



Research Paper

A study of existential anxiety and the call of conscience in the analysis of the novel *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* based on Heidegger's perspective

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Abstract

Leo Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* is among the most profound literary explorations of human awareness of death and the possibility of authentic existence. This study examines how existential anxiety and the call of conscience unfold in Ivan Ilyich's process of awareness, drawing on Martin Heidegger's ontological analysis. Employing conceptual analysis and phenomenological interpretation, the research rereads the protagonist's lived experiences of illness, dying, and the collapse of everyday self-evidence within the horizon of Heidegger's key concepts, particularly being-toward-death, anxiety, and the call of conscience. The study is grounded in close engagement with Heidegger's primary texts, especially *Being and Time*, alongside a systematic analysis of the novel's existential findings demonstrate that Ivan Ilyich's anxiety closely parallels Heidegger's notion of existential anxiety, which confronts the human being with finitude and nothingness, dismantles the illusion of security inherent in everyday life, and opens the possibility of existential disclosure. Within this framework, the call of conscience functions as an awakening force that summons the individual to retrieve the self from inauthentic modes of existence. Moreover, the analysis shows that the exposure of the limitations of empirical science in addressing the question of the meaning of Being emerges from the structural interrelation between anxiety and conscience, as anxiety disrupts unquestioned reliance on scientific understanding and initiates a turn toward existential responsibility. Nevertheless, a fundamental divergence appears regarding the origin of the call of conscience. While Tolstoy grounds conscience in a divine and faith-based source, Heidegger.

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Extended Abstract

1. Introduction

Death has always been one of the most fundamental horizons through which human existence becomes intelligible. Although death is often treated as a biological or medical event, philosophical reflection reveals it as a decisive existential phenomenon that fundamentally reshapes the meaning of life. In modernity, scientific rationality and social conventions have largely reduced death to a technical problem to be managed or postponed, thereby concealing its existential significance. As a result, everyday life often unfolds in a mode of forgetfulness, where individuals remain absorbed in social roles, professional success, and externally imposed norms.

Leo Tolstoy's novella *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* presents a powerful literary depiction of this condition. Ivan Ilyich lives a socially respectable and legally successful life, guided by what is considered proper, normal, and advantageous. However, the onset of a terminal illness disrupts this seemingly stable world and forces him into an intense confrontation with death. This confrontation does not merely generate fear or physical suffering; rather, it gives rise to a deeper form of anxiety that calls into question the authenticity of his entire existence.

Martin Heidegger's existential analytic in *Being and Time* offers a philosophical framework capable of illuminating this experience. Heidegger distinguishes existential anxiety (*Angst*) from ordinary fear, emphasizing that anxiety reveals the nothingness underlying everyday meanings and discloses *Dasein's* finitude. Closely related to anxiety is the call of

conscience, which summons *Dasein* away from absorption in *das Man* (the anonymous "they") and toward responsibility for its own being. Heidegger himself briefly refers to Tolstoy's novella as an exemplary illustration of the collapse of everydayness in the face of death, indicating a deep structural affinity between philosophical phenomenology and literary narrative.

The present study seeks to analyze Ivan Ilyich's existential crisis through the Heideggerian concepts of anxiety and conscience. At the same time, it aims to clarify the limits of this interpretation by showing how Tolstoy's narrative ultimately moves beyond Heidegger's non-theological ontology toward a spiritual understanding of death.

2. Findings

The analysis reveals several key findings. First, Ivan Ilyich's experience of illness gradually transforms from a medical concern into a form of existential anxiety. Initially, he seeks reassurance from doctors and scientific explanations, but these prove incapable of addressing the meaning of his suffering. As anxiety deepens, the entire network of everyday meanings—career advancement, social respectability, and family life—loses its self-evidence. This corresponds closely to Heidegger's description of anxiety as a disclosure in which the world as a whole becomes insignificant.

Second, anxiety plays a revelatory rather than merely destructive role. Through anxiety, Ivan becomes aware that his life has been governed by external norms and social expectations rather than authentic self-understanding. This disclosure prepares the ground for the emergence of the call of conscience. Ivan's persistent inner questioning whether his



life has been lived “rightly” mirrors Heidegger’s account of conscience as a silent call that reveals one’s ownmost responsibility. Importantly, this call is not reducible to moral guilt or social judgment; it is an existential summons to confront oneself as a finite being.

Third, the study shows that Tolstoy’s narrative exposes the limitations of scientific rationality. Medical discourse objectifies Ivan’s body and treats his condition as a case, thereby concealing the existential meaning of dying. Anxiety interrupts this objectification and reveals the inadequacy of purely empirical explanations when faced with the question of meaning. In this respect, the novella implicitly criticizes scientism and affirms the necessity of existential reflection.

Finally, while Heidegger’s framework successfully clarifies the phenomenological structure of Ivan’s anxiety and conscience, the analysis also identifies a crucial divergence. Heidegger interprets authenticity as resolute acceptance of being-toward-death, without appeal to transcendence. Tolstoy, however, depicts Ivan’s final transformation as involving compassion, self-transcendence, and a passage toward light, suggesting a spiritual overcoming of death rather than mere acceptance of finitude.

3. Result

The study concludes that *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* can be fruitfully interpreted through Heidegger’s concepts of existential anxiety and the call of conscience. In both the philosophical and literary accounts, anxiety dismantles the taken-for-granted structures of everyday life and reveals the inauthenticity of existence governed by social conformity. Conscience functions as a turning point

that summons the individual to assume responsibility for one’s own being.

At the same time, the comparison highlights the limits of Heideggerian existential ontology when applied to Tolstoy’s narrative. Whereas Heidegger remains within the horizon of finitude and refrains from affirming any transcendent resolution of death, Tolstoy’s novella gestures toward a spiritual horizon in which death is not merely faced but transformed. This divergence explains the enduring interpretive tensions surrounding the novella and shows how literature can both anticipate and exceed philosophical analysis.

Ultimately, the article demonstrates that Tolstoy’s work not only exemplifies existential anxiety in a Heideggerian sense but also challenges philosophy to reconsider the possibility that the confrontation with death may open onto meanings that lie beyond phenomenological disclosure alone.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, phenomenological-comparative approach grounded in close textual analysis. Within this framework, Martin Heidegger’s *Being and Time* is examined in parallel with Tolstoy’s *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* in order to elucidate their conceptual and structural affinities, with particular emphasis on existential anxiety and the call of conscience.

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Contribution of the Authors

Vahid Rostami conducted the main philosophical analysis and prepared the initial draft of the manuscript.

Dr. Jahangir Masoudi supervised the research, critically reviewed the



arguments, and contributed to the final revision of the article.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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