



THE SPIRITUAL AND THE PHYSICAL — TOLSTOY'S 'NOUMENAL' AND 'PHENOMENAL' CONCEPTS

Ferdinand B. Lyngdoh

(Assistant Professor, College of Home Science, Central Agricultural University, Tura – 794005 Meghalaya.)

ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to trace Tolstoy's philosophy and belief pertaining to the physical and the spiritual notions or his noumenal and phenomenal concepts. He was an ardent admirer of Christian standpoint and he held some radical views which are perhaps analogous to Immanuel Kant's. Some profound iconoclastic views on sex and marriage, on love, and his ascetic affinity towards Buddhist teachings can also be traced in some of his works.

Keywords: Tolstoy's philosophy, Immanuel Kant, noumenal and phenomenal concepts.

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Count Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy (1828-1910), famously known as Leo Tolstoy, was a Russian author who is regarded as one of the greatest writers of all time. Tolstoy is best known for his novels *War and Peace* (1869) and *Anna Karenina* (1877). Tolstoy's writings include a large collection of stories and short fiction (novellas) such as *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (1886) and *Family Happiness* (1859). He also authored several plays and essays which are steeped in profound philosophy. He started writing at a young age and achieved much acclaim for his autobiographical trilogy *Childhood, Boyhood, and Youth* (1852–1856). *Sevastopol Sketches* (1855) is an

account that is based upon his experiences in the Crimean War as he enlisted in 1852.

Tolstoy underwent a sort of crisis in the 1870s. According to Donna Tussing Orwin, "Tolstoy's personal crisis depicted in *A Confession* (1881) had political as well as personal causes, and is originally linked to the political radicalism that he began to espouse soon after he wrote it. Starting in the early 1880s, he called for the dissolution of the state and the establishment in its place a universal Christian Brotherhood in which loosely organised small communities supported themselves and no one tyrannised over his fellows" (52). His crisis was moral in nature and was profound. However, by his



account, he experienced a spiritual awakening as traced out in his confessional work *A Confession* (1881). His awakening was influenced by the moral and ethical teachings of Jesus, particularly the Sermon on the Mount which influenced him to convert into a spiritual and highly devout Christian. His attitude towards everything in life was transformed into a peaceful, non-violent and pacific nature. Ernest Howard Crosby in *Tolstoy and His Message* advocates, "At fifty years of age he found himself celebrated, rich, surrounded by a loved and loving family, and yet so wretched that he thought seriously of suicide, and gave up shooting for fear that he might be tempted to blow out his brains, and hid a rope which offered itself too readily to him as a means of escape. The question which he had throughout his life buried under his superficial activities now rose to confront him and to insist upon an answer. The crisis, which we find in the love of men who pass through deep spiritual experiences, and are by them fitted to guide others, was upon him" (19).

Tolstoy was affected deeply by his relations particularly with the poor peasants as he belonged to the rich noble class. He felt his life was inadequate no matter how honourable it was in the eyes of others and the world at large. The existential question that troubled him included "What if I should become more famous than Pushkin and Shakespeare – than all the writers of the world," he asked himself, "What then? What result will there be from what I am doing now and may do tomorrow? What will be the issue of my life? Why should I live? Why should I wish for anything? Why should I do anything? Is there any object in life which can survive the inevitable death which awaits us?" (20).

Tolstoy is a Realist who emerged onto the Russian literary scene during the reign of Tsars Alexander II and Nicholas I. The reign of Tsar Alexander II saw the introduction of many significant and radical changes. According to Kaufman, the pre-modern agrarian economy with its "traditional, Russian values of community and peaceful coexistence" was replaced by a modern, industrialized, impersonal, urban culture which believes in "individualism and competition" (Knowlson 12) in the economic sphere and

otherwise. During the era of the 1870s, Marxism and the First Socialist International Movement attracted many Russian radical thinkers like Bakunin and Nechaev, giving rise to the Populist Movement or peasant socialism that had a widespread impact, and a seminal influence on Tolstoy. The school of writers to which Tolstoy belongs, is different from the Romantic tradition of Nikolai Gogol and Alexander Pushkin of the early nineteenth century, and the satirical and neo-classical tradition of the eighteenth century. Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoevsky and Anton Chekov presented a more realistic picture of Russian life. They emerged as a new class of revolutionaries, whose goal was "to correct the ills of modern life and to create the perfect society on earth" (ibid). They viewed the heroes of the Romantic era as 'superfluous heroes', and created realistic and pathetic portraits of the urban poor, although the image of the idealised Russian peasant was also still dominant in their writings.

Much of Russian history of the period focused on the struggle towards the abolition of serfdom, and the need to alleviate the Russian peasants from bourgeois domination. The Populist Movement and the writings of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky contributed to bringing about a major change in the life of the peasants. The Russian Communist leader Lenin observed that "Tolstoy is great when he expresses the ideas and moods of millions of Russian peasants on the eve of the bourgeois revolution in Russia" (Struve 174).

An ardent follower of Christian teaching, Tolstoy's Christianity, is purely based on the doctrine of peace, brotherhood and love. His philosophy renounces every established church and denomination, whether Greek, Catholic or Protestant. According to Seltzer, "by God, he understands the spirit dwelling in man, that spirit which every one recognizes within him and which he is conscious of as being free, rational, and independent of the flesh" (9). It is with the attainment of this understanding that education serves a holistic purpose. Accordingly, education takes place not through reason and philosophy, but through sentiments and therefore, through art. And this message is conveyed by means of characters and their actions set against the backdrop of Russian life



with which he was ever so familiar. Apart from the profound and thought-provoking Christian morals, G.K. Chesterton says, "the real moral of Tolstoy comes out constantly in his stories, the great moral which lies at the heart of all his work of which he is probably unconscious and of which it is quite likely that he would vehemently disapprove" (10, 11). Critics and readers, over the years have also echoed Chesterton's words, and have identified Tolstoy's great stories as moral lessons, which possess a parable-like quality.

In a moving account in his famous book of essays, *Confessions*, Tolstoy reveals his constant search for a form of religion in which he could believe and which could help him identify and understand the true meaning of life. In his quest to identify and understand the true meaning of life he first turned Russian Orthodoxy "but its devotees repelled him because their lives, quite different from the altered form of life he had begun to adopt, did not correspond with the Christian principles they espoused" (ibid 105). According to Mitsuru Eguchi, "Tolstoy's discourses on religion and the diaries and letters he wrote in the latter half of his life highlight his unique views on various religions. He sought a kind of religion corresponding to human reality that is freed from mystical elements—a religion that does not promise happiness in heaven or in the after-life but ensures that people attain happiness on earth" (92). After his disillusionment with Russian Orthodoxy, he drew close to the simple folk: peasants, monks, sectarians, and pilgrims. The more he came to know these people, the more he loved them. The faith and meaning of the labouring people gave him an understanding of life which he could accept. Tolstoy could no longer accept the Church rituals, sacraments, fasts and adoration of relics and idols. He was outraged by the marked divisiveness of the Christian religion since he believed that truth in religion lay in union through love. With this conviction, he "rejoiced to discover that one need only be aware of God to live, for God is life" (ibid 105).

Tolstoy's celebrated treatise, *On Life*, brings forth his dual concept of life. The dualism of his thinking emerged clearly in the argument that "humanity has two lives, spiritual and physical, of

which the spiritual is the more important" (Freeborn 131). The physical life is concerned with the well-being of the flesh and should yield to the priorities of the spiritual which, by contrast, are aimed at achieving the well-being of others. In addition to this, "Tolstoy took for granted that man's life is made up of two parts, the one that includes all the lower instincts and the elemental swarm-life that impels man toward the performance of predetermined actions, seeking always the satisfaction of animal desires and impulses; the other, the higher individual life governed by reason and seeking for its welfare a good and harmonious well-being" (Abraham 106, 107). This partition of the self partly resembles Immanuel Kant's more famous divisions of man into the Noumenal self and the Phenomenal self.

According to Joe Barnhart, "It is possible to read Tolstoy as a philosopher coming to terms with Kant...there appears to be in Tolstoy the distinction that Kant made between the noumenal self and the phenomenal self. There are, however, at least two interpretations of Kant's noumenal self. According to the first, the whole self contains a depth or dimension that in some far-reaching sense enjoys independence from the empirical or phenomenal self enmeshed in space, time, and conditioned relationships. The noumenal self thus conceived is a kind of finite unmoved mover. The second interpretation, while denying that the noumenal self is really independent, calls on the phenomenal self to act as if it were an independent noumenal self not wholly conditioned by the contingencies of the phenomenal self. By so acting, the phenomenal self transcends itself in the sense of bringing into being factors that would otherwise remain dormant" (36). Tolstoy was inclined towards the second interpretation, which keeps the self embedded in space, time, and causality. Tolstoy wrote, "To imagine a man perfectly free and not subject to the law of inevitability, we must imagine him all alone, beyond space, beyond time, and free from dependence or cause" (ibid). Both Kant and Tolstoy subscribed to the viewpoint that in observing the behavior and actions of people, reason drives us to conclude that the self is wholly dependent on numerous external factors and conditions. But the issue of "how we can be morally free in which we are



subject to the law-like regularities of nature" (Higgins 211), persisted with these two great thinkers.

In Kant's second critique, *The Critique of Practical Reason*, he contends that "as part of the natural world each of us is subject to causal influences; these influences manifest themselves in the form of desires, moods and emotions, which Kant collectively calls inclinations" (ibid). But people have the ability 'to will', and this will-power is free from natural forces. Human beings are able to regulate their behaviour in accordance with their own law, the law which reason constructs for itself, "the moral law" (ibid). According to Kant, people demonstrate their freedom when they act in accordance with this moral law. It is this notion of the 'moral law', "the law that our reason constructs for itself" (ibid), upon which part of Tolstoy's fundamental creed rests. The moral law which emerges from the rationality of human beings "instructs us to respect the rationality of others, the essential humanity...their dignity" (ibid). It is the same philosophy which drives Tolstoy to portray the goodness of soul in his characters, and that good should dwell in every individual, and only then will the world be reformed and changed:

Others' sins are before your eyes,
but your own are behind your
back...His badness you see, but
your own you don't. If he was bad
and you were good, there would be
no strife.

(Selected Stories, 235)

This message is an aphorism, a discourse meant for all humanity. It reasserts his belief that the kingdom of God, which is the attainment of peace, is not in the external world, but in the soul of man.

The concept of the physical extends to materialism and worldly wealth, which are immaterial for Tolstoy. Since human life is transient, so are the material things attached to it. Avarice and cupidity are the corruptors and deceivers which only mortify the soul. In *How Much Land Does a Man Need?* Tolstoy palpably brings out this theme. This morality tale transcribes the imminent doom of mortals who give in to the insatiable desire of the human heart. Life is best lived in simplicity since there is no end to human greed. Pahm, the story's

protagonist, eventually dies in his effort to grasp as much land as he could possibly muster:

'See,' said he, 'all this [arable land], as far as your eye can reach, is ours. You may have any part of it if you like.' Pahm's eyes glistened: it was all virgin soil, as flat as the palm of your hand, as black as the seed of a poppy, and in the hollows different kinds of grasses grew breast high. 'This will be the mark. Start from here and return here again. All the land you go round shall be yours.'

(Selected Stories, 328)

Tolstoy aptly reminds his readers that human beings are momentary guests on this earth, and in death what they eventually require is a grave that measures 'six feet from the head to the heels.'

Such stories are a form of teaching and impart moral lessons resting on Tolstoy's belief that the noumenal self is regulated by reason and in accordance to the moral law. According to Temira Pachmuss, "This part of Tolstoy's metaphysical concept agrees with the philosophy of Plato, Shakespeare, Dostoyevsky, and many others: that the ultimate truth as long as human beings can grasp it, is the harmonious relations of all beings and things — the ultimate all embracing reality of the universe" (81).

Another aspect of the spiritual and physical theme can be seen in Tolstoy's controversial view on sex and marriage as manifested in many stories. According to Tolstoy, physical desire is an obstacle to relations between a man and a woman and it may result in tragedy. In *The Kreutzer Sonata*, the protagonist Pozdnyshev, contradicts the view that many couples live in contentment as a result of procreation and love. Pozdnyshev reveals himself as a man with an insane sexual obsession — he links sex with guilt, regards it as a fall from ideal purity. Love, as humans understand, is not the ideal kind though it contributes to the individual well-being. The love declared by Christ, which is the ideal form, is more complex, thought-provoking, and self-denying.

As illustrated in *The Death of Ivan Ilych* and *The Kreutzer Sonata*, the traditional concept of marriage has lost its meaning. This iconoclastic view



of social institutions and an ascetic ideology is but a result of his twin devotion to Christian and Buddhist dogmas. The Buddhist teaching asserts that, "unrestrained sexual desires can intoxicate the whole personality to the exclusion of spiritual values and interests" (Post 404). Further, the absence of all forms of desire and asceticism is what the Buddhism advocates. Tolstoy's interpretation of the commandment enumerated in Matthew v. 28, is that it prohibits sex altogether. For Tolstoy, "there are three possible relationships between the sexes: fornication, married life, and celibacy, and the greatest of these is celibacy" (Knowlson 121).

Therefore, it can be confirmed that Tolstoy's dual conception of the physical and the spiritual, and his noumenal and phenomenal concepts which are analogous to Kant's philosophy. His radical and iconoclastic views on sex and marriage, the affinity of his ascetic philosophy towards Buddhist teachings, and his philosophy of real love which alone can reform society are some deep concerns that can be traced in most of his works.

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