The Tolstoy Dilemma: A Paradigm Case Formulation and Some Therapeutic Interventions

Raymond M. Bergner, Ph.D.
Illinois State University

Abstract

Some psychotherapy clients report a core life problem in which, like Leo Tolstoy over a century ago, awareness of their inevitable death undermines significantly their sense that life can have meaning. This article presents a paradigm case formulation of these individuals. In it, I shall (a) delineate the beliefs embodied in this Tolstoyan world view, (b) show how each is problematic, (c) formulate alternative and more meaning-generative views of reality that may be promoted by psychotherapists, and (d) proffer a number of specific therapeutic recommendations that have proven helpful in my own work with clients in the grip of this dilemma.

At a point in his life when he was strongly tempted to commit suicide, Leo Tolstoy expressed the basis for his despair and crisis of meaning in the following way:

> "What will come from what I am doing now, and may do tomorrow? What will come from my whole life? Otherwise expressed—Why should I live? Why should I wish for anything? Why should I do anything? Again, in other words, is there any meaning in my life which will not be destroyed by the inevitable death awaiting me?" (1929, p. 20).

A small but significant number of psychotherapy clients share Tolstoy's dilemma (Yalom, 1980). For these clients, awareness of

their inevitable death undermines significantly their sense that life can have meaning. "What's the point of doing such things as working hard, striving to accomplish something in my life, or forsaking personal satisfactions and advantages in order to be moral," they wonder, "if in the end I must cease to exist and my world must end? What difference will it make even if I am tremendously successful? Will not I and my achievements disappear without a trace from human awareness some day? It's all for nothing in the end—like Camus' (1955) Sisyphus striving to push that gigantic rock up the hill again and again, only to see the fruits of his labor inevitably destroyed." In some cases, like Tolstoy's, the dilemma is in the foreground of consciousness and is experienced as especially acute. In others, it forms a less conscious, vaguely articulated backdrop to life in which there are, in Yalom's words, "mortal questions churning below" (1980, p. 121). In either case, it provides the basis for a life lived in depression and meaninglessness.

In this paper, a portrait of individuals with this "Tolstoy dilemma" will be provided. This portrait will take the form of a paradigm case formulation (Ossorio, 1981, 2006), which in this case will be a prototypical or ideal case that embodies all of the features that an individual with this problem might exhibit. While not every client will manifest all of these features, such a depiction provides coverage for other less complex cases where some of these features may not be in evidence. The portrait here is comprised of a set of component beliefs that, taken collectively, constitutes a world view that is highly destructive of meaning and happiness. The following discussion delineates the component beliefs embodied in the Tolstoy position, relates how each is problematic, and formulates alternative and more meaning-generative views of reality that might be promoted by psychotherapists.

A Paradigm Case Formulation of the Tolstoyan World View

Component Belief: Immortality Would Guarantee Meaning

Embodied in Tolstoy's lament, and in the broader world view in which it is embedded, is an implicit assumption. Since, in this view, it is our temporal finitude that robs life of meaning, it follows that if we were not subject to this limitation such meaning could be ours. Thus, the implicit belief is that personal immortality would somehow guarantee meaningfulness.

However, in the world that Tolstoy so desperately craves, one where we and our achievements would last forever, the question of how to find value in one's actions and one's life would remain (Bergner, 1998; Yalom, 1980). Indeed, in such a world, the problem would be greatly exacerbated. It is instructive in this regard to recall Sisyphus, whose precise problem in Camus' (1955) classical essay is that he is condemned to a world in which he must repeatedly engage in the ostensibly pointless action of pushing a gigantic boulder up a steep hill again and again, only to see it roll down each time. The potential meaninglessness is not eliminated, but in fact made far worse, by the fact that he is condemned to do this *forever* (see also Lagerkvist's 1958 portrayal of "The Sibyl"). The meaninglessness lies in the action itself and in Sisyphus' relation to that action, not in his mortality or lack thereof. Being granted immortality, even if that were possible, would in no way guarantee that any person's actions and world would be rendered meaningful.

Component Belief: Meaning Cannot be Found in Temporal World

The centerpiece of Tolstoy's world view is the belief that meaning cannot be found in the world as it is—a world in which one must die. In his view, the fact that both oneself and all of one's efforts and accomplishments are ineluctably doomed to extinction renders them

utterly pointless and futile. It was precisely this belief that brought Tolstoy to his deepest despair and to the brink of suicide.

Factually, we and our experiences and achievements are ephemeral. Despite this, everyday observation, as well as abundant anecdotal and scientific evidence (Baumeister, 1991; DeBats, Drost, & Hansen, 1995; King, Hicks, Krull, & Del Gaiso, 2006; McGregor & Little,1998) attest to the fact that countless individuals find many of their actions and pursuits highly meaningful, and lead overall meaningful lives. Therefore, important bases for meaningfulness clearly exist that in no way depend on being immortal.

The bases upon which persons find such worth and value in their behavior and their lives, far from being obscure and ineffable, are very familiar to us. They are readily observable in everyday life and have long been documented in the psychological literature, although not as a rule in the present connection. These bases are the instrumental, intrinsic, and spiritual value that persons may, and very often do, derive from their behavior (Bergner, 1998). Let us briefly examine each of these.

Instrumental value. In instrumental behavior, an action is engaged in because it is deemed by an individual to be instrumental in bringing about some desired state of affairs (Ossorio, 1976, p. 163). The achievement of this state of affairs constitutes the instrumental value of the behavior. The student studies in order to pass the test, the employee works in order to earn money, the athlete practices in order to win the race, and so forth. In some cases, the desired outcomes of instrumental behavior may constitute highly valued causes around which persons organize their whole existence (e.g., promoting world peace, protecting consumers from unscrupulous companies, promulgating religious positions, or winning an Olympic gold medal).

Intrinsic value. In intrinsically motivated behavior, a person engages in some behavior for the meaning or satisfaction inherent in that behavior itself, independently of any extrinsic ends that it might bring about (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Ossorio, 1976, p. 163). The individual converses with a friend, plays a game, listens

to music, reads a book, solves a problem, makes love, or plays with the children, in whole or in part, for the reason that he or she derives meaning and satisfaction from these activities themselves. Once again here, we encounter cases in which persons become so immersed in activities such as participating in athletics, creating art, or caring for children, that these become core life activities around which they center much of their existence (cf. Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, on "flow"). Furthermore, many persons derive intrinsic satisfaction in the pursuit of instrumental ends—in playing the game or working for the important cause—whether or not they ultimately achieve their objectives.

Spiritual value. In spiritually motivated behavior, a person behaves for reasons that are characterized by ultimacy, totality, and boundary condition (Ossorio, 1978; Shideler, 1983, 1985, 1992). With regard to ultimacy and boundary condition, such persons look beyond immediate, limited ends accomplished by their behavior to ultimate ones: "When all is said and done, what is the ultimate purpose of what I am doing, the purpose that lies at the boundary beyond which there are no further reasons or justifications?" "In my behavior, am I acting in relation to some ultimate being?" With regard to totality: "What is the purpose, not just of this action today, but of my whole life?", or "What is the purpose of everything that is; what does it all mean?"

At this level of ultimacy, totality, and boundary condition, some individuals, both religious and nonreligious, have arrived at personal answers to such questions that provide enormous value for them in their actions and lives. The religious among them give as their ultimate answers ones such as the following: "I believe that in doing this I am doing God's will," or "loving and praising God," or "achieving union with God." The nonreligious profess ultimates such as: "I believe that in doing this, I am doing my best to make the world a better place for coming generations," or "bringing happiness and relief from misery into the lives of others," or "living each of my allotted days in the fullest and most authentic way possible." Thus, some persons live their lives in light of such ultimates (cf.

the classical notion of living "sub specie aeternitas") and derive the sorts of value from their actions and lives that come from living in this way (Shideler, 1983, 1985, 1992). (NB: The enterprise of promulgating "*the* meaning of life" to others may be seen, on the present analysis, as a case of taking one's own personal ultimate and promoting it as a universal one to be embraced by all persons.)

From the foregoing, it should be clear that deriving instrumental, intrinsic, and spiritual value from one's actions need not be mutually exclusive. One may, in single behaviors and in extended courses of action, realize all of these values simultaneously. In the single act of teaching children, for example, a teacher might simultaneously earn a living, derive strong intrinsic satisfactions, and do something that she believes has ultimate significance.

Meaning in life, then, does not and could not derive from immortality. It derives, rather, from the instrumental, intrinsic, and spiritual value inherent in one's behavior. Individuals enmeshed in the Tolstoy dilemma are in fact mistaken in their beliefs both that immortality would guarantee meaning, and that meaning cannot be found in the ephemeral and transitory world where all of us must die.

Component Belief: "It's All Instrumental"

Individuals enmeshed in the Tolstoy dilemma characteristically hold a world view that is excessively instrumental, a world where almost every behavior, if it is to be counted worthwhile, must be instrumental in the production of some important end. For these individuals, meaning equals payoff, and life is essentially an operant affair that is all about the achievement of extrinsic benefit. In his suicidal outcry, related above, Tolstoy twice raises the question of what will "come from" his actions and his life. In so doing, it is clear that his concern is with the outcomes of his past and future life's efforts. When he inquires further, "Is there any meaning in my life which will not be destroyed by the inevitable death awaiting me?" (1929, p. 20), he can only be referring to future consequences derived from his actions, since past and current meanings and satisfactions

could never be so destroyed. Finally, when psychotherapy clients express this dilemma, their characteristic lament has to do with the fact that the result of all their efforts to achieve, to accomplish, to create, and to be moral will in the end be obliterated—that they are like children building sand castles at the beach, only to see them inevitably washed away by the incoming tide.

Lack of intrinsic and spiritual behavior. There are several critical problems with this wholly instrumental world view insofar as achieving meaning and satisfaction in life are concerned. The first of these critical problems lies in what is missing from this world view; namely, intrinsic and spiritual value as described above. Both intrinsic and spiritual value are in a very important sense immune from death. They are derived in the very participation in individual behaviors and courses of action—derived "on the spot," one might say. There is no question of their being, in Tolstoy's phrase, "destroyed by death." Indeed, persons whose lives are heavily immersed in such behavior are not even prone to raise questions about "the meaning of life" (Bergner, 1998), and this seems to capture the sense of Wittgenstein's famous assertion that "the solution of the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of the problem" (1922, p. 73). Just as such questions "vanish" while persons are deeply immersed in a game, transported by music, captivated in conversation, caught up in solving a problem, or engaged in lovemaking, so do they vanish largely from whole lives in which there is an abundance of intrinsically and spiritually motivated behavior.

A requirement for instrumental behavior to be meaningful . It was noted earlier that very important sources of meaning often do lie in the instrumental outcomes achieved by a person's actions. However, in order to secure such meaning, a basic requirement must be met, and this requirement is characteristically unmet in persons enmeshed in the Tolstoy dilemma. Specifically, for instrumental behavior to be meaningful, it must be linked to an ultimate goal of a certain precise sort. In the means-ends chain of instrumental acts, however long or short, where behavior X is engaged in to bring about

state of affairs A, which in turn will result in B, which in turn will result in C, and so forth, at some point a terminal goal must exist that constitutes for the individual an end of sufficient intrinsic value that it requires no justification by reference to any further end. On a smaller, day-to-day scale, such final order goals may lie for the ordinary person in such simple things as making a good dinner, winning a game, or attending a favored entertainment. On the larger scale of persons' whole lives, they may lie, depending on the individual, in such things as making a contribution to a highly valued cause, spreading a religious doctrine, winning a great competition, or raising children to be healthy, secure, contributing citizens.

With respect to such larger life goals, the primary danger seems to lie in individuals setting for themselves final order goals that in prospect seem highly alluring, but that ultimately prove insufficient for them, a phenomenon that is sometimes referred to as "pursuing false gods." When this is the case for a person, one of two things may happen, and both conduce to meaninglessness and despair. First, individuals may get what they want, but find that, while it may provide significant satisfactions, in the larger scheme it proves woefully insufficient in providing all that they had hoped for. This is precisely what happened to Tolstoy, as expressed in the following quote:

> "I now have six thousand desyatins in the province of Samara, and three hundred horses—what then?…what if I should be more famous than Gogol, Pushkin, Shakespeare, Moliere—than all the writers in the world—well, and what then? I could find no reply. Such questions demand an immediate answer: without one it is impossible to live. Yet answer there was none," (1929, p. 20).

Tolstoy, to this point in his life thoroughly enmeshed in an instrumental world where his actions were always about the achievement of the ends of fame, wealth, and exalted literary reputation, achieves his cherished goals but in time comes up empty

and despairing to the point of suicide. His crisis came precisely when they did not deliver all that it seemed they would, and where pursuit of the same path, it was clear to him, could not possibly succeed. For even if he were to succeed beyond his wildest dreams, he laments, his triumph would nevertheless be doomed to extinction by death.

The second scenario related to the setting of larger life goals occurs when individuals spend their lives in the instrumental pursuit of such goals, but this pursuit never culminates in a fruition deemed adequate. Life in this scenario is exclusively focussed on achieving some ultimate prize to the exclusion of intrinsic or spiritual behavior. However, the quest proves unsuccessful, and on this account the individual comes to regard his or her life as meaningless. For, in this instrumental world view, if you don't achieve your goals, the belief is that your efforts and your life have been "wasted" and it's "all for naught."

Component Belief: The Key to Human Happiness is to be a Special Person

The content of Tolstoy's crisis illustrates something further here. Like Tolstoy, many people beset with his dilemma believe that the key to human happiness lies in becoming a special, exalted, extraordinary person in the eyes of the world. Being a special, admired individual is seen as an ultimate accomplishment and a magical solution to one's existence. Achieving this end becomes the individual's holy grail, resulting in an excessively instrumental orientation to life in which achieving it is all that matters, and in which intrinsic and spiritual meanings are lost. The roots of this belief in personal specialness as the key to human happiness lie in a number of societal and individual factors, several of which are characterized briefly here.

Societal factors. On a societal level, individuals are given countless messages that, to be persons of worth, they must stand out from the crowd as being uniquely special and above others. This may encompass various domains such as being extraordinarily achieving,

powerful, wealthy, beautiful, or "cool." The social encouragements are endless: "Be number one or you're nothing." "Winning isn't the most important thing; it's the only thing." "You must make your mark in the world." "Good enough isn't good enough—you have to be the best." As an author, politician, athlete, beauty, business person, or scientist, you must achieve distinction—win a Nobel prize, write an acclaimed novel, become president, acquire great wealth, be selected Miss America, win an Olympic gold medal, and so forth. Achieving such distinction, you will be admired, happy, self-confident, and treated with respect and deference by others. Failing to achieve it, you will be ordinary, a failure in life, just another faceless nobody in the crowd.

Individual factor: Defense against death. Yalom (1980) has asserted that strong personal needs for, and beliefs in, one's own specialness, serve as defenses against death anxiety:

> "To the extent that one attains power, one's death fear is further assuaged and belief in one's specialness further reinforced. Getting ahead, achieving, accumulating material wealth, leaving works behind as imperishable monuments becomes a way of life which effectively conceals the mortal questions churning below" (Yalom, 1980, p. 121).

Individual factor: low self-esteem. Factors in the lives of certain individuals are often conducive to their having inordinate needs for specialness and personal glory. For example, as clinicians we observe that undergoing degradation at the hands of others often results both in low self-esteem and in powerful needs for self-affirmation (Ossorio, 1976; Kohut, 1977; Bergner, 1987). The child who, in one way or another, is humiliated, ostracized, marginalized, rejected, or otherwise degraded, emerges in many cases with powerful needs to "show them all" by achieving personal glory. The need here is to achieve some grand public triumph, to have such a triumph acknowledged, and to have others admit they were wrong about one.

Thus, motivated by societally and personally generated needs for personal specialness, the individual becomes inordinately consumed with an instrumental search to secure it. However, as noted previously in connection with Tolstoy's own personal crisis, personal glory or specialness seems to be a goal that, while it has its advantages, does not deliver all that it promises. In Kushner's (1988) words, it frequently turns out that "all you ever wanted isn't enough" (p. 1). Even if secured, personal glory does not provide the promised peace, happiness, and self-esteem that it seemed it would. Where self-esteem is concerned, the individual often proves unable to concur with the crowd in their acclaim. He or she knows the "real low-down" about self that others cannot suspect, and which puts the lie to their fawning admiration. As also noted previously, the desired glory is often not achieved, and senses of failure, disillusionment, and meaninglessness ensue, all of which become more and more acute as the individual grows older and despairs that it will ever be achieved. Finally, there is a dawning sense of what an exercise in utter futility and meaninglessness it is to work terribly hard to achieve personal glory—to accomplish some extraordinary feat or to accumulate vast power or wealth—only to die and have it all obliterated.

Component Belief: "In 100 Years, It's All the Same"

Many clients in the thrall of the Tolstoyan outlook hold a view that says in effect: "What I do today—what things I accomplish, what efforts and sacrifices I make, what satisfactions and advantages I forego in the name of morality—make absolutely no difference in the long run. In 100 years, it's all the same. So what is the point?"

These clients are not aware of, or are not subscribing to, what chaos theorists have termed the "butterfly effect" (Gleick, 1988). This is the phenomenon in which even a minor perturbation of the weather system in one country may have far-reaching effects in the future in a distant country, such as the creation of a hurricane. For some more altruistic clients immersed in an instrumental world, it

can be useful to use the image of the butterfly effect to remind them that, while they may or may not be around to see them, their actions may have consequences in the near and distant future of unknowable proportions. This is easily seen in the lives of the parents of certain great people such as Abraham Lincoln and Woodrow Wilson, whose largely unseen childrearing practices in obscure regions of America, according to their own children, were responsible for producing people who changed human history. While these are extreme cases, it is simply not a given to assume that "what I do will make no difference after I am gone."

Therapeutic Recommendations

The overarching goal of psychotherapy with persons in the grips of the Tolstoy dilemma is to enable them to participate in life in ways that they find meaningful and satisfying. In this section, some therapeutic interventions that have proven helpful in the accomplishment of this goal are presented.

Modify Tolstoyan World View

The first therapeutic recommendation here follows directly from all that has been said to this point. It is that therapists assist their clients to abandon the painful and life-destroying beliefs embodied in the Tolstoyan outlook, and to replace them with alternative beliefs and outlooks such as those described in the previous section of this paper. Thus, for example, beliefs that death destroys meaning, that meaning cannot be found in the temporal world, and that an instrumental search for personal glory is the answer to human happiness would be critically examined, and the client helped to see far more salutary and meaning-generative alternatives. The accomplishment of this goal is achievable through a wide variety of intervention types. Most obviously, this includes cognitive restructuring (Beck, Rush, Shaw, and Emery, 1979; Beck & Weishaar, 2005) and existential ones (Bergner, 1998; May & Yalom,

2005; Yalom, 1980). Less obviously, it includes status dynamic (Bergner, 1993, 2007; Roberts, 1985), strategic (Fisch, Weakland, and Segal, 1982; Watzlawick, Weakland, & Fisch, 1974), solution-focussed (O'Hanlon & Weiner-Davis, 2003), and any number of other therapeutic strategies. Since the general therapeutic approaches of these various schools are well and fully developed elsewhere, and are beyond the scope of the present article, I shall not develop them further here.

Provide Experience in Fantasy

A status dynamic intervention that the author has employed to good effect with clients caught up in the search for glory scenario described above is to have them generate a fantasy experience of perfect triumph, acclamation, and (often) vindication. The client is helped within the therapy hour to create an elaborate and detailed fantasy of this kind, to truly enjoy and savor this fantasied experience, and then as a homework assignment to do it over and over again in a certain prescribed way. For example, in one case involving a graduate student in English literature, the form that his fantasy assumed was that he would write the next "great American novel" and achieve national and international acclaim as an important literary figure. A subplot in his fantasy involved giving a speech to some gathering and, after his speech, having a woman who had spurned him in high school approach him in a friendly manner and ask if he remembered her. To her query, he would reply dismissively, "I'm sorry, I'm afraid I don't, and if you don't mind, I'm terribly busy." Pursuant to generating and enjoying this fantasy during the therapy hour with eyes closed, the client was instructed to open his eyes and to declare aloud with as much vehemence as he could muster: "This triumph, and its endurance forever, is what I *must* have at all costs; this is the standard that I impose on life, and I *declare* anything less than this meaningless." Subsequently, he was given the homework assignment of repeating this sequence of fantasy-followed-by-declaration for five minutes each day during

the following week. At his next appointment, he stated that he had followed the directive, but that as the week wore on he had found it increasingly difficult to do with enthusiasm. He noted, further, that the exercise had brought home to him that he was in fact imposing an impossible standard that served to disqualify potentially satisfying parts of his life, and felt that his prior belief that the realization of this fantasy would be the ultimate answer to his existence had lost much of its grip on him.

Such a fantasy exercise is clearly paradoxical in nature. It instructs the client to take his or her precise problem—here, the imposition of the impossible Tolstoyan standard of meaning on one's experience—and to consciously and deliberately continue to enact it in a certain prescribed way. Such a directive, when successful, moves the client from the low power position of "being in the grips of" something to the more powerful position of being the deliberate author and perpetrator of that thing, a position from which a decision to change becomes far more possible (Bergner, 1993, 2007). In general, as in this case, when clients are able to carry out and fully involve themselves in this exercise, the effect is that they are able to have (albeit in fantasy) the experience that they so desperately seek, to savor and enjoy this experience genuinely, and in some small way both to put it behind them and to realize that, however gratifying it might be, it would not provide the needed answer to personal meaning and happiness.

Focus on Self-esteem

As noted above, poor self-esteem is often at the root of a client's desperate, preemptive search for personal specialness. While the distal cause of such esteem may lie in current and past actions and criticisms of other persons towards one, it is at the end of the day by definition *self*-esteem. That is to say, it is *one's own* summary appraisal of one's worth and value, and its proximal cause is the individual's own judgmental acts as a critic of self (Bergner, 1995). Thus, a strongly recommended focus in those cases where poor self-

esteem is evident (perhaps beneath a facade of narcissism) is on helping clients with the Tolstoy dilemma to identify precisely the destructive critical acts that they perpetrate upon themselves, and to abandon these in favor of more constructive modes of self-appraisal (Bergner, 1995). Again here, as in the previous intervention, the attempt is the status dynamically oriented one of removing the client from a low power position from which change is difficult ("I have low self-esteem") to a high power position of responsible authorship ("I am the perpetrator of certain destructive self-critical behaviors which result in low self-esteem"), a position from which it becomes far more possible to change.

"You've Already Shown Them."

A helpful message to some more successful clients, i.e., those who have achieved a substantial measure of achievement and recognition in the eyes of the world, is that "You've already shown them" (Ossorio, personal communication, 1995). The message here has two important implications. First, it states that what is desired by the client has already been accomplished, and no longer stands in need of accomplishment. Second, it reminds the client that, while special achievement and recognition are fine things, the client's current distress attests to the fact that they have not provided the needed solution to achieving meaning and happiness in life, and therefore that doing more of the same is not likely to provide it either.

"Baby Can't be Blessed..."

A final therapeutic focus that the author has found helpful in working with clients beset with the Tolstoy dilemma is well expressed in the words of an old Bob Dylan song: "Nobody has to guess, that baby can't be blessed, 'til she finally sees that she's like all the rest" (Dylan, 1966). The message here is essentially a call to community and fellowship rather than to the separateness inherent in setting oneself up as a superior, exalted, special person. The

message is that, while there may be special things about one, one remains fundamentally a person among persons, and that enormous satisfactions (or "blessings") lie in participating in the world as a fellow, co-entitled human being and not an aloof, set-apart, competitive superior.

Conclusion

The Tolstoyan world view, in its highly problematic relation to death, its denial that meaning can be found outside of an impossible immortality, its exclusively instrumentally focussed search for personal glory, and more, constitutes an enormously destructive and even suicide-provoking outlook. Individuals in the thrall of this outlook can be therapeutically assisted in many ways, a few of which have been documented in this article. Whatever the therapeutic means selected, the abiding goal of psychotherapy with these persons must be that of helping them to achieve an immersed participation in life that allows them to derive the countless instrumental, intrinsic, and spiritual meanings and satisfactions that this world affords to many, and may afford to them.

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