
WILLIAM JAMES IN RUSSIAN CULTURE
What Men Live By: 
Belief and the Individual in 
Leo Tolstoy and William James

Donna Tussing Orwin

When William James read War and Peace and Anna Karenina in the summer of 1896, he declared them to be “perfection in the representation of human life” (Letters, 2: 48). Tolstoy subsequently became one of James’s favorite authors (Myers, p. 42), both as a novelist and as a religious thinker cited extensively in The Varieties of Religious Experience. Tolstoy, by contrast, showed little overt interest in James. True, as L. Kuzina and K. Tiunkin (p. 82) plausibly argue, the famous passage at the end of part I of Resurrection comparing individuals to rivers may refer to James’s idea (first expressed in The Principles of Psychology) of a stream of consciousness. Tolstoy, who closely followed debates about psychology in the journal Questions of Philosophy and Psychology in the 1890s, could not have been unaware of James, while Psychology: Briefer Course (the one-volume abridgement of The Principles of Psychology) itself was published in Russian in 1896. Tolstoy’s borrowing, however, if it is that, may be polemical (Kuzina, Tiunkin, pp. 73–88).¹ In any case, the author of War and Peace and Anna Karenina had little to learn from James about the way consciousness flows, changes, and affects our perceptions of reality. James’s wildly appreciative 1896 reaction to these novels as perfectly representative of life—that is, the dynamics of human psychology—suggests that he saw in them a prescient imaging of his own ideas. And in fact, as I shall argue in this chapter, James’s and Tolstoy’s psychology have common roots in transcendental philosophy as it affected both American and Russian culture.

Age alone does not explain the enthusiasm of the younger man and the seeming indifference of the older one. Tolstoy viewed James as too intellectual, too “scientific.” The only two references to James in Tolstoy’s diary refer acidly
to James's depiction of Tolstoy in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* and then to Tolstoy's impression of the book: "An inaccurate relation to the subject [i.e., religion]—scientific nauchnee. Oh, is it ever scientific!" (December 14, 1909; PSS, 57:188). James's father, Swedenborgian and idealist Henry James Sr., whom Tolstoy read in March 1891, evoked a much more positive response. Tolstoy preferred the father's religious disposition to the son's science. Ironically, then, it was partly Tolstoy's religiosity that drew William to him. In Tolstoy James found psychologizing as rigorous as his own, a yearning for belief as perfervid, and a capacity for mystical experience that he himself lacked. James confesses this failing at the beginning of his lectures on "mystical states" in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*: "[M]y own constitution shuts me out from their enjoyment almost entirely, and I can speak of them only at second hand" (p. 301). Yet James believes that religion is essential, and it is Tolstoy whom he quotes (from the title of a story written in 1881) as saying that "faith . . . is that by which men live" (VRE, p. 336).

"Mystical states," which James identifies in *Varieties* as "twice-bornness and supernaturality and pantheism," are "absolutely authoritative over the individuals to whom they come." Although others need not accept them uncritically, they cannot simply be discounted either.

[Mystical states] break down the authority of the non-mystical or rationalistic consciousness, based upon the understanding and the senses alone. They show it to be only one kind of consciousness. They open out the possibility of other orders of truth, in which, so far as anything in us vitally responds to them, we may freely continue to have faith. (p. 335)

Both Tolstoy and James were psychologists and moralists, who, analyzing individual consciousness, concluded that human beings rely for moral guidance on beliefs that cannot be justified rationally. Today, when many scientists question the authority of "rationalistic consciousness," and the religion of progress through science has many fewer adherents than in the nineteenth century, the arguments of James and Tolstoy about the necessity of religious faith deserve a fresh look. So, too, do their agreements and disagreements. In what follows, I will discuss the role of belief in the writings of the two men, enlarge upon the significance of Tolstoy for James, and offer a comparison of the two.

The Necessity of Belief in Tolstoy

Tolstoy first explores the psychology of belief in *otvochestvo* (Boyhood 1853). The philosophizing adolescent arrives at a "skepticism" so complete that "be-
sides myself I imagined no one and nothing existed in the whole world. ... In a word, I concurred with Schelling in the conviction that not objects, but my relation to them exists” (PSS 2:57). Nikolenka doubts the objective existence not only of the physical, but of the moral world. He gives up old beliefs— "which for the happiness of my life I ought never have dared to touch”—for new philosophic theories. If, as Tolstoy believed, philosophizing should always be directed toward good practices, then skepticism is unsustainable because it destroys the possibility of any practice. Extreme subjectivism is the intellectual expression of the self-centered world of adolescence. Tolstoy calls it "skepticism" because in the process of analyzing the world the overactive logical mind of his adolescent dismantles it until nothing is left, not even reason itself: "mind left reason behind [um za razum zakhodil]." The Russian proverb neatly captures Tolstoy’s distinction between inadequate human reason—the "pitiful, meager spring of moral activity ... the mind of man"—and divine Reason as the organizing principle of an external reality the existence of which he, like James, never seriously doubted.

Boris Eikhenbaum distinguished the "moral instincts" by which Tolstoy lived from the "convictions" [ubezhdentii] which he despised (Lev Tolstoy, p. 216). These instincts are moral ideas that are thought as well as felt. This passage from Youth is typical:

Those virtuous ideas that I would work over in conversations with my adored friend Dmitrii ... were still pleasing only to my mind, but not to feeling. But the time came when these thoughts with such fresh power of moral discovery came into my mind that I would panic, thinking of how much time I had lost to no purpose; and immediately, that very same second, I wanted to apply these thoughts to life, with a firm resolve never to betray them (PSS 2: 79). (Emphasis mine)

The difference between moral ideas and the “convictions” that Tolstoy despised lies in their origins. Convictions are products of individual minds, and as such are both subjective and superficial; while moral ideas guide our actions even though our minds may not wholly grasp them. “How did I dare to think that one could know the ways of Providence. It is the source of reason, and reason wants to comprehend it ... The mind loses itself in these abysses of wisdom.”: thus did Tolstoy as a young soldier in the Caucasus in 1851 formulate his relation to higher reason embodied in Providence (PSS 46: 61). In Youth moral ideas do not actually take hold in Nikolenka’s mind until they “come into” it with “fresh power of moral discovery”: the grammatical construction expresses the passivity of the individual in relation to these formative ideas. They are both feelings and ideas at the same time. In Youth, Christian tradition remains a repository of moral belief, but nature is more
compelling. Chapter 32 ("Youth") returns Nikolena to his boyhood home Petrovskoe and especially to its garden, a metaphor for Eden. There Nikolena communes with sources of belief not directly available to the mind. The rest of Youth chronicles the struggle in Nikolena's soul over conflicting impulses, and ends, significantly, with another "moral surge" and a promise to the reader to depict its consequences "in the next, happier half of youth."

The structure of Youth, with its peak of lyric intensity before the end (at "Youth"), and lesser peaks and valleys throughout, is meant to imitate the psychological process more closely than traditional novels built on linear plots. In War and Peace Tolstoy took a different approach. There the cycle of belief—action based on belief, crisis, then renewed belief and renewed action—became the "plot" around which he built the novel. Pierre Bezukhov, for instance, begins as an enthusiastic advocate of assassination if it is for the sake of "the rights of man, emancipation from prejudices, and equality of citizenship." These conventional ideals crumble after Pierre actually wounds Dolokhov in an affaire d'honneur. Pierre is immobilized by the ensuing crisis of belief: he is obsessed with political injustices that his previous beliefs had rationalized. The mason Bazdeev revivifies Pierre by supplying him with a new set of ideas which will guide him until they too fail the test of reality.

Each major character in the novel follows this pattern. Nikolai Rostov's failure to get charges against his beloved Denisov dismissed, for instance, undermines his faith in the justice of the government. No intellectual, Nikolai elects to "do [his] duty, to fight and not to think" (book 5, chapter 18), but he will later resign his commission to take up the life of a gentleman farmer. War and Peace is a bildungsroman with a difference, however. The education that characters undergo is cyclical, not linear, so that Pierre and Nikolai are poised at the end of the novel to slip out of their peaceful equilibrium into warlike states which will resurrect old passions in them. To this extent, Tolstoy retains the more "open" form of Youth which critics have praised as more lifelike and blamed as less artistically satisfying. In both works, belief in but not wholly of the mind, is "what men live by."

The Necessity of Belief in James

James praised Tolstoy as a "[witness] testifying to the worth of life as revealed to an emancipated sympathy" (Perry, 2: 273). By this he meant that Tolstoy's writing lends credence to the essential assumptions of the individual about himself. Tolstoy and James, the one in art, the other in science, defended the ultimate worth of the individual against rational abstractions that devalued particularity. In Psychology: Briefer Course, James insists that "no psychology
... can question the existence of personal selves. Thoughts connected as we feel them to be connected are what we mean by personal selves. The worst a psychology can do is so to interpret the nature of these selves as to rob them of their worth" (p. 141). For James, as for Tolstoy, this worth depended first and foremost on our understanding of ourselves as moral beings and both agreed that science, including the science of psychology, could not by itself validate this understanding.8 For James, as earlier for Tolstoy, “emancipated sympathy” therefore led beyond science to metaphysics.

Our sense of our “connectedness” and our worth depends upon freedom of the will. We cannot take ourselves seriously if we believe ourselves to be slaves either to impulse or to predetermined ideas. Will, according to James, “relates solely to the amount of effort of attention which we can at any time put forth” (PBC, p. 391). If this is determined solely by internal instinct or by the object under consideration (rather than by a self capable of choice), we are not free. Psychology cannot measure the extent of our freedom, and in any case, as a science, psychology can assume determinism. Free will, like the existence of the self, is a subject for philosophy, not science.

If Tolstoy and James seem modern in their advocacy of individuality and freedom, they seem old-fashioned in their insistence on the existence of moral will and a moral order. They defined free will accordingly. In early philosophical jottings from the late 1840s, Tolstoy wrote of the “reasonable will” (razumnaiia volia) as free (svobodnaia), unlike the lower wills of body and feeling.9 In Psychology: Briefer Course, James calls for education to create habits and routines that will free “our higher powers of mind . . . for their own proper work.” To do this, one has to have a strong will; and he quotes J. S. Mill that “a character is a completely fashioned will,” that is, in James’s formulation “an aggregate of tendencies to act in a firm and prompt and definite way upon all the principal emergencies of life” (p. 136). For both writers, free will means specifically the “higher,” or “reasonable” will. As Tolstoy affirms in the Second Epilogue of War and Peace, furthermore, ethics requires something more than just freedom: “Man’s actions proceed from his innate character and the motives acting upon him. What is conscience and the perception of right and wrong in actions that follows from the consciousness of freedom? That is a question for ethics.”10

There has to be a good to choose, and science cannot supply this good any more than freedom can. James argues that in restricting itself to “facts that are actually tangible,” science cannot provide its own raison d’être, let alone rules to govern human conduct. Science strives instead to be neutral, a posture which, James retorts, is “unrealizable,” because doubt as well as belief is a living attitude, which as such “involve[s] conduct on our part.” It is therefore absurd to hold dogmatically that “our inner interests [namely, our desire to be
worthy by being good) can have no real connection with the forces that the hidden world may contain." Even science has advanced due to "an imperious inner demand on our part for ideal logical and mathematical harmonies" ("Is Life Worth Living?" WB, pp. 50–51), which imply the existence of an ideal world to which science has no access.

In the nineteenth century, James explains elsewhere, the chief criterion for saintliness is "social righteousness." "Since belief is measured by action, he who forbids us to believe religion to be true, necessarily also forbids us to act as we should if we did believe it to be true." The "religious hypothesis" would be a "superfluous" if it were without consequences for action; but since belief alone makes morality possible, it must be defended ("The Will to Believe," WB, p. 32, n. 4). Good deeds, as James explains in The Varieties of Religious Experience, depend upon ideas without sense-content and hence inaccessible to the very mind that embraces them. These include not only the Kantian "ideas of pure Reason," but moral ideas of "abstract and essential goodness, beauty, strength, significance, justice. . . . Such ideas, and others equally abstract, form the background for all our facts, the fountain-head of all the possibilities we conceive of. They give its 'nature,' as we call it, to every special thing. Everything we know is 'what' it is by sharing in the nature of one of these abstractions. We can never look directly at them, for they are bodiless and featureless and footless, but we grasp all other things by their means, and in handling the real world we should be stricken with helplessness in just so far forth as we might lose these mental objects, these adjectives and adverbs and predicates and heads of classification and conception (VRE, pp. 53–54).

Our most important moral ideas—including the existence of the self and free will, and our sense of the moral significance of life—dwell within us as beliefs. These James equates with personal religion as the necessary preconditions of conscience or morality.

**Tolstoy's Place in James's Thought**

Whether or not he was acquainted with Tolstoy's writings before he read War and Peace and Anna Karenina in the summer of 1896, James did not emphasize their importance for him until then. His actual allusions to Tolstoy's writings are infrequent. To appreciate the significance of these allusions, it is necessary to move beyond them to the larger Jamesian drama in which they play a small but important role.

Along with certain other thinkers, Tolstoy was useful in James's attempt to reconcile the need for religious belief with the imperatives of science as he understood it. Tolstoy's fictional representation of the psychological role of belief
strikingly anticipates James’s theories. What differentiates Tolstoy’s style from James’s is Tolstoy’s seeming moral certainty, reflected in what Morson has called his “absolute language” (*Hidden in Plain View*, chapter 1). Tolstoy’s narrator will often speak from the perspective of unconditional truth. By contrast, James’s language is conciliatory: He writes in the tone of a man who knows that he can never achieve absolute certainty on even the most pressing metaphysical questions. According to his friend Théodore Flournoy, as a young man James rejected the two monisms dominant in his time: “the evolutionary naturalism of Herbert Spencer, and pantheistic idealism, brilliantly represented on the one hand by the Hegelian or absolutist school of Oxford (Green, the Cairds, Bradley), and on the other hand by Royce and others in the United States” (pp. 39–40). James’s tone may reflect his ambivalence toward philosophical justifications of the individual. If science threatens the individual by denying the existence of a self, so too the “intangible ideas” that confirm selfhood and morality may threaten him by impinging upon his freedom. In this way metaphysical idealism can be as deterministic as materialism and just as deadening.

On this issue, James argues that no philosophy that is simply fatalistic can satisfy man, because “to take life strivingly is indestructible in the race... Man needs a rule for his will, and will invent one if one be not given him” (“The Psychology of Belief,” p. 1053). James therefore questions Tolstoyan “fatalism” even as he embraces the “infallible veracity” of his prose (letter to Th. Flournoy, August 30, 1896; *Letters*, p. 48). Instead of fatalism he adopts pluralism as a metaphysical theory that allows for the existence of chance, and therefore moral choice, within an ordered universe.

Given his emphasis on free choice, James’s avowed belief in universal order, and even in “Providence,” is striking—he combines the two openly in “The Dilemma of Determinism” (*Ways and Means*, pp. 138–141)—and leaves him open to charges of philosophic inconsistency. Tolstoy’s brand of fatalism based on moral “instinct” may have appealed to him as less deterministic than most. A letter to Benjamin Paul Blood, an important figure in James’s life, suggests a reason for James’s attraction to Tolstoyan certainty as he understood it.

*Have you read Tolstoy’s “War and Peace”? I am just about finishing it. It is undoubtedly the greatest novel ever written—also insipid with veracity. The man is infallible—and the anaesthetic revelation plays a part as in no writer. You have very likely read it. If you haven’t, sell all you have and buy the book, for I know it will speak to your very gizzard. (Letters, p. 40)*

*It is no coincidence that James recommended Tolstoy specifically to Blood, nor are the terms of his recommendation arbitrary. James recognized a kinship between Blood and Tolstoy and, as we shall see, both of them contributed to his defense of belief against atheistic science and philosophy.*
The term "anaesthetic revelation" refers to Blood's theory, first aired in the pamphlet *The Anaesthetic Revelation and the Gist of Philosophy* that, by taking nitrous oxide, one can gain access to metaphysical truths unavailable to the mind. In 1874, reviewing *The Anaesthetic Revelation* in *The Atlantic Monthly*, James praises it both for its explanation of the insufficiency of philosophy "to comprehend or in any way state the All," and for its positive suggestion that the "secret of Being . . . is not in the dark immensity beyond knowledge, but at home, this side, beneath the feet, and overlooked by knowledge" (*ECR*, pp. 287–288). James corresponded with Blood for the rest of his life, and he visited him in 1895. His final essay for publication, "A Pluralistic Mystic," is "actually a collage of Blood's writings, interspersed with some passing commentary by James" (John J. McDermott, *ECR*, pp. xxxiv). Blood may have overestimated his influence on James when he claimed that his "anaesthetic revelation" contained "the secret of the world," from which James's "unlucky heart" barred him; but James himself, in a passage ultimately omitted from "A Pluralistic Mystic," once called Blood's pamphlet "one of the cornerstones or landmarks of my own subsequent thinking" (*ECR*, pp. 228–229).

Unwilling to neglect any possible avenue to metaphysical truth, James himself inhaled nitrous gas. In his review of *The Anaesthetic Revelation*, however, he hedges his praise with reservations. He contrasts "laughing-gas intoxication" which "blunts the mind and weakens the will" with "the faith that comes of willing, the intoxication of moral volition" which possesses "a million times better credentials" (*ECR*, p. 287).

The reference to will is of course significant. Beginning in the early 1860s, after his failure to become an artist and before he started to teach at Harvard, James underwent a lengthy crisis of passage. Afflicted with various mental and physical ailments, he flirted with suicide. He attributed his depression to a pessimism that could be avoided only "if one's moral interests are real rather than illusory; but they cannot be real if there is no free will, because there is no sense in holding that we ought to do what we cannot do." Thus does Gerald Myers summarize James's understanding of his predicament at the time. Although he continued to suffer from nervous complaints, James stepped back from suicide in 1870 with the help of the essays of the French philosopher Charles Renouvier. Myers quotes from James's diary of April 30, 1870:

I think that yesterday was a crisis in my life. I finished the first part of Renouvier's second *Essais* and see no reason why his definition of free will—"the sustaining of a thought because I choose to when I might have other thoughts"—need be the definition of an illusion. At any rate, I will assume for the present—until next year—that it is no illusion. My first act of free will shall be to believe in free will.11
In Renouvier, James found a philosophical explanation of free will understood as intrinsically moral and connected to the reason. Renouvierian free will “consists, not of following our sentiments or our desires, but of controlling them through the use of our reason. The will is a regulating rather than a generating force for Renouvier; presented with choices, it can decide which to adopt. Far from yielding to the strongest motives, it decides which are the strongest” (Logue, p. 95). James, following Renouvier, began to fashion a silk purse out of a sow’s ear by treating the self-imposed narrow epistemological limits of positivism as a license to go beyond them in search of a new morality. If, as positivism asserts, we cannot know any ultimate truths, why not choose, at least provisionally, to embrace the ones that lend dignity—worth—to human life? When James writes of the “faith that comes of willing, the intoxication of moral volition,” in his review of The Anaesthetic Revelation four years later, he is referring to the effect on him of Renouvier’s definition of free will as moral choice.

Blood’s discovery, according to James, opens a window on Nirvana, which “whether called by that name or not, has been conceived and represented as the consummation of life too often not to have some meaning” (“The Anaesthetic Revelation,” ECR, p. 287). The spelling Nirvana alerts the reader that James, along with the rest of the educated public, was reading the works of Arthur Schopenhauer (in German, in James’s case); and indeed, less than a year after the review of Blood’s pamphlet appeared in The Atlantic Monthly (November 1874), James explicitly associated the concept of nirvana with Schopenhauer. In 1870, as his youthful crisis neared a crescendo, he resolved in his New Year’s diary to read Schopenhauer along with many other writers (Allen, p. 162). Schopenhauer would have appealed to the young James because of both his emphasis on the will as the essence of each human being and his concern with compassion. For Schopenhauer, however, compassion and individual will, to which the young James was clinging for dear life, contradict one another. Schopenhauer rejects any possibility of a moral will such as that found in Renouvier. As individuals, we are slaves to our own desires, which will, being itself an irrational force, fuels rather than controls. Only with the death of desire can the compassion stemming from our common origin in one universal soul come into its own. This rejection of the personal self could not have sat well with James, though in his vulnerable state it may have troubled him. It was around this time, perhaps under the influence of Schopenhauer, that James experienced a panic attack, a “horrible fear of my own existence” that
he recalled thirty years later in a disguised autobiographical passage of *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. By 1873 he was attacking pessimism as not “logically legitimate,” as “fatalism,” because it asserts that “there is no good upshot to the whole, that the good empirically existing is accidental and desultory, and not part of a system; and that it is useless to try to fix it or develop it” (Perry 1: 722). James eventually came to hate Schopenhauer so much that in 1883 he refused to contribute money for a memorial to the German philosopher: “I really *must* decline to stir a finger for the glory of one who studiously lived for no other purpose than to spit upon the lives of the like of me and all those I care for.” But for all that he never simply turned his back on Schopenhauerian pessimism. Even in the letter just cited, he admitted that there was “a kernel of truth in Schopenhauer’s system”; and in *Some Problems of Philosophy*, published only posthumously, he lauded Schopenhauer as the first philosopher to tell “the concrete truth about the ills of life” (quoted in Perry 1: 721). Indeed James came to think that “no man is educated who has never dallied with the thought of suicide.” These words, significantly enough, were written to Benjamin Paul Blood, in a letter from 1896 in which James recalls his suicidal despair in 1870.

As a young man trying to find his own path, suspecting alike the idealism of his father’s generation and the “monisms” of his own time, James found himself bereft of the moral certainties needed to live a meaningful life. He thankfully seized upon Renouvier but kept on looking for sturdier shelter against the moral chaos of life as envisaged by modern science and such doctrines as Spencer’s materialism and Schopenhauer’s pessimism. While never rejecting free will, he saw that the freedom to be moral could not by itself make life worth living. Ideals were necessary as well (“What Makes a Life Significant?” *TT*, pp. 163–164). In search of something more substantial than free choice, he came in 1874 upon Blood’s physiological road back to metaphysical idealism “at home, this side, beneath the feet, and overlooked by knowledge” (“The Anaesthetic Revelation” *ECR*, p. 288).

In his final appreciation of Blood James sees him as teetering between Hegelian monism, according to which “‘each is all, in God…. The one remains, the many change and pass; and every one of us is the One that remains’”; and pluralism such as James himself came to advocate. The first alternative James associates with transcendental idealism, so much so that he comments that Blood’s prose echoes that of Emerson. With more assurance than James’s “unlucky heart” can muster, however, Blood’s pluralistic side yields truth and reason, but only as mystically realized, as lived in experience. Up from the breast of man, up to his tongue and brain, comes a free and strong determination, and he cries, originally, and in spite of his whole nature and environ-
ment, "I will." This is the Jovian fiat, the pure cause. This is reason; this or nothing shall explain the world for him. For how shall he entertain a reason bigger than himself? . . . Let a man stand fast, then, as an axis of the earth; the obsequious meridians will bow to him, and gracious latitudes will measure from his feet. (Blood, quoted in "A Pluralistic Mystic," EPh, p. 185)

As James seems to have sensed, the biological coloring of Blood's thought, as well as its irrational rationalism, links it to Tolstoy, whom historian of Russian philosophy V. V. Zenkovsky has called at once an empiricist and a mystic of the mind ("The Problem," p. 30). The anaesthetic (and reasonable!) revelation wells up from the body, "up from the breast of man, up to his tongue and brain." James may be alluding to the physiological cast of Blood's inspiration when he wrote him that War and Peace "will speak to your very gizzard." James himself "was always prepared to oppose sensing to thinking and to champion the former as the source of the profoundest insights into the differences between appearance and reality" (Myers, p. 86). In yet another striking coincidence between Tolstoy and James, Pierre—like Benjamin Paul Blood in James's review of his pamphlet—is said therefore to have found the truth and significance of life "at his very feet" (book 15, chapter 5). Both Tolstoy and James trusted sensing more than thinking because the senses were less susceptible to error than the mind. Even more important, metaphysical idealism accessible through feeling and experience rather than the mind avoided the systematizing that both men abhorred as destructive of freedom.

In "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings," James wove War and Peace into the strands of his life and thought that I have picked out here. (The essay was written after he first read War and Peace in June 1896, and published in The Atlantic Monthly in 1899.) As an example of someone who "felt the human crowd . . . as an overwhelmingly significant presence" he quotes Walt Whitman from On Crossing Brooklyn Ferry. He then contrasts Whitman's celebration of ordinary life with the ennui of Schopenhauer.

The eternal recurrence of the common order, which so fills Whitman with mystic satisfaction, is to a Schopenhauer, with the emotional anaesthesia, the feeling of "awful inner emptiness" from out of which he views it all, the chief ingredient of the tedium it instills. What is life on the largest scale, he asks, but the same recurrent inanities, the same dog barking, the same fly buzzing forevermore? Yet of the same kind of fibre of which such inanities consist is the material woven of all the excitement, joys and meanings that ever were, or ever shall be, in this world. 16

To refute Schopenhauer, James turns to Tolstoy. One can escape Schopenhauerian ennui through a sense of the "unfathomable significance and importance" of the world, but this comes only from direct experience, "in mysteriously
unexpected ways." Tolstoy is "the great understander of these mysterious ebbs and flows. . . . They throb all through his novels." As an example James adduces the captivity of Pierre Bezukhov in *War and Peace*. He recounts Pierre's experience, from his initial recovery of pleasure in satisfying the basic needs of the body to his subsequent ecstatic identification with nature.

When at daybreak, on the morrow of his imprisonment, he saw [I abridge here Tolstoy's description] the mountains with their wooded slopes disappearing in the grayish mist; when he felt the cool breeze caress him; when he saw the light drive away the vapors, and the sun rise majestically behind the clouds and cupolas, and the crosses, the dew, the distance, the river, sparkle in the splendid, cheerful rays; his heart overflowed with emotion. This emotion kept continually with him, and increased a hundred-fold as the difficulties of his situation grew graver . . . . He learnt that a man is meant for happiness, and that this happiness is in him, in the satisfaction of the daily needs of existence, and that unhappiness is the fatal result, not of our need, but of our abundance . . . . When calm reigned in the camp, and the embers paled and little by little went out, the full moon had reached the zenith. The woods and the fields roundabout lay clearly visible; and beyond the inundation of light which filled them, the view plunged into the limitless horizon. Then Peter cast his eyes upon the firmament, filled at that hour with myriads of stars. "All that is mine," he thought. "All that is in me, is me! And that is what they think they have taken prisoner! That is what they have shut up in a cabin!"—So he smiled and turned in to sleep among his comrades.

To this extract James appends the testimony of Emerson:

The occasion and the experience, then, are nothing. It all depends on the capacity of the soul to be grasped, to have its life-currents absorbed by what is given. "Crossing a bare common," says Emerson, "in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune, I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration. I am glad to the brink of fear.

Life is always worth living [James comments] if one have such responsive sensibilities. ("On a Certain Blindness," *TT*, pp. 145-146)

Note that James does not say that Emerson *created* his own exhilaration. Rather Emerson's state of soul allows what James earlier in the passage calls "the real and the ideal" in nature to enter and occupy him. For Pierre also, the return to "the real scale of life's values" opens him to the real significance of everyday occurrences. James, Emerson, and Tolstoy all subscribe to a "prosaics," a celebration of everyday life, which ultimately depends upon an idealist interpretation of reality. They peer into the Goethean "reason behind everything that lives."
What Men Live By

Differences between Tolstoy and James

The similarities in the thought of Tolstoy and James reflect convergences between Russian and American nineteenth-century culture. When Russians first read *Psychology* in the 1890s, they recognized in James a kindred spirit who shared their understanding of reality and human nature as broader than either philosophy or science could comprehend apart from the other. By the same token, James found Russian writers, including Tolstoy, congenial. As a beginning writer Tolstoy took the side of the so-called men of the '40s against the militantly empiricist men of the '50s in debates about the nature of consciousness. His own unique mix of idealism and biologism developed from his exposure in the mid-1850s to the metaphysical idealism of the 1830s and 1840s. He may even have read the most important American transcendentalist, Ralph Waldo Emerson, during these formative years. In the 1860s and 1870s, while writing *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy joined Dostoevsky and Strakhov in a rearguard offensive against left-wing determinism. This was at the same time that the young William James was struggling to harmonize the transcendentalism that he had learned in his father’s house with positivistic science. For both men, Schopenhauer represented a dangerous challenge to their belief in a morality based on rational will.

At the same time, Tolstoy responded to similar influences and situations differently from James. In "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings," James used Pierre’s experiences as a prisoner of war to illustrate the connection between ordinary events and the metaphysical currents underlying each human life. It is therefore ironic that Tolstoy himself at exactly the same time as James, while he was finishing *War and Peace* in the late 1860s, began an encounter with Schopenhauer that unsettled his belief in the direct access of the individual to those currents. Prince Andrei’s awakening at death from the sleep of life already reflects the influence of Schopenhauer. Like James, Tolstoy eventually repudiated Schopenhauer, at least in part. The way he did it, however, and what he retained from the encounter, suggest the difference between Jamesian pragmatism and Tolstoyan mysticism of the mind.

Tolstoy’s correspondence with his friend the critic N. N. Strakhov reveals his complicated response to Schopenhauer. On January 8, 1873, Strakhov asked Tolstoy to explain his contention (from a previous letter) that the essence of life was the good. In claiming this, wrote Strakhov, Tolstoy proved himself an optimist, unlike the pessimistic Schopenhauer, whose thought "concede[d] to the rejection of everything firm in morality" (*Perepiska*, p. 21). In a later exchange from 1876, Strakhov suggested that Tolstoy’s thought, if developed, would be “pantheism, the basis of which would be love, as in Schopenhauer it is will, and in Hegel—thought” (*Perepiska*, p. 87). In *Anna
Karennina, Levin provisionally adopts a Schopenhauerian metaphysics based on love rather than will, only to reject the result as too artificial, “a muslin garment without warmth.” At around the same time, however, Tolstoy in another letter to Strakhov credited Schopenhauer (along with Plato) with practicing the right philosophic method that included “everything that everything living knows about itself” (11/30/1875; PSS 62: 223). Perhaps most significantly, in 1877 Tolstoy criticized the young philosopher Vladimir Solovyov for his attack on Schopenhauer.

Then, how inaccurate and trivial is his [Solovyov’s] attempt to refute Schopenhauer, [to suggest] that while pitying we promote the spectral false life of those whom we pity. Schopenhauer says that, giving ourselves to pity, we destroy the lie of isolation and give ourselves to the law of the essence of things, to unity—and whatever comes out of that doesn’t matter. His ethics concur therefore with metaphysical principle [nachalo]. What more can one ask? 22

Tolstoy’s reaction to Schopenhauer differed from James’s in two ways. Whereas James pitted antideterministic pragmatism against Schopenhauerian metaphysics, Tolstoy eventually countered it with determinist metaphysics of his own. Perhaps even more significantly, after reading Schopenhauer, Tolstoy, unlike James, partly turned against the celebration of individual life that James so admired in his earlier fiction. After a decade-long struggle to respond philosophically to Schopenhauer (during which he produced Anna Karenina), Tolstoy became, in James’s terminology in The Varieties of Religious Experience, the “morbid-minded” religious mystic of A Confession.23 James, by contrast, despite an ongoing struggle with depression, hoped to the end of his days that “our subjective natures, feelings, emotions, and propensities exist as they do because something in reality harmonizes with them; insofar as they are yearnings and longings, reality will ultimately fulfill them.”24

The later Tolstoy would not have sanctioned Jamesian optimism on this score any more than he could have approved of the “immortality of the substantial self” championed by the neo-idealists of the Moscow Psychological Society who voted James an honorary member.25 In “The Problem of Immortality in L. N. Tolstoy” (1912), V. V. Zenkovsky castigates Tolstoy for his denial of personal immortality, and especially for his claim that Christ had denied it as well (33–35).26 The personal immortality for which Tolstoy had yearned his whole life he sadly rejected in his old age.27 In War and Peace, one symptom of Sonia’s inferiority is her inability to join Natasha in imagining life before birth. The soul of Prince Andrei leaves his body before death; and despite her family happiness and her frequent pregnancies, Princess Maria’s face occasionally expresses “the lofty, secret suffering of a soul burdened by the body.” The characters of Anna Karenina are already more earthbound. The death of
Levin's brother Nikolai is "an unexplained mystery." Already in the 1870s, Tolstoy made fun in *Anna Karenina* of the spiritualism that increasingly fascinated William James.²⁸ In Tolstoy's late story *Hadzhi-Murat,* the soul inhabits the body until physical death occurs, and the narrator can tell us nothing about the consciousness of Hadzhi-Murat thereafter.

Yet Tolstoy did not become less an individualist in his old age. On the contrary, he still perceived all morality and therefore all moral progress as originating in individual souls. To get to their own moral core, however, individuals had to reject their bodies and all bodily pleasure. They could do this by heeding "reasonable consciousness (razumnoe soznanie)," which became the mechanism by which we control our lower, animal selves. Tolstoy himself saw Schopenhauer as his kinsman in this asceticism. Reading Schopenhauer's *Aphorisms* in November, 1895, Tolstoy wrote in his diary that one would only have to substitute "service to God" for "knowledge of the vanities of the world" for him to agree completely with Schopenhauer (PSS 53: 51). For Tolstoy in his old age, the way to morality led beyond the individual to God, from the many to the one.

Tolstoy continued to defend free will. In *The Kingdom of God Is within You* (1894), for instance, he reasons in a way that strikingly resembles James. Everything that one does is in accordance with some truth that one recognizes, or because it is a habit derived from some previous recognition of a truth. So one may not be free with regard to one's acts, which have a previous cause, but one is free in "the motive of one's acts." One can change one's view of things and therefore change future acts that arise from that view. Some truths are accepted as faith through education and tradition, others are too vague for the individual really to grasp. But some are clear enough to require a choice, and it is in regard to these truths that one is free (pp. 351–352). In *Psychology: Briefer Course,* James makes similar arguments about the role of habit and belief. In the "stream of consciousness" chapter he too locates the possibility of freedom in a change of habit which will affect future behavior. He frames this argument, moreover, as Tolstoy might have done, as a response to Schopenhauer.

Schopenhauer, who enforces his determinism by the argument that with a given fixed character only one reaction is possible under given circumstances, forgets that, in these critical ethical moments, what consciously *seems* to be in question is the complexion of the character itself. The problem with the man is less what act he shall now resolve to do than what being he shall now choose to become. (p. 158)

The difference between Tolstoy and James appears from the *use* to which each puts freedom of the will. Whereas in *Psychology: Briefer Course* James was
concerned to defend the possibility of human freedom, in *The Kingdom of God Is within You* Tolstoy went further to name the purpose of freedom and thereby to limit it.

The liberty of man does not consist in the power of acting independently of the progress of life and the influences arising from it, but in the capacity for recognizing and acknowledging the truth revealed to him, and becoming the free and joyful participator in the eternal and infinite work of God, the life of the world; or on the other hand for refusing to recognize the truth, and so being a miserable and reluctant slave dragged whither he has no desire to go. (pp. 354-355)

James is suspicious of revealed truths. In “Is Life Worth Living?” for instance, he explicitly rejects pantheism, or the religion of nature, as a justification for morality. “Visible nature is all plasticity and indifference, a moral multiverse, as one might call it, and not a moral universe” (*WB*, p. 43). In the same essay, however, he insists all the same on his “right to supplement it [the physical order] by an unseen spiritual order that we assume on trust, if only thereby life may seem to us better worth living again” (p. 49).

As psychologists Tolstoy and James each challenged the assumptions about human nature of determinist science and philosophy. As thinkers they were unwilling to give up either of the ingredients—ideals and the freedom to pursue them—necessary for a meaningful life. Both reflect the commitment of their respective countries to the value and rights of the individual on the one hand, and the moral duties of that same individual on the other.

Russian culture has been more prone to compromise the prerogatives of the individual in defense of social order and morality, while American culture has tended toward greater individualism at the expense of morality. The idealists and social activists who introduced James into Russia did so as part of their project to provide a theoretical foundation for individual dignity and rights that had never been part of Russian political culture; they needed to defend the individual against modern positivist and materialist scientific thought on the one hand, and political absolutism on the other (Poole, pp. 59–66). For his part, as a bridge between American transcendentalism and the rationalist thought that succeeded it, James saw Tolstoy as an ally in his battle to save the “two kingpins of Americanism, morality and individualism” (Bjork, p. 173). Tolstoy’s robust belief in an “unseen spiritual order” alarmed James and attracted him at the same time. It was both the source of the “fatalism” that James disliked in Russian writers, and a justification for the “emancipated sympathy” that he so loved in Tolstoy.
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Notes

1. If this is so, however, the polemics do not revolve, as Kuzina and Tiun'kin maintain, around Tolstoy's social determinism versus James's belief in inner freedom. On the contrary, as I shall argue, James is drawn to Tolstoy in large part because of the latter's demonstration in his fiction of the existence of inner freedom. James and Tolstoy ultimately part ways because of Tolstoy's metaphysical determinism, something that Kuzina and Tiun'kin do not acknowledge. They do not, therefore, address the issue of what exactly constitutes the part of the soul that stays the same in Tolstoy's opinion. Tolstoy himself, in O zhizni (About Life) (1888), explains that each individual's "character" is transcendental, originating outside of time and space. Only this, he says, can explain why people react differently to exactly the same circumstances (PSS 26: 401-406).

2. "[James says] that I'm a melancholic, close to mental illness" (December 13, 1909; PSS, 57:187). All translations from Tolstoy, unless otherwise indicated, are mine.


4. For various implications, literary and otherwise, of the death of the idea of progress, see Morson's Narrative and Freedom. Morson is a great admirer of William James.

5. See Gustafson (pp. 34–38) for a compelling discussion of Nikolenka's "paradigmatic" return to Petrovskoe. In 1856, before the publication of Youth, Chernyshevsky (p. 423) praised Tolstoy as a writer who depicted the psychological process itself. Boris Eikhenbaum in The Young Tolstoy began the modern exploration of the "open form" that grew out of this concentration on the details of psychological life.

6. The deliberately undramatic structure of Youth made it unpopular with readers, who criticized it for being long-winded and too detailed. In a letter to V. P. Botkin, for instance, Tolstoy agreed with his astute friend that the work was "petty" (melo) (Gusev, p. 153).

7. It is suggestive that Tolstoy himself passed through several major crises of belief in the course of his life and career. See Eikhenbaum, "O krizisakh Tolstogo" (On Tolstoy's Crises).

8. Tolstoyan "pan-moralism" was typical of Russian thought as a whole, according to V. V. Zenkovsky (History, pp. 5–6).


10. The translation is by Aylmer Maude as corrected by George Gibian in the Norton edition of War and Peace.

11. Myers, p. 46. See also pp. 387–390. Myers considers Renouvier to have been the most important intellectual influence on James's life after his father. Myers acknowledges, of course, that James's crisis was not merely intellectual, nor was it resolved by intellectual means.

13. In his 1875 review of Pfleiderer, James may be referring to his own first impression of Schopenhauer (whom he calls "one of the greatest of writers") when he says of Schopenhauerian compassion that it "will of course exert a spell over persons in the unwholesome sentimental moulting-time of youth" (ECR, p. 312).


15. Allen, pp. 268–269. Renouvier with his defense of free will helped James escape the moral collapse to which Schopenhauer may have contributed, so that it is not surprising that in 1893 James highly praised Renouvier's own subsequent attack on "the badness of the will to live" in Schopenhauer (ECR, pp. 455–456).

16. IT, p. 144. James borrowed his characterization of Schopenhauer almost verbatim from his 1893 review of Renouvier's essay.

17. The term "prosaics" is that of Gary Saul Morson, who developed it originally from his studies of the Russian thinker Mikhail Bakhtin and has applied it to his interpretations of Tolstoy. See especially Hidden in Plain View, pp. 126–128, 218–223. I am suggesting here that nineteenth-century prosaics, although a reaction against abstract philosophical systems, rests on metaphysical presuppositions that infuse the ordinary with meaning. Goethe was one of the creators of prosaics in this sense. On the influence of Goethe on Tolstoy see my Tolstoy's Art and Thought, where I use the phrase "reason behind everything that lives" to describe the Goethean blend of realism and idealism. James and Emerson were also great admirers of Goethe, as, of course, was Herzen, whose Letters on the Study of Nature, much influenced by Goethe, helped shape realism in its Russian form.

18. James's refusal to remain within the boundaries of either science or philosophy did not shock contemporary Russian readers. In Russia, Nikolai Grot's 1890 review of The Principles of Psychology in Questions of Philosophy and Psychology identified James as a positivist who recognized the limitations of knowledge imposed by that philosophy even as he vowed to remain within them (Voprosy filosofii i psikhologii, 2:1, book 5 [1890], 90). A second, more extensive review of the book, by E. Chelpanov in 1892, picked up approvingly on James's personal commitment to "spiritualism" (3:11, 72, 74, 76). When, eighteen years later, Chelpanov wrote James's obituary for Voprosy filosofii i psikhologii and an article called "James as a Psychologist" (21:4 [1910], bk. 104, v–viii, 437–456), he stressed James's breadth, his commitment to both science and philosophy, to both facts and the theories that make sense of them.

19. On this subject, see Orwin, Tolstoy's Art and Thought, especially chap. 3. Metaphysical idealism, according to Maurice Mandelbaum (6), "holds that within natural human experience one can find the clue to an understanding of the ultimate nature of reality, and this clue is revealed in those traits which distinguish man as a spiritual being" . . . in sum, the metaphysics of idealism finds man's own spiritual nature to be the fullest expression of that which is to be taken as basic in reality."

20. It has long been recognized that Tolstoy's "absolute language" first made its appearance in his Sevastopol stories (Eikhenbaum, The Young Tolstoy, 102–105). Not coincidentally, the first outburst of the preacher in the first story is followed, in the third one, by the first infusion into Tolstoyan prose of Carlylian idealism. In Carlyle, Tolstoy discovered a justification for patriotism that carried him through War and Peace.
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(Orwin, “Tolstoy and Patriotism”). He eventually left Carlylian metaphysics behind, but from 1884, when he read the essay Self-Reliance, he ardently admired Emerson, Carlyle's disciple in America. Emerson became one of those sages whom Tolstoy quoted again and again in his tracts and his daily readers. Tolstoy may have read Emerson earlier (see Orwin, “Tolstoy and Patriotism,” 69n39; and Islamova, “Leo Tolstoy and Emerson” [Lev Tolstoi i Emerson]). Islamova argues that Emerson was more concerned with ideas and theories, while Tolstoy cared more for reality and action. This brings Tolstoy close to James, who shared a similar relation to Emerson; but whether from his youth he shared this direct link to transcendentalism with James, his education paralleled that of James in ways significant for this discussion.

21. On the relation of Tolstoy and Schopenhauer, see Eikhenbaum, Lev Tolstoi: Semidesiatye gody, pp. 95–97; McLaughlin, and Orwin, Tolstoy's Art and Thought, pp. 150–164.

22. 12/17–18/1877; PSS 62:360. Solovyov’s Kritika otvelchenykh nachal (A Critique of Abstract Principles) was published in Russkii vestnik (The Russian Herald) nos. 11, 12, 1877.

23. James quoted extensively from Tolstoy’s A Confession in the chapter called “The Divided Self” in The Varieties of Religious Experience, and, although he did not comment on other works of the older Tolstoy, he presumably read at least some of them. His writing occasionally echoed them, especially when Tolstoy was his subject. In a letter of 1908 to H. G. Wells, for instance, he compared Wells to Tolstoy as a practitioner of “contagious speech.” This peculiar turn of speech may well come from Tolstoy’s What is Art?, in which successful art is said to be “contagious”: the recipient catches the artist’s mood (Letters, 2: 316). It is important to observe too that James read the earlier Tolstoy only in 1896. This may help explain why, in the midst of his enthusiasm for Tolstoyan “veracity,” he was nonetheless struck by Tolstoy’s “fatalism and semi-pessimism” (Letters, 2: 45): these qualities, present but relatively subdued in Anna Karenina and even more subdued in War and Peace, would have leapt out at readers used to the grimmer fare served up by Tolstoy in his old age. James made his comment on August 4, 1896, in a letter to Charles Renouvier, who, he could be sure, would oppose any kind of “fatalism” caused by metaphysical determinism.

24. Myers, p. 461. Myers goes on to comment that “no philosopher has ever proposed a more outrageous premise for faith than this. Because we want the world to be a certain way, our desire actually makes it so.”

25. See Poole, below. James himself did not seem that concerned about personal immortality, but he does make a very attenuated argument for it in his preface to the second edition of “Human Immortality: Two Supposed Objections to the Doctrine.” See Essays in Religion and Morality, pp. 75–76.

26. In the same publication, see also the article by Berdiaev, in which he claims that Tolstoy, unlike Dostoevsky in this regard, rejects individual souls for a World Soul, and therefore emphasizes law and the Old Testament over freedom and the New Testament.

27. Compare the diary entry from June 29, 1852, when, just having read the Profession de foi du Vicaire Savoyard (from Rousseau’s Emile), Tolstoy joyfully proclaims that “the one thing I have extracted from it is a belief in the immortality of the soul” (PSS
46:128) with numerous admissions in the diary of the 1890s that the individual personality (личность) is not immortal and does not even remain the same in the course of one lifetime. See, for instance, entries for January 15, 1890 (51:10–11); February 15, 1890 (51:19); March 13, 1890 (51:28); July 25, 1890 (51:66–67), in which he explicitly distinguishes his own particular consciousness and character from the immortal part of his soul; May 27, 1891 (52:35); July 22, 1891 (52:45), in which he speculates that reincarnation is theoretically possible because time is infinite, and therefore the same combination of traits may reform to duplicate a personality; October 24, 1895 (53:62–63).

28. Kuzina and Tiun’kin point out that Tolstoy’s favorite psychologist from the pages of Questions of Philosophy and Psychology was the Dane Harald Höffding, who, like Tolstoy, and in opposition to James, was an opponent of spiritualism and denied that the individual soul was substantial (pp. 74–75).

Works Cited

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