
A Comparative Analysis of the Theme of Death in Martin Heidegger and Leo Tolstoy

Comparison of Tolstoy and Heidegger on the Theme of Death

Prominent advocates of post humanism make the case that an extreme increase in the human lifespan would be inherently good. The question of extended lifespan has become more debatable since the fields of medicine and science are working hand in hand to ensure that the lifespan of humans is extended. Martin Heidegger's work on death and freedom can be used to develop a probable opposition to the assertion that an indefinite lifespan is fundamentally desirable. Tolstoy's work of philosophy on the Death of Ivan Ilych is also used to show his acceptance of death. Different comparisons are drawn from the two philosophical writers about the theme of bereavement in the novella.

The novel became the first major fictional work of Tolstoy, having been written in 1886. Tolstoy published the book after his crisis and conversion to serve as a background to the understanding of the novel. The moral principles that emerge in the book are those of brotherly love, mutual support, and Christianity values. The same values became essential in the second half his life. His past experiences and suffering contributed to his stand on death.

There is conflict on the phrase used by Tolstoy in the novel. "One dies" is used by Tolstoy in his novel to bring out his idea on the theme of death. Heidegger, on the other hand asserts that the phrase is used to mean disruption and collapse in the Death of Ivan Ilych. According to Heidegger, the phrase is only associated with an approach to death, which he obviously dislikes. His argument is based on the assertion that the phrase used by Tolstoy can easily be disapproved based on qualifications. The expression used in the novel could be unpacked in several different ways to mean different ideas. For instance, the phrase can be used to pass the message that somebody is dying. Somebody who is dying is in his or her last stages of sickness. For example, someone who is in the last stages of pneumonia can be said to be dying (Guignon et al. 2001, P.231).

Technically, Heidegger uses describes the phrase used by Tolstoy as an expression of an attitude concerning the existence of human beings. Heidegger's position on the phrase is an implication that he disapproves the descriptions that people use in everyday life. It is the descriptions that are used by Tolstoy to refer to death in his novel. Apparently, Heidegger assumes that the phrase is used carelessly by people. For instance, while shrugging their shoulders to show a negative attitude. The position of Heidegger also asserts that someone

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could say “people die,” while glancing off camera as a sign of a negative attitude towards life. However, Tolstoy has accepted the fact that life has different stages because of his life history. At some point in his life, there is suffering and he eventually faces death after almost a decade of suffering. He understands the conviction of sin as a philosophical writer and the path to which suffering can lead human beings (Guignon et al. 2001, P. 250).

There is some sought of certainty on the theme of death, based on the overtones of what Heidegger asserts and the overtones of Tolstoy’s narrative attitude. Tolstoy makes assertions that the determinants of everyday attitude are dependent on issues such as personality and functions. Despite Heidegger’s argument on the theme of death, he fails to cite various passages to convince readers on his stand. His philosophy, therefore, fails to confirm any reader’s degree of certainty on the same issue of defining the phrase “people die.”

In Tolstoy’s novel, the news of Ivan’s death triggers different kinds of reactions. His colleagues start thinking of who to fill his post and how they will take care of their concerns and careers. The novel portrays the death of Ivan as an event that will be followed by a line of activities. Some events are seen to be casually influenced by the fact that Ivan has died. It is imagined that the first thought upon the arrival of the news of his death was that of promotions and other changes that might be needed after his death (Tolstoy, 1960, P. 77).

The colleagues of the deceased even confess of being promised promotions if the post could remain vacant. For example, Fedor Vasilievich thinks of being sure to acquire Shtabel’s place as he was “promised of the same some time back.” Promotion would mean an increase in salary with up to eight hundred rubles a year as well as allowances. Other employees thought of the transfer of their relatives from far areas due to the death of Ivan. There are mixed feelings that have been triggered by the news of Ivan’s death at his previous workplace (Tolstoy, 1960, P. 111).

Their reactions are a show of the fear of death although it is expressed as happiness in this case. The pang of the fear of death is quickly replaced by concerns of attending the funeral of the deceased after which considerations of possible transfers and promotions are to be made. Different emotions of those who are still alive being favored and Ivan dying are the order of the day. “Well, he’s dead but I’m alive!” others felt. The friends of the deceased also have the responsibility of attending the funeral as a means of fulfilling their demands of propriety. They attend the funeral and pay condolence to the widow. From the set of events that take place after the death of Ivan in the novel, Tolstoy has succeeded in bringing out his philosophical idea that the community has accepted his death and are concerned by the fact that every member of the community has to die after some time. The acceptance of death is indicated when a colleague of the deceased thinks of how he had been promised of a promotion a long time ago. Perhaps the death of Ivan had been predicted by some people (Tolstoy, 1960, P. 112).

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On the contrary, Heidegger comments on the activities being carried out after the death as being of no importance. He explains that most people seem concerned but the death of Ivan in the novel creates a lot of disturbance in the society. The comment made by Heidegger on Ivan's death implies that a person who dies is simply being bothersome and inconsiderate. Many activities have to be undertaken as a show of commitment to the person's legacy when they were alive. For example, the friends have to attend the funeral and show their last respect to Ivan (Guignon et al. 2001, P. 224).

The point of death being a bother in the society is again corrected by Tolstoy in his novel as he describes the reaction of Ivan Ilyich's daughter. The daughter and the deceased fiancé are really offended and angry, showing their great concern for the person who has died. Before the death of Ivan, his attitude towards death was just like the attitudes of those who surrounded him. He behaved in a similar manner in which his friends and relatives reacted to his death (Tolstoy, 1960, P 112).

In comparison to Tolstoy's philosophy about death, Heidegger would develop his description of the phenomenon as he relates it to other people's attitudes. Heidegger describes the attitudes of others towards a dying man by explaining that one's being towards death is his alone and cannot be related to anyone else. The summation of Tolstoy's work draws a similar conclusion to that of Heidegger since Tolstoy also recognizes that death is just for an individual although the impact is felt by those who are around him or her, and have accepted death as a natural phenomenon.

In the contemporary world, there is a common attitude for death as people are concerned of losing their loved ones. The same attitude is bad news to both Heidegger and Tolstoy. In his narrative about death, Tolstoy does not involve in saying words of disapprobation concerning the manner in which Ivan's colleagues react to his death. Tolstoy only points out the different reactions but he does not take sides to give the characters space in the short narrative about death. The attitude of Tolstoy regarding the reactions after the death of Ivan is apparently that which avoids inconsistency.

Heidegger takes part in philosophical works but Tolstoy's novel does not help him much in coming up with his work of art. Heidegger believes that appropriate behavior is constructive of a structure that holds beliefs and attitudes but not on other people's pieces of philosophical works. Heidegger describes "Alltaglichkeit" to mean disapproval as it relates to the understanding of humans that commonly arises from commonly held beliefs and attitudes (Guignon et al. 2001, P.237).

In his writing, Tolstoy does not get entwined in the paradoxes that bedevil Heidegger. It appears as if Tolstoy is preaching instead of philosophizing. His novel is apparently seeking to find out

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converts who are ready to change their death and accept the phenomenon of death. The author's belief asserts that evils can be corrected by the love of a fellow man. The challenge of isolating the dying in the experience of death is different from the approval of human beings who still cannot understand the dying man (Tolstoy, 1960, P. 143).

According to Heidegger, there are still issues that need to be solved in making philosophical statements. Commonly held attitude is developed by people who have accepted the specific philosophical description of the commonly held attitudes. In more passages, Heidegger argues that normal conceptual thinking cannot end the possibility of death in the world. Technically, the assertion Heidegger makes is meant to avoid a different universalizing paradox. It is notable that Heidegger is not immune to rejecting logical thinking even as he makes assertions to defend his position on the issue of death (Guignon et al. 200, P.247).

Some aspects in Tolstoy's novel are not covered in the note written by Heidegger or in the analysis to which the note is attached. Tolstoy noted that Ivan has a sort of revelation as he understands his death bound loneliness. The "revelation" used in the novella largely eases the agony of dying and isolation. In his note, Heidegger does not consider thinking from the point of view that Tolstoy had a revelation of his death; thus, his acceptance of death as it is. Again, another revelation is noted in Tolstoy's piece of philosophical work when Ivan touches his son's head before his death. The action is seen to be religious in nature as he strives to be closer to his people by bringing them happiness. The revelation in the book makes death to appear as a family affair and not an individual affair as Heidegger had stated (Tolstoy, 1960, P. 153).

In the text, there are terms that Tolstoy borrows from religion to show his understanding of death in the context of religion. Terms such as revelation and "He whose understanding mattered" are borrowed from religious vocabulary to bring greater understanding of death. Fortunately, after Ivan's efforts to make it up to his family, he sees light at the end of the tunnel as his fear for death stops and his physical pain is no more. According to Tolstoy, Ivan perceives that "There is no death" as his fears are gone. In religious context, there is no death since Ivan would be soon in heaven, probably playing with his harp. Honest opinions revealed that Tolstoy never believed in life after death or in the biblical context but the religious experience he depicts in his novel are exact assertions in the New Testament Biblical contexts (Tolstoy, 1960, P. 162).

Heidegger has failed to propose any solution to the isolation incidences in Tolstoy's novel about death. Heidegger also borrows from religious contexts when he asserts that all is needed is one to be nice to other people and life would be fruitful. Many readers may think that Heidegger would at least be sympathetic in his logic about death in Tolstoy's novella (Guignon et al. 2001, P.242).

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In a nutshell, besides the physical death, there is also the spiritual death that comes from redemption in the so-called philosophical death. In Philosophy, when humans are redeemed by the philosophical deaths, it constitutes the true definition of philosophy. The double nature of death, therefore, provides an insight in the manner in which people ought to treat death.

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