

**Tolstoy, Leo. *A Confession*. Translated by L. and A. Maude. San Bernadino, California: WLC Books, 2009.**

Count Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910 A.D.), known best for his epic novels *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, experienced a psychological crisis later in life that led to his adoption of a pacifist and quasi-Christian form of anarchism. His later spiritual works were less well received by the public than his novels. Tolstoy toyed with adopting a life as a peripatetic ascetic. During his last such sojourn, he died at a distant railway junction. *A Confession* was written during the throes of his conversion to idiosyncratic Christianity, in the late 1870s. The text of *A Confession* was first published in 1884.

**Chapter I.** Tolstoy was raised Orthodox, but fled faith at age eighteen. He had an atheist friend, and an ascetically religious brother. Religious precepts were, to him, distant and detached from genuine living. The Orthodox and atheist were identical. One cannot tell them apart. Religious conviction erodes invisibly. Tolstoy told of S., whose faith collapsed one day when his brother asked, surprised, if S. still prayed as had been the family custom when they were children. S. never prayed again. So it is with most people. Tolstoy's trajectory differed in that he read philosophy early on. Rejecting God, he moved to perfect himself in the eyes of others. And that effort devolved into raw competition for fame and riches.

**Chapter II.** When young, Tolstoy wanted to be morally good, but was ridiculed for that effort, and praised only when indulging vice. The aunt who raised him wished for him fornication, high political associations, and a wealthy wife. Tolstoy committed many crimes, both legal and moral. This path continued for a decade. His friends considered him moral. He hid in his novels, and then associated with writers. They flattered Tolstoy, and taught him that he was the instructor of mankind, as were they. But the internecine squabbling of the authors convinced Tolstoy, after a few years, that this authors' creed was empty. And the authors themselves were corrupt. Tolstoy renounced them, but retained their accolades for himself. He remained the teacher of mankind, but did not know what it was he was teaching. Subjectively, the experience for Tolstoy was that of being in an insane asylum. All the authors talked without listening and fought for fame and money. Tolstoy considered them all lunatics, except himself.

**Chapter III.** Tolstoy traveled to Europe and found a faith similar to his own, which they called "progress." But following progress is like a sailor aimlessly buffeted by winds, who says, when he lands, This is where I wanted to go. Tolstoy's faith in progress stumbled when he witnessed a guillotining. No theory of progress could justify the thump of the head in a box. It was wrong. The only judge that matters in this regard is Tolstoy's own heart. He taught in peasant schools, but was just hiding there. Tolstoy published a magazine, still seeking, as a teacher, something to teach. His mental health suffered. Then Tolstoy married. That changed everything. He substituted optimizing his family life for seeking self-perfection and progress. He wrote again, this time for money, teaching that life consists in improving the weal of oneself and one's family. But after fifteen years, perplexities struck. What is life about? These perplexities aggregated into suffering, and ultimately, death. Tolstoy could not go on. He had to know why he was doing his tasks. But there were no answers.

**Chapter IV.** Tolstoy's life ground to a halt. Life is meaningless. All that lies ahead of any man is senseless activity followed by utter dissolution. Tolstoy toyed with suicide. Still, his life brimmed with good things: youth, love, children, wealth, praise, fame, physical health. Nevertheless, Tolstoy wanted to die. He tricked himself into living. He saw life as a stupid trick of some demiurge, senseless and cruel. Tolstoy recounts the besieged traveler; this traveler leaps into a well to avoid a cruel beast, and hangs by a twig protruding from the wall, for the traveler makes out a dragon at the well's bottom. As he weakens, the traveler sees mice gnaw his twig. Yet he spies drops of honey on the twig and licks them, in the face of his

certain doom. This is Tolstoy's circumstance. The truth of life is death. Suicide seemed the only path by which to free one from the fear.

**Chapter V.** Tolstoy turned to science for answers to his questions about life, but found none. He explored diligently. His question: Is there meaning in life that death does not erase? Neither pole of science, neither experimental nor metaphysical, answered the question. Investigatory science plumbs other questions, but leaves the core issue at one side. People do not understand one another, and science leaves this defect unplumbed. So, Tolstoy worked on a theory that made of his preferences a rule for mankind. But it collapsed when he considered the question about life's meaning. All natural science knows only of cause and effect. The final cause dumbfounds it. As for metaphysics, it asks the right question, but finds no answer. It is tempted to restate the question in complex ways, but never answers its reformulated question.

**Chapter VI.** Tolstoy considered himself lost in the forest of human knowledge. He asked the meaning of his life, of life's sequel, of existence. The answers were none, nothing, and what exists exists. One learns a great deal from science, all details pertaining to questions Tolstoy was not asking. But when questioned about meaning, science answers, You are an accidental coalescence of clay, now fermenting. Later, fermentation stops. That is all. This is no answer. Metaphysics responds with mumbling. This too is no answer. Real answers lie in Socrates' meditation upon the role of death in philosophizing, and in Schopenhauer's eulogy on the will to live, and in Solomon's vanity sermon in Ecclesiastes, and in Buddha's resolution to be free of life and suffering. Each finds in life senseless pain, and in death release. This is human wisdom. Tolstoy has felt what these felt, as have millions of others. So, science and philosophy deepened Tolstoy's despondence. It is best never to be born.

**Chapter VII.** Tolstoy looked to other humans for answers about the meaning of life. He found nothing useful. Four approaches dominate: 1) People ignore the question, being dull or young or female. 2) People cling to good things, vapid though they are. 3) People of strength commit suicide, since death is better than living. Tolstoy wishes to emulate these persons. 4) People simpler, clinging to life despite knowing that nothing worthwhile comes of it. Tolstoy found himself, to his disgust, living as one of these latter weaklings. Tolstoy attributed his perseverance to a fragmentary consciousness that his thinking was skewed. He thought it odd that reason derives from life, only to disparage it. And most people live life as a meaningful enterprise, despite their knowledge of its emptiness. It is they who taught Tolstoy all he knows, and yet he disparages their conclusions. Tolstoy thought he has blundered somewhere. But where?

**Chapter VIII.** Tolstoy felt his reasoning was correct, and confirmed by history's best minds. Still, he was conscious of life, which diverted Tolstoy's thinking. Tolstoy saw that he and those philosophers who agree with him are but the tiniest fraction of humanity. Theirs was not normal life. Normal life is lived by the millions of pedestrian, unsophisticated people, whom Tolstoy had to date ignored. The millions live by faith, which is irrational knowledge. They live by God. So, to find meaning, one renounces reason in favor of faith.

**Chapter IX.** So, reason is less rational than it seems, or faith less irrational than believed. Tolstoy's question about life's meaning sought an infinite answer in finite matters. The answer was null because one cannot address ultimate questions with penultimate evidence. Tolstoy overstated reason's non-answer because of his powerful feelings on the subject. When the infinite sub-rational evidence is included, one finds that life has meaning because of the asker's relationship to the ultimate, to God. This irrational answer makes life livable. The many faiths of man are identical in their broad strokes. Each gives limited, suffering life an infinite meaning. Faith lets man live in an ostensibly meaningless world. If one lives, one has faith. Man dwells as part of the infinite. That is what men are. "Reasonable" men take apart the finely-tuned mechanism of meaning, play with its parts, and then are amazed when the device ceases to work. Faith offers meaning that transcends reasonable considerations. In

the answers of faith lies humanity's deepest wisdom, reason notwithstanding. Faith answers the question of meaning. Yet Tolstoy wishes to understand faith's answers in his own rubric.

**Chapter X.** Tolstoy investigated Islam, Buddhism, and Christianity. Making all concessions he could manage, Tolstoy could adopt none among them. Those faiths obscured, not illuminated, life's meaning. The lives of those religions' believers did not conform to their assertions, and all lived in the same grasping insecurity as unbelievers, or even worse. Tolstoy looked not to arguments, but to deeds, and convincing deeds were absent. The consolation of these Christians was their own pleasure, not a connection to the infinite that renders life's terrors innocuous. Tolstoy saw unbelievers do deeds of great self-sacrifice, but not believers. Tolstoy looked for the faith that sustains normal people in facing their tribulations. Tolstoy turned to common, uneducated people, and there, mixed with abundant superstition, he found lives that conformed to their faith. These faced illness and death with equanimity. Over the ages, they numbered millions. Tolstoy loved these faithful, simple people. Tolstoy accepted their faith.

**Chapter XI.** Tolstoy despaired not because he thought wrongly, but because he indulged desires, thereby living badly. Tolstoy was right. Life is empty, but he spoke rightly only of his own life. Animals are happy if they feed themselves. Humans have the same task, except that each must feed all other humans. Such is human responsibility. Tolstoy lamented that he never sustained even himself, much less humanity. Simple people do as God asks, without reflection, without philosophizing. By obeying, they learn more and more.

**Chapter XII.** Tolstoy was tempted to idle thinking. But truth waits real life, not stuffy philosophizing. Real life is that of working people, never fancy. Day after day, they put food in their mouths. Tolstoy described his search for God as a feeling of oppressive pain, tinged with hues of fear, isolation, and hope of help. Tolstoy recounted the first cause argument for God's existence. But it left him empty. God's existence filled Tolstoy. But theologizing about God emptied him. Theologizing kills life. Living with God fulfills life. God is life. So, Tolstoy was saved from suicide. Tolstoy found that life's aim is to improve, to live by God's will. Tolstoy rediscovered belief in moral perfection within a tradition transmitting life's meaning from one generation to the next. Tolstoy allegorized. He was on a shore called home. He shoved off into a stream that grew more rapid at its center, overpowering all rowers. Many careened toward the rapids midstream, partying. Tolstoy forgot the shore, which was God. Shoreward was tradition. Freedom is rowing for shore. At shore, one lives.

**Chapter XIII.** Tolstoy turned to examination of the life of simple Russian laboring people. They find meaning in their simplification of orthodox Christianity. In their telling, one exists by God's will, who fashioned man to be able to save or destroy his own soul. To save one's soul, he renounces all worldly pleasure, and lives humbly in godliness, suffering what comes, and giving mercy where it is needed. But the simple people take this message along with a generous dose of nonsense with which the message is mixed. None, including Tolstoy, can sort the jumble. But Tolstoy went along with it all. What Tolstoy formerly rejected he now strove to understand. Still, Tolstoy could not participate in the simple people's incomprehensible rituals. Tolstoy took refuge in the church's claims of infallibility. Denying the possibility of church error, one accepts and does things with which one disagrees. Eventually, Tolstoy saw the sophistry of church infallibility, but it helped him integrate with the church for a time. But many words passed by Tolstoy, who slogged along in incomprehension.

**Chapter XIV.** Tolstoy failed to grasp resurrection and eucharist and prayers for the Emperor. He felt himself lying when he explained these doctrines. The celebration of miracles proved a negative experience for Tolstoy. He did grasp communion and baptism, but rejected them in his heart. So, he faced the need to dissimulate or abandon the church's teaching. In communion, transubstantiation robbed the act of meaning for Tolstoy. He could not go to

communion again. Tolstoy read the lives of saints, setting aside the miracles, and prospered for a time. But then they too proved hollow, and Tolstoy neared an abyss.

**Chapter XV.** Tolstoy spent three years learning the church's teachings. As he went along, these catechisms grew increasingly painful. Some doctrines could only be accepted by lying to oneself. So, Tolstoy renounced the Eastern Orthodox church. He found men of other sects who lived exemplary lives, but were deemed deceived by the Orthodox. The Orthodox extend their narrowness to exclude all who do not use the same symbols and rituals as themselves. Asserting one's own truth and excluding another's view is the most cruel thing men say to one another. Theology destroys the union among men it ought to promote. Tolstoy asked if all Christians cannot grasp their doctrines from a higher plane, so that the disputes shrink and belief expands? When this proposal was rejected, Tolstoy understood that he sought the power of life, while theologians were protecting vested interests. Asserting the absolute truth of one church leads inexorably to killing those who disagree. The church also loses its way when it supports wars and criminal executions. How are these murders love?

**Chapter XVI.** Tolstoy concluded that the errors of the Orthodox Church need not cause him to doubt his religion. The prelates believed and did much that was false, and even the working people mixed error with truth in their religious practices. The Church promulgates truth and simultaneously falsehood. Tolstoy wanted to understand, within the limitations of human capacities. So, he set to work on theology, sorting the wheat from the chaff.

**1879.** Tolstoy wrote a last installment three years after composing the sixteen previous chapters. Tolstoy had a dream that clarified things. He lay on a bed. Pushing at its leg supports, they slid away from him, so his lower half hung mid-air. He looked down to find that he hung, barely suspended, at a vast height above the ground. He froze in fear. He tried to waken himself, to no avail. Then Tolstoy saw that just as below him there was a great fall, above him was an even greater space into which he might ascend. He calmed, and recognized that there remained one support squarely in the middle of his torso, so long as he looked up and relied upon that lone support. A voice told him to remember this. Then Tolstoy awoke.