CHAPTER I

I. The Beginning (1828-1879)

The search for the meaning of life was the most important activity for Tolstoy. It was the very centre of all his activities. After the publication of A Confession in 1879, when he was engaged more and more with the problems of life and religion, it was generally complained that he had forsaken art for an activity which was futile. Countess Tolstoy in a letter to her sister wrote that her husband was seriously engaged with the problems in which not even ten people in Russia could be interested. To all that criticism Tolstoy replied that the search for the meaning of life was the root of the problem for him and all the rest depended upon that. According to Aylmer Maude, his friend and biographer, as soon as he was convinced that one was really interested in life's great problems, all barriers of race, nationality, rank, education, and ability, were abolished, and one could talk to him quite frankly and on a footing of equality.¹

And as the meaning of life has always been explained

authoritatively by religion in one form or the other at various periods of human development, Tolstoy naturally turned to the study of religion as well. His occupation with matters religious was as soul-searching as his search for the meaning of life. The two were closely intertwined for him. If he could explain the meaning of life it would be with the help of religion, and if religion meant in any way to him it was primarily to seek the explanation why to live and how to live.

The problems of life and death were brought to the mind of Tolstoy when he was only eight years old. The event was the death of his father, Count Nicholas Tolstoy, who having gone to Tula on business fell down in the street and died of apoplexy. The first impression of horror about death was further intensified when nine months later his grandmother died, virtually of the shock of her son's death.

That he was a precocious child concerning the problems of life and death may be gathered from certain passages in Boyhood (1884), an account of boyhood in general written by him. Childhood, Boyhood, and Youth were his early trials of pen at novel writing. Though it would be wrong to say that these works were strictly autobiographical in nature, as Tolstoy himself once
contradicted, yet there are pages — as there are all through his works of imagination — which are representa-
tive of him in person and opinion. The passages quoted below are autobiographical and they trace his early
attitude to matters as abstract and spiritual as life and soul:

It will hardly be believed what were my favourite and most constant subjects of reflection during boyhood — so incompatible were they with my age and position. But in my opinion the incompatibility of a man's position with his moral activity is the surest indication of his searching for truth.

For a year, during which I led a solitary, self-
concentrated mental life, all the abstract questions concerning man's destiny, future life, and the immorta-
ility of the soul, had presented themselves to me; and my feeble, childish mind, with all the ardour of inexpe-
rience, tried to clear up these questions the formulation of which is the highest stage the human mind can reach, but the solution of which is not granted to it.

It seems to me that the human mind in each sepa-
rated individual follows in its development the same road along which it has developed during many generation, and that the thoughts which serve as basis for various philosophic theories are indivisible parts of that mine, but that each man more or less clearly realized them before he knew of the existence of the philosophic theories.

Those thoughts presented themselves to my mind so clearly, and definitely that I even tried to apply them to life, imagining that I was the first discoverer of such great and useful truths.

At one time the idea occurred to me that happi-
ness does not depend on external causes, but on our relation to those causes, and that a man accustomed to endure sufferings cannot be unhappy — and to inure myself to hardship, regardless of the severe pain I felt, I use to hold Tatishchev's dictionaries out at a time, or go into the box-room and lash my bare back
with a rope so painfully that tears involuntarily appeared in my eyes.

At another time, remembering that death awaited me at any hour and at any moment, I understood, wondering that people had not understood it before, that one can only be happy by enjoying the present and thinking of the future, and, for three days, under the influence of this idea, I neglected to learn my lessons and did nothing but lie on my bed, enjoying myself by reading a novel, and eating gingerbread made with honey, on which I spent my last coins.

Another time, standing before a blackboard and drawing various figures on it with chalk, I was suddenly struck by the thought: "Why does any symmetry please the eye? What is symmetry? It is an innate feeling," I replied to myself. "On what is it based? Is there symmetry in everything in life? On the contrary — this is life," and I drew an oval figure on the board — "when life ends the soul, passes into eternity — this is eternity;" and I drew a line from one side of the oval figure to the edge of the board. "Why is there no such line on the other side? Yes, indeed, how can eternity be only on one side? We must have existed before this life, though we have lost the recollection of it."1

At another place he wrote:

... the philosophic discoveries I made flattered my vanity extremely: I often imagined myself a great man, discovering new truths for the benefit of mankind, and regarded the rest of humanity with a proud consciousness of my own worth....2

Still in another passage he wrote:

It goes without saying that under Nekhlyudov's influence I involuntarily assimilated his tendency, the essence of which was ecstatic adoration of the ideal of virtue, and a conviction that the purpose of man's life is continually to perfect himself. At that time it seemed very possible to improve all men, to destroy all the vices and miseries of mankind, and it seemed very easy and simple to improve oneself, to assimilate all the virtues, and to be happy....3

---

2 Ibid., p. 196. Italics mine.
3 Ibid., p. 219. Italics mine.
It may be remarked that some of these tremendously deep reflections might have been put into boyhood by Tolstoy at the age of twenty-seven when he was writing those autobiographical fragments; nevertheless, it lays bare before us what he felt likely about those matters at that period. A boy who thought of discovering new truths for the benefit of mankind and regarded the rest of humanity with a proud consciousness of his own worth, was certainly an uncommon boy.

From the passages quoted above it appears that apart from the reflections made about a variety of unearthly matters Tolstoy's young mind searched for the purpose of life as well. He wrote that the purpose of man's life was to continually perfect oneself. This signifies that his search for the meaning of life began pretty early in life. An entry in his diary dated March 17, 1847, lends confirmation to it. He wrote: "I find myself confronted by the question: 'What is the aim of man's life?' and ... I invariably arrived at the conclusion that the purpose of our human existence is to afford a maximum of help towards the completest development of everything that exists."1

---

1As quoted in Aylmer Maude, *The Life of Tolstoy*, I, 40.
At the same place he added further that "I should be the unhappiest of men if I could not find a purpose for my life - a purpose both general and useful.... So now my whole life will be an active and constant striving towards that single aim." This makes definitely clear the single predominant activity which would engage him for the whole of life.

We find a confirmation to Tolstoy's feeling for a purpose of life 'both general and useful' in a passage in *A Landlord's Morning* (1866). Searching for a true aim of life, Nekhlyudov, the young landlord in whom Tolstoy put some of himself, probes the various possibilities concerning his life. Firstly his youthful imagination pictures the voluptuous form of woman, and it appears for a while the fulfilment of an unexpressed desire. But his deeper feelings say "No". Then his mind rises higher from selfish indulgence to the realm of abstraction and he thinks of discovering the laws of beings. But again certain vague feelings inside him tell "Not that". Then suddenly a thought comes to his mind "filling his whole soul - the thought that love and goodness are truth and happiness - the only truth and the only happiness possible in the world. And this
time his deeper feelings did not say: 'Not that,' and he rose and began to verify this new thought. 'This is it! This! So it is!' he said to himself in ecstasy, looking at all the phenomena of life in the light of this newly-discovered and as it seemed to him perfectly novel truth.... 'Love, self-denial — that is the only true happiness — a happiness independent of chance!' Applying this thought to all sides of life and finding it confirmed by life as well as by the inner voice... he experienced a new sensation of joyful agitation and delight. 'And so, to be happy I must do good,' he thought, and his whole future presented itself to him no longer in the abstract, but in vivid pictures of a landed proprietor's life.'

"He saw before him an immense field of action for his whole life, which he would devote to well-doing and in which consequently he would be happy."  

Tolstoy matriculated from Kazan University in 1844 at the age of fifteen. He studied there up to 1847 when he left it without taking any degree as he felt that he had nothing more to learn. After leaving the university he had a choice either to join civil service

---

or go to army. He joined army in 1658. He spent the period from 1652 to 1656 in the region of Caucasus while serving in the army. The life in Caucasus was spiritful, adventurous, and romantic. During his later years he often ruminated over the life he spent there and also wrote an excellent account of it in his famous *The Cossacks*. There his life was a mixture of morality and vice, and as was always usual with his periods of high excitement alternated with hours of depression. Though outwardly he led a busy and somewhat purposeful life of a soldier, yet at times he was dissatisfied and restless. That dissatisfaction during his early years often arose due to the reason that his mind was ever eager to find a meaningful and purposeful aim of life towards which he could move with all his zest and earnestness. This is evident from an entry made in his diary on March 29, 1652: "The pettiness of my life worries me....There is something in me that forces me to believe that I was not born to be what other men are....I have reached maturity, the season of development is passing or has passed, and I am tortured with a hunger— not for fame— but to acquire great influence for the *furthering of the happiness and benefit of*
Tolstoy's aim of life at this period "to acquire great influence for the furthering of the happiness and benefit of mankind" is also reflected in *The Cossacks* (1868), the work concerning the life in Caucasus. The hero of the book, Olenin, who represents Tolstoy at this period, says at one place:

"Happiness is this!" he said to himself, "Happiness lies in living for others. That is evident. The desire for happiness is innate in every man; therefore it is legitimate. When trying to satisfy it selfishly — that is, by seeking for oneself riches, fame, comforts, or love — it may happen that circumstances arise which make it impossible to satisfy these desires. It follows that it is these desires that are illegitimate, but not the need for happiness. But what desires can always be satisfied despite external circumstances? What are they? Love, self-sacrifice." He was so glad and excited when he had discovered this, as it seemed to him, new truth, that he jumped up and began impatiently seeking some one to sacrifice himself for, to do good to and to love. "Since one wants nothing for oneself," he kept thinking, "why not live for others?".... He thought of God and of the future life as for long he had not thought about them.... "And is it worthwhile living for oneself," thought he, "when at any moment you may die, and die without having done any good, and so that no one will know of it?"2

The sentiment to do good to others and work for common good is reflected in another entry in his diary made on June 29, 1868:

He whose aim is his own happiness, is bad; he whose aim is the good opinion of others is weak; he

---

1 As quoted in Aylmer Maude, *The Life of Tolstoy*, I, 76. Italics mine.

whose aim is the happiness of others, is virtuous, he whose aim is good, is great....That is bad for me which is bad for others; that is good for me which is good for others. So conscience always speaks....The aim of life is goodness. It is a sentiment inherent in our soul. The way to good living is by knowledge of good and evil....We are good only when our whole strength is constantly directed to that aim....1

In some of the passages quoted above we note Tolstoy laying stress on love, self-sacrifice, and in some indefinite way to work for the benefit of mankind. It may be mentioned here that all these ideals, suggesting to him a way out for his future path of movement, would constitute the basis of his philosophy of life. Gradually his mind was probing the fundamentals on which the whole system of life was established. If he could find out the fundamentals, the line of action guided to that would follow consequentially.

All these reflections he was making with full understanding of his worth to explore and discover new paths and truths. In the heart of his heart he felt that he was capable of doing so. Even when he was only twenty-five years of age he wrote: "Once for all I must become accustomed to the thought that I am an exception and ahead of my age....I must adopt a different

1As quoted in Aylmer Maude, The Life of Tolstoy, I, 87.
standard (lower than my own) and measure people by it.... I have not yet met a single man who was morally as good as I, or who believed that I do not remember an instance in my life when I was not attracted by what is good and was not ready to sacrifice everything for it."1

Tolstoy's life in the army increasingly became more strained as the development of spiritual consciousness manifested itself more and more in him. He complained of the rigid, personality-effacing, iron discipline of military life. He felt as if he had become just a part of the machine and moved as the machinery moved. The manifestation of the new spiritual life in him could not remain compatible with the senseless killing and wild carousing in which the army indulged. He left the army in 1866, and on return settled on his estate at Yeasnya Polyana. He married Sophia Andreyevna Behre, the daughter of a Kremlin physician, in 1869. After settling down on his estate with his wife a new period of faithful married life and agricultural occupation started for him. For the rest of his life he lived at Yeasnya Polyana, except for a brief period when he

---

1As quoted in Aylmer Maude, *The Life of Tolstoy*, I, 99-100.
moved to Moscow along with his family, where however he was always ill-at-ease as the poverty, filth, and moral depravity of city life disgusted him.

At Yasnaya Polyana Tolstoy worked physically on his land ploughing and moving like a peasant, and intellectually produced volume after volume of a variety of work which made him the second greatest writer in Russia after Pushkin and one of the greatest in the world for all time to come. During the next fifty years he undertook a wide range of activities which claimed him eminence as a writer, philosopher, dramatist, critic, educationist, journalist, farmer, social reformer, and much more.

By the time he married and settled on his estate he was in his middle thirties. The rush of younger years was gone, and with the passage of time while his wife was increasing the size of his family, he was gradually settling down to the serious problems of life which since his early days had continuously haunted his mind. The initial period he devoted to the writing of works of imagination. Apart from the early 'trials of pen' like the tales from army life and some stories of high seriousness like God Sees the Truth, But Waits and
The Prisoner of Caucasia - for which he himself claimed excellence in What is Art?, he wrote two novels on the epic scale, War and Peace and Anna Karenina. This was the period when his mind was deeply absorbed in observing and analyzing the general phenomena of life to find the answer to the questions pestering his mind. Once he wrote that unlike the physical sciences he could not experiment with his problems in a laboratory; it was because his queries were such which could not be experimented like that. His problems concerned the meaning of life, which embraced all the visible and the invisible phenomena of the world. It had to take into consideration such abstract and unproven matters as soul and God. That way his field of observation and analysis included the whole of universe, conscious and unconscious, visible and invisible, in its farthest and deepest reaches. Now it was in his various stories and larger works like War and Peace and Anna Karenina that he recorded his observation and understanding of life. It were his works of imagination that supplied him with a makeshift laboratory to experiment with his problems. He experimented with hundreds of his characters

placed in a variety of situations and circumstances and thus deduced certain conclusions relevant to his enquiry. It was with the aid of these conclusions that he would try to solve the problems of life. The period upto 1879 when he published an analysis of his life, and by way of it the life of man, in *A Confession*, was the experimental period.

In his short stories Tolstoy presented the various attitudes of human life, but in his larger works he sketched life in whole. Take, for example, his shorter works like *Master and Man* and *The Death of Ivan Illych*. *Master and Man* depicts the awakening of God's spirit in a merchant whose entire life had been spent in accumulating more and more wealth. One day while going on a business errand to a nearby town in a sledge along with his servant he loses the way in a snow-storm. For the whole of night they search the way out but in vain. Frozen, nearing death, and in utter despair, the hawk-eyed merchant feels sympathy and a sense of brotherliness for his man. Overcome by these feelings he tries to warm up the fragmently dressed man with the warmth of his body by lying over him. In the morning when the people from the neighbouring village find them, the
stiffly frozen body of the merchant is found lying over the man who happens to be alive.

The Death of Ivan Ilych, which is amongst the most powerful stories of Tolstoy, illustrates the futility of living for one’s personal self. It is in fact the fictionalized form of his philosophical essay On Life. Ivan Ilych is a pleasant-natured, pleasure-seeking, man-of-the-world judge presiding over a court of law. He is happy, well-placed, and poised for a bright future. He has at his disposal good means to enjoy life and aspires for more. One day he gets hurt a little accidentally. The injury is minor and he dismisses it just as one of the unfortunate mishappenings of life. But, even after many days the pain not only does not subside but increases. He visits a Doctor who prescribes medicine and he looks forward to the resumption of his normal life. But to his great vexation the pain increases further. As time passes on his pain and sufferings grow in intensity. The more his sufferings increase the more treatment he undergoes. When his pain is not relieved he changes over to a new treatment under a new physician. Yet all this is of no avail. His pain and sufferings increase further and he becomes an in-
valid. By now he is sick for many months. One day he
is so overwhelmed with his pointless and never-ending
suffering that he weeps like a child. He weeps on account
of his helplessness, his terrible loneliness, the cruelty
of God, and the absence of God. "What is it for? What
have I done?" he cries in anguish and enquires an expla-
nation from God. But there is not to be any explanation.
He does not expect any. Then he grows quiet and resigns
to his fate. "Go on! Strike me!" he says. But again he
enquires "What is it for? What have I done to thee?"
Now he comes to realize that he had been living an
illusory life. If life is to end in this suffering then
his aim to live for the pursuit of pleasure was senseless.
Real life did not consist in this. It consisted, on the
contrary, in living for others and loving all. Life of
flesh in its finite state was meaningless; real life
was the continuity of living in others in its infinite
state. One day, in the realization of this truth, he
finally breathes his last.

From the above references it would be wrong to
infer that Tolstoy believed in Dryden's concept of
'delightful teaching' in his works of art. He was too
great an artist to descend to this level. His works
of art remain classic examples of the highest art.

Except for *Walk in the Light While There is Light*,
which he himself downgraded to a poor story, his stories
are always stories to be told. Even in his *God Sees the
Truth. But Waits*, which he acclaimed as his best achieve-
ment in the category of religious art, one cannot
discern any preaching. As a writer he never allowed
his artistic works to be marred by any moral or religious
superimposition, though whatever may be the controversy
regarding his explanation of art, *The Death of Ivan
Ilyich* though represents his philosophy of life, is
nevertheless a story to be read. It is his very pecu-
liarity that as an artist he unfolded the philosophy
of life, and his great philosophy works he wrote in
the manner of a consummate artist. His *A Confession*
is not only an analytical record of a great observer
of life, but also an example of the highest art. Similarly
the first chapters of *What Then Must We Do?* show what
commingling of art and serious purpose can be. The
point to be emphasized here is that though 'delightful
teaching' was never Tolstoy's aim, yet interspersed in
his works of fiction we find his opinions as well as

---

1 Tolstoy, *What is Art?*, p. 346
his person. In Landlord's Morning we find him in Nekhludov, in The Cossacks; Lenin reflects some of his thinking, in War and Peace Pierre and Prince Andrew speak and behave as he did, in Resurrection again Nekhludov personifies him in many respects, and Levin in Anna Karenina is his most prominent appearance in his work of art.

If in his shorter works Tolstoy represented some attitudes of life, in larger works he sketched life fully. The Cossacks, for example, is an organic piece of life in Caucasus. Resurrection is a record of life in the late nineteenth century Russia. Social, political, cultural—*all life is presented here. But life in full, to say the book of life with all the relevant chapters, is unfolded in War and Peace and Anna Karenina.

John Galsworthy called War and Peace (1865) as the greatest novel ever written, a novel of all time, yesterday, today, and tomorrow. It is not only the greatest novel ever written but also the most comprehensive piece of life. In conception and volume it is a stupendous work. What basic ingredients constitute life are to be found here. The men and women who inhabit

---

1 Tolstoy, War and Peace (London, 1941), p. xvi.
Its world was more real than encountered in the real world. The innumerable characters, with their multifarious attitudes woven in the framework of life, provided him with his experimental field from which to draw conclusions concerning his enquiry on life. In War and Peace Tolstoy examined life from all the essential points of view from which it was worth examining. Like life it evolves out of the past, it settles down in the present and unfolds the drama of life through its scenes from war and peace, then it rolls on to the future with some of its characters dying, others growing old, while some others being born. Towards the end of the novel the author leaves the spectacle of life as it was going on, and ascending to a stature he makes reflections about the state of mankind, the life of men, and the whole universe.

If Tolstoy's works of imagination provided him with a laboratory to experiment with his characters by placing them in a variety of situations and circumstances and thereby deduce certain conclusions relevant to his enquiry, then Anna Karenina (1877) fulfilled this task to the best. By means of a variety of most excellently drawn characters life is viewed and argued.
from all the essential aspects. Social, political, religious, intellectual, philosophical, scientific—all viewpoints concerning life, may the very quintessence of life, is found here. Along with War and Peace, Anna Karenine provided him with the most well-equipped imaginative laboratory for his investigation.

In relation to War and Peace, Anna Karenine is more ripe and artistically better organized. Apart from being a spectacular piece of life, it has also a story with a beginning, middle, and end. It is also the most autobiographical of Tolstoy's works of art and supplies us with a great deal of personal information as he was living on his estate at Yasnaya Polyana after his marriage. It is in the character of Levin that he makes his appearance. As he was living, Levin lives an intellectual-farmer life. Physically he works on the land alongside the peasants, and intellectually his mind is for the most part engaged with the enquiry 'What does this all mean?', as Tolstoy was at this period. It was the search for the meaning of life— for what he lived and what should be the aim of life—that was his most engaging pursuit. Levin saying to himself at one place that "Without knowing what I am, and why
I am here, it is impossible to live,"¹ is very true of Tolstoy at this period.

Relevant to the investigation under consideration, the great merit of the novel lies in that it projects Tolstoy's gradual movement towards a period of spiritual crisis in life. The later chapters of it make us realize that a dead-end was approaching in his life. Anna Karenina is the most important work to understand the future development of his search for the meaning of life. How deeply Tolstoy was engrossed in his search for the explanation of life may be gathered from a passage in the novel in which Levin, standing in granary supervising the work done by his peasants, tries to make out what it all was?

"Why is all this being done?" he wondered. "Why am I standing here, obliging them to work? Why do they all make such efforts and try to show me their zeal? Why is my old friend Matrena toiling so (I doctored her after the fire, when she was struck by a girder)?" he thought...."She recovered then, but today or tomorrow, or in ten years' time, they will bury her and nothing will be left of her, nor of that smart girl with the red skirt, who with such dexterous and delicate movements is beating the chaff from the ears. She too will be buried, and that piebald gelding too — and that one very soon," he reflected, looking at a horse breathing quickly with falling and rising belly and inflated nostrils, as it trod on the slanting wheel that moved under it. "They will bury her, and so they will Theodore, who is feeding the machine....And, moreover, not only they only but I too shall be buried and nothing will be left. What is it all for?"²

²Ibid., p. 411.
What for? That was the crux of the problem for him. He had lived and lived—better or worse, he might live for many more years to come; but what the devil did it all mean? Millions were born and died, the world had been going on nobody knew since when, and nobody knew where it would end; what did that mean? If all was to end in nothingness, then for what one should effort?

On September 30, 1860, his second brother, Nicholas, died. Unlike the death of his first brother, Dmitri, the death of this brother came as a rude shock to him. It caused him painful soul-searching. He wrote in his diary on October 13, 1860: "It is nearly a month since Nicholas died. That event has torn me terribly from life. Again the question: Why? Already the departure draws near. Whither? Nowhere:..."¹

Some days later he wrote about it to his friend, Petr, in the same vein:

On 30th September he died, literally in my arms. Nothing in my life has so impressed me. It is true, as he said, that nothing is worse than death. And when one reflects well that that is the end of all, then there is nothing worse than life. Why strive or try, since of what was Nicholas Tolstoy nothing remains his? ....Some moments before his death he drowsed off, but awoke suddenly and whispered with horror: What is that?"

¹As quoted in Aylmer Maude, *The Life of Tolstoy*, I, 214.
That was when he saw it—the absorption of himself into Nothingness. And if he found nothing to cling to, what can I find? Still less... 

And what is life all for, when tomorrow the torments of death will begin, with all the abomination of falsehood and self-deception, and will end in annihilation for oneself? An amusing thing! Be useful, be beneficial, be happy while life lasts—say people to one another; but you, and happiness, and virtue, and utility, consist of truth. And the truth I have learned in thirty-two years is that the position in which we are placed is terrible. "Take life as it is; you have put yourself in that position." How? I take life as it is. As soon as man reaches the highest degree of development, he sees clearly that it is all nonsense and deception, and that the truth—which he still loves better than all else—is terrible. That when you look at it well and clearly you wake with a start and say with terror, as my brother did: "What is that?"

Of course so long as the desire to know and speak the truth lasts, one tries to know and speak. That alone remains to me of the moral world; higher than that I cannot place myself. That alone I will do, but not in the form of your art. Art is a lie and I can no longer love a beautiful lie.1

Tolstoy, like Milton in Lycidas, for a while came to feel 'What avails?' Art was now a beautiful lie to him and unless he was able to find out a meaning of life all literary activity appeared meaningless to him.

An outlook very similar to it we notice in a passage in Anna Karenina. The reflection on the mystery of life and death is similarly occasioned by the death of Levin's brother:

Since the moment when, at the sight of his beloved and dying brother, Levin for the first time looked at the question of life and death in the light of the

1Tolstoy, Letter to Fet, October 17, 1860, as quoted in Aylmer Maude, The Life of Tolstoy, I, 214-16.
new convictions, as he called them, which between the ages of twenty and thirty-four had imperceptibly replaced the beliefs of his childhood and youth, he had been less horrified by death than by life without the least knowledge of whence it came, what it is for, why, and what it is. Organisms, their destruction, the indestructibility of matter, the law of the conservation of energy, development the terms that had superseded these beliefs—were very useful for mental purposes; but they gave no guidance for life, and Levin suddenly felt like a person who has exchanged a thick fur coat for a muslin garment and who, being out in the frost for the first time, becomes clearly convinced, not by arguments, but with the whole of his being, that he is as good as naked and that he must inevitably perish miserably.1

The death of his brother made Tolstoy think of the very mysteriousness of death. Death seemed to end all. Whatever life's achievement death appeared to level that. This is what Levin thinks of it:

Death, the inevitable end of everything, confronted him for the first time with irresistible force. And that death which was present in this dear brother . . . was not so far away as it had hitherto seemed to be. It was within himself too—he felt it. If not today, then tomorrow or thirty years hence, was it not all the same? But what that inevitable Death was, he not only did not know, not only had never considered, but could not and dared not consider.

"I am working, I want to do something, and I had forgotten that it will all end in Death!"

... the more mental effort he made the clearer he saw that it was undoubtedly so: that he had really forgotten and overlooked one little circumstance in life—that Death would come and end everything, so that it was useless to begin anything, and that there was no help for it. Yes, it was terrible, but true.

"But I am still alive: what am I to do now? What am I to do?" he said despairingly.2

---

2 Ibid., I, 396.
Later on in his *A Confession* also referring to his brother's death he wrote: "Wise, good, serious, he fell ill while still a young man, suffered for more than a year, and died painfully, not understanding why he had lived and still less why he had to die. No theories could give me, or him, any reply to these questions during his slow and painful dying."¹

The death of men made Tolstoy think of the possibility of future life. If death destroyed man's corporeal existence on earth, any hope lay only in some form of the future continuity of living. This aspect of his exploration to find a way out of the dead-end is very essential to note. His explanation of life later on would be by way of the continuity of living in future. He would try to hurdle over the barrier of death by creating a permanent link between the finite bodily existence and the infinite continuity of life in future others.

For the time, however, he is busy exploring it. In November, 1860, he wrote in his diary: "A boy of thirteen has died in torment from consumption. What for? The only explanation is given by faith in the compensation

of a future life. If that does not exist there is no justice...."  

But, there is an incident recorded by S. A. Behre, Tolstoy's brother-in-law, about the future life which expresses a contrary view of it. The incident is:

We were riding past the village church where his parents lie buried. Two horses were grazing in the churchyard. We had been talking over the only subject that then interested me.

"How can a man live at peace," I asked, "so long as he has not solved the question of a future life?"

"You see those two horses grazing there," he answered; "are they not laying up for a future life?"

"But I am speaking of our spiritual, not our earthly, life."

"Indeed! Well, about that I neither know nor can know anything."  

Yet, there is a passage in War and Peace which makes us feel that Tolstoy did believe in a future life and with a pretty hopefulness. He was inclined to believe in it as it led to an opening from the dead-end to which he had come to be. This belief is expressed by Pierre, who personified Tolstoy to a great extent, while talking to Prince Andrew, who also represented some of his thinking. Pierre says:

"You say you can't see a reign of goodness and truth on earth. Nor could I, and it cannot be seen if one looks on our life here as the end of everything. On earth, here on this earth ... there is no truth, all is false and evil, but in the universe, in the  

---

1 As quoted in Aylmer Maude, The Life of Tolstoy, I, 216.

2 Ibid., I, 335.
whole universe, there is a kingdom of truth, and we who are now the children of earth are—eternally—children of the whole universe. Don't I feel in my soul that I am part of this vast harmonious whole? Don't I feel that I form one link, one step, between the lower and higher beings, in this vast harmonious multitude of beings in whom the Deity—the Supreme Power if you prefer the term—is manifest? If I see, clearly see, that ladder leading from plant to man, why should I suppose it breaks off at me and does not go farther and farther? I feel that I cannot vanish, since nothing vanishes in this world, but that I shall always have existed and always have existed. I feel that beyond me and above me there are spirits, and that in this world there is truth. 1

Here are the reflections of some of Tolstoy's later writings explaining life, especially on life. Reference to the immortality of man's life is very akin to the basic philosophy of Bhagvada Gastes. Pierre saying that "I shall always exist and always have existed" is close to what Geeta says:

It was not born; it will never die; nor once having been,
Can it ever cease to be? Unborn, Eternal, Ever-enduring,
Yet Most Ancient, The Spirit dies not when the body is dead.2

The passage also suggests that Tolstoy believed in a form of evolution—to be particular, a spiritual evolution. Though all through his life he was opposed to any conception of life based on the Darwinian theory of evolution, he believed in spiritual evolution, as we

1Tolstoy, War and Peace, I, 518.
shell examine later on.

Try as he might there seemed to be no way out. Life only appeared transitory, ephemeral. The best reaches of mind understood life to be: live while you live, tomorrow you will die. And when one dies it is all over. Then, was it worth worrying oneself when life was only an instant in comparison with eternity? Situated in that condition all his riches, fame, and position in life, was unpalatable to him. This is how a passage in War and Peace reflects this thinking:

The Torshok pedlar woman in a whining voice went on offering her wares...."I have hundreds of rubles I don't know what to do with, and she stands in her tattered cloak looking timidly at me," he thought. "And what does she want the money for? As if that money could add a hair's breadth to her happiness or peace of mind. Can anything in the world make her or me less a prey to evil and death? - death which ends all and must come today or tomorrow - at any rate in an instant as compared with eternity." And again he twisted the screw with the stripped thread, and again it turned uselessly in the same place.

"...Nothing has been found out, nothing discovered," Pierre again said to himself. "All we can know is that we know nothing. And that's the height of human wisdom." 1

How frantically Tolstoy was searching for the meaning of life, for what should he live and how to live, may be realized from the talk which Levin is having with peasant Theodore in Anna Karenina. Even a

1Tolstoy, War and Peace, I, 460-1.
suggestion to the solving of his problem makes him
breathless with excitement:

"... One man lives only for his own needs: take
Mityuka, who only stuffs his own belly, but Plato is
an upright old man. He lives for his soul and remembers
God."

"How does he remember God? How does he live for
the soul?" Levin almost cried out.

"You know how rightly, in a godly way. You know,
people differ!..."

"Yes, yes! Goodbye!" uttered Levin, gasping with
excitement, and turning away, he took his stick and
walked quickly away toward home. At the peasant's words
about Plato living for his soul, rightly, in a godly
way, dim but important thoughts crowded into his mind,
as if breaking loose from some place where they had
been locked up, and all rushing toward one goal, whirled
in his head, dazzling him with their light.1

But all that was in the form of exploration to
arrive at the true understanding. He was exploring
scientific, intellectual, and philosophic fields also
for the same purpose. Referring to what science had a
bearing on the question of life and Levin's opinion
of it there is a passage which tells us:

... he had never connected ... scientific deduc-
tions as to man’s animal origin, reflex actions, biology
and sociology, with those questions concerning the
meaning to himself of life and death, which had of
late more and more frequently occurred to him.2

Another time lying on the grass in the natural
surrounding of a wood and thinking about the relation
of evolution and life he says:

1 Tolstoy, Anna Karenina, II, 411-12.
2 Ibid., I, 27.
"I used to say that in my body, in this grass, in this insect ... there takes place, according to physical, chemical, and physiological laws, a change of matter. And in all of us, including the aspens and the clouds and nebulae, evolution is proceeding. Evolution from what, into what? Unending evolution and struggle....As if there could be any direction and struggle in infinity! And I was surprised that, in spite of the greatest effort of thought on that path, the meaning of life, the meaning of my impulses and my aspirations, was not revealed to me."

Tolstoy who had the research mind of a scientist, and who later on vested his absolute faith in reason to elucidate the matters religious, never believed that science could ever solve the problem of life.

In that respect he was antipathetic to science, though in a talk with I.I. Mechnikov, a scientist, he denied it and explained his attitude, which we shall examine later on.

If he had no faith in science explaining life, similar was the case with philosophical explanation. He found the non-materialistic explanation of life also inadequate:

Latterly in Moscow and in the country, having convinced himself that he could get no answer from the materialists, he read through and re-read Plato, Spinoza, Kant, Schelling, Hegel, and Schopenhauer, those philosophers who explained life otherwise than materialistically.

Their thoughts seemed to him fruitful when he

1Tolstoy, Anna Karenina, II, 414.
read, or was himself devising refutations of other teachings, the materialistic in particular; but as soon as he began reading, or himself devised, solutions to life's problems, the same thing occurred every time. Following long definitions of vague words such as spirit, will, freedom, substance, and deliberately entering the verbal trap set for him by the philosophers, or by himself, he seemed to begin to understand something. But he had only to forget that artificial line of thought, and to return direct from real life to what had appeared satisfactory so long as he kept to the given line of thought - and suddenly the whole artificial edifice tumbled down like a house of cards, and it was evident that the edifice had been constructed of those same words differently arranged, and without regard for something in life more important than reason.1

Even reason - pure and simple - did not seem to answer his questions:

"...reason could not give me an answer - reason is incommensurable with the question....

"...Reason has discovered the struggle for existence and the law that I must throttle all those who hinder the satisfaction of my desires. That is the deduction reason makes."2

If science, philosophy, and reason, failed to explain life to Tolstoy, he did not accept the Christian explanation of life either. Levin says:

"...If I don't accept the replies offered by Christianity to the questions my life presents, what solutions do I accept?" And he not only failed to find in the whole arsenal of his convictions any kind of answer, but he could not even find anything resembling an answer.3

But, we get a clue to his mind that he had not

1Tolstoy, Anna Karenine, II, 404.
2Ibid., p. 415.
3Ibid., II, 402.
lost faith in religion altogether. This is evident from the following passage about Levin:

One thing he had discovered since these questions had begun to occupy him, namely, that he had been mistaken in imagining from his recollections of his youthful university circle, that religion had outlived its day and no longer existed. All those near to him who lived good lives were people who believed: the old prince, Lvov, of whom he had grown so fond, his brother, Kosnyeshov, and all the womenfolk. His wife believed as he had done in early childhood, and ninety-nine out of a hundred of the Russian people, the whole of the people whose lives he most respected, also believed.

It is an important reference to trace the future course of development in his search for the enquiry meaning of life. From the very beginning he had a certain belief in religion explaining life. This belief gathered more and more conviction, and later on he came to understand that only a true conception of religion could supply the meaning and guidance to human life. He made an explanation that if the conception of religion was true then the meaning of life accruing from that understanding would unmistakably be clear. Though his understanding of religion itself would undergo a phase of development, yet his explanation of life would be along that course.

However, for the time Tolstoy was in the thick.

1Tolstoy, Anna Karenina, II, 408.
of crisis. The problems haunting his mind remained unsolved. However he turned the screw it did not bite in but went on turning round and round. A thick veil of darkness fell upon him. He felt very dejected. The pace of life slowed down and often came to a standstill. If he could not find any meaning in life then life was not worth living. All hope and happiness lay in the past, future beckoned nothing. A passage in Anna Karenina represents his state of mind very appropriately:

Three days after his brother's departure Levin left for abroad. He surprised young Shcherbatsky, Kitt's cousin, whom he happened to meet at a railway station, by his moroseness.

"What is the matter with you?" asked Shcherbatsky.
"Nothing much, but there is little to be happy about in this world."
"Little? You'd better come to Paris with me instead of going to some Kulhausen or other. You'll see how jolly it will be!"
"No, I have done with that; it is time for me to die."
"That is a fine thing!" said Shcherbatsky, laughing.
"I am only preparing to begin to live."
"Yes, I thought so too till lately; but now I know that I shall soon die."

Levin was saying what of late he had really been thinking. He saw death and the approach of death in everything....After all, he had to live his life somehow, till death came. Everything for him was wrapped in darkness....

Death seemed to end all. Life, work, deed, it all appeared mortal. Levin says:

1Tolstoy, Anna Karenina, I, 400.
"This whole world of ours is only a speck of mildew sprung up on a tiny planet; yet we think we can have something great - thoughts, actions! They are all but grains of sand!"

"But, my dear fellow, all that is as old as the hills."

"It is old... But, do you know, when you once grasped it clearly, everything becomes insignificant! If you once realize that tomorrow, if not today, you will die and nothing will be left of you, everything becomes insignificant!"

It is evident that a period of spiritual crisis had arrived in the life of Tolstoy. The last chapters of Anna Karenina indicate the state of turmoil he was in. By now he had explored life very thoroughly. He had got down the facts of life. He was now prepared to record those facts of life in his most autobiographical of writing, A Confession.

II

As remarked earlier, Tolstoy's search for the meaning of life was closely aligned to his search for the meaning of religion. He wrote that "religion is the meaning given to life, it is what gives life strength and direction." If the meaning of life was the enquiry, the answer appeared to be most likely in the fundamental..."
als of religion. Since times immemorial religion had tried to answer the questions of life and death, it had tried to bring comprehensibility to matters unknown and mysterious, and had tried to bring about a co-ordination of man's life with a certain consistent beginning and end. Due to this very basic functioning of religion it was logical that he turned towards religion to find out the explanation of life.

Tracing his early attitude to religion we find that for a time he followed the practices of religion to which he was initiated. He was baptized and brought up in the orthodox Christian faith. He followed it in childhood and all through his boyhood and youth. But when he left the university at the age of eighteen he no longer believed anything he had been taught. In fact he had never believed seriously in his faith, it was rather a matter of habit and to remain in conformity with the practices of his elder.1

By this period though Tolstoy had discarded his early religious belief, yet he had not settled upon any well-defined belief in its place. Though in a vague sense he believed in God and Christ, but what was the basis of that belief he could not say. He tried to be

1Tolstoy, A Confession, p. 8.
a perfect man in various manners, but in what it actually consisted he could not tell. His general attitude was indefinite but eager to find out a sound basis to rest his life upon:

I did not believe what had been taught me in childhood but I believed in something. What it was I believed in I could not at all have said. I believed in a God, or rather I did not deny God—but I could not have said what sort of God. Neither did I deny Christ and his teaching, but what his teaching consisted in I again could not have said.

Looking back on that time, I now see clearly that my faith—my only real faith—that which apart from my animal instincts gave impulses to my life—was a belief in perfecting myself. But in what did this perfecting consisted and what its object was, I could not have said. I tried to perfect myself mentally—I studied everything I could, anything life threw in my way; I tried to perfect my will, I drew up rules I tried to follow; I perfected myself physically, cultivating my strength and agility by all sorts of exercises, and accustoming myself to endurance and patience by all kinds of privations... The beginning of it all was of course moral perfection, but that was soon replaced by perfection in general; by the desire to be better not in my own eyes or those of God but in the eyes of other people. And very soon this effort again changed into a desire to be stronger than others; to be more famous, more important and richer than others.1

As the meaning of life eluded Tolstoy's grasp, and he searched for the clues in various ins and outs of life, so was the case with his understanding of religion. He was exploring the whole matter concerning religion to arrive at the true explanation of religion.

We get a further clue to the development of his religious understanding from an entry in his diary on November 14, 1852:

"I believe in one, good, and incomprehensible God, in the immortality of the soul, and in eternal recompense for our deeds. What I do not understand the mysteries of the Trinity and of the birth of the Son of God? I honour, and do not reject, the faith of my fathers."1

It implies that though he rejected the mysteries and miracles of Christianity he believed in its essential aspects. We get a further confirmation to it from another entry in his diary on March 5, 1855, in which he conceived a great, stupendous idea, to found a new, practical religion. It was to be the religion of Christ, purged of dogmas and mysticism, promising bliss not in the other world but here upon earth:

A conversation about Divinity and Faith has suggested to me a great, a stupendous idea, to the realisation of which I feel competent of devoting my life. That idea is the founding of a new religion corresponding to the present state of mankind: the religion of Christ but purged of dogmas and mysticism as a practical religion, not promising future bliss but giving bliss on earth. I understand that to accomplish this the conscious labour of generations will be needed. One generation will bequeath the idea to the next, and some day fanaticism or reason will accomplish it. Deliberately to promote the union of mankind by religion is the basic thought which I hope will dominate me.2

This entry in Tolstoy's diary is very essential

---

1As quoted in Aylmer Maude, *The Life of Tolstoy*, I, 66.

2Ibid., I, 189. Italics mine.
to understand the future development of his religion. His early understanding of religion, and thereby the meaning of life, would be somewhat in the form of Christ's religion purged of dogma and mysticism. Also, his desire to promote the union of mankind by religion, would form a part and parcel of his religion. The union of mankind would be the basic functioning of his religion and thereby the true understanding of life.

With doubts and conflicts he was groping his way on. He had found certain clues in the religion of Christ along which he would move in future, yet for the time there was a tussle between intellect and the acceptance of a belief. He is inclined to accept a belief, yet - as was always the case with him - his strong critical reasoning must verify the whole matter before he could draw in favour of the conclusion. His attitude to religion at this period is summed up by him in a letter he wrote to his aunt, Alexandra Tolstoy, in April, 1876:

It is strange and terrible to say: I do not believe in anything that religion teaches us to believe in; yet at the same time I not only hate and scorn unbelief, I cannot see any possibility of living without faith, much less dying without one....With my intellectual demands and the answers given by the Christian Religion, I find myself in the position of two hands
trying to clasp each other but whose fingers stand in the way. I yearn to believe but the harder I try the worse off I am; and yet I know that the possibility is there, the one is made for the other.1

The future development would of course be to create a rapproachment between intellect and the Christian belief. The possibility that the one was made for the other, as yet doubtful, would be accomplished soon afterwards. Tolstoy's understanding of life in the early phase would be by way of the Christian belief.

---