

XIX. BOYHOOD

PERHAPS people will scarcely believe me when I tell them what were the dearest, most constant, objects of my reflections during my boyhood, so little did those objects consort with my age and position. Yet, in my opinion, contrast between a man's actual position and his moral activity constitutes the most reliable sign of his genuineness.

During the period when I was leading a solitary and self-centred moral life, I was much taken up with abstract thoughts on man's destiny, on a future life, and on the immortality of the soul, and, with all the ardour of inexperience, strove to make my youthful intellect solve those questions--the questions which constitute the highest level of thought to which the human intellect can tend, but a final decision of which the human intellect can never succeed in attaining.

I believe the intellect to take the same course of development in the individual as in the mass, as also that the thoughts which serve as a basis for philosophical theories are an inseparable part of that intellect, and that every man must be more or less conscious of those thoughts before he can know anything of the existence of philosophical theories. To my own mind those thoughts presented themselves with such clarity and force that I tried to apply them to life, in the fond belief that I was the first to have discovered such splendid and invaluable truths.

Sometimes I would suppose that happiness depends, not upon external causes themselves, but only upon our relation to them, and that, provided a man can accustom himself to bearing suffering, he need never be unhappy. To prove the latter hypothesis, I would (despite the horrible pain) hold out a Tatistchev's dictionary at arm's length for five minutes at a time, or else go into the store-room and scourge my back with cords until the tears involuntarily came to my eyes!

Another time, suddenly bethinking me that death might find me at any hour or any minute, I came to the conclusion that man could only be happy by using the present to the full and taking no thought for the future. Indeed, I wondered how people had never found that out before. Acting under the influence of the new idea, I laid my lesson-books aside for two or three days, and, reposing on my bed, gave myself up to novel-reading and the eating of gingerbread-and-honey which I had bought with my last remaining coins.

Again, standing one day before the blackboard and smearing figures on it with honey, I was struck with the thought, "Why is symmetry so agreeable to the eye? What is symmetry? Of course it is an innate sense," I continued; "yet what is its basis? Perhaps everything in life is symmetry? But no. On the contrary, this is life"--and I drew an oblong figure on the board--"and after life the soul passes to eternity"--here I drew a line from one end of the oblong figure to the edge of the board. "Why should there not be a corresponding line on the other side? If there be an eternity on one side, there must surely be a

corresponding one on the other? That means that we have existed in a previous life, but have lost the recollection of it."

This conclusion--which seemed to me at the time both clear and novel, but the arguments for which it would be difficult for me, at this distance of time, to piece together--pleased me extremely, so I took a piece of paper and tried to write it down. But at the first attempt such a rush of other thoughts came whirling through my brain that I was obliged to jump up and pace the room. At the window, my attention was arrested by a driver harnessing a horse to a water-cart, and at once my mind concentrated itself upon the decision of the question, "Into what animal or human being will the spirit of that horse pass at death?" Just at that moment, Woloda passed through the room, and smiled to see me absorbed in speculative thoughts. His smile at once made me feel that all that I had been thinking about was utter nonsense.

I have related all this as I recollect it in order to show the reader the nature of my cogitations. No philosophical theory attracted me so much as scepticism, which at one period brought me to a state of mind verging upon insanity. I took the fancy into my head that no one nor anything really existed in the world except myself--that objects were not objects at all, but that images of them became manifest only so soon as I turned my attention upon them, and vanished again directly that I ceased to think about them. In short, this idea of mine (that real objects do not exist, but only one's conception of them) brought me to Schelling's well-known theory. There were moments when the influence

of this idea led me to such vagaries as, for instance, turning sharply round, in the hope that by the suddenness of the movement I should come in contact with the void which I believed to be existing where I myself purported to be!

What a pitiful spring of moral activity is the human intellect! My faulty reason could not define the impenetrable. Consequently it shattered one fruitless conviction after another--convictions which, happily for my after life, I never lacked the courage to abandon as soon as they proved inadequate. From all this weary mental struggle I derived only a certain pliancy of mind, a weakening of the will, a habit of perpetual moral analysis, and a diminution both of freshness of sentiment and of clearness of thought. Usually abstract thinking develops man's capacity for apprehending the bent of his mind at certain moments and laying it to heart, but my inclination for abstract thought developed my consciousness in such a way that often when I began to consider even the simplest matter, I would lose myself in a labyrinthine analysis of my own thoughts concerning the matter in question. That is to say, I no longer thought of the matter itself, but only of what I was thinking about it. If I had then asked myself, "Of what am I thinking?" the true answer would have been, "I am thinking of what I am thinking;" and if I had further asked myself, "What, then, are the thoughts of which I am thinking?" I should have had to reply, "They are attempts to think of what I am thinking concerning my own thoughts"--and so on. Reason, with me, had to yield to excess of reason. Every philosophical discovery which I made so flattered my conceit that I often imagined

myself to be a great man discovering new truths for the benefit of humanity. Consequently, I looked down with proud dignity upon my fellow-mortals. Yet, strange to state, no sooner did I come in contact with those fellow-mortals than I became filled with a stupid shyness of them, and, the higher I happened to be standing in my own opinion, the less did I feel capable of making others perceive my consciousness of my own dignity, since I could not rid myself of a sense of diffidence concerning even the simplest of my words and acts.