ABSTRACT. Tolstoy’s Iván Ilých lies near death, regretting a terrible life but unaware of what he could have done differently while alive. Although motivated to work for all the wrong reasons—money, self-esteem, social acceptance, and escape from home—by all formal accounts he has been a highly responsible professional. This analysis of a work about work illustrates the relationship between meaningful work, professional responsibility, and meaningful life.

KEY WORDS: business ethics, meaning of work, meaningful work, professional responsibility, Tolstoy, work

Introduction

The meaningful cliché, that nobody on his deathbed ever wishes he had worked more, says as much about the speaker as it purports to say about meaningful life. It implies, for example, that the speaker is affluent enough to choose to work less without sacrificing essential material comforts for himself and his dependents. It suggests, further, that for the speaker, work is antithetical to meaningful life, that work involves the privation of life, a failure to partake in valuable experiences and actions because one is too busy working.

For many of us “working stiffs,” nodding as though we understand and agree with what the speaker means, the point is subtly and importantly different. The problem of deathbed regret is not so much that work is so terrible that it must be avoided at all costs as it is that the terrible life involves a failure to live meaningfully, to appreciate what life has to offer, so to speak. As long as work is necessary to what life has to offer, an alternative way to think about the speaker’s concern is to say that avoiding the deathbed regret for a more meaningful life could be at least partially addressed through more meaningful work—that is, a belief about one’s work that it is integral to a life well lived.

“Ivan Ilych has died!”

Passing through space with Tolstoy’s omnipresent narrator, we overhear news of his death from his former colleague:

During an interval in the Melvinski trial in the large building of the Law Courts the members and public prosecutor met in Iván Egórovich Shebek’s private room...”Gentlemen,” [Peter Ivánovich] said, “Iván Ilých has died!” (p. 247)

From the Law Courts, we follow Peter Ivánovich to Iván Ilých’s house, where Peter Ivánovich, awkward and unsettled, hurriedly pays his respects to his old colleague and his widow, grateful that death has not happened to him. He leaves to visit with another colleague, unchanged and unprepared to resolve his own future deathbed regret, oblivious that an astounding solution to the problem came to his friend before Iván Ilých died.

The narrator then brings us back in time to an account of Iván Ilých’s prior life, which “had been most simple and most ordinary and therefore most terrible” (p. 255). The narrative alternates between Iván Ilých’s workplaces and his homes, characteristic of a life that, prior to Iván Ilých’s fatal illness, is substantially spent working. We learn briefly of the family into which he was born, his schooling, the position he arranged to be a provincial lawyer in the civil service, and his rise to a more powerful position in another province as an examining magistrate. We observe his marriage to Praskóvya Fèderovna and how, increasingly annoyed by her, he began to work more, using his social ability,
pragmatism, and dutifulness to obtain higher posts. And then, after seventeen years of marriage, Iván Il’yč turns a briefly disappointing episode in his career into a “remarkable and unexpected success” (p. 263), an appointment in the Department of Justice.

At this point in the story, about one-fourth of the way through, having barely given Iván Il’yč the opportunity to savor his new post, time slows down and space constricts, as if to taunt him. The remainder of the narrative chronicles the last 4 months of Iván Il’yč’s life. (See Jahn, 1993, for a more detailed structural analysis of the novella.) After falling while decorating his new home, an accident that he initially thought to cause only a minor bruise, Iván Il’yč’s health progressively deteriorates. Some days, early on in his advance toward death, Iván Il’yč is forced by his illness to stay home. When he is not preoccupied with the pain in his side and thoughts of his own death, he makes brief and pathetic appearances in court but cannot fulfill his duties. Work gradually disappears from his thoughts and from the text, except when he is visiting his doctor or his servants are visiting him. For 3 months, he agonizes in boredom and annoyance in the nearly constant company of his wife and children. In his last month, when it first occurs to him, “Maybe I did not live as I ought to have done” (p. 295), work reappears as an essential element of all that was “false” (p. 299) in the life he rejects. With the onset of his three final days of screaming, work disappears again, and Iván Il’yč gets on with his death in a room at home.

What frees Iván Il’yč on his deathbed from life and pain after his acknowledgment that, “Yes, it was all not the right thing” (p. 301), is his discovery in the last 2 hours of his life of pity and forgiveness, human, and supernatural. Iván Il’yč undergoes a final religious conversion that is undetected by those he waves away from his bedside, not unlike the way in which Tolstoy was increasingly estranged from his own wife and children after going through his own religious conversion as described in his Confession. This genuine conversion tellingly takes place not long after Iván Il’yč’s wife urges him to take communion, which he resists and then perfunctorily accepts, a sign of Tolstoy’s own skepticism about organized religion and search for a more genuine personal expression of spirituality. With this final turn in the narrative, it is for many readers easier to accept, even to be amazed by, the realism of Tolstoy’s negative portrayal of a life that was all not right, than to be led to a positive conclusion regarding what ought to be done to change it. Perhaps Iván Il’yč’s conversion solves his own deathbed regret, and Tolstoy perhaps may have intended even for each reader to solve his own unhappiness in his own particular way, but the conversion itself provides limited practical, positive guidance about how the most ordinary person ought to live differently if he is not to live terribly.

A work about work

The Death of Iván Il’yč is usually understood to be a novella about the good life, or about the meaning of death, but not specifically about workplace ethics (nor, for that matter, about morality in marriage, family, and home). There are, however, several compelling reasons to examine Iván Il’yč as a work about work. First, notwithstanding that the balance of the novella takes place at home, Iván Il’yč would rather be at work. Even after his conversion, when he recognizes how much of his life, which has been dominated by work, was false, he does not wish he had given more time and attention to his life at home. Second, Iván Il’yč was Tolstoy’s own body of work written after his own religious conversion caused him to reject much of his previous work as false, including War and Peace and Anna Karenina. In several of his works, pre- and post-conversion, Tolstoy is preoccupied with characters and their relation to work, from contrasting the military and family roles of the main male characters in War and Peace (Prince Andrei, Pierre, and Nikolai), Levin working (like Tolstoy himself) in the fields among the peasants at the end of Anna Karenina, to Iván Il’yč himself and his supporting cast, from his unhelpful physician to his kindly servant Gerasim. Recent scholarship on the importance of moral imagination to decision-making in the workplace (Werhane, 1998, 1999) supports the use of literature to understand and appreciate issues in professional ethics. Third, Kamm, in her compelling study of Iván Il’yč’s death, remarks as an aside in a peculiar footnote, “Ivan Illych’ can be read, in part, as a primer on professional ethics” (p. 204) – but she says little about how this can be done. Fourth, and