

NIKOLAY MILKOV

THE MEANING OF LIFE:  
A TOPOLOGICAL APPROACH

1. OPENING

In his *Notebooks*, *Tractatus* and “Lecture on Ethics”, Wittgenstein suggested a new approach to the problems of philosophical anthropology. His task was to locate man’s place in the cosmos with scientific rigour. This project was something of an answer to Russell’s explorations on this theme in his essay “The Essence of Religion” (Russell 1912), but accomplished on a higher level of exactness. Indeed, after Wittgenstein read Russell’s paper, he criticised his teacher and friend in that the latter discussed in public themes which are too private, in a way that was far from being exact. In June 1916–January 1917, however, in his *Notebooks*, Wittgenstein developed an exact method of treating the same problems of philosophical anthropology which Russell discussed in 1912. In this essay I intend to show that what was new in Wittgenstein’s treatment of the problems of philosophical anthropology was the formal method of topology.

2. EVADING THE PROBLEM

The problem of the *meaning of life* is relatively new in philosophy. The first who openly began to speak about it – in the 1880s – was Leo Tolstoy.<sup>1</sup> That very fact already shows that this problem is not easy to identify. At the same time, in the last few decades we witnessed a dramatic increase of literature on the ‘meaning of life’. This legitimates the question: did that literature really address *the* very problem which was initially raised? I claim that the authors who wrote on the *meaning of life* in the last century systematically evaded the kernel of the problem in question – what I shall call below the *existential paradox*. In other words, many investigations on the *meaning of life* were in fact not such investigations at all.

To be more specific, under the rubric of the *meaning of life*, two usually quite different problems are discussed. Therefore, when we start to examine this theme, it is of utmost importance to set out what exact aspect of this theme we are going to discuss, and what remains without notice.

(1) Many philosophers merely try to set out what makes our everyday life meaningful, when life is meaningless, and how can we make it meaningful. Such discussions of the problem of the meaning of life were suggested in Sylvan and Griffin 1986, Wiggins 1987, Flanagan 1996, Kekes 2000, and in many other works. According to David Wiggins, for example, there is no one meaning of life that we can find, or discover. The meaning of life is to be constructed, or invented; we ourselves must create it. The meaning of life cannot come from outside. Unfortunately, when we are asked “What is the meaning of life?”, “we bewitch ourselves to think we are looking for some one thing like the Garden of Hesperides, [or] the Holy Grail” (Wiggins 1987, p. 136).

This is, apparently, an anti-realistic solution of the problem of the *purpose of life* – called misleadingly the *meaning of life* – in the wake of Michael Dummett’s anti-realistic philosophy of language. It claims that we cannot find the object under analysis in reality; we must rather construct it. Another anti-realist, Owen Flanagan, discussing the “meaning of life”, claims: “Life’s meaning comes, if it does come, from having chances to express and carry through on projects that matter, that have value and worth, first and third personally” (Flanagan 1996, p. viii). We create our life, with all its meaning; we are the constructors of our narrative. Specifically, we create our “I”, telling stories about it. We, as persons, are nothing but centres of narrative gravity.

(2) Another group of philosophers – Karl Jaspers, Thomas Nagel, Ernst Tugendhat, among them – following the old existentialist tradition, have connected the problem of the meaning of life with the absurd.<sup>2</sup> Now, as Thomas Nagel has noted, the absurdity of life is difficult to articulate. Despite the fact that “most people feel on occasion that life is absurd, ... they *could* not really explain why life is absurd” (Nagel 1971, p. 13). Usually – a notorious example here is Blaise Pascal – they refer to the fact that we are but tiny specks in the infinite vastness of the universe.<sup>3</sup> The importance of the problem of the absurd results from the fact that an experience of it makes life profoundly meaningless.

Unfortunately, philosophers who discuss the absurd scarcely treat it in clear-cut terms. A typical example in this respect is Karl Jaspers. According to this author, absurdity emerges most often in extreme situations: fight, contingency, death, guilt. These are “borderline situations” (*Grenzsituationen*) in which we lose the “hold that [usually] supports every experience and every thought” (Jaspers 1919, p. 229).

This, of course, is not an exact definition of the absurd. Indeed, Jaspers’s *Grenzsituationen* are complex situations which, as just seen, can be defined

in at least four different ways. In contrast, in this paper I am going to show that absurdity has a simple (not complex) structure.

### 3. THE ROOTS OF THE PROBLEM OF THE MEANING OF LIFE: THE EXISTENTIAL PARADOX

Another sloppiness apparent in Jaspers's understanding of the absurd is that we do not lose our hold on life in the face of extreme situations only. In truth, we have our most intensive experiences of the absurd when we are not faced with, what he calls, borderline situations.

This can be illustrated through the experience that Count Leo Tolstoy (b. 1828) had in the first days of September 1869,<sup>4</sup> when he was 41. Soon after he finished *War and Peace*, Tolstoy decided to buy a new property in the Penza region. One day, when travelling with this intention, he stayed for a night in Arzamas, a small town some 800 km east of Moscow. Suddenly, at two o'clock a.m., he awoke with a strong feeling of horror, unknown to him before. Here is the description of this experience as told fifteen years later in his unfinished, and unpublished in his lifetime, story "Memoirs of a Madman":

When I awoke, there was nobody in the room. ... I have gone to the corridor, wanting to escape from what tormented me. But it came with me and shadowed everything. I was even more horrified now than before. "But what folly is this?" I told myself. "Why am I depressed? What am I frightened of?" – "Of me," answered the voice of Death. "I am here!" A fit of chill has gone onto my skin. Yes, of the death. She comes, she is here, but she must not be. If the death would be really before me, I wouldn't experience the same that I experienced when I am afraid of her. But now I was not afraid of her; rather, I saw, I felt that the death is coming, and in the same time felt that she must not be. My whole essence felt the need, the right to live, and in the same time the triumph of death. And this inner split was horrible. (Tolstoy 1884, p. 469)

Apparently, the kernel of this experience was the clash of two mutually exclusive beliefs in one mind. According to another description, Tolstoy felt that night that "there is nothing in life but death, *but it must not be like this.*" (Shklovsky 1967, p. 315; my italics). These two beliefs were felt to be absolutely true – they were seen in the mental eye with the best possible clarity – and at the same time to contradict in most severe ways. I shall call the clash of these beliefs the *existential paradox*. The "must" here comes from the conviction that we are eternal (this is our "hold" in life of which Jaspers spoke). This conviction makes the mundane purposes we follow in life (for example, buying new property) of ultimate importance: they are something *necessary*.<sup>5</sup> Faced with the Nothingness that we experience when we contemplate the existential paradox, these purposes lose their point.

I shall note here that at the age of 41, Tolstoy had already experienced extreme, life-threatening situations and was subdued to mortal anguish many times. Indeed, in 1848–52 he performed military service on the Caucasus (Chechnya) where he fought against the rebels. During the Crimean War 1853–5 he worked as a military journalist at the foremost front. He also took part in bear-hunting many times and was even wounded by a bear. At no time, however, did he experience such a *disgusting* horror as that night in Arzamas. Now, Tolstoy described it as something like a mental giddiness.<sup>6,7</sup> But he also noted that, unexpectedly, the next day all these troubles were forgotten. Tolstoy continued to pursue his quotidian agenda – among other things, he bought the new property. Some weeks later, however, the same troubles appeared all of a sudden again, in a milder form though. Despite this, Leo Tolstoy continued his literary career in the years to come in a brilliant way. Indeed, he wrote and published *Anna Karenina* after this incident (in 1876–7). His conversion to religious-philosophical themes took place some ten years after his Arzamas experience: around 1879.

This story gives us ground to make the following preliminary conclusion. Most often, we experience the existential paradox without warning. As a rule, this experience does not leave immediate traces on us. The traces that it leaves are long-term – the *perfect* knowledge that all our “very important” mundane purposes are *totally* vain. Usually, people react to such experience later, and differently. Some go to a monastery, others undergo another kind of radical conversion. Still others – the vast majority – continue their habitual lives, but with this new knowledge in the background.

Typically, the sudden experience of the existential paradox occurs after sleep. Apparently, the reason for this is that in waking life, we are occupied with reacting to stimuli we receive from the real environment: to the necessity (ἡ ἀνάγκη) of reality (cf. Freud 1916, Ch. 5). When sleeping, in contrast, we follow the narrative of the dream. It is in short-term sleep, however, that we are bared of all distractions – of both reality and of dreams – and so can see the whole truth about our place in the universe.<sup>8</sup>

A very important point is that the absurdity of the existential paradox is experienced quite seldom;<sup>9</sup> for example, Leo Tolstoy experienced it, in this intensity, only once. As a result, it is very difficult to identify it. It is also difficult to contemplate it when we decide to investigate it theoretically: this is a slippery experience. The problem of those philosophers who write on the absurd is that they cannot reconstruct what *exactly* the experience of the absurd is. In their academic thought-experiments they

usually only remind themselves of a part of the problem.<sup>10</sup> This point explains why those philosophers who discuss the absurd theoretically, in fact do not have in mind exactly *this* most important experience, which lies at the bottom of the problem of the meaning of life, but something similar to it – for example, Jaspers' *Grenzsituationen*, or Sartre's world teaming with naked existences.

#### 4. THE LOGICAL STRUCTURE OF EXISTENTIAL ANGST

In the last section, I noted that the feeling of the absurd is caused by a crystal-clear picture in our mental eye of the complete truth of two facts which are absolutely contradictory. This implies that the existential paradox is only a kind of philosophical paradox which, similar to most philosophical paradoxes, is of a purely logical nature.<sup>11</sup> My claim here is that, even if that paradox cannot be solved, the logic of its structure can be laid down in a clear form. Indeed, in what follows in this section, I shall try to articulate the specific logic of the existential paradox in more detail.

Now, my opening guess is that absurdity is a state of intellectual giddiness, similar to that described by Wittgenstein in his *Philosophical Investigations* (see Wittgenstein 1953, § 412). To remind the reader, in this section Wittgenstein sets out that we face intellectual giddiness when we contemplate the problem of how the mind is connected with the brain.<sup>12</sup> But what are the specific logical and epistemological grounds of the absurd?

According to Wittgenstein's Tractarian epistemology, people make pictures of reality: they cognize (*erkennen*) the facts of the world. What they cognize is, more precisely, how the objects of the world hang together one to another: that is what knowledge consists of.

Not only this, however. Knowledge is also linked to emotions. This point is connected with the fact that knowledge actually consists in affirming some of the pictures of reality that we perceive as true, and in denying others as false. Now, this affirming and denying is also emotionally laden. The emotional side of our cognitive life finds expression in the fact that we *strive* to know (Aristotle, *Met.*, 980a). The same point was articulated by Wittgenstein: "We are happy through the life of knowledge – in spite of the misery of the world." (Wittgenstein 1961, p. 81) This means that the very fact that we cognize things, facts, and events makes us happy (of course, to this happiness can be added the misery of the facts we cognize).

Now, the logic of the existential paradox can be described just so: when experiencing existential absurdity, our intrinsically affirmative knowledge is faced with the fact that its source – my person – will perish. This is a self-referential paradox that stirs the mental giddiness in us when we realize it.

Let's try to put this point in other words. We as persons are something like machines for picture-producing, for knowing – for emotionally underpinned knowing, or machines for cognitive affirming. When experiencing the existential paradox, our self-referential awareness as knowledge-producing machines contradicts the knowledge that I – the source of knowledge – will perish. Exactly that contradiction gives rise to the existential absurdity – to the strong feeling that our life is absurd.<sup>13</sup>

Some authors argue that life is absurd not simply because it lasts seventy years; it would be also absurd “if it lasted through eternity” (Nagel 1971, p. 12). Unfortunately, common sense says – with Woody Allen – something different: what is important is not to die.<sup>14</sup> Here I agree with common sense and claim that philosophers who defend the view that even eternal, and necessary, life is *intrinsically* absurd, take their arguments from accidental reasons. In particular, Bernard Williams refers to the case of Karel Čapek's character Elina Macropulos, who is 342 years old.<sup>15</sup> She had lost all her friends, the ability to enjoy tennis, *la belle cuisine*, etc. The consequences: “Her unending life has come to a state of boredom, indifference and coldness” (Williams 1973, p. 82). For her death is not an absurd option; it is a welcome event.

My answer to this argument is that we can *imagine* the following case: a person who is 342 years old and who leads (including physically) such a form of life that she doesn't lose her interest in sports, making friends, and other meaning-creating activities. She recurrently rejuvenates, sets her practical interests and aims anew, etc. I am sure that even this person, if in clear consciousness and in moral and physical health, can experience the same existential paradox which Tolstoy experienced in Arzamas. My conclusion: you cannot beat logic with natural arguments. At the most, you change the subject this way: e.g., instead of speaking about the existential paradox, you can start speaking about the problems which old, or annoyed, or sick people face in life.

##### 5. TOPOLOGY OF EXISTENCE

Until now I have only tried to outline the problem of the meaning of life. What remains to be done is to solve it: to find a solution to the existential paradox.

Such a solution was advanced by Wittgenstein. According to his topology of persons, there are three meanings of “subject”: empirical, metaphysical, and willing, which, at least in theory, must be kept separate.

(1) There is no *empirical subject*, i.e., a knowing subject of flesh and blood. Such a subject does not pertain to the facts of the world. Empirical subjects are a transcendental illusion. Instead, there is an *epistemological subject* which has the character of a point. As a matter of fact, “this is exactly like the case of the eye and the visual field. But really you do *not* see the eye. And nothing *in the visual field* allows you to infer that it is seen by an eye” (Wittgenstein 1922, 5.633). In the same way, we experience the facts of the world without being one of these facts – when knowing, we do not experience ourselves as empirical subjects. But we are one of the points of the world.

This way of seeing the subject is a form of radical realism. It claims that the world is the totality of facts – “The world I found” (Wittgenstein 1961, p. 49) – which the subject experiences, and nothing beyond it. By the way, Wittgenstein’s motive for accepting this view was his attempt to exclude the *a priori* (the subject, in this case) from philosophical psychology. In logic, he excluded the *a priori* by eliminating logical objects, of any form.

But why are we susceptible to this transcendental illusion: the empirical self? Apparently, it “occurs because a person does not have to *think* his identity – [s]he *lives* it.<sup>16</sup> Of course, one needs criteria of other people’s identities, but not, it seems, of one’s own” (Pears 1996, p. 126; italics mine). The philosopher, however, leads an examined life; she reflects upon her identity as a subject. In short: lay people accept that their empirical subject exists. This belief, however, is false, and the true philosopher realizes that upon reflection.

(2) Intrinsically connected with the meaning of life is the *metaphysical subject*. (i) This is the subject of values and purposes. *She* brings *meaning* into life; that is why she is also called metaphysical. It is this subject that experiences existential absurdity. At that, the absurdity is always related to the (pseudo) empirical person: indeed, we fear the death of our body. Now, Wittgenstein wards off the absurd by accepting that the metaphysical subject does not lie on the plane of ideas (pictures), which the supposed empirical subject experiences. Rather, it is its boundary. We can illustrate this boundary on the example of happy people and unhappy people. Often they experience the same facts of the world, but in a different way, with a different attitude, which expands, or, respectively, contracts, the

boundary of the world. In a word, the attitude to the world sets out the boundary of the world.<sup>17</sup>

(ii) The epistemological subject, which we have already mentioned in (1), can also be seen as a metaphysical subject. Being a point, however, she is the inner boundary of the subject – as different from the outer metaphysical subject (or the pure metaphysical subject) which is connected with the meaning of life. Incidentally, the relation between the epistemological and the pure metaphysical subjects, as two forms of the metaphysical subject *per se*, is similar to that of the contradiction and tautology in Wittgenstein's Tractarian logic. "Contradiction is the outer limit of propositions: tautology is the unsubstantial point at the centre" (Wittgenstein 1922, 5.143).

(3) The *willing subject* is the source of acting, of cognitive acting, i.e., she is the source of knowledge. It neither lies on the plane of ideas, nor on its (outer) boundary. Nevertheless, its *effects* are to be seen both on the plane of ideas, as well as on its boundary – in the metaphysical subject: indeed, it is the will that makes the world meaningful/meaningless. How this?

In order to answer this question, we must outline the specific structure of the willing subject. Above all, (i) the will is an attitude to the world – to the facts in it. That is why the will is neither an extenseless point (like the epistemological subject), nor does it lie on the outer boundary of facts (like the pure metaphysical subject). She is also not another fact, or point, or surface, which lies among the facts and objects of the world, like the epistemological or the quasi empirical subject. However, she determines the form and the dimension of the outer boundary of facts. It, more precisely, settles which facts are included in the horizon of the subject and which are not.

Further, (ii) a main characteristic of the will is that it communicates the feeling of "mine". Now, it is *this* feeling that brings with itself *life-meaning*. "Things acquire 'significance' only through their relation to my will" (Wittgenstein 1961, p. 84). But where does this "significance", or meaning, come from?

My answer to this question is not topological but more widely geometrical, and is thoroughly in the spirit of the early Wittgenstein. Above all, meanings and values are connected with the plurality of the world: with the empirical fact that the world has different geometrical places, or, more precisely, *points* in space. The existential paradox is a consequence of the fact that – as Helmut Plessner has pointed out – on the evolutionary scale, starting with the animals (in contrast to plants), the biological units

are *centred* around one such point. As different from animals, however, subjects reflect – they are *eccentric*. This makes human knowledge self-referential. Indeed, while animals have experience only, humans experience this experience (see Plessner 1928, p. 18).

Pure metaphysical subjects emerge this way; they are attached to empirical and epistemological subjects – with the help of the will – as attitude to them. “My will fastens on to the world somewhere, and does not fasten on to other things” (Wittgenstein 1961, p. 88). This “somewhere” is me as a geometrically defined empirical/epistemological subject.

Through this complex structure of the subject, the *world will* (to be discussed in § 7) receives different biographies. To put this in conventional terms: different empirical subjects follow in life their specific trajectories. This fact is conditioned by biological, geographic, and social factors: specific place and time of birth, social, cultural and biological environment, etc. These different biographies make us to believe that our essence (soul/will) is qualitatively different from that of all other persons. In consequence, we embrace solipsistic beliefs. In truth, however, we are identical with the one and the same world will or world soul (these latter are identical too; and here we anticipate the subject of § 7 again). In a sense, we are the world soul. Being the (whole) world soul, however – in the course of our life – we become local patriots of our empirical history. As a result, we start to love ourselves more than anything else in the world.<sup>18</sup> This fundamental importance of the self caused Wittgenstein to exclaim: “If suicide is allowed then everything is allowed” (Wittgenstein 1961, p. 91).

#### 6. COMMENTARY

If we embrace this topology of persons, we shall see that there is only one real subject and this is the willing subject. She determines the metaphysical subject which is the outer boundary of the world – the horizon of the empirical subject – and so does not lie in the world of facts. From here it follows that no event in real life (in, what Wittgenstein calls, the *world of ideas*) can harm us. Indeed, the facts in the world are not good or evil. “Whoever realizes this will not want to produce a pre-eminent place for his own body or for the human body. He will regard humans and beasts quite naively as objects which are similar and which belong together.”<sup>19</sup> (*ibid.*, p. 82) He will also not regard himself as qualitatively different from other humans. The solipsist, in contrast, believes that “I am qualitatively different from all other persons – I am the world.”

We see here once again that the existential paradox, as experienced by Tolstoy in his hotel room in Arzamas in 1869, was a transcendental illusion. Further, Wittgenstein's method of tracing the boundaries of logic and of the world was introduced as quasi "taming" logical objects and the empirical subject. In the sphere of philosophical anthropology, the aim of this manoeuvre was to make the subject one-dimensional, so that she cannot look at herself from a point that lies beyond her. Wittgenstein embraced this approach in an attempt to evade cases of self-reference of person's knowledge, including cases of existential paradox.<sup>20</sup>

This is a clear topological solution of the existential problems of the person. It is true that Karl Jaspers' theory of person is *prima facie* topological too: indeed, it speaks of "borderline situations and experiences". Unfortunately, "borderline experience" means to Jaspers experience in which we are deprived from that hold which we have by every "inner" experience. In contrast, Wittgenstein's "limit of the world" aims at putting aspects of the person on different planes and surfaces.

Some readers would find that this solution of the existential paradox refers to construction of persons, and, in this way, contradicts my criticism of the constructivist (anti-realist) theories of meaning of life laid out in § 2, (1). Indeed, Wittgenstein claimed that a person, as we know her in life, consists of three (plus one) subjects which are – at least in theory – to be kept separate. In fact, however, there is a substantial difference between them. While Wittgenstein's theory was analytic, the anti-realists' conception of the meaning of life is synthetic. Wittgenstein's strategy was to find out how persons are constructed in order to analyse them to their elements, demonstrating in this way that their complexity creates transcendental illusion in the form of the existential paradox. The anti-realists, by contrast, try to show that the meaning of life is a positive, complex construction.

#### 7. SOLIPSISM, WORLD SOUL, WORLD WILL

Our discussion above has shown that persons know the world, being geometrically fixed *points*. This explains (1) why, traditionally, the soul, which parallels the person in philosophy of religion (no person without a soul!), is conceived as *simple*. (2) This nature of persons also explains why Wittgenstein defines life itself referring to the uniqueness of my life (indeed, points are unique, even when they are numerically identical): my life is a consciousness of the uniqueness of my life. From this consciousness, our solipsistic intuition emerges: the intuition that only I exist. Its

effect is the striving for religion, science, and art.<sup>21</sup> The hope is that our achievements in these realms would affirm our *domination* – in expression – over the world.<sup>22</sup>

Some additional remarks on this point are in order here. We have already seen that according to Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, the world is a sum of facts (or of ideas, pictures), the value of which is one and the same: there are no lows and downs in it. One implication of this position is that all epistemological subjects relate to *one and the same* world (this, by the way, makes scientific, public, etc. discourse possible). We all believe – correctly – in one and the same world, about which we think and speak. That is why solipsism *in the world* – as a truth about the world – is wrong.

Yes, we are *all* something of solipsists. We all believe that, in a sense, “I am *the* true person, and that other human beings are not persons in exactly *this* sense in which I am – not really.” That belief of ours, however, contradicts the fact that we, as empirical subjects, are nothing. This means that we cannot express (articulate) our solipsism, or, more precisely, our solipsistic intuition, in a logically impeccable form. But we nevertheless understand (and mean) it, and what we mean with it is correct: “[W]hat the solipsist *means* is quite correct; only it cannot be *said*, but makes itself manifest” (Wittgenstein 1922, 5.62).

What is more, in the same way in which the world is one for all subjects, the will is also one: the will of every one of us is part and parcel of the world will, and every one of us experiences the world will as her own will (Wittgenstein 1961, p. 85). And that's not the whole story. As a matter of fact, the will is nothing but the soul. This also explains why there is one world soul, or *anima mundi* “which I for preference call *my* soul” (p. 49). Wittgenstein also expressed this point with the words: “Man *is* the microcosm: I am my world” (p. 84). In contrast to similar conceptions of Plato,<sup>23</sup> Plotinus,<sup>24</sup> Spinoza,<sup>25</sup> Tolstoy,<sup>26</sup> and Robert Nozick,<sup>27</sup> however, Wittgenstein's particular souls are not *parts* of this world soul that return to it after the death, or in a moment of insight;<sup>28</sup> they are *identical* with it. This treatment of the relation between microcosm and macrocosm is unique in the history of philosophy, and it differs radically from the shaky position of all other philosophers who try to solve the existential paradox in terms of some *mereological* relation of the person to the world soul. This latter position is shaky because it fails to notice that there is no necessary directed relation from the world soul to the person, which conveys meaning to her life.<sup>29</sup> This, however, is not true for Wittgenstein's philosophical anthropology, which is not grounded on

a mereological relation of persons to the world soul but on their effective identity.

#### 8. LIFE WITHOUT ANGST, MEANINGFUL LIFE

Two implications can be made from these deliberations, depending on how we react to the existential paradox; immediately or long-term.

(1) *Immediate reaction to borderline situations.* If we realize how human personality is made, we can further take steps to free ourselves from anguish before the upcoming death. We have already seen that (i) what is absent in such a vision of the person is our empirical subject; (ii) we know that our pure metaphysical and epistemological subjects do not pertain to the empirical world but are rather parts of its boundary; and that (iii) our willing subject is not connected with the facts of reality but is rather an attitude to it. Of course, similar to many conventional illusions, we cannot avoid being trapped in the existential paradox – in what was called “vegetative angst of the death” (the angst people experience in a plane in flames, or in a car falling in an abyss) (see Tugendhat 2001, p. 70). When we are so trapped, however, we *can* remember that it is an illusion and we can further make efforts to find ways out of it. I said “can” since this is a practical, not theoretical, task.

We find the best example of a philosopher’s *sang-froid* in the face of extreme situations in Wittgenstein’s war-time *Notebooks*, which describes his experience of baptism by fire on June 4–6, 1916, when he was confronted with a most likely death for the first time:

In permanent life threat. The night was, thanks to God, rather calm. Time and again I experience severe forms of anguish. This is the school of the false understanding of life.<sup>30</sup> (Wittgenstein 1991, p. 70)

In the time of welfare, we don’t think of the weakness of the flesh; when we, however, reflect in times of need, it comes into our consciousness. And we address the spirit. ... I do not stop to say in my spirit the words of Tolstoy: “Man is weak in flesh, but free through his spirit.” (*ibid.*, p. 21)

The person is free through her spirit because she renounces any influence on the happenings of her life. She does not live in time but in the present, and is in this way happy. And “a man who is happy has no fear. Not even in face of death” (Wittgenstein 1961, p. 74).

When I compare this solution of the absurdity of life of Tolstoy–Wittgenstein to Thomas Nagel’s *irony* (see Nagel 1971, pp. 20, 23), or Albert Camus’ *scorn* (see Camus 1942, p. 90) in the face of death, I find

the latter not convincing.<sup>31</sup> They are all too romantic and so incompatible with the sober spirit of exact philosophy.

I do remember, of course, that there are many other non-philosophical techniques which help to diminish, or even to eliminate, the vegetative fear of death. Such techniques are in possession of the kamikaze pilots, for example, or of other war heroes. Be this as it may, it is a matter of fact that Wittgenstein's performance at the front was qualitatively different from the performance of his comrades. He was the person who retained composure in critical situations, and helped the soldiers of his unit to preserve countenance – a performance for which he was decorated with high military honours.

(2) *Meaningful Life; the Purpose of Life*. But how are we to change our life in the long term? Well, we must find the right attitude towards life; this means that we must simply live happy and in harmony. That is the life which sees the world (its facts) *sub specie aeternitatis*, as a limited whole, beyond time. Opposed to it is the life which sees the world from within – together with all particular objects.

This also means: “The man is fulfilling the purpose of existence who no longer needs to have any purpose except to live. That is to say, who is content” (Wittgenstein 1961, p. 73). In contrast, when we strive to achieve some particular “high” purpose, including riches, or fame, we lose the simplicity of the problem-free life. Conclusion: We must live a “life that can renounce the amenities of the world. To it the amenities of the world are so many graces of fate” (*ibid.*, p. 81).

This idea of the purpose of life is close to that of Tolstoy. Indeed, the main idea of his famous short story “The Death of Ivan Il'ich” is that what makes the end of our life unbearable is our fixation on our property and other amenities of life: on what we conventionally consider our “achievements”. It is the loss of these *goods* that makes the thought of the end of our life unbearable. If, however, we profoundly dissociate ourselves from these particular objects, and if we also concentrate on our belonging to the community of all men (not only of our relatives, nation, or race), a community which is a part of God himself, then death ceases to be horrific and paradoxical.

Thomas Nagel, in contrast, defines death as evil “because it brings to end all the goods that life contains” (Nagel 1970, pp. 1–2). Death also deprives us of many possibilities of life. It is a matter of fact, however, that these possibilities are so multifarious that, also when alive, we make use of only a very small fraction of them. We lose innumerable possible

goods also when alive and active. This point shows Nagel's argument to be inconsistent.

#### 9. EPILOGUE

In this final section I shall recapitulate the results I reached in this essay. In his early philosophical writings Wittgenstein advanced a new approach to the problems of philosophical anthropology. It was based on the apparatus of topology and the more wide resources of geometry. This approach helped him to develop an exact philosophy of human personality and in particular of the absurd side of life.

I found out that the feeling that life is absurd comes from the existential paradox: from realizing two strongly contradictory truths about our existence, that our prime action as persons is to cognize, and that we eventually cognize that this cognizing has an end. From a logical point of view, this is nothing but a case of the self-referential paradox. Further, I found that this paradox is very difficult to contemplate so that most philosophers who write on the absurd failed to get hold of the proper subject per se.

Wittgenstein solved this paradox by showing that in persons there are three different subjects: empirical, metaphysical (plus epistemological) and volitional. Analysing them, he showed that: (1) There is no empirical subject; it is rather an illusion. (2) The metaphysical subject is merely the outer boundary of the empirical subject. She expounds or contracts depending on the (3) volitional subject which is nothing but our attitude to the world. Further, (2a) the inner side of the metaphysical subject is the knowing, epistemological subject, who has the character of a point. Wittgenstein also demonstrated that the existential paradox is a transcendental illusion which results from the confusion of these three (plus one) subjects, or of the relation between them. His positive philosophy of person claimed that persons are not parts of, but are rather identical with, the world soul. This latter point resolved the existential paradox.

This solution has two practical implications. When caught in *Grenzsituationen*, we must try to find our identity with the world soul. In the long term, we shall simply live our life happily, without setting transcendental objectives. In this way we shall "fulfil the purpose of existence."

*University of Bielefeld*

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Before that, philosophers used to talk about the purpose of life, or of what makes life meaningful. For an alternate view see Gerhardt 1995.
- <sup>2</sup> See also Nozick 1981, p. 582.
- <sup>3</sup> “What is the [place of] man in nature? Nothing in respect to infinity, everything in respect to nothing” (Pascal 1669, p. 136).
- <sup>4</sup> This is documented in a letter from Tolstoy to his wife Sonya (Sofia) on September 4, 1869.
- <sup>5</sup> The lack of necessity of our existence vexed Sartre; he described it in his *La Nausée* (see Sartre 1938, p. 152). Blaise Pascal described it so: “We are burning of desire to find a solid platform and final and constant footing [of our existence] in order to build a tower that reaches the infinity. But our footing cracks, and the earth opens in abyss” (Pascal 1669, p. 139).
- <sup>6</sup> “There was a horror, horror similar to that before vomiting, but mental horror. Terrible, horrible; it seemed that death is horrible, but if I thought of life, it was the dying life that was horrible. As if life and death were melting together into one. Something was braking my soul, but cannot brake it” (Tolstoy 1884, p. 470).
- <sup>7</sup> Similar to (Sartre’s) Antoine Roquentin’s *nausée* which was *prima facie* caused not by the existential paradox but rather by wondering at the innumerable “existences” (i.e. data) of the world. I cannot escape the feeling, however, that what Sartre meant in *La Nausée* (Sartre 1938, pp. 150 ff.) was the same existential paradox described by Tolstoy, simply set out in another perspective. Indeed, his problem was that the data are contingent, not necessary; they could fail to exist. Antoine Roquentin’s nauseating insight was that the existence, of any object, is not grounded; and in the same time that the existence, as such, is of absolute necessity. Consequently, we, as existents, too, are both absolutely necessary, and at the same time are not.
- <sup>8</sup> In fact, this point also lies at the centre of the attention of the anti-realist (or constructivist) philosophers of the “meaning of life”. Unfortunately, they accept that distraction from the existential paradox is its solution. In answer to their acceptance that it is true that the problem of the meaning of life disappears when we construct convincing narratives about ourselves. This, however, happens only because the problem is evaded, not because it is solved.
- <sup>9</sup> Cf. with Bertrand Russell’s claim that we contemplate the true subject-matter of philosophical logic “once in six months for half a minute” (Russell 1956, p. 185).
- <sup>10</sup> Here we must have in mind that even such a pure genius of the narrative as Leo Tolstoy, a man who was famous for his ability to describe any situation or event in just a few words, apparently failed to communicate the horror of his experience in its authentic form simply because he tried to put it in words fifteen years after he actually experienced it.
- <sup>11</sup> Incidentally, philosophers readily agree that existential paradox has a structure similar to some logical, or epistemological paradoxes (see Nozick 1981, p. 603; Nagel 1986, p. 218; Wiggins 1987, p. 128).
- <sup>12</sup> Jaspers too connects the *Grenzsituationen* with the paradox of the mind–body relation (see Jaspers 1919, p. 230).
- <sup>13</sup> This point was expressed in *practical* terms – and so, not in a clear and distinct form – by Thomas Nagel: “We cannot live human lives without energy and attention, nor without making choices which show that we take some things more seriously than others. Yet we have always available a point of view outside the particular form of our lives, from which the seriousness appears gratuitous. These two inescapable viewpoints collide in us, and that is what makes life absurd” (Nagel 1971, p. 14). Some fifteen years later Nagel suggested a new

– unsatisfactory again – definition of the absurd in terms of a conflict between two *perspectives* on our life: inner (personal), and outer (realistic): “The sense of the absurd is just a perception of the limits of this effort, reached when we ascend higher on the transcendental ladder than our merely human individuality can follow, even with the help of considerable readjustment” (Nagel 1986, p. 221).

<sup>14</sup> Here I mean the saying: “I don’t want to achieve immortality through my work. I want to achieve it through not dying,” which is attributed to Woody Allen.

<sup>15</sup> See Čapek 1922.

<sup>16</sup> She lives her identity, woven up from her narratives, exactly as described by the anti-realist philosophers of the meaning of life (e.g., Owen Flanagan). This point shows that the anti-realist’s argument over the meaning of life is based on a transcendental illusion.

<sup>17</sup> Incidentally, this conception of a metaphysical subject parallels Wittgenstein’s understanding of logic. In the same way in which the empirical world has its boundaries, logic has its boundaries too. Moreover, the two boundaries are, in a sense, identical. The boundaries of my world are also the boundaries of my language. The point is that what is expressed in language is nothing but how things relate to one another in the states of affairs, and also how the states of affairs relate to one another. And since the sum of all things and states of affairs has a boundary, language has a boundary too.

<sup>18</sup> See on this Frankfurt 1999. This is the famous *amour de soi* of which Jean-Jacques Rousseau already spoke.

<sup>19</sup> This point has important implications for the philosophy of animals.

<sup>20</sup> This method has been seen as “an example of Wittgenstein’s tendency always to transcend a problem. He attempts, *modo suo*, to dissolve it by moving to a higher level” (McGuinness 2001, p. 3).

<sup>21</sup> “Only from the consciousness of the *uniqueness of my life* arises religion – science – art. And this consciousness is life itself” (Wittgenstein 1961, p. 79).

<sup>22</sup> This Nietzschean theme will be the subject of another paper of mine.

<sup>23</sup> See Plato, *Philebus* 30a5–6.

<sup>24</sup> See Plotinus 1964, pp. 127 f.

<sup>25</sup> See Spinoza 1677.

<sup>26</sup> On Tolstoy’s identification of persons with the world-soul see Milkov 2004, III, § 3.

<sup>27</sup> See Nozick 1981.

<sup>28</sup> This conception is also held, for example, by Hindu philosophy. The world soul (*Brahman*) regularly (in millions of cases!) transforms into particular souls (*Atman*), which after their death return to the world soul. See on this Cornish 1998, pp. 250 f.

<sup>29</sup> This argument was first formulated in Sylvan and Griffin 1986, § 4.

<sup>30</sup> The expressions “true life” and “false life” play a central role in Leo Tolstoy’s interpretation of the *New Testament*. See Tolstoy 1881, Ch. 5 and 6; pp. 847 ff., 860 ff. This point reveals a trace of influence of Leo Tolstoy’s philosophy of life on that of Wittgenstein, discussed in Milkov 2003.

<sup>31</sup> In 1986 Nagel admits: “[T]here is no credible way of eliminating the inner conflict” between inner and outer perspectives on human person. (Nagel 1986, p. 221)

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Translated by Justin O’Brien. New York: Vintage, 1959 (1st ed. 1942).

- Cornish, Kimberley. *Der Jude aus Linz: Hitler und Wittgenstein*. A. Johansen (üb.). Berlin: Ullstein, 1998.
- Čapek, Karel. "Věc Makropulos." In *Spisy*, vol. 7. Praha: Český spisovatel, 1992 (1st ed. 1922), pp. 179–259.
- Flanagan, Owen. *Self Expressions: Mind, Morals, and the Meaning of Life*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- Frankfurt, Harry. *Necessity, Volition, and Love*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Freud, Sigmund. *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*. Translated by J. Riviere. New York: Pocket Books, 1958 (1st ed. 1916).
- Gerhardt, Volker. "Der Sinn des Lebens." In *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, vol. 9. Basel: Schwabe & Co., 1995, pp. 815–824.
- Jaspers, Karl. *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen*. München: Piper, 1985 (1st ed. 1919).
- Kekes, John. "The Meaning of Life." *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 24 (2000): 17–34.
- McGuinness, Brian. "'Solipsism' in the *Tractatus*." In D. Charles and W. Child (eds.), *Wittgensteinian Themes: Essays in Honour of David Pears*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, pp. 1–11.
- Milkov, Nikolay. "Tolstoi und Wittgenstein: Einfluss und Ähnlichkeiten." *Prima philosophia* 16 (2003): 187–206.
- . "Leo Tolstois Darlegung des Evangelium und seine theologisch-philosophische Ethik." *Perspektiven der Philosophie. Neues Jahrbuch*, 30 (2004) (to appear).
- Nagel, Thomas. "Death," 1970, in 1979, pp. 1–10.
- . "The Absurd," 1971, in 1979, pp. 11–23.
- . *Mortal Questions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979.
- . "Birth, Death, and the Meaning of Life," in *The View From Nowhere*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986, pp. 208–31.
- Nozick, Robert. "Philosophy and the Meaning of Life," in *Philosophical Explanations*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981, pp. 571–647.
- Pascal, Blaise. *La Pensées*. Edited by Luis Lafuma. Paris: Seuil, 1952 (1st ed. 1669).
- Pears, David. "The Originality of Wittgenstein's Investigations of Solipsism." *European Journal of Philosophy*, 4 (1996): 124–136.
- Plessner, Helmut. *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch*. Berlin: de Gruyter, 1928.
- Plotinus. *The Essential Plotinus*. Edited and translated by Elmer O'Brien. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1964.
- Russell, Bertrand. "The Essence of Religion," in *The Basic Writings of Bertrand Russell*, R. E. Egner and L. E. Denonn (eds.). London: Allen & Unwin, 1963, pp. 565–76 (1st published 1912).
- . *Logic and Knowledge. Essays 1901–1950*. Edited by R. C. Marsh. London: Kegan Paul, 1956.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. *La nausée*, in *Œuvres romanesque*. Paris: Gallimard, 1981 (1st ed. 1938).
- Shklovsky, Victor. *Lev Tolstoi*. Moscow: Molodaja Gvardia (in Russian), 1967.
- Spinoza, Benedictus de. *Ethica ordone geometrico demonstrata*. Translated by George Parkinson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000 (1st ed. 1677).
- Sylvan, Richard and Griffin, Nicholas. "Unravelling the Meanings of Life?" *Journal of Indian Council of Philosophical Research* 4 (1986): 23–72.
- Tolstoy, Leo. *A Short Presentation of the New Testament*, in 1928–58, vol. 24, pp. 801–938.
- . "Memoirs of a Madman," in 1928–58, vol. 26, pp. 454–66.

- . *Complete Writings* [*Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*], 90 volumes (in Russian), V. G. Chertkov (ed.). Moscow, 1928–58.
- Tugendhat, Ernst. “Über den Tod,” in *Aufsätze 1992–2000*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2001, pp. 67–90.
- Wiggins, David. “Truth, Invention and the Meaning of Life,” in *Needs, Values, Truth*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1987, pp. 87–138.
- Williams, Bernard. “The Macropoulos Case; Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality,” in *Problems of the Self*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973, pp. 81–100.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*. Translated by D. Pears and B. McGuinness. London: Routledge (1st ed. 1922).
- . *Philosophical Investigations*. Translated by Elisabeth Anscombe. Oxford: Blackwell, 1953.
- . *Notebooks 1914–1916*. Translated by Elisabeth Anscombe. Oxford: Blackwell, 1979 (1st ed. 1961).
- . *Geheime Tagebücher 1914–1916*. Translated by Wilhelm Baum. Wien: Turia & Kant, 1991.