What Does Ivan Ilyich Need To Be Rescued From?

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Abstract

Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* describes how a man's exposure to imminent death allows him to secure redemption from a flawed life. Through close textual attention to Tolstoy's novella and extensive engagement with Frances Kamm's treatment of it, this article quarrels with this 'Redemption View' of Ivan's case, offering a sourer, more pessimistic view. It is argued that Ivan's reconciliation to death is facilitated by a series of mistakes he makes *en route* to his dying moments. Two more general lessons are drawn: first, that we are all vulnerable to the mistakes Ivan makes, and second, that reflection on the quality of our lives does not present us with any obvious resources for coming to terms with our own deaths.

In his great short novel *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*,[1] Tolstoy depicts, in riveting and unsparing detail, how a man's life is transformed in and through the prospect of his death. Frances Kamm's fascinating essay, 'Rescuing Ivan Ilych: How We Live and How We Die',[2] adds some valuable analytical finesse and structure to our judgment of Ivan Ilyich's case, but concurs with Tolstoy's implied view that Ivan's death may actually be the making of him; the prospect of his death allows him, at the eleventh hour, to secure some genuine form of redemption from a flawed and shoddy life.

I want to argue, by contrast, for a sourer, more pessimistic view: Ivan's way of coping with his death does not make him a better person, but merely exposes and magnifies what was always objectionable about him. Alas, and moreover, Ivan's case enjoys potential relevance to us all, even if we are not bound to repeat Ivan's precise mistakes. My conclusions will be that the manner of death does not easily restore, or compensate for, bad lives, and that good lives do not easily prepare us for death. Whether we have led a good life or a bad life, death is likely to present us with problems of reconciliation.

[1] I shall use the translation of it by Anthony Briggs in Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich and Other Stories* (London: Penguin Books, 2008). Page references in the main text will be to this particular edition, accompanied by the abbreviation '*DI*'.

[2] F. M. Kamm, 'Rescuing Ivan Ilych: How We Live and How We Die', *Ethics* **113** (2003), 202–33.

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The argument will unfold as follows. The first three sections provide a detailed examination of *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. Section 1 sketches out what I refer to as the 'Disconnectedness Complaint' about Ivan's life and the 'Redemption View' about Ivan's death, both of which are offered by Kamm, and also describes some useful general apparatus which Kamm provides for thinking about Ivan's case. In section 2, I criticize the Disconnectedness Complaint, while, in section 3, I question the Redemption View by retelling Ivan's story as a non-redemptive one in which the imminence of his death prompts Ivan to arrive at a distorted view of his life and of the relationships he has constructed in it. To this end, I will enumerate five mistakes made by Ivan, which cumulatively explain his relative serenity as he nears the moment of his death. In section 4, I use Ivan's case to flush out two general lessons for us all.

1. Disconnectedness and Redemption in *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*

Though they inhabit different intellectual worlds, Tolstoy and Kamm appear to find common cause in Ivan Ilyich's death, and in the general lessons furnished by Ivan's particular fictional case. I want to quarrel with these lessons, which I believe are bleaker than Tolstoy and Kamm are prepared to admit. But first, and as a preliminary, I shall provide a skeletal summary of the story.

The Death of Ivan Ilyich recounts the life and death of Ivan Ilyich, a judge in his mid-forties working for the Ministry of Justice in Saint Petersburg in the 1880's. (It was published in 1886.) Ivan lives in a typical bourgeois middle-class way for his time, is professionally ambitious and conscientious, socially skilled and eager to uphold social respectability, is somewhat detached from his family life (if not the house they live in), and is entirely unprepared for the death which eventually ensues from what seems to be a trivial accident, suffered in the course of supervising decorations of the new family home.

Much of the novella is concerned with the painful physical and emotional progress Ivan makes between this accident and the death which befalls him several months later. (He suffers the accident in September, and is dead by February.) The main steps in this part of the story are, arguably, these. Ivan is, first, anxious to find a cure for his condition. Second, and in response to the futility of these remedies, he is slow to accept the reality of his condition, and anxious to seek distraction from it. Third, he gradually comes to feel disgust at the lies and evasions of those around him (apart from his

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blunt-speaking servant Gerasim). Fourth, as he slowly comes to realize that he is dying, he expresses fear and horror at the prospect of '*It*', or 'the black hole' represented by death. Fifth, he attempts some sort of review of the life he has led. Sixth, this review of his life leads him to conclude that his life has been bad. Seventh, in coming finally to accept that his life has been bad, the 'black hole' is put behind him: 'Instead of death there was light' (*DI*, 217). This realization grants Ivan a relatively peaceful death.

For Kamm, Tolstoy's overriding lesson is that '[s]ome people like Ivan may only have good in their lives by dying in the right way'.[3] But how can the judgment that he has had a *bad life* allow Ivan to have a *good death*? And how can a good death *redeem* a bad life? Regardless of the exact nature of the 'light' Ivan experiences at the very end of his life, it is unclear how such an event could redeem or ameliorate the character of the life which now lies largely in Ivan's past.

We are about to investigate this terrain more carefully. Before we do that, we should note Kamm's distinctions among three different sources of Ivan's fear, which I will call 'Type-1' fears, 'Type-2' fears, and 'Type-3' fears.[4] *Type-1* fears are deprivation fears: they reflect Ivan's fear that, in dying, he will be deprived of future goods. These goods fall into two basic categories. Some of the goods of which death will deprive him are the kind of goods he has already enjoyed, such as professional success and evenings spent playing bridge: we can call these fears *Type-1(a)* fears. Other goods of which he is deprived are goods he has not previously enjoyed, such as trips to new places, professional ascent to even higher levels in the legal profession, and perhaps the pleasures of playing with his grandchildren: these are *Type-1(b)* fears. *Type-2* fears are extinction fears: Ivan fears, as a separate matter, his imminent extinction. *Type-3* fears are waste and rectification fears: these fears reflect the possibility that Ivan has wasted his life, and that he is unable to rectify the wasted life he has led. Call the fears about a wasted life *Type-3(a)* fears, and the fears about the possibility of rectification *Type-3(b)* fears.

As Kamm points out, there are striking asymmetries in the vulnerability to these different categories of fear faced by those who have led good lives and bad lives, respectively. For those who have led good lives, Type-1 fears, concerning deprivation, will be more intense than they are for those who have led bad lives, at least for Type-1(a) fears. But those who have led good lives, unlike those who

[3] Ibid., 209.
[4] Ibid., 207.

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have led bad lives, will have little to worry about with respect to Type-3 fears. Type-2 fears, concerning extinction, will be tied in each case. For this reason, and because it is difficult to separate between the phenomenology of Type-2 fears and Type-1 fears, Type-2 fears will play comparatively little role in what follows.[5] On Kamm's view, the progress of Ivan's reflections takes the following course: he starts with Type-2 fears, then he largely moves on to Type-1(a) fears, and then he is principally consumed by Type-3 fears.[6] It is the resolution of his Type-3 fears which eventually allows Ivan to put the 'black hole' of death behind him. I have a contrasting way of plotting the course of Ivan's fears, which will be spelled out in section 3.

Ivan's lack of readiness for death, for Kamm, reflects his disconnectedness from others. Call this the *Disconnectedness Complaint*. The source of the Disconnectedness Complaint can be traced to a bewildered passage in which, shortly after his agonized realization that he is dying, Ivan is trying to take stock:

> All his life the syllogism he had learned… – Julius Caesar is a man, men are mortal, therefore Caesar is mortal – had always seemed to be true only when it applied to Caesar, certainly not to him. (*DI*, 193)

Ivan cannot, it would seem, apply an acceptance of Caesar's mortality to himself. He, Ivan, has the kind of subjectivity and capacity for experience and memory which he has not previously ascribed to Caesar. So the facts about Caesar's mortality cannot, by any simple exercise of reason, be transferred to Ivan himself, and what explains this failure to transfer Caesar's case to himself is Ivan's lack of connectedness to other people.

Kamm writes, about Ivan's attitude to this syllogism:

[5] However, I do want to express some misgivings about Kamm's *Limbo Man* argument for the separateness of Type-1 fears and Type-2 fears (ibid., 208). Limbo Man can postpone death by electing to spend certain periods of the future in a quasi-comatose state of limbo. It follows, then, that Limbo Man can stay alive for longer, so that he can realize *future* goods, but not through the realization of any *additional* future goods; the unusual option available to him is that of distributing a fixed quantity of goods across a longer life span. Limbo Man's options are not Ivan's: for Ivan, *future* goods just are *additional* future goods. The Limbo Man argument thus cannot demonstrate that Type-1 fears and Type-2 fears are genuinely separate *for Ivan*. I say more about the phenomenology and progression of Ivan's fears in section 3; see, in particular, my discussion of Ivan's 'First Mistake'.

[6] Ibid., 207.

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> It would be easier for him to accept the universal premise in the syllogism and its application to him, if he took seriously – given his knowledge that others die – that others have the same special reality to themselves as he has to himself.[7]

And also:

> A true friend (let alone a clearheaded thinker)… might not be able to latch onto this separating mechanism.[8]

According to the Disconnectedness Complaint, then, Ivan's very lack of readiness for death reflects his disconnectedness from other people. Had he been more invested in other people's lives, and traced with more sympathy and interest their passage from life to death, he would not find himself so disastrously underprepared for his own death.[9] We shall return to the Disconnectedness Complaint in the next section.

On Kamm's *Redemptive View*, Ivan experiences a kind of rebirth towards the end of his life, when he reaches the acceptance that his life has been bad. But how can this description of Ivan's situation near his death be anything other than unhelpful hyperbole? How can he be *reborn* when, after all, he is about to *die*? Kamm's answer to these questions is that Ivan's rebirth amounts to a comprehensive alteration in him of his *values*. These new values allow him for the first time to see that his life has been a failure. His acknowledgement that his life has been a failure therefore reflects a new evaluative perspective, borne out of values which are at odds with those governing his attitudes and actions prior to his accident and final illness. As Kamm expresses the point:

> [T]o accept without any backsliding that his life was wrong is for him to accept a new set of values by which it fails.[10]

The connection between death and the existence of this new self is complex. First, the prospect of his death is, arguably, causally necessary for Ivan's acceptance of the fact that his life has been a failure, which leads to his rebirth or his reconstitution as a new self. As Kamm puts it, '*he* [i.e. Ivan] needs death… for the opportunity it

[7] Ibid., 204.
[8] Ibid., 206.
[9] It is noted in passing that two of Ivan's children have died in infancy (*DI*, 172). The brevity and cursory nature of this reference carry the implication that their deaths have not thrown him off his stride to any great extent.
[10] Kamm, op. cit., 219.

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gives him to be rescued'.[11] Second, though this new self is short-lived, it is intact at the moment of his death. It does not suffer any corruption or atrophy, but merely perishes due to Ivan's physical death. Thus death completes a life which ends on an upwards incline: 'Ending on the high point means that only death, not life itself… ends the good'.[12] This fact helps to explain Kamm's contention that Ivan 'dies in triumph'.[13]

Still, is Ivan's evaluative rebirth too little, too late? How can it compensate for the bad life he has actually lived? This takes us to a third point, heavily emphasized by Kamm. Ivan comes to see that *living well* is what matters, rather than leaving behind a valuable *product*, and that he can live well in whatever little time he has left:

> 'Yes, it's all been wrong', he told himself, 'but that doesn't matter. It's possible to do the right thing. But what is the right thing?' he wondered, and suddenly he was calm… Ivan Ilyich had fallen through and seen a light, and it was revealed to him that his life had not been as it should have been, but that it could still be put right. (*DI*, 216)

All Ivan can now do in the few moments still available to him is to maintain the integrity of his new self by maintaining the attitudes that are constitutive of it; it is too late for him to leave behind a valuable product, or to offer any more tangible atonement for his life.

Still, there ought to be a fuller justification for this final realization, if it is to escape suspicion as being a made-to-measure solution for the straightened circumstances in which Ivan finds himself. Kamm's exploration of this theme returns us to immortality cases.[14] If some individual was immortal, she could always count on the future to make up for the wasted life she has led so far. But that strategy would not establish that everything was satisfactory in the life she was presently living. As Kamm puts the point, 'So what if it is a waste, if it will last forever' would not be a correct motto for an immortal individual to live by.[15] But if that is so, we can appropriate a lesson for non-immortal cases. There must be more to how worthwhile your life is *in the present* than what you can do with it *in the future*. And that lesson applies to Ivan even *in extremis*.

[11] Ibid., 212; original emphasis.
[12] Ibid., 223.
[13] Ibid., 221.
[14] Ibid., 209–11.
[15] Ibid., 211.

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To be clear: Ivan's old, shoddy life is not replaced with another life. That old life is now simply a matter of historical record. Even so, Kamm thinks that it is not inappropriate or outlandish to describe Ivan's final insights as a kind of rebirth. The *self* which led his old shoddy life has now been replaced by a new self. And Ivan's new self remains entirely *intact* at the time of his physical death very soon afterwards. So, just as his awareness of the prospect of death causally prompted Ivan to shed his old self and create his new self, death itself ensures that Ivan's new self is not undone by his manner of living. Ivan's actual death is by no means, then, an entirely obstructive or unwanted presence in this chain of developments. Or so the Redemptive View holds.

2. 'Everyone Dies Alone': Questioning the Disconnectedness Complaint

I now want to revisit Kamm's arguments in a more critical spirit, starting with the Disconnectedness Complaint. There are a number of points to make about this complaint.

First, Ivan can hardly be accused of not being self-involved, yet he is entirely unprepared for death. By symmetry, if he was much more thoroughly *other*-involved, he might still have failed to digest the implications to those others of *their* deaths.[16] The distinction between being prepared or unprepared for death is therefore orthogonal to the distinction between being self-involved and being other-involved. That does not reprieve Ivan from the charge that he is insufficiently other-involved, but it weakens the connection between his self-absorption and his lack of readiness for death. If there is a complaint to make about Ivan on this score, it is not the very same complaint as that which pertains to his excessive self-absorption.

Second, and despite the hyperbolic nature of his internal reflections, it is uncharitable to regard Ivan's supposedly insecure grasp of the syllogism as involving the denial that other people who die are as real to themselves as he is to himself. His anguish concerns *his own* lack of readiness for death. The deep point conveyed by his reflections is that the fates of *other people* cannot, by themselves, effect Ivan's reconciliation to his own death. This is Ivan's real source of anguish: he is not really in the business of affirming or

[16] Kamm actually provides a parenthetical acknowledgement of this possibility (ibid., 203), yet fails to see that it considerably blunts the force of the Disconnectedness Complaint.

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denying the reality of other people's lives and deaths to them, but is primarily evincing his disquiet over the fact that *he* is not ready for *his* death, and does not know how to reconcile himself to it.

These two points combine to suggest a third point: the challenge presented by Ivan's imminent death is *distinct* from the other-involved biographical resources which might help to subdue his bewilderment. Ivan is not mistaken about the personal nature of the challenge which faces him, and he is not mistaken to think that this challenge calls for a response that goes beyond a simple application of syllogistic reasoning to his own case. In fact, there is nothing to prevent Ivan from *universalizing* from his own case. It is everyone's *individual* task to find a way of coping with the prospect of death: in *this* sense, to invoke the old cliché, everyone dies alone. Ivan instantiates a single instance of this more general truth; and so does everyone else who has to face death. If that is so, then he need not be regarded as, objectionably, making an exception of himself.

The cliché that everyone dies alone may seem too insubstantial or otherwise unreliable to constitute a secure defence of Ivan against the Disconnectedness Complaint. Contrast the treatment of these issues by Shelly Kagan,[17] whose considered view is that the phrase 'Everyone dies alone' is 'simple nonsense'.[18] For ease of reference, we will refer in what follows to the 'Everyone dies alone' claim as the *EDA-claim*. There is, for Kagan, no interpretation of the EDA-claim where it comes out both as true and as also an interesting, necessary, and distinctive truth about death.

In effect, Kagan divides treatments of the EDA-claim into what we can call *substantive* and *non-substantive* interpretations. Examples of substantive interpretations of the EDA-claim are 'No one dies in the presence of others', and 'No one dies as part of a joint undertaking'. These interpretations impute thick descriptive properties to death, or to the experience of death, in order to illuminate the EDA-claim. The substantive interpretations would be interesting if they were true, but Kagan insists, at least for the candidate interpretations he considers, that they are all false: many people die in the presence of others, and joint suicide pacts are possible.

Non-substantive interpretations of the EDA-claim largely prescind from descriptive features of death, or the experience of dying, in order to emphasize what might be referred to as the more starkly logical properties about the ownership of death. A non-substantive

[17] See Shelly Kagan, *Death* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2012), 196–204.
[18] Ibid., 204.

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interpretation of the EDA-claim which is likely to be true is this: 'No one can die *my* death for me'.[19] This non-substantive interpretation of the EDA-claim may be impregnable – *Leo's* death can surely only happen *to Leo* – but, for Kagan, it is also ultimately uninteresting, because this interpretation of the EDA-claim *over-generates* implications. The EDA-claim is true, in this sense, in exactly the same way that 'Everyone lunches alone' is true, or 'Everyone has his haircut alone' is true. Leo's lunching can only happen *to Leo*, even if he happens to have his lunch in the company of other people every day. Similarly, Leo's haircut can only happen *to Leo*; if it isn't Leo's hair which is being cut, then it can't be *Leo's* haircut.

Kagan's treatment of the EDA-claim is too brusque, in my view. Charitably interpreted, the EDA-claim does not propose an *argument* for taking a certain attitude to death. Rather, it is a suggestive way of *responding* to a combination of two characteristics of the experience of dying. First, the prospect of death calls for a serious reflective response. Death is not unique in this respect, since other milestones in our lives also call for such serious reflection: our decisions about which career to pursue, for example, or whom to marry, or where to settle. Of course, we do not, and would not, say 'Everyone marries alone', or 'Everyone decides which profession to pursue alone', as a way of enunciating these truths. We plainly need to say more, then, to display the intelligibility of the EDA-claim. The second characteristic of death, which is not shared with the significance of conjugal or professional decision-making, is that death centrally involves taking permanent leave of everyone around you.[20] So the problem of death is, in part, the problem of how to reconcile yourself to the fact that everyone and everything you care about will be permanently withdrawn from you. That is likely to be experienced as a chilling and lonely prospect.

None of this means that you cannot *learn* anything from others' reflections on death. It does not enforce an evaluative kind of solipsism. (We might avoid certain mistakes from a careful reading of *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, for example.[21]) But it does mean that what you will be aware of, when you learn from others about how to cope with death, will be experienced in an intensely first-personal way, in which you focus on *your* removal from the lives of everyone else, and in

[19] Ibid., 201.

[20] Kai Draper, 'Disappointment, Sadness, and Death', *The Philosophical Review* **108** (1999), 387–414, also emphasizes these characteristics of death as a means of pinpointing death's distinctive badness.

[21] Though not, I think, by reading it in Kamm's way.

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which, as a result, your *separateness* from everyone else will almost inevitably be emphasized.

To summarize: the EDA-claim makes sense as the joint product of a non-substantive and a substantive interpretation of that claim. The non-substantive interpretation of the EDA-claim is the very interpretation Kagan thinks is useless, due to its over-generation of implications: 'No one can die *my* death for me'. The implications do not over-generate, however, because this non-substantive interpretation of the EDA-claim is partnered with the following, more substantive interpretation of the EDA-claim: 'Everyone's death consists in their permanent removal from the lives of others'. These interpretations of the EDA-claim combine to produce the intense awareness of your *separateness* from others which you are likely to experience when you learn that you will shortly die. To say that everyone dies alone is not an inapposite way of trying to express these truths. Or so it seems to me.

A final thought: what the EDA-claim is getting at, when all is said and done, is a truth which is somewhat analogous to the 'separateness of persons' or 'distinctness of lives' emphasized by Nozick and other deontologists.[22] The point that our lives are separate may seem trivial, but may yet be salutary if the background complaint is that consequentialism pays insufficient heed to the moral differences between the *intrapersonal* and *interpersonal* aggregation of costs and benefits. In this way, one can emphasize that individuals lead separate lives without risking the accusation of triviality.[23] Similarly, one can sensibly allude to the separateness of deaths without denying that everyone is affected by death, or even without having to deny that everyone is affected by death in exactly the same way.

3. 'Face to face with *It*': Ivan's Mistakes

On the Redemptive View, Ivan becomes a better person (even a new person) prior to death. On my view, the traits which equipped him pretty well for life do not equip him well for death. Dying makes

[22] See Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1974), 33, and also John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 26–7.

[23] How much work the 'separateness of persons' claim can do for deontology is, of course, a moot point. But I don't think it fails at the first hurdle. See Iwao Hirose, 'Aggregation and the Separateness of Persons', *Utilitas* **25** (2013), 182–205, for a recent discussion of how far it gets us.

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him a *worse* person, not a *better* person. Or, to put the point in a slightly different way, death flushes out qualities or dispositions of Ivan's character which had been kept largely under wraps whilst he was alive and healthy. We come to know more about these character faults when Ivan approaches death than we did before the onset of his final illness.

As a useful prelude to my fuller case, it may be worthwhile emphasizing some of the traits which Ivan exhibits in his life. Ivan has been non-confrontational, calculating, and accommodating. He routinely avoids painful confrontations with his wife, and flees from her neediness and jealousy into the world of his legal work, where he enjoys a greater sense of control. He pursues his professional ambitions, for the most part, shrewdly, with composure, and through skilful adjustment to his circumstances. Even his youthful sensual excesses and flings seem to have been artfully managed and carefully timetabled. He is a highly *compartmentalized* person, as the following passage makes clear:

> The skill of compartmentalizing the official side of things and keeping that apart from his own real life was one that Ivan Ilyich possessed in the highest degree; long practice and natural talent had enabled him to refine it to such a degree that now he could act like a virtuoso performer, occasionally allowing himself to mix human and official relationships by way of a joke. He allowed himself this liberty because he felt strong enough whenever necessary to reinstate the distinction between the official and the human by discarding the latter. (*DI*, 179)

These traits serve him pretty well in his professional career. But they serve him very badly as he gradually succumbs to the ravages of his illness and is forced to face up to the gravity of his situation. The impossibility of avoiding the reality of his death, of averting his gaze from it and arranging some diversion for himself, makes the experience of dying practically unbearable to him. In dying, he has nowhere to run, nowhere to hide:

> He would go into his study, lie down and find himself alone again with *It*. Face to face with *It*. Nothing to be done about *It*. Only stare at *It* and go cold. (*DI*, 196; original emphases)

And yet Ivan tries to seek distraction from death for as long as he can. Entirely understandably, he is, at first, consumed with the task of finding an effective medical remedy. When these remedies all prove futile, he seeks distraction from his condition by finding fault with everyone around him: by their evasiveness, their thoughtless

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optimism, *their* failure to confront the fact that he is dying. (I shall revisit this point.) In my view, these are principally strategies of distraction, and they largely explain the course of the further development of Ivan's ways of managing his fear of death as he nears the end. At the stage just after Ivan's struggles with the syllogism, the narrator remarks:

> He tried to get back to his earlier ways of thinking which had once protected him from thinking about death. (*DI*, 194)

These ways of thinking, in my view, cast a very long shadow over his subsequent reflections. Ivan never manages to elude them entirely.

On Kamm's Redemptive View, Ivan's attempts to review his life are taken to reflect his tacit belief that 'if we are closing the production, we should make a tally. We should not bring the production to an end… unless there is something sufficiently good left behind'.[24] Ivan then comes to see that his life has been wasted. But the very verdict that he has wasted his life is reflective of the existence of a new self, from which that verdict has been issued. So Ivan's principal concern, faced with death, is to assuage his Type-3 fears. He cannot undo his wasted life, but he comes to learn that, by becoming a new sort of person, he can rectify his life. As a happy side-effect of these reflections, his Type-1(a) fears are also assuaged, since at this stage he no longer values a continuation of his old life.

The key fault of the Redemptive View lies in its contention that Ivan is overwhelmingly concerned with Type-3 fears. As I see it, Ivan is *not* concerned with Type-3 fears. His principal concern lies with Type-1(a) fears. To see why this might be so, consider a couple of different ways of reacting to the news that you are about to lose everything through death.[25] First, you might make a tally of what you left behind in order to discover what was good about your life. This is Kamm's suggestion, and it is what she thinks Ivan attempts. The knowledge that what you have done with your life is good may then provide you with some consolation as you prepare to depart from it. Second, and alternatively, you might *condemn* everything you are about to leave behind, in order to comfort yourself for the fact that there will be no more of it. In other words, you might be tempted to conduct a *biographical fire sale*. If you can convince yourself that the life you are about to leave behind was no good, then you might be less troubled by the fact that it will shortly end. That will take care of Type-1(a) fears. (Type-1(b) fears will be a

[24] Kamm, op. cit., 212.
[25] These approaches are not meant to be exhaustive.

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less pressing issue if you have *not* become a new self, and if the future goods you will be deprived of are readily identified as goods you are already familiar with.) And that might be the best you can do in the circumstances. Roughly speaking, this strategy is, I think, Ivan's. He does not arrive at this strategy immediately. It is approached indirectly, and is preceded by other types of mistake. It is unlikely to be fully conscious to him. I shall have more to say about it below.

Having sketched in this background, I can now plot a more detailed path through the various fears Ivan is beset by, as his condition impresses itself upon him. As I see it, he makes five principal mistakes. It ought to be noted, of course, that these mistakes may be understandable, and excusable. He is dying, and he is in great pain, particularly towards the end. They are nonetheless still *mistakes*. The point is not that we should blame Ivan for making them, but that he is not *unmasking* nearly as much as he thinks he is.

Ivan's *First Mistake*, made soon after the consciousness that he is dying, is to wonder what the experiential properties of death will be:

> There has been daylight; now there is darkness. I have been *here*; now I'm going *there*. Where? (*DI*, 191; original emphases)

Ivan here appears to conceptualize death as an unfamiliar state of being with unusual, unknown experiential properties. That is not the way Ivan should be thinking about death. Death consists of extinction, not of a different type of experience.[26] Now the First Mistake plays comparatively little role in what follows, and it soon wears off in any case, so it must be counted as a minor mistake. It is worth enumerating it, nonetheless, because it puts some pressure on Kamm's tabulation of Type-2 fears as a genuinely separate form of fear which she ascribes to Ivan. Ivan's First Mistake demonstrates that he is not thinking of death in terms of extinction, but rather as an unusual modulation of experience. When he moves beyond this misapprehension, his approach to death betrays no sensitivity to Type-2 fears as distinct from Type-1 fears.

True to his desire to distract himself from the reality of his situation, and because he is no longer able to attend to his professional duties, Ivan takes refuge in the recesses of his life rarely thought about. He still thinks, at this stage, that his life has been a good,

[26] Ivan reveals no stable religious impulses, although his wife arranges for him to be attended by a priest towards the end (*DI*, 214), and though some of his private reflections and entreaties appear to be addressed to God (*DI*, 208). There is therefore no deep reason why Ivan should conceive of death as the pathway to an afterlife, rather than as extinction.

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happy and successful one on the whole. He now expects the goodness of his life to comfort him for the fact that there will be no more of it. This is his *Second Mistake*. This is a mistake because memories of his previous happiness simply do not seem to constitute the kind of resource that can reconcile him to his death. Perhaps memories of his previous happiness can help to console him if he is *already* reconciled to his death. But if he is not so reconciled, and is trying to bring about a feeling of reconciliation, then it is little surprise that a diet of happy memories will intensify his fears and despair, not resolve or cure them. These memories will simply sharpen his awareness of what he is about to lose. And so it proves. Ivan distrusts or resents those memories, because they are not doing what they were supposed to do. They are making things harder, not easier, for him. This distrust of, or disappointment in, his memories also encourages him to make other mistakes.

Ivan realizes, at this point, that the only memories that avoid generating feelings of dissatisfaction with his life are the memories of childhood. The nearer he gets to the present, the more dissatisfied he is:

> [A]ll the reasons that had seemed so real melted away now before his eyes and turned into something trivial and often disgusting… the nearer he got to the present day, the more trivial and dubious his pleasures appeared. (*DI*, 209)

It is not implausible, of course, that Ivan's reflections about his life should reveal it to have been less happy and accomplished than he has taken it to have been. He did not live in a particularly reflective way. Yet it is important to bear in mind that his dissatisfaction must partly derive from the role he has already awarded to his memories. They were meant to lighten his burden, to console him for the fact that his life is nearly over. They are not doing that. It is therefore unsurprising that he finds them deficient.

Of course, Ivan might at this stage distinguish between an experience, E, he has had, and his memory, M, of that experience. The introspective presentation of M is not doing him much good in his present situation, yet the unhelpfulness of M need not impugn E itself. But Ivan does not draw this distinction. He thinks that, because M is not making his predicament any easier, there must also be something gravely deficient about E, or about *what* is remembered. This negative verdict helps to set the stage for his *Third Mistake*: Ivan expects the contents of his life to tell him *why* there will be no more of it. He has come to think that the way he has led his life explains *why* he is going to die. The connection in question

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is not a causal one, but one which is concerned with moral desert. Consider:

> In society's opinion I was heading uphill, but in equal measure life was slipping away from me… And now it's all over. (*DI*, 209)

And also:

> There was one point of life back there at the beginning of life, but after that everything had been getting blacker and blacker. 'In inverse proportion to the square of the distance from death', he thought. And this image of a stone accelerating as it flies down imprinted itself on his soul. Life, a series of increasing sufferings, flies ever faster towards its end, the most terribly suffering. 'I'm flying somewhere…' (*DI*, 212)

Slightly further on, he resists the verdict that his life has been bad, but this resistance actually confirms his view that the way in which he has led his life must explain why it is about to end:

> 'Resistance is impossible', he would say to himself. 'But if only I could see what it's all about! No, that's impossible too. *There would be an explanation if I could say I've been wrong in the way I've lived my life*. But you couldn't say that. It's not possible', he would tell himself, recalling how fastidious he had been about the propriety and respectability of his life. (*DI*, 212; emphases added)

This matches a slightly earlier reflection:

> And whenever the thought occurred to him… *that all this was happening to him because he had been living the wrong kind of life*, he would instantly remember how proper his life had been and dismiss such a bizarre notion. (*DI*, 210; emphases added)

Interestingly, the Third Mistake is in tension with other passages, in which Ivan seems to accept that death is not a sentence passed on the goodness or badness of his life:

> 'Why hast Thou done all of this? Why hast Thou brought me to this point? Why oh why dost Thou torture me like this?…'
>
> He was not expecting any answers; he was weeping because there were not and could not be any answers. (*DI*, 208)

> [I]n solitude he brooded on the same inexplicable question: 'What is this? Can it really be death?' And an inner voice would reply, 'Yes, that's what it is'. 'What is this torture for?'

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> And the voice would reply, 'It's just there. It's not for anything.' Above and beyond this there was nothing. (*DI*, 210)

But Ivan's acceptance of this verdict is simply not stable. In this respect, his professional involvement in the legal world casts a long shadow over his approach to the death:

> 'So, what *do* you want now? To live? Live how? To live as you do in court when the usher yells out, "The court is in session!"' 'Court in session, sessions in court', he repeated to himself. 'Here comes judgement! But I'm not guilty', he cried out angrily. 'What is this for?' (*DI*, 210; original emphasis)

Ivan is in a quandary over his guilt. He later decides to enter a plea of guilt, having, at first, vigorously protested his innocence. But the most important point to labour here is not the content of Ivan's precise plea, but his faulty conviction that his death has anything to do with his guilt or his innocence. He may be dying, but he is not under a death *sentence*. His infidelity to that conviction also explains his vulnerability to his *Fourth Mistake*.

Ivan's Fourth Mistake is to disparage the contents of his life in order to console himself that there will be no more of it. The verdicts which have already been gathered under the Second Mistake, and further underlined by the Third Mistake, are then re-applied to constitute the Fourth Mistake. The Fourth Mistake consists in the biographical bonfire sale I adverted to earlier. It is prepared for and facilitated by the Second Mistake and Third Mistake. At this point, Ivan is no longer resistant to the doubts that his life has not been all it should have been:

> His career, the ordering of his life, his family, the things that preoccupied people in society and at work – all of this might have been wrong. He made an attempt at defending these things for himself. And suddenly he sensed the feebleness of what he was defending. There was nothing to defend. (*DI*, 213–4)

At first, Ivan's admission to himself that he has not lived well compounds his suffering: 'This knowledge exacerbated his physical suffering, making it ten times worse' (*DI*, 214). The admission of guilt, then, does not offer him immediate consolation. He has not yet reached the moment at which he 'had fallen through and seen a light' (*DI*, 216), and his mood, even at this stage, is still liable to fluctuate between hope and resignation. But the ingredients for his final act of resignation are now all in place. As I see it, the admission that his life has been indefensible is the product of his response to the fact

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that his memories cannot console him for the fact he will die (the Second Mistake), together with his conviction that his death must be explained by the way in which he has lived (the Third Mistake). When he can no longer deny that he will shortly die, he is forced to concede that his life has been a failure. But that painful admission is, in turn, a source of consolation: he no longer has to bemoan the discontinuation of his life, since he no longer values that life. It may be complained that this tackles Type-1(a) fears, but not Type-1(b) fears. But, on my reading, Ivan has not become a new sort of person. If he had continued to live, he would have lived in broadly the same sort of way. Deprivation fears, for Ivan, just are Type-1(a) fears.

The Fourth Mistake is a mistake of which Ivan is not fully conscious. That makes it qualitatively different from the other mistakes I have imputed to him.[27] It is no coincidence that he is not fully conscious of his Fourth Mistake. The strategy embedded in it exemplifies a 'sour grapes' mode of valuation, where the unattainability of a future life explains why he comes to disvalue that life. Generally speaking, sour grapes exercises in valuation will not be fully conscious to the subjects who manifest them.[28] That is because these exercises in valuation clearly deal in the 'wrong kind of reasons' for evaluation, which would not be efficacious for those subjects who were aware that they were dealing in the wrong kind of reasons.[29] They will lack such efficacy because the subject is motivated to make these evaluations for reasons which are distinct from those which are relevant to the content of the evaluations. Our moral judgments are naturally interpreted as cognitive, or belief-shaped, and beliefs aim at truth, not efficacy.

[27] But it is rather similar to the Fifth Mistake, which I discuss below. Of course, Ivan is not aware of *any* of these mistakes *qua* mistakes.

[28] See Jon Elster, *Sour Grapes: Studies in the Subversion of Rationality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), and Donald Bruckner, 'In Defense of Adaptive Preferences', *Philosophical Studies* **142** (2009), 307–24, for relevant discussions.

[29] The 'wrong kind of reasons' problem has received much recent discussion in connection with T. M. Scanlon's 'buck-passing' account of value, which attempts to analyze values in terms of reasons. For relevant discussion, see Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (London: Harvard University Press, 1998), 95–8, Wlodek Rabinowicz and Tonni Rønnow-Rasmussen, 'The Strike of the Demon: On Fitting Pro-Attitudes and Value', *Ethics* **114** (2004), 391–423, and also Gerald Lang, 'The Right Kind of Solution to the Wrong Kind of Reason Problem', *Utilitas* **29** (2008), 472–89.

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My justification for attributing the Fourth Mistake to Ivan is that doing so makes better overall sense of his acceptance of the fact that he will soon die. But does it make sense of the 'light' that is revealed to Ivan at the very end of his life? Yes, I think it does. The 'light', for Ivan, consists in his grasp of how to deal with the fact that he will die, which is the primary task he has to tackle. And living well, for him, consists in his ability to deal appropriately with the dire circumstances he is in.

Ivan's final mistake – his *Fifth Mistake* – is to disparage the character of those around him, whom he accuses, at least silently, of being uncaring and dishonest, in order to reconcile himself to the fact that he must shortly take his leave of them. This is a particularly controversial mistake to impute to Ivan, since the narrator makes much of the detachment or indifference Ivan notices, or thinks he notices, in those he has to deal with in the course of his illness. Their attitudes are supposed to echo the attitudes Ivan has manifested towards those he has dealt with in the course of his legal career, and thus serve the grim table-turning purpose of reflecting the true calibre of the relationships Ivan has constructed in his life. On this view, the character of the relationships in which Ivan is now embedded matches the character of the relationships in which Ivan has previously embedded other people. Both sets of relationships are gravely deficient. Consider Ivan's reflections after a medical appointment in the early days of his illness:

> The whole thing turned out just as he had expected, and as it always does. He was made to wait, the doctor was full of his own importance – an attitude he was familiar with because it was one that he himself assumed in court – then came all the tapping and listening, the questions with predetermined and obviously superfluous answers, the knowing look that seemed to say, 'Just place yourself in our hands and we'll sort it out, we know what we're doing, there's no doubt about it, we can sort things out the same way as we would for anyone you care to name.' It was just like being in court. The way he looked at the accused in court was exactly the way he was being looked at now by the famous doctor. (*DI*, 182–3)

Of course, it must be admitted that Ivan's relationships are not all they might be. He has been a distant father and an evasive husband. His friendships have been largely pursued to entrench and further promote his professional advantage and sense of bourgeois respectability. For all that, it must be remembered that these relationships are now being viewed under an extremely harsh light, and for a

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particular purpose: his desperate need to reconcile himself to his present situation, in which he is gravely ill, and has little or no chance of recovery. Under a light as harsh as this, it is unsurprising that these relationships do not pass muster. We are told, for example, that he is offended by the '[h]ealth, strength, and vitality' of those around him (*DI*, 198–9).[30] Health, strength, and vitality are not, generally speaking, offensive characteristics to possess.

Having received such condemnation, the poverty of these relationships also serves to ratify his conviction that his life as a whole has been a failure:

> Next morning, when he saw his servant, then his wife, then his daughter, then the doctor – their every movement and every word bore out the terrible truth that had been revealed to him during the night. In them he saw himself and all he had lived by, and he could clearly see that it was all wrong; it was all a gross deception obscuring life and death. (*DI*, 214)

Ivan's attitudes to those around him follow a somewhat similar course to the attitudes manifested by his Second Mistake, Third Mistake, and Fourth Mistake. He looks to them for consolation; then the weak quality of those relationships is taken to reflect the badness of the life which now explains why he is about to die; and then these relationships are simply written off, as a way of coping with the fact that he is about to lose everything.

One of Ivan's complaints about those around him consists in their dishonesty and indifference. Though Ivan knows that he will not recover, his family and doctors pretend otherwise, either to avoid a painful confrontation with him, or out of indifference to his fate:

> Ivan Ilyich's worst torment was the lying – the lie, which was somehow maintained by them all, that he wasn't dying, he was only ill, and all he had to do was keep calm and follow doctor's orders and them something good would emerge. Whereas he knew that, whatever was done to him, nothing would emerge but more and more agony, suffering and death. And this lie was torture for him – he was tortured by their unwillingness to acknowledge what they all knew and he knew; they wanted to lie to him about his terrible situation, and they wanted him – they were compelling him – to be a party to this lie. (*DI*, 199)

[30] Apart from those qualities as they are manifested in Gerasim; I shall return to Ivan's (problematic) relationship with Gerasim below.

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Ivan is correct: he is dying, and the remedies will all prove to be futile. For all that, he has no medical training, and does not *know* that he is dying. He is inclined to think that his doctors' advice is unreliable, because it is not accompanied by anguish or signs of personal involvement. His judgment on that score is itself unreliable. Professional detachment is not a heinous quality for doctors (any more than judges) to have. In general, Ivan is simply too harsh on the hoping-against-hope strategies employed by his family and doctors. And, as far as his family is concerned, he is blind to *their* need to accommodate themselves to the possibility that he may indeed be dying. To some degree, he is manifesting an ostrich-like attitude to the reality of their condition, as well as his own condition, by fastening on their ostrich-like attitude towards the reality of his condition. Both sets of attitudes call for sympathy and understanding, not condemnation and contempt.

What does Ivan want from those around him, apart from a cure for his illness? We are told that:

> There were some moments.... when what Ivan Ilyich wanted more than anything else – however embarrassed he would have been to admit it – what he wanted was for someone to take pity on him as if he were a sick child. He wanted to be kissed and cuddled and have a few tears shed over him in the way that children are cuddled and comforted. (*DI*, 200)

We are told, furthermore, that 'his relationship with Gerasim offered something close to this' (*DI*, 200). But it is difficult to see how his relationship with Gerasim really fits the bill, whatever the narrator says.

What Gerasim has to offer is a form of guileless, blunt-speaking straightforwardness, and a willingness to serve Ivan, rather than the pity or the overtly comforting behaviour that Ivan is after. Here is a telling example. As his condition deteriorates, Ivan finds that his pain is relieved if his legs are raised:

> It was a comfort to him when Gerasim, *sometimes for nights on end*, held his legs up and refused to go to bed. (*DI*, 199; emphases added)

I think we have reason to see his close association with Gerasim, not as a promising and sadly unique example of a warm and open and respectful relationship which he enjoys with no one else, but as someone whom, uniquely, he can treat more or less as he likes. Even if these interactions help to control Ivan's pain, they also spring from Ivan's desire to dominate others, and they lead to

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Ivan's treatment of Gerasim as little more than a piece of furniture. Ivan is in a position to extract this behaviour from Gerasim, but not anyone else. At this point, Ivan has finally succumbed to his hitherto unexercised desire to exercise power over others, the presence of which has already been revealed in earlier passages:

> [N]ow that Ivan Ilyich was an examining magistrate he felt that everyone without exception was in his power, even the most important and self-satisfied of people… Far from abusing this power, he did his best to play it down, but his consciousness of that power and the very choice to play it down were what gave his new job its interest and appeal. (*DI*, 169)

Compare a passage describing Ivan's attitudes after his promotion to assistant chief prosecutor:

> The knowledge of the power that he wielded, the possibility of ruining anyone that he fancied ruining, the gravitas (even if it was all outward show) which could be sensed as he walked into court or dealt with his subordinates, the success that he was enjoying with his superiors and subordinates alike, and, above all, his masterly handling of the cases – all of this gave him pleasure, and, along with chit-chat with colleagues, dinners and whist, filled his life to the full. (*DI*, 173)

If the relationship he develops with Gerasim towards the end of his life is a new sort of relationship for him, or a relationship which serves some of his immediate needs, it remains far from a wholly admirable one.

4. What Can We Learn From Ivan Ilyich?

In certain respects, Ivan seems *average*: he is averagely unprepared for the prospect of death, and is averagely terrified by it.[31] But what should we say about Ivan's *responses* to the prospect of his death? How generalizable or average can *they* be?

I have argued that Ivan's deathbed verdicts on his life betray deficiencies of judgment, and reveal a certain failure of nerve. The prospect of death actualizes traits of character which had been kept, for the most part, unactualized when he was alive and healthy. For these reasons, Ivan's particular case is unlikely to serve as the universal template for responses to dying. Other individuals, with average,

[31] Kagan, op. cit., 193, seems to agree.

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flawed, but non-disastrous lives behind them, might react differently: perhaps more nobly, and with greater insight. The prospect of death might deepen them, or prompt them to form more accurate beliefs about the value of the lives of which they will shortly be taking their leave.

Of course, I do not want to deny these possibilities. But there are still two interesting general lessons furnished by Ivan's case, which I will gesture at in this closing section.

The first of them is related to the fact that the biographical review conducted by Ivan, in his particular situation, was always liable to be corrupted by the particular burdens which this exercise was forced to shoulder. This point readily generalizes: if you know that you are dying, there may be a standing temptation to turn to your personal memories as a source of consolation, but one foreseeable consequence of this exercise is that your awareness of the goodness of your life may sharpen your sense of loss, and thus actually reduce your chances of being properly reconciled to your death. To cope with this problem, you might be disposed instead to take a dismissive attitude to the life you have lived. In taking such an attitude, you will find less to complain about in respect of its discontinuation, but then you will be departing from your life with distorted beliefs about its true value. Even if we may legitimately aspire to avoiding these mistakes, Ivan's case should persuade us that we remain vulnerable to them. His case thus serves a salutary purpose.

The second, more abstract, lesson follows from reflection on the first lesson. Even if we can avoid Ivan's particular mistakes, what would a successful reconciliation to death actually consist of? How is it to be achieved, except as a grim acceptance of a *fait accompli*? Perhaps we might think of our lives as a kind of story, or narrative. Since stories need to be brought to an end, death may offer a satisfying completion of our personal stories. The problem with this line of thought is that there is a conceptual and affective gap between the qualities of the lives we have led and the need to reconcile ourselves to the completion of those lives. Ivan's case suggests that to judge your life in a certain way is one thing, to reconcile yourself to your death is quite another.

We can put the point in a slightly different way: *given* our acceptance that we will die, better lives are to be preferred to worse lives, and relatively shapely and complete tallies may be preferable to relatively shapeless and incomplete tallies.[32] But reconciliation to death

[32] See David Velleman, 'Well-Being and Time', *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* **72** (1991), 48–77, for a view which emphasizes the importance

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cannot be delivered by these well-being-realizing properties. The reconciliation project which faces us as we near death is distinct from the well-being project which tends to consume us throughout our lives. I think, therefore, that it may be simply a mistake to welcome death because our lives will have been tidier as a result of its arrival, or because, when death arrives, our lives are on an upwards trend, rather than a downwards trend, or because we find ourselves at a loose end, with the major storylines of our lives wrapped up and completed. (Ivan surely died too soon for this to be true of *him*.) These properties of lives may make our *lives* better, but they do not show us, by themselves, how we are to reconcile ourselves to our *deaths*. The materials for reconciling ourselves to our deaths are not straightforwardly settled by the quality of our lives.

There is, of course, a great deal more to say about these issues. But we are already in a position to grasp why it may be so difficult to end our narratives in a satisfactory way. Death is *tacked on* to our lives in ways which make it very difficult for us to achieve reconciliation with it, or to prepare adequately for it. In this sense, Ivan's case, depicted with such deft particularity by Tolstoy, has universal resonance. Each of us will have different projects to try to complete, different memories to fall back on, and different people to rely upon and say our farewells to, if and when we come to know in advance that we are dying. But the predicament we will be in may well be closer to that of a fictional judge in nineteenth-century Saint Petersburg than we might have been inclined to think.[33]

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of narrative structure to human lives. For a dissenting view, see Galen Strawson, 'Against Narrativity', *Ratio* **17** (2004), 428–52.

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