated and bent with fearful energy on a single blissful goal. And this made him happy.”<sup>4</sup> Napoleon is immoral on deontological grounds, as having no prin-

ciples: "It was plain that it had long been Napoleon's conviction that no possibility existed of his making a mistake, and that, according to his understanding of things, whatever he did was right, not because it harmonized with any preconceived notion of right or wrong but because it was *he* who did it" (WP, p. 740). Rostopchin comforts himself physically in a bad sense, although as we shall shortly see it is also possible to do this in a good sense. As governor of Moscow, he has allowed the mob to assassinate a political prisoner released on Napoleon's approach to the city; "Lightly swayed on the easy springs of the carriage and no longer hearing the terrible sounds of the crowd, Rostopchin grew calmer physically and, as always happens, simultaneously with physical relief his reason suggested arguments to salve his conscience" (pp. 1057–58). The case of Maslova is trickier and I shall come back to it.

The moral situation of the army as an institution is *sui generis* and may be dealt with, as a topical parenthesis, at once. I allude here not to Tolstoy's anti-militarism, his characterization of war as murder, but to the constitutive moral harmony of the military life, as exemplified in the character of Nikolai Rostov, one of the least troubled members of the cast of *War and Peace*. Not only does Rostov find a second home in his regiment: "After reporting himself to his colonel and being reassigned to his former squadron . . . Rostov experienced the same sense of peace, of moral support, and the same sense of being at home and in his right corner as he felt under the paternal roof. Here was none of that turmoil of the world at large in which he found himself out of his element and made mistakes in exercising his free will" (WP, pp. 462–63), but the class of officers enjoys a systematic sense of righteousness:

. . . our moral nature is such that we are unable to be idle and at peace. A secret voice warns that for us idleness is a sin. If it were possible for a man to discover a mode of existence in which he could feel that, though idle, he was of use to the world and fulfilling his duty, he would have attained to one facet of primeval bliss. And such a state of obligatory and unimpeachable idleness is enjoyed by a whole section of society—the military class. It is just this compulsory and irreproachable idleness which has always constituted, and will constitute, the chief attraction of military service. (p. 574)

In both cases this harmony is purchased at the expense of a divorce from the reality of moral life in society at large, but this divorce itself is a real fact of society and seems to me to be as salient now, in the Pentagon for example, as it was in Tolstoy's day. It is something any

move towards disarmament has to reckon with, and may be far more intractable than nuclear war itself, to whose likelihood however it probably makes the greatest single contribution.

Having got the villains out of the way, let me turn to the heroes. I begin with what may be called the non-moral strategies for dealing with uneasiness of the self. There are four of these, respectively work, love, hardship, and philosophical modesty. One of the most celebrated descriptive passages in *Anna Karenina* is the scene of the mowing of the great meadow. Levin has been arguing with his brother, Koznyshev, and has felt more bewildered than usual; he needs air and exercise, and joins the peasants for a day's mowing. On his return Koznyshev tries to resume the conversation: "Yes, of course. But what does it matter? I don't insist on my view,' answered Levin, with a guilty, childlike smile. 'Whatever was I disputing about?' he wondered. 'Of course, I'm right, and he's right, and everything's excellent. Only I must go round to the office and see to things.' He stood up, stretching and smiling" (AK, p. 279). Sometimes, therefore, the problem is just dissolved; under the right circumstances, healthy fatigue can be as effective as enlightenment. So can bliss, as in the case of Pierre when he realizes that he is in love with Natasha, even though she is in disgrace and he is married: "his image of her instantly lifted him into another world, a serene realm of spiritual activity, where there could be neither right nor wrong—a realm of beauty and love which it was worth living for" (WP, pp. 787–88). This situation will not be resolved without suffering, and Pierre suffers, as a prisoner of the French—and paradoxically is rewarded with a form of liberation hitherto unknown to him: "All Pierre's dreams were now centered on the time when he would be free; though afterwards, and to the end of his days, he thought and spoke with enthusiasm of that month of captivity, of those irrecoverable, intense, joyful sensations, and above all, of the perfect spiritual peace, the complete inner freedom, which he experienced only during that period of his life" (WP, p. 1199). Finally Levin, on his way to enlightenment but before he actually gets there, finds his burden lifted when he stops chafing under it: "When Levin puzzled over what he was and what he was living for, he could find no answer and fell into despair. . . . But when he did not think, but just lived, he never ceased to be aware of the presence in his soul of an infallible judge who decided which of two possible courses of action was the better and which the worse . . ." (AK, p. 826).

All this however is therapy, not moral certainty. Moral certainty is the positive mark of a special variety of experience (the echo of William

James is not inappropriate in this context) that comes almost as a form of grace to the principal characters at the end of their troubled adventures. It too has its counterfeits, which ought perhaps to have bothered Tolstoy more than they did. In the case of Rostopchin, cited above, the harmony he achieves is transparently a matter of rationalization and so does not count, but it would seem on the face of it hard to know in what might look like authentic experiences that some such rationalization had not taken place. Maslova is a case in point; as Nekhlyudov becomes re-acquainted with her, "what surprised him most was that she showed no sign of shame, except of being a convict—she was ashamed of that, but not of being a prostitute. On the contrary, she seemed rather pleased, almost proud of it. And yet, how could it be otherwise? Nobody can wholeheartedly do anything unless he believes that his activity is important and good."<sup>5</sup> However, a couple of tests of the genuine article do emerge from a comparison of its prime exemplars: on the one hand it has to be clear and unambiguous, on the other it has to be selfless.

The first test is almost Cartesian, and for example Anna and Natasha, both of whom have powerful experiences of some sort of certainty, fail it. Natasha, falling under the fatal spell of the unscrupulous Kuragin, is sure of two contradictory propositions: "She loved Prince Andrei—she remembered distinctly how deeply she loved him. But she loved Anatole too: of that there was no doubt. . . . 'What am I to do if I love him and the other too?' she asked herself, and was unable to find an answer to those terrible questions" (WP, p. 679). Here the clarity is right but the outcome is neither moral nor unambiguously certain. Anna, doomed but redeemable (if only by death), tries to be certain as she leaves Moscow in the train, pursued, unknown to her, by the equally unscrupulous Vronsky; she manages to feel joy, but what moral certainty she does achieve goes, for her, in the wrong direction. While reading an English novel, and wishing she could do what the characters in it are doing, she suddenly has a feeling of shame:

There was nothing to be ashamed of. She ran through the recollections of her visit to Moscow. They were all good and pleasant. She recalled the ball and Vronsky and the look of slavish adoration in his eyes, recalled what had passed between them: there was nothing to be ashamed of. But just as she got to this point in her recollections the feeling of shame was intensified and some inner voice, when she was thinking about Vronsky, seemed to say to her "Warm, very warm, hot!" (pp. 115–16)

Tolstoy's description of Anna's feelings after she and Vronsky have slept together for the first time is an extraordinary evocation of emotional stress. Of course Tolstoy himself would not dream of being even as explicit as this, nor does he need such explicitness in order to convey the fact powerfully enough; the way he actually does this is to say: "That which for nearly a year had been the one absorbing desire of Vronsky's life, supplanting all his former desires; that which for Anna had been an impossible, terrible, but all the more bewitching dream of bliss, had come to pass" (p. 165). Anna's reaction to her adultery is violent and intense but hardly lucid, and Tolstoy's use of strongly positive terms (her "sense of . . . rapture," her not wishing to "profane this feeling") underlines the tormented ambiguity of such moments: "She felt that at that moment she could not put into words her sense of shame, rapture, and horror at this stepping into a new life, and she did not want to talk about it and profane this feeling by inappropriate words. But later on, the next day and the next, she still not only found no words to express the complexity of her feelings but could not even find thoughts with which to reflect on all that was in her soul" (p. 166). In that last sentence clarity has disappeared altogether.

The other sort of false certainty is given away by its admixture of self-regard. Vronsky has it, twice, once with Kitty and once with Anna; both are obvious cases of self-satisfaction. His reaction to Anna has already been cited; Kitty had had a similar although less passionate effect earlier: "He could not believe that what gave such great and enjoyable pleasure to himself, and above all to her, could be wrong" (p. 71). Even Nekhlyudov, who is destined for authentic enlightenment at the end of *Resurrection*, has his moments of sentimentality early in the novel. (The best definition of sentimentality I know is due to Stuart Hampshire: "the man whose regret or despair is a sentimental regret, or a sentimental despair, is the man who thinks of his own state of mind, however disagreeable in itself, as a praiseworthy or agreeable fact about himself."<sup>6</sup>) So Tolstoy paints Nekhlyudov in black as well as white:

He felt himself one with [God], and therefore he was conscious not only of the freedom, the courage and joy of life, but of all the power of righteousness. All, all the best a man could do, he now felt himself capable of doing.

His eyes filled with tears as he was saying all this to himself, good and bad tears: good because they were tears of joy at the awakening of the spiritual being within him, the being that had slumbered all these years; and bad tears of tender emotion at his own goodness. (R, p. 142)

And again: "Nekhlyudov's first sensation when he awoke the next morning was that something had happened to him, and even before he recalled what it was that had happened to him he knew that something important and good had happened. . . . This idea, that, on moral grounds, he was ready to sacrifice everything and marry her made him feel very warm and tender towards himself that morning" (R, pp. 158–59).

### III

What now of positive moral certainty—the real thing? It undergoes an interesting development through the three novels: embryonic in *War and Peace*, full and independent in *Anna Karenina*, openly religious at the end of *Resurrection*. Relatively early in *War and Peace* there are two remarkable cases of something like moral certainty, one practical, one mystical. The first is the experience of Pierre Bezuhov as he contemplates marriage: ". . . at that moment Pierre was conscious that Helene not only could but must become his wife, and that it must be so. He was aware of this at that moment as surely as if he were standing at the altar with her. How and when it would be, he could not tell. He did not even know if it would be a good thing (indeed, he had a feeling that for some reason it would not), but he knew it was to be" (WP, p. 237).

The second case in *War and Peace* is that of Prince Andrei at Austerlitz, on the verge of a death he escapes there only to meet it at Borodino; as he lies in delirium Napoleon himself passes by: "Gazing into Napoleon's eyes, Prince Andrei mused on the unimportance of greatness, the unimportance of life which no one could understand, and the still greater unimportance of death, the meaning of which no one alive could understand or explain. . . . 'Nothing, nothing is certain, except the unimportance of everything within my comprehension and the grandeur of something incomprehensible but all-important'" (pp. 340–41). It is true that Prince Andrei is light-headed, and Tolstoy uses the episode to belittle Napoleon, as he likes to do, but the intrusion of something transcendent in the experience is, as we shall see later, only the making explicit of something implicit in most of the other cases. Pierre on the other hand seems in the passage cited merely to be clairvoyant, in which case the certainty is a function of something in his character rather than in the experience as such. But here again there is implicit in other cases a hint of the elect status of those to whom certainty is vouchsafed. At the end of the novel he too is in touch with

the transcendent, indeed with the Kingdom of God: “The awful question that had shattered all his mental edifices in the past—the question *Why?*—no longer existed for him. To that question *Why?* he now had always ready in his soul the simple answer: *Because God is*—the God without whose will not one hair falls from a man’s head” (WP, pp. 1308–09). And, according to the promise, other and more mundane things are added unto him:

In practical affairs Pierre now suddenly felt within himself a centre of gravity he had previously lacked. Hitherto, every question concerning money . . . had reduced him to a helpless state of worry and perplexity. . . . Now he found to his amazement that he was no longer troubled with misgivings and hesitation. Now there was a judge within him, settling, by some laws of which he himself was unaware, what should or should not be done. He was just as unconcerned about money matters as before, but now he knew infallibly what he ought and what he ought not to do. (p. 1312)

It is in *Anna Karenina* that the fullest and most unmixed case of moral certainty occurs, naturally enough to Levin, whose name, as has often been pointed out, is closest to Tolstoy’s own. It arises partly out of a disillusion with argument, whose futility is brought home to him in a preparatory passage by the intuitive Kitty: “Levin had often noticed in discussions between the most intelligent people that after enormous efforts, and endless logical subtleties and talk, the disputants finally became aware that what they had been at such pains to prove to one another had long ago, from the beginning of the argument, been known to both, but that they liked different things, and would not define what they liked for fear of its being attacked” (AK, p. 421). When he tries to say this, Kitty understands at once: “I see: you have to find out what your adversary is arguing for, what is precious to him, then you can. . . .’ She had completely caught and found the right words for his badly expressed idea.” But the central experience occurs after a conversation with the peasant Fiodr.

One of Tolstoy’s deepest convictions (and a constitutive part of his equipment as a hedgehog) is that peasants are closer to the truth than intellectuals, whose efforts to find it are represented as so much overlooking of the obvious. The obvious is overlooked because of acquired habits of *rational* inquiry, which wants everything to be accounted for in terms of cause and effect, whereas this is precisely

what, for the moral life, cannot be done. The realization of this is in fact what constitutes Levin's enlightenment:

"Fiodr says that Kirilov lives for his belly. That is intelligible and rational. All of us as rational beings can't do anything else than live for our bellies. And all of a sudden this same Fiodr declares that it is wrong to live for one's belly; We must live for truth, for God, and a hint is enough to make me understand what he means! . . .

"If goodness has a cause, it is no longer goodness; if it has consequences—a reward—it is not goodness either. So goodness is outside the chain of cause and effect.

"It is just this I know, and that we all know. . . .

"Can I have found the solution to everything? Are my sufferings really at an end?" thought Levin, striding along the dusty road, oblivious to heat and fatigue, filled with a feeling of relief after his long travail. The sensation was so joyous that it seemed almost incredible. (AK, p. 830)

This sense of incredulity at its all being, in the end, so simple, is reproduced almost exactly in the case of Nekhlyudov in the closing pages of *Resurrection*. Here the agency of enlightenment is not a peasant but the Gospel according to St. Matthew, found in the New Testament that has been given to Nekhlyudov by an evangelical Englishman. "Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child," says Jesus, "the same is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." And then, in the parable of the ungrateful servant: "Then his lord, after that he had called him, said unto him, O thou wicked servant, I forgave thee all that debt, because thou desiredst me: shouldst not thou also have had compassion on thy fellow-servant, even as I had pity on thee? 'And can that be the whole answer?' Nekhlyudov suddenly exclaimed aloud. And the inner voice of his whole being said, 'Yes, that is all'" (R, p. 564). Such enlightenment by Scripture is however anomalous for Tolstoy, for reasons I shall suggest at the end. And Nekhlyudov has already experienced the standard Tolstoyan *satori* in which the turning from self to others produces certainty and joy:

Everything was simple now because he was not thinking of what would be the result for himself—he was not even interested in that—but only of what he ought to do. And, strange to say, he had no idea what to do for his own needs, but knew beyond any doubt what he had to do for others. He knew beyond all doubt now that the peasants must have the land because to keep it would be wrong. He knew beyond all doubt that he

must never abandon Katusha but try to help her as best he could, in order to expiate his guilt towards her. He knew beyond all doubt that he must study, examine, elucidate to himself and comprehend the whole system of trial and punishment, in which he was conscious of seeing something that nobody else saw. What the result would be of all this he did not know, but he knew for certain that this, that and the other he had to do. And this firm conviction gave him joy. (R, p. 296)

Before going on, in conclusion, to a consideration of how all this ties in with moral theory, a couple of interesting indications in *Resurrection* should be noted. One of them concerns a stage in Nekhlyudov's enlightenment that involves certainty all right, but not at all of the bright and reassuring kind vouchsafed to Levin, for example. It is on just one of those night-long summer evenings in St. Petersburg to which I alluded at the beginning of this article, and Nekhlyudov has become depressingly convinced of the corruption of the Russian penal system and indeed of Russian society in general: "And just as on this northern summer night no soothing restful darkness hung over the land, but only a dismal dreary unnatural light coming from an invisible source, so there was no longer the comfortable darkness of ignorance in Nekhlyudov's soul. . . . Although the light itself seemed dim, cheerless and unnatural, he could not help seeing what that light revealed, and he felt at one and the same time both happy and disturbed" (R, pp. 391–92). Moral certainty is not such an unmixed blessing after all; it involves the discomfort of the reluctant knower, who might exclaim with Eliot in "Gerontion": "after such knowledge, what forgiveness?"

The other indication I find even more interesting. As we have seen, *Resurrection* is the most overtly religious of Tolstoy's major works—or perhaps I should say the most overtly Christian. But in it there appear two revolutionaries, and peasants (or "men of the people") at that, representing therefore for Tolstoy at that epoch a combination of virtues, Russian on the one hand and political on the other, that would be hard to beat. They embody moral certainties of their own, not however conferred by any epiphany but deriving in the one case from folk wisdom and in the other from radical philosophy. And one is indifferent to religion, the other hostile to it. Of the first, Nabatov, Tolstoy says:

He was not interested in the question of how the world came into being, just because he was constantly occupied by the question of how best to live in this world. Nor did he ever think of the future life, having

inherited from his ancestors the firm and calm belief, common to all who till the soil, that just as in the animal and vegetable kingdoms nothing ceases to exist but is continually being transformed from one thing into another . . . so man does not perish either but only undergoes a change. (R, p. 504)

And of the second, Kondratyev, he says:

His views on religion were as negative as his views on the existing order of things. Realizing the absurdity of the faith in which he had been brought up, and having with difficulty freed himself from it—knowing terror in the process, and then rapture—as if in retribution for the deception which had been practiced on his forefathers and himself, he never tired of pouring venomous and embittered ridicule on priests and religious dogmas. . . . He was now poring over the first volume of Marx, which he carried about in his sack with the greatest care, like some priceless treasure. (R, p. 506)

That Marx should show up as a “priceless treasure” at the end of this most Christian of novels, along with a peasant who believes in the continuity of life but has no need of the hypothesis of God, seems to me to deserve serious notice in any attempt to understand what Tolstoy’s mature beliefs consisted in.

#### IV

These last cases bring us up against the question: where in fact does Tolstoy stand in all this? What moral theory did he have in mind in creating this assortment of vivid characters with their diversity of experience, their ultimate unity of conviction? What moral theory best fits all from our own perspective?

To begin with, of course, Tolstoy himself would not have been happy with the idea of moral *theory* at all. It was a feature of his theory *about* morality that theoretical views are not useful in the moral life. A great part of his message, indeed, is that our attempts to theorize get in the way of moral certainty, that we have really known all along what is right and wrong, what we ought to do, and that the struggles of thought with moral questions are fundamentally misguided. We have already encountered Levin’s cheerful disillusionment with reason in *Anna Karenina*. It is followed by a remarkable passage in which Levin’s children have been experimenting with the manufacture of raspberry jam, in cups

held over candles; they do not see that this may destroy the cups, which are parts of the furniture of their daily existence that they take for granted—their play is innocent enough but it puts at risk a fabric of life that has been established from time immemorial, simply for the sake of trying to do things in a new way. “Don’t we—didn’t I?—do just the same, searching by the aid of reason to discover the significance of the forces of nature and the purpose of human life?” asks Levin. “. . . And don’t all the theories of philosophy do the same, trying by the path of thought, which is strange and not natural to man, to bring him to a knowledge of what he has known long ago, and knows so surely that without it he could not live?” (AK, p. 832).

The theme of time immemorial comes up explicitly in *Confession*: “The concepts of an infinite God, moral good and evil, the immortality of the soul, and a relation between God and the affairs of man are ones that have been worked out historically through the life of a humanity that is hidden from our eyes. They are concepts without which there would be no life, without which I myself could not live, and yet, by putting aside all the labor of humankind, I wanted to do it all over again by myself and in my own way.”<sup>7</sup> What corresponds in this passage to the cups in the raspberry jam story is the set of regulative ideas (in Kant’s sense) with which the citation ends.

This looks, of course, like a straightforwardly religious answer, and as such not of much interest for secular moral theory. But even in *Confession* Tolstoy is not committed to it unambiguously. At the end of that work he says: “I have no doubt that there is truth in the doctrine; but there can also be no doubt that it harbors a lie; and I must find the truth and the lie so I can tell them apart. This is what I set out to do” (C, p. 91). However the result of this inquiry was never published. Of course Tolstoy’s anti-clericalism is patent, especially in *Resurrection*—perhaps that was the lie he was thinking of. But since our concern here is in any case with the novels and their author, whoever in the moment of writing he may have been, and not with Count Leo Tolstoy in person at other times in his life, there is room for further reflection on this topic.

Enlightenment is something that *happens*, certainty is something *given*. Where do they come from? The history of moral speculation offers many candidates for an answer: from God; from Nature; from human nature; from common sense; from history. In spite of appearances to the contrary God is not, I think, Tolstoy’s candidate, even to the degree to which he is, say, Heidegger’s. Although, as we have seen,

God's existence is already explicitly linked to the sense of certainty as early as *War and Peace* (see WP, p. 1309), and the concept of an infinite God is listed among the regulative ideas of *Confession*, Tolstoy's world is too earthly to find its principle in the purely transcendent. If there is a Tolstoyan God in the novels the most appropriate model is perhaps that of Vico's theological poets for whom "Jove was no higher than the mountain peaks."<sup>8</sup>

I mention Heidegger in part to signal, without developing in detail, a remarkable parallel between some themes in his later work and some reiterated principles in Tolstoy: the late Heidegger is full of "letting"—letting-be, letting-appear, letting-learn—and in reading him I have sometimes been forcibly reminded of Prince Andrei's reflections about Kutuzov:

"He will not introduce anything of his own. He will not scheme or start anything," thought Prince Andrei, "but he will listen, bear in mind all that he hears, put everything in its rightful place. He will not stand in the way of anything expedient or permit what might be injurious. He knows that there is something stronger and more important than his own will—the inevitable march of events, and he has the brains to see them and grasp their significance, and seeing that significance can abstain from meddling, from following his personal desires and aiming at something else. . . ." (WP, pp. 357–60)

And what is Levin's realization of the absurd overlay of rational contortions on the primordial clarity of moral truth if not a call for the deconstruction of Western metaphysics, a recognition of truth as unconcealment, *aletheia*?

Something will appear, and save us, if we only let it. But if it is not the case that "nur ein Gott kann uns retten," what will it be? Nature perhaps: "Tolstoy repeats the lesson of Rousseau's *Emile*. Nature: only nature will save us," as Berlin says in "Tolstoy and Enlightenment."<sup>9</sup> Something natural, we might agree, but—in spite of the fact that Tolstoy learned from Rousseau and "liked and admired Rousseau's views more than those of any other modern writer" (p. 240)—hardly Nature, I think, in Rousseau's romantic sense. It is not so much nature as culture—yet not high culture but immemorial culture, the culture of the peasants and of the soil, culture in other words having integrated itself with nature—that for Tolstoy carries the legacy of truth. This is a matter, not of revelation, but of the accumulation of authentic human experience. Tolstoy, says Berlin,

believed that only by patient empirical observation could any knowledge be attained; that this knowledge is always inadequate, that simple people often know the truth better than learned men, because their observation of men and nature is less clouded by empty theories, and not because they are inspired vehicles of the divine afflatus. There is a hard cutting edge of common sense about everything that Tolstoy wrote which automatically puts to flight metaphysical fancies and undisciplined tendencies towards esoteric experience, or the poetical or theological interpretations of life, which lay at the heart of the Slavophile outlook. (p. 55)

How does the truth this culture contains communicate itself to us? and why does it appear to us with certainty, why are we convinced by it? To the first of these questions it must be replied that in Tolstoy there nearly always is an actual peasant to communicate the wisdom of his kind; but with respect to the second it has to be admitted that the experience of conviction always comes some time after this communication. The empiricist note struck in the last citation from Berlin is the one I want to end on. Tolstoy's characters arrive at moral certainty not through revelation, even though their experience of it comes with the force of a revelation, but through a realization, born (Levin to the contrary notwithstanding) of rational reflection, that the immemorial wisdom in question will actually *work*.

One of the clearest indications of this comes at the end of *Resurrection*. After the simple scriptural conviction that has come over him Nekhlyudov, persuaded that if a corrupt society has survived at all this cannot be due to its legal institutions but only because "in spite of their depraving influences people still pity and love one another," rereads the Sermon on the Mount in search of confirmation. In it he discovers, embodied in five commandments, the principles of the moral life. In abbreviated form they are (1) no anger, (2) no impurity, (3) no oaths, (4) no resistance to violence, and (5) no enemies. "Nekhlyudov sat staring at the light of the lamp that had burned low, and his heart stopped beating. Recalling all the monstrous confusion of the life we lead, he pictured to himself what this life might be like if people were taught to obey these commandments, and his soul was swept by an ecstasy such as he had not felt for many a day. It was as though, after long pining and suffering, he had suddenly found peace and liberation" (R, p. 566).

"*If* people were taught to obey these commandments" (my emphasis): there is an anticipation here (reinforced by the slightly earlier

passage cited above: “ever more frequently finding confirmation in life”) of what might be called a hypothetico-deductive method in moral theory. That is something I have expounded elsewhere,<sup>10</sup> but it is gratifying to be able to inscribe Tolstoy as a precursor. Of course one might disagree in this particular case with the desirability of the consequences of the practical deduction, but I think the point holds generally: we confirm by our experience (one element of which may be considered without contradiction, after the manner of William James, to be the very relief from perplexity that entertaining the hypothesis affords) the wisdom of a moral sense acquired over the millennia by a race that in the modern world, alas, is always trying, by the employment of a reason inadequate to the complexity of the task, to improve on it, an effort that can only end in disaster.

One might sum up Tolstoy’s main moral insight, in its practical form, as follows: it cannot possibly be worse, and will probably be much better, to let nature and tradition take their course than to try to improve matters morally by calculation. In the light of current conditions there is a tempting plausibility about this. I do not in fact think it is the solution, because I do not share Tolstoy’s confidence in tradition as a conduit for truth, and still less do I accept the religious component of the tradition in question. But I think it is much harder than we are usually willing to admit to offer even an equally plausible alternative to this view, let alone a practically more compelling one. It is in other words a view to be reckoned with, and as a hedgehog principle I think it deserves the greatest respect. That is partly because it is exemplified, in Tolstoy, in such an extraordinarily rich diversity of contexts—with the vigor and imagination, in other words, of the fox.

As I remarked earlier, foxes make the best hedgehogs, indeed morally speaking the only tolerable kind, because their knowledge of the human condition, their sensitivity to and sympathy with the variety of human life, makes us take their concern with great principles seriously; we are not inclined to think that their minds are made up in advance, without regard to the rest of the world—they are not monomaniacs, they do not have the cruelty of fanaticism or the vested interest of authority. Tolstoy earns the right to his moral view not only by his own experience but also by the experiences of his characters, through whom what becomes accessible to us is less that view itself—and this is part of his greatness—than an opportunity to test it against our own experience, lived vicariously in reading them. We need the vicarious experience partly because of the absence in our own lives of

ready access to the sources of naturalism and populism that he found in the peasants. But it is an important corrective to an increasing contemporary tendency towards fundamentalism and mysticism to realize that in spite of the appearances of his very last days it is in a plain awareness—acquired by experience among human beings rather than through some other-worldly insight—of the *obvious* requirements of the moral life that Tolstoy's characters find the ground of their certainty and that we might, *mutatis mutandis* (but that would involve a lot of work), find something like it too.

GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

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1. Peter Caws, "The Ontology of Criticism," *Semiotext(e)* 1 (1975): 35–50.
2. Isaiah Berlin, *Russian Thinkers*, ed. Henry Hardy and Aileen Kelly (New York: Viking Press, 1978), pp. 22ff.
3. L. N. Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, trans. Rosemary Edmonds (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1978), pp. 672–73. (Cited as *WP*.)
4. L. N. Tolstoy, *Anna Karenin*, trans. Rosemary Edmonds (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1954), p. 120. (Cited as *AK*.) In the text I use *Anna Karenina*, because of its familiarity, even though Rosemary Edmonds, consistent with the normal English treatment of Russian names (as she points out, we say Madame Blavatsky, not Madame Blavatskaya), uses the masculine form.
5. L. N. Tolstoy, *Resurrection*, trans. Rosemary Edmonds (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1966), p. 201. (Cited as *R*.)
6. Stuart Hampshire, *Freedom of Mind and Other Essays*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 249.
7. L. N. Tolstoy, *Confession*, trans. David Patterson (New York: W. W. Norton, 1983.) (Cited as *C*.)
8. Giambattista Vico, *The New Science*, trans. Thomas Bergin and Max Fisch (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970), p. 77. See also Peter Caws, "No Higher Than the Mountain Peaks," *World Literature Today* 51 (1977): 357–60.
9. Berlin, p. 255.
10. Peter Caws, *Ethics from Experience* (Boston: Jones and Bartlett, 1996).