



# DEATH: RED, WHITE, AND SQUARE

- thomas sachen

We can better understand the three stages of Ivan Ilyich's life by comparing them to the three spheres of aesthetic, ethical, and religious life detailed by Kierkegaard. Comparing these conceptions of the stages of life also sheds light on the essential differences between their conceptions of a meaningful life, in that Tolstoy characterizes our relationship with God as our love for and earthly duty to fellow man, while Kierkegaard argues that the role of God is deeply individual, and that our faith is primarily built on self-reflection.

One of the reasons "The Death of Ivan Ilyich" is so effective is its warped chronology. By inflicting the central character with a rapidly worsening terminal illness, Tolstoy hones in on the most critical aspects of each stage of Ivan Ilyich's life: his youth, his adulthood, and his

revelation moments before death. Already, Ivan Ilyich's linear progression through these stages seems to be at odds with Kierkegaard's so-called "concentric spheres" of the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. For example, while Kierkegaard believed that the ethical stage of life is in an enrichment rather than a denial of the aesthetic stage, it seems that Ivan Ilyich forgoes completely his childhood when he becomes an adult, and that he renounces his adulthood entirely when he is on his deathbed and realizes his folly.

Of course, Ivan Ilyich is not meant to be a model of Tolstoy's conception of a well-lived life. On the contrary, "The Death of Ivan Ilyich" is a cautionary tale warning of the pitfalls of the misalignment of one's ethical and aesthetic aims. Indeed, a diary entry from 1855 corroborates this interpretation: "In general man aspires towards the spiritual life, and to attain spiritual aims one needs a situation in which the satisfaction of the desires of the flesh does not contradict, but rather accords with desires of the spirit — ambition, love of beauty, love of nature, art, and poetry."

This view is more in accordance with Kierkegaard's "concentric spheres" of aesthetics and ethics, in that the ultimate goal isn't to reject the aesthetic, but rather to elevate it to the level of the spirit. We can compare this with Kierkegaard's treatment of marriage in *Either/Or* as one such union of the ethical and the aesthetic, wherein Judge Wilhelm discusses the so-termed "Equilibrium of the Aesthetic and the Ethical in the Development of Personality," or, in a more Tolstoyan way, the accord of the desires of the flesh and the desires of the spirit. In this instance, Kierkegaard (as Judge

Wilhelm) argues that the sense of commitment, duty, and stability

accompanying marriage is precisely what grants it aesthetic value and ennobles it, allowing one to absorb aesthetic sensibilities into the realm of the ethical.

Of course, Tolstoy's use of the word "spirit" in the above diary entry is actually near to what Kierkegaard refers to as the "aesthetic," but still we can see Tolstoy's attempt to integrate sensual and spiritual desire. The key similarity between the "desires of the spirit" described by Tolstoy and Kierkegaard's ethical life is in this temporal self-concept. That is, they are ideals which aim to transcend immediacy and evoke man's eternal spirit in the abstract.

It isn't exactly accurate to portray Ivan Ilyich's adulthood as a period of unabashed Kierkegaardian aestheticism in the mold of Johannes the seducer. One of the foremost issues Tolstoy takes with Ivan Ilyich's life is its unremarkableness and impotence, whereas as A, the model aesthete in *Either/Or*, writes "What wonder is it, then, that the world is regressing, that evil is gaining ground more and more, since boredom is on the increase and boredom is the root of all evil." It is in this "crop rotation," of continually reinventing oneself and living dangerously, that an aesthete finds meaning.

Precisely because of his passivity, Ivan Ilyich is a bit of a tricky subject to cast neatly into Kierkegaard's framework of the aesthetic, ethical, and religious. The only real distinctive quality of his adulthood is his single-minded desire to conform to society's expectations of him and to be wholly *comme il faut*. Kierkegaard would likely say that Ivan Ilyich's

despair was the "inauthentic" despair of being "unconscious of being an eternal self." That is, only when Ivan Ilyich was faced with his own death did he realize that he had despaired all his life, but had for years expertly and unconsciously avoided the tremendous struggle that comes with confronting one's despair and spiritual self. This is what Tolstoy and Kierkegaard would likely agree is Ivan Ilyich's central flaw – in his unconsciousness, he didn't have enough conception of self to even engage with an ethical or spiritual life.

Here, however, it's important to note another key tension between Kierkegaard and Tolstoy's philosophies, evident in Ivan Ilyich's "revelation" on his deathbed. The agony that overcomes Ivan Ilyich at the end of his life comes from his realization that he did little in his earthly life to the benefit of his loved ones and fellow man. He begs forgiveness of both his wife and God at the end, thinking "'Yes, I am making them all wretched... [t]hey're sorry, but it'll be better for them when I die...[b]esides, why speak? I must act.'" Though Tolstoy was famously at odds with the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche, it's impossible to avoid drawing parallels between Tolstoy's disillusionment with organized religion and Nietzsche's proclamation that "God is dead," a principle upon which they both sought to reinvent new value systems: Tolstoy through his religious reawakening and the works of his late period, and Nietzsche through his conception of the *Übermensch*.

Though Tolstoy, particularly at the

time of writing "The Death of Ivan Ilyich" was a devoted Christian, his formulation of religion was almost antithetical to most formulations of Christianity that were popular in and before the 19th century. Tolstoy's anarcho-Christianity focused on doing earthly good in the service of one's fellow man, with an extremely limited emphasis on religious dogma and the afterlife. Compare this to Kierkegaard, who spent his life dissatisfied with institutional religion, arguing that faith in God is an intensely personal battle with which every individual must struggle. The search for value systems beyond those neatly offered to us by society is a theme that resonates among all these thinkers.

While Tolstoy and Kierkegaard would of course agree that Ivan Ilyich was in despair, they might disagree on aspects of the why and whence of his existential agony. While Kierkegaard would more likely credit it to Ivan Ilyich's unconsciousness and refusal to engage with God or his eternal self, Tolstoy would probably attribute it to the realization that his

adulthood was spent in the absence of love of moral living. The culminating moment of "The Death of Ivan Ilyich" is when, moments before death, Ivan garbles an apology to God Himself, essentially acknowledging that his shortcomings in life (his obsession with conforming to social orthodoxy, his lack of a meaningful relationship with his family, and his failure to do positive or impactful work) led to his estrangement from God. In this sense, we may view Tolstoy's religion as a

transcendence of the self, in favor of loving others and acting charitably. This claim is supported by some of Tolstoy's other works regarding death and its relationship with our religious life. In the 1895 short story "Master and Man" the protagonist, a wealthy landowner, achieves religious salvation only when he gives his life to save his servant, and so God himself is manifest in this ultimate act of altruism. The story "Three Deaths" portrays the deaths of a landowner's wife, of a peasant, and of a mighty oak tree. Here Tolstoy takes this notion of detachment from one's self even further, positing that the most noble death among these the oak tree's, in that its life was devoted to service (indeed, its death came only when someone mourning the death of the peasant chopped it down to make a cross) and devoid of even consciousness, the utmost denial of self.

This isn't to say that Kierkegaard and Tolstoy were entirely in disagreement as to God's role in our lives. A striking similarity between the two writers' conception of God is His manifestation as "love." For example, Kierkegaard's *The Sickness Unto Death* describes the ultimate solution to despair as faith, or the acceptance of the "Power that posited oneself" (i.e. God) as the embodiment of love. It's an extremely optimistic text in this sense, and there is harmony in Tolstoy and Kierkegaard's view that the path out of despair lies in love, and God Himself.

note: I will never forget the night after I read "The Death of Ivan Ilych" for the first time. I awoke suddenly at 4am, gripped by intense restlessness and trepidation, and began pacing around frantically to

distract myself from the haunting images that were scratching at the insides of my brain. I thought of Ivan Ilych prostrate on the sofa, removed from this world and staring into the void. I felt myself struggling at the bottom of the great black sack, straining to find something to grab hold of, to stand on, or a Gerasim to rest my legs on. In that moment I felt certain I could never recover, that I could never again live in peace without picturing Ivan's yellow face screaming in agony on the sofa. Though I'm young and healthy and have my entire life ahead of me, for a few brief moments I felt utter existential terror at the prospect of my own mortality, a topic that I (and most people) have so carefully swept under the rug for so long.

I thought for a while to try and understand what that episode meant, and what Tolstoy was trying to convey with this story. I eventually came to understand that it was functionally very similar to *War and Peace*, though in a radically different format. Above all, what Tolstoy is so skilled at evoking is a ravishing love for life itself, with its hardships and joys, its sorrows and triumphs, and its bittersweet regrets and mournful losses. What is to love in man is that he is a bridge.