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The author and his protagonists find that they'd sought a theory in the wrong place.

Leo Tolstoy's Search for the Meaning of Life

HOUSES OF WORSHIP

By Gary Saul Morson

Reading breathless claims that technology will free us from death, we may wonder at the refusal to face the fundamental fact of the human condition: Mortals are mortal. Leo Tolstoy, whose descriptions of dying remain unequalled, never ceased to ponder how we might find meaning in the face of our inevitable end.

Long before Tolstoy experienced the psychological crisis that led to his decadeslong effort to rethink Christianity, he was concerned with spiritual questions. Anyone who has read his two great novels, "War and Peace" and "Anna Karenina," will recall how their heroes wrestle with the same questions that beset the author: Is there something beyond the material world? Does death, which turns our efforts to dust, make life absurd?

In August 1869, at 40, Tolstoy traveled to view an estate he might buy. At the inn where he stayed the night, he wrote to his wife, "something extraordinary happened to me. It was two o'clock in the morning, I was terribly tired . . . and I felt perfectly well. But suddenly I was overcome by despair, fear and terror, the like of which I have never experienced before."

Konstantin Levin, the coprotagonist of "Anna Karenina," experiences this despair. Like Tolstoy, he was happily married and enjoyed running his prosperous estate. Yet he was nevertheless unaccountably "stricken with horror" at life "without any knowledge of whence, and why and how and what it was." Having accepted the scientific worldview in place of religious faith, he turned to it for answers, only to realize it couldn't address questions of meaning. Its ideas "were very useful for intellectual purposes. But for life they yielded nothing, and Levin felt suddenly like a man who has changed his fur cloak for a thin muslin garment, and, going for the first time into the frost, is immediately convinced, not by reason, but by his whole nature that he is as good as naked, and that he must inevitably perish miserably."

Like Tolstoy, Levin told himself he must answer his questions or die: "Without knowing what I am and why I am here, life's impossible." He was so tempted to kill himself that "he hid a rope, so that he might not be tempted to hang himself, and was afraid to go out [hunting] with his gun, for fear of shooting himself."

Yet Levin also wondered why, when he didn't focus on the questions that drove him to despair but simply lived, "it seemed as though he knew both what he was and why he was living, for he acted resolutely." He took care of his family, interested himself in the welfare of his peasant employees, and managed his sister's property, not because of some "general principles" but because these actions were "incontestably necessary." It was as impossible not to care for those dependent on him "as to fling down a child one is carrying in his arms."

Tolstoy wanted readers to ask, as he asked himself: What would you think of someone who needed some "general principle" to decide whether to fling down a child in one's arms? Levin's problem is that he assumes, as intellectuals often do, that truth is a matter of theory that one applies to

particular circumstances. That is how mathematics works, but questions of meaning and ethics are different. They require unformalizable wisdom, which arises from sensitive reflection about specific cases, and demand we trust our experience with particulars. Theory, rightly understood, is simply a set of tentative generalizations from practice.

This insight dawns on Levin when he asks a peasant why he doesn't rent a certain plot of land, as another man does. The peasant replies that you can make the land pay only if you squeeze the life out of workers, which is wrong because

you must live for your soul and for God. As if struck by "an electric shock," Levin realizes that our fundamental knowledge of right and wrong isn't derived from theory but is simply "given." "I and all men have one firm, incontestable knowledge, and that knowledge cannot be explained by reason—it is outside it, and has no causes and can have no effects."

In saying goodness has no causes, Levin means that why we have come to think certain things are good—say, the way some evolutionary biologists explain altruism as good for group survival—is a different question. What is good is good regardless of why we're able to think so. By the same token, "effects" are beside the point because to do something good to be rewarded, in this life or the next, would simply be an economic bargain, like saving for retirement.

Though goodness can't be explained by cause and effect, Levin thinks, we all know it. "I watched for miracles, complained that I did not see a miracle that would convince me. And here is a miracle . . . continually existing, surrounding me on all sides, and I never noticed it!" Levin reaches the beginning of faith and is ready to take further steps. He realizes that in his quest for a theory, he had been looking in the wrong place.

One directly senses the meaning of existence by living rightly. It isn't a proposition or philosophy that can be taught. All one can do is indicate the sort of thing meaning is by showing how someone found it—exactly what Tolstoy's great novels do.

Mr. Morson is a professor of Slavic languages and literatures at Northwestern University.

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