

CONFESSION

by Leo Tolstoy

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I.

I was baptized and educated in the Orthodox Christian faith. I was taught it from childhood and through the whole time of my boyhood and youth. But when I, at eighteen years of age, left the second year's course of the university, I no longer believed any of the things I had been taught.

To judge from certain recollections, I had never believed in earnest; I had only had confidence in what I was taught and what the grown persons confessed in my presence; but this confidence was very brittle.

I remember when I was but eleven years old, a boy, now long dead, Volódinka M—, who attended the gymnasium, came to our house one Sunday and communicated to us as the latest bit of news a discovery which had been made at the gymnasium. This discovery was that there was no God, and that everything which we were taught was a mere fabrication (that was in the year 1838). I remember how my elder brothers were interested in that news and how they called me to a council, and all of us were very much excited about it and received that information as something exceedingly interesting and quite probable.

I also remember how, when my eldest brother, Dmítri, who was a student at the university, suddenly with a passion which was characteristic of his nature abandoned himself to faith and began to attend all the services, to fast, and to lead a pure and moral life, all of us, even the grown persons, never stopped making him a butt of ridicule, and for some reason called him Noah. I remember how Músin-Púshkin, who at that time was the Curator of the Kazán University and who invited us to come to a dance at his house, tried in jest to persuade my brother, who declined to come, by telling him that even David had danced before the ark. At that time I sympathized with the jests of my elders and deduced the conclusion from it that the Catechism ought to be taught, that church ought to be attended, but that all that ought not to be taken too seriously. I also remember that I was very young when I read Voltaire, and that his ridicule not only did not provoke me, but even amused me very much.

My defection from faith took place in the same manner as it has taken place and still takes place in people of our cultivated class. In the majority of cases it happens like this, I think: people live as everybody else lives, and everybody else lives on the basis of principles that not only have nothing in common with the religious teaching, but generally run counter to it; the religious teaching does not enter into life, and in one's relation with other people one never has occasion to come across it, and in one's own life one never has occasion to refer to it; this religious teaching is professed somewhere there, far away from life and independently of it. If you come in contact with it, it is with its external phenomenon, which is not connected with life.

From a man's life, from his acts, it is impossible now, as it was then, to find out whether he is a believer or not. If there is a difference between one who openly professes

Orthodoxy and one who denies it, it is not in favour of the first. The open recognition and profession of Orthodoxy has generally been met with in dull, cruel, and self-important people, while intelligence, honesty, straightforwardness, good-heartedness, and morality are generally met with in people who profess to be unbelievers.

In the schools the pupils are taught the Catechism and are sent to church; officials have to show certificates of having received their communion. But a man of our circle, who is no longer studying and is not holding a government position, may nowadays pass dozens of years,—and formerly that was even more the case,—without thinking once that he is living among Christians and himself is professing the Christian Orthodox faith.

Thus, now as then, the religious teaching, which is accepted through confidence and is supported through external pressure, slowly melts under the influence of knowledge and the experiences of life, which are contrary to the religious teaching, and a man frequently goes on imagining that the religious teaching with which he has been imbued in childhood is in full force in him, whereas there is not even a trace left of it.

S——, an intelligent and truthful man, told me how he came to stop believing. When he was twenty-six years old he once at a night's rest during the chase followed his old habit, acquired in his childhood, and stood up to pray. His elder brother, who took part in the chase, was lying on the hay and looking at him. When S—— got through and was about to lie down, he said to him: "So you are still doing these things?"

That was all that was said. And S—— that very day quit praying and attending church. Thirty years have passed

since he stopped praying, receiving the communion, and going to church. Not that he knew the convictions of his brother and had joined them, not that he had decided on anything in his mind, but only because the sentence which his brother had uttered was like the pressure exerted with a finger against a wall which was ready to fall of its own weight; the sentence was merely an indication that where he thought there was faith there had long been a vacant spot, and that, therefore, the words which he spoke and the signs of the cross and the obeisances which he made during his praying were quite meaningless actions. Since he had come to recognize their meaninglessness, he could not keep them up any longer.

Thus it has always been with an enormous majority of people. I am speaking of people of our degree of culture, of people who are true to themselves, and not of those who use the very subject of faith as a means for obtaining any temporary ends. (These people are most confirmed unbelievers, for, if the faith is to them a means for obtaining any social advantages, it is no longer faith.) The people of our degree of education are in that condition when the light of knowledge and of life has melted the artificial structure, and they have either noticed it and have cleared the place, or have not yet noticed it.

The religious teaching which was imparted to me in my childhood disappeared in me just as in others, with this difference only that, since I began to read philosophical works at fifteen years of age, my apostasy very early became conscious. With my sixteenth year I quit praying and through my own initiative stopped attending church and preparing myself for communion. I did not believe in what I had been told in my childhood, but I believed in something. I should never have been able to say what it was I believed in. I believed in God, or, more correctly, I

did not deny God, but what kind of a God, I should have been at a loss to say. Nor did I deny Christ and his teaching, but what his teaching consisted in, I should also have been at a loss to say.

Now, as I recall that time, I see clearly that my faith, that something which, outside the animal instincts, moved my life, my only, real faith at that time was a belief in perfection. But what that perfection consisted in, or what its aims were, I should have been unable to say. I tried to perfect myself mentally,—I studied everything that I could and that life brought me in contact with; I tried to perfect my will and formed rules which I tried to follow; I perfected myself physically, prompting my strength and agility with all kinds of exercises, and practising endurance and patience in all kinds of privations. All that I regarded as perfection. At first it was, of course, moral perfection, but soon it was changed to perfection in general, that is, to a desire to be better, not before myself or before God, but before other people. And soon that tendency to be better before people gave place to a desire to be stronger than other people, that is, more famous, more influential, richer than others.

II.

Some day I will tell the history of my life,—it is both touching and instructive,—for those ten years of my youth. I think many, very many, have experienced the same. I wished with all my heart to be good; but I was young, I had passions, and I was alone, completely alone, when I was trying to find the good. Every time I endeavoured to give utterance to what formed my most intimate wishes, namely, that I wished to be morally good, I met with contempt and ridicule; and the moment I surrendered myself to the abominable passions, I was praised and encouraged.

Ambition, lust of power, selfishness, voluptuousness, pride, anger, revenge,—all that was respected. By abandoning myself to these passions I became like a grown person, and I felt that people were satisfied with me. A good aunt of mine, a pure soul, with whom I was living, kept telling me that there was nothing she wished so much for me as that I should have a liaison with a married woman: “Rien ne forme un jeune homme, comme une liaison avec une femme comme il faut;” there was another piece of luck she wished for me, and that was that I should be an adjutant, preferably an adjutant to the emperor; and the greatest piece of luck, that I might marry a very rich girl so that, in consequence of this marriage, I might have a very large number of slaves.

I cannot recall those years without dread, loathing, and anguish of heart. I killed people in war and challenged to duels to kill; I lost money at cards, wasting the labour of the peasants; I punished them, fornicated, and cheated. Lying, stealing, acts of lust of every description, drunkenness, violence, murder— There was not a crime which I did not commit, and for all that I was praised, and my contemporaries have regarded me as a comparatively moral man.

Thus I lived for ten years.

At that time I began to write through vanity, avarice, and pride. In my writings I did the same as in life. In order to have glory and money, for which I wrote, I had to conceal what was good and speak what was bad. And so I did. How often I managed to conceal in my writings, under the aspect of indifference and even light ridicule, those strivings of mine after the good, which formed the meaning of my life. I was successful in that, and I was praised.

When I was twenty-six years old, I arrived in St. Petersburg after the war, and there came in contact with authors. I was received like one of their own, and was flattered. Before I had time to look around, the conventional literary views of life, which these persons whom I met held, were appropriated by me and completely wiped out all my former attempts to become better. These views furnished the looseness of my morals with a theory which justified it.

The view of life which these people, my literary fellows, held, consisted in stating that life was all the time developing, and that in this development the chief part was taken by us, the men of ideas, and that among these men of ideas the greatest influence was exerted by us, artists and poets. Our calling was to teach people. In order that the natural question, "What do I know, and what shall I teach?" might not present itself to one, this theory explained that it was not necessary to know that, and that an artist and poet taught unconsciously. I was considered a marvellous artist and poet, and so it was quite natural for me to make this theory my own. I, the artist and poet, wrote and taught, myself not knowing what. For this I was paid, and I had excellent food, quarters, women, society; I had fame. Consequently, what I taught was very good.

Faith in the meaning of poetry and in progress in life was a creed, and I was one of its priests. It was very agreeable and profitable to be its priest, and I lived for a long time in that belief, never doubting its truth. But in the second and, especially, in the third year of that life I began to have my doubts about the infallibility of that faith, and started to investigate it. What gave me the first impulse to these misgivings was the fact, which I noticed, that all those priests were not at one among themselves. Some said: "We are the best and most useful teachers; we teach what is necessary, but the others teach incorrectly." And others

said: "No, we are the real ones, but you teach incorrectly." And they disputed, quarrelled, scolded, cheated, and deceived each other. Besides, there were many people among us who did not trouble themselves to find out who was right and who wrong, but who simply attained their selfish ends by means of that activity of ours. AU that made me doubt the truth of our faith.

Besides, having lost faith in the truth of my literary creed, I began to observe the priests more closely, and I convinced myself that nearly all the priests of that faith, the authors, were immoral people and, for the most part, bad people, insignificant as to their character, who stood much lower than those men whom I used to meet in my former riotous and military life; but they were self-confident and self-satisfied, as only such men can be who either are great saints or who do not know what sanctity is. I got sick of those people, and I got sick of myself, and I understood that that faith was a deception.

But what is strange is that, although I soon comprehended all that lying faith and renounced it, I did not renounce the rank which I was given by those men,—that of artist, poet, teacher. I naively imagined that I was a poet, an artist, and that I could teach others, not knowing myself what I was teaching. That was what I did.

From my association with these people I carried away a new vice,—a morbidly developed pride and an insane conviction that I was called to teach people, myself not knowing what.

Now that I think of that time, of my mental state, and of the mental state of those men (however, there are thousands of such even nowadays), I feel pity, and terror, and

amusement; there arises precisely the feeling that one experiences in a madhouse.

We were all convinced at that time that we must talk and talk, and write, and print, as fast as possible, and that that was necessary for the good of humanity. And thousands of us, denying and cursing one another, printed and wrote, teaching others. And, without noticing that we knew nothing, that to the simplest question of life,—what is good, and what bad,—we did not know what answer to give, we all spoke together, without listening to our neighbours, and now and then encouraged and praised each other, so that we, too, might be encouraged and praised, and now and then were irritated toward one another, precisely as in a madhouse.

Thousands of workmen day and night worked with all their strength, setting type and printing millions of words, and the post-office spread them all over Russia, and we proceeded to teach, and did not have time enough to teach everything, and kept growing angry because little attention was paid to us.

It is all very strange, but now it is easy to understand. Our real, intimate calculation was that we wanted to get as much money and praise as possible. In order to obtain this end we had nothing to do but write books and newspaper articles. And that we did. But, in order to do such a useless piece of work and be confident that we were very important people, we needed a consideration which would justify our activity, and so we concocted the following: everything which exists is reasonable. Everything which exists develops; everything is developed by means of culture; culture is measured by the dissemination of books and newspapers. We are paid and respected for writing books and newspapers, consequently we are most useful and good

men. This reflection would have been very nice, if all of us had been of one mind; but, since for every idea, expressed by one man, there always appeared another idea, diametrically opposed to the first, as expressed by another, that ought to have made us reflect. But we did not observe that; we received money, and the men belonging to our party praised us, consequently we every one of us considered ourselves in the right.

Now it is clear to me that there was no difference between that and a madhouse; but at that time I only dimly suspected that, and, like all insane persons, called everybody insane but myself.

III.

Thus I lived, abandoning myself to that insanity for six years longer, until my marriage. During that time I went abroad. My life in Europe and my associations with prominent men and scholars in Europe confirmed me even more in that faith of perfection in general, in which I was living, because I found the same faith in others. This faith assumed with me that customary form which it has with the majority of cultured people of our time. This faith was expressed by the word "progress." At that time I thought that that word expressed something. I did not yet understand then that, tormented, like any live man, by the questions as to how to live in the best manner possible, I, by saying that I ought to do so in conformity with progress, was giving the same kind of an answer that a man might give, who, being borne in a bark by the waves and by the wind, to the one important question of whither to keep his course, should not reply to the question, but should say: "We are being borne somewhere."

At that time I did not notice it. Only now and then, not my reason, but my feeling, revolted against that common superstition of our time, with which people veil from themselves the comprehension of life. Thus, during my stay in Paris, the sight of a capital punishment showed me the frailty of my superstition of progress. When I saw the head severed from the body, and both falling separately with a thud into a box, I understood, not with my reason, but with my whole being, that no theories of the reasonableness of everything existing and of progress could justify that deed, and that if all men on earth, beginning with the creation, had some theory which made this necessary,—I knew that it was not necessary, that it was bad, and that, therefore, not what people said and did, and not progress, but I with my heart was the judge of what was good and necessary. Another occasion which made me conscious of the insufficiency for life of the superstition of progress was the death of my brother. An intelligent, good, serious man, he grew sick when he was young, suffered for more than a year, and died an agonizing death, without comprehending what he had lived for, and still less why he should die. No theories could give any answers either to me or to him, during his slow and painful death. But those were only rare cases of doubt; in reality I continued to live professing the faith of progress. “Everything develops, and I, too, am developing; why I am developing with the rest, will appear later.” That is the way I ought to have then formulated my faith.

When I returned from abroad, I settled in the country and hit upon busying myself with the peasant schools. That occupation was particularly to my liking, because in it there was not that apparent lie which had appalled me in the activity of my literary teachership. Here also I worked in the name of progress, but this time I assumed a critical attitude toward progress. I said to myself that progress in

some of its manifestations took place irregularly, and that it was necessary to treat the primitive men, the peasant children, in a free way, by letting them choose the path of progress which they wished. In reality, I was still gyrating around one and the same insoluble problem, which was that I should teach not knowing what. In the higher spheres of my literary activity I saw that it was not possible to teach not knowing what to teach, because I observed that everybody was teaching in his own way, and that by disputing among themselves the men tried to conceal their ignorance; but here, with the peasant children, I thought that the difficulty might be obviated by leaving it to the children to learn what they pleased. Now it is ludicrous for me to think how I temporized in order to gratify my desire to teach, although in the depth of my soul I knew full well that I could not teach what was necessary, because I did not myself know what was necessary. After a year passed in occupations with the school, I went abroad again, in order to learn there how, without knowing anything myself, I might teach others.

I thought that I learned that abroad, and, armed with all that wisdom, I returned to Russia in the year of the liberation of the serfs and, accepting the position of a rural judge, I began to teach the uneducated masses in the schools and the educated people in the periodical which I published. Things apparently went well, but I felt that I was mentally not quite well and that it would not last long. I might have arrived even then at that despair at which I arrived fifteen years later, if I had not had another side of life, which I had not yet explored and which promised me salvation,—my domestic life.

For a year I acted as a rural judge and busied myself with my schools and my periodical, and I was so worn out, especially because I became so much involved, and my

struggle in my capacity as rural judge was so oppressive to me, and my activity in the schools was so pale, and I grew so tired of wagging my tongue in my periodical, which still consisted in the same thing,—in the desire to teach others and conceal the fact that I did not know what to teach,—that I grew sick, mentally rather than physically, and gave up everything and went to live with the Bashkirs of the steppe,—to breathe the air, drink kumys, and live an animal life. When I came back, I got married. The new conditions of my happy family life completely drew me away from all search for the general meaning of life, All my life during that time was centred in my family, my wife, my children, and, therefore, in cares for the increase of the means of existence. The striving after perfection, which before had given way to the striving after perfection in general, after progress, now gave way simply to the striving after making it as comfortable as possible for me and my family.

Thus another fifteen years passed.

Although I regarded authorship as a waste of time, I continued to write during those fifteen years. I had tasted of the seduction of authorship, of the seduction of enormous monetary remunerations and applauses for my insignificant labour, and so I submitted to it, as being a means for improving my material condition and for stifling in my soul all questions about the meaning of my life and life in general.

In my writings I advocated, what to me was the only truth, that it was necessary to live in such a way as to derive the greatest comfort for oneself and one's family.

Thus I proceeded to live, but five years ago something very strange began to happen with me: I was overcome by minutes at first of perplexity and then of an arrest of life, as

though I did not know how to live or what to do, and I lost myself and was dejected. But that passed, and I continued to live as before. Then those minutes of perplexity were repeated oftener and oftener, and always in one and the same form. These arrests of life found their expression in ever the same questions: "Why? Well, and then?"

At first I thought that those were simply aimless, inappropriate questions. It seemed to me that that was all well known and that if I ever wanted to busy myself with their solution, it would not cost me much labour,—that now I had no time to attend to them, but that if I wanted to I should find the proper answers. But the questions began to repeat themselves oftener and oftener, answers were demanded more and more persistently, and, like dots that fall on the same spot, these questions, without any answers, thickened into one black blotch.

There happened what happens with any person who falls ill with a mortal internal disease. At first there appear insignificant symptoms of indisposition, to which the patient pays no attention; then these symptoms are repeated more and more frequently and blend into one temporally indivisible suffering. The suffering keeps growing, and before the patient has had time to look around, he becomes conscious that what he took for an indisposition is the most significant thing in the world to him,—is death.

The same happened with me. I understood that it was not a passing indisposition, but something very important, and that, if the questions were going to repeat themselves, it would be necessary to find an answer for them. And I tried to answer them. The questions seemed to be so foolish, simple, and childish. But the moment I touched them and tried to solve them, I became convinced, in the first place,

that they were not childish and foolish, but very important and profound questions in life, and, in the second, that, no matter how much I might try, I should not be able to answer them. Before attending to my Samara estate, to my son's education, or to the writing of a book, I ought to know why I should do that. So long as I did not know why, I could not do anything, I could not live. Amidst my thoughts of farming, which interested me very much during that time, there would suddenly pass through my head a question like this: "All right, you are going to have six thousand desyatínas of land in the Government of Samara, and three hundred horses,—and then?". And I completely lost my senses and did not know what to think farther. Or, when I thought of the education of my children, I said to myself: "Why?" Or, reflecting on the manner in which the masses might obtain their welfare, I suddenly said to myself: "What is that to me?" Or, thinking of the fame which my works would get me, I said to myself: "All right, you will be more famous than Gogol, Pushkin, Shakespeare, Molière, and all the writers in the world,—what of it?" And I was absolutely unable to make any reply. The questions were not waiting, and I had to answer them at once; if I did not answer them, I could not live.

I felt that what I was standing on had given way, that I had no foundation to stand on, that that which I lived by no longer existed, and that I had nothing to live by.

IV.

My life came to a standstill. I could breathe, eat, drink, and sleep, and could not help breathing, eating, drinking, and sleeping; but there was no life, because there were no desires the gratification of which I might find reasonable. If I wished for anything, I knew in advance that, whether I gratified my desire or not, nothing would come of it. If a

fairy had come and had offered to carry out my wish, I should not have known what to say. If in moments of intoxication I had, not wishes, but habits of former desires, I knew in sober moments that that was a deception, that there was nothing to wish for. I could not even wish to find out the truth, because I guessed what it consisted in. The truth was that life was meaningless. It was as though I had just been living and walking along, and had come to an abyss, where I saw clearly that there was nothing ahead but perdition. And it was impossible to stop and go back, and impossible to shut my eyes, in order that I might not see that there was nothing ahead but suffering and imminent death,—complete annihilation.

What happened to me was that I, a healthy, happy man, felt that I could not go on living,—an insurmountable force drew me on to find release from life. I cannot say that I wanted to kill myself.

The force which drew me away from life was stronger, fuller, more general than wishing. It was a force like the former striving after life, only in an inverse sense. I tended with all my strength away from life. The thought of suicide came as naturally to me as had come before the ideas of improving life. That thought was so seductive that I had to use cunning against myself, lest I should rashly execute it. I did not want to be in a hurry, because I wanted to use every effort to disentangle myself: if I should not succeed in disentangling myself, there would always be time for that. And at such times I, a happy man, hid a rope from myself so that I should not hang myself on a cross-beam between two safes in my room, where I was by myself in the evening, while taking off my clothes, and did not go out hunting with a gun, in order not to be tempted by an easy way of doing away with myself. I did not know myself what it was I

wanted: I was afraid of life, strove to get away from it, and, at the same time, expected something from it.

All that happened with me when I was on every side surrounded by what is considered to be complete happiness. I had a good, loving, and beloved wife, good children, and a large estate, which grew and increased without any labour on my part. I was respected by my neighbours and friends, more than ever before, was praised by strangers, and, without any self-deception, could consider my name famous. With all that, I was not deranged or mentally unsound,—on the contrary, I was in full command of my mental and physical powers, such as I had rarely met with in people of my age: physically I could work in a field, mowing, without falling behind a peasant; mentally I could work from eight to ten hours in succession, without experiencing any consequences from the strain. And while in such condition I arrived at the conclusion that I could not live, and, fearing death, I had to use cunning against myself, in order that I might not take my life.

This mental condition expressed itself to me in this form: my life is a stupid, mean trick played on me by somebody. Although I did not recognize that “somebody” as having created me, the form of the conception that some one had played a mean, stupid trick on me by bringing me into the world was the most natural one that presented itself to me.

Involuntarily I imagined that there, somewhere, there was somebody who was now having fun as he looked down upon me and saw me, who had lived for thirty or forty years, learning, developing, growing in body and mind, now that I had become strengthened in mind and had reached that summit of life from which it lay all before me, standing as a complete fool on that summit and seeing clearly that there

was nothing in life and never would be. And that was fun to him—

But whether there was or was not that somebody who made fun of me, did not make it easier for me. I could not ascribe any sensible meaning to a single act, or to my whole life. I was only surprised that I had not understood that from the start. All that had long ago been known to everybody. Sooner or later there would come diseases and death (they had come already) to my dear ones and to me, and there would be nothing left but stench and worms. All my affairs, no matter what they might be, would sooner or later be forgotten, and I myself should not exist. So why should I worry about all these things? How could a man fail to see that and live,—that was surprising! A person could live only so long as he was drunk; but the moment he sobered up, he could not help seeing that all that was only a deception, and a stupid deception at that! Really, there was nothing funny and ingenious about it, but only something cruel and stupid.

Long ago has been told the Eastern story about the traveller who in the steppe is overtaken by an infuriated beast. Trying to save himself from the animal, the traveller jumps into a waterless well, but at its bottom he sees a dragon who opens his jaws in order to swallow him. And the unfortunate man does not dare climb out, lest he perish from the infuriated beast, and does not dare jump down to the bottom of the well, lest he be devoured by the dragon, and so clutches the twig of a wild bush growing in a cleft of the well and holds on to it. His hands grow weak and he feels that soon he shall have to surrender to the peril which awaits him at either side; but he still holds on and sees two mice, one white, the other black, in even measure making a circle around the main trunk of the bush to which he is clinging, and nibbling at it on all sides. Now, at any

moment, the bush will break and tear off, and he will fall into the dragon's jaws. The traveller sees that and knows that he will inevitably perish; but while he is still clinging, he sees some drops of honey hanging on the leaves of the bush, and so reaches out for them with his tongue and licks the leaves. Just so I hold on to the branch of life, knowing that the dragon of death is waiting inevitably for me, ready to tear me to pieces, and I cannot understand why I have fallen on such suffering. And I try to lick that honey which used to give me pleasure; but now it no longer gives me joy, and the white and the black mouse day and night nibble at the branch to which I am holding on. I clearly see the dragon, and the honey is no longer sweet to me. I see only the inevitable dragon and the mice, and am unable to turn my glance away from them. That is not a fable, but a veritable, indisputable, comprehensible truth.

The former deception of the pleasures of life, which stifled the terror of the dragon, no longer deceives me. No matter how much one should say to me, "You cannot understand the meaning of life, do not think, live!" I am unable to do so, because I have been doing it too long before. Now I cannot help seeing day and night, which run and lead me up to death. I see that alone, because that alone is the truth. Everything else is a lie.

The two drops of honey that have longest turned my eyes away from the cruel truth, the love of family and of authorship, which I have called an art, are no longer sweet to me.

"My family—" I said to myself, "but my family, my wife and children, they are also human beings. They are in precisely the same condition that I am in: they must either live in the lie or see the terrible truth. Why should they live? Why should I love them, why guard, raise, and watch them? Is it

for the same despair which is in me, or for dullness of perception? Since I love them, I cannot conceal the truth from them,—every step in cognition leads them up to this truth. And the truth is death.”

“Art, poetry?” For a long time, under the influence of the success of human praise, I tried to persuade myself that that was a thing which could be done, even though death should come and destroy everything, my deeds, as well as my memory of them; but soon I came to see that that, too, was a deception. It was clear to me that art was an adornment of life, a decoy of life. But life lost all its attractiveness for me. How, then, could I entrap others? So long as I did not live my own life, and a strange life bore me on its waves; so long as I believed that life had some sense, although I was not able to express it,—the reflections of life of every description in poetry and in the arts afforded me pleasure, and I was delighted to look at life through this little mirror of art; but when I began to look for the meaning of life, when I experienced the necessity of living myself, that little mirror became either useless, superfluous, and ridiculous, or painful to me. I could no longer console myself with what I saw in the mirror, namely, that my situation was stupid and desperate. It was all right for me to rejoice so long as I believed in the depth of my soul that life had some sense. At that time the play of lights—of the comical, the tragical, the touching, the beautiful, the terrible in life—afforded me amusement. But when I knew that life was meaningless and terrible, the play in the little mirror could no longer amuse me. No sweetness of honey could be sweet to me, when I saw the dragon and the mice that were nibbling down my support.

That was not all. If I had simply comprehended that life had no meaning, I might have known that calmly,—I might have known that that was my fate. But I could not be soothed by

that. If I had been like a man living in a forest from which he knew there was no way out, I might have lived; but I was like a man who had lost his way in the forest, who was overcome by terror because he had lost his way, who kept tossing about in his desire to come out on the road, knowing that every step got him only more entangled, and who could not help tossing.

That was terrible. And, in order to free myself from that terror, I wanted to kill myself. I experienced terror before what was awaiting me,—I knew that that terror was more terrible than the situation itself, but I could not patiently wait for the end. No matter how convincing the reflection was that it was the same whether a vessel in the heart should break or something should burst, and all should be ended, I could not wait patiently for the end. The terror of the darkness was too great, and I wanted as quickly as possible to free myself from it by means of a noose or a bullet. It was this feeling that more than anything else drew me on toward suicide.

V.

“But, perhaps, I overlooked something, or did not understand something right?” I said to myself several times. “It is impossible that this condition of despair should be characteristic of men!” And I tried to find an explanation for these questions in all those branches of knowledge which men had acquired. I searched painfully and for a long time, and I searched not from idle curiosity, not in a limp manner, but painfully and stubbornly, day and night,—I searched as a perishing man searches for his salvation,—and I found nothing.

I searched in all the branches of knowledge, and not only failed to find anything, but even convinced myself that all

those who, like myself, had been searching in the sciences, had failed just as much. They had not only not found anything, but had also clearly recognized the fact that that which had brought me to despair,—the meaninglessness of life,—was the only incontestable knowledge which was accessible to man.

I searched everywhere, and, thanks to a life passed in study, and also because through my connections with the learned world I had access to the most learned of men in every imaginable branch of knowledge, who did not refuse to disclose to me their knowledge, not only in books, but also in conversations, I learned everything which science replies to the question of life.

For a long time I could not believe that science had no answer to give to the questions of life, except what it gave. For a long time it seemed to me, as I looked at the importance and seriousness of tone which science assumed, when it enunciated its principles which had nothing in common with the questions of human life, that there was something in it which I did not understand. For a long time I was intimidated by science, and it seemed to me that the inapplicability of the answers to my questions was not the fault of science, but of my own ignorance; but the matter was for me not a joke, a trifle, but an affair of my whole life, and I was against my will led to the conviction that my questions were the only legitimate questions, which served as a foundation of all knowledge, and that not I with my questions was to blame, but science, if it had the presumption to answer these questions.

My question, the one which led me, at fifty years, up to suicide, was the simplest kind of a question, and one which is lying in the soul of every man, from the silliest child to the wisest old man,—that question without which life is

impossible, as I have experienced it, in fact. The question is: "What will come of what I am doing to-day and shall do to-morrow? What will come of my whole life?"

Differently expressed, the question would stand like this: "Why live, wish for anything, why do anything?" The question may be expressed still differently: "Is there in my life a meaning which would not be destroyed by my inevitable, imminent death?"

To this one, differently expressed, question I searched for an answer in human knowledge. I found that in relation to this question all human knowledge seemed to be divided into two opposite hemispheres, at the opposite ends of which there were two poles: one, a negative, the other, a positive pole; but that at neither pole was there an answer to the questions of life.

One series of the sciences does not seem to recognize the question, but clearly and definitely answers its own, independently put questions: that is the series of the experimental sciences, and at their extreme point stands mathematics; the other series of knowledge recognizes the question, but gives no answer to it: that is the series of the speculative sciences, and at their extreme point stands metaphysics.

Ever since my early youth I had been interested in the speculative sciences, but later mathematics and the natural sciences attracted me, and so long as I did not clearly put my question, so long as the question did not of itself rise in me, insisting on an answer, I was satisfied with those fictitious answers which sciences give to the question.

In the sphere of the experimental sciences, I said to myself: "Everything develops, is differentiated, moves in the

direction of complexity and perfection, and there are laws which govern this progress. You are a part of the whole. Having, in so far as it is possible, learned the whole, and having learned the law of evolution, you will learn your place in this whole, and all about yourself." I am ashamed to confess it, there was a time when I seemed to be satisfied with that. That was the time when I myself was growing more complex and was developing. My muscles grew and became stronger, my memory was being enriched, my ability to think and comprehend was increasing, I grew and developed, and, feeling within me that growth, it was natural for me to think that that was the law of the whole world, in which I should find a solution also to the questions of my life. But the time came when my growth stopped,—I felt that I was not developing, but drying up, that my muscles were growing weaker and my teeth falling out,—and I saw that that law not only explained nothing to me, but that there never was and never could have been such a law, and that I took for a law what I found within me at a certain period of life. I was more severe toward the definition of that law; and it became clear to me that there could be no law of endless development; it became clear to me that saying that in endless space and time everything was developing, perfecting itself, becoming more complex, differentiating, was tantamount to saying nothing. All those are words without any meaning, for in the infinite there is nothing complex, nor simple, nor in front, nor behind, nor better, nor worse.

The main thing was that my personal question, "What am I with my desires?" remained entirely unanswered. And I understood that those sciences were very interesting, very attractive, but that the definiteness and clearness of those sciences were in inverse proportion to their applicability to the questions of life: the less applicable they are to the

questions of life, the more definite and clear they are; the more they attempt to give answers to the questions of life, the more they become dim and unattractive. If you turn to that branch of those sciences which attempts to give answers to the questions of life,—to physiology, psychology, biology, sociology,—you come across an appalling scantiness of ideas, the greatest obscurity, an unjustified pretence at solving irrelevant questions, and constant contradictions of one thinker with others and even with himself. If you turn to the branch of knowledge which does not busy itself with the solution of the problems of life, but answers only its special, scientific questions, you are delighted at the power of the human mind, but know in advance that there will be no answers there to the questions of life. These sciences directly ignore the question of life. They say: “We have no answers to what you are and why you live, and we do not busy ourselves with that; but if you want to know the laws of light, of chemical combinations, the laws of the development of organisms, if you want to know the laws of the bodies, their forms, and the relation of numbers and quantities, if you want to know the laws of your mind, we shall give you clear, definite, incontrovertible answers to all that.” In general the relation of the experimental sciences to the question of life may be expressed thus: Question, “Why do I live?” Answer, “In the endlessly large space, in an endlessly long time, infinitely small particles are modified in infinite complexity, and when you understand the laws of these modifications, you will know why you live upon earth.”

In the sphere of the speculative sciences I said to myself: “All humanity lives and develops on the basis of spiritual principles, ideals, which guide it. These ideals are expressed in the religions, in the sciences, in the arts, in the forms of political life. These ideals are all the time getting higher and higher, and humanity is moving toward

a higher good. I am a part of humanity, and so my calling consists in cooperating in the consciousness and materialization of the ideals of humanity." During the period of my mental insipidity I was satisfied with that; but as soon as the question of life arose clearly within me, all that theory immediately went to pieces. Not to speak of that unscrupulous inexactness with which the sciences of this kind give out the deductions which are based on the study of a small part of humanity as general deductions; not to speak of the mutual contradictions of the different partisans of this conception as to what constitutes the ideals of humanity,—the strangeness, not to say stupidity, of this conception consists in this, that, in order to answer the question, which presents itself to every man, "What am I?" or, "Why do I live?" or, "What shall I do?" a man must first solve the problem, "What is the life of all humanity?" which is not familiar to him, and of which he knows only one tiny part at a tiny period of time. In order to understand what he is, a man must first know what all this mysterious humanity is, which consists of just such men as he himself is, who do not understand themselves.

I must confess, there was a time when I believed all that. That was the time when I had my favourite ideals, which justified my lusts, and I tried to discover a theory which would allow me to look upon my lusts as a law of humanity. But as soon as the question of life arose in my soul in all its clearness, that answer at once was scattered to the winds, and I understood that, as in the experimental sciences there were real sciences and half-sciences, which attempted to give answers to questions which are not in their domain, so also in this sphere there was a whole series of wide-spread sciences which tried to answer to irrelevant questions. The half-sciences of this sphere, jurisprudence and the social sciences, try to solve the

problems of man by apparently solving, each in its own way, the question of the life of all humanity.

But just as in the sphere of the experimental sciences a man who asks in all sincerity how to live cannot be satisfied with the answer, "Study in infinite space the modifications, infinite in time and complexity, of the infinite particles, and then you will understand all life," just so a sincere man cannot be satisfied with the answer, "Study the life of all humanity, whose beginning and end we cannot know, and then you will understand your own life." Just as in the experimental half-sciences, these half-sciences are the more filled with inexactness, obscurities, silliness, and contradictions, the farther they depart from the problems themselves. The problem of experimental science is a causal consecutiveness of material phenomena.

Experimental science need only introduce the question of final cause, and nonsense is the result. The problem of speculative science is the consciousness of the causeless essence of life. It needs only introduce the investigation of causal phenomena, such as the social and historical phenomena, and the result is nonsense.

Experimental science gives positive knowledge and manifests the greatness of the human mind only when it does not introduce the final cause into its investigation. And, on the other hand, speculative science is a science and manifests the greatness of the human mind only when it entirely sets aside the questions of the consecutiveness of causal phenomena and considers man only in relation to the final cause. Such in this sphere is the science which forms the pole of the sphere, metaphysics or philosophy. This science clearly puts the question: "What am I, and what is the whole world? and why am I, and why is the whole world?" And ever since it has been, it has answered in the same way. Whether the philosopher says that the

idea, the substance, the spirit, or the will are the essence of life, which is within me and in everything existing, he keeps repeating that this essence exists and that I am that essence; but why it is, he does not know and does not answer, if he is an exact thinker. I ask, why should this essence be? What will result from the fact that it is and that it will be? And philosophy does not answer that,—it asks itself that question; and if it is a sincere philosophy, its whole labour will consist merely in clearly putting that question. And if it sticks firmly to its problem, it cannot do otherwise than answer to the question, “What am I, and what is the whole world?” by saying, “Everything and nothing;” and to the question, “Why?” by saying, “I do not know why.”

Twist the speculative answers of philosophy as I may, I shall never get anything resembling an answer, not because, as in the clear, experimental sphere, the answer does not refer to my question, but because, though the whole mental labour is directed to my question, there is no answer, but instead of the answer there is received the same question, only in a complicated form.

VI.

In my search after the question of life I experienced the same feeling which a man who has lost his way in the forest may experience.

He comes to a clearing, climbs a tree, and clearly sees an unlimited space before him; at the same time he sees that there are no houses there, and that there can be none; he goes back to the forest, into the darkness, and he sees darkness, and again there are no houses.

Thus I blundered in this forest of human knowledge, between the clearings of the mathematical and experimental sciences, which disclosed to me clear horizons, but such in the direction of which there could be no house, and between the darkness of the speculative sciences, where I sunk into a deeper darkness, the farther I proceeded, and I convinced myself at last that there was no way out and could not be.

By abandoning myself to the bright side of knowledge I saw that I only turned my eyes away from the question. No matter how enticing and clear the horizons were that were disclosed to me, no matter how enticing it was to bury myself in the infinitude of this knowledge, I comprehended that these sciences were the more clear, the less I needed them, the less they answered my question.

“Well, I know,” I said to myself, “all which science wants so persistently to know, but there is no answer to the question about the meaning of my life.” But in the speculative sphere I saw that, in spite of the fact that the aim of the knowledge was directed straight to the answer of my question, or because of that fact, there could be no other answer than what I was giving to myself: “What is the meaning of my life?”—“None.” Or, “What will come of my life?”—“Nothing.” Or, “Why does everything which exists exist, and why do I exist?”—“Because it exists.”

Putting the question to the one side of human knowledge, I received an endless quantity of exact answers about what I did not ask: about the chemical composition of the stars, about the movement of the sun toward the constellation of Hercules, about the origin of species and of man, about the forms of infinitely small, imponderable particles of ether; but the answer in this sphere of knowledge to my question what the meaning of my life was, was always: “You are

what you call your life; you are a temporal, accidental conglomeration of particles. The interrelation, the change of these particles, produces in you that which you call life. This congeries will last for some time; then the interaction of these particles will cease, and that which you call life and all your questions will come to an end. You are an accidentally cohering globule of something. The globule is fermenting. This fermentation the globule calls its life. The globule falls to pieces, and all fermentation and all questions will come to an end." Thus the clear side of knowledge answers, and it cannot say anything else, if only it strictly follows its principles.

With such an answer it appears that the answer is not a reply to the question. I want to know the meaning of my life, but the fact that it is a particle of the infinite not only gives it no meaning, but even destroys every possible meaning.

Those obscure transactions, which this side of the experimental, exact science has with speculation, when it says that the meaning of life consists in evolution and the cooperation with this evolution, because of their obscurity and inexactness cannot be regarded as answers.

The other side of knowledge, the speculative, so long as it sticks strictly to its fundamental principles in giving a direct answer to the question, everywhere and at all times has answered one and the same: "The world is something infinite and incomprehensible. Human life is an incomprehensible part of this incomprehensible all." Again I exclude all those transactions between the speculative and the experimental sciences, which form the whole ballast of the half-sciences, the so-called science of jurisprudence and the political and historical sciences. Into these sciences are just as irregularly introduced the

concepts of evolution and perfection, but with this difference, that there it is the evolution of everything, while here it is the evolution of the life of man. The irregularity is one and the same: evolution, perfection in the infinite, can have neither aim nor direction, and answers nothing in respect to my question.

Where speculative science is exact, namely, in real philosophy,—not in the one which Schopenhauer calls the professorial philosophy, which serves only for distributing all existing phenomena according to new philosophical rubrics and calling them by new names,—where the philosopher does not let out of sight the essential question, the answer is always one and the same,—the answer given by Socrates, Schopenhauer, Solomon, Buddha.

“We shall approach truth in proportion as we remove ourselves from life,” says Socrates, preparing himself for death. “What are we, who love truth, striving after in life? To free ourselves from the body and from all evil which results from the life of the body. If that is so, why should we not rejoice when death comes to us? The wise man is seeking his death all the time, and therefore death is not terrible to him.”

And this is what Schopenhauer says:

“Having learned the internal essence of the world as will, and in all the phenomena, from the unconscious striving of the dark forces of Nature to the full consciousness of the activity of man, having learned only the objectivity of this will, we shall by no means escape the consequence that with the free negation, the self-destruction of the will, there will disappear all those phenomena, that constant striving and tendency without aim or rest on all the stages of objectivity, in which and through which the world exists;

there will disappear the diversity of consecutive forms, and with the form will disappear all its phenomena with their general forms, space and time, and, finally, its last fundamental form, subject and object. When there is no will, there is no concept, no world. Before us nothing only is left. But what opposes this transition to nothingness, our nature, is that very will to exist (Wille zum Leben), which forms ourselves as well as the world. That we are so afraid of nothingness, or, what is the same, that we desire to live, signifies that we ourselves are nothing but that desire to live and that we know nothing else. Therefore, what will be left after the complete annihilation of the will for us who are still full of that will is naturally nothing; and, on the other hand, for those in whom the will has turned away and renounced itself, this our so real world, with all its suns and milky ways, is nothing.”

“Vanity of vanities,” says Solomon, “vanity of vanities; all is vanity. What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun? One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh: but the earth abideth for ever. The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun. Is there any thing whereof it may be said. See, this is new? it hath been already of old time, which was before us. There is no remembrance of former things; neither shall there be any remembrance of things that are to come with those that shall come after. I the Preacher was king over Israel in Jerusalem. And I gave my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all things that are done under heaven: this sore travail hath God given to the sons of man to be exercised therewith. I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and behold, all is vanity and vexation of spirit. I communed with mine own heart, saying, Lo, I am come to great estate, and have gotten more wisdom than all they that have been

before me in Jerusalem: yea, my heart had great experience of wisdom and knowledge. And I gave my heart to know wisdom, and to know madness and folly: I perceived that this also is vexation of spirit. For in much wisdom is much grief: and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow.

“I said in mine heart, Go to now, I will prove thee with mirth; therefore enjoy pleasure: and behold, this also is vanity. I said of laughter, It is mad: and of mirth. What doeth it? I sought in mine heart to give myself unto wine, yet acquainting mine heart with wisdom; and to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was that good for the sons of men, which they should do under the heaven all the days of their life. I made me great works; I builded me houses; I planted me vineyards: I made me gardens and orchards, and I planted trees in them of all kind of fruits: I made me pools of water, to water therewith the wood that bringeth forth trees: I got me servants and maidens, and had servants born in my house; also I had great possessions of great and small cattle above all that were in Jerusalem before me; I gathered me also silver and gold, and the peculiar treasure of kings, and of the provinces: I gat me men-singers and women-singers, and the delights of the sons of men, as musical instruments, and that of all sorts. So I was great, and increased more than all that were before me in Jerusalem: also my wisdom remained with me. And whatsoever mine eyes desired I kept not from them, I withheld not my heart from any joy. Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do: and behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun. And I turned myself to behold wisdom, and madness, and folly. And I myself perceived also that one event happeneth to them all. Then said I in my heart. As it happeneth to the fool, so it happeneth even to me; and why was I then more wise? Then I said in my heart, that this also is vanity. For

there is no remembrance of the wise more than of the fool for ever; seeing that which now is in the days to come shall all be forgotten. And how dieth the wise man? as the fool. Therefore I hated life; because the work that is wrought under the sun is grievous unto me: for all is vanity and vexation of spirit. Yea, I hated all my labour which I had taken under the sun: because I should leave it unto the man that shall be after me.

“For what hath man of all his labour, and of the vexation of his heart, wherein he hath laboured under the sun? For all his days are sorrows, and his travail grief; yea, his heart taketh not rest in the night. This is also vanity. There is nothing better for a man, than that he should eat and drink, and that he should make his soul enjoy good in his labour.

“All things come alike to all: there is one event to the righteous and to the wicked; to the good, and to the clean, and to the unclean; to him that sacrificeth, and to him that sacrificeth not: as is the good, so is the sinner; and he that sweareth, as he that feareth an oath. This is an evil among all things that are done under the sun, that there is one event unto all: yea, also the heart of the sons of men is full of evil, and madness is in their heart while they live, and after that they go to the dead. For to him that is joined to all the living there is hope: for a living dog is better than a dead lion. For the living know that they shall die: but the dead know not any thing, neither have they any more a reward; for the memory of them is forgotten. Also their love, and their hatred, and their envy, is now perished, neither have they any more a portion for ever in any thing that is done under the sun.”

And this is what the Indian wisdom says:

Sakya-Muni, a young, happy prince, from whom have been concealed diseases, old age, and death, drives out for pleasure, when he sees a terrible, toothless, slaving old man. The prince, from whom old age has heretofore been concealed, is surprised, and he asks the charioteer what that is, and why that man has come to such a wretched, loathsome state? And when he learns that that is the common fate of all men, that he, the youthful prince, has inevitably the same in store, he cannot proceed in his pleasure drive, but gives order to be driven home, in order to consider that. Evidently he finds some consolation, for he again drives out cheerful and happy. But this time he meets a sick man. He sees an emaciated, livid, shivering man, with blurred eyes. The prince, from whom diseases have been concealed, stops and asks what that is. And when he learns that that is sickness, to which all men are subject, and that he himself, a healthy and happy prince, may be as sick as that on the morrow, he again has no courage to amuse himself, orders himself driven home, and again looks for consolation, which he evidently finds, for he has himself driven out a third time; but this third time he sees again a new spectacle,—he sees that something is carried by. “What is that?”—A dead man. “What does a dead man mean?” asks the prince. He is told that to become dead means to become what that man is. The prince goes up to the corpse, and takes off the shroud and looks at him. “What will be done with him?” asks the prince. He is told that he will be buried in the ground. “Why?”—Because he will certainly never be alive again, and there will be only stench and worms. “And is this the fate of all men? And will the same happen to me? Shall I be buried, and will a stench rise from me, and will worms eat me?”—Yes. “Back! I do not wish to go out for pleasure, and will never be driven out again.”

And Sakya-Muni could not find any consolation in life, and he decided that life was the greatest evil, and used all the forces of his soul to free himself from it and to free others, and to do this in such a way that even after death it might not return in some manner,—to annihilate life with its root. Thus speaks the whole Indian wisdom.

So these are the direct answers which human wisdom gives when it answers the question of life.

“The life of the body is an evil and a lie, and so the destruction of this life of the body is a good, and we must wish it,” says Socrates.

“Life is that which ought not to be,—an evil,—and the transition into nothingness is the only good of life,” says Schopenhauer.

“Everything in the world, foolishness, and wisdom, and riches, and poverty, and merriment, and grief, everything is vanity and nonsense. Man will die, and nothing will be left. And that is foolish,” says Solomon.

“It is impossible to live with the consciousness of inevitable suffering, debility, old age, and death,—it is necessary to free oneself from life, from every possibility of life,” says Buddha.

And what these powerful minds have said, millions of millions of people have said, thought, and felt like them, and so think and feel I.

Thus, my wandering among the sciences not only did not take me out of my despair, but even increased it. One science gave no reply to the question of life, another gave me a direct answer and only confirmed my despair and showed me that what I had arrived at was not the fruit of

my aberration, of a morbid condition of my mind; on the contrary, it only confirmed me in my belief that my thoughts were correct and that I agreed with the deductions of the most powerful minds of humanity.

There is no cause for self-deception. Everything is vanity. Happy is he who is not born,—death is better than life: it is necessary to free oneself from it.

VII.

Having found no elucidation in science, I began to look for it in life, hoping to find it in the men who surrounded me. I began to observe the people such as I, to see how they lived about me and what attitude they assumed to the question that had brought me to the point of despair.

This is what I found in people who were in the same position as myself through their education and manner of life.

I found that for people of my circle there were four ways out from the terrible condition in which we all are.

The first way out is through ignorance. It consists in not knowing, not understanding that life is evil and meaningless. People of this category—mostly women or very young or very dull persons—have not yet come to understand that question of life which presented itself to Schopenhauer, Solomon, and Buddha. They see neither the dragon that awaits them, nor the mice that are nibbling at the roots of the bushes to which they are holding on, and continue to lick the honey. But they lick the honey only till a certain time: something will direct their attention to the dragon and the mice, and there will be an end to their licking. From them I can learn nothing,—it is impossible to stop knowing what you know.

The second way out is through Epicureanism. It consists in this, that, knowing the hopelessness of life, one should in the meantime enjoy such good as there is, without looking either at the dragon or the mice, but licking the honey in the best manner possible, especially if there is a lot of it in one spot. Solomon expresses this way out like this:

“Go thy way, eat thy bread with joy, and drink thy wine. Live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest all the days of the life of thy vanity, which he hath given thee under the sun, all the days of thy vanity: for that is thy portion in this life, and in thy labour which thou takest under the sun. Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest.”

Thus the majority of the people of our circle support the possibility of life in themselves. The conditions in which they are give them more good than evil, and their moral dulness makes it possible for them to forget that the advantage of their situation is a casual one; that not everybody can have a thousand wives and palaces, like Solomon; that to every man with a thousand wives there are a thousand men without wives, and for every palace there are a thousand people who built it in the sweat of their brows; and that the accident which has made me a Solomon to-day, will to-morrow make me a slave of Solomon. The dulness of the imagination of these people makes it possible for them to forget that which gave no rest to Buddha,—the inevitableness of sickness, old age, and death, which sooner or later will destroy all those pleasures.

Thus think and feel the majority of men of our time and our manner of life. The fact that some of these people assert that the dulness of their comprehension and imagination is

philosophy, which they call positive, in my opinion does not take them out of the category of those who, in order not to see the question, lick the honey. Such people I could not imitate: as I did not possess their dulness of comprehension, I could not artificially reproduce it in myself. Just like any live man, I could not tear my eyes away from the mice and the dragon, having once seen them.

The third way out is through force and energy. It consists in this, that, having comprehended that life is evil and meaningless, one should set out to destroy it. Thus now and then act strong, consistent people. Having comprehended all the stupidity of the joke which has been played upon them, and seeing that the good of the dead is better than that of the living, and that it is better not to be at all, they go and carry this out and at once put an end to that stupid joke, so long as there are means for it: a noose about the neck, the water, a knife to pierce the heart with, railway trains. The number of people of our circle who do so is growing larger and larger. These people commit the act generally at the best period of life, when the mental powers are in full bloom and few habits have been acquired that lower human reason.

I saw that that was the worthiest way out, and I wanted to act in that way.

The fourth way out is through weakness. It consists in this, that, comprehending the evil and the meaninglessness of life, one continues to drag it out, knowing in advance that nothing can come of it. People of this calibre know that death is better than life, but, not having the strength to act reasonably, to make an end to the deception, and to kill themselves, they seem to be waiting for something. This is the way of weakness, for if I know that which is better,

which is in my power, why not abandon myself to that which is better? I belonged to that category.

Thus people of my calibre have four ways of saving themselves from the terrible contradiction. No matter how much I strained my mental attention, I saw no other way out but those four. The one way out was not to understand that life was meaningless, vanity, and an evil, and that it was better not to live. I could not help knowing it and, having once learned it, I could not shut my eyes to it. The second way out was to make use of life such as it is, without thinking of the future. I could not do that either. Like Sakya-Muni, I could not go out hunting, when I knew that there was old age, suffering, death. My imagination was too vivid. Besides, I could not enjoy the accident of the moment, which for a twinkling threw enjoyment in my path. The third way out was, having come to see that life was an evil and a foolishness, to make an end of it and kill myself. I comprehended that, but for some reason did not kill myself. The fourth way out was to live in the condition of Solomon, of Schopenhauer,—to know that life was a stupid joke played on me, and yet to live, wash and dress myself, dine, speak, and even write books. That was repulsive and painful for me, but still I persisted in that situation.

Now I see that if I did not kill myself, the cause of it was a dim consciousness of the incorrectness of my ideas. No matter how convincing and incontestable seemed to me the train of my thoughts and of the thoughts of the wise men who had brought us to recognize the meaninglessness of life, there was left in me an obscure doubt of the correctness of my judgment.

It was like this: I, my reason, have discovered that life is unreasonable. If there is no higher reason (there is none, and nothing can prove it), reason is the creator of life for

me. If there were no reason, there would be no life for me. How then does this reason negate life, since it is itself the creator of life? Life is everything. Reason is the fruit of life, and this reason denies life itself. I felt that something was wrong there.

Life is a meaningless evil,—that was incontestable, I said to myself. But I have lived, still live, and all humanity has lived. How is that? Why does it live, since it can refuse to live? Is it possible Schopenhauer and I alone are so wise as to have comprehended the meaninglessness and evil of life?

The discussion of the vanity of life is not so cunning, and it has been brought forward long ago, even by the simplest kind of men, and yet they have lived and still live. Why do they continue living and never think of doubting the reasonableness of life?

My knowledge, confirmed by the wisdom of the sages, has disclosed to me that everything in the world,—everything organic and inorganic,—everything is constructed with surprising cleverness, only my own condition is stupid. And those fools, the enormous masses of people, know nothing about how everything organic and inorganic is constructed in the world, and yet live, and they think that their life is sensibly arranged!

And it occurred to me that there might be something I did not know, for ignorance acts in precisely that manner. Ignorance always says the same. When it does not know a thing, it says that what it does not know is stupid. In reality it turns out that there is a human entity which has lived as though understanding the meaning of its life, for, if it did not understand it, it could not live, and I say that the whole life is meaningless, and that I cannot live.

Nobody prevents our denying life by committing suicide. If so, kill yourself and stop discussing! You do not like life, very well, then kill yourself! If you live and cannot understand the meaning of life, make an end to it, and do not whirl about in this life, going into discussions about not understanding life. If you have come to a gay company, where all are very happy and know what they are doing, while you feel lonesome and disgusted, go away!

Indeed, what are we, who are convinced of the necessity of suicide and who do not have the courage to commit it, if not the weakest, most inconsistent, and, to speak simply, the most foolish kind of men who carry about their foolishness as a fool carries around his painted wallet?

Our wisdom, however incontestable it may be, has not given us the knowledge of the meaning of our life; but all humanity which is carrying on life—the millions—does not doubt the meaning of life.

Indeed, ever since those most ancient, ancient times since when life has existed, of which I know anything, there have lived men who knew the reflection on the vanity of life, which has shown me the meaninglessness of life, and yet they lived, ascribing some kind of a meaning to it. Ever since any life began with men, they had that meaning of life, and they have carried on the life that has reached me. Everything which is in me and about me,—everything carnal and non-carnal,—all that is the fruit of their knowledge of life. All the tools of thought, with which I judge this life and condemn it,—all that was done by them, and not by me. I was born, educated, and grew up, thanks to them. They mined the iron, taught how to cut down the forest, domesticated cows and horses, taught how to sow, how to live together, and arranged our life; they taught me to think and to speak. And I, their product, nurtured and

fed by them, taught by them, thinking their thoughts, and speaking their words,—I have proved to them that they are meaningless! “There is something wrong there,” I said to myself. “I must have made a mistake somewhere.” But where the mistake was, I was unable to discover.

