

CHAPTER ONE

Ivan Ilych: Ethics and Morals

Socrates spoke of the necessity for human beings to live the *examined life* and to shun

To think we are as others think about us or as others act is to be suicidal.

lives motivated by wealth, honor and reputation. The *examined life* is devoted to the knowledge and “improvement of the soul and virtue“, (*Apology*, 39 a-f). Socrates warned that “The difficulty, my friends, is not to avoid death, but to avoid unrighteousness; for that runs faster than death“. So, death by natural cause is not our human problem, rather, death by unrighteousness is. “Death by unrighteousness“, of course, is death by our own decision, the decision to live an unbalanced, or unjust life. But, what kind of thinking produces a death by our own decision? What kind of an attitude results in “death by unrighteousness”?

The oriental, Lao-tzu also cautioned: “to pretend to know when you do not know is a disease“. (the *Way*, # 71) So, we shall see that a certain type of thinking, namely, **thinking** about ourselves **being other than we are** brings disease, spiritual sickness. So, this kind of thinking is dying by our own decision.

The twentieth century A.D. occidental, Albert Camus begins his series of essays, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, “Absurd Reasoning“, with the statement: “There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide“. (p. 3) Throughout 2,500 years of thought, oriental and occidental philosophers identify the human problem to be to die by our own hand. Confucius states the problem simply:

The Master said, Man’s very life is honesty, in that without it he will be lucky indeed if he escapes with his life. (*Analects*, Book VI, no. 17)

When we think, we do not necessarily think *of ourselves as we are*.

Tolstoy’s Ivan Ilych is the perfect example of unrighteousness running faster than death, of

pretending to know causing disease; such exemplifies the serious philosophical problem of suicide. Ivan Ilych, though alive, died by his own hand. Ivan Ilych lived a double life: a biological and a psychological life. Biologically, Ivan was alive and unique; yet, psychologically, Ivan was someone whose thinking required that his actions mirror the approval of other people. Ivan was suicidal because he thought he should live as his legal peers lived, as other aristocrats lived. Ivan’s attitude suffocated his ability; he acted appropriately: he spoke French and played *vint, bridge*!

Tolstoy begins *Chapter ii* of *The Death of Ivan Ilych* with the simple comment: “Ivan Ilych’s life had been most simple and most ordinary and therefore most terrible“. Ivan’s life and death is a living example of what Socrates had been teaching, namely, the danger of lacking self-knowledge and of being ignorant of not-knowing. Lao-tzu would describe Ivan as “diseased“.

When do we decide not to live, literally to commit suicide?

Ivan lived a life of “propriety“, or, in Plato’s words, a life of appearance based on “what others said and did“. Tolstoy describes the result of living his life by “what others said and did” within *Chapter ix*, as he depicts Ivan in the midst of pain reflecting upon his condition:

‘What do I want? To live and not to suffer,’ he answered... ‘To live? How?’ asked his inner voice. ‘Why, to live as I used to - well and pleasantly.’... And in his imagination he began to recall the best moments of his pleasant life. But strange to say none of those best moments of his pleasant life now seemed at all what they had then seemed - none of them except the first recollections of childhood. There, in childhood, there had been something really pleasant with which it would be possible to live if it could return. But the child who had experienced that happiness existed no longer, it was like a reminiscence of somebody else.

As soon as the period began which had produced the present Ivan Ilych, all that had then seemed joys now melted before his sight and turned into something trivial and often nasty.

And the further he departed from childhood and the nearer he came to the present the more worthless and doubtful were the joys. (*p. 147*)

“Living his life by what others said and did” amounts to living life by what is “proper” or “right” in the eyes of our peers. Ivan’s attitude was to live as his peers lived, so Ivan ignored his abilities and died because of this attitude. Ivan lived by thinking what his peers thought and did, literally a life according to the **mores**, or morals of his peers. When we live such a life, we seek the approval of others and do what is “socially acceptable“. We expect respect and recognition in return. We want to be “moral“. Socrates chided the Athenians for living their lives in such a manner; Socrates called it living according to “wealth, honor and reputation“, ignoring the value and virtue of the soul and he warned them that to live such a life is to live “unrighteously,” literally, an unbalanced life - Confucius calls it a “dishonest life” and Lao-tzu labels it “diseased“.

Acting in a proprietary manner has nothing whatsoever to do with what is right or wrong, true or good, ethical or unethical, to what is internal to oneself.

Such proprietary living ignores **who we are** in favor of **what others do and say**. Such a life pertains **only** to what is external

To live as others live is to live a life of avoidance as well as dependence.

and “approved” by others, where wealth, honor and reputation become the purpose of our daily living. Our motivation is to be accepted, not to do the right thing. Yet, such an intent is contradictory to any natural desire to live, so such thinking is self-destructive, suicidal. Besides, even if our motivation is the approval of others, we still lack their acceptance because they approve us not for **who we are**, but for **how we appear to them**. So to hope for approval by others not only frustrates our intention to be accepted as we are, but also means we deny who we are. To act with the thoughtful intent to obtain approval, therefore, is to lie to ourselves and to others. But, to lie to self is to commit suicide.

People oriented in such a way avoid responsibility and choice; but worse, they avoid themselves and deny who they are. Although doing what we think other people would like us to do is a rather comfortable existence. it is the “luxury” of avoidance. We make no ethical decisions about our actions, thus, we avoid any responsibility for the consequences of our actions, but such a life is “most simple and most ordinary”: “You said I could”; “They all do the same thing”; indeed, “The devil made me do it“. These are typical responses calculated to shift blame and avoid responsibility. Such a “simple” and “ordinary” life-style achieves the comfort of acceptance and approval, a very transitory comfort, as it only can be since the motive for such action is dishonest and self-denial. Such a life is lived in intolerable pain.

To live in the past or in the future is not to live in the present.

This life-style leads us into deception where we not only deceive ourselves, but we impose our deception on others. We claim

to be moral, yet, we disclaim being responsible. Many make this on-going deception such an integral part of our lives and our responses become so habitual that we are not even aware of our self-deception. Ivan lost contact with himself: “...the child who had experienced that happiness existed no longer, it was like a reminiscence of somebody else“. The “person” whom Ivan had become was a foreigner, a stranger, someone else, a creation of himself in the image and likeness of his peers, one who acted and lived “properly“. Appearing successful, happy and good replaced Ivan’s reality of being happy, good and virtuous and Ivan hurts terribly.

What **is** true and good, right or wrong, becomes irrelevant; rather, what **appears** good, right and acceptable becomes the **only** relevant issue. Others' decisions and thinking take control of our reason and will and our self-worth reduces to the question: "how do others see me?" We human beings trade our internal, self-direction, **who we are** for external self-direction and orientation, **being other than we are**. It is through this self-imposed deception that we have chosen **not to be free**, to be who we are; we therefore choose to be irresponsible. We pass over to others our reason to live and, therefore, refuse to live as we are. Thus, we become slaves, held hostage to the approval of other people, our parents, peers, and pass self-control to outside agents. We no longer make independent decisions, or act with the choice which is the essence of human freedom. e e cummings describes such a person:

The life we hope for is the gift of life we possess!

when man decided to destroy himself
he took the was of shall
and finding only why
smashed it into because

Ivan Ilych was such a person. His reason was not to reason. He chose not to choose and this decision made his life "most simple and most ordinary", as the life his peers lived. Ivan's self-reflection was limited to "his approval rating". Yet, this life was also "most terrible" because the pain of not being himself affected his physical health. Ivan became ill, but this illness eluded discovery by eminent doctors of science because the physical hurt was a symptom of a spiritual illness,, not susceptible to the scrutiny of science. His physical disease was symptomatic of a more destructive disease, dis-ease of the spirit, the imbalance of living other than we are.

Not even the best professional scientists can save us from the illness which causes death because even nature heals internally.

Tolstoy's brother, Nikolai died in 1860, slowly and painfully; Tolstoy was close to his brother. Tolstoy

married in 1862; his first born son, Petya, died in 1863. Tatyana, his wife, died in 1874. Tolstoy wrote:

If not today - then tomorrow, sickness and death will come to those I love, to me; and nothing will remain except stench and worms. My affairs, whatever they are, will sooner or later all be forgotten, and I simply won't exist. So why make any effort?

A life of darkness, empty of meaning faced him:

The horror of the darkness was too much for me, and I wanted to free myself of it as quickly as possible with a noose or bullet.

Tolstoy sought to control the forces of nature. He turned outside himself to the natural

The best of medical science can not bring health where attitude has generated disease.

sciences, to mathematics, to the social sciences, then, to philosophy and, finally to the lives of his peers - Ivan Ilych might be Tolstoy's autobiographical character. Tolstoy, like Ivan Ilych did not find the meaning he sought in these disciplines or friends because his problem was his interior lack of self-meaning, something only he could discover but whose discovery was blocked out by his attitude that hope could be found in external sources. Yet, Tolstoy believed strongly in reason; however, no scientific or philosophic knowledge would dispel the darkness of arbitrary sickness and untimely death or dissipate the emptiness he felt within as a result of these losses. The sickness and death of his family were things over which reason and will could exercise no control, yet seemed so wasteful and unjust. The life Tolstoy found was not the reasonable life he sought.

Then, Tolstoy found something within the common people of Russia, "the Gerasims", natural people, religious. Tolstoy had to admit that only a supra-rational knowledge, or faith, lighted the darkness of death and provided fragile life with meaning. Tolstoy wrote *The Death of Ivan Ilych* (1886) to teach this simple, but human truth, a self-learned lesson. His self-reflection became his self-discovery. Tolstoy learned what life was **not**, but could be; faith taught him something no other human being could teach: trust nature as present and operative in himself as the only reality controllable by him. Faith and trust were under his control, since he could control only how he reacted to what happened to him, but he had no control over what happened to him. Tolstoy learned the reality, value, peace and happiness of taking responsibility over his own actions and reactions; he learned to be ethical.

Ivan Ilych and Self-knowledge

The setting of this novelette is significant: Peter Ivanovich looked through the newspaper during a "recess in the Melvinsky proceedings", during a trial, wherein innocence or guilt is decided within the law courts. Justice, of course, is objective, based only on primary, first hand evidence or testimony. Judges base verdicts upon external evidence because the evidence implies and infers the internal motive. The setting of *The Death of Ivan Ilych* reminds us of the

Apology. The Apology opens upon the trial of Socrates. Socrates acts as his own defense attorney before the 501 peer Athenian jury. Socrates comments that the opening statements of the states' prosecuting attorneys almost made him forget who he was because the prosecutors were so convincing. Tolstoy has a fellow lawyer friend of Ivan, Peter read Ivan's death notice.

Ivan's illness was said to be incurable, but the doctors could not decide what was wrong with him. Those medical doctors diagnose disease in a manner analogous to the way judges render decisions. Both judges and doctors judge their clients' condition according to the evidence presented. Skilled in medical science, doctors judge about the condition of a patient's internal health or sickness from external symptoms. But, Ivan's doctors could not discern the cause of his illness since it was internal to him; thus, they could not alleviate his pain nor prevent his death. Objective science and skilled doctors failed Ivan. These scientists could not even diagnose his illness, so, they could not save him.

The first reaction to the obituary notice of Ivan's death is a physical loss, just as Socrates's first reaction to the prosecutors' description of him was a loss of identity. Yet, we read that Peter thinks of Ivan's death as a physical loss only in the sense that his death is useful. Ivan's death is the event which opens up a job opportunity, a vacancy, a "hole" to be filled by one of his fellow lawyers and, therefore, an opportunity for promotion. This observation alerts us to the fact that Ivan was not a presence to his peers; rather, they remembered Ivan only in relation to filling a job, as a functionary which now must be replaced so the function may continue.

The second reaction is just as "objective"; it is "the complacent

To decide not to live in the present is to decide not to live.

feeling that, 'it is he who is dead and not I', each one thought and felt, 'Well, he's dead but I'm alive!'" We all find that at some time or other we react this way, whether we drive past a serious accident, or see someone stopped on the side of a freeway by a police officer - "but for the grace of God..". or some such comment streaks through our minds. Such a reaction focuses on external facts. Ivan's "friends" are not reflecting upon themselves and the meaning of life, nor on the value of their own lives. They think about themselves as occupying a place, a space, and the relation of it to a promotion, to honor, reputation and more wealth. "How" they are living is lost in the fact "that" they are still living, but Ivan is not. Ivan's friends have "busied" their minds with hopes of material gain, not reflecting for a moment on the factual reality of their mortality and spirituality. Socrates criticized his fellow Athenians for caring more about

wealth, honor and reputation, external entities than caring for their soul, the internal reality. Confucius advised:

To live is not the same thing as to be alive.

The Master said, In the presence of a good man, think all the time how you may learn to equal him. In the presence of a bad man, turn your gaze within. (*Analects*, Book IV, no. 17)

Note that both reactions refer to Ivan's death as a loss, which in turn, makes his friends aware of a gain, for a lucrative promotion, a quantitative life of more material security, as if an increase in quantity would result in an increase in quality. Their awareness of being "alive" relates only to external and material "goods", like job, honor, wealth. They, therefore, have no understanding of dying because they have no awareness of living. Their habit focuses on having because their reality consists in possessing, not being. Consequently, neither reflection gets "inside" them, to their souls so neither results in self-knowledge.

Peace comes when we free ourselves from what is not important.

The third reaction records his friends' secondary reflection on the

effect of his death: "that they would now have to fulfill the very tiresome demands of propriety by attending the funeral service and of paying a visit of condolence to the widow". Here we find expressed the "most terrible" aspect of acting according to "propriety. "The "proper" Ivan dies and provides his "friends" with a brief and hopeful pleasure of material gain, yet, at the same time, stings them with the painful realization of the "proprieties" attendant to the pleasure of material success, such as "paying respects" and "religious mannerisms". So, even their hope of material reward reminds them of the pain of performing external proprietary duties; living by external standards results in dying by external standards, condemned to suffer again! They fail to reflect, to get "inside" themselves, to their souls and gain any self-knowledge. They remain oblivious to the contradiction between the natural self and the proprietary self they are living.

To have the companionship of marriage without friendship with ourselves is to deprive ourselves of companionship.

Tolstoy describes Ivan's life as "most simple, most common and most terrible", at the beginning of *Chapter ii*. His life is exteriorly oriented; it was one of propriety, resulting in moral living. Ivan has

lost contact with himself as a living, self-choosing human being. But, Tolstoy recalls that when he was at the School of Law he was just what he remained for

the rest of his life; a capable, cheerful, good-natured, and sociable man, though strict in the fulfillment of what he considered to be his duty - "... and he considered his duty to be what was so considered by those in authority. (*Chap. 2, p. 50*) Duty! Ivan's question began with: what must I do to be like others, to be accepted. Must became want; duty became freedom - which latter identity the Occidental, Immanuel Kant makes the subject of his celebrated thesis, The Critique of Pure Reason, a 1781 book which became the basis for all Protestant Theology thereafter - because of which Kant was heralded as "the Philosopher of Protestantism". Ivan became a slave! Ivan's very morality came from outside himself, from his "peers" so he has nothing to look forward to, no life of his own, no life after death:

At school he had done things which had formerly seemed to him very horrid and made him feel disgusted with himself when he did them, but when later on he saw that such actions were done by people of good position and that they did not regard them as wrong, he was able not exactly to regard them as right, but to forget about them entirely or not to be at all troubled at remembering. (*Chap. ii, pp. 50-51*)

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Indeed, whatever Ivan did "was all done with clean hands, in clean linen, with French phrases and above all among people of the best society and consequently with the approval of people of rank". (p. 52) This cleanliness again stresses the external, as do the "French" phrases; even the "best society" and "people of rank" are external. Both are required because they provide the "cover", or security necessary for a person lacking internal balance. Ivan's emaciated self is clothed with the mantle of social acceptability, or proprietary morals. How he looked replaced how he acted and how he acted took the place of who he is.

Ivan appropriately graduated from Law school and qualified for the "tenth rank of the civil service". His life was set and "safe", "most simple and most ordinary and therefore most terrible". He became a "new man", when new men were needed, a "magistrate", "began to play *vint*" (*bridge*, as was the custom of his peers) and, then Praskovya "fell in love with him". This touch of Tolstoy is profound. Ivan decided to marry, not as a result of an internal act of love or even a feeling of like, but only as a result of the external and objective facts that Praskovya "came of a good family, was not bad looking and had some property". (p. 55) Ivan's decision to marry was based on external looks,

possession of property and social status, or as Plato had Socrates describe it, wealth, honor and reputation.

As a matter of fact:

Ivan Ilych had begun to think that marriage would not impair the easy, agreeable, gay and always decorous character of his life, approved by society and regarded by himself as natural, but would even improve it.

To presume that external devices will save us from disease is just as suicidal as Ivan's presumption that imitating his peers would make life worth living.

But, then Praskovya “got pregnant“. Nature enters into Ivan's life and he finds nature an unwanted intruder! Ivan's introduction to “family life” is a “very intricate and difficult affair“, yet, he “only required of it those conveniences—dinner at home, housewife, and bed—which it could give him, and above all that propriety of external forms required by public opinion“. (p. 57)

We notice that Ivan was so unaffected by internal desire, even by passionate feelings that he would not even “have an affair“, or contract with a prostitute because any such action would deprive him of “that propriety of external forms required by public opinion“. This decision of Ivan's was not virtuous because his motive was not based on love of a good and thus on the rightness or wrongness of the act, so his decision could not be ethical—neither can decisions be ethical when they are based on such external motives such as, not catching venereal disease, AIDS, Cytomegalovirus (CMV).

The dis-ease of spirit, or vice, as we see in the case of Ivan Ilych frequently precedes physical illness. Yet, this is not surprising because being healthy is not the purpose of living for such as Ivan Ilych people. Not catching a disease is the motive guiding Ivan Ilych choices, so sexual activity becomes a mere function of a passion not an act of love between two persons. Thus, if “safe sex” is the motive, health and virtue become irrelevant, so dis-ease lurks in every functional act we perform!

After he received his law degree, Ivan was appointed assistant public prosecutor, but as married life became difficult, the salary became too little and Ivan felt forgotten and passed over for some seventeen years; so he lobbied for a job in Petersburg. “Thanks to a change in personnel“, Zsobar Ivonivich appointed Ivan to a position in the Ministry of Justice. Ivan bought a new house, furnished it with “antiques” and “superintended the arrangements, chose

the wallpaper... supervised the upholstering“. (*Chap. iii, p. 65*) Ivan found new incentive and energy by doing and organizing these external things.

However, Ivan literally “stepped outside” his judicial domain. He lost his patience with the decorator’s objective judgment as to how the drapes should be hung and injected “his” subjective view. Irrate Ivan climbed up the upholsterer’s ladder to show him how to hang the drapes. (Ivan “stepped out” of character!)

Ivan slipped; “he made a

false step and slipped...

(and) knocked his side

against the knob of a

window frame“. (p. 66) Ivan’s internal imbalance occasioned him physically to lose balance.

Ivan perceived death as an “it” because he perceived his life as an “it“.

The irony of this episode highlights the genius of Tolstoy. Ivan’s preoccupation with propriety led him “to climb the social ladder” to achieve honor, reputation and wealth. But now, he momentarily “bites it”: Ivan’s emotional desire for the external fact of perfectly hung drapes leads him to step out of his habitual character and he becomes unbalanced. Ivan climbs the ladder to perform a non-peer work, a personal work of setting the drapes properly. This climb results in a “mis-step” and is the beginning of the end, the beginning of Ivan’s internal pain, indicating his lack of internal pleasure and the end of satisfaction with the external pleasure generated by pleasing his peers.

This physical pain became the means through which Ivan’s attention focused on the emptiness and lack of virtuous wealth within his soul, notwithstanding the fullness of wealth, honor and reputation he had amassed outside himself.

To rationalize is to hide; to hide is to lie; to lie is to die.

This is the first time that any difference between his moral living and his ethical non-life occurred to him. This pain in his left side opened

up a window into his soul; honesty escaped and the fresh air of spirituality entered.

Tolstoy’s initial description of Ivan’s reaction to the “slip on the ladder” was that Ivan felt “fifteen years younger”—the ladder becomes symbolic of Ivan’s achievement of a high status in the Department of Justice and in the peer society and is comparable to the “going up” and “coming down” of Camus’ Sisyphus. Again, nature speaks to Ivan as the physical pain penetrates the proprietary veil covering Ivan’s past and Ivan remembers what he had forgotten, that younger feeling; and this youthful awareness escapes from the hidden memories of his youth. Ivan glimpses the lack of personal pleasure

which the peer pleasure has covered up all during his moral life of public service. This glimpse faces him with the difference between his emptiness in ethical living and the fullness of his moral life and marks the turning point of his life; Ivan becomes aware of the lack of balance within his life.

Ivan's affairs improve initially; but then they worsen, as he develops a queer taste in his mouth and feels increasing discomfort in his side - his moral living becomes distasteful and difficult. His kidneys are failing so his natural system can not eliminate the poisons from his body! He becomes more irritable and his temper increases (*Chapter iv*); his wife "began to wish he would die, yet, she did not want him to die because then his salary would cease"—the marriage, indeed, all his relationships are externally oriented, matters of convenience dominate and everything is contingent on wealth, honor and reputation. (p. 74)

With the exception of Gerasim whom he meets after he becomes ill, Ivan, his wife and his friends are prototypes of moral man, a "rationalizer", that is, man whose principal power, reason, has become enslaved to wealth, honor and reputation (recall the description Plato provided of such a man within the *Republic*) and whose actions are motivated by external approval rather than by internal decision. Thus, even when Ivan and his friends "reflect", whether upon death or the bruising of his body, the inconvenience of his death, the "reflection" centers wealth, honor and reputation, and does not recognize the lack of internal balance and the consequent poverty and pain the soul feels. This motivation reflects Ivan's "darkness of opinion", the opinions of peers, and society; therefore, it is blind to the light of Truth—Ivan, his wife and friends are wrapped within the dark sack of proprietary opinion.

"Ivan Ilych saw that he was dying, and he was in continual despair", because of "it". (*Chap. vi, p. 131*) True to habit, Ivan fled to his mind, whose education and skill had served him so well in his successful public life. His habit of rationalizing takes over again and he experiences a clash between his thinking and his living - the world of mind differs from the "real" world:

The syllogism he had learned from Kiezewetter's Logic: 'Caius is a man, men are mortal, therefore, Caius is mortal', had always seem to him correct as applied to Caius, but certainly not as applied to himself. That Caius—man in the abstract—was mortal, was perfectly correct, but he was not Caius, not an abstract man, but a creature quite, quite separate from all others. He had been little Vanya, with a mama and a papa, with Mitya and Vobdya, with the toys, a coachman and a nurse, afterwards with Katenka and with all the joys, griefs, and delights of childhood, boyhood, and youth. (p. 132)

Ivan then realizes that “It“, namely, death, is inevitable, uncompromising, unrelenting, not subject to “propriety” and not even his judicial mind can strike death from the record of admissible evidence in the courtroom of life confronting him now as a defendant.

It really is so! I lost my life over that curtain as I might have done when storming a

The habit of how we live becomes the reality of how we die.

fort. Is that possible? How terrible and how stupid. It can’t be true! It can’t, but it is. He would go to his study, lie down, and again be alone with IT; face to face with IT. And nothing could be done with IT except to look at IT and shudder. (p. 134)

The fact of death and the fact of the circumstances surrounding the injury which occasioned his pain are the evidence which now weigh upon his reflection, but the “why” still illuded him. Death is still a happening, an accident, an “It” - something **outside** himself, an impersonal, “objective” entity - a formidable enemy “with whom” he could not interact, much less “take in” as an integral part of himself. He could only **look at** “It“, thus keeping “It” as distant as he possibly could. He does not see that he has any responsibility or any remedy; Ivan does not yet see that he was not but could be ethical.

Enter Gerasim, a plain peasant, self-reflective, honest, out-going, a strong yet gentle man. Gerasim lacks peer orientation. Gerasim is Gerasim, spontaneous, natural and ethical. Gerasim is Tolstoy’s human counterpart to nature and the very contradiction of Ivan’s peers as proper people. Gerasim’s quiet strength, yet pleasant gentleness drew Ivan’s attention. In all other people, good health, strength, and vigorous life affronted Ivan Ilych; but Gerasim’s strength and vigorous life did not affront Ivan Ilych, but calmed him. (Ch. vii, p. 138)

Gerasim’s naturalness of being himself contrasted with Ivan’s and friends’ artificialness of being other than themselves.

Ivan’s thoughts here are the beginning of his turn within. Note how he says “other peoples” good health were an “affront” to him, but

the issue is really not others’ good health, strength or vigorous life that is the “affront“, but rather the “others” themselves. These are the “others” who embody all within themselves that Ivan hates within himself - that is, the deception and hypocrisy which cloth all actions performed only for social acceptability. Yet, “Gerasim’s strength and vigorous life did not affront Ivan Ilych, but calmed him“.

Here again, it is not Gerasim's "strength and vigor" that calmed him, but Gerasim himself. Gerasim embodied all that was true and good, therefore, he could not possibly be an "affront" to Ivan. Gerasim's naturalness and self-confidence appealed to Ivan's internal void.

We can see nothing outside ourselves that we do not have within ourselves and this fact

To be a "victim" is to be dependent; to be dependent is to deny responsibility and such a denial is suicidal

makes meeting Gerasim Ivan's beginning of self-knowledge, the condition for ethical living. The true and good Ivan Ilych is being "tapped" for the first time; Gerasim awakens Ivan to the true and good nature within him. Even though Ivan could not yet make this discovery his own, he did recognize it in Gerasim and saw it reflected within himself, if not consciously, then unconsciously, as Gerasim "calmed him". Gerasim understood Ivan as ill and accepted him as ill, independent of any job, peers, influence, wealth, reputation and honor. Gerasim cared for Ivan and was able to "calm him" because:

Gerasim alone did not lie; in every way it was evident that he alone comprehended what the trouble was, and thought it unnecessary to hide it, and simply pitied his sick baron, who was wasting away. (Ch. vii, p. 138)

To lie is to forget, to hide, to bury and to cover up; to live a lie is to suffocate. to commit suicide.

Most of us find "to be pitied" repugnant and distasteful and not something we seek from others, yet, when we find it pleasant, we also

seek fulfillment from outside adulation and recognition, what we can "get out of life", even when such recognition is pity! But for Ivan, pity represented a caring for him and an understanding of his illness, and in this respect, pity for his situation was most welcome. The attention to him as Ivan, ill and uncomfortable was the attention Ivan so desperately craved. Even Ivan did not attend to himself as Ivan, but only Ivan as others viewed him. So, when Ivan thought of himself, his thought was not of Ivan, but of Ivan-as-other, a lie and that thought was suicidal.

Ivan Ilych felt the greatest torment from the fact that no one pitied him as he longed for them to pity him...he yearned more than all - although he would have been the last to confess it - he yearned for someone to pity him as a sick child is pitied. He longed to be caressed, to be kissed, to be wept for...(Ch.vii, p. 138)

His thoughts here are poignant and require reflection beyond possibly the initial response of the “selfish man looking for attention“. Ivan’s thoughts call upon that longing in each of us, whether we “confess” it or not, for someone to care about us, to understand us, to be “with” us not only in joy, but possibly more importantly, in sadness and suffering.

Such a person accepts us as we are, independently of our wealth, honor or reputation. When we feel that we are understood and truly cared for, the burden of suffering diminishes somewhat because when we are loved; the lover shares our suffering. Ivan, like twentieth century Americans is not a person, someone valuable, unique and irreplaceable; Ivan is merely useful and, therefore, a “throw-away” when that usefulness ceases. So Ivan is unaware of *being loved* until Gerasim accepts Ivan as he is, in pain, ill and seeks to ease his discomfort. More than anything, Ivan longed to be loved. This longing was all the more profound because his life was not about love, but about the duty of approval, prestige, and what he could “get” from others. The void in his heart was total and he **longed** to have it filled. Just as all of us will die as we have lived, Ivan was dying as he lived. He lived morally, as an object approved by his peers; but, as a subject, Ivan, he did not exist so he was dead ethically.

Ivan’s other burden - equally as tormenting as his lack of others’ love for him - was the “lie“, the deception that surrounded him like a “sack”, hiding even precluding his love of self. His nature, his real **self** was forgotten, hidden beyond his vision by **other** and his love of other’s adulation. His real self was buried and covered up by that second-nature of propriety he had acquired by imitating his peers. Ivan was living a lie and this fact was intensified by his family, the doctors and his friends:

Ivan Ilych’s chief torment was a lie - the lie somehow accepted by everyone, that he was only sick, but not dying. (*Ch. vii, p. 137*)

Is the pain occasioned by *being other than we are* necessary for humans to accept and act according to *who each one is*?

Ivan is acutely aware of the “role-playing” and hypocrisy of all those around him; they are all

non-subjects because they are moral, acting because of peer approval, not acting because the action is right or wrong. Again, he detests in others what he detests in himself. No one (with the exception of Gerasim) is willing to “admit” to Ivan’s impending death. Ivan **longs** for honesty in those around him, yet he cannot be honest with himself and is further tormented by the fact that (they) “made him also a party to this lie“. The deception of others has drawn Ivan into self-deception, that is, making excuses for being a non-subject and, therefore,

not ethical. This self-deception further escalates his abhorrence for himself and those around him. This deception is not something new to Ivan, as he is only dying as he lived. Ivan's impending physical death is merely the logical result of his prior lack of living ethically occasioned by his daily, moral life.

Ivan, enveloped in self-pity and self-deception feels lonely and helpless, and since he cannot "get" from others what he longs for, he now gives to others the only thing he has to "give" -that is, **blame**. In his despair, Ivan

...wept over his helplessness, over his terrible loneliness, over the cruelty of men, over the cruelty of God, over the absence of God.(*Ch. ix, p. 146*)

The interior, physical pain sensitized Ivan to the fact that his "friends" are lying about his illness.

Ivan sees himself as a victim, and to be a victim necessitates a "victimizer", namely, men and God. Again, Ivan acts out

the way he has lived; he has lived by the approval of others, so he now blames his lack of self-action on others, men and God. Consistent with his habit, Ivan continues to act morally and to turn "without" - to blame man and God for their cruelty to him. These same "others" who once "gave" him his self-worth, were now blamed for his self-loathing and emptiness. Ivan experiences the weakness of living according to the peer approval from which he had drawn his strength to live in the public eye. His wealth, honor and reputation fail him; Ivan finds himself personally helpless in the face of illness. His internal power is as weak as the external "power" which occasioned his physical weakness was "strong". His "friends" and admirers cared not for him; rather, they used him, as he did them. This was cruelty, and God was cruel because they were made by God, in His image and likeness.

To live as "one ought" is not to live as one is.

Yet, Ivan's reflection about his peers and himself contrasts with nature's reflection of honesty in Gerasim. This contrast brings him

to the realization that they and he are self-made and this self-made is "pretend", in the image and likeness of peers, again, a function of propriety. Ivan sees that he is a moral animal, an object, not an ethical person, a subject. He has lived as "other", as a foreigner, even to himself. The "pretend" of Ivan's life becomes a bewildering thought to a tormented man:

It was as if all the time I was going down the mountain, while thinking that I was climbing it. So it was. According to public opinion, I was climbing the mountain; and all the time my life was gliding away from under my feet..And here it is already...die! (*Ch. ix, p. 148*)

Ivan Ilych begins to reflect in a way analogous to the thinking of Socrates and Sisyphus. He had objective knowledge of others, but he had no subjective knowledge of himself. The way to knowledge is thought to be “up”; the opposite “down”; yet, as Socrates observed, to be aware of what we do-not-know is the most basic and necessary knowledge. Ivan now feels the same descent that Sisyphus felt and begins to discover the reality of himself *within*.

Ivan, who was once gratified by all the wealth, honor and reputation that the world *without* could bestow, reluctantly begins to look at his world *within* when he questions the self-made values of which he was always so certain:

‘Can it be that I did not live as I ought?’ suddenly came into his head. ‘But how can that be, when I have done all that it was my duty to do?’ he asked himself...And when the thought occurred to him (that all this horror) came from the fact that he had not lived as he should, he instantly remembered all the correctness of his life, and he drove away this strange thought. (*Ch. ix, p. 148*)

To hear looks to outside things coming in, whereas *to listen* reflects upon things going on within.

Although Ivan’s self-questioning is a

“turn within“, it is but a *glance*, because his horror of the lack of self-knowledge and consequent emptiness is overwhelming. He realizes his greatest fear when he finds no “self“, but only “other” *within*. Yet, self-aborrence is dismissed as quickly as it is revealed: he “instantly...drove away this strange thought“. Ivan is habituated to peer approval, and has become a master in the craft of self-deception. Ivan chooses this luxury of avoidance and his comfort is the lie that it is absurd to think he has not lived as he should—after all, his life has been successful because it has been moral. Ivan, therefore, still avoids the origin of his pain, the cause of his illness, his way of thinking about himself. Resolution of Ivan’s painful, but “proper” life occurs only at the “end“. A simple thing happens, something which occurs through a sense, not his mind, through touch, not through thought:

This took place at the end of the third day, an hour before his death. Just then his son crept quietly into the room and went up to the bedside. The dying man was still screaming desperately and waving his arms. His hand fell on the boy’s head, and the boy caught it, pressed it to his lips, and began to cry. (*Ch. xii, p. 155*)

Ivan now, for the first time since childhood, turns *within*, reflects upon himself *as he is*. He questions hitherto unquestioned values, the “propriety” he assumed, his successful moral life. He looks for an answer which throughout his student

and adult life he assumed to be outside himself. Tolstoy writes that Ivan “grew still, listening“. Prior to this Ivan had only “looked” at others and heard approval. “Then he felt that someone was kissing his hand“. He opened his eyes, saw his son and “felt sorry for him...He felt sorry for her too“.

Ivan no longer sought “approval“. He felt empathy and tried to give

To live as we are is to be who we are and this is to live and be alive rather than to not-live and to be dead.

comfort—his taking from his job, others outside himself, now became a giving of something within himself, just as Gerasim did for him. He tried to apologize, but decided “...why speak? I must act..“. Again, prior to this instance, Ivan had only “followed” his peers, propriety; now, he leads, and acts.

Yet, Tolstoy deftly places this “breakthrough” after Ivan had given up on science and had taken the Sacrament “with tears in his eyes“. (*Ch. xi, p. 153*) For a moment, however, he considered an operation, then, realized the “deception“. Just before the Sacrament, he “lay on his back and began to pass his life in review in quite a new way“.

In the morning when he saw first his footman, then his wife, then his daughter, and then the doctor, their every word and movement confirmed to him the awful truth that had been revealed to him during the night. In them, he saw himself - all that for which he had lived - and saw clearly that it was not real at all, but a terrible and huge deception which had hidden both life and death. This consciousness intensified his physical suffering tenfold. He groaned and tossed about, and pulled at his clothing which choked and stifled him. And he hated them on that account. (pp. 152-153)

Ivan felt “stifled“, later, “suffocation“. Ivan’s inner self began to stir and felt “covered up“. He was angry with his family and friends for going along with his own self-deception, yet, this consciousness again was a deception because Ivan chose his life style, so this “consciousness intensified his physical suffering tenfold”! (Again, recall here the Greek word for “truth“, namely, *a - letheia*, literally, a forgetting, a hiding, a burying and a covering up; remembering and uncovering are painful!) “Propriety” did all of these things, but Ivan wanted “to live! I want to live!” (p. 153) Ivan wants to be real, to be himself.

After Ivan made room for the Sacrament and the feeling of empathy, “sorry” for his son and wife and asked “forgive“, then

...suddenly it grew clear to him that what had been oppressing him and would not leave him was all dropping away at once from two sides, from ten sides, from all sides. He was sorry for them: he must act so as not to hurt them: release them and free himself from these sufferings. (p. 155)

“How good and how simple“, he thought. “And the pain?” “What has become of it? Where are

To be our naked selves is as pleasurable as to be clothed in the habits of being other than we are is painful!

you, pain?” He has shed his resistance to being himself; he feels the natural punishment for living as someone else, the pain of being “other” than he is. He accepts the pain and exclaims: “And death...where is it?”

He sought his former accustomed fear of death and did not find it. ‘Where is it? What death?’ There was no fear because there was no death. (p. 155)

Recall Socrates. The clarity of *knowing that he did not know* replaced the confusion, even pain experienced when he was initially called a “wise man“. The awareness of what wisdom is **not** provides release from the responsibility of being right; Socrates relaxes in the honest awareness that he *is* wise, both aware that he knows and that he does not know. It is possible for us to draw an analogy here between Socrates and Ivan Ilych.

Perhaps, in his final hour, Ivan attained an awareness of what life is **not**, namely, living according to the pleasure of acceptance, being like others, or, propriety; this may have given him insight into what life is, namely, living according to nature and **being** oneself, different from others, something involving a certain pain. Thus, life, as Plato noted, is a mixture of pleasure and pain, always self-acceptance, sometimes rejection by others. The pain had called Ivan to pay attention to something he did not want to look at—himself! What he saw so disturbed him that his self-aborrence and hatred for others only escalated. Yet, Tolstoy observed: “In place of death there was light...’What joy!’”

We are compelled to reflect upon Ivan’s “joy” and “light“. Could it be that Ivan “leaped” from a life of fear, of self-loathing, abhorrence of the world, self-deception and blame to one of self-love, love of others, truth and responsibility in his final hour before death? Is Tolstoy dramatizing a human being’s decision to move from living a moral to an ethical life? If he made this death-bed “conversion“, then his joy was reality and his light was from within. However, the possibility remains that Ivan’s joy reverted back to his habitual self-deception and the “light” was externally imposed, unable to alleviate the darkness of lack of self-knowledge in which Ivan had lived and was now dying.

Yet, Tolstoy's depiction of Ivan's peace and joyful resignation seems to belie this possibility.

We must realize, however, that neither Ivan nor we are victims battered about by the circumstances of life, as Odysseus was by the Furies when he sailed through the strait of Gibraltar. Yet, even if we were, we can, like Odysseus steer our ship between these twin rocks, if we decide to do so. Ivan's life of propriety was the life that he chose to live; he lived within the house of life which he constructed. He chose neither to seek nor invite involvements in life below the surface level of propriety; Ivan rejected commitment.

To be who we are is natural, however, to be other than we are is artificial.

As he reflects back upon his life, Ivan may see more clearly the course and shape his life has taken, but the awareness in no way diminishes the fact that he possessed and was capable of exercising the power of free choice, yet, chose not to do so. Ivan chose not to be Ivan. He thought that *being other than he is* was a more successful way of living and the decision to live according to this thought was suicidal. This is perhaps the most severe pain he experienced, namely, the realization that he refused to exercise the power of free choice to be Ivan. Thus, he chose not to choose and, in so doing, he chose to be dependent, a slave to the whims, fashions, actions and, yes, in-actions of his peers, of other people, of propriety.

Ivan learned the lesson late in his life which all humans are born with, namely, the desire *to be who we are* is **natural**. The decision *to be other than we are* is to chose to be **artificial**. Ivan learned that the choice to be artificial leads to frustration, pain and to an irreplaceable loss of the time and experiences, never to be replicated. We, like Ivan must realize that the *nakedness of who we are* can not be re-covered under the habits and clothes of fashion and domesticity or we commit suicide. We must dig honesty out from under the cover-up of pretend.

The fascinating lesson of Ivan Ilych is that the human being, we, as wonderfully powerful as we are and as uniquely talented as each one is, can choose to be slaves, to be moral rather than ethical. A question, then remains. Was Ivan's "sense of himself" truly a self-knowledge that brought him to any real resolution about who he is so that he could "rectify" his life and die honest? Or, did Ivan in fact die as he lived, enveloped in self-deception, wrapped in "other", unable to see the reality of his *being*? Did his physical disease mirror his much more destructive dis-ease of the spirit?

If, however, we ask this question of Ivan, do we also not have to ask it of ourselves: can any of us ever recover the honesty of being ourselves, if we have lived the lie of being something other than we are? Tolstoy seems to answer this question with a resounding “yes”, but at such a painful price! So, we ask: must humans suffer such pain merely to accept and act according to who they are?

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