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ETHICS, RELIGION, AND THE PROBLEM OF LIFE:
TOLSTOY'S INFLUENCE ON WITTGENSTEIN'S THINKING
ABOUT THE MEANING OF LIFE*

Tolstoy is one of the few figures that young Wittgenstein read and revered. This has been well known for a long time, but only few attempts have been undertaken to analyze what impact could possibly the Russian thinker have on Wittgenstein's thought. Actually the scope of possible influence is quite broad. For the last thirty years of his long life, Tolstoy was much more a philosopher than a fiction author, writing extensively on religion, ethics, metaphysics and art.¹ Wittgenstein knew at least some of those writings, and given the very high esteem that he had for their author it is very likely that his own thought on those or akin matters was somehow influenced or inspired by them. Dealing with the whole field of possible impact is of course too broad a topic for a short text like this, so in this paper I will concentrate on only one thing, namely the discourse on "Ethics" or "the problem of meaning of life" that constitutes the main topic for the concluding propositions of the *Tractatus* (6.4–6.522) and *Lecture on Ethics*.

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¹Someone has counted that Tolstoy's philosophical writings are 10,000 pages long, so many times more than *Anna Karenina* and *War and Peace* taken together. Unfortunately comprehensive introductions or commentaries to this massive work are absent, especially in English, where one can find mostly either superficial remarks or ideologically driven caricatures (like BOOT 2009). This fortunately has started to change recently (MALIMONOVA 2022; MOULIN 2017). For general introductions to Tolstoy's thinking about religion see WEISBEIN (1960); ROSZYK (2020, 29–56).

I begin with the question of how much and what exactly of Tolstoy's writings, especially philosophical, Wittgenstein might have known before he started writing the *Tractatus* (§1). Then I proceed to three topics in Wittgenstein's thought about the problem of the meaning of life that in my opinion have Tolstoyan origins: defining "Ethics" in terms of the meaning of life (§2), treating the problem of life as the central issue for philosophy (§3), and the ideas about the solution of the problem of the meaning of life, namely that the question concerning the meaning of life is a pseudo-question, that this vanishing of the question is not yet the solution, and that the solution of the problem of life consists in practical change, i.e. in taking a religious attitude towards the world (§4).

1. WITTGENSTEIN'S ACQUAINTANCE WITH TOLSTOY'S WRITINGS

Tolstoy's presence in Wittgenstein's life is usually mentioned a lot in passing, but actually never treated seriously enough. However, the very compilation of relevant facts already suggests that Tolstoy was enormously important for his life. Firstly, as it is most widely known, at the beginning of World War I, Wittgenstein bought a sample of Tolstoy's *The Gospel in Brief*, and it impressed him enormously; as he was later to say, this book literally saved his life, and he carried it with himself everywhere, so that in the army he was called "that with the Gospel".² Secondly, his admiration for Tolstoy was not short-lived, since he mentioned or made allusions to the Russian thinker or his views till the end of his life, and always spoke about him with respect (DRURY 1981, 100–102; MALCOLM 1958). Thirdly, Wittgenstein attached special importance to Tolstoy's views about religion; as one of his disciples, Maurice Drury noted, he claimed that there were "only two European thinkers in recent times who really had something important to say about religion, Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky" (DRURY 1981, 101). And last but definitely not least, the life of Wittgenstein was to a great measure a practical realization of Tolstoy's teachings: Wittgenstein was one of tens of thousands of "Tolstoists", i.e. people, usually from elites, who agreed with Tolstoy's criticism of degenerated life of the rich, renounced the wealth they were to inherit, and instead led a simple life, sustaining themselves by work, often physical.³

² "Der mit dem Evangelium" (WITTGENSTEIN 1981, 17). See also MCGUINNESS (1988, 220–21).

³ That Wittgenstein led a "Tolstoyan life" is a fact first noted by Allan Janik and Stephen

All this shows that Tolstoy had a very deep impact on Wittgenstein's private life. This of course does not necessarily mean that the influence in the intellectual sphere was as strong, but at least suggests that it is really worth enquiring into.⁴ In order to determine what this impact might have been with regard to the problem of the meaning of life first we have to look at what of Tolstoy's writings Wittgenstein knew in his youth. As I mentioned above, Tolstoy was both a fiction writer and a philosopher, and since often his fiction writing is imbued with philosophical problems, both kinds have to be taken into account. As regards purely literary works, then, we may safely assume that Wittgenstein read some of the most important novels, novellas and short stories of Tolstoy. In the beginning of the twentieth century, when Wittgenstein was a teenager, Tolstoy was an international celebrity, considered the greatest living writer and one of the greatest in the whole history of Western culture. It would be very surprising, then, if the Wittgensteins, rich and highly cultural as they were, did not read and discuss his work in their family circle (see JANIK and TOULMIN 1996, 169–77). The only documented reading, however, concerns Tolstoy's late but outstanding novella, *Khadzhi-Murat*, which he read before summer 1912 (MCGUINNESS 1988, 33, 134). As regards Tolstoy's philosophical works our sources are fortunately more helpful. Firstly, Wittgenstein knew Tolstoy's famous essay *A Confession*—parts of it for sure, since they are heavily quoted in William James' *Varieties of Religious Experience*, which he read in the first half of 1912 (MCGUINNESS 1988, 129), and it is highly likely that he extended it by reading also the whole of the original work. Secondly, before 1916 he knew for sure Tolstoy's book from 1897 entitled *What is Art?*, which we know from Paul Engelmann's recollections, where he suggests that when they met Wittgenstein had already read it (ENGELMANN 1967, 91). And thirdly, as is widely known, Wittgenstein bought in 1914 Tolstoy's version of the Gospels, entitled *The Gospel in Brief*, and not just read it, but knew almost by heart (MCGUINNESS 1988, 220–21).

So we know that before he started writing the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein had known for sure or almost for sure three philosophical works of Tolstoy: *A Confession*, *What is Art?* and *The Gospel in Brief*. That is particularly important from the point of view of the present paper, because all three operate

Toulmin (JANIK and TOULMIN 1996, 202–8). For more on the Tolstoyan movement see BARTLETT (2010, 345–454).

⁴ Which has hardly been done so far, both in general and with regard to the problem of the meaning of life in particular. As for the latter the only two texts which make valuable contribution are THOMAS (1997) and THOMPSON (1997).

with the problem of the meaning of life or at least use a conceptual framework in which this question occurs. This topic is decisively most prominent in *A Confession*, which is wholly devoted to show how Tolstoy went into a crisis concerning the meaning of life, what analyses and considerations he undertook to deal with it, and to what conclusion all these led him. *The Gospel in Brief* does not use the concept of meaning of life so openly and frequently, but since it is a continuation to *A Confession*, and shows Tolstoy's interpretation of Jesus as a teacher of the right way of life, these issues are still central to that book.⁵ *What is Art?* was written almost two decades later and the problem of the meaning of life is not, as one can easily guess from the title, its central occupation, but none the less it still appears there: in the book Tolstoy criticizes the modern art from the point of view of Christianity as he conceives it, and since religion in general and true Christianity in particular are according to him is an answer to the problem of the meaning of life, naturally this concept is also at work here, even if it does not occur very frequently.

Given this evidence, both direct and circumstantial, it seems highly probable that it is Tolstoy's analyses about the problem of meaning of life that Wittgenstein had in mind when in the middle of 1916 he began his own investigation into that issue. So let us now proceed to what might have been the particular areas of influence of the former on the latter.

2. DEFINITION OF ETHICS IN TERMS OF THE MEANING OF LIFE

The first strikingly Tolstoyan motive in Wittgenstein's thought is his concept of ethics, or rather Ethics, as he preferred to write it down. As rarely is the case, we are lucky to be given a precise definition of the concept by him:

⁵ At the end of 1870s, Tolstoy planned to write and publish a four-volume work aimed at showing his turn towards religion, criticizing the Church Christianity, and presenting his positive view on the real Christianity. *A Confession* was supposed to be the first volume. The second was to provide with a critique of theology, the third his own translation and commentary on the Gospels, and the fourth his positive vision of Christianity. Due mainly to the problems with censorship the work never appeared as a whole, and its parts were published separately. *The Gospel in Brief* is the final, abridged version of what was supposed to be volume 3 (see BARTLETT 2010, 283–89). Note, by the way, that this book is neither Tolstoy's translation of the Gospels, as it is sometimes called, nor "Tolstoy[']s book] on the Gospels", as Russell had it. It does contain Tolstoy's translation, but not of the canonical Gospels as they stand: it is his unified text of the story and teaching of Jesus, based on the canonical Gospels, but since of course they contradict one another all the time, he edited and corrected them heavily. Besides each of twelve chapters is preceded by a Tolstoy's text explaining what is inside, and this introductory interpretation is sometimes almost as long as the Gospel text itself.

Instead of saying “Ethics is the enquiry into what is good” I could have said Ethics is the enquiry into what is valuable, or, into what is really important, or I could have said Ethics is the enquiry into the meaning of life, or into what makes life worth living, or into the right way of living. (WITTGENSTEIN 1993, 37)

The analysis that follows this definition displays first of all strongly Kantian character (see also THOMAS 1997, 365). Wittgenstein introduces there the famous distinction between relative value and absolute value, the former obliging to action only conditionally, provided that an agent wants to achieve something, and the latter prescribing an act totally unconditionally, no matter what the agent’s wants, desires, or aims are. Then he claims that Ethics in the strict sense of a term is concerned only with the absolute value, since the judgments about relative value are actually factual statements in disguise, and hence only superficially have something to do with values. Those two claims clearly echo Kant’s distinctions between hypothetical and categorical imperatives on the one hand, and on the other his insistence that all discourse concerning hypothetical imperatives is not ethics, but rather pragmatics, since what it really amounts to are just practical tips on how to achieve what we want, not the duties that we ought to fulfill no matter what our desires and inclinations are. Thus for Wittgenstein Ethics is concerned not with what is normally called “good” or “values”, but only with that which obliges us to take action totally unconditionally (ROSZYK 2020, 104–9).

Now what is interesting in the fragment quoted above is that Wittgenstein seems to equate the definition of Ethics as the enquiry into values in the absolute sense of the term with another string of expressions which suggest that Ethics is actually concerned with the meaning of life—with something that guides our life in general. This identification is somewhat surprising, since even if the very term “the meaning of life” actually enters philosophers’ discourse (which is rarely the case), it still does not play an important role in ethical considerations, let alone serve as a key term for the definition of ethics. However, the idea that the ethical enquiry is not concerned with many different goods, values and duties that we ought to realize by various actions, but rather with something that guides our life in entirety, and treating this single, most important value in terms of the meaning of life are two basic assumptions of Tolstoy’s famous philosophical-autobiographical essay *A Confession* (TOLSTOY 1987). This book may be characterized as a protocol of Tolstoy’s quest for a good life. In the opening chapters he writes that from a very early age he looked for one thing that could make his life meaningful and valuable. In the spirit of the age he assumed first that the meaning

of life lay in constant progress, since that was the property of all things and of the universe in general that was claimed to be crucial by all the most learned and “enlightened”, as he puts it, men of his time. Later on, in his forties, Tolstoy came to the conclusion that it was a wrong answer, since, first, no one knew what was this progress aimed at, and second, no matter how developed, wise, moral or powerful we became in our life, all this is inevitably terminated by death, which destroys everything which we accomplished. So he started his quest anew, looking for something different, the meaning of life that will be immune somehow to all the threats of aging, decomposition and death (TOLSTOY 1987, 19–29). In both cases what he means by “the meaning of life” is a kind of value or good that gives direction to the whole life of an individual, something which makes one’s life meaningful and worth living. The latter is particularly important. Tolstoy describes his existential crisis saying that he started feeling that life has no sense, is absurd, a kind of malicious joke made by someone, and that finding the meaning of life is necessary to continue living: if life has no meaning, then the only rational solution is suicide (TOLSTOY 1987, 30–35).

Given that Wittgenstein certainly knew parts of *A Confession* and most likely the whole of it, it is quite safe to suppose that it is precisely this text that lies behind his identification of Ethics as the enquiry into the absolute value with the enquiry into the meaning of life—“or into what makes life worth living, or into the right way of living” (see also THOMPSON 1997, 100–101). First of all, we know that Wittgenstein’s personal existential thinking in his early years was conducted partly in the context of Tolstoy’s writings—as I mentioned above, apart from *A Confession*, he read *The Gospel in Brief* a lot, knowing it almost by heart, and also *What is Art?* Secondly, Tolstoy doesn’t make any technical analyses and doesn’t invoke Kant (nor does he use his framework implicitly, as Wittgenstein does), but the general air in which his argument is conducted implies somewhat vaguely that this something which makes life worth living has categorical, unconditional character: if one finds it, one feels that realizing this value is his/her duty, and feels forced to do so. This tacit implication might have led Wittgenstein to the conclusion that what Tolstoy means by “the meaning of life” is the only thing that can really meet the requirements of the absolute value. After all, if there are many duties, actions to be done for the sake of themselves, none of them can be really unconditionally obliging, so if we are to treat the idea of the absolute obligation seriously, there can be just one such

thing.⁶ And that allows one to do what Wittgenstein does in *Lecture on Ethics*: define Ethics as the enquiry either into what is (absolutely) good *or* into the meaning of life.

3. THE PROBLEM OF THE MEANING OF LIFE AS THE CENTRAL TASK OF PHILOSOPHY

The second move that Wittgenstein makes and which seems to be inspired by Tolstoy is the identification of the main problem of philosophy with the problem of Ethics. Here the situation is somewhat more elusive, but still some kind of following in the footsteps of the Russian thinker is detectable.

The first problem is of course that Wittgenstein in his early phase does not determine explicitly what are the main problems of philosophy, and whether according to him any one of those is central. However, the construction of the *Tractatus* might give us some hints as to what he thought on the matter. Having shown in theses 2–5 that language can describe only contingent facts, in thesis 6 he proceeds to those areas which allegedly depict something necessary: logic (6.1), mathematics (6.2), most general laws of the material world (6.3), and finally Ethics (6.4). The fact that Ethics occurs as the culmination of the whole series, and that in 6.5 Wittgenstein continues with remarks about the question about the meaning of life suggests that he considered it even if not *the* central problem of philosophy, then at least *the most important* among the central ones. In other words, the construction of the *Tractatus* shows that the most important problem that philosophy deals with is the Ethical problem—the problem of the meaning of life.

In *A Confession*, Tolstoy makes the same claim, although it is formulated in a little different way. First of all, he says that the natural sciences not only do not bring an answer to the problem of meaning of life, but they don't even understand the problem itself. Everything they can provide us with is knowledge about facts, and from bare facts nothing follows as what is really important in life or how we should live (a view, it is worth noting, that Wittgenstein echoes in 6.52). On the other hand, he continues, we have philosophical disciplines: they in turn understand the problem, but are not able to

⁶ This makes apparent that what is lacking in the argument is the analysis showing that the whole idea of categorical imperative, if worked out consistently to the very end, leads to just one general duty. Whether Wittgenstein made this reasoning for himself or borrowed from someone else is however a question for further research.

give a solution, even though they try hard. What is interesting is that Tolstoy seems to think that among the philosophical disciplines it is not ethics which is most important in dealing with the problem of meaning, but metaphysics. According to Tolstoy metaphysics tries to answer the question through the insight into the essence of life: having determined what is the essence of life, we would know how we should live. And consequently metaphysicians try to provide us with the answer, claiming that Will, Spirit, Idea or Substance is the essence of everything. The problem, Tolstoy says, is that of course any such answer provokes further questions about the meaning of the existence of that something which has been put forward, and what are the practical implications of its existence. Thus metaphysics, even though it understands the problem of meaning of life, does not give us the solution (TOLSTOY 1987, 34–38).

So both Tolstoy and Wittgenstein seem to think that the central, ultimate problem that philosophy is dealing with is the problem of the meaning of life. The difference between them is that Wittgenstein claims that among philosophical disciplines it is Ethics—even if understood in a peculiar way—that tries to answer that central question, whereas Tolstoy assigns this task to metaphysics (normally conceived). The reason for this difference is not entirely clear. Given the context, however, it is quite obvious that what Wittgenstein is doing here is not just borrowing from Tolstoy or being inspired by him, but rather actively correcting his position or pursuing it further. Again the construction of the *Tractatus* can give us an insight into what he is trying to do. Tolstoy in *A Confession* starts with accepting at face value an assumption, actually quite often tacitly taken and sometimes even openly stated in the history of Western philosophy, that discovering the ultimate nature or structure of reality will bring with itself the answer to the question as to how we should live or what is the highest value. At the end, he raises the difficulties mentioned above, but does not reject the whole idea that what is going on here is detecting the ultimate nature of reality, which will automatically solve the problem of meaning. Wittgenstein in turn seems to think that if we assume that the central problem for philosophy is the problem of the meaning of life, then what we are actually looking for is not the ultimate nature of reality, but rather the absolute value. This absolute value may well have to be anchored, so to say, in some distinguished element of reality, but still what we are searching is value, not fact, and this means that the whole enterprise would be better called Ethics, not metaphysics.

4. THE SOLUTION OF THE PROBLEM OF THE MEANING OF LIFE

The third area in which Wittgenstein's thinking on the problem of the meaning of life seems to be influenced by Tolstoy is his view on the solution of the problem and the role that philosophy may play in it. Here the matter is somewhat more complicated, because his (and Tolstoy's) line of reasoning proceeds in three stages.

The first idea concerning the solution of the problem of life is that the very question is mistaken, actually it is a pseudo-question, a string of signs that may at first seem to have sense, but in reality is nonsense. The analysis in the *Tractatus* leads to the conclusion that the sense of life cannot be located in the world. The reason is that the world consists only of facts. Facts are contingent, so they are so and so, but can be otherwise, so they cannot have this absolutely obliging force that—as we have seen above—the meaning of life should possess (6.41). In other words any kind of fact we may think, be it God almighty or whatever else, cannot be the answer to the problem of life. This, however, implies that there cannot be any Ethical theses whatsoever: in language we can speak only about facts, and since the meaning of life is not a fact—does not belong to the world—there cannot be any sentence that describes it (6.42). And this is no surprise given what Wittgenstein says in *Lecture on Ethics*. The term “sense of life”, just like “good” or “right”, has a normal meaning in ordinary language. Wittgenstein does not spell this meaning out, but we may safely suppose that the proper way of doing that would be similar to the case of “right” he speaks about in the text. So just as “right” in the sentence “This is the right way to Granchester” means something like “shortest (given you want to get there as quickly as possible)”, the expression “the sense/meaning of life” is normally used in order to express one's feeling that certain kind of activity brings both satisfaction to the agent and positive effects in some wider social context. So I can say perfectly meaningfully: “Teaching philosophy is the sense of my life”, expressing in this way that I find this activity both satisfactory and useful for others. But that of course is not the way the term is used in Ethics. Looking for the meaning of life as this term is used there we want to find something which is not simply and trivially satisfactory and useful, but still somehow having this obliging force that teaching philosophy has for me, only universal and unconditional this time. But what it means if not “satisfactory and useful” we do not know, and actually cannot know, since once we

give a definite content to that expression it will be describing a fact, and a fact is not what we are looking for (ROSZYK 2020, 111–16).

Thus the expression “the meaning of life” as it is used in *Ethics* is meaningless. This in turn implies that all sentences in which it occurs are nonsense—not just statements that so and so is the meaning of life, but also in the very question to which all the statements are supposed to be the answers. This means that a philosophical analysis that is done properly leads to the vanishing of the question of life—it shows that in reality there is no such problem:

6.5 For an answer which cannot be expressed the question too cannot be expressed.

The riddle does not exist.

Now the second important thing about Wittgenstein’s analysis is that he apparently does not equate the vanishing of the question concerning the meaning of life with the solution of the problem of life:

6.521 The solution of the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of this problem.

Note that he is not saying here that the solution of the problem “consists in” or “equals to” or simply “is” in the vanishing of the problem, but only that it “is seen”. The original expression “merkt man” can be even better translated as “is recognized”, but whatever is its best equivalent in English, it is clear that for Wittgenstein the vanishing of the question is only a part of the solution, a sign that the problem has been solved, and not the essence of its solution.

So, thirdly, there is a question as to what according to Wittgenstein the solution of the problem of life consists in. Here the *Tractatus* is not helpful and we have to consult other sources, mostly *Notebooks 1914–1916*. First of all, Wittgenstein identifies the solution of the problem of life with happiness:

And in this sense Dostoievsky is right when he says that the man who is happy is fulfilling the purpose of existence.

Or again we could say that the man is fulfilling the purpose of existence who no longer needs to have any purpose except to live. (WITTGENSTEIN 1961, 73e)

Secondly, he identifies happiness with a good life:

I keep on coming back to this! Simply the happy life is good, the unhappy bad.
(WITTGENSTEIN 1961, 78e)

The third move Wittgenstein makes consists in equating a good life with one in which one's will is in agreement with the world as it is:

In order to live happily I must be in agreement with the world. (WITTGENSTEIN 1961, 75e)

The fourth and final move is making clear what this agreement with the world consists in. Wittgenstein treats that in terms of will, which he understands as “an attitude of the subject to the world” (WITTGENSTEIN 1961, 87e). On the most general level there can be just two attitudes possible: either we—our will—accept the world as it is, or we do not accept it and want it to be different in some respects. For example, we may see that death, decomposition and oblivion are facts, that they are just what there is, and either accept it as it stands, or not and want a world in which there are no such facts. In the former case our will is in agreement with the world, and it is, says Wittgenstein, a “good will”, the will of a happy human being; in the latter it is not, and it is an “evil will”, the will of an unhappy human being. And finally, “The world of the happy is a different world from that of the unhappy” (WITTGENSTEIN 1961, 78e), but the difference between them is not a difference in facts, for they are the same for both. What is the difference then, that notorious “change [of] the limits” (6.43)? Well, someone—a “happy one”—whose will is in agreement with the world accepts the facts as they are, and do not want them to be different. Such a person is happy and feels no need for the meaning in life, for he/she is satisfied with the world as it is. On the contrary, an “unhappy one” is someone whose will does not accept the facts: he/she sees them, but does not want them to be. The situation of such a person may be described in a way that he/she feels that something is wrong with the world, that something is lacking, and that is the reason why his/her world, although consisting of the same facts, is different from the world of the happy one. Now what is lacking may be precisely called sense or meaning: such a person sees something in the world which according to him/her ought not to be there, and since it is, feels that this existence needs some kind of justification: for

example, if everyone dies, there must be some higher meaning in life, because otherwise it is absurd—as Tolstoy shows in *A Confession*.

Whatever the details, the general idea is clear. According to Wittgenstein, the solution of the problem of meaning of life does not lie in giving any theoretical proposition, but rather in a practical change in life, and more precisely in a change of will—a change in attitude in which we accept the world as it is and do not want it to be different. In such a life the question of meaning do not arise at all: a happy one is someone who feels satisfied with what there is and “no longer needs to have any purpose except to live.” It is in this sense that the vanishing of the question is just a part or rather a symptom of solving the problem of life, and not the solution itself.

What is important for the present purposes is that all those three ideas—that the question about meaning is flawed, that the vanishing of the question is a symptom of finding the solution, and that the solution consists in a practical change—are present and even prominent in Tolstoy’s writings. Here the best starting point is not *A Confession*, however, but rather the final fragments of *Anna Karenina*. *Anna Karenina* is a novel that Tolstoy finished in 1877, just before he started writing *A Confession*, and the crisis that the major protagonist of the novel, Konstantin Levin, falls into in its final parts, resembles very much the crisis of the author himself, the one that Tolstoy starts with in *A Confession*. Thus Levin, just like Tolstoy, in a certain moment of life starts feeling that given death and decomposition of everything life has no sense, and he looks for the answer to the question of meaning in philosophy, especially metaphysics. Again, like Tolstoy, he is not satisfied with the conceptions that he is given there, neither by materialist nor by idealist metaphysicians. Then, finally, he gets enlightened during a conversation with an occasional peasant, but the solution to the problem turns out not to be an answer to the question. He rather realizes that the whole idea of looking for a rational answer to the question of meaning of life is wrong, because the meaning of life lies in the sphere of the irrational. That, in turn, suggests that it is not that the question is unanswerable, but rather somehow flawed in its very presuppositions (TOLSTOY 2023, 631–41).

The figure of Levin almost automatically comes to mind of anyone acquainted with when reading Wittgenstein’s famous words:

6.521 Is not this the reason why men to whom after a long doubting the sense of life became clear, could not then say wherein this sense consisted?

Levin is precisely someone who doubted for a long time, finally the sense became clear to him, but, as the last chapters of the novel make clear, he was unable to say what this sense consisted in (TOLSTOY 2023, 636–55). The problem is solved, and the question disappears—he no longer feels a need to ask. Although of course he does not make any technical analysis, still his remarks suggest that the terms that are used to discuss the problem, both in the question itself and in answers offered, are “senseless”, “obscure, inexact” (TOLSTOY 2023, 637). From that perspective, it seems that what Wittgenstein does in the *Tractatus* is developing Russian’s thinker vague hints in a more technical way, using machinery of the theory of meaning to show what exactly has gone wrong in the whole discourse about the meaning of life.

Secondly, Tolstoy clearly suggests that seeing that something is wrong with the very question concerning meaning does not yet constitute the solution. On the contrary, both for Levin in *Anna Karenina* and for himself in *A Confession* this realization is just one and even rather preliminary step on the way to solving the problem: Levin even does not deem his insight about logical problems with the question specially important, moving quickly to considerations concerning practical matters, whereas in *A Confession* deliberations about the nature of the question take place in chapter 5 (TOLSTOY 1987, 34–38), so well before even the middle of the book.

Thirdly, Tolstoy claims in his works that the solution of the problem of meaning is not theoretical in nature, but practical, and has something to do with the way of life, religion and finally the attitude towards reality, although it took him some time to get clear about those ideas. Both in *Anna Karenina* and in *A Confession* we have clear statements that the solution lies in a certain way of life, and that “religion”, i.e. Christianity, plays an important role in it. Levin discovers that it is a way of life that he was raised in, based on simple moral truths about love, compassion and sacrifice (TOLSTOY 2023, 640). Tolstoy himself notices that the feeling that life is devoid of meaning is something that occurs only in wealthy people from privileged classes leading a parasitic life, but not amongst peasants who, in contrast to the wealthy elites, are still deeply practicing Christians (TOLSTOY 1987, 49–51). He was, however, very much dissatisfied first with what taking part in the official Christianity amounts to, and next with the official Christianity itself, the main reason being a great discrepancy between what one can find in the Gospels and what is actually preached and practiced in various churches which all claim to be Christian. As a consequence, he started a quest for the

real, original Christianity, which led him to harshly criticize the Church and form his own positive vision of what Christianity really is (ROSZYK 2020, 29–54). Alongside that investigation into the nature of Christianity Tolstoy developed his own conception of religion in general, according to which the essence of religion is a practical attitude to the world, namely one in which an individual feels to be a part of a great, infinite whole, perceives it as being endowed with a will of a kind, and tries to harmonize his or her life with the life of that great, cosmic whole (ROSZYK 2017).

So finally Tolstoy came to the last idea, namely that ultimately the solution of the problem of life consists in taking an attitude towards the world, in which a person neither wants nor tries to subordinate the world to her will, but rather the reverse—she tries to subordinate him/herself to the world. The wording in Wittgenstein and Tolstoy is somewhat different, as Tolstoy rarely, if at all, speaks about the matter in terms of will and of agreement, but the general idea conveyed through this different terminology is strikingly similar. Whether this is a direct inspiration, however, or rather independent development, we can only speculate, since the sources that we possess show nothing determinate on that matter. There is no evidence that Wittgenstein read any of the works in which Tolstoy presents his conception of religion, and in *What is Art?*, which Wittgenstein knew at that time for sure, this conception is only alluded to.⁷

On the other hand, let us note that Wittgenstein clearly treats the problem of the meaning of life as one which functions and can be solved only within religious context, and that what he means by “religion” here is very far away from standard understandings, both common sense and philosophical. From the very beginning in his notebooks from 1916, Wittgenstein deals with the problem of meaning in religious terms, and this lasts till the end of his investigations into the matter, that is *Lecture on Ethics*, where in one of the last sentences he equates for a while “Ethics” with “Religion” (WITTGENSTEIN 1993, 44). Religion, however, is not understood by him conventionally, as a set of theoretical doctrines which allegedly describe some otherworldly re-

⁷ Three main works in which Tolstoy presents and develops his conception of religion in general are: *Religion and Morality* (TOLSTOY 1987b), a short essay from 1893, chapter IV of the 1894 book *The Kingdom of God is Within You* (TOLSTOY 1951, 52–64), and somewhat longer essay from 1902 entitled *What is Religion and What Does Its Essence Consist In?* (TOLSTOY 1987c). *The Kingdom of God* was a very popular and widely discussed book at that time, so Wittgenstein might have known it, but we have no clear evidence for that. How much the other two texts were known and accessible in Wittgenstein’s youth I cannot assess, but it is not impossible that he came across them in *Der Brenner* or elsewhere.

alities, or as a worship of some of those realities, but rather as a kind of practical attitude towards life or the world in general, attitude which, as we have seen, consists in trying to accord one's will with the world as it really is. And this is the understanding of religion that is precisely developed by Tolstoy. So it is not, as one of the scholars claimed, that "Wittgenstein embraces Tolstoy the confessor, for whom the question of the meaning of life falls away, and rejects Tolstoy the Christian proselytizer" (THOMPSON 1997, 106). Tolstoy for whom the question of the meaning of life fades away is the same person as Tolstoy who preaches Christianity (properly understood, of course) as the solution to the problem. Tolstoy does not think that "God" refers to some external reality that can miraculously solve our problems, nor he thinks that there is some kind of afterlife that can make this life meaningful (whatever this may be supposed to consist in). The solution according to him lies precisely in admitting that we are for the world and not the world for us, that we have to start feeling ourselves a small part of the infinite whole and try to harmonize our life with it, and this is the heart of Christianity as he preaches it in *The Gospel in Brief* and elsewhere. And Wittgenstein clearly follows him in that.⁸

CONCLUSIONS

Given the amassed evidence it seems quite likely that Tolstoy's thought constitutes most, if not all, of the context for Wittgenstein's approach to the problem of the meaning of life. So far, the scholars have been very reluctant to claim anything about direct influence, talking somewhat hyper-carefully only about structural parallels or similarities.⁹ For me, however, as a historian, the situation is rather clear. If a thinker *A* read a lot of a thinker *B*, respected him much, knew at least one of the thinker's *B* books almost by heart, and then wrote about the same problems that the thinker *B* had written in the books that he read, then it would be very strange to stop at stating structural similarities and avoid the issue whether "direct influences are traceable" (THOMAS 1997, 363). It is as if someone noted that in Aristotle's writings you can find ideas strongly resembling Plato's views, for example a distinction between the determining factor and the raw material shaped by it,

⁸ For more see ROSZYK (2020, 134–66).

⁹ See especially THOMAS (1997, 363). Thompson (1997) is bolder in using the term "influence" in the beginning, but then speaks only about "parallels" as well (99, 106)

admit that according to the sources we have Aristotle spend twenty years of his life in Plato's school, and that precisely Plato developed a conception in which things are constituted by shapeless matter and ideas that determine it, but still would be hesitant to say that it was Plato who influenced Aristotle's metaphysical thought. Wittgenstein knew for sure or almost for sure the books in which Tolstoy speaks about the problem of the meaning of life, the structural similarities and continuities are visible, so we may safely assume that it is Tolstoy who influenced Wittgenstein here, unless there comes strong evidence for another source of inspiration.

The analyses above allow us to determine also what exactly this influence is. Let us note that first of all, as we have seen in §3, Wittgenstein accepts Tolstoy's idea from *A Confession* that the problem of the meaning of life is ultimately the central problem of philosophy; but, on the other hand, he corrects the formulation of the Russian thinker by calling this central problem of philosophy the Ethical. That in turn makes intelligible the definition of Ethics in terms of the meaning of life (§2), which, if it stands simply by itself, is very surprising and idiosyncratic. And finally, regarding the solution of the problem of the meaning of life, Wittgenstein seems to accept Tolstoy's main ideas and tries to formulate them in his own way or, put differently, to make them intelligible to himself. Thus he gives a technical explanation why the very question of the meaning of life is a pseudo-question, repeats (this time actually without even reconceptualizing) that the notion that the question concerning the meaning is a confusion is not yet the solution, and finally that this practical change in life which brings the solution to the problem consists in a change in general attitude towards the world, which he, differently than Tolstoy, expresses in somewhat Schopenhauerian terms of will and its agreement with the world.

All this of course does not preclude that there are other sources of inspiration for Wittgenstein. It would be very interesting, for example, to analyze how much of Schopenhauer comes in this part of his thinking. Also the idea that the solution consists in a practical change in life may be also partly inspired by William James and Søren Kierkegaard, whom Wittgenstein read at the same period of his life, and whom he liked and respected a lot. However, unless there comes strong evidence for otherwise, it seems that it was Tolstoy who played the crucial role in constituting the context for Wittgenstein's thought about the problem of the meaning of life.

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ETHICS, RELIGION, AND THE PROBLEM OF LIFE: TOLSTOY'S INFLUENCE ON WITTGENSTEIN'S THINKING ABOUT THE MEANING OF LIFE

Summary

In this paper, I try to show to what extent Wittgenstein's thinking about the problem of the meaning of life was influenced by Tolstoy. I begin with the problem of what Tolstoy's writings, especially philosophical, Wittgenstein knew. Then I proceed to three areas of impact: (1) treating the question of the meaning of life as the central problem for philosophy, (2) defining Ethics in terms of the meaning of life, and (3) the idea that the solution of the problem of the meaning of life lies in a practical change, not in giving a theoretical answer, which in turn is broken down into three more specific ideas, namely that (3a) the question concerning the meaning of life is a pseudo-question, that (3b) this vanishing of the question is not yet the solution, and that (3c) the solution of the problem of life consists in taking a religious attitude towards the world. I try to show that in point 1 Wittgenstein accepted Tolstoy's general idea, but gave it his own version, which in turn makes the definition of Ethics in terms of the meaning of life in point 2 understandable; whereas in point 3 Wittgenstein accepts Tolstoy's ideas and tries to formulate them in his own way.

Keywords: Wittgenstein; Tolstoy; ethics; meaning of life; religion.

ETYKA, RELIGIA I PROBLEM ŻYCIA: WPŁYW TOŁSTOJA NA MYŚLENIE WITTGENSTEINA NA TEMAT SENSU ŻYCIA

Streszczenie

W niniejszym artykule staram się pokazać, jaki wpływ na myślenie Wittgensteina o zagadnieniu sensu życia wywarł Lew Tołstoj. Rozpoczynam od ustalenia, które pisma Tołstoja Wittgenstein znał. Dalej przechodzę do trzech obszarów wpływu: (1) ujmowania pytania o sens życia jako centralnego problemu filozoficznego, (2) definiowania Etyki za pomocą kategorii sensu życia oraz (3) idei, zgodnie z którą rozwiązanie problemu sensu życia polega na zmianie praktycznej, a nie udzieleniu teoretycznej odpowiedzi. Zagadnienie to z kolei składa się z trzech części: (3a) tezy, że pytanie dotyczące sensu życia jest pseudopytaniem, (3b) tezy, że zniknięcie pytania o sens nie jest jeszcze rozwiązaniem problemu oraz (3c) tezy, że rozwiązanie problemu sensu życia polega na przyjęciu religijnego nastawienia względem świata. Staram się pokazać, że w punkcie 1 Wittgenstein przejął pomysł Tołstoja, lecz poddał go pewnej korekcie, co wyjaśnia zabieg definicyjny wymieniony w punkcie 2, natomiast w punkcie 3 Wittgenstein akceptuje idee Tołstoja, starając się jedynie nadać im swoje własne sformułowanie.

Słowa kluczowe: Wittgenstein; Tołstoj; etyka; sens życia; religia.