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Socrates has been hiding in plain sight. We call him the father of Western philosophy, but what exactly are his philosophical views? He is famous for his humility, but readers often find him arrogant and condescending. We parrot his claim that "the unexamined life is not worth living," yet take no steps to live examined ones. We know that he was tried, convicted, and executed for "corrupting the youth," but freely assign Socratic dialogues to today's youths, to introduce them to philosophy. We've lost sight of what made him so dangerous. In *Open Socrates*, acclaimed philosopher Agnes Callard recovers the radical move at the center of Socrates' thought, and shows why it is still the way to a good life.

Callard draws our attention to Socrates' startling discovery that we don't know how to ask ourselves the most important questions—about how we should live, and how we might change. Before a person even has a chance to reflect, their bodily desires or the forces of social conformity have already answered on their behalf. To ask the most important questions, we need help. Callard argues that the true ambition of the famous "Socratic method" is to reveal what one human being can be to another. You can rely on another person in many ways—for survival, for pleasure, for comfort—but you are engaging them to the fullest when you call on them to help answer your questions and challenge your answers.

As Callard reveals, Socrates' method can reshape our usual approach to managing romantic love, confronting death, and thinking about politics. She extracts from the first philosopher nothing less than a new ethics to live by.

OPEN SOCRATES

The Case for a Philosophical Life

AGNES CALLARD

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philosophical life looks like, but I can't say whether the sight of it will fill you with Socratic hope and energy or plunge you into Tolstoyan despair. If you are willing to take the risk, read on.

A Note on the Use of Plato's Dialogues

Chapters 1 to 5 bounce around among Plato's Socratic dialogues (*Alcibiades*, *Apology*, *Charmides*, *Clitophon*, *Crito*, *Euthydemus*, *Euthyphro*, *Gorgias*, *Hippias Minor*, *Laches*, *Lysis*, *Meno*, *Protagoras*), but from chapter 6 onward, each chapter is chiefly devoted to one dialogue, as follows:

chapter 6, Moore's Paradox: *Alcibiades*
chapter 7, Meno's Paradox: *Meno*
chapters 8 and 9, Politics: *Gorgias*
chapter 10, Love: *Symposium*
chapter 11, Death: *Phaedo*

Part One

UNTIMELY QUESTIONS

Chapter 1

The Tolstoy Problem

> My question, which at the age of fifty brought me to the point of suicide, was the very simple question that lies in the soul of every human being, from a silly child to the wisest sage—the question without which life is impossible, as I experienced in actual fact. The question is this: What will come from what I do and from what I will do tomorrow—what will come from my whole life?[1]

In middle age, Tolstoy came to the terrible conclusion that the question "without which life is impossible" is also intractable, in that no matter how much he thought about it, he would never be able to answer it. If Tolstoy is right that this question "lies in the soul of every human being," then his predicament is far from unique. Nor does he seem especially well placed to fall into bottomless despair. Quite the contrary: one might have thought that if anyone would have been in a position to find the meaningfulness of their life to be self-evident, it would have been someone like Leo Tolstoy. So why aren't all of us haunted by Tolstoy's problem?

It is tempting to answer that Tolstoy was depressed. When you hear that anyone is contemplating suicide, it is hard not to jump to a medical diagnosis; so much the more so when the person in question is spectacularly successful. The natural explanation for why someone thinks their life is going badly when it gives every outward sign of going well is that there is something off with the part of the body whose malfunctioning characteristically escapes

the mind's notice: the brain. But when it comes to Tolstoy, we are in an awkward position to draw these conclusions. The basis on which we presume to diagnose him, namely, the book in which he describes his crisis, constitutes an eloquent argument for feeling just the way he does. He held that there are facts about the human condition which, if you attended to them, would make you "mentally ill," too.

This is why the psychologist and philosopher William James (1842–1910), discussing *Confession* in his book *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, insists that Tolstoy's "melancholy," as James described it, "was not merely an accidental vitiation of the humors," but rather "the escape from falsehoods into what for him were ways of truth." James continues: "And though not many of us can imitate Tolstoy, not having enough, perhaps, of the aboriginal human marrow in our bones, most of us may at least feel as if it might be better for us if we could."[2]

If most people find themselves unbothered by Tolstoy's question, is it because they have a real answer to it, or because they have the power to ignore it?

I. Questions That Come Too Late

If you stood under the immediate threat of violence—unless you take action, you or a loved one will be harmed—the last thing it would make sense to do would be to ask about the meaning of life. In movies, people frequently are provided with good reasons to cut off conversations because "we have to go, now!" Many of us have become gifted at endowing everyday tasks with such urgency: I "must" go to the store, I "have to" get to work, I "need to" call my parents, I am "very busy"—after all of which I probably "deserve" a break during which the last thing I want to do is embark upon an exhausting existential inquiry. We learn to take life fifteen minutes at a time. And if you add up enough of those fifteen-minute periods, the sum total is a whole life. This is what T. S. Eliot refers to when he writes, "I have

measured out my life with coffee spoons." We find a way to avoid ever asking, "What will come from my whole life?"

One can avoid Tolstoy's crisis by placing one foot after another, and attending either to whatever strikes one as the greatest danger—either physical or moral—to be avoided, or, alternatively, the greatest source of pleasure or entertainment to be pursued. Whether we see life, pessimistically, as an ongoing crisis punctuated by periods of relief, or, more optimistically, as an ongoing source of pleasure punctuated by periods of crisis, we will find it replete with reasons for postponing philosophical inquiry. If we postpone for long enough, death will rescue us from ever having to come to terms with the meaninglessness of life.

I believe that Tolstoy identified a special class of question that I am going to call "untimely questions." An untimely question is a question that comes at the wrong time—namely, after it has been answered. Untimely questions are remarkable not only because they are hard to answer, but, first and foremost, because they are hard to ask; and they are hard to ask not only because it is hard to pose them to others, but, first and foremost, because it is hard to pose them to oneself. We are familiar with the circumstances under which a person will be unable to get others to engage with her question—when they won't let her talk, or when she doesn't want to admit that she doesn't know the answer, or when there is simply no one around. But can't one always pose a question to oneself? No. Some questions are so elusive that if you write them down on a piece of paper, and then go on to read what you have written out loud to yourself, over and over again, to the point where even after you stop talking, the words of the question are echoing through your head, you still won't be *asking* the question. You'll be going through the motions of inquiry without actually inquiring into anything.

The reason why you can't ask yourself untimely questions is that you think you already have the answer to them, and the reason you think you have the answer is that you are *using* the answer. Such questions don't show up to you *as questions*; by the time you get

them in view, you find that they have hardened into the shape of answers. Untimely questions come too late. "What will come of my entire life?" was, for Tolstoy, such a question, but in other places he is more specific. Recall:

> Before occupying myself with the Samara estate, the education of my son, the writing of a book, I had to know why I would be doing that. *As long as I didn't know why, I couldn't do anything.* As I thought about estate management, which kept me very occupied at the time, there would suddenly come into my head the question: "Very well, you'll have sixteen thousand acres in the province of Samara and three hundred horses, and then what?" I was completely thrown, and didn't know what more to think. Or, starting to think about how I was educating my children, I would say to myself, "Why?" Or considering how the welfare of the people might be achieved, I suddenly would say to myself, "But what's it to do with me?" Or thinking about the fame my works would bring me, I would say to myself, "Very well, you'll be more famous than Gogol, Pushkin, Shakespeare, Molière, than all the writers in the world—so what?" And I couldn't answer anything, anything at all.[3]

Why seek material prosperity? Why educate my children? Why care about the welfare of the people? Why does literary fame matter? These are untimely questions, and they form a contrast with the sorts of questions that float free of what we are currently doing, questions where open-mindedness is possible, questions whose answers we needn't rely on already knowing. Those sorts of questions come at the right time.

At this point you might reply that a person does not "need" an answer to this, or any other, question in order to live: Food, water, air, and shelter are the sorts of things a person needs in order to

survive—not answers to questions! It is true that food and water are the sorts of things that, if withdrawn from a person, remove the possibility of survival. No answer can substitute for any of those things: man cannot live on ideas alone. But there are questions whose answers constitute a person's basis for living. This is because, first, living, for a human being, essentially involves acting; second, every action is for the sake of some goal; and, third, a goal is an idea about what matters. Ideas are, in fact, prerequisites for the kind of living that we human beings do. Indeed, even breathing is, as Tolstoy noted in his suicidal despair, strictly speaking, optional. We go on breathing because we chose to do so.

Human existence requires a biological infrastructure; human agency requires, in addition, a conceptual infrastructure. Though everything from changes at the cellular level to involuntary reflexes illustrate the fact that our bodies can be moved in ways we don't control, most of what we refer to under the heading "human life" concerns all the ways we *do* exercise some control our bodies: we choose where to go and how to behave when we get there, we decide what words to assert, we do our best to hurl ourselves into one future rather than another. To engage in these acts of self-control and self-management, we have to believe that something is worth pursuing. Recall Tolstoy: "As long as I didn't know why, I couldn't do anything." Every belief that we might act on is the answer to some "why" question. But that means whichever answer we're currently acting on the basis of closes the corresponding question. The difficulty is that we can't make use of the answer and ask ourselves the question at the same time.

Suppose I firmly believe that cloning is immoral. I won't be able to ask myself, "Is cloning immoral?" because, when I check in with my beliefs, I see that one of them already answers the question. In order to inquire into that question, I would have to take "cloning is immoral" off of the list of my beliefs. At that point I could look into whether I can derive it from other beliefs that I have, or whether any new information I might acquire could settle the question for

me. But if what I am currently doing is advocating against cloning, then I cannot take "cloning is immoral" off of the list of my beliefs, because I'm relying on its presence. If someone asked me, "Why are you doing what you are doing?" I need to be able to answer, "Because cloning is immoral."

If it strikes you as somehow brutal and uncaring that Tolstoy is willing to countenance such thoughts as "Why should I care about my children" and "So the peasants are suffering, what's it to me?" your judgmental response—How dare he?!—points to the unaskability of the corresponding question. You are not supposed to regard those questions as open, precisely because you are supposed to already be using the answers, in the caring that you are currently doing. But in that case, how was Tolstoy, who did care about his children, and about the welfare of the peasants, able to ask himself those questions? The answer is that he wasn't. He could say the words of the questions to himself, but he couldn't ask them.

II. What Tolstoy Couldn't Do

Though Tolstoy repeatedly *refers* to the process of inquiry into fundamental questions, his text betrays no sign of his having performed such inquiry: actual philosophical reasoning and argumentation are strikingly absent from it.

Consider Tolstoy's initial response to his own questions:

> At first I thought that these were just pointless, irrelevant questions. I thought all this was known and that if and when I wanted to take up finding the answers, it wouldn't be much work for me—it was only that now I didn't have the time to do that, but when I turned my mind to it I would find the answers.[4]

Tolstoy's description of how we use trivializing rationalizations to keep such questions at bay likely rings true for many people. But

one might expect that the result of rejecting this approach would be a recognition of those questions as worthy of sustained intellectual effort. By Tolstoy's report, however, despair set in immediately:

> I understood that this was no casual exhaustion but something very important, and that if these same questions kept on being repeated, then one must answer them. And I tried to answer. The questions seemed such stupid, simple, childish questions. But as soon as I tackled them and tried to find the answers, I at once became certain first that these were not childish and stupid questions but the most important and profound questions in life, and second that I could not, just could not answer them, however much I thought about it.[5]

Note the simultaneity of question and answer: "*As soon as* I tackled them and tried to find the answers, I *at once became certain* . . . that I could not, just could not answer them." Tolstoy jumps very quickly from acknowledging that these questions must be answered to certainty that they cannot be. The claim that it is immediately obvious that philosophical questions cannot be answered is no less evasive than Tolstoy's initial claim that it is immediately obvious that philosophical questions are easy to answer. In one way Tolstoy's attitude toward these questions undergoes a profound transformation: from casual dismissal to reverential awe. Eventually, this awe takes a religious form. But Tolstoy's attitude never at any point becomes inquisitive; in one way or another, inquiry always gets ruled out in advance.

Though he reiterates this negative conclusion many times over the course of his autobiographical account, he never actually explains how he arrived at it. Consider another of his descriptions of that conclusion: "I couldn't attribute any intelligent meaning to a single act or to the whole of my life. I was surprised that I couldn't understand that at the very beginning. All this had been known to everyone for so long."[6] Though he has moved from his initial description

of the questions as "pointless" and "irrelevant," his description of the meaninglessness of life as "known to everyone" is likewise evasive: Does everyone really know that neither one's life, nor any act contained therein, has any meaning? How do they know this?

Tolstoy never explains why the questions he asked himself were impossible to answer, or what makes these questions so "important and profound." He does not even leave the reader with much clarity as to what the questions are—or how many of them there are. Sometimes, as in the passages above, the "questions" are in the plural: these are his questions about the value of wealth, literary fame, or parenting. At other times he seems to see but a single question, though he formulates it in multiple ways that are not obviously identical to one another:

> The question without which life is impossible . . . is this: What will come from what I do and from what I will do tomorrow—what will come from my whole life? . . . Expressed differently, the question would be this: Why should I live, why should I wish for anything, why should I do anything? One can put the question differently again: Is there any meaning in my life that wouldn't be destroyed by the death that inevitably awaits me?[7]

This list of questions itself raises many questions, for example: Is the final question really equivalent to all of the others? What could it mean for something to "come from" a whole life—especially given that literary fame doesn't count as an answer? Should one expect that a question such as "Why should I educate my children?" will be answered by the same "meaning" that would also underwrite "Why should I pursue a literary career?"

It is evident that Tolstoy was in anguish over questions about the meaning of his own life, but it is less evident that he actually succeeded in asking those questions. He regularly leaps from a highly imprecise statement of some form of the question to despair over

the impossibility of arriving at any kind of answer. Tolstoy offers no development or discussion of the questions that, by his own admission, obsessed him to the point of driving him toward suicide. He does not articulate what the steps in offering an answer might look like, or draw any distinctions relevant to the answering of the question. Tolstoy's text is characterized by a jerky movement, as though he is being repeatedly brought up short by the prospect of an impossible investigation. This leads him to feel that he has come up against the meaninglessness of life:

> How can a man see this and go on living—that is what's astonishing. You can only live as long as you're drunk with life; but when you sober up, you can't help but see that all this is just a fraud, and a stupid fraud.[8]

Over and over again he describes himself decisively concluding against the meaning of life and in favor of suicide. He describes this conclusion in the firmest possible terms: "Life is a meaningless evil, that is unquestionable."[9] Why then, doesn't he commit suicide? He says that something—which he describes variously as "habit," "weakness," or "intoxication"—inhibits him from carrying out the deed:

> If in drunken moments I did not have so much desires as the habits of old desires, then in sober moments I knew that it was delusion, that there was nothing to desire. I could not even desire to know the truth because I guessed wherein it lay. The truth was that life is nonsense.[10]

Tolstoy describes an odd confluence of attitudes about suicide. On the one hand, he fears committing it: he removes the ropes from the room where he undresses every night to prevent himself from hanging himself on the beam between the cupboards; he avoids hunting lest he encounter an irresistible temptation to turn his rifle on himself. At the same time, he classifies these fears as "delusion"

and "intoxication" by contrast with the "truth" that life is meaningless and suicide is required. He calls his approach "the way of weakness." By weakness, Tolstoy means "understanding the evil and meaninglessness of life, to continue to drag it out, knowing in advance that nothing will come of it."[11] He describes people like him as "the weakest, most illogical" and "most stupid of men."[12]

He admires those "strong and logical people" who, in his position, commit suicide, and is ashamed to classify himself as belonging to the category of people who "know that death is better than life but, not having the strength to act intelligently—to end the fraud quickly and kill themselves—they seem to be waiting for something." He asks himself, "If I know what is best and it is in my power, why not take the best?"[13]

There is an obvious objection to the claim that suicide is a coherent response to despair about meaning. If human life is meaningless, if there is *nothing* that we can do that would matter in any way, then that line of reasoning applies equally to suicide. To put it another way: if you think that suicide is valuable enough to perform, you think that *something* is valuable and now it seems you are no longer a nihilist. Tolstoy does not refute this objection, or even consider it, because he does not arrive at the idea of suicide by a process of systematic thought. Faced with despair over a set of questions he can neither avoid nor confront, he finds himself blown back and forth between the unthinkability of suicide and the necessity of it, oddly confident about his ability to determine which of those states counts as "sobriety," which as "intoxication."

I have been drawing your attention to two striking features of the account Tolstoy provides in *Confession*. The first is that although Tolstoy repeatedly refers to fundamental questions about the meaning of life, he never succeeds in asking himself those questions. The second is that he firmly, passionately, and with certitude espouses a conclusion—life is meaningless, suicide is mandated—to which he has not reasoned and from which his behavior repeatedly *wavers*.

III. Enter Socrates

In the *Protagoras*, Socrates tells a funny story of being awakened very early in the morning by a young Hippocrates:

> This morning just before daybreak, while it was still dark, Hippocrates, son of Apollodorus and Phason's brother, banged on my door with his stick, and when it was opened for him he barged right in and yelled in that voice of his, "Socrates, are you awake or asleep?"
>
> Recognizing his voice, I said, "Is that Hippocrates? No bad news, I hope."
>
> "Nothing but good news," he said.
>
> "I'd like to hear it," I said. "What brings you here at such an hour?"
>
> "Protagoras has arrived," he said, standing next to me.
>
> "Day before yesterday," I said. "Did you just find out?"
>
> "Yes! Just last evening." As he said this he felt around for the bed and sat at my feet and continued: "That's right, late yesterday evening, after I got back from Oenoë. My slave Satyrus had run away from me. I meant to tell you that I was going after him, but something else came up and made me forget. After I got back and we had eaten dinner and were about to get some rest, *then* my brother tells me Protagoras has arrived. I was getting ready to come right over to see you even then, until I realized it was just too late at night. But as soon as I had slept some and wasn't dead-tired any more, I got up and came over here right away."[14]

Hippocrates resembles a chicken with his head chopped off. He is rushing around, chasing after Satyrus, meaning to tell Socrates about this but forgetting, barging in on Socrates before sunrise, far

too early to politely call on Protagoras, and awakening Socrates by asking whether he is awake!

Hippocrates' outward behavior displays incoherence and thoughtlessness, and when Socrates scratches the surface, we see more of the same. He goes on to question Hippocrates: Why is Hippocrates so excited to meet Protagoras? Because Protagoras is a sophist, replies Hippocrates. But what is a sophist? asks Socrates. Hippocrates turns out to be unable to answer, offering only empty phases such as "someone who has an understanding of wise things"—which ones? What is a sophist good at?—"making people clever speakers"—on which subjects?[15] Eventually Hippocrates admits that he just does not know what he's rushing into: "By God," he said, "I really don't know what to say."[16]

Socrates chastises Hippocrates:

> You hear about him in the evening—right?—and the next morning, here you are, not to talk about whether it's a good idea to entrust yourself to him or not, but ready to spend your own money and your friends' as well, as if you had thought it all through already and, no matter what, you had to be with Protagoras, a man whom you admit you don't know and have never conversed with, and whom you call a sophist although you obviously have no idea what this sophist is to whom you are about to entrust yourself.[17]

Note Socrates' criticism that Hippocrates is behaving "as if you had thought it all out." Hippocrates had not even asked himself the questions to which he confidently assumed an audience with Protagoras was the answer. When we settle on answers to the central questions of our lives without ever having opened up those questions for inquiry, that is a recipe for wavering. A mind tasked only with thinking its way through the next fifteen minutes is likely to find itself acting inconsistently, routinely undoing what it confidently did earlier.

Hippocrates and Socrates do eventually head over to where Pro-

tagoras is staying, and Socrates and Protagoras end up in a conversation about the relationship between being a good person (having "virtue") and having knowledge. At the end of this conversation Socrates points out that the conversation itself has wavered:

> It seems to me that our discussion has turned on us, and if it had a voice of its own, it would say, mockingly, "Socrates and Protagoras, how ridiculous you are, both of you. Socrates, you said earlier that virtue cannot be taught, but now you are arguing the very opposite and have attempted to show that everything is knowledge—justice, temperance, courage—in which case virtue would be eminently teachable. . . . Now, Protagoras maintained at first that it could be taught, but now he thinks the opposite, urging that hardly any of the virtues turn out to be knowledge. On that view, virtue could hardly be taught at all."
>
> Now, Protagoras, seeing that we have gotten this topsy-turvy and terribly confused, I am most eager to clear it all up, and I would like us, having come this far, to continue until we come through to what virtue is in itself . . . if you are willing, as I said at the beginning, I would be pleased to investigate them with you.[18]

Socrates diagnoses their mistake as trying to answer the question of whether virtue can be taught or whether virtue is knowledge without asking, "What is virtue?" They presupposed they had an answer to that question, but in fact they had never even asked it. The result is that they wavered. Protagoras is impressed with Socrates, but turns down the invitation to inquire:

> Socrates, I commend your enthusiasm and the way you find your way through an argument. I really don't think I am a bad man, certainly the last man to harbor ill will. Indeed, I have told many people that I admire you more

> than anyone I have met, certainly more than anyone in your generation. And I say that I would not be surprised if you gain among men high repute for wisdom. We will examine these things later, whenever you wish; now it is time to turn our attention elsewhere.[19]

Protagoras thinks that he must turn his attention elsewhere, away from inquiry. He needs to get on with the next fifteen minutes of his life. Socrates encounters a similar scenario in another dialogue, with Euthyphro, who complains that "whatever proposition we put forward goes around and refuses to stay put where we establish it."[20] The conversation ends when Socrates insists, "We must investigate again from the beginning . . . "[21] and Euthyphro replies "some other time, Socrates, for I am in a hurry now, and it is time for me to go."[22]

In the *Alcibiades*, a dialogue we will examine in more detail in chapter 6, Socrates takes it upon himself to draw a young, ambitious person's attention to the fact that he has never asked himself the most basic ethical questions. That failure manifests as wavering:

> Socrates: So if you gave conflicting answers about something, without meaning to, then it would be obvious that you didn't know it.
>
> Alcibiades: Probably.
>
> Socrates: Well then, you tell me that you're wavering about what is just and unjust, admirable and contemptible, good and bad, and advantageous and disadvantageous. Isn't it obvious that the reason you waver about them is that you don't know about them?[23]

Yet another dialogue, the *Lesser Hippias*, ends with an exchange in which Socrates admits his own wavering:

> Hippias: I can't agree with you in that, Socrates.

> Socrates: Nor I with myself, Hippias. But given the argument, we can't help having it look that way to us, now, at any rate. However, as I said before, on these matters I waver back and forth and never believe the same thing.[24]

Socrates diagnoses his own wavering in the same way as he diagnoses Alcibiades': "I go back and forth about all this—plainly because I don't know."[25] What causes Socrates to waver is his failure to have inquired sufficiently; to this extent, he is in the same boat as everyone else. The difference between Socrates and those around him is that he wants to do something about this problem. Socrates thinks that his circumstances call for inquiry, whereas his interlocutors are inclined to cut off the inquiry and move on with their lives. As Socrates sees it, by preemptively closing the questions, they consign themselves to a lifetime of wavering.

IV. Everybody Wavers

One cannot but sympathize with Tolstoy's self-representation as someone who is inquiring assiduously, laboriously, energetically:

> And I searched for explanations of my questions in all the branches of knowledge that human beings have acquired. And I searched long and agonizingly and not just out of idle curiosity; I didn't search limply but I searched agonizingly, persistently, day and night; I searched as a dying man searches for salvation, and I found nothing.[26]

Nonetheless, Tolstoy's "I found nothing" should shock any reader. How could it be that Tolstoy found absolutely *nothing* to address the question of the meaning of life in *all the branches of knowledge that human beings have acquired*? Has the whole human intellectual endeavor been a total failure? One might have thought that there

would be *something* useful for thinking about the meaning of life in the vast ocean of human intellectual output—in fact, I would contend that there is much that is useful to be found even in that tiny portion of the sea constituted by Tolstoy's own literary output.

The Socratic interpretation is that Tolstoy did not try and fail; rather, he failed to try. He confused his own failure to ask a question with a conclusive "unquestionable" discovery that there was no possible answer. Although Tolstoy regularly refers to "my reasoning," the absence of philosophical thinking in his text suggests that his conclusions were not products of reasoning, but substitutes for it. Sometimes, when we are very determined not to ask a question, we make a claim of having very decisively answered it.

Tolstoy was not able to ask himself whether his existence mattered, because he could not pause the activity of living for long enough to inquire into an answer. Tolstoy imagined that he had formed a settled judgment against the meaning of life, but he had not. Rather, he failed to articulate any kind of sustained argument against the meaning of life, and his incessant wavering made it impossible to find any sense of closure or contentment in the conclusion he pretended to have decisively arrived at:

> If I had simply understood that life has no meaning, I might have known that calmly, could have known that this was my fate. But I couldn't be content with that. If I had been like a man in a forest from which he knows there is no way out, I could have lived; but I was like a man lost in a forest who has been overcome by terror through being lost, and he rushes to and fro trying to find the road; he knows that every step makes him more lost, and he can't stop rushing about.[27]

We might be reminded here of young Hippocrates rushing around in the early morning hours.

Wavering is not a phenomenon consigned to the ancient world, though it has gone by many names. The philosopher Bertrand Russell called one species of it "emotive conjugation":

> I am firm, you are obstinate, he is a pig-headed fool. I am righteously indignant, you are annoyed, he is making a fuss over nothing. I have reconsidered the matter, you have changed your mind, he has gone back on his word.[28]

Russell is noticing the form of wavering that arises from the ways in which ethical language is hostage to its user's approval: we call self-confidence "arrogance" when we dislike it; we call youthfulness "immaturity" when we dislike it; we call revenge "accountability" when we like it; we call consequences "punitive" when we dislike them (otherwise we just call them consequences). Consider the difference between "tribalism," which always references something we don't like, and "loyalty," which is what we call the same phenomenon when we approve of it. Likewise, consider how we applaud someone's behavior as "cooperative" when we like the fact that she is doing what works for others, and reject her behavior as "conformist" when she's once again doing what works for others, but this time we happen to dislike it. Those who risk their lives for a cause they believe in count as "courageous" to those who also believe in the cause, whereas disbelievers are likely to say these people are "fools" or "indoctrinated."

Folk wisdom is another place to see wavering. Pick a maxim or adage and you can usually articulate a counter-maxim that people will use to cover the case where they wish to praise the opposite: "Look before you leap," *but* "He who dares, wins"; "Slow and steady wins the race," *but* "Time waits for no man"; "Birds of a feather flock together," *but* "Opposites attract"; "Silence is golden," *but* "The squeaky wheel gets the grease." And so on.

You waver when you decide that one thought is suitable for one context and a different one for another, even though you cannot specify any relevant difference between the two contexts. Did I say

"Silence is golden" on the basis of a principle that allows me to determine when it is or is not the time to be a squeaky wheel? Or did I say "Silence is golden" simply because, in the here and now, I don't want you to talk? Whereas other people criticize Socrates for being repetitive, he criticizes them for wavering—or, as he puts it, refusing to say the same things about the same subjects. In the *Gorgias* Socrates is discussing the central question of politics—who should rule—and he says:

> Do you see, my good Callicles, that you and I are not accusing each other of the same thing? You claim that I'm always saying the same things, and you criticize me for it, whereas I, just the opposite of you, claim that you never say the same things about the same subjects.[29]

There is no domain where our wavering is more obvious than it is in politics, and there is no one who finds it more obvious than our political opponents. If you are in favor of free speech, except when it comes to people you disagree with, those people will see you as wavering. If you think a president whose term is coming to an end should still get to choose a Supreme Court justice—but only when that president belongs to your party—the opposite party will say you are wavering. If you cite empirical research only when it supports the position you antecedently championed, and call that "following the science," those who hold the other position will say you are wavering.

Wavering often takes the form of weakness of will, where we commit ourselves to one course of action, and end up acting against our better judgment, instead. Remember Tolstoy's reference to "the way of weakness" in which I do something worse even though "I know what is best and it is in my power." We say we *know* that we should exercise more and spend less time on our phones and be nicer to our parents and keep our kids away from video games and eat more vegetables and read more novels and be more conscious about

our consumption choices and so on and so forth, but quite often we don't act in accordance with this supposed knowledge—instead, we act exactly as people would act who didn't know those things.

V. Fiction as Refuge

Most of the time, when we waver, we don't notice that we are wavering. We become adept at avoiding having to acknowledge our wavering. We *rationalize*. When Tolstoy is wearing his novelist hat, he sees this phenomenon quite clearly. For example, in *War and Peace*, Pierre wrangles with himself over whether or not he should go to a party at Anatole Kuragin's house:

> "I should like to go to Kuragin's," thought he.
>
> But he immediately recalled his promise to Prince Andrew not to go there. Then, as happens to people of weak character, he desired so passionately once more to enjoy that dissipation he was so accustomed to that he decided to go. The thought immediately occurred to him that his promise to Prince Andrew was of no account, because before he gave it he had already promised Prince Anatole to come to his gathering; "besides," thought he, "all such 'words of honor' are conventional things with no definite meaning, especially if one considers that by tomorrow one may be dead, or something so extraordinary may happen to one that honor and dishonor will be all the same!" Pierre often indulged in reflections of this sort, nullifying all his decisions and intentions. He went to Kuragin's.[30]

Pierre gives Andrew his word of honor that he won't go to Kuragin's party, then enters a carriage, and almost immediately directs the driver to Kuragin's. The paragraph above describes the thoughts

he has along the way. Notice that Pierre not only decides to go to Kuragin's, but also convinces himself that he has carefully reasoned his way to the conclusion that it would be best to go—when in fact, as Tolstoy tells us, that question was closed from the outset: "He desired so passionately . . . that he decided to go." Passionate desire, not inquiry. Passionate desire pressures us to think no more than fifteen minutes ahead.

But imagine *being* Pierre, and acknowledging what is happening: maybe the truth is that drinking and partying really are my central concerns; I'm like an animal, battered around by pleasure and convention; there's nothing my life is about. No one could bear to see himself as one of those "people of weak character." The only way to get through the next fifteen minutes is to convince yourself that you're doing something much nobler than getting through the next fifteen minutes. And so you produce, as Pierre does, as Tolstoy does, the illusion of a synoptic perspective on your life as a whole.

If we never inquire into untimely questions, the thinking we use to guide our lives will be unstable. We will never be able to rely on it for very long—perhaps no more than fifteen minutes or so—before it is subject to being overturned. But we don't experience these overturnings, because we are accustomed to smoothing over the bumps created by wavering. Again, we rationalize. This is why it comes as a shock to his interlocutors when Socrates, using his probing questioning, forces the wavering into the light. Socrates brought the Tolstoy problem to the attention of people who would otherwise never have noticed it.

There are so many questions about human life that we never stop to ask ourselves, because we are too busy moving on with our lives, deploying our answers. They are questions about how to treat other people fairly, what kind of greatness to pursue in life, what it means to love and be loved, how we should face death, how society should be organized, who our real friends are, how to raise our children, what the demands of justice are, and quite generally, what to do with our lives. These are questions about the things that matter most to

us, about projects we have a standing investment in, questions we have always already answered. We cannot "step back" to a detached position from which having no answer at all is permissible: question and answer are magnetically attracted to one another, and the space for thought is eliminated. So we get by without asking untimely questions—or we appear to ourselves to get by, while actually wavering. We waver in our actions, we waver in our thoughts, and we waver most of all when pressed to explain ourselves.

When Tolstoy has Pierre excuse his promise-breaking on the grounds that "all such 'words of honor' are conventional things with no definite meaning, especially if one considers that by tomorrow one may be dead," it is clear that the reader is meant to see right through this. We should not fall for Pierre's grandiose nihilism. And yet Tolstoy falls for his own. The reader of *Confession* can see clearly that Tolstoy closed the questions before ever opening them; that he is pretending at profundity even with his despair ("the truth was that life was meaningless"); that the deepest abyss is one he never allows himself to confront. But Tolstoy cannot see this. It is a commonplace that the self is a blind spot, and that we detect others' rationalizations more easily than our own, but behind this commonplace lies the troubling fact that each person routinely fails to confront the most important questions about their lives.

Fiction was a place where Tolstoy could dramatize, from a safe distance, his own brush with the meaninglessness of life. The Tolstoy problem haunts so much of Tolstoy's fiction: many of his characters confront the question, "What will become of my whole life?" His novella *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* is straightforwardly centered on the Tolstoy problem. It tells the tale of the collapse of Ivan's infrastructure of ideas in the face of the terrifying prospect of death. We will return to that novella, and some of Tolstoy's other fictionalizations of the Tolstoy problem, in the final chapter of this book; I draw attention to them here only to note the larger pattern, that Tolstoy was evidently fascinated with the Tolstoy problem, and that he had an easier time giving free rein to this fascination in fictional form.

We see through others' conceits more readily than our own, and there is even a profession—that of novelist—that capitalizes on this asymmetry. The Italian novelist Elena Ferrante hypothesizes that the writing of fiction prevents someone from employing the strategies of avoidance that we ordinarily use to get through our lives:

> To tolerate existence, we lie, and we lie above all to ourselves. Sometimes we tell ourselves lovely tales, sometimes petty lies. Falsehoods protect us, mitigate suffering, allow us to avoid the terrifying moment of serious reflection, they dilute the horrors of our time, they even save us from ourselves. Instead, when one writes one must never lie. In literary fiction you have to be sincere to the point where it's unbearable, where you suffer the emptiness of the pages.[31]

Ferrante finds in fiction a refuge from the lies: an opportunity to sincerely and directly address what must otherwise be skirted around. Many readers of fiction find in it a similarly liberating experience. All fiction offers up the possibility of escape from everyday life, but great fiction allows us to explore what we otherwise look away from. Books and movies offer opportunities to ponder the great questions about the meaning of marriage, of friendship, of career, of politics, of suffering—and, yes, also of life and death.

Fiction can make untimely questions askable—but only in relation to fictional characters. That is a serious limitation. We approach the lives of others with a kind of boldness that seems impossible for our own. When we come back to reality, and to the course of our own lives, we are, like Tolstoy, stuck "telling ourselves tales." When Ferrante describes "the terrifying moment of serious reflection," it is clear that she has confronted the Tolstoy problem.

Tolstoy laments: "How often I envied the peasants for their illiteracy and lack of education." William James accurately channels Tolstoy's combination of condescension and admiration toward the

peasantry: "Yet how believe as the common people believe, steeped as they are in grossest superstition? It is impossible,—but yet their life! their life! It is normal. It is happy! It is an answer to the question!"[32] The ideal, for Tolstoy, would be never having to confront the Tolstoy problem in the first place. Tolstoy held that reasoned thought is useless when it comes to the most fundamental problems. If Tolstoy were correct, the best course for those unlucky enough to cross paths with the Tolstoy problem might be to postpone and postpone, fifteen minutes at a time, until one runs out the clock.

Ferrante thinks that seriously reflecting on life is terrifying, and Tolstoy thinks that its logical conclusion is suicide. Both allow us, as readers, some access to the untimely questions that drive their fictional characters to waver so disastrously. Neither countenances the possibility of sincerely articulating and carefully examining the conceptual framework of one's own real, ongoing, life. In much the way that a painting presents us with a landscape but prevents us from entering it, novelists give us a view onto the promised land, but not more.

Socrates believed that "the unexamined life is not worth living for a human being,"[33] and that belief motivated him to make time for untimely questions. Whereas the nonphilosopher is "is always in a hurry when he is talking; he has to speak with one eye on the clock," the philosopher resists taking life fifteen minutes at a time: "He talks in peace and quiet, and his time is his own." Socrates says that "it does not matter to such people whether they talk for a day or a year, if only they may hit upon that which is."[34] Socrates thought that the Tolstoy problem could be solved.

VI. Unwavering Action

But why should we care whether we solve the Tolstoy problem? There is a tense moment toward the end of one dialogue where Socrates' interlocutor—a young visitor from Thessaly by the name of Meno—casts doubt on the value of inquiry. Why should we care

whether or not we can inquire into untimely questions? Socrates has to admit that even without inquiring, we are not wanting for answers to these questions. What makes a question untimely is precisely that it comes to us already answered. Socrates explains that by pursuing knowledge—which is to say, by seeking a solution to the Tolstoy problem—we *stabilize* those answers:

> Meno: That . . . makes me wonder, Socrates . . . why knowledge is prized far more highly than right opinion, and why they are different.
>
> Socrates: Do you know why you wonder, or shall I tell you?
>
> Meno: By all means tell me.
>
> Socrates: It is because you have paid no attention to the statues of Daedalus, but perhaps there are none in Thessaly.
>
> Meno: What do you have in mind when you say this?
>
> Socrates: That they too run away and escape if one does not tie them down but remain in place if tied down.
>
> Meno: So what?
>
> Socrates: To acquire an untied work of Daedalus is not worth much, like acquiring a runaway slave, for it does not remain, but it is worth much if tied down, for his works are very beautiful. What am I thinking of when I say this? True opinions. For true opinions, as long as they remain, are a fine thing and all they do is good, but they are not willing to remain long, and they escape from a man's mind, so that they are not worth much until one ties them down by (giving) an account of the reason why.[35]

Socrates is here distinguishing an opinion that one simply has from an opinion that is formed by way of an inquisitive process. When the

opinion is the conclusion of a process of inquiry, whose steps can in turn be retraced ("an account of the reason why"), our wavering stops. "After they are tied down, in the first place they become knowledge, and then they remain in place. That is why knowledge is prized higher than correct opinion, and knowledge differs from correct opinion in being tied down."[36] The thinking that we do in pursuit of an answer holds that answer fixed. Knowledge is simply the name for an answer that is the product of a completed inquiry into a question. Wavering, by contrast, is a sign that one has cut off an investigation before it came to a close—or that one never even opened it.

When it comes to untimely questions, the challenge is not simply to find answers. We can have those without inquiring. We can even have *true* answers ("right opinion") without inquiring. What inquiry gets us are answers that are both true and stable. When we have not really reasoned our way to a conclusion, it is easily reversed—especially under conditions of urgency. The preference for knowledge over mere "right opinion" is the preference for answers that have been stabilized by inquiry.

But why is stability—the avoidance of wavering—so important? I have said that human action differs from mere behavior through its conceptual infrastructure: action is based on ideas about what is good, ideas that supply the motivating goal of the action. The fact that you think those ideas are true is the only reason you are doing anything at all. The question is: How long will these ideas last? For how much time will you continue to think that they are true? If you are only trying to make it to the end of your action without being confronted by the fact that you have lost faith in the ideas underwriting it, then they might only need to last fifteen minutes or so. But in that case your action does not really have a conceptual infrastructure; it only appears to you that it does for the duration of the time during which you are acting. In retrospect—viewing the completed action from the standpoint of a time when you no longer hold the relevant idea—you would be forced to acknowledge there was no point to what you did.

Of course, you would only be forced into such an acknowledgment if, having wavered, you also chose to look back. If you confine your gaze—never looking back, never looking too far ahead, always only making it through the next fifteen minutes—you can avoid being confronted with evidence of your wavering. But suppose you succeed at this: you put one foot in front of another, over and over again, all the way to the end, which is to say, right up until the moment that your journey is cut off by death. What will you have achieved? The answer is that you will have maintained the appearance, to yourself and others, that your behavior has a conceptual infrastructure. It will seem to be true that all your various doings hang together, bound by some through-line that makes them intelligible as parts of a whole life. You will have put on a good show of being someone whose life is supported by ideas, someone who knows what they are doing.

But the only explanation for why a person would put on this show is that she wants it to be reality. Some part of her desperately wants to live a life that makes sense. The philosophical project springs from this desire. The inquiry into untimely questions is the search for a life that doesn't need to be shielded from reflection, a life you live *by* understanding it. Viewed in this light, "philosopher" is not the name of a profession. It is just a way—an especially open, direct and straightforward one—of being a person.

Chapter 2

Load-Bearing Answers

Socrates died by drinking hemlock. Before the city of Athens compelled him to drink it—an event dramatized in Plato's *Phaedo*—he awaited execution in a prison cell, and his friend Crito came to visit him. Crito offered to bribe the guards so as to help Socrates escape prison and death, and Socrates persuaded him that escaping would be wrong—their conversation is dramatized in another dialogue, the *Crito*. Before that happened, Socrates was convicted of impiety by an Athenian jury, and before he was convicted, he made a speech of self-defense, which is dramatized in the *Apology*. Before he visited the courtroom to defend himself, Socrates made an earlier visit to the same courtroom, to hear what his three accusers (Meletus, Anytus, and Lycon) charged him with; and before he arrived at the courtroom that first time—when he was standing just outside it—he ran into a religious prophet named Euthyphro, and they had a conversation about piety. This conversation, dramatized by Plato in the *Euthyphro*, is thus the first in a chain of dialogues that end in the death of Socrates.

Euthyphro has come to the courtroom to prosecute his own father for murder. If we would be surprised to hear a son announce such a plan, a contemporary of Euthyphro would have been shocked. Athenian law categorized murder as a crime against the family of the victim, not the state; in that respect, such a lawsuit resembles our civil cases more than our criminal ones, and it would normally only be brought on behalf of, not against, a family member. In fact, Euthyphro's is the only case of a son prosecuting his father that we know