

Leo Tolstoy's and Henri Bergson's "Philosophy of Life": Comparative Analysis*

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Abstract—The article deals with the comparative analysis of philosophical conceptions of life proposed by Leo Tolstoy and Henri Bergson. The authors show the affinity of the definitions of life proposed by H. Bergson in his work "Creative evolution" and by L. Tolstoy in his works "On life" and "Path of life" as well as in his late diaries. Both thinkers understand life as spiritual and dynamic force which effects on the passive matter and originates complex organized structures within it. Human's consciousness is the fullest expression of life. In both conceptions, memory is a key feature of consciousness which has rather metaphysical than psychological nature. Uniting all elements of life, memory makes person a supertemporal and eternal entity, i.e. shows him as a part of life in its authentic and original form. The authors arrive at a conclusion concerning a presumable influence of L. Tolstoy's ideas on the forming of H. Bergson's philosophy of life.

Keywords—*L. Tolstoy; H. Bergson; philosophy of life; person; memory*

I. INTRODUCTION

The concept of life lies in the center of the late religious-philosophical doctrine by L. Tolstoy; his two major philosophical works — "On life" (1888) and "Path of life" (1910) directly show this fact. However, all European thought of the end of the XIXth and beginning of the XXth centuries actively used this concept, and its main achievement appeared to be a development of the specific form of "philosophy of life" as a central form of non-classical style of philosophy proposing totally new perspectives of understanding of man and his relations to world.

Can L. Tolstoy's philosophical quests be understood as a part of this important philosophical process? The majority of researchers hold that Tolstoy's viewpoint is "archaic" and rather belongs to the past than to the present or the future of the European philosophy; it is considered to be closely related to the plain rationalism of the Enlightenment. However, such approach seems incorrect as scrupulous analysis of Tolstoy's philosophical works, fiction, diaries and letters proves that he was well acquainted with the XIXth century philosophy and in his own philosophical constructions, he used both the achievements of the German philosophy of the turn of the XIXth century (he understood late conception by J.G. Fichte especially important), and novel ideas developed by non-classical philosophy, primarily by A. Schopenhauer. He not only grasped the new trends in philosophy, but also brilliantly developed them, being in advance of his times. We believe that Tolstoy can undoubtedly be placed among the founders of "philosophy of life"; moreover, comparing him with the other representatives of this complex and multipronged philosophical movement, we can conclude that his philosophy appeared to be the closest to the conception developed by the most illustrious philosopher of that time — Henri Bergson [1].

To prove the affinity of the main principles of the philosophical conceptions of life proposed by Tolstoy and Bergson, we will address to two crucial moments of their teachings: first, metaphysical definition of life and, second, the role of memory for the description of human being and its relation to the world and to the absolute principle of all existence (God as the origin of life).

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II. METAPHYSICAL DEFINITION OF LIFE

Bergson's philosophy of life, which he most fully elaborated in the work "Creative evolution", proposes the idea that life serves as a spiritual Absolut grounding everything which exists in the world; it is not accident that Bergson's conception is called "new spiritualism" [2]. Life is expressed in every natural thing to a different extent, nevertheless, being the essence of human consciousness, it is most fully realized in man. The essential feature of the very life is the fact that it strives for the absolute unity; life interacts with the mater, which represents a robust principle of division and separation of all elements, and thus life splits up into a multiplicity of forms including both those which are less developed than human consciousness and those which excel it. "It is as if a broad current of consciousness had penetrated matter, loaded, as all consciousness is, with an enormous multiplicity of interwoven potentialities. It has carried matter along to organization, but its movement has been at once infinitely retarded and infinitely divided" [3].

We can identify exactly the same doctrine of life and its relation to the material world in L. Tolstoy's works, although it should be noted that in comparison with Tolstoy, Bergson much less tied the concept of life with religion and religious teachings of the past. One of the most well-known ideas defended by Tolstoy concerns the conception of inseparable unity of life shown in the infinite plurality of the living individuals (it may have been influenced by Schopenhauer); this idea is especially clear in his late diaries and his last book called "Path of life": "All living beings are separated from each other with their bodies, but something which gives them lives is the same in all of them" [4]. Tolstoy equates the life within us and all living beings with soul and the God: "Except all corporals in itself and the whole world, we are aware of something immaterial, which, being related to our body, gives it life. We identify this something immaterial and connected with our body as soul. The same immaterial and isolated principle giving life to everything which exists is called God". [5] However, Tolstoy more frequently ties this principle with the human consciousness, or, to put it more precisely, with self-consciousness. "All the life is what we realize; therefore, studying all the life is solely possible by means of inner way; nevertheless, what we can observe objectively is only consequences of life. Life is only what we realize as life" [6]. Like Bergson, Tolstoy decisively opposes the scientific understanding of life, which only describes its material, i.e. temporal and spatial, consequences, to the true conception of its essence presented in religious and philosophical doctrines which understand it as a spiritual beginning placed "inside" personality beyond space and time. "My life is shown in time and space, but it is its mere expression. The very life I realize is realized beyond time and space". [7]

Like Bergson, Tolstoy considers life rather as universal and absolute foundation of all being then as a particular form of existence; that is why, to put it strictly, life is within every mundane phenomenon, although it is expressed in very different ways: "Everything is alive. Everything is organism. We do not consider some of things as living only because of the fact that they are either too big, like the Earth and the Sun, or too small, like the particles of minerals and crystals" [8].

This idea leads to the conception of the infinite "scale" of creatures which are either lower of higher than man; they show different degrees of life and are capable of transferring from one level to another. Nevertheless, man appears central and the most important element of the whole "élan vital", and the fact of his consciousness fully expresses the structure of life; to understand the essence of life, i.e. to know the Absolut, the God and the beginning of all being it is needed to outline the most crucial content of our consciousness. It is here that in Bergson's and Tolstoy's argumentation, the concept of remembrance and memory comes to the fore (Tolstoy prefers to use the former word, while Bergson — the latter one).

Describing the difference between spiritual being (which expresses itself in the consciousness of man) and physical one, Bergson is led to a necessity to oppose two types of time, which are characteristic of the corresponding types of being. Plurality appears to be a main feature of the material being; it is something which determines the fact that space, being by its abstract-mathematical essence a system of external relations between equivalent and at the same time different elements (similar points of space), is the most important characteristic of existence. The second characteristic of the material being is represented by time which determines the possibility of movement and change; but in the individual being it cannot retain its own inner specificity and is transformed into a form of space; separate temporal states of the material world are only externally interrelated (like in the case of spatial relations), and each new state supplants the former one. As a matter of fact, the very separateness of the present from the past in the material world is a consequence of its general feature — its division into the elements and states.

In contrast to this fact, according to Bergson, the inner spiritual being is characterized with the absolute unity to which the features of space are impossible to be applied. Beyond absolute integrity, the second important characteristic of the spiritual being is represented with its dynamic development which is expressed in the fact that it constantly generates new states which are not opposed to the previous ones and to the whole, but are inseparably united with them and are included into the whole. Such development also implies time, but it has totally another sense (metaphysical), in comparison with time of the material world. The unity of all the states means that spiritual being unites the past, the present and the future; Bergson calls such characteristic duration (*la durée*); this notion appears the most important in his philosophy.

III. MEMORY AS A MAIN FEATURE OF LIFE

Since spiritual being coincides with the spiritual content of personality and personal consciousness, the description of the structure of the unity of this being and its united development can be understood by means of the analysis of consciousness. Bergson believes that everyone is able to do such analysis leading to the conclusion that a concrete structure of the activity (i.e. united development of spiritual being) is expressed in the form of memory. Under this approach, memory acquires rather metaphysical and ontological than psychological meaning: the unity of the

present spiritual being with its past forms is shown in the act of remembrance. It should be emphasized that although various psychological theories and common sense understand this fact as a simple existence of the past in the present, it in fact expresses the objective (ontological) connection between the present state of the spirit and its equally real state in the past (this connection is psychologically expressed as a full “unity” of the states, since those memories which man remembers become a part of his present being). Bergson writes: “But the truth is that we shall never reach the past unless we frankly place ourselves within it” [9]. Every past state of the personal being is retained in person’s whole structure, therefore, person cannot totally forget the things which took place in the past (his past states); contrary to the traditional psychological conceptions of memory, which understand brain as a basis for the memory mechanism, Bergson attributes the only function to brain – the capacity of blocking the connections of present person’s consciousness with her past states for the sake of more effective action in the present: “In reality, the past is preserved by itself, automatically. In its entirety, probably, it follows us at every instant; all that we have felt, thought and willed from our earliest infancy is there, leaning over the present which is about to join it, pressing against the portals of consciousness that would fain leave it outside. The cerebral mechanism is arranged just so as to drive back into the unconscious almost the whole of this past, and to admit beyond the threshold only that which can cast light on the present situation or further the action now being prepared — in short, only that which can give useful work” [10].

Strictly speaking, memory cannot be a result of some kind of “mechanism”, as by its definition it represents the essential feature of our spiritual being, forming its basic ontological characteristic (complete unity). The whole complex mechanism of human body with the brain and nervous system as its central organs appears to be merely an instrument to impose the confines on our memory, which means to make our infinite spiritual being, which exists within united temporal dynamics (duration), limited. Moreover, it is this mechanism (realizing by means of the act of perception) which leads to the fact that person rather identifies herself as existing only at the present moment and only in the given material world than in the whole infinity of the spiritual being which embraces all moments of the duration and its elements. Bergson writes: “More generally, in that continuity of becoming which is reality itself, the present moment is constituted by the quasi-instantaneous section affected by our perception in the flowing mass; and this section is precisely that which we call the material world. Our body occupies its center; it is, in this material world, that part of which we directly feel the flux; in its actual state the actuality of our present lies” [11]. This fact means that material world is not pre-given in relation to person; it is rather formed within existing structure of the world by means of the acts of human perception.

This complicated metaphysics, which Bergson unclearly presented in his own works, can easily be found in L. Tolstoy’s late treatises and diaries; moreover, these ideas are presented by Tolstoy in more understandable, albeit

simplified, form combining new non-classical approaches with the traditional concepts of the religious metaphysics.

Tolstoy also contrasts two types of being: higher absolute spiritual being and lower material finite one; every person is equally connected with them both, although he/she only identifies himself/herself in relation to the lower being, while it is spiritual being that is true, and material world is its limited form. “We are embarrassed about the concept of infinity of space and time. It originates from the fact that we ascribe reality to the unreal and seeming phenomena – to the phenomena in time and space. These phenomena are perceived as infinite. Actually, they do not exist and, therefore, cannot be neither finite, nor infinite. It is the spiritual which exists – not something infinite, but something to which the properties of infinity and finiteness cannot be ascribed. In our ordinary life, we perceive the phenomena put into a series, in time and space, and ascribe the continuation beyond our life to this series. This is an error. The error is in the fact that we consider our life transient, while world is considered stable; actually, our spiritual life does exist permanently, the concept of infinity cannot be referred to it; at the same time, world with its move is only a transient phenomenon which is dependent on our perception”. [12]

Spiritual being “in itself” is the All, i.e. absolute unity of everything which exists; one can state that it is the God. However, this is not the personal God of the traditional religions, but rather “philosophical God” of Nicholas of Cusa, Hegel, Schelling, V. Solovyov and other creators of pantheistic and semi-pantheistic systems. There is a tendency to self-restriction in this spiritual being, i.e. a tendency to separation into independent finite beings whose ties with the substance which created them is concealed from them. Like Bergson, Tolstoy believes that human body and other corporal beings represent phenomenal expression of their separateness as well as relative independence from other beings and form the spiritual whole which created them; although it is to be noted that by means of this separation bodies also create their connections with each other and the whole: “...body is an organ of connection with the world. Nevertheless, I say that body, both of mine and of other beings, is only a limit of my separation from the world. But the limit always belongs partly to one and partly to the other side of what it divides. And my body is exactly composed in such a way that it is an organ of connections with the external world”. [13] All body-material and space side of our life is an expression of the limited nature and infiniteness of our human existence, while consciousness is an expression of the permanent unity with the spiritual principle: “Life is consciousness of a limited spiritual creature changing his limits (consequently, non-spatial and non-temporal)”. [14] According to Tolstoy, concrete content of life is constituted by the dialectical contradiction between united unlimited spiritual essence of every creature and its limited spatial form.

Like in Bergson’s philosophy, the concept of time proposed by Tolstoy is twofold. Tolstoy stresses that on the one hand, like space, time is a sign of separateness and finiteness of our existence in the material world: “Time is what confines me by separating me from the other forms of

life within which I was and shall be". [15] Such concept of time is physical time of the material world formed by the separate elements which can be understood independently from each other. But divided by physical time, the forms of being can be united by consciousness which is able to restore the unity of the spiritual being by means of the most important act of consciousness — by remembrance. "Consciousness is an integral of the remembrance. Remembrance is consciousness in time coloured by the phenomena of matter and space". [16]

Tolstoy's idea of the remembrance is a parallel to Bergson's conception of duration understood as a sign of the integrity of the spiritual being; the acts of consciousness are totally reduced to the uninterrupted during act of remembrance, i.e. act of restoring of the plenitude of life as plenitude of person: "Life begins when self-consciousness of spiritual being is started (which is limited). Moreover, this consciousness begins with the first remembrance of what has happened to me. What is remembrance? The remembrance is a sort of act (obviously immaterial) by means of which I associate two or more different events, or perceptions with myself: I both feel and say that all the events were mine. This consciousness of unity of different states serves as an origin of the spiritual life". [17]

The remembrance forms a concrete and existential content of the consciousness: while consciousness in general and abstract form describes the typical connections of all living creatures with the absolute spiritual principle, the remembrance secures a concrete connection of a given living creature (man) with this principle. Tolstoy describes this fact in such words: "...consciousness is the remembrance purified from the images, while remembrance is consciousness filled up with the images. Consciousness is the remembrance (perceived in time) of all life lived during the infinite period of time. The remembrance is exactly the consciousness (in time) of continuity of my life and (to put it in abstract words) consciousness of non-temporality of my life". [18]

Just as consciousness is impossible to be perceived in space and time, since it is an expression of the absolute spiritual principle in material creature, so remembrance should be perceived as rather non-temporal and dominating over the physical time than as being in time and subjected to the temporal structures. This fact allows us to explain the Tolstoy's paradoxical assertion in the aforementioned quotation concerning the idea that the remembrance is "consciousness of non-temporality of my life". We can clearly find here the difference between metaphysical conception of remembrance (memory) in Tolstoy's and Bergson's works from the modern psychological theories of memory. Memory not only includes an image of another moment in every given moment of time, but also defines the whole structure of the person's spiritual being whose mere reflection is presented in physical time. In this sense, Tolstoy's "remembrance" is exactly the whole plenitude of memory preserving all elements of the person's life without any exclusion: "Memory destroys time: it unites what happens as if it were separate". [19]

IV. TOLSTOY AND BERGSON: THE PROBLEM OF INFLUENCE

Bearing in mind the obvious affinity between Bergson's "philosophy of life" and Tolstoy's conception of life, it is possible to put forward a hypothesis concerning the immediate influence of the writer's philosophical ideas and literary images on Bergson.

Could Bergson read Tolstoy's philosophical works and be influenced by his ideas? It seems to us that it was quite possible. The Tolstoy's book "On life" (it is the most identical Tolstoy's work to Bergson's "philosophy of life") was published in French in 1889. Just this year, Bergson finally settled in Paris, defended his thesis and began his active teaching and research work resulted in the conception of essential meaning of notion of life.

Bergson was well acquainted with Russian culture and respected its most notable representatives; moreover, he appreciated L. Tolstoy among Russian writers and thinkers. This fact is proved by contemporary biographers of Bergson: "Concerning contemporary literature, Bergson declares that Maurice Barrès is his preferable writer, because of music of his style. He equally expresses his admiration for Tolstoy and Dostoevsky". [20] The fact that Bergson was well aware of the Dostoevsky's texts is quite known. Nevertheless, the fact that in his evaluation of the Russian thinkers he puts Tolstoy at the first place (before Dostoevsky) allows us to be sure that he was no less aware of the Tolstoy's creative work. This means that Tolstoy's philosophical ideas were most likely to influence the forming of his version of "philosophy of life".

V. CONCLUSION

The parallels between Tolstoy's and Bergson's ideas are already made by researchers [21]; however, such analysis only concerned a number of ideas presented in very limited circle of the writer's works. Our analysis allows to re-evaluate the relation of Tolstoy's worldview to the context of European philosophy of his time and to recognize his views as a meaning part of non-classical philosophical tradition — as one of first versions of "philosophy of life", a novel movement which became the most considerable achievement of the European thought of the XIX–XXth centuries.

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