

# LEARNING TO LIVE “THE REAL THING”

## Contemplation, *Acedia*, and Redemption in *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*

### ABSTRACT

This paper argues that Leo Tolstoy’s *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* presents not merely a cautionary tale, but an account of spiritual reorientation and redemption. Bringing Josef Pieper’s concepts of *acedia* and contemplation into dialogue with Tolstoy, it contends that Ivan’s confrontation with death exposes the misalignment of his life while opening the possibility for transformation. Ultimately, Ivan’s final moments reveal that authentic human flourishing lies not in social success, but in contemplative openness to reality and a redemptive consent to truth—even at life’s end.

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### I. INTRODUCTION

When I first read *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, I was struck, and almost unsettled, by how depleted, hollow, and tragically ordinary Ivan’s life seemed. Yet when I reread Tolstoy’s novella, I came to realize that Ivan is not merely a cautionary symbol of a life gone wrong; in fact, quite the opposite: Ivan actually serves as an exemplar of what it means to reorient one’s life in the face of death.

What initially seemed like a cautionary tale of squandered potential, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* provides a transformative vision grounded in contemplation and spiritual reorientation. As Ivan lives out his final days, squirming in anguish from his terminal sickness, he reconciles his shortcomings, turning away from the dark abyss that previously consumed his life and toward the bright light of authentic love. This moment of conversion marks a true *metanoia*:<sup>1</sup> far from a denial of suffering, his transformation is a march through it, allowing death to strip away his vanity so that he may love without fear.

While many scholarly interpretations treat Ivan as a tragic warning against a superficial bourgeois life, this paper will claim that Tolstoy presents Ivan as an unexpected exemplar of spiritual reorientation. Although his early life is marked by distraction and *acedia*, Ivan’s final contemplative consent to reality reveals that redemption remains possible until the final breath is drawn. To defend this claim, this paper proceeds in three steps: first, it examines how Ivan’s confrontation with death exposes the misalignment of his life; second, it brings Josef Pieper’s account of *acedia* and contemplation into conversation with Tolstoy; finally, it argues that Ivan’s death is not merely tragic but redemptive, revealing that human flourishing consists not in success or control, but in consent to reality and openness to what exceeds us.

### II. WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO LIVE “THE REAL THING”?

First, let us explore, in more depth, the question that sits at the heart of Leo Tolstoy’s *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*: What does it mean to live “the real thing?”

For most of his life, Ivan orients himself around what is socially approved rather than what is inwardly true. He strives to become a

<sup>1</sup> The word ‘*metanoia*’ comes from the Ancient Greek ‘*meta*’ (changed) and ‘*nous*’ (mind), meaning ‘a change of mind,’ or ‘a fundamental change of heart.’



well-respected legal official, cultivates proper manners, and structures his family life according to convention, mistaking external success for genuine fulfillment. His days are marked by efficiency and respectability, yet largely devoid of reflection, and moral depth. Thus, as his illness worsens, Ivan is forced into a painful moral clarity: the possibility that he has not truly lived at all. In a moment of severe physical pain, and immense psychological torment, he reflects, “But no matter. I can still make it the real thing—I can. But what is the real thing?”<sup>2</sup> His concluding question exemplifies the overarching tension of the human condition: the fear that one’s life may have been inauthentic, misdirected, or un-lived.

Yet even this fear contains an unexpected grace. As the Roman philosopher Cicero once proclaimed, *dumanimaest spesesse*, or “While there is life, there is hope.”<sup>3</sup> It is never too late to turn toward virtue and to confront death—not as a final terror, but as a mirror revealing how we have truly lived. Josef Peiper, in *Leisure, the Basis of Culture*, offers a philosophical framework for answering the very question that torments Ivan: How can one reorient oneself towards “the real thing?” In short, both Tolstoy and Peiper would argue that we must remain open to what exceeds us<sup>4</sup>—open, that is, to the moral and metaphysical realities that lie beyond the self. These works reveal that death does not simply end life—it exposes life’s authentic orientation, disclosing whether it was marked by distraction or directed toward the Truth. Dying well, then, is only possible if one has lived well; yet, until the last breath is drawn, there is always the potential for reorientation toward reality and toward that which transcends human limitation.

Ivan Ilyich, despite a life initially marked by distraction and carelessness, ultimately came to live “the real thing” in the final moments before his death. Ivan’s life can be aptly framed through a reflection from Shelly Kagan’s *Death*:

Recall Tolstoy’s *Death of Ivan Ilyich*. The people in the Tolstoy story seem to have put the fact of mortality out of their mind. Why? Presumably because they think that facing it is just too crushing and overwhelming. So the way they cope with it is by simply disregarding the facts, trying not to think about them.<sup>5</sup>

2 Tolstoy, Leo. *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (Bantam Classics, 1981), 71.

3 Cicero, *Letters to Atticus*, Book 9, Letter 10.

4 The phrase “we must be open to what exceeds us” is a Pieperian coined term, meaning that we must look beyond the mundane and acknowledge something greater than ourselves—namely, transcendence or the divine reality. This clarification is important because it establishes the philosophical grounding of the term, preventing it from being misinterpreted, and situating the argument within Pieper’s account of transcendence as essential to human flourishing.

5 Kagan, Shelly. *Death* (Yale University Press, 2012).

This description captures not only the society that shapes Ivan, but also Ivan himself—an individual who spent much of his life evading the essential truths that prompt self-examination. His pursuit of comfort and status served as diversions from confronting the finitude that quietly shaped his existence. Ivan may have been aware of death, but he never allowed that awareness to shape how he lived—as if mortality were always a distant concern. In refusing to live with *memento mori*, the honest remembrance of death, Ivan’s pursuit of societal recognition becomes a lifelong attempt to escape the very truths that give life depth.<sup>6</sup> It is only when these illusions collapse that he begins to recognize the essence of a life authentically lived.

### III. DEATH AND THE COLLAPSE OF ILLUSION

Nonetheless, Ivan’s journey affirms the central claim that until the last breath is drawn, the potential for reorientation toward reality remains. Ivan’s illness, while outwardly agonizing, births redemption, serving as a site for profound spiritual transformation. Upon first encountering his diagnosis, Ivan retreats behind psychological “screens” to defend himself from the looming reality of death. As Tolstoy narrates, “to save himself from this condition Ivan Ilyich looked for consolations—new screens—and new screens were found and for a while seemed to save him, but then they immediately fell to pieces or rather become transparent, as if It penetrated them and nothing could veil It.”<sup>7</sup> This metaphor of “veils breaking down” illustrates the collapse of illusion in the face of ultimate Truth. Tolstoy not only exposes Ivan’s fear of suffering, but his resistance to viewing his life as it truly is. The “screens” that Ivan fascinates himself with function as forms of self-deception, preserving a way of life structured around distraction rather than honesty. Thus, once these defenses fail, Ivan is left with no refuge except reality itself. It is precisely this forced encounter with truth that makes genuine reorientation possible, revealing that redemption does not occur despite suffering, but through the clarity suffering imposes.

Tolstoy shows that the true catalyst for Ivan’s crisis is not the physical pain, but the impossible-to-ignore fact of his quickly approaching death. As Perrett explains,

First, it is the knowledge of death that once again generates the crisis. Ivan (like any adult person) must know that he will

6 “Memento mori” is a Latin phrase that translates to “remember you must die,” serving as a philosophical reminder of the inevitability of death used to encourage living a more purposeful, virtuous, and meaningful life.

7 Tolstoy, Leo. *The Death*, 51.



die, but since he refuses to face this fact, he has no idea of how to live in the light of it. He does not know how to live. In the face of his death he comes to know that the way he has lived is wrong, for his death renders meaningless the life he has led.<sup>8</sup>

Ivan's frantic need for distraction—his desperate attempts to maintain a sense of control—only highlights how thoroughly he had built his life on evasion. Once death punctures every barrier, the shallow interior of his life is exposed.

Ivan's frantic need for distractions to maintain his sense of control becomes increasingly inadequate as death punctures every barrier. At one decisive moment, Tolstoy shows Ivan brushing up against the very insight that could transform him: "‘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."<sup>9</sup> Even when clarity emerges, Ivan initially refuses it—clinging instead to the life he had curated with such care. This moment reveals the tragic logic that governs Ivan's self-understanding: the assumption that one's reputation is equivalent to moral truth. Ivan cannot yet conceive that a life "properly" lived could be fundamentally misaligned with reality. His refusal comes not from ignorance, but from a defense of identity. If Ivan were to accept this insight, his life would collapse, as he would be exposed to the fundamental flaw in the very standards by which he has measured his worth. Thus, Tolstoy suggests that the greatest obstacle to reorientation is not the absence of insight, but the cost of accepting it: the surrender of a self built upon comfort, order, and social approval.

#### IV. IVAN'S ORDINARY LIFE

Tolstoy uses this contemplative inquiry to underscore the role of submission in viewing reality. Also, as several scholars note, Tolstoy never intended Ivan's situation to be viewed as an isolated tragedy, but instead a rather common one. Perrett successfully captures this insight: "Although it is Ivan's life that the story presents for us, it is also quite clear that his case is to be viewed as an entirely typical one: ‘Ivan Ilych's life had been most simple and most ordinary and therefore most terrible.’"<sup>10</sup> This observation underscores the unsettling universality of

8 Perrett, Roy, "Tolstoy, Death and the Meaning of Life," *Religious Studies* 26, no. 2 (1990): 241, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3751001>.

9 Tolstoy, Leo. *The Death*, 64.

10 Perrett, Roy, "Tolstoy, Death," 238.

Ivan's situation. His life is "terrible" not because it is monstrous, but because it is painfully ordinary—structured around social approval, comfort, and routine rather than reflection, virtue, or genuine love. Tolstoy's warning is clear: ordinary life, when unexamined, becomes a quietly catastrophic one. Thus, Ivan's story is not meant to isolate him as a moral outlier, but to warn the reader of how easily a socially successful life can drift into spiritual emptiness without ever appearing outwardly disordered. In this way, Tolstoy transforms Ivan from a singular character into a mirror, urging the reader to reflect on the dangers of societal norms. However, Ivan's suffering becomes a redemptive blaze, purging him of pride and forcing him to confront the question that lies beneath all human striving: "How. . . then. . . shall [I] live?"<sup>11</sup>

#### V. SUFFERING, THE TURN INWARD

As Ivan's death approaches, he turns inward and begins to explicitly wrestle with the meaning of his suffering in relation to God. In one of the most theologically charged passages of the novella, Ivan cries out, "Why hast Thou done all this? Why hast Thou brought me here? Why, why dost Thou torment me so terribly?"<sup>12</sup> Initially, this appears to be an outburst of exasperation, but Tolstoy quickly shifts the tone. Ivan "grows silent," holding his breath and becoming attentive not to an external voice, but to the stirrings of his own soul: "It was as though he were listening not to an audible voice but to the voice of his soul, to the current of thoughts arising within him . . . ‘What do I want? To live and not to suffer.’"<sup>13</sup> This moment of reflection reveals Ivan's desire for a life without fear—a life aligned with God. The response that rises from within, "As you lived before, well and pleasantly?,"<sup>14</sup> is piercing. The question mark signals Ivan's first genuine hesitation of the standards by which he once measured a good life.

Through this inquiry, Tolstoy exposes the hollowness of a "happy life" rooted in ease rather than truth. What once appeared societally acceptable now appears foul, underscoring the contradiction between comfort and virtue that Ivan can no longer ignore. This question confronts Ivan with the truth of his life's orientation: that he had loved comfort more than virtue, and that he had loved himself more than the Truth. The role of stillness in contemplation proves to be essential,

11 Tolstoy, Leo. *The Death*, 71.

12 Tolstoy, Leo. *The Death*, 70.

13 Tolstoy, Leo. *The Death*, 70.

14 Tolstoy, Leo. *The Death*, 71.



-serving as a quiet opening of oneself to the reality that exceeds them. In allowing himself to hear the voice of his conscience rather than fear isolation, he begins the slow work of reorienting his soul toward the truth.

## VI. IVAN'S FINAL GESTURE: A STRETCH TO THE DIVINE

In a final effort to repair the neglect he had constantly shown his family, and as his wife and children gather beside him, Ivan attempts to say, "Forgive me," but can only utter "forego," while waving his hand—"knowing that He whose understanding mattered would understand."<sup>15</sup> In this culminating moment of vulnerability, Ivan sheds his former self and opens his entire being to the divine. The beauty of this closing moment lies not in his action but in the humility of his gesture, a final submission to the truth. By explicitly naming God in his final moments, Ivan opens himself to what exceeds him and deliberately decides to love God more than himself. Thus, Ivan's death becomes something truly beautiful. In the final moments of his life, he finally embraces the gift he had been given and turns toward the reality that transcends him. In the end, it is death itself that enables Ivan to become fully human via the act of contemplation.

## VII. ACEDIA: THE HIDDEN DISORDER OF IVAN'S LIFE

By bringing Josef Pieper into conversation with Tolstoy, two insights come into focus. First, Pieper's account of *acedia* provides a name for the spiritual disorder that quietly shapes Ivan's misguided life long before his illness. Second, Pieper's understanding of contemplation illuminates how Ivan, at the very end of his life, is finally able to turn toward the truth he had spent so long avoiding.

Pieper's diagnosis of Ivan's life can be captured by a single term first articulated by the fourth-century monastic thinker Evagrius Ponticus. *Acedia* offers a useful lens for understanding the spiritual emptiness that shapes Ivan's life long before he ever becomes physically ill. Pieper defines *acedia* as follows:

*Acedia* is the 'despair from weakness' which Kierkegaard analyzed as the 'despairing refusal to be oneself.' Metaphysically and theologically, the notion of *acedia* means

that a man does not, in the last resort, give the consent of his will to his own being; that beneath the dynamic activity of his existence, he is still not at one with himself.<sup>16</sup>

This diagnosis describes Ivan's condition with utter precision. Throughout the novella, Ivan avoids the deeper demands of selfhood by immersing himself in the distractions of career, propriety, and social status. Pieper captures this dynamic with a single line: "A man who cannot be still cannot perceive the truth of the world."<sup>17</sup> Ivan's overwhelming busyness masks an interior refusal to confront who he truly is and what his life is ordered toward. Pieper warns that such restlessness is not merely personal but culturally reinforced within what he calls the totalitarian world of work—a social order that measures human worth almost exclusively by productivity and outward success.<sup>18</sup> Ivan's life unfolds almost entirely within this framework, leaving little space for contemplation, leisure, or genuine self-encounter. In Pieperian terms, Ivan's lifelong pursuit of comfort is a symptom of spiritual negligence, as he refuses to affirm the truth of his own being. His later transformation, then, becomes clear when viewed in light of his underlying condition, which Pieper would define as *acedia*.

## VIII. CONTEMPLATION AS REORIENTATION

If *acedia* names the sickness that shapes Ivan's life, contemplation becomes the saving grace that finally halts it. For Pieper, contemplation is not an act of grasping or analyzing, but a posture of receptive openness: "To contemplate, on the other hand, to 'look' in this sense, means to open one's eyes receptively to whatever offers itself to one's vision, and the things seen enter into us, so to speak, without calling for any effort or strain on our part to possess them."<sup>19</sup> This is the very practice that Ivan had avoided for most of his life. Instead of reflecting on the world around him, Ivan filled his days, fleeing from anything that might disrupt his carefully curated comfort. Yet contemplation demands the opposite: an unguarded willingness to receive reality as it is. As Pieper puts it, "The person who contemplates is one who consents to the world, who says 'yes' to the whole of creation."<sup>20</sup> Only in his final days when his illusions crumble and he can no longer distract himself

16 Pieper, Josef. *Leisure: The Basis of Culture* (Ignatius Press, 2009), 44.

17 Pieper, Josef. *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, 41.

18 Pieper's "totalitarian world of work" resembles a culture that prioritizes utilitarian production, making work the center of existence which spiritually impoverishes people.

19 Pieper, Josef. *Leisure*, 26.

20 Pieper, Josef. *Leisure*, 37.

15 Tolstoy, Leo. *The Death*, 82.



does Ivan begin to practice this kind of receptivity. Ivan finally opens himself, in painful stillness, to the truth of his existence, and to the needs of those around him. Ivan discovers that redemption does not come through correction, or achievement, but through a fundamental reorientation of vision—a willingness to affirm reality rather than flee from it. Thus, Ivan’s final contemplative act becomes the very root of his transformation, revealing that it is not the avoidance of suffering but the consent to reality, even when it hurts, that allows a human life to be set right.

## IX. CONCLUSION: DEATH AS THE ULTIMATE TRUTH

In short, this reflection underscores the central role of contemplation in everyday human life and the necessity of remaining open to what exceeds us. Pieper reminds us that true flourishing, contrary to today’s materialistic implications, begins when we stop grasping at life, and simply receive it when we submit to reality, rather than resist it. Ivan Ilyich, in his final days of life, serves as an exemplar of the truth of Pieper’s message. His life, so long shaped by *acedia* and avoidance, becomes a case study for the transformative power of contemplation.

Tolstoy’s portrayal of Ivan ultimately advances a decisive claim: a human life is not measured by its material success, but by its orientation toward reality. When read alongside Pieper’s account of contemplation, Ivan’s final transformation reveals that even a misdirected past does not close the door to redemption. A life shaped by distraction and *acedia* can, in its final moments, be reoriented toward truth. Ivan Ilyich is therefore not merely a cautionary tale, but an exemplar of how suffering, rightly received, can become the site of spiritual renewal.



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