

## Introduction

### *Moral Experience Personified*

We sometimes neglect questions about what is good for us, such as the question of whether our conscience at times shows moral goodness in intentional attitudes or actions toward us as persons. We thus can fail to notice some intentional goodness in our lives and how it functions toward us. We shall examine how our neglecting some moral questions restricts our understanding and appreciation of intentional goodness in our lives. We shall see, however, that a suitably responsive attitude to moral values and duties can shed new light on vital questions about the nature of moral goodness and life's meaning. Such an attitude, involving self-adaptive attention to experienced goodness, can also figure in a person's commitment to a role for a good God in human moral experience and life. We may think of moral experience generally as awareness of, or attention-attraction by, factors bearing directly on righteousness or unrighteousness.

### **Moral Impact and Response**

In *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (1886), Leo Tolstoy imagines a troubled but inquisitive Russian judge, Ivan Ilyich, who reflects Tolstoy's life in various ways. Downtrodden with physical injury, Ivan confronts the "inner voice" of his conscience in moral dissonance and struggle and, according to my reading, in moral responsiveness in self-adaptation to experienced moral goodness.

## INTRODUCTION

### *Initial Awareness and Challenge*

Ivan's struggle and experiment begin with his awareness of inadequate moral goodness in his life (his main "suffering") and a corresponding challenge in a question from his conscience.

"What is it you want?" was the first clear conception capable of expression in words, that he heard. "What do you want? What do you want?" he repeated to himself. "What do I want? To live and not to suffer," he answered. And again he listened with such concentrated attention that even his pain did not distract him. "To live? How?" asked his inner voice. "Why, to live as I used to – well and pleasantly." "As you lived before, well and pleasantly?" the voice repeated.<sup>1</sup>

This self-reflection leads to Ivan's asking, for the sake of a good explanation, about the actual moral character of his life. He had assumed on the basis of his moral self-experience that his own role was morally good on balance. His self-reflection adds, however, to the moral challenge he faces by revealing moral dissonance and even conflict from within. His indicators in experience of his moral goodness now face discord from his experience of his moral failure. Such morally relevant dissonance leaves him troubled and perplexed.

### *Initial Response Adapted*

Tolstoy portrays Ivan as revising his initial understanding of his prior moral experience and life.

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

<sup>1</sup> Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, in *Great Short Works of Leo Tolstoy*, trans. Louise Maude and Aylmer Maude (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), p. 294 (hereafter DII).

## MORAL IMPACT AND RESPONSE

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 . . . Then all became confused and there was still less of what was good; later on again there was still less that was good, and the further he went the less there was.<sup>2</sup>

Ivan is adapting himself and his self-understanding to the actual moral experience of his life, including its dissonance, thus leaving behind some earlier self-deception about his moral character. Such self-adapting to moral reality, although painful at times, provides an opportunity for moral candor and for further moral challenge on that basis. Ivan is learning about himself through trial and error in his responsive self-reflection on his moral experience and character, including their dissonance. His process of self-adaptation to moral goodness rests on the moral values he experiences and accepts as motivating qualities, albeit with some change in those values over time.

*Fear of Moral Inadequacy and Despair*

Ivan expresses concern about his moral inadequacy in his life, and he fears what may be the painful truth about himself.

“Maybe I did not live as I ought to have done,” it suddenly occurred to him. “But how could that be, when I did everything properly?” he replied, and immediately dismissed from his mind this, the sole solution of all the riddles of life and death, as something quite impossible. “There is no explanation! Agony, death . . . What for?”<sup>3</sup>

The painful truth of Ivan’s moral inadequacy prompts his fear of despair (as well as of a lack of satisfactory explanation) regarding

<sup>2</sup> DII, p. 295.

<sup>3</sup> DII, p. 295.

## INTRODUCTION

his moral character and life. His potential moral failure in life seems too much for him to acknowledge and handle.

Tolstoy puts perceived moral failure at the center of Ivan's moral struggle. He remarks:

It occurred to [Ivan] that what had appeared perfectly impossible before, namely that he had not spent his life as he should have done, might after all be true. It occurred to him that his scarcely perceptible attempts to struggle against what was considered good by the most highly placed people, those scarcely noticeable impulses which he had immediately suppressed, might have been the real thing, and all the rest false. And his professional duties and the whole arrangement of his life and of his family, and all his social and official interests, might all have been false.<sup>4</sup>

Tolstoy identifies in Ivan's experience, perhaps in his conscience, morally relevant "impulses" felt but suppressed by him, thus indicating morally relevant dissonance in his life. He also gives a central role to Ivan's self-adapting to the new evidence from his moral experience and character, which indicates that "he had not spent his life as he should have done."

Ivan's self-adaptive change frees him from a harmful attempt to protect or to justify his previous moral self-image that suppressed the actual moral truth about his character and life. It also enables him to proceed, through self-adaptive attention, with moral inquiry akin to experiment to discover and to clarify what, if anything, lies behind the veil of his moral values directed toward a good life. Such values leave him troubled about the overall moral value and meaning of his life.

Ivan's search for moral self-justification includes his lashing out at God: "He wept on account of his helplessness, his terrible loneliness, the cruelty of man, the cruelty of God, and the absence

<sup>4</sup> DII, p. 299.

## MORAL IMPACT AND RESPONSE

of God. ‘Why have You done all this? Why have You brought me here? Why, why do You torment me so terribly?’”<sup>5</sup> Ivan finds no relief in his attempt at moral self-justification for his life, even if the attempt seeks relief in his blaming the “cruelty of God.” He is thus stuck in moral suffering over his life.

*Beyond Moral Self-Justification*

Tolstoy remarks that “Ivan was hindered from getting [relief from his moral suffering] by his conviction that his life had been a good one.” He also comments: “That very [self-]justification of his life held him fast and prevented his moving forward, and it caused him most torment of all.”<sup>6</sup> The latter moral torment, according to Tolstoy, exceeds Ivan’s considerable physical suffering, and it invites despair over his life. He simply is not in a position to justify his own life, given his moral shortcomings.

Upon relinquishing his dubious attempt at moral self-justification, Ivan has a powerful experience: He “caught sight of the light, and it was revealed to him that though his life had not been what it should have been, this could still be rectified. He asked himself, ‘What is the right thing?’ and grew still, listening.”<sup>7</sup> The “light” experienced by Ivan is more than heat and smoke, as it comes with a challenging moral purpose. It “revealed” something to him about how his life could be “rectified,” or made right, from a moral point of view. This revelation changes everything for Ivan. It opens the door to new hope for him regarding his overall life.

Tolstoy has Ivan’s moral self-adaptation to goodness continue, with his listening for further evidence in moral experience that

<sup>5</sup> DII, p. 294.

<sup>6</sup> DII, p. 301.

<sup>7</sup> DII, p. 301.

## INTRODUCTION

requires further adaptive attention, without his life being self-rectified or self-justified. We need to ask, then, exactly how it is to be rectified or justified. The moral experiment is thus ongoing throughout Ivan's later life, until its end, owing to the ongoing emergence of new evidence and discovery in his moral experience, including conscience. We need to consider, then, such vital evidence and its bearing on the meaning of human life.

Tolstoy builds into Ivan's life an important personal source of moral experience and evidence: a peasant healthcare assistant, Gerasim, who impresses Ivan with his attractive moral character under stressful work. Ivan remarks to Gerasim: "How easily and well you do it all!" Tolstoy adds: "Gerasim did it all easily, willingly, simply, and with a good nature that touched Ivan Ilych. Health, strength, and vitality in other people were offensive to him, but Gerasim's strength and vitality did not mortify but soothed him."<sup>8</sup> His "good nature, strength, and vitality" were morally grounded in goodness, in a way that was attractive to Ivan, even if they created some dissonance for him. They thus figured in Ivan's not losing hope for his life and in his ultimately catching "sight of the light." We need to consider, then, the role of moral goodness in other people for a person's appreciation of the overall value and meaning of human life.

Tolstoy has Ivan undergo a moral experience of God akin to Tolstoy's own life-changing experience, noted in his *Confession* of 1884:

"Live seeking God, and then you will not live without God." And more than ever before, all within me and around me lit up, and the light did not again abandon me. And I was saved from suicide. When and how this change occurred, I could not say. As imperceptibly and gradually the force of life in me had been destroyed and I had reached the impossibility of living, a cessation

<sup>8</sup> DII, p. 285.

## MORAL IMPACT AND RESPONSE

of life and the necessity of suicide, so imperceptibly and gradually did that force of life return to me.<sup>9</sup>

So, Tolstoy's own moral self-adaptation to moral goodness was ongoing and gradual, and it went against his initial effort toward his moral self-justification. Even so, it had a definite goal: to explain his actual moral experience, including its challenges, conflicts, and frustrations, with candor and illumination, for the sake of recognizing, appreciating, and self-conforming to the needed moral goodness in his life.

Tolstoy links the needed moral goodness in the meaning of life with the intentional will of God, as does Ivan (if with more subtlety in the latter case):

I returned to the conviction that the single most important purpose in my life was to be better, to live according to this will [of God for goodness]. I returned to the conviction that I could find the expression of this will in something long hidden from me, something that all of humanity had worked out for its own guidance; in short, I returned to a belief in God, in moral perfection.<sup>10</sup>

Tolstoy thus was moved toward co-valuing with God and even agreeably cooperating with God's will or purpose, as experienced by him, for him to "be better." Such cooperating can exceed co-valuing in that it adds inward commitment to outward action. It can include self-conformity in motive, action, and character to God's perfectly good will or purpose.

We shall explore how the kind of moral values recognized by Tolstoy and Ivan can motivate people settling on their attitudes, actions, and character. A critical issue will be whether such motivating by moral values is sometimes directed, perhaps intentionally

<sup>9</sup> Leo Tolstoy, *A Confession and What I Believe*, trans. Aylmer Maude (London: Oxford University Press, 1929), pp. 76–7.

<sup>10</sup> Tolstoy, *A Confession*, p. 77.

## INTRODUCTION

by God, toward a goal rather than being “blind.” If it is, this calls for some careful explanation, perhaps in terms of an intentional, directing divine source beyond humans. Tolstoy, as noted, thought of the relevant goal in terms of the divine purpose to “be better.”

We need to ask what exactly prompted Tolstoy’s controversial move to invoke God in relation to his moral experience, particularly in connection with his idea of “moral perfection.” We also need to ask whether that bold move was or can be well grounded, and, if it can, how so. This book explores such matters without being limited to Tolstoy’s or Ivan’s instructive moral experiences. It also allows for variable grounded responses to moral experience among humans. In doing so, it assesses the significance of this variability for the alleged reality of moral values and God. We shall see how moral experience and self-adaptation to goodness contribute to our discovery and understanding of moral values and perhaps even of intentional divine activity in our moral experience. The role of variable moral understanding among inquirers will contribute to our appreciation of motivating and voluntary factors in meaning for a person’s life.

### **God in Moral Values**

The book examines a controversial twofold question: Can we humans have lives with lasting meaning and value, and, if so, does God have any role here? The answer is grounded in moral experience of intentionally being led toward moral goodness through values and duties in conscience. A key feature of being led in this way is self-conformity to moral goodness, and the latter requires being duly inquisitive, responsive, intentional, and loyal toward such goodness in moral experience. The details required for such self-conformity will add clarity in due course, relative to moral motives, actions, and character. We shall see that God would aim for moral rapport or communion with humans, including a



relationship of volitional harmony in vital moral matters, for the sake of building human moral character and relationships.

We do not beg the question of whether God exists. Nothing would be gained by such cheating in our controversy. Instead, in all cases, evidence has free rein to indicate the nature of a person's moral or religious experience and the corresponding evidence it supplies. Given the variability in relevant evidence, we thus show mutual tolerance in characterizing our moral and religious experiences or their absence. This approach should save us from counterproductive dogmatism. It also seems to fit with the character of a good God who would be morally above coercing, manipulating, or intimidating inquirers. This strategy seems fair and fruitful for all concerned, and it seems to accommodate genuine responsibility for humans.

The very word "God" invites controversy and caution, given its breathtaking diversity of uses. This book adopts a simplifying assumption: The word "God" is an exalted title requiring of any titleholder worthiness of worship and trust, and thus perfect moral goodness.<sup>11</sup> It does not follow that God exists or even that using the title "God" commits us to the existence of God. The title "king of the USA," for instance, is intelligible even though there is no such king. (There might have been such a king, of course.) Likewise, the title "God" can be intelligible in the absence of God's existence. The meaningfulness of the title, then, does not settle the issue of an actual titleholder. So, the term "God," as we shall use it, is not a proper name that logically requires a bearer or referent. The title "God" might fail to refer to any real object. Agnostics and atheists, then, can discuss matters of God without assuming that God exists or that the title "God" is meaningless. A nondogmatic approach to God should accommodate this lesson.

<sup>11</sup> An illuminating discussion of the relevant notion of worship is H. H. Rowley, *Worship in Ancient Israel* (London: SPCK, 1967), pp. 246–71.

## INTRODUCTION

Some people find hope for lasting purpose in human life via evidence in their experience of moral values as powerful qualities intentionally attracting and guiding them toward a distinctive Godward goal. Such values, they report, are “for goodness’ sake,” as they intentionally lead them, with due timing and fittingness, toward love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, and faithfulness. These values are taken to be *filial* by them in being an interpersonal expression of and a means to God’s inviting, forming, and guiding a universal family of people reflective of divine goodness. Famously, the Apostle Paul takes them to be the “fruit” of God’s Spirit, being borne by God in divine character and action. He thus regards them as intentionally self-manifested character traits of God in human experience. We examine this prospect by attending to its suggested self-awareness of divine values that aim to challenge, support, and guide humans toward voluntary character formation for goodness’ sake.

Moral self-adaptation and experiment, including trial and error, toward the reality and nature of experienced values and duties offer a responsible way to assess, and perhaps to discover, the reality and the goodness of a God worthy of worship. They do so from the perspective of human moral experience and response. The general idea is this:

We self-adapt and morally experiment toward divine goodness and thereby God when we give our adaptive attention to any evident indication of such intentional goodness and thereby God in our moral experience of values, including our adaptive willingness to value God if divine goodness is suitably present in our moral experience.

This is an initial statement to be clarified in subsequent discussion. It does not specify a needed degree either of our willingness to value God or of the presence of divine goodness in our experience. In addition, it does not specify how divine goodness would or could be indicated or confirmed (or even disconfirmed) in human moral