

# The language of speaking about and reflecting on death: an analysis of L. Tolstoy's story "The death of Ivan Ilyich"

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*Phenomena are a visible manifestation of the invisible.* Anaxagoras

*Man is what he is engaged in.* M. Heidegger

This paper is an attempt to interpret the phenomenon of death, at least in terms of its relevance to our understanding of life, using L. Tolstoy's story "The Death of Ivan Ilyich" as a congenial starting point. It is an important attribute of death that it fundamentally defies analysis, and, with human consciousness blocking our access to anything that does so, we find ourselves unable to "admit" death into ourselves or identify ourselves with it. Hence our efforts to come to terms with the phenomenon of death by reducing it to a kind of semiotic form expressed in the accepted practices of mourning and burial. The inevitable clash between the phenomenon of death and that of *Dasein*, whose topos of opposition is being itself, results in an antinomy which can only be resolved by addressing the phenomenal essence of both as a means of looking beyond their mere contents, clearing thereby a space for thought that is normally occupied by consciousness. L. Tolstoy's treatment of his character's dying reveals the fundamental solitude of a human being in the face of the most crucial experiences of human existence, such as pain and death. The indefinite nature of such phenomena reveals the power of the impersonal, making one turn to oneself, to one's very presence in the world (cf. the notion of *Dasein*), the most authentic way of doing which is turning to one's childhood.

Compared with conversation concerning the situations of habitual life, the event of death gives a new direction to thinking, leaving no room for dialogue (with no common ground for communication) and creating a kind of conversation with oneself, which is thoroughly complete in itself. Death introduces a position of reflection that establishes a formal limit to the development of life and can properly be defined as a position of thinking. The event of death enables one to conceive life in its integrity. The *topoi* of life can be "cleared" of their contents and correlated to each other in their formal respect (i. e. that proper to life itself). Such a correlation is made possible by time, the time of the present, the time of life itself, which defies measurement and has no duration, and, for that reason, is perceived as fictitious, from the point of view of life's 'contents'. Thus, the event of death reveals itself as a 'utopian' and, at the same time, a theoretical point (topos), from which thinking unfolds itself. Such a position, which in fact is a metaphysical point of observation, enables one to consider what occurs in one's life from a new perspective and to coin language forms that are connected with thinking rather than with consciousness. This perspective also enables one to think of time irrespective of the specific contents of life, for it lies beyond their boundaries.

**Key words:** phenomenology, phenomenon, life, death, time, *Dasein*, language, consciousness, thinking, reflection

Death is always understood by us in what seems to be a veiled and disguised fashion, i. e. in a sparing way: a discussion of death, proceeding from the concerns of habitual, everyday thoughts and actions, i. e. those that are always and thoroughly situational, will miss its target in reflection on death. Why should it be like this? Most probably because a person who is reflecting in this way proceeds from the cares and concerns besetting him, in the parameters of which there can be no question of perceiving and seeing death. In a prism of life's concerns, death lacks a clearly perceptible image, and we are bound to fail to distinguish it as something essential, something affecting us directly. M. Heidegger tells us that "the ordinary *Dasein* understands itself in the most immediate way and mainly through what has customarily made its concern" (Хайдеггер 1997: 239). On the other hand, J.-P. Sartre, who is seemingly taking a polemical stance against Heidegger, remarks that "there is no place for death in my subjectivity" because death "is always outside it" (Саптр 2000: 552).

L. Tolstoy's story "The Death of Ivan Ilyich" (Толстой 1987) can be helpful in analysing the understanding of death and in identifying essential aspects of the coming of this event. Of course, it is not our purpose to engage in text analysis as such, we are rather trying to argue that it is possible to try to look at the event of death by concentrating our attention on how it happened to the protagonist of the story.

The text in question, published for the first time in 1886 and consisting of 12 chapters, is seemingly a narration about the *private* events of the life and death of an *ordinary man*. In the first chapter, the reader finds a newspaper report about the death of Ivan Ilyich Golovin and sees a reaction to this event of his colleagues, family and acquaintances. The service for the dead and visits of condolence paid to the family of the deceased are also depicted. The following two chapters portray the past life of Ivan Ilyich which was both "a most simple and ordinary and a most awful one". From these chapters the reader learns about the most important events in the main character's life from the moment of his birth to the moment of his death at the age of forty five.

It is shown how, in the process of maturing, a person forms a spectrum of values connected with the *public* perception of his life's contents and with the definition of his *social* status. It is emphasized that all the other events connected with the inner world of the hero and the circle of his human relations are made dependent on his *external* circumstances. Beginning with Chapter Four, Tolstoy concentrates his attention on the event of the illness which *suddenly* afflicts the main character, as well as on the progressive disintegration of all his relations which were formed at the time when he enjoyed good health: both his relations with the family and colleagues, and his attitude to himself. The increasing destruction of what seemed to be the established order of things forces the main character to take a *different* stance to what his confidence had been previously based on. In fact, Chapters Four to Twelve confront the reader with an increasing 'deepening' of the event of illness, during which the main character is compelled to reconsider many of his *conventional* attitudes to various components of life. From Chapter Five on, the illness is understood by him *in the perspective of death*, as he gradually comes to realize not only human mortality in general, but also his own mortality. As they fall apart under the pressure of death and begin to be understood in a new way, the contents of life practically force the protagonist to scale down all his communications with other people and to become isolated within his inner world. Loneliness helps Ivan Ilyich to review everything around him and also to thoroughly reconsider his past. In the final chapter, it is shown that, being practically at death's door, the main character understands that his own life, examined by him in view of the event of

death, appears “worthless”, while justification of the contents of his life prevents him from recognizing either the power of death or its meaning.

This has been a brief summary of the story. In our opinion, this text, 54 pages long, can serve as a *starting point* and *springboard* for thought seeking to understand death. The relative brevity of the story, its sober, almost chronological narration and the precision of its descriptive language enable us to treat this literary work as a kind of magnifying glass that will make it possible to focus our attention on what is normally left unobserved<sup>1</sup>.

At the same time, it would seem possible to try and deepen own understanding of an event of death, and thereby – our understanding of the meaning of such an event for *the living*, i. e. its relevance to anyone’s life. It should also be added that, in our view, a reader has the right to interpret the contents of the text in his or her own way, and consequently the practice of adding new perspectives of perception different from those of the author seems to be justified to some extent. This is why bringing philosophical reflection and language features into what is being read becomes essentially motivated.

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Each of the people around Ivan Ilyich, confronted with his death, gives much thought to the fact that it is *he* who has died, not *me*. It is significant that the human *ego* is incapable of letting death into itself and directly identifying with it. It is a specific feature of the phenomenon of death that it is indefinite and fundamentally defies limitation at any point of time or space. Death “comes to us from without and transforms us into the external” (Caprp 2000: 550)<sup>2</sup>, i. e. it deprives us of independence and self-reliance. This is why death frightens us by its openness which is capable of breaking and hacking to pieces any boundaries of people’s inner world. Death frightens us by being *unanalysable*.

It is an interesting fact that consciousness blocks in every possible way people’s direct contacts with anything that defies analysis and consequently cannot be calculated, forecasted and projected. Should anything of this kind happen (when it does it annoys us by being a troublesome exception to the rules), it must at all costs be thrown out of consciousness or any area that consciousness covers. Even the phenomenon of life itself, thanks to the industry of birth control and the universal availability of contraception, turns out to be something that can in principle be calculated.

But death is different. Perhaps today this phenomenon is almost unique in not being something that we confront ‘on our own terms’. Is that not the reason why, caught unaware by a meeting with death, we all do our best to reduce this phenomenon to a mere manifestation, something that is achieved by giving it the form of a *sign* thanks to which the event

<sup>1</sup> This paper is a result of reflections suggested by a course of lectures on the problems of philosophical anthropology delivered by the author to the students of Petrozavodsk State University and, somewhat later, in 2005, to the post-graduate students of philosophy at Murmansk State Pedagogical University.

<sup>2</sup> Let it be noted that J.-P. Sartre repeatedly emphasizes the idea that death cannot be understood in the context of a continuation of life. Thus, reflecting on death, he says: “<...> It becomes *my* death, only if I have already placed myself within the perspective of subjectivity; it is my subjectivity determined by the pre-reflexive *Cogito* that makes my death irrevocably subjective, it is not death that gives an irreplaceable ‘self’ to my ‘for-myself’” (emphasis in original. – A. S.). Ref.: Caprp 2000: 540. Further on, he explains this idea: “As a consequence, death cannot be my own possibility; it cannot be one of *my* possibilities” (emphasis in original. – A. S.). Ref.: Caprp 2000: 545.

of death becomes connected with a multitude of signs in reviewing which our consciousness gains confidence of its existence and importance. All of this is only natural, since death, now correlated to a series of acts and thoughts that proceed from people's concerns and are expressed in the business of funeral, ceremonies and rituals (extreme unction, service for the dead, burial service), as well as in the practice of giving one's condolences to the friends and family of the deceased would seem to be tamed by consciousness and connected through it to a great number of signs.

Thus, held in captivity by signs, the event of death is thoroughly "extenuated". The very possibility of understanding death as an event that puts an end to life (and this is something that consciousness insists upon) makes death appear tamed. Tolstoy pays special attention to the attitude to such actions (possessing the value of signs), which sees them as an expression "of the boring duties of decency". Let it be noted that, through signs, we are able to reduce the indefiniteness and immensity of death to nothing.

However, all this works until the moment that may be slow in coming but that is ultimately inevitable when death, breaking the boundaries of signs, overtakes people by its *phenomenal* 'worth' and becomes a source of horror in the face of which consciousness is unable to function prudently and controllably and can only develop in a sporadic and faltering way. As a result, we understand, as Sartre puts it, that death "cannot *put an end* to our life", it "can only *make life completely meaningless*" (emphasis in original. – A. S.) (Captp 2000: 544). It is worthwhile, at least, to heed the words of the philosopher who insists that "death not only devastates my expectations, radically eliminating *expectation* and leaving uncertain the realization of the aims that testified to what I am, death also gives a meaning to everything that I lived by in my subjectivity" (emphasis in original. – A. S.) (Captp 2000: 549).

The picture depicted by Tolstoy induces us to experience the acuteness of the meeting of one who is alive and conscious with death as an event which cannot be located either within the limits of life or within the scope of our consciousness. The collision of the phenomenon of *presence* (*Dasein*) determined in its worth by one finding oneself in one's inner world, with the phenomenon of *death exposes* their "untranslatability" into each other, unless, of course, one of these phenomena is qualitatively distorted, in which case the event unfolding itself from within each of them is simplified and degenerated before our consciousness. The need for such a simplification is connected with the inability of our consciousness to endure in the *topos* of antinomy. If you proceed from life, death is intolerable. However, we have to suffer death and bear its pressure! If we are honest to ourselves, we will have to understand that despite the impossibility of bearing death we still bear it. We bear it *ourselves!* We bear it *by ourselves!*

A solution to this antinomian collision could be found in turning to the understanding of the phenomenal essence of both presence (*Dasein*) and death, i. e. in attracting one's immediate attention to the fact that in both cases one collides with phenomena of one's existence, by means of which it is possible to understand something both in life and in death besides their "contensive" component.

Otherwise one runs the risk of getting entangled in only one side of the contradiction. One is either immersed in the "contensive" part of life and consequently, proceeding from one's existence, is unable to accept death with dignity, for each and every "cell" of his existence resists it, no matter whether it is determined by present, past or future; or else, one is thoroughly absorbed by the event of death and is, then, inclined to discredit the "conten-

sive” part of one’s existence when one reflects on life as if it was something happening to someone else. A “privileged” point from which the consciousness of such a person proceeds and to which it returns is then the compromising of any “contensive” parameter of life.

Coming back to the topic of our conversation, it is noteworthy that the inability to ‘let into oneself’ the phenomenon of death probably comes from one’s inability and unwillingness to carry out – with regard to oneself – a phenomenological “shift” which alone makes it possible to distance oneself from being concerned exclusively with life or only with death. Through a direct interaction with these phenomena one creates room within oneself for thought (the ability of thinking), this room being normally occupied by the concerned consciousness together with its intentionality structure.

Thus, the human being is an arena of struggle between the phenomena of *presence* (*Dasein*) and death when the human space and time turns out to be connected with one of these principles. The *presence*, which is *always internally complete*, aspires to reveal itself in the *completeness* and *fullness* of existence, consequently it cannot admit death at any point of its scope. Death is in a collapse of definiteness of everything that is connected with existence, and death also gravitates to absolute *completeness* and *fullness*. This is why any barrier to death is inevitably destroyed by death oneself. Confronting the phenomena of *presence* and death it is important to understand their integrity: this is a way to determine oneself in being or failing to be receptive to *being* oneself. Being is a *topos* of opposition of the phenomenon of *presence* and the phenomenon of death, when the integrity of one phenomenon – either that of presence or that of death – is determined precisely by the opposite phenomenon and by correlating itself with it, which induces us to raise the question about their role and value in the parameters of our life. Being in the state of consciousness, we first pass through the stages of their initial incommensurability and discontinuousness, then through those of a partial increase of their overlapping within which consciousness experiences an antinomian dissension, and only then do we pass through that of understanding the inevitability of both phenomena for the human being, a stage when the time of *consciousness* is displaced by the time of *thinking*.

Left to its own devices, presence (*Dasein*) cannot bear itself, which is why it is transformed into “givenness” (*Vorhandensein*) when the human being is inclined to feel himself to be a vessel or a container<sup>3</sup> filled with various contents against his will. Thus, the only barrier to a distortion of the nature of *presence* is its association with death, when the one who is *present* concedes, as a matter of principle, to a certain relationship with the event of death which helps him to identify himself with the territory and time of “givenness”.

Without the “event” dimension, a human being’s effort of life cannot be connected or correlated to any depth. Consequently such a human being is unable to bear depth. As a result, everything that happens to him is unable to leave a trace, for his essence has been pushed up to the surface of life and driven into what is existent. The unaffected essence of the human being is compressed to uncertainty and slumbers until it is awakened by the meeting with death. In this case, the human being is unprepared to the meeting with himself and his presence: it irritates and frightens him.

<sup>3</sup> As one song, rather popular in the recent past, proceeding from the implication that the singer’s attitude to his life is based solely and exclusively on his existence, puts it “I am a bamboo, an empty bamboo”. Let it also be noted that when one has filled oneself with something, it is incredibly difficult to let in something new, it may even be impossible.

The life of Ivan Ilyich, as depicted by Tolstoy, does not seem to differ essentially from the life of any other person. He has lived a “decent” life. And up to the point of a qualitative change of the order that had established itself in his attitude to the current events, his life has been going smoothly, i. e. it has been in complete conformity with the “hallmarks of decency” in terms of growing up, attaining a certain social status and promoting one’s career, having a family and a home.

The word “decent”, employed in different combinations as a means of characterising the protagonist, is used by the author quite frequently. In this sense, Tolstoy is a classical writer: he does not “allow” Ivan Ilyich to indulge in extravagance or go to the extremes. The author does not waste his talent on trifles, i. e. on something that can distract us from the basic story – the line connected with Ivan Ilyich’s “normal” and “decent” behaviour during all his life up to the meeting with death. So the reader’s view is directed to the most essential things, and his attention is focused immediately on the contents of what is happening. It is precisely because Ivan Ilyich’s life is “normal” and “decent” that anyone reading the text of the story can relate to what is described in the story without any effort, i. e. the reader is able to identify himself with the actions and behaviour of the main character. It should be added that one of the major characteristics and indispensable attributes of observing the rules of decency in life is one’s intention “to pretend” – just like the main character who “pretended to be doing his duty to the defendants”, or the famous doctor who “pretended to be doing his duty to him”. Such an intention – *not of being*, but of *appearing* to be – is an attribute of decency. It is equally characteristic of lawyers and doctors. Probably, judging by the highest standards (and an ontological approach to the phenomena of life requires just that), a human being faces a dilemma: either to invest oneself continuously in life and one’s every single action, finding in this way a ground and basis for one’s *ego* that has no reason to place itself in a situation of inactivity and reluctance; or else, to invest one’s energy in “pretending”, using it as a source of strength for identifying life with existence.

It is especially interesting to emphasize that the first infringement of the normal order of Ivan Ilyich’s life was connected with his wife’s pregnancy and the birth of their child. The birth of a new life that has no basis in the old could not help but break down what appeared to be a permanently established order and stability of the contents of life in their relation to each other. It should be specially noted that life, at least at the moment of its emergence, just like death, appears to be *something indecent* and, in their “indecenty”, both events affect the human being in the most essential way. This is what Heidegger remarks: “Quite often people see the dying of others as a public impropriety, even a straightforward tactlessness, from which the public should be protected” (Хайдеггер 1997: 253).

Life, as well as death, forces us to take it into account. It must be taken into account regardless of there being or not any “reasons” and “arguments” for this. *The indecent* is in opposition to *the established*: it destroys everything that is correct. Let it be also remarked at this point that the necessity to reveal the validity and causality of what is happening is inevitably connected with the search for concrete circumstances, episodes and situations in life; this necessity springs from the consciousness which cannot reconcile itself to the fact that it has nothing to do with it.

Blowing up and breaking open the “decent” flow of life, it is *the unexpected* and *the awaited* (i. e. what has had neither place nor time in the past) that gains access to life through what is new. What is new arises within the horizon of risk when the human being lets it into himself and is compelled to engage in a groundless tying – through oneself and one’s



thinking – of new knots of life. Life in general, though, is nothing but this tying of knots from the various contents of different origin. This tying only takes place when the human being is able to master enough strength to tie through himself and on himself the various contents defined by mutually unconnected forms. And, of course, in the topos of such a tying of the threads of life, the habitual world falls apart and is no longer able to be a basis for life, for in this case the human being finds support in thought itself which serves as a basis for such tying which, in turn, destroys the basis on which everything that has formally happened is founded on. Thought is lightning. It is a fire which may burn, and does burn if the thought has really come into being as everything that has formally happened and taken shape.

The birth of a new life cannot but change the habitual state of affairs that has taken shape before, for it establishes, in an analytical environment controlled by consciousness, something that overturns any calculations and throws them out. It is reasonable to suppose that to stay unaware of it one must be very skilled in erecting internal, mostly psychological, barriers. And it is understandable that such a consciousness, “skilled” in immersing itself in its inner world, is in no need of *life* as such.

Everyone feels from time to time a need for an inner world: it is the only way of keeping one’s identity intact. Otherwise what seems to be one’s own space and time is taken up by something alien; though, strictly speaking, one’s space and time are not the property of a *human being*, but rather the property of *the world* and are given to a human being only for the time of his or her life. Someone whose consciousness is entirely engaged in the erection of all manner of barriers, dams and obstacles blocking the way whereby new phenomena might penetrate one’s consciousness, will inevitably aspire to keep the territory which is controlled and “calculated” by one’s consciousness. As a result, the inexhaustible human need for the *internal* is degenerated into a need for the preservation (almost at any cost) of one’s own tiny world for oneself; into a *need to have* an area where nothing would threaten one’s consciousness. With Ivan Ilyich, this manifested itself in an urgent need “to create a world for himself outside his family”, a need that he preserved to the end of his days and that only grew in intensity as time passed. His aspiration “to love his service more” made him a workaholic.

There is, however, another aspect of this state of affairs. As it drowns hidden in itself, the main character’s *presence* is substituted for by a state of consciousness and experiences in this connection a steady increase of its authority: Ivan Ilyich’s consciousness, being connected exclusively with his existence, does not experience any serious restrictions in terms of manifesting itself within a life viewed in this way. And, consequently, compressed in itself, the presence unconsciously intends to hold on to the presence of another, and if it fails to, it tries to strengthen its thoroughly “conscious” existence by an identification with the “conscious” existences of other people. It is understandable, that a criterion of one’s attitude to life in this case is not “*I*”, but, on the contrary, “*they*”, by means of which the strength of “*we*” is formed. Staying in the sea of existence is capable of bringing pleasure only as long as one has a large “amount” of presence in oneself. Otherwise, the key attitude to any depth in life, or even a possibility of any such depth, is hostility to, and struggle with it.

It is no wonder that, having lost his inner world and having connected himself essentially with the surface, i. e. with those contents of life that completely corresponded to existence and assisted his effective progress within its limits, the main character had developed a thoroughly cautious attitude to any forms wherein the human manifests itself,

excluding practically “everything crude and vital that always interferes with the smooth running of official affairs”. All his “pleasures” became concentrated in the sphere comprehended by consciousness and protected by it from everything that has nothing to do with conscious existence. The space and time of the hero’s life, controlled by consciousness, seem to be under a kind of umbrella: the areas reserved for the analytical become isolated by barriers – by barriers of consciousness – barring the way to anything that is brought in by life. A person like that has a clear intention to connect existence with an obligatory fulfillment of a number of ceremonies and rituals, whose observance ensures in fact the strength of consciousness. Besides this, dependence on different masks and disguises becomes an accompaniment to one’s lack of independence in the face of something new: a disguise of clothes, a mask of a facial expression, a disguise of bodily manifestations. These masks, by the way, oust us from ourselves; and it happens in such a way that we are lost: we are lost in ourselves. We lose ourselves as a *presence* in ourselves, as someone existent. And now that it has happened, we cannot understand *who we are*. We cannot understand *where* we are, or *when* we are *ourselves* and when not.

Being busy, one does not pay attention to oneself. Nostalgia for oneself turns out to be boring. Why does one become bored? Why does one suffer boredom? It is so because he fails to find oneself in oneself. When part of our being leaves for somewhere else and is immersed in something that has to do with ourselves, and we are strongly absorbed by an absence of ourselves, a time of boredom comes. The following stage on this way is melancholy and despair. Being unable to cooperate with oneself, one finds room for oneself on the edge of one’s inner world and assumes a marginal position with reference to one’s depth. It is difficult and sometimes impossible to reconcile oneself to it: having identified myself with respect to an existence which is not mine, for I find it too restricted, I cannot help but to fall in despair. Contrary to what Ivan Ilyich had imagined, it turns out to be impossible to compensate for the loss of one’s presence by means of improving one’s conditions of existence and intensifying one’s efforts aimed at achieving such an improvement. In this case, one does not live one’s “own” life. Consciousness is inclined to rule and to dominate. One can only control oneself and be strict towards oneself if one is in a state of internal split within oneself and takes the position of a *controlling* instance which in principle knows no barriers. Such is consciousness.

With a “split” entering our inner world and settling in it, we aspire to free our life from being governed by mood, and even if moods periodically capture us we aspire to reduce them to a set of calculated and predictable statuses of our psyche.

One’s moods, of course, do not cease to exist: we always proceed from a mood, even if we do not notice it. Everyone knows that moods vary. However, the use of the word in the plural does nothing to change the situation: it is not possible for us to have no mood at all. It means that, in relation to mood, we are always of secondary importance because, before anything else, we are always somehow tuned to a mood (Cepreeb 2004). That is why it is so important to understand one’s relations with one’s mood, as well as the way we understand a given situation.

Tolstoy emphasizes that the life of his main character, at the time the latter is preparing to meet death and has found himself in its immediate vicinity, manifests itself through a sharp change of mood when life itself appears “to be divided in two opposite moods”. Such a polarization of moods is highly indicative of the situation. Ivan Ilyich appeared at one moment to be in the authority “of despair and expectation of an incomprehensible death”,



and it was impossible to get rid of this mood “in no way at all”, while at the next moment he was in a mood of “hope and interested observation of his body’s activity”. Confronted with the phenomenon of death, he experienced a weakening of the strength of consciousness, as well as a sharp narrowing of the area covered and controlled by it; in fact this area was reduced almost to zero. It is no wonder that a characteristic attribute of such a mood is *incomprehensibility* which captures the human psyche, blocking all its conscious potentialities.

On the contrary, the opposite mood, springing from life, causes a growth and an obvious strengthening of consciousness when the human being is guided *by interest*, namely by an interest in observing everything that happens to him. Someone with this kind of mood constantly relies on the instance of consciousness which, since this mood has grasped him, meets no more obstacles for its development. It would seem reasonable to suggest that a human being is only alive, i. e. is only capable of living, as long as he experiences interest which serves to tune him to a certain mood. It is an interest in what is going on that makes it possible for consciousness to develop without any fundamental restrictions. If interest slackens, fades or is no longer there, the human consciousness dies, although the human body may continue to function<sup>4</sup>.

In the case of susceptibility to the mood of life that manifests itself in an uncontrollable growth of the instance of consciousness and in an actualization of interest, Ivan Ilyich aspires to grasp what is happening to him in the form of *a diagnosis*, i. e. by means of a conscious control of his existence. Diagnosis is one of those convenient means that the analytical attitude to life has in its arsenal, it is a means that enables one to penetrate the length and the breadth of one’s field of life, which, incidentally, is a way of reducing it to the form of “existence” in which any claims on the part of *being* are destroyed before they have had time to emerge and to be defined. Since the early Modern period, man has been intentionally organizing himself and his existence by means of intricately penetrating it with his consciousness, finally reaching a point where he can no longer do without it. It is highly characteristic of this attitude that the main character, in spite of the fact that he has found himself in the very centre of a collision of life and death, at the last moment of his life, proceeding from the latter and from consciousness (this unavoidable companion of life), aspires at any cost to define and to limit death. His intention of giving the immensurability of death the form of *definiteness* and *finiteness*, at a time he is actually at the death’s door<sup>5</sup>, is extremely revealing. Ivan Ilyich shares with everyone of us this urge to resist death which blows up everything that comes on its way. The centre of this “resistance” is to be found nowhere else but in consciousness, with its intention to subject everything without exception to a conscious consideration. We all have noticed at some point in our life that, overtaken by the death of our loved ones and thus confronted with the ontological intractability of death, we do our best to recall some events of their life, treating them as a support for our

<sup>4</sup> It has been emphasized before, though in a different context, that besides the meanings in question, the Latin “inter” also retains the meaning of *presence*, on the one hand, and that of *distinction*, on the other. The word ‘inter-esse’ means ‘to be in the middle’, ‘to be between’, ‘to be present’ and ‘to differ’. (Cepreev 2004: 243). Let it also be added that distinction and the ability to distinguish things, i.e. the analytical ability, along with the ability of identification, is an indispensable attribute of consciousness.

<sup>5</sup> “It’s over!”, said somebody bending over him. He heard the words and repeated them in his soul. “It is over with death”, he told himself. “Death is no longer there”.

consciousness. It can be clearly seen even in such a trivial situation as that in which one learns about the death of a friend or relative and immediately finds one's consciousness protesting against it in every possible way, making one exclaim things like: "It can't be true! I only talked to him (her) yesterday (the day before yesterday, a few days or weeks ago)". We seem to treat our interaction with the deceased person in the past as a guarantee for his or her immortality in the present. It should also be noted at this point that the death of someone we do *not* know fails to affect us and can in fact never be expected to, since it does not concern our *ego*, and consequently it can only become the contents of a *conscious* attitude and an element of *conscious* work appearing exclusively as information.

Consciousness is in fact none other than *concerned* thinking, the kind that has entirely connected itself with concerns and cares, which are in turn always connected with existence, for they proceed from it and return to it. This exclusive focusing of consciousness on existence serves both as a guarantee of the immensurability of the development of consciousness and a basis for the "shielding" of a human being exclusively within the horizon of a concerned existence. Death's defiance of analysis is substituted, in the protagonist's consciousness, by the question of choosing between a floating kidney and a caecum, which is made possible thanks to the ability of consciousness to calculate. This obliterates the irrelevance of any conscious choice on our part, brought along by death, and blunts the ontological extreme of the human situation. Death is thus located in the coordinates of a diagnosis, in certain places of the body and a chronology of time of the corporal existence; in this way consciousness wishes to cope with death and discipline it, reducing it to elements of existence. The question of life and death is substituted by the question of diagnosing a floating kidney or caecum.

Concerned with his existence, man places traps in order to cope with any unexpectedness and unpredictability that result from phenomena interfering with the measured flow of his life. This is reached *by the definiteness* of the questions raised by consciousness, and *by the admissibility* of the answers one receives to them. The metaphysical mode of questioning, the one that blows up all definiteness and goes beyond the fields established by consciousness, is inadmissible as such: what takes place can be described as a kind of *positivization* of the pressure of life, induced by a collision of being and nothingness. Such a positivization is achieved, among other things, by means of analysing the potentialities of language used by man, when the depths of language that cannot be penetrated by consciousness and consequently cannot be expected to serve it, i. e. the language structures and types of language that are not capable of being servants and vassals of consciousness are rejected. They are in this way denied a right to existence. Man grows accustomed to relying only on the language constructions that are verifiable by consciousness and, accordingly, to relying on verifiable judgments and conclusions. Language begins to admit as appropriate only those things that are open to verification. This is how we achieve the "domestication" and "adaptation" of things that are capable of touching the essence of man, that are capable of raising him to a pressure which is not calculated by the practices of consciousness. In particular, such a pressure can cause one to perform some exceptional act that can never and in no way be calculated, as distinct from the normal pattern of human behaviour.

If we can afford a little digression from our topic, it might be appropriate, at this stage, to suggest a kind of "ontological justification" of the Russian language. It is noteworthy that Russian has preserved an openness towards the ontological mode of questioning not only in its professional use by philosophers, but also in ordinary, casual speech. In fact,

this ontological advantage of Russian lies largely dormant in much of our philosophical discourse and, as a rule, is obliterated by the pressure of foreign speech. Anyone living in the Russian-speaking world knows how often and how naturally the Russians ask *ultimate* questions, trying to find out what everything *actually* is. Any Russian would know how relevant and important are the situations characterized by the expressions *na samom dele* (corresponding approximately to 'in fact'), *v deistvitelnosti* ('actually', literally meaning 'in reality'), *poistine* ('really', literally 'in truth'). It might seem amazing, but all these meanings are also found in the Greek word "ὄντως". Such ontological directness and straightforwardness in raising problems that can only discredit any "conscious" experience of existence (i. e. one springing from consciousness) permeate our habitual life. However, this 'ontologicality' is concealed in the philosophical language of those professionals who are oriented towards *other* roots: both towards other *language* roots and other roots *in life* (i. e. not those of their own).

It may be argued that our philosophical endeavor in future should, among other things, take up the subject of developing a philosophical 'toolkit' of terms rooted in our own native language, something that could eventually help to shape a new linguistic apparatus of thinking. It is by no means a question of celebrating the unique qualities of the Russian language, because in this case its philosophical (i. e. universal) dimension will simply fail to manifest itself. It is rather a question of understanding ourselves better through revealing the ontological peculiarities of Russian: this will enable us, through understanding our connection with existence and the anxious consciousness proceeding from it, to be prepared to face being itself and our own presence within ourselves.

It is not only death, but also pain that can dislodge one from one's orderly existence in a circle of concern and conscious awareness. Any radical change in the order of our existence will, of course, initially cause irritation and disappointment, for it is our natural disposition to desire order, we only feel comfortable in a zone where the chaotic flow of life is orderly structured and formalized. It is through endowing everything that is chaotic with an orderly character that our consciousness displays its importance and its proper status, whereas pain and death become alternatives to any conscious order.

Pain is such a powerful force that it grasps and possesses us entirely, and in grasping us, it forces us to take it seriously. As the intensity of pain increases, the human being sees the territory of existence which is under his conscious control to sharply reduce. Pain prevents him from concentrating on himself: his *ego* is reduced to nothingness, becoming ever more illusive. Pain, in a sense, takes one away from oneself. This reduction to nothingness when pain becomes more intense, is by no means a purely physical problem: the latter is aggravated by the problem of losing the possibility of being fully conscious and capable of reflection. With L. Tolstoy, the protagonist's "moral suffering" becomes more terrifying than his "physical suffering". The force of pain aimed at reduction to nothingness exposes an emptiness within ourselves to which it is difficult to reconcile oneself. Thus, pain supersedes our presence, acting as a companion of death. Something alien settles in the human being and begins taking an increasingly definite shape, something that has no immediate relation to him or her, something that has not previously existed, for it is based on a foundation which is opposite to their presence.

The situation of a patient suffering from pain is aggravated by the fact that he has to face his pain and suffer it alone. No one else can see that pain, and its intensity defies a conclusive definition within the parameters of conscious comprehension. The reason why

it defies such a definition is probably that the phenomenon of pain, just like that of death, is defined on *its own* basis which is not a product of consciousness: our ability of conscious comprehension corresponds to an external and superficial identification of pain, but it fails to penetrate its internal and profound essence. This, once again, serves to emphasize the idea that in relation to the most important things we always find ourselves alone – fundamentally, essentially alone.

Besides that, it is also important that we are always late when it comes to the most important things. It is especially clearly seen in relation to everything new that we intentionally wish to see identified and recognized, i. e. reduced to something already known and familiar, to something that would enable us to identify it with a certain sign. Probably we are late in relation to the most significant things simply because we lack the strength to accept them.

It becomes particularly clear that pain is something opposite to life from the fact that pain ignores the sufferer and even fails to notice him. Pain is capable of terrifying us precisely because it can engulf the totality of our being, taking no account of either intellectual or emotional, or volitional impulses which spring from our concerns engendered by existence and are, consequently, indissolubly linked to consciousness. Staying strong up to the onset of pain, we weaken abruptly as we come to realise that pain has ‘made itself comfortable’ within us as if we simply did not exist. It is this arrangement – *apart* from us, *beyond* us and *regardless* of us – that, alongside with pain, defines death in man. The immensity and irrevocability of pain, as well as of death that resist any attempt at definition, force us to look carefully for the right word. It is remarkable that, being compelled to speak about pain and death in the ontological aspect, Tolstoy resorts to the pronoun “she”. The suitability of such an expression lies in the fact that it preserves the “indefiniteness” of the phenomena of pain and death in comparison with those of life and presence.

No matter how easily comprehensible the death of another person or of other people in general might appear, it does not compromise the impossibility of understanding and consequently of accepting one’s own death. Correlating himself with death, man reflects on *himself* as if it were *someone else*: it turns out to be impossible to ‘accommodate’ within oneself the event of one’s own death. The event of death becomes connected to being *conscious* of our mortality and to being aware that we will die some day and somewhere. Such a focus obliterates the tragedy of our situation, and our consciousness is now directed to the “circumstances”, “cases” and “situations” of dying, sliding into a contensive interpretation of death and blocking the possibility of correlating our presence with the very event of death.

An attempt to make one’s own or another’s dying a matter of one’s concern, an attempt that is in a sense directed against death which has nothing to do with our concerns is, in the final analysis, always a doomed attempt to bypass death and to win a victory over it by preserving a field of life controlled by consciousness and a circle of concerns inside which death is no more than information and a sign of existence. Quoting Heidegger once again, “in our being-together-with-others (*Miteinandersein*), it is precisely to “the dying” that their “nearest and dearest” continue trying to explain that they will avoid death and will then return at once to the calm habitual life of their world arranged by concerns”. He also notes: “Such a “caring concern” hopes “to console” in this way even “the dying”” (Хайдеггер 1997: 253). Being defined by his existence and concern about it, man sees death as something that does not have any rights regarding him. Nevertheless, despite it, death “settles down” in man and makes itself comfortable.

It could be half so bad, but man is unable to reconcile himself to the loss of his *ego*. It is important for man that his *ego* cannot be eliminated even when there are no foundations for that. Our *ego* has no foundation: it emerges in a situation of making some real effort, above all – an effort of thinking. Both feeling and will are preserved and perpetuated thanks to being penetrated by this effort. But even if we fail to make a “sufficient investment” of thought into our existence, i.e. when there is no foundation for our *ego*, we still would like at least to *have* an *ego*, if not to *be* one. And then we cling to our former ‘validity’, one that is now a thing of the past, that is no longer there. This is how the main character is trying to cling to those moments of his life which he associates with the reality of his *ego*. These reflections lead him eventually to the idea that it is possible to speak about any ‘validity’ of his *ego* only with reference to his childhood. And Ivan Ilyich’s best memories, i. e. those that are meaningful, are the memories of his childhood when his presence within himself was so strong that it could not be plunged into circumstances and situations. On the contrary, all his subsequent life was “something wrong”: a continuous chain of various kinds of “something wrong”. The ‘spending’ of his presence on ensuring the foundations of his existence, which is connected with a steady immersion of oneself into a multitude of various concerns, leads the main character to understand that the present – all of it – was in his childhood, and now, immersed in an impersonal field of human “cases”, it has come to an end. Life, contained within the limits of existence, increasingly reveals the strength of the *impersonal*. A pinnacle and an epitome of impersonality is pain and death which turn out to be a natural result that man achieves on the way of immersing himself in actions and thoughts directed towards the maintenance of his existence. Confronting death, being a pinnacle of impersonality, is something that makes one turn to face one’s presence. But it is all in the past, in one’s childhood...

Thus, the necessity of returning *to* oneself and *into* oneself when one begins to feel particularly acutely a sense of need to take back all the “pieces” of one’s life which are connected with one’s presence and which were called into being by this very presence, but which have now been torn off from it and have got stuck in the various “places” of his existence, – this need has to confront the fact that all the moments of one’s life connected with one’s presence are in the depths of one’s previous life, are in one’s childhood. And in order to achieve one’s depth in the present, one has to “settle down” in the memories of one’s past.

It may be possible to attempt to characterize growing-up itself as a temporal and spatial environment formed in the course of a process in which man finds support for himself in what can be “captured” by him and becomes thereby connected with him. Anything that *cannot* be in principle “captured” in this way is rejected as so much rubbish. And it is very difficult to realize that such “uncaptured” things are the most important of all: they are *ourselves*.

However, we are far away from our *ego* – for all its being so close to us. And this *remoteness* grows stronger and stronger in us, not least in the process of our growing up. And, such an increase in ourselves of *alien* things is directly connected with the domination in our life and consciousness of an orientation towards other people when we try to behave *as everybody else* and to think *as everybody else*. This is how the ontological loss of oneself takes place, a loss which one is inclined to ignore till one finds oneself ‘on the verge’, i. e. at death’s door.

*Lying*, universally recognized and approved, becomes a common feature accompanying the coming of death, it is death’s companion and partner. It is many-sided and, on the one

hand, it manifests itself in the attitude to the dying person of those who are near and dear to him. However, on the other hand, the dying people themselves feel that lying is necessary, they aspire to allure death into a trap of analysis by having their case diagnosed and by performing a number of other procedures controlled by consciousness. The main character of the story who shares this orientation believes that if he were to consider death in such a *calculating* and *anxious* fashion, it would suddenly disappear and would be classified as a certain disease. Such lies spring from the irrevocability of death and man's ontological need to give everything that occurs as events of his existence the form of an existing 'case' or circumstance. Lies can flow freely and become reality there, where what happens to existence is translated into the category of its internal contents. But the point is that death cannot become the contents of our life and fiercely resists it. And this is why, identifying death with "dying", "illness", "funeral" and other such things, man eliminates its essence and consequently can accommodate it as the contents of his consciousness – albeit in a perverted or weakened form. It is extremely difficult (in fact almost impossible) for man to associate death with himself. It may only be possible to knot life and death together, if our thinking proceeded from presence and were defined by it rather than by existence.

Tolstoy shows how lies, repeatedly multiplied, function almost like truth. This is how death is trivialized in ordinary conversation – something that people may not even be aware of, and this trivialization obviously springs from consciousness. As a result, man's situation, that of being between life and death, becomes disguised. And this is how we fail to understand clearly enough that the most important and essential things for us are those that are *capable of capturing* us and that *do capture* us, rather than those that we can capture and make our property. We partake of higher Truth (cf. the Russian 'istina'). Trivial truths (cf. the Russian 'pravda') are our *property*, at least to an extent: if one can *tell* the truth, it must be something in the speaker's possession.

The setting of a real choice between life and death when man has to stake the whole worth of his existence and risk to look at it from a *different* perspective (i. e. from the perspective of his finiteness and mortality) is obscured by speaking of his *condition*, which only too frequently takes the form of idle talk. It is understandable that giving up one's whole worth (something that is connected with life being decisively relegated to the parameters of the past and defined with the help of signs of what has already happened) requires courage on the part of man. This is only natural: he has, after all, to build on a new intellectual foundation – that of death. He cannot but change the parameters of this new perspective on the problems of his habitual existence. He is forced to do it.

It should be noted that, even in spite of the complexity of the situation and being aware that he is *at* death's door, the main character comes to realize that the most unbearable thing is that his nearest and dearest are lying to him. Thus, a veil of lies is thrown over the truth that is revealed at a collision of life with death, these lies proceeding from the ordinary, due to which the lies aspire to establish themselves and to be treated with due consideration. However, if one manages, as does Ivan Ilyich, to correlate himself, i. e. his presence, to death, this presence, lost in different places and under different circumstances, is gathered *within oneself*; it is gathered there precisely in the face of death.

There is another important point relevant to the protagonist's attitude to the worth of his life, the one expressed by the words "something different".

Imminent death cuts off the dying man's communications with other people who in their relations with him proceed, as a matter of principle, from life which is understood



as constantly and unstoppably developing, and consequently they are inclined to take the *continuity* of conversation for granted. The dying man, if he is aware of his dying, on the contrary, cannot be defined by the sequence of his lifetime or by that of the conversation derived from such a sequence of life. The talk of the dying man is determined by a lack of *succession*: it is now irrelevant and meaningless to him.

The event of death is understood as a point capable of interrupting a sequence and directing reflection, which originally manifests itself in one's conversation with oneself, in a direction *different* to that of a normal flow of conversation caused by the situations of life. Dialogue is not possible and cannot be possible here. Everyone, i. e. the dying person on the one hand and the living people on the other, proceed from events that lack a common basis which could give rise to a new communication: the dying proceed from the event of death and the living from that of life. The conversation of a dying person with other people is *complete* in itself at any point of its course because, above all, it is his conversation with *himself*. The event of death encloses the current of this conversation within itself, placing its beginning and its end in one and the same dimension. Such a conversation is internally complete and, consequently, it is not comparable with other conversations which are essentially unfinished since they are motivated by the concerns of life and develop in the rhythm of a sequence proceeding from these concerns.

It is possible to put it another way. Ivan Ilyich aspires to be the subject of his consciousness and his speech, whereas the subjectivity of the living is transient, because it is unfolded through the intention of the living to constantly reaffirm themselves as subjects by referring to their ability "to have" objective knowledge. The main character of Tolstoy's story wishes to live and, facing death, he is defined *by a general aspiration to life*, whereas the living want to have *objects of life* and consequently get stuck inside it more and more. That is why the dying person appeals to the contents of his thinking and is thus connected to himself as a being capable of thought, while the living intentionally associate themselves with some contents of life outside their thinking, falling into an objective reality and correlating themselves ever more thoroughly with its comprehension, which is a way of escaping from themselves. It may be paradoxical, but the fact remains: man finally gets rid of his weakness when he finds himself close to death, his weakness springing from the pressure of the circumstances, situations and episodes of life, when he wishes to get into the midst of life and intentionally dissolves himself in it, immersing both his consciousness and his language into different contents of life.

With death, a *position of reflexion* is introduced into the space and environment of life's contents, a position that establishes a *formal* limit to the development and flow of life. It is precisely this kind of reflexive position that can properly be defined as a position of *thinking*. Now that the event of death has come to be present, one can not only be aware of life (something that is always the case and that proceeds from its contents as such), but one can also conceive it in its integrity. Being observed – from the perspective of the event of death – the *topoi* of life can be "cleared" of their contents and can therefore be correlated to each other. The various *topoi* of our life world, crammed with the 'situatedness' and 'circumstantiality' of their contents, thanks to the event of death become correlated to each other in their formal respect, i. e. one proper to life itself.

But what is it that connects them?! – It is time, of course! The time of *the present*! The time of life itself: the time that, having occurred, has neither dissolved itself in the past nor disappeared, the time that exists at present, the one that is here and now. And such

a time of life happens to be accentuated by the event of death. This is why it cannot be measured – for there is no scale to measure it in terms of contents, and there is in fact nothing to measure at all. From the point of view of ‘contents’, such time is *fictitious*: it does not have any duration.

Thus, the event of death reveals itself as a utopian<sup>6</sup> and at the same time a theoretical<sup>7</sup> point (*topos*) from which thinking unfolds itself. Such a position can in a way be characterized as that of *an external observer*, a position that enables man to observe himself as he participates in the contents of life, and to contemplate himself as one who is immersed in various situations and circumstances of life. This “theoretical” position, which happens to be a metaphysical point of observation, enables man to consider what occurs in his life from *another perspective*. It is precisely here that other language forms are coined, those that ‘conjugate’ the contents of human life in another way. And they are connected directly with thinking, but not with consciousness. Such a perspective, metaphysical and utopian (in relation to the contents of life), also enables man to think of time *irrespective of* specific contents of life, for it lies “beyond” their boundaries.

In the perspective of all the points of life being embraced by the event of death, all the determinations of life proceed directly from man himself, whereas in the dimension of life that has to do with its contents, the causes and the reasons are only partially connected with him. It is no wonder, therefore, that in this latter case man’s permanent dissatisfaction with his life is his inevitable companion.

Our life is *ours* only as long as we are able to withdraw and “pull” ourselves out of “what is not ours”: out of what essentially cannot be “us” or “ours”. To achieve this, one needs a position of reflection, or that of an outside observer, which is gained by introducing the event of death into life and by considering what happens in life precisely from this angle.

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<sup>6</sup> “Utopian” comes from the Greek word *ατοπία* which expresses the meanings of “irrelevance”, “strangeness” and “peculiarity”.

<sup>7</sup> “Theoretical” comes from the Greek word *θεωρία* possessing, among others, the meanings of “observation”, “consideration” and “contemplation”.

ANDREJ SERGEEV

## Šnekėjimo ir mąstymo apie mirtį kalba: L. Tolstojaus apsakymo „Ivano Iljičiaus mirtis“ analizė

### *Santrauka*

Straipsnyje, remiantis L. Tolstojaus apsakymu *Ivano Iljičiaus mirtis*, nagrinėjamas mirties, kuri esanti svarbi gyvenimo supratimui, fenomenas. Vienas svarbiausių mirties bruožų yra jos neanalitiškumas. Kadangi sąmonė blokuojanti visa, kas neanalitiška, žmogus esą nepajėgus „įsileisti“ mirtį ir su ja susitapatinti. Todėl bandoma mirties fenomeną įsisavinti, redukuojant jį į ženklą, įsikūnijusį laidojimo ir gedulo papročiuose. Mirties fenomenui susidūrus su esaties fenomenu, atsirandanti antinomija įveiktina pakylant virš jų turinio ir taip išvalant erdvę minčiai, kuri paprastai užpildo sąmonę. L. Tolstojus, vaizduodamas, kaip miršta pagrindinis herojus, atskleidžias neįveikiamą žmogaus vienetę skausmo ir mirties akivaizdoje. Tai esą verčia žmogų kreiptis į save, į pačią savo esatį, kuri pasiekama atsigręžus į savo vaikystę. Kitaip nei kasdienio gyvenimo pokalbiai, mirties įvykis suteikias naują kryptį mąstymui, kuriame nebėra vietos dialogui ir kuriame išskylantis visuminis, užbaigtas pokalbis su savimi pačiu. Mirtis teikianti refleksiją, kuri nustato gyvenimo plėtros formalią ribą ir kurią esą galima apibrėžti kaip mąstymo poziciją. Mirties įvykis padedantis įprasminti gyvenimą kaip visumą.

**Raktažodžiai:** fenomenologija, fenomenas, gyvenimas, mirtis, laikas, esatis, kalba, sąmonė, refleksija