Tolstoy's Antiphilosophical Philosophy
in *Anna Karenina*

In *Approaches to Teaching Anna Karenina*

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When I discuss the role of philosophy in Anna Karenina with students, I first must deal with an obstacle that its author has set in my way. Here, as elsewhere, Tolstoy foregrounds his disagreements with philosophy. The novel contains lampoons of professional philosophers, and in part 8 Levin states explicitly that philosophy, even as practiced by such nonmaterialists as Schopenhauer and Plato, cannot explain life (713; ch. 9). In fact, Tolstoy’s attitude toward philosophy is more complex than he would have us believe. True, philosophy for him was legitimate only when it served practical, moral goals. At the same time, he took thought very seriously, and his opposition to philosophizing in the novel was itself part of a principled philosophical position. As is typical of Tolstoy, moreover, his attack on false philosophy (filosofstovanie) is accompanied by a vigorous if muted defense of what he regards as the real thing. In what follows, I explain the contradiction between his private and public stance toward philosophy and then reconstruct parts of the philosophical scaffolding that he used to build Anna Karenina. I trace the origins of his antiphilosophical philosophy to two thinkers whom he read carefully—Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Plato—and discuss them in some detail.

Tolstoy’s antiphilosophical stance, partly rhetorical and partly serious, goes back to his immersion, in his student days, in the writings of Rousseau. In his Confessions, Rousseau explains how he educated himself by reading all the modern philosophers, Locke, Descartes, Leibnitz, “and others” (246). In the First Discourse, he criticizes these same philosophers as “extravagances of the human mind” and “aberrations of human reason” (Discourse on the Sciences 20). Rousseau’s reasons for this attack are in part rhetorical and have to do with the status of reason in the human soul. According to Karl Barth, Rousseau brought the Enlightenment to a close and inaugurated the “age of Goethe” by his focus on the individual self (Melzer 38). Tolstoy, Rousseau’s faithful student in this regard, writes confessional literature himself and appeals to each of us as a particular individual. He engages us by starting with the ultimate source of our particularity, our bodies, and the senses that are our first access to the external world. Through the vicarious experiences that we have from literature that applies this strategy, the feelings of the writer, so Tolstoy hoped, would reverberate in the soul of each reader. As for thoughts, Tolstoy believed that if we as readers did not think that they originated with him, we would not believe them. If we did not ourselves feel their truth as a result of our own experience, we would never truly accept them. While writing Anna Karenina, he praised his friend Nikolai Strakhov’s article on Darwin and predicted at the same time that it would have little impact on the general public (Polnoe sobranie 62: 67; 13
The implication is that only art will convince people of the truth of Strakhov's argument. Not logic but feelings communicated through art move readers. In his fiction, Tolstoy wants us to believe that his ideas are not derived from books of philosophy; he wants them to be inscribed in our souls, as they are in his.

Students are enthralled with Anna Karenina, just as we teachers were when we first read it. To help them think about how Tolstoy enchants them, I step back from the song to the Pied Piper. His public stance notwithstanding, Tolstoy read philosophy throughout his long life. As a thinker, he was a product of the nineteenth-century philosophical movement that Maurice Mandelbaum has called metaphysical idealism. Metaphysical idealists believed 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" (6). According to Tolstoy's brand of metaphysical idealism, poets, who seek out and represent natural human experience as fully as possible, are the ones who have access, albeit partial, to ultimate truths. Metaphysical idealism called for a unique relation of the particular to the general, in which generalizations might extract certain truths from particular details, but the details represent reality more completely than can any rational generalization about them.

Returning from author to text, I show the students how Tolstoy's art operates from the bottom up, from details to generalizations rather than the other way around. This method initially strikes them as paradoxical, especially as regards Anna Karenina, which seems much more tightly structured than War and Peace. Anna Karenina commences with a kind of overture in which the basic elements of the structure are laid out and their relations established. (See Holland, this volume, for a discussion of the novel's opening.) But in the opening the shifts from one level of generalization to another do not flow smoothly. On the greatest level of generalization there is the epigraph itself—"Vengeance is mine; I will repay"—the relation of which to the text is as enigmatic as that of God to the world created and ruled by him. Then, as Robert Jackson has pointed out, the emphasis in the first paragraph on happy families and togetherness gives way immediately in the second paragraph to unhappy families and the isolation of individuals in them ("Ambivalent Beginning" 345–53). None of the different structural elements of the novel introduced at its beginning coexist harmoniously with one another, and therefore they raise more questions than they answer. All the levels of discourse are true in some way, but it is not always easy to explain exactly how and why they fit together. But the poet need not explain. God, standing outside life and inexplicable to the human mind, will take care of final judgments and appropriate sentences.

After I have taken my students through the complexities (and perplexities) of narrative levels in the beginning of Anna Karenina, I tell them that this formal element of the novel reflects Tolstoy's philosophical beliefs. Specifically, it pre-
sents reality from the point of view of metaphysical idealism. Tolstoy drank deeply at the sources of this school, in his reading of Rousseau starting in the 1840s and also in his discovery, in the early 1850s, of Plato, whom he first read in the translation of Victor Cousin. Less obvious than the many thematic connections to Plato in Tolstoy's oeuvre is the debt that Tolstoy owes to the genre of the Platonic dialogue (see Evdokimova, this volume). The beginnings of this influence can be detected in his early stories, especially “The Raid,” but Anna Karenina actually contains an embedded narrative that is both a tribute to Plato and also an explanation of his “Tolstoyan” significance.

The relevant Platonic dialogue in Anna Karenina is one of Tolstoy's favorites, the Symposium (see Plato, Lysis). In it, Pausanias's definition of the two kinds of love, a low one associated with the body and sex and a high one associated with virtue and the soul, is tested in the other speeches and also by the dramatic situation. Pausanias wants to convince the handsome young Agathon, with whom he is in love, that his love is the higher kind. Disguising his snickers as hiccups, Aristophanes laughs at Pausanias's self-serving high-mindedness and deflates it later with a myth about love as longing for the half of our bodies lost when the gods split us in two as punishment for our hubris. Socrates counters this comic view of love as entirely self-absorbed with an explanation (attributed to the wise Diotima) of love as longing for the beautiful. Just as Aristophanes is about to defend his speech, the drunken Alcibiades bursts into the gathering and tells stories about Socrates that partly support and partly contradict the earlier speeches, including even the one by Socrates. We are left with the impression that there are two kinds of love but that it is difficult to define what the higher one is or even to distinguish it completely from the lower one.

As always when I teach about the relation between philosophy and literature, I stay as close as possible to the writer's interpretation of the philosopher, no matter how eccentric or partial that may seem. My abbreviated summary of the Symposium is intended only to demonstrate that it is what we would call a philosophical drama, not a tract. It is the mixture of Socratic dialectic and poetic exposition in the Platonic dialogue as a genre that appealed to Tolstoy, and in tribute to this form he created just such a philosophical drama in Anna Karenina.

In the novel Plato is invoked on three different occasions, which together constitute a philosophical subplot about Levin's search for the proper relation of the details of his life to its fundamental organizing moral principles. Plato first comes up in part 1, during a restaurant dinner (chs. 9–11) that is itself an allusion to the Symposium. Like the participants in Plato's banquet, Stiva and Levin discuss love, and Levin provides a definition of it drawn from the Symposium. Later, during his spiritual crisis, which climaxes in part 8, he consults philosophical texts in a futile effort to find a justification for living. The houses of cards constructed from artificial chains of thought by various nonmaterialist philosophers, including Plato, all collapse because they do not directly
engage life, which is anterior to reason and not the same as it (713; pt. 8, ch. 9). When Levin does recover his belief in the possibility of a moral life a few pages later, however, it is because he hears of a virtuous peasant named Platon,\(^2\) who “lives for his soul and remembers God” (719; pt. 8, ch. 11).

Coming at the beginning and end of the novel, functioning as they do respectively as opening, crisis, and denouement, the three Platonic moments bind the novel together on the level of thought. In this subplot, the name of Plato is implicated in both the problem and its solution. At the restaurant, Levin makes two related but different claims about Plato. In the first place, he says that, according to Plato in the *Symposium*, there are two kinds of love. This statement is shown to be true and thus, as Irina Gutkin has claimed, is one key to understanding the organization of the novel. The relation between this philosophical statement about love and its dramatic exposition is that of a maxim to its illustrations. The two kinds of love are physical and spiritual, corresponding to Tolstoy’s dualism, which Tolstoy believed Plato shared with him. Plato’s definition as Levin first states it does not, however, rank the two loves morally; Levin immediately does this by designating the higher, spiritual love platonic and the lower, bodily one, not platonic. In a slight but significant shift, he now associates Plato with a love of virtue and wholeness, the relation of which to reality is unclear. He admits also that his own past behavior does not harmonize with his preference for platonic love. This inconsistency creates a drama that would not exist if ideals and reality simply coincided, as Levin is temperamentally inclined to assume they do. Once he remembers his own misdemeanors, he twice says that he doesn’t know what to think (36, 39; pt. 1, ch. 11). Moral generalizations in which he wholeheartedly believes do not organize the details of his life.

So the knot is tied in this episode, and the philosophical subplot is launched. It consists of a search for what, if anything, might make the life of an individual meaningful, that is, capable of the higher, disinterested love of others called agape. Even Gutkin has to conclude, however, that if these categories, which she calls fleshly and spiritual, organize and explain the content of the novel, they do so only to a certain extent. The love of Kitty and Levin is “more Platonic”; that of Vronsky and Anna “explicitly erotic” (90). In the poetic narrative, not a single important character fits exclusively into Levin’s category of high or low, platonic or unplatonic, lover. The novel contains a veritable catalog of mixes of the two, and there is no sense that this catalog is exhaustive. Anna expresses the truth about the mixed character of reality when she says, “I think ... if it is true that there are as many minds as there are heads, then there are as many kinds of love as there are hearts” (125; pt. 2, ch. 7).

Plato as he is invoked by Levin in the restaurant supplies definitions of what love is and what it ought to be. What he does not explain is love in its particular manifestations. The philosophical search for meaning resumes in part 8, with Levin’s crisis. The platonic wholeness or purity for which he longs and with
which he identifies in his original discussion with Stiva is unattainable: therefore no philosophical tract, not even a nonmaterialist one, can bridge the gap between general ideals and reality. Levin escapes his suicidal despair only when he realizes that what he seeks is inaccessible to his intellect but visible in a life well led. And whereas Plato is mentioned among those philosophers who fail Levin, another Plato, a Russian peasant bearing this name, comes to his rescue. The peasant appears not as a thinker, who as such must labor in the limitations of the inherent laws governing the intellect and therefore knows that he knows nothing about ultimate truths, but as a character whose actions bear witness to the capabilities of the human personality.

The second Plato, that peasant Platon who appears as a character in the novel, represents the positive side of Plato the philosopher as Tolstoy understood him, namely, his knowledge and love of the good, and it is Platon who is platonistic in the moral sense in which Levin uses the term in the conversation with Stiva in part 1. Plato as Tolstoy understood him was able, like Levin, to know the good and act on it, because Plato could rely on a moral instinct. In a revealing letter to Strakhov contemporary with the writing of Anna Karenina, Tolstoy placed Plato among the true philosophers, because he “does not correct the original and simplest concepts of [his] listeners, but seek[s] out the meaning of life without breaking down into constituent parts those essences of which life is composed for every person” (Polnoe sobranie 62: 222). Along with selfishness, goodness, or “life for the soul” such as Platon lives, is one of the “essences” of human life from which true philosophy, instead of deconstructing life, should “seek out the meaning of life,” as Levin does.

Platon proves the existence of platonic love by demonstrating its effect on his actions. When Tolstoy says that Plato practices true philosophy, he means that Plato starts philosophizing from the ground up. Rather than apply abstract categories to explain behavior, the true philosopher arrives at them through the analysis of experience and constantly returns to that experience to check the truth of his conclusions against it. In Anna Karenina Tolstoy follows a similar path, moving from description to analysis of phenomena and revisiting the same phenomenon obsessively until he has supplied a comprehensive account of it. Comprehensiveness is more important to him than interpretation. That life comes before thought is reflected by the relation between the dramatic context that adequately captures life as it is and explanations of life supplied by characters or even an omniscient narrator. Not bound to the principles of reason, broader and deeper than a rationalizing philosophy because less abstract, the novel imitates before it analyzes life, which therefore is never completely explained by analysis.

So we are back at Tolstoy’s antiphilosophical philosophy in Anna Karenina. When I teach the novel, however, I find that I cannot stop here, because Tolstoy himself does not. On the one hand, he rejects any systematizing philosophy; on the other, he does generalize and even appeals to what he regards as
true philosophy, which, I repeat, is always in the service of morality. His technique is to make the reader aware of clashes of interests among characters, moral contradictions that call out for solutions.

The first, jolting example of such a clash is at the beginning of the novel, when the narrative switches abruptly from Stiva’s to Dolly’s point of view. Another occurs in part 6, between Levin and his guest Vasenka Veslovsky. Veslovsky appears with Stiva and functions as his simplified and completely comic double. Even more than Stiva, Veslovsky, whose very name in Russian connotes merriment, lives at the level of the raw emotional content that makes up existence, and he declines to think about life. Watching Veslovsky with the pregnant Kitty, Levin feels jealous pangs. Then on the hunt (521–41; chs. 8–13), he unreservedly admires Veslovsky for his charm and his zest for life, and it is important for us to understand the conditions of this admiration. The hunt is a natural activity that takes place outside the conditions of civilized life. The hunters jostle good-naturedly to outdo one another at sport, and Levin does not take much offense when Veslovsky and Stiva between them—Veslovsky taking the lion’s share, so says Stiva—devour all the food Kitty has prepared. When Stiva and Veslovsky go off to dally with peasant girls, Levin does not reproach them. Their dalliance works to his advantage the next morning, when they sleep in and he has a successful hunt without them; after it he enjoys Oblonsky’s envy at his catch. In his later philosophical tract On Life (1887), Tolstoy acknowledges that the self-centered view of life taken by a Stiva, a Veslovsky, or Levin on the hunt is natural. (Laska, Levin’s dog and his partner in the hunt, similarly has no moral qualms as she stalks birds, whom she mentally designates as others, them.) The problem for human society is that the natural inclination for each individual to be self-centered leads to conflict. So, when the hunters return home and Veslovsky flirts again with Kitty, Levin’s mood turns ugly (541–48; ch. 14). Levin may laugh indulgently at Veslovsky’s conduct with other women, but he does not laugh when, as he sees it, that conduct compromises his own wife. In chapter 15, while consulting Dolly about Veslovsky’s behavior, Levin pleads with her to forgive little Masha for some childish sexual experimentation carried on in the bushes (i.e., in nature). Dolly tells Masha she may go, but the child, feeling guilty, lingers, catches her mother’s eye, and bursts out crying. Dolly caresses her, and Levin leaves, thinking, “What is there in common between us and him [Veslovsky]?” (546). He has witnessed a moment of moral education, in which a child learns from a beloved teacher that she must not do certain things even though her desire to do them is natural. Such restraint does not exist for Veslovsky, but it is necessary if human society is to cohere.

The outcome of the subplot of Dolly and Masha is satisfying both because Dolly does the right, moral thing and because this right thing is tailored so specifically to the circumstances that require it. Before Levin comes into the room, Dolly is a prisoner of her anger at Masha’s transgression, which must remind her of Stiva’s philandering. She softens and forgives Masha as part of the
process of assessing Levin’s problem. Masha, standing in the corner, notices her mother’s “scarcely perceptible smile” at the stock comic situation of the jealous older husband (545). Masha turns around, and Dolly orders her back, but the little criminal has truly gauged the sea change in her mother’s mood and soon rides to safety on the wave of Dolly’s horror that Levin may overreact, breach social decorum, and throw Veslovsky off his estate. Masha is saved by coincidence, of course, but Dolly forgives her daughter in obedience to the laws of noncontradiction. Responding to an unexpected turn of events, comparing the two scenarios fortuitously entwined, she realizes that she cannot in good conscience go on blaming Masha even as she excuses Veslovsky.

The little drama between Masha and Dolly illustrates how moral decision making takes place in the chaos of ongoing life. On the hunt, Stiva and Levin have a conversation, echoing their earlier one at the restaurant, about the possibility of morality. Once again Levin is forced by his worldly interlocutor to acknowledge an inconsistency between his moral beliefs and his life: he knows that his relations with his peasant workers are unfair, but his obligations to his family make it impossible for him to change them. But whereas this troubles Levin (although he can put the question aside during the hunt), for Stiva it is enough to admit his injustice in order to be able to go on committing it. Like Levin, the reader recognizes and forgives Stiva’s inability to choose the good of others over his own. As each of us knows from experience, in individual consciousness the rules of noncontradiction do not yet apply: what we want takes precedence over what makes sense. Tolstoy hopes to wean us eventually from the bedrock of irrational consciousness. His text is built on individual instances of it, however, and only a willingness to submit to a dialectic based on the laws of reason will lead readers finally to the level of generalization necessary for moral rectitude. At any point, readers (like some of Tolstoy’s characters) can refuse to go along, and many have refused. The amazing verisimilitude of Tolstoy’s fiction depends at every level on its rootedness in the realities of individual consciousness.

Stiva and Veslovsky are amiable hedonists. The opening sally in the novel is especially daring, because Tolstoy maneuvers readers into identifying with Stiva when this character is behaving unfairly. Everyone likes Veslovsky; even Levin feels sorry as he expels him. In the utmost self-absorption, characters may also behave admirably, as Dolly does in the example just discussed. In fact, every moment of moral significance in the novel, for good or for evil, occurs at that same level of irrational consciousness to which we are introduced through Stiva. The standards, or ideals, inhere in the very raw material of the soul that they shape morally. To behave badly, even Stiva, so in tune with everything, has occasionally to ignore the voice of conscience, and he is shown ignoring it in certain key episodes in the novel. (One of these is when he tries to convince Karenin to grant Anna a divorce.)

Tolstoy’s belief in inherent moral standards is evident already in his 1847
reading of Rousseau’s *First Discourse*. According to Rousseau there, God has placed the thoughts necessary for our happiness and virtue within us, in the form of conscience:

O virtue! Sublime science of simple souls, are so many difficulties and preparations needed to know you? Are not your principles engraved in all hearts, and is it not enough to learn your laws to return into oneself and listen to the voice of one’s conscience in the silence of the passions? That is true Philosophy, let us know how to be satisfied with it.

(Discourse 22)

In 1847 Tolstoy began a commentary, both defiant and reverential, on the first and second discourses of Rousseau. The nineteen-year-old Russian student asserts his independence from his French master by taking issue with parts of the *First Discourse*, but one major strand of the argument, about the status of “true Philosophy,” he swallows whole. The commentary sounds the first notes of the notorious Tolstoyan assault on books: “[... ] all philosophical questions for the resolution of which so many have labored and so many [useless] books have been written, all these questions, I say, can be reduced to simple beginnings. [... ] The leaves of the tree please us more than the roots” (*Polnoe sobranie* 1: 222).

Thirty years later, in *Anna Karenina*, we find Levin following the Rousseau-esque path to “simple beginnings” first suggested in these words. Inspired by the peasant Platon, Levin finds in his own heart the “true Philosophy” that has eluded him in books. Although he is looking for “something more important in life than reason” (713; pt. 8, ch. 9), his renewed confirmation of life comes from thoughts that are innate: “At the peasant’s words about [Platon] living for the soul, rightly, in a godly way, dim but important thoughts crowded into his mind, as if breaking loose from some place where they had been locked up, and all rushing toward one goal, whirled in his head, dazzling him with their light” (719; ch. 11).

Despite his belief in the incomprehensibility of life, as a thinker Tolstoy was not simply an irrationalist. He was a kind of transcendentalist—in V. V. Zenkovsky’s apt conception, a mystic of the mind (29)—and both his reading of Rousseau and Plato and his own artistic practice reflect this. He believed that the fundamental precepts of ethics, or practical reason as he understood it, were available to people not from the intellect but, as he would put it, from the heart. Rather than ascend to truth through dialectic, people descend to truth by listening to voices that well up in their soul. These voices compete with others in the soul. Therefore moral truths, as Tolstoy understood them, do not so much shape reality as add a dimension to it that allows human beings to behave morally while remaining free not to do so. We know that such voices exist, because we hear them speaking in us and, just as important, see their effects in our actions and those of others.
In *Anna Karenina* as elsewhere in his writings, Tolstoy rejects Enlightenment thought but still privileges reason and hence the practice of philosophy. The contemporary philosophy that he condemns as merely logical, systematizing, and abstract does not account for the facts of life. Real philosophy, as Tolstoy understands it, has limited, ethical goals. Because human beings are sentient, not rational creatures, they accept direction from poetry, which addresses feelings, rather than from philosophy, which speaks to reason. Ultimately, however, Tolstoy equated moral truth and reason. Like Rousseau in that seminal passage from the *First Discourse* quoted above, Tolstoy both denigrated philosophizing and equated “true Philosophy” with the conscience, which for him represented the voice of transcendental reason. In the case of Levin, the mind searches for its moral compass, without which a thinking person cannot live, and discovers it both in the individual soul and manifest in the deeds of good people.

**NOTES**


1Tolstoy did not actually read the most important influence on metaphysical idealism, Immanuel Kant, until 1887. On Kant’s debt to Rousseau and Tolstoy’s own discovery of Kant, see Orwin, *Tolstoy’s Art* 192–95. Tolstoy read both Rousseau and Kant through the prism of German idealist thought as it was taught in Russia in the 1840s, and his ties to German idealism were strengthened in the 1850s through his friendship with such men as V. P. Botkin (51–81).

2Platon is a common peasant name that is the Russian version of Plato. The Maude-Gibian translation of the name is “Plato.”