
Anna Karenina and Moral Philosophy

Jonathan Glover

It is obvious that *Anna Karenina* is not in the ordinary sense a work of philosophy.¹ It is a novel, a story about a group of particular people. Admittedly some of the characters 'philosophize' in a popular sense, expressing opinions on life, death, love, morality, and religion. But the book does not have the apparatus of a real piece of philosophy: arguments, analysis of concepts, rebuttals of opposing points of view. Yet virtually anyone who reads it must come away with the sense that it is not just a book about those particular people, and that its subject matter includes some of the central philosophical questions. (Not quite everyone: when it came out, the reviewer for the *Odessa Courier* wrote: 'Food, drink, hunting, balls, horse races and love, love, love in the most naked sense of the word, without psychological ramifications or moral interest of any sort—that is what the novel is about from start to finish . . . I challenge the reader to show me one page, nay! one half-page, that contains an idea, or rather the shadow of an idea.')

Some of us come away from the book with the sense that there is at least as much to learn from Tolstoy about how we should live as can be learnt from Aristotle or from Kant. If this is right, philosophy will be poorer if philosophers stay in their professional compartment and ignore Tolstoy and other novelists. But there is a difficulty in the project of bringing these two kinds of writing in contact with each other, a difficulty that haunts my attempt here to link Tolstoy with moral philosophy. It is hardly a mere accident that

I have learnt much, both from Jim Griffin's writings and from his friendship. I like to think these Tolstoyan reflections (first presented to Martha Nussbaum's class at Brown University) have an affinity with two themes in *Value Judgement*. One is Jim Griffin's denial of 'the sufficiency of the moral': his insistence in locating morality in wider human concerns. The other is his view that philosophers writing on ethics should take much more notice of what people are like. It is disconcerting how many moral philosophers, in their writings and in person, exude human obliviousness. Jim is their antipodes.

¹ All quotations are taken from the penguin edition: *Anna Karenina*, trans. Rosemary Edmonds (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1954).

Tolstoy wrote *Anna Karenina* as a novel, or that Kant wrote the *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals* not as a novel. We may fairly confidently hope that no one will try to rewrite the *Groundwork* as a novel. But there is a bit more danger of philosophers trying to extract some set of philosophical propositions from *Anna Karenina*, and in the process squeezing the life out of it.

The danger can be glimpsed when an academic philosopher makes a brief appearance in the novel, in conversation with Levin's half-brother, Koznyshev. Levin listens to them,

but every time they got close to what seemed to him the most important point, they promptly beat a hasty retreat and plunged back into the sea of subtle distinctions, reservations, quotations, allusions, and references to authorities; and he had difficulty in understanding what they were talking about.

Levin asked them a question, which Koznyshev said they were not in a position to answer, a view backed up by the philosopher:

'We have not the necessary data,' confirmed the professor and went back to his argument. 'No,' he said, 'I maintain that if, as Pripasov directly asserts, sensation is based directly on impressions, then we are bound to distinguish sharply between these two conceptions.' Levin listened no longer, but sat waiting for the professor to go.

One danger is of being heavy-handed. I once heard of a mathematics teacher who would sketch out the solution of a problem, but not work it out in detail, saying, 'the rest is heavy'. There is a risk of this heaviness, taking some economical Tolstoyan gesture and going on about 'what Tolstoy is trying to say'. There is also a danger of being crudely reductive, squeezing the complexity of the people and events of the novel into some Procrustean set of philosophical categories.

These dangers are real, and I am not sure I can altogether escape them. There are reasons that may make them worth risking. One reason comes from the feeling that in Tolstoy's novels, perhaps especially in *Anna Karenina*, there are ways of seeing people and their lives that philosophy is poorer for neglecting.

Maynard Keynes wrote about the influence of G. E. Moore and *Principia Ethica*. He said of Moore that 'he had one foot on the threshold of the new heaven, but the other foot in Sidgwick and the Benthamite calculus and the general rules of correct behaviour'. Keynes and his circle at Cambridge believed in the new heaven of cultivating relationships and states of mind, and ignored the utilitarian part:

We accepted Moore's religion, so to speak, and discarded his morals. Indeed, in our opinion, one of the greatest advantages of his religion was that it made morals unnecessary—meaning by 'religion' one's attitude towards oneself and the ultimate and by 'morals' one's attitude towards the outside world and the intermediate.

In something like this sense of 'religion', many of us who are atheists have a religion as well as a morality: a set of things we hold to be of great personal importance, but which we probably would not expect to be able to defend by argument, and which we would not suppose other people have any kind of duty to promote. This has links with the way we care a great deal about a few people close to us, without thinking that they have any stronger moral claims—for instance, on scarce medical resources—than people we do not know. Some people have living in the country and watching animals as their religion, for others the religion is friendship, or music, or children, or mountaineering. Since first reading *Anna Karenina*, I have been partly Tolstoyan by religion, while having a much more prosaic morality.

But perhaps this distinction between morality and religion may become a bit battered if exposed to much critical scrutiny. And there is also the worry that calling some beliefs or values 'religion' is just a way of leaving them, like many people's theistic beliefs, in a state of unexamined darkness and confusion. So it may be good for me to try to spell out what can be learnt from *Anna Karenina*, but of course my hope is that it will be worthwhile for others too. There is also something puzzling. I find myself disagreeing with some of Tolstoy's main views, while at the same time feeling that underneath them is something both important and right. But, if the views are rejected, what is it that commands assent? If whatever it is has the importance I think it has, it seems worth risking being heavy or reductive in making the attempt to get clear about it. But I know that I run the risk that there is some Levin in the audience, listening no longer, and waiting for me to go.

1. MORALITY AND THE EMOTIONS

(i) *How we should listen to far more than we can analyse*

Tolstoy thinks we should listen to our own emotional responses, even to quite vague pangs of unease at the edge of our attention. When Kitty was thinking of a possible future life with Vronsky, she had a dazzling vision of happiness, but at the same time 'something uneasy clouded her thoughts of Vronsky, though he was all a well-bred man-of-the-world could be, as if there were a false note—not in him, he was very simple and nice, but in herself'. Or there can be an obscure sense that something is significant in a way hard to pin down. Anna, enthusing about Vronsky after their meeting on the train, remembered him giving away two hundred roubles for the widow of the guard who had been crushed: 'But she did not mention the two hundred roubles. For some reason she did not like thinking about them. She felt that there had been something in the incident to do with her personally, that should not have been.'

This false note struck by Vronsky in both Kitty and Anna is a clue, which they mistakenly ignored because it was unwelcome or hard to explain. The tacit knowledge that cannot be spelled out because it is based on subliminal cues is something Tolstoy is surely right to respect. Good doctors sometimes say that they themselves, with their own reactions to people, can be their most sensitive diagnostic instrument.

Obviously there are dangers in the too easy reliance on an intuitive feel for people: where beliefs about people do not have to be backed up by reasons, any old prejudice can have free play. There is a need to be alert to differences between feelings whose reliability is supported by other evidence and those which often have to be revised when there is more information. But when intuitive impressions are under some broad empirical control, to discard them is to lose important clues about people.

Tolstoy goes further than this, and treats some intuitive impressions as the voice of conscience, or as a moral compass. When Vronsky visits Anna during the period of their affair before the break-up of Anna's marriage, he was often troubled by the presence of her son, Seriozha:

The child's presence invariably called up in Vronsky that strange feeling of inexplicable revulsion which he had experienced of late. The child's presence called up both in Vronsky and in Anna a feeling akin to that of a sailor who can see by the compass that the direction in which he is swiftly sailing is wide of the proper course, but is powerless to stop. Every moment takes him farther and farther astray, and to admit to himself that he is off his course is the same as admitting final disaster.

This child, with his innocent outlook upon life, was the compass which showed them the degree to which they had departed from what they knew but did not want to know.

Here Tolstoy suggests that Vronsky's feeling of revulsion is a sign of his having gone astray from 'the proper course'. But there are questions to be asked about this. Are we meant to see *any* feeling of revulsion as a 'moral intuition' that we are off course? This seems much too crude: Tolstoy surely does not think that the revulsion a medical student may have to overcome in order to do dissection is a moral warning of this kind. It must be a particular kind of revulsion, but what are its distinctive features?

Some 'moral-sense' theories suggest that awareness that something is wrong involves an introspectively distinct kind of unpleasant feeling, perhaps marked off from others in the way one kind of bad smell can be distinguished from another. But proponents have had little to say about the special feature we are supposed to notice. Appeal to indescribable inner qualities does not seem promising. A natural alternative appeals to context. If some moral intuitions are rooted in feelings of revulsion, they are distinguished by the reasons for them and by the beliefs that accompany them. This seems to fit Tolstoy's account. The feeling is not cited alone, but together with the claim that the

moral compass was 'the child, with his innocent outlook on life'. The feeling should be taken seriously, because it is based on the contrast between the innocence of Seriozha's outlook and the far from innocent outlook inseparable from Vronsky's own behaviour.

There are often problems in identifying the reasons for a feeling of revulsion. For instance, in Vronsky's case, he might suspect that the feeling was based more on guilt about the harm he was doing Seriozha in breaking up his parents' marriage, rather than on any contrast between Seriozha's innocence and his own lack of it. But, if Tolstoy's account is simply taken to be correct, it is worth noting that the emotional response is not a completely independent moral guide. It is to be taken seriously because of the reason for it, and that reason itself appeals to a moral belief that Vronsky's conduct is incompatible with an 'innocent' outlook. There are times when we should listen to our emotions, but more general moral beliefs guide us about when those times are.

But Tolstoy does not make the authority of feelings depend on their moral quality being recognized. When Oblonsky first approaches Karenin to suggest that he should give Anna a divorce, he starts by stammering:

'Yes, I would like . . . I must . . . Yes, I wanted to talk to you,' said Oblonsky, surprised at his own unaccustomed timidity. The feeling was so unexpected and strange that Oblonsky did not believe it was the voice of conscience telling him that what he was about to do was wrong. He made an effort and conquered the timidity that had come over him.

Tolstoy believes that breaking up a marriage is morally wrong, and perhaps this is why he thinks that Oblonsky's feeling of timidity was the voice of conscience. But, without this moral view prior to the feeling, such an interpretation is not the only possible one. Anyone might feel timid about intruding enough to suggest to someone that he should give his wife a divorce, particularly in a society where it was such a rarity. I disagree with Tolstoy's view that Oblonsky's suggestion was morally wrong, but can imagine feeling timid about making it if placed in Oblonsky's position, and I would not take this as showing the suggestion to be morally wrong. Tolstoy would no doubt see this as being deaf to the voice of conscience. But there is the problem of how we are to recognize the voice of conscience. There is also the suspicion that Tolstoy's thinking here is circular: the timidity is the voice of conscience because it fits with his moral beliefs, which are in turn validated by his conscience.

Tolstoy's religious beliefs give him a possible way out of this circularity. It is also worth mentioning that most of us have a circularity problem of this kind. Our moral beliefs and intuitive responses are usually in some kind of mutual support, the state of affairs that John Rawls has perhaps optimistically

called 'reflective equilibrium'. In thinking about whether some feeling of reluctance is a sign of some serious moral objection or *merely* timidity, all we can do is think carefully about it, and this thinking is inevitably guided by more general moral beliefs we already hold. So the 'circularity' objection is not devastating against Tolstoy, but it does bring out that there is room for disagreement over what counts as the voice of conscience.

(ii) *The opposition to 'Kantian' morality*

Tolstoy's belief in listening to the emotions is linked to his continuing opposition to moralities of cold dutifulness. Anna's tragedy can be traced back to Karenin's decision to marry her, taken out of duty rather than love. His feelings had been that 'there were as many arguments for the step as against it, and no overwhelming consideration to outweigh his invariable rule of abstaining when in doubt'. But he was persuaded by Anna's aunt that he had already compromised her and so had a duty to propose marriage. The stiff coldness of the marriage that resulted made it unsurprising that, when Karenin knew of the affair with Vronsky, his main demand was that the proprieties should be observed. Anna expresses a natural human revulsion against all this:

'He's in the right!' She muttered. 'Of course, he's always in the right; he's a Christian, he's magnanimous! Yes, the mean, odious creature! And no one understands it except me, and no one ever will; and I can't explain it. People say he's so religious, so high-principled, so upright, so clever; but they don't see what I've seen. They don't know how for eight years he has crushed my life, crushed everything that was living in me—he has never once thought that I'm a live woman in need of love.'

This high-principled coldness is a disaster for Karenin himself as well as for Anna. Without love, his life has only the satisfactions of careerism. He escapes its emptiness only by immersing himself in bureaucratic detail. The first time he feels deep happiness is when Anna seems likely to die in childbirth, and he acts out of generous feelings: 'He was not thinking that the Christian law which he had been trying to follow all his life enjoined on him to forgive and love his enemies; yet a glad feeling of love and forgiveness for his enemies filled his heart.' The message is that, by comparison with impulses of warmth and generosity, the duties and rules of conventional morality are nothing. Or they can be worse than nothing, as in the cruel ostracism at the opera of Anna after her social disgrace.

A similar point about conventional or rule-based morality comes out in the case of Vronsky. His code of principles was narrow but clear. 'This code categorically ordained that gambling debts must be paid, the tailor need not be; that one must not lie to a man but might to a woman; that one must never

cheat anyone but may a husband; that one must never pardon an insult but may insult others oneself, and so on.' It was a code that made him think of Karenin mainly in terms of a possible challenge to a duel. Its limitations started to appear even to Vronsky himself when Anna told him she was pregnant: 'He felt that this fact and what she expected of him called for something not fully defined in his code of principles.'

As with Karenin, Vronsky's mistake is to live by some conventionally determined set of duties. In a way, what is set against this outlook is the whole novel, in which an astonishing range of people are seen in their complexity, and from the inside. (This is part of what gives the impression that Tolstoy's view is like that of God. And perhaps it was partly this range of understanding and sympathy that led Gorky to write of him: 'Great—in some curious sense wide, indefinable by words—there is something in him which made me desire to cry aloud to everyone: "Look what a wonderful man is living on the earth." For he is, so to say, universally and above all a man, a man of mankind.') This view of people and their variety from inside brings out the inadequacy of the duties people such as Karenin and Vronsky live by. These simple moral rules are insufficiently subtle and flexible, too Procrustean to accommodate the needs and the emotional complexity of people.

2. ANNA

(i) *How far Anna could help it*

Tolstoy disapproves of Anna's affair with Vronsky and of her choice to leave Karenin and Seriozha for him. But he writes of the affair with a great deal of sympathy and understanding, and also with an awareness of how difficult it would have been for her to have chosen to stay with Karenin. Given the strength of her love for Vronsky and her feelings of being stifled in her marriage, it would have at least been very difficult for her to have made what Tolstoy thought was the right choice. There is the question of whether that choice went beyond the very difficult and was for Anna impossible. Was she drawn to Vronsky by an 'irresistible impulse', as a lenient Tolstoyan moralist might suggest, or was it an impulse she merely *did not* resist, as a severe Tolstoyan moralist might say? We all know how difficult this boundary is to draw in the real world, and the problems this creates for psychiatric witnesses in legal cases.

Because in many cases there seems to be no very sharp boundary, people have some free play for their inclinations towards severity or lenience. Some (mainly the more severe moralists) are drawn towards a Kantian emphasis on the scope of the will, stressing the extent to which we can decide whether or

not to yield to a desire, and the way we can shape the desires we have. On this view, self-creation is a real possibility, and the role of good or bad luck in the kind of people we are is minimized. Others (mainly the more lenient moralists) place much more emphasis on the psychological difficulties that circumscribe any project of self-creation. They stress what Bernard Williams has called 'constitutive luck': we are lucky or unlucky not only in the circumstances of our lives, but also in the kind of nature we have, and which we can usually change only to a very limited degree.

Tolstoy does not deny the possibility of self-creation, but his emphasis is in general on the difficulties that set limits to it. He means us to sympathize with Levin's thoughts about his brother:

Levin felt that in his soul, in the innermost depths of his soul, his brother Nikolai, in spite of his dissolute life, was no worse than the people who despised him. It was not his fault that he had been born with a tempestuous nature and a kink in his mind. He had always wished to do right.

Because of his strong sense of the recalcitrance of people's natures (as well as of the role of unpredictable outside circumstances), Tolstoy is sceptical about the idea of drawing up a 'life plan' and then living by it. Levin's own life is a story of repeated decisions in favour of radical self-transformation while he stays recognizably unchanged throughout the book. There is a moment when this conflict surfaces in his mind:

A candle was brought in and gradually lit up the study, revealing the familiar details: the antlers, the book-shelves, the stove with its ventilator which had long wanted repairing, his father's sofa, the big table on which lay an open book, a broken ash-tray, a manuscript-book full of his handwriting. As he saw all this, he began to doubt for a moment the possibility of arranging the new life he had been dreaming of during the drive. All these traces of his old life seemed to clutch him and say: 'No, you're not going to get away from us; you're not going to be different. You're going to be the same as you always have been—with your doubts, your perpetual dissatisfaction with yourself and vain attempts to amend, your failures and everlasting expectation of a happiness you won't get and which isn't possible for you.'

This was what the things said, but another, inner voice was telling him not to submit to the past, telling him a man can make what he will of himself. And listening to this voice he went to the corner where his two heavy dumb-bells lay and started to do exercises with them, trying to restore his confident mood.

The better we know Levin, the more we are inclined to believe the stove with the broken ventilator and the things on the table. The more optimistic inner voice is unconvincing, and it is unlikely that he will keep up the exercises with the dumb-bells tomorrow.

Although Levin is striking in his frequent attempts to change himself, he is not portrayed as more extreme than others in his lack of psychological mal-

leability. The version of nineteenth-century Russian rural life that forms the Tolstoyan background is one long series of attempted reforms of agriculture, which fail because people will not change in the required ways. The Soviet leaders who saw Tolstoy as closer to them, and as more 'progressive' than Dostoyevsky, may have underrated his conservatism: his sense (so relevant to the Soviet project) that the stubborn cussedness of people will usually defeat the neat and tidy plan. Political transformation and self-creation run up against much the same obstacles.

With Anna too, Tolstoy has a vivid sense of how hard it would have been for her to have been different. Whichever way she decides, she feels buffeted by circumstances and at the mercy of her own weakness. When she thought she would not break with Karenin, she

felt that the position she enjoyed in society, which had seemed of so little consequence that morning, was precious to her after all, and that she would not have the strength to exchange it for the shameful one of a woman who has deserted husband and child to join her lover; that, however much she might struggle, she could not be stronger than herself.

And, as she moves in the other direction, she feels the destruction of her marriage by her love for Vronsky as something inevitable. Thinking about how others, and particularly Seriozha, may later judge her, she says to herself, 'Can it be that they won't forgive me, won't understand how none of it could be helped?' And, much later, the same line of thought surfaces when Dolly visits her and Vronsky, and she asks Dolly whether Kitty hates and despises her. Dolly says she does not, but that there are some things one does not forgive. Anna replies, 'I know. But I was not to blame. And who is to blame? What does being to blame mean? Could things have been otherwise? Tell me what you think? Could it possibly have happened that you didn't become the wife of Stiva?'

These thoughts about not being able to be stronger than herself, about how none of it could be helped, and about the obscurity of blame and of the idea that things could have been different are Anna's own, and Tolstoy does not explicitly endorse them. (Though Vronsky is described as 'involuntarily submitting to the weakness of Anna'.) As often in real life, it is unclear whether the thought that none of it could be helped is partly self-deceiving or whether it is simply true. I do not know whether there is a right answer to the question of which view Tolstoy took. There is a tension between his inclination towards moral criticism of Anna and the convincing portrayal of the strength of the pressures on her. At the very least we cannot dismiss her thoughts about not being able to help it as *mere* self-deception.

Towards the end, there are immense pressures on Anna. The humiliations of social ostracism, and perhaps even the loss of Seriozha, might have been

bearable if the relationship with Vronsky had been going well. But, as that too disintegrates into quarrelling and bitterness, Anna is left utterly without support in life. (In one of the last quarrels she says, 'When I feel as I do now, that you are hostile—yes, hostile to me—if you only knew what that means for me! If you knew how near disaster I am at such moments . . .') When she self-destructively insists on courting insults by going to the opera, this is immediately after the visit to Seriozha. It is hard to see her as fully responsible for what she does in such a manic state.

And it is hard not to see the pressures on Anna that build up before her suicide as overwhelming. The disastrous failure of the relationship with Vronsky leaves her nowhere to turn. The (perhaps remote) possibility of the relationship reviving if they can marry is blocked off by Karenin's refusal of a divorce. (The fact that this pressure results from something accidental—Karenin refusing because he has fallen under the influence of the loathsome countess and accepts the virtually random advice of her charlatan clairvoyant—is both Tolstoyan and true to life. The same goes for the horribly convincing muddle of crossed messages between Anna and Vronsky just before her suicide.) Her entrapment produces the nightmare psychological state (in which things are seen in a distorting light but with great vividness) of her final ride to the station. It is hard to expect balanced decisions of anyone in such a state.

Tolstoy leaves us with a difficult question. If we are inclined to think Anna could not help her suicide, but are inclined to think that she was responsible for some of her earlier actions, there is the question of where to draw the line between what could and what could not be helped. As she slides down towards final disaster, there seems no single clear point where what before was only hard to resist becomes irresistible. In that way, Tolstoy faithfully reproduces the blurred moral boundaries of real life, rather than the artificially sharp ones of legal and moral theory.

(ii) The Morality of Anna's Choice

Tolstoy's attitude towards Anna has elements of both sympathy and disapproval. He gives a very sympathetic picture of the pressures that made it either very hard or perhaps impossible for Anna to reject Vronsky and save her marriage. But he is also at least inclined to the view that, to whatever extent it could be helped, Anna's choice was morally wrong.

Tolstoy's first intentions seem to have been mixed. His wife, in a letter to her sister in 1870, wrote, 'Yesterday evening he told me that the type had occurred to him of a woman, married and in high society, who had lost her footing. He said his problem would be to present that woman not as guilty,

but as merely pathetic . . .'. But early drafts of the book suggest the intention to write something much more crudely moralistic against adultery. In those drafts (which I have not read, but which are described in the biographies of Tolstoy by Henri Troyat and by A. N. Wilson) the wrongness of Anna's conduct was emphasized, while Karenin was portrayed as warm, sensitive, and kind, and Vronsky was 'firm, kind-hearted and sincere'. In the first notes on her, Anna's moral failings went with an unprepossessing appearance: 'She is unattractive, with a narrow, low forehead, short, turned-up nose—rather large. If it were any bigger, she would be deformed . . . But, in spite of her homely face, there was something in the kindly smile of her red lips that made her likeable.' And in an early draft one chapter describing her has the title 'The Devil'.

Tolstoy said to friends, 'Do you know, I often sit down to write some specific thing, and suddenly I find myself on a wider road, the work begins to spread out in front of me. That was the way it was with *Anna Karenina*.' From the sound of the earlier versions, we can be glad Tolstoy found himself on a wider road. The final version is certainly not crudely moralistic. But, without the crudity, the moral condemnation of Anna's choice to break up her marriage and family remains, although interwoven with understanding of the pressures on her. He said to Sofya, his wife, 'If a book is to be any good, you have to love the central idea it expresses. In *Anna Karenina* I love the idea of the family . . .'. And on the title-page the book has the chilling epigraph, 'Vengeance is mine, and I will repay'.

While he was writing *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy was having his portrait painted by Ivan Kramskoy, who was in turn having his portrait sketched as the painter Mihailov in the novel. Kramskoy wrote up some of their conversations. On a walk, Kramskoy asked how Tolstoy's novel was. Tolstoy said, 'I don't know. One thing's certain. Anna's going to die. Vengeance will be wreaked on her. She wanted to rethink life in her own way.' Kramskoy asked, 'How should one think?', to which Tolstoy replied, 'One must try to live by the faith which one has sucked in with one's mother's milk and without arrogance of the mind.'

Although the novel grew out of being the simple moral tale in which 'the Devil' got her just deserts, the more sympathetic and complex final version does still have the intended moral message in praise of the family and in support of the religious view of marriage and its indissolubility.

This message is one about which I have mixed feelings. The feelings of sympathy are for Tolstoy's praise of the family. It is almost embarrassing now to speak in praise of the family, an institution so loudly supported by politicians eager for it to replace state support for the disadvantaged, and by religious campaigners against abortion and against homosexuals. And

feminists and gay rights campaigners have real points to make about the limitations of the traditional family. But, for all this, there are psychological needs, both of children and adults, to which the family (at least after it has been mellowed by attitudes of equality) is well adapted. Perhaps there are no generalizations here that fit everybody. But many adults flourish more in the security and stability of a long-term partnership than with a series of shifting partners. And, when life throws up major problems, it is almost impossible to overrate the advantages of having put down deep roots together. It hardly needs saying that children too benefit from a sense of permanence and from the security it brings, and that for them parental divorce can be a disaster.

But even here absolute rules are too easy. (Anyway, too easy to endorse, if often too hard to live with.) In Anna's case, there is no doubt that the break-up was a disaster for Seriozha. This makes it hard to be certain that Anna was right to leave Karenin. But there are reasons for being less certain that she was wrong than Tolstoy seems to have been. There is the false original basis of the marriage. And there is the nightmare it has turned into for Anna. At one point she says about Karenin, 'I have heard it said that women love men even for their vices, but I hate him for his virtues. Do you understand—the sight of him has a physical effect on me? It puts me beside myself. I can't, I can't live with him.' In the context of the relationship as described, this is totally believable. And the idea that—even when there is a child—divorce is in all circumstances wrong seems too confident and too harsh in a case like Anna's.

Here, perhaps for religious reasons, Tolstoy's normal willingness to be guided by human responsiveness rather than by the rules to some extent deserts him.

Tolstoy's own view emphasized the wrongness of breaking a marriage. But, to those of us who do not share his absolutism on this issue, Anna's deepest mistake was her blindness to what Vronsky was like. The feelings of disquiet he sometimes aroused should have been listened to, and his moral code was shallow and conventional.

The shallowness extended far beyond his moral code. Part of his interest in Anna was his enjoyment of the stir the relationship created and the glamour this gave him. When Anna tells him that she has told Karenin, his response is inadequate, and his thoughts mainly about a duel with Karenin:

If on hearing this news he were to say to her firmly, passionately, without a moment's hesitation: 'Throw up everything and come with me!' she would give up her son and go away with him. But the news had not produced the effect she had expected in him: he only looked as though he were resenting some affront.

Compared to Anna's suicide, Vronsky's earlier attempted suicide seems theatrical. When they are in Italy together, Vronsky is not so much a painter

as someone playing at being one, and when the contrast with Mihailov brings out his own lack of talent, he does not face this squarely but in a self-deceiving way just lets his painting career fade away. The life in the country together is more play-acting: the pretentiously furnished house and the playing of the role of the big benefactor of the hospital all seem to be filling a big hole in Vronsky's life.

His life lacks a centre: the love for Anna was never either the overwhelming passion of Anna for him nor the deep straightforward love of Levin for Kitty, but always tinged with consciousness of image. And his life does not have the other kind of centre: something he is really serious about in the way Levin is serious about Kitty, or their child, or about his estate and his work, or about the questions he asks about his life. Tolstoy's belief in seriousness is one of the main links between the part of the book that is about Anna and Vronsky and the part that is about Levin. Vronsky is not right for Anna because he lacks the seriousness that she has. This seriousness is above all exemplified by Levin. This seriousness is one of Tolstoy's deepest values, and it is the central thing I was responding to when I said my religion was partly Tolstoyan.

3. TOLSTOY'S VIEW OF SERIOUSNESS

Tolstoy always gives the same sort of picture of people living in ways that are shallow, or not serious. They are meeting people to advance their career. Or they are saying things that they hope will seem respectable or clever or fashionable. Or they are painting because they care not about painting but about being painters. Or they are paying polite calls and talking about nothing. What all this has in common is what Bertrand Russell, in a letter to Colette Malle-son, called 'worldliness'. He wrote that he was 'against worldliness, which consists of doing everything for the sake of something else, like marrying for money instead of love. The essence of life is doing things for their own sakes.'

When Levin is thinking of what it is that Koznyshev lacks, he notices 'not a lack of kindly honesty and noble desires and tastes, but a lack of the vital force, of what is called heart, of the impulse which drives a man to choose one out of all the innumerable paths of life and to care for that one only'. There is no insistence that anyone serious must choose the same path. (Perhaps all shallow lives are alike, but a serious life is serious in its own way?) Anna's love is serious, Levin's questioning is serious, and the peasants mowing the hay (in Tolstoy's perhaps romanticized picture of them) are serious. They care about different things and do different things. Part of what they have in common is that they care about things that are not trivial.

Another part of their seriousness is that they notice things, in a way the person who does everything for the sake of something else does not. John Donne said in a sermon:

We are all conceived in close prison, and then all our life is but a going out to the place of execution, to death. Was any man seen to sleep in the cart between Newgate and Tyburn? Between prison and place of execution does any man sleep? But we sleep all the way. From the womb to the grave, we are never thoroughly awake.

The dark picture of all our life as but a going-out to the place of execution is more like Dostoyevsky than Tolstoy. But going through life thoroughly awake is something Tolstoy cares about, and Anna and Levin are awake as they go through life as Vronsky and Karenin are not.

Another aspect of seriousness comes out in the way people talk to each other. It is a matter of breaking through the barriers of inhibition and convention that keep conversation at the level of politeness and small talk rather than about the thoughts and feelings that matter more. The clearest case of failure to break through these inhibitions is in the scene where Koznyshev and Varenka go collecting mushrooms together. Everyone round them thinks they will decide to get married. Koznyshev goes off gathering mushrooms in another part of the birch wood for a few moments final reflection. He comes back having decided to propose marriage, and they walk a few steps alone:

It would have been easier for them to say what they wanted to say after a silence than after talking about mushrooms. But against her will, and as if by accident, Varenka said:

'So you did not find any? But of course there are always fewer in the middle of the wood.' Koznyshev sighed and made no answer. He was vexed that she had spoken about the mushrooms. He wanted to bring her back to her first remark about her childhood; but after a pause of some length, as though against his own will, he made an observation in reply to her last words. 'I've only heard that the white edible fun-guses are found chiefly at the edge of the wood, though I can't tell a white boletus when I see one.'

More time passed with both of them knowing this was the vital moment. Koznyshev

repeated to himself the words in which he had intended to put his offer, but instead of those words some perverse reflection caused him to ask:

'What is the difference between a white boletus and a birch mushroom?'

Varenka's lips trembled with agitation as she replied:

'There is hardly any difference in the top part, but the stalks are different.'

And as soon as these words were out of her mouth, both he and she understood that it was over, that what was to have been said would not be said . . .

This passage admits of more than one interpretation. One is the 'Freudian' one, that the verbal stumbling was motivated by an unconscious desire not to marry. And perhaps Koznyshev's need for final reflection is some indication that his love was less than whole-hearted. But it also seems possible that, if they had not been defeated by politeness and inhibition, but had broken through to the deepest level of each other, they would have found they both wanted each other. I believe that many people know from the inside this kind of failure to break through the barriers of inhibition and convention. Tolstoy does not respond to it with moral condemnation, and writes of it with marvellous understanding and sympathy. But he still sees it as a failure of seriousness: something sad, which in this case Koznyshev and Varenka perhaps pay for heavily.

There is a contrast with Anna, who, whatever moral criticisms Tolstoy makes of her, does not lack seriousness. When Dolly arrives to visit her and Vronsky, the first conversation turns to Anna's position, but Dolly tries to shy away from this:

'However, we can talk about that later. What are all those buildings?' she asked, wanting to change the subject, and pointing to some red and green roofs that could be seen through a quickset hedgerow of acacia and lilac. 'It looks quite a little town.'

But Anna did not answer her.

'No, no, tell me how you look at my position? What do you think of it, tell me?' she asked.

By pushing through the polite small talk, Anna's seriousness was rewarded by eliciting Dolly's deepest response, which was so warm that Anna replied, 'All your sins, if you had any, would be forgiven you for this visit and what you have just said.'

Seriousness may explain something I have often found puzzling in discussions between people on different sides of disagreements about values. It is something I have noticed sometimes when arguing, for instance, about abortion, a topic notorious for the hostility and vehemence it generates. I am broadly sympathetic to the case for seeing abortion as something that should be available to women if they choose it. I often discuss the issue with people who take the opposite view that even early abortion is murder. My view tells me that they are helping to maintain the unjustifiable coercion of women into having unwanted children, and creating massive unnecessary misery in doing so. Their view tells them that I am advocating treating babies as things, and contributing to a climate in which there is the mass murder of innocent and defenceless human beings on an unprecedented scale. But often I value the discussion and respect the things said by my pro-life opponent. And my impression is that often they have a similar view. At least, they talk to me in

a much more friendly way than I would talk to some Nazi who was advocating mass murder. And this is not peculiar to the abortion debate: it can happen in discussions of religion and politics too.

Part of the explanation may be that, on these matters, we are aware that our own views may not be right. There could be reasons that would make us change our minds. But also the explanation has to do with our response to people openly expressing their beliefs about things they have thought about and that matter to them. The combination of seriousness and openness is impressive in a way that transcends disagreement.

These comments on seriousness leave a lot of loose ends. One obvious question (to which I am not sure of the answer) is how far seriousness as I have tried to describe it is a unitary value, and how far it would be better to treat it as a cluster of different values. But I hope there is enough unity to make it worth talking about.

If it is worth talking about, not much of that talk seems to take place in moral philosophy. There seems to be a gap in philosophy between highly abstract discussions of rights or happiness or justice at one end of the subject, and very detailed 'applied-ethics' discussions of medical dilemmas or of nuclear deterrence. There is not a lot at about the level of Aristotle's discussion of friendship, or Pascal's of diversion, where there is engagement in some detail with questions about the kinds of life that are most worth living. Perhaps here is where we have most to learn from novels.

Finally, in the context of philosophy, we can go back for a moment to people disagreeing with each other. There is a passage about some thoughts of Levin on this:

Levin had often noticed in discussions between the most intelligent people that after enormous efforts, and endless logical subtleties and talk, the disputants finally became aware that what they had been at such pains to prove to one another had long ago, from the beginning of the argument, been known to both, but that they liked different things, and would not define what they liked for fear of its being attacked. He had often had the experience of suddenly in the middle of a discussion grasping what it was the other liked and at once liking it too, and immediately found himself agreeing, and then all arguments fell away useless. Sometimes the reverse happened: he at last expressed what he liked himself, which he had been arguing to defend and, chancing to express it well and genuinely, had found the person he was disputing with suddenly agree.

This is a marvellous picture of how an argument, perhaps about philosophy, could go. Somehow it does not seem to be quite what is going on in the *Journal of Philosophy* or in *Mind*. But perhaps it is an ideal we could keep at least at the back of our minds. The last part of the passage, about coming to like what the other person likes, may be a bit optimistic. Because we are

different, we will *not* always come to like the same things, though we may do so sometimes. But the idea of coming to grasp what the other person likes could come to be seen as an important part of philosophy, perhaps even as important as 'endless logical subtleties and talk'.