

Living with absurdity: A Nobleman's guide

Ryan Preston-Roedder 

Occidental College

Correspondence

Ryan Preston-Roedder, Occidental
College.

Email: preston.roedder@gmail.com

Abstract

In *A Confession*, a memoir of his philosophical midlife crisis, Tolstoy recounts falling into despair after coming to believe that his life, and for that matter all human life, is meaningless and absurd. Although Tolstoy's account of the origin and phenomenology of his crisis is widely regarded as illuminating, his response to the crisis, namely, embracing a religious tradition that he had previously dismissed as "irrational," "incomprehensible," and "mingled with falsehood" seems unpromising, at best. Nevertheless, I argue, Tolstoy's account of his response makes a valuable contribution to contemporary thought about the meaning and absurdity of life. I begin by drawing on classic discussions in the philosophical literature, and on Tolstoy's memoir, in order to characterize the problem of meaning and the problem of the absurd, and to clarify the relation between these problems. I then draw on Tolstoy's account of his response to his crisis in order to characterize a form of faith in our deepest values. I argue that such faith supplies one important part of the story concerning how we might respond to the problem of the absurd - a part that has been overlooked by more recent discussions of these issues.

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1 | TOLSTOY'S CRISIS

In *A Confession*, a memoir of his philosophical midlife crisis, Tolstoy recounts falling into despair after coming to believe that his life, and for that matter all human life, is meaningless and absurd. It may seem that, given Tolstoy's circumstances at the time, he had little to complain about. Of that period, Tolstoy writes,

I had what is considered complete good fortune. I was not yet fifty; I had a good wife who loved me and whom I loved, good children, and a large estate which without much effort on my part improved and increased. I was respected by my relations and acquaintances more than at any previous time. I was praised by others, and ... my name was famous. And far from being insane or mentally diseased, I enjoyed on the contrary a strength of mind and body such as I have seldom met among men of my kind (Tolstoy 2005, 16).

But, despite his health, his wealth and fame, the flourishing of his personal relationships, and – we might add – his aristocratic birth, Tolstoy claims, “I could not live, and, fearing death, had to employ cunning with myself to avoid taking my own life” (Tolstoy 2005, 16). Indeed, he reports that, to avoid yielding to the temptation to commit suicide, he hid a rope that he might otherwise have used to hang himself, and he refused to go hunting with his gun (Tolstoy 2005, 16).

After struggling unsuccessfully to identify a source of meaning by studying the leading scientific and philosophical work of his day, Tolstoy purports to resolve his crisis by returning to the core tenets of the religious faith that he had adopted, in a superficial way, during his childhood and, like other members of his class, abandoned later in life. But Tolstoy's account of this purported resolution is likely to seem unsatisfying, and often puzzling, to contemporary readers. Many will find implausible the articles of faith that Tolstoy ends up embracing, namely, the view that there is a “Will that produced me, and desires something of me,” that “the chief and only aim of my life is to ... live in accord with that Will,” and that “I can find expression of that Will” in religious “tradition” (Tolstoy 2005, 61). Beyond this, Tolstoy often seems to go out of his way to make these views harder to accept. He repeatedly describes the views as “irrational” (Tolstoy 2005, 43–46), he claims that the religious tradition that reveals them comprises a good deal of “falsehood ... mixed with the truth” (Tolstoy 2005, 75), and he acknowledges that “quite two thirds” of the religious services in which he participated “either remained incomprehensible, or, when I forced an explanation into them, made me feel that I was lying” (Tolstoy 2005, 67). In short, despite the fact that Tolstoy's account of the origins and phenomenology of his crisis, which I will describe below, remains illuminating, his account of his response may seem unpromising, at best.¹

¹ There are many discussions of Tolstoy's crisis in the philosophical literature. Wolf (2010) and Setiya (2014; 2017) describe the crisis in order to illustrate a profound incapacity to recognize the value in one's own projects and relationships. Flew (1963), Perrett (1985), Levine (1987), and Metz (2013) discuss the crisis in the course of considering whether and how the existence of God or the existence of an eternal soul might enable us to live meaningful lives. I will discuss all of these topics briefly, but will not focus on any of them here.

Nevertheless, I argue, Tolstoy's account of his response to his crisis makes a valuable contribution to contemporary thought about the meaning and absurdity of life. Put roughly, I will draw on this account in order to characterize a form of faith in our deepest values, and I will argue that such faith supplies one important part of the story concerning how we might respond to the absurdity of life – a part that has been overlooked by more recent discussions of these issues. In Section 2, which will focus on conceptual issues, I will appeal to some classic discussions in the literature and draw several distinctions in order to characterize the problem of meaning and the problem of the absurd, clarify the relation between these problems, and explain why the absurd is inescapable. In Section 3, which will focus on psychological issues, I will discuss Tolstoy's encounter with these problems. I will explain how his account conveys what it is like to be gripped by worries about the meaning and absurdity of life, I will argue that the account illustrates how our attempts to address worries about meaning may force us to confront the absurd, and I will describe the attitude that Tolstoy adopts in response to the absurd. Finally, in Section 4, I will explain how this response, when it is suitably characterized, deepens our understanding of the inescapable absurdity of life and helps us better understand how to cope with it.

2 | MEANING AND THE ABSURD

2.1 Leading a human life is, in Thomas Nagel's words, a "full-time occupation, to which everyone devotes decades of intense concern" (Nagel 1979, 15). We devote a staggering amount of energy and attention to winning our peers' esteem, or at least avoiding ridicule; securing jobs and promotions; finding and keeping romantic partners; having children and figuring out how to raise them; navigating infirmities that we accumulate as we age; and helping our loved ones navigate their infirmities. Ordinarily, when we are engaged in these pursuits, we simply take for granted that our lives merit such concern. But, on occasion, our circumstances prompt us to step back – to use Nagel's metaphor – and consider our lives from a more detached perspective. Someone might adopt this perspective on her life when she completes a project around which she has organized much of her life – like becoming a partner at her firm or serving a successful term in some political office – and she must decide what to do next. Or she might adopt this perspective, say, when reflection on historical events draws her attention to the astonishingly low probability of her birth or when a serious illness draws her attention to her own mortality. Once we consider our lives from this detached perspective, we may call into question our lives' significance; that is, suspending some of the assumptions that normally frame our pursuits, we might ask whether our lives *merit* the kind of energy and attention that we normally devote to them. When we raise this question, but find that we cannot provide any satisfactory response, we face the problem of meaning.²

To be clear, the fact that we sometimes consider certain of our projects from a more detached perspective and, upon reflection, find those particular projects wanting may be a source of

²My initial characterization of the problem of meaning and problem of the absurd – especially my use of the metaphor of stepping back to view one's life from a detached perspective – follows Nagel (1979; 1986, Ch. XI). My discussion then diverges from Nagel's in three main respects: First, I distinguish three factors that can make our lives absurd. One of these factors is rendered invisible, and the distinction between the remaining factors is often blurred, in Nagel's discussion. Second, I claim, while Nagel denies, that the absurdity that is grounded in what I call the unruly origins of our convictions is, indeed, a problem, and I explain why it is troubling. As I explain in Section 4, this disagreement is rooted in important differences between the cases on which Nagel and I focus. Third, and relatedly, while Nagel recommends that we respond to the absurd with irony, I recommend that, in cases with which I am concerned, we respond with a kind of faith.

distress, but it need not generate the problem with which I am concerned. After all, taking a step back, on occasion, to evaluate one's pursuits from some broader context, and then returning to those pursuits, revising them, or abandoning them in light of one's evaluation, is part of being a well-functioning agent. Consider someone who takes a lucrative, but demanding, job at an advertising agency and finds that, although the work is enjoyable, it prevents him from spending as much time as he would like with his children. After considering respects in which, over time, such work might undermine his relationship with his children, he decides to leave his job and find another, less demanding position. Or imagine that someone who lives in an affluent, predominantly White neighborhood, and who has advocated for the adoption of stop-and-frisk police programs in poorer Black and Latino communities, listens carefully and with an open mind to interviews in which residents of such communities describe the relentless, and often cruel, police harassment that they endure under such programs. Listening to these narratives draws her attention to the residents' vulnerability to mistreatment by police and prompts her to reconsider the merits of stop-and-frisk programs. Finally, imagine that someone snaps angrily at his teenage son – who has forgotten to perform some household chore – but then pauses to consider the source of his anger. The parent recognizes that he has had a difficult day and may be irritable as a result, and he decides that, in this case, angry criticism is neither an appropriate response to the son's forgetfulness nor an effective means of encouraging the son to help out at home. In these three cases, people consider their own behavior from some broader perspective – namely, by considering the longer-term consequences of the behavior, considering the behavior from other people's points of view, or examining the underlying attitudes that generate the behavior – and in each case, detached observation seems to be part of thinking responsibly about how to live.

But we can also use these same forms of reflection to achieve, in thought, even greater degrees of detachment from our own lives, and the problem of meaning arises when we consider our lives from such a broad context that our lives *as a whole* seem insignificant or seem to have no point. We peer at our lives from that great height and ask whether it matters that we exist at all, or, given that we do exist, whether it matters what we think, how we feel, what we do, or what we care about. Of course, one might respond by insisting that adopting such a highly detached perspective on one's own life, and taking seriously the judgements that one makes from that rarefied perspective, involves some form of confusion.³ I believe that, although there is something right about this response, the worry that life lacks significance cannot be so easily dismissed. But I can better explain what this response gets right and what it gets wrong after I describe in more detail Tolstoy's confrontation with the problem of meaning. So, I will return to this response in Section 3.

2.2 When we use these forms of reflection to adopt a highly detached perspective on our own lives, we may come to worry not only that our lives are insignificant, but also, relatedly, that our lives are *absurd*. To say that something is absurd is to say that it exhibits some striking incongruity that renders it ridiculous.⁴ Our circumstances may be absurd, on occasion, because we adopt behaviors that are at odds with the ends that we wish to achieve; for example, a child who is somewhat too eager to make a new friend may pursue some potential playmate with such excessive zeal that he ends up pushing the child away. Or our circumstances may be absurd, say, because our pretensions clash with reality. Someone might, for example, launch into a marriage proposal during a meticulously planned dinner, not realizing that a large piece of spinach is dangling conspicuously from her teeth. Cases like these are familiar from ordinary life, but to be clear, the fact that such cases arise does not, by itself, pose any serious philosophical problem. After all,

³ Nagel (1986, 220-221) discusses this problem.

⁴ See Feinberg (1992, 299-305) for an overview of what we might mean when we claim that a life, or anything else, is absurd.

the people in the absurd situations that I just described can escape the absurdity at little cost by bringing the discordant features of their circumstances into better alignment. Provided that he has sufficient self-awareness, the overeager child can give his potential playmate a little more personal space; and the person who issues a marriage proposal can simply use a dinner napkin. Furthermore, even if we set aside the possibility of eliminating the incongruities that make these people's circumstances absurd, the incongruities have almost no bearing on the overall quality of these people's lives. So, it seems appropriate to respond to the incongruities not by wringing one's hands or falling into despair, but rather by smiling, or shrugging, and moving on. Indeed, a disposition to smile when our circumstances become absurd in these ordinary ways helps counteract the all-too-human tendency to take ourselves too seriously.

Rather, the problem of the absurd arises when it seems that, in virtue of deeply entrenched features of human life, or of our particular form of life, our lives *as a whole* are absurd. But the absurdity that seems, when we encounter this problem, to characterize our lives as a whole differs in important respects from the absurdity that characterizes certain ordinary circumstances within life, and, in virtue of these differences, these two types of absurdity call for very different responses. First, obviously enough, the absurdity of life as a whole arises in virtue of strikingly incongruous features of our lives that do not just make this or that situation ridiculous, but rather render our lives as a whole ridiculous. Second, because these features of our lives are deeply entrenched, we cannot escape the absurdity to which they give rise unless we abandon life itself, or take on the onerous task of eliminating these features. In short, when we encounter the problem of the absurd, it seems that our lives as a whole are apt for ridicule, and that we cannot alter this condition, at least, not without making some grave sacrifice. Unlike the observation that some ordinary situation within life is absurd, this conclusion has a tragic dimension. So, although humor might have some role to play in a satisfactory response to the problem of the absurd, we cannot simply dismiss the problem with a smile.⁵ Rather, to address the problem, we must show that, contrary to initial appearances, we can somehow escape the absurd without taking on too great a burden, or we must identify attitudes or behaviors that somehow render the absurd more tolerable.

As I will now argue, most of us cannot escape the absurd; put roughly, there are multiple incongruities that, if present, make one's life absurd, and one of these incongruities is almost unavoidable. Nevertheless, as I will argue in Sections 3 and 4, Tolstoy's account of his crisis and its resolution identifies an attitude, which we can adopt toward our deepest convictions, that helps us cope with this condition.

2.2.1 I want to consider three types of incongruities that, together, render almost everyone's life absurd. The first is the incongruity between, on the one hand, our striving to lead a life whose significance can survive scrutiny from a highly detached perspective and, on the other hand, the fact – if it is a fact – that the conditions of human life make it impossible for us to achieve such significance. Imagine that someone who leads an ordinary human life, with its characteristic forms of intense concern, takes a step back from her pursuits and considers her life from a highly detached perspective. She comes to realize, upon reflection, that any good or ill that she can accomplish is trivial in comparison to the sea of misery and wrongdoing in the world around her. Furthermore, although she can make some merely local differences in the lives of people who are close to her, she and everyone that she cares about will someday die; and, eventually, everything that she does will be forgotten. So, she concludes, her life as a whole is relatively *insignificant* and cannot be otherwise – it matters relatively little what she does, what she thinks, or whether she exists at all. Nevertheless, the moment that she ceases these reflections, she returns with undiminished

⁵ For discussion of the role that humor might play in an appropriate response to the absurd, see Cohen (1999, Chs. 4-5).

effort and attention to the same projects that previously occupied her, or she keeps striving, in vain, to identify and adopt pursuits that really are significant. In either case, there is a striking incongruity between the intense concern that she devotes to her life and what we might call – to borrow Guy Kahane’s (2013) phrase – the *cosmic insignificance* of her life. Albert Camus (1970; 1991) offers evocative and influential characterizations of the absurdity that is rooted in this first incongruity, and he develops a response to it, which I will discuss in Section 4.

2.2.2 The second incongruity, which is structurally similar to the first, characterizes the lives of many oppressed people in virtue of the poor social positions they are forced to occupy. Put roughly, most of us need to affirm in some way the moral status that we possess in virtue of being human, most need to have this status recognized in some way by the people with whom we interact, and most cannot eliminate either of these needs without paying some grave psychic cost. But the lives of many oppressed people exhibit a striking incongruity between these needs and the fact that the laws and mores in these people’s societies systemically undermine these people’s attempts to affirm their moral status, and systematically discourage their compatriots from recognizing that status. In his work on Black theology, James H. Cone (1997) argues that the lives of Black Americans, laboring within a system of White racial domination, exhibit just this sort of incongruity. Cone observes that the Black American regards himself as human, but, “as he meets the white world and its values, he is confronted with an almighty No and is defined as a thing. This produces the absurdity” (Cone 1997, 11). Drawing on Camus’s work, Cone develops a response to the absurdity that is rooted in the *denial of oppressed people’s humanity*. I will discuss this response in Section 4.

Discussions of the problem of the absurd within analytic philosophy often overlook this second incongruity. In his classic article “The Absurd,” which has shaped many of these discussions, Thomas Nagel claims that

Most people’s lives are absurd, temporarily or permanently, for conventional reasons having to do with their particular ambitions, circumstances, and personal relations. If there is a philosophical sense of absurdity, however, it must arise from the perception of something universal – some respect in which pretension and reality inevitably clash for all of us (Nagel 1979, 13).

This way of thinking about the absurd obscures, and rules out as irrelevant, the incongruity that characterizes the lives of many oppressed people in virtue of the oppression that they – but not their more privileged compatriots – endure. But Cone and others make clear that this incongruity gives rise to a philosophically important form of absurdity, and that we can use philosophical tools to better understand and respond to it.⁶

2.2.3 We encounter these first two incongruities when we adopt a highly detached perspective on our own lives and consider the longer-term consequences of our projects or the broader circumstances in which our projects are embedded. But we encounter a third, subtler incongruity, which Nagel (1979) identifies, when we consider the biological and social forces that help generate the values in light of which we assess our projects. Put another way, we encounter the first two incongruities when we look forward, at the consequences of our projects, or look outward, at the broader context in which we pursue those projects. But we encounter a third incongruity when we look *backward*, at the origins of the values in light of which we judge that certain projects are worth pursuing, and others not. This third incongruity is the discrepancy between the seriousness

⁶ For further discussion of this incongruity, see Jackson (1962) and West (1999).

with which we take our deepest practical convictions and the fact that these same convictions are subject to grave doubts. To clarify, the convictions that I have in mind are firmly entrenched judgments concerning how we should live, and they guide and constrain the projects around which we organize our lives. Some of these convictions are moral, like the judgment that all human beings merit equal moral consideration, while others are non-moral, like the judgment that having friendships of a certain sort is vital for living a good life.

When we consider the origins of the convictions that help shape our lives, we find that, whatever the content of these convictions may be, the convictions are subject to doubt for one or both of the following reasons. To begin with, everyone's convictions are, to a considerable degree, arbitrarily adopted; that is, the fact that we have adopted these convictions, as opposed to others that conflict with them, is, to a considerable degree, the result of biological and social forces that are indifferent to the considerations that render such convictions true or false, or, perhaps, render them apt or inapt.⁷ Beyond this, many of us recognize, upon reflection, that a broad range of our convictions have been shaped partly by social forces that are not merely indifferent to the truth, or aptness, of these convictions, but rather, likely to produce errors in practical judgment.⁸

I can more clearly characterize what I will call the *unruly origins* of our convictions if I discuss two types of examples. First, adapting a case from G.A. Cohen, imagine that Smith, who was raised in a socialist community, firmly believes that justice requires certain forms of economic equality (Cohen 2000, 8). And imagine that she structures much of her life around this judgment; for example, she may devote much of her time, money, and attention to the aim of realizing this socialist ideal of equality in her society. Smith encounters and enters into conversation with Jones, who was raised in a politically moderate community. Jones is no more or less intelligent, careful, or informed about the empirical facts than Smith, but he nevertheless accepts with equanimity forms of economic *inequality* that, Smith believes, are deeply unjust and ought to be eradicated. Both Smith and Jones provide arguments for their positions, but, whenever one of them offers an argument, the other simply offers grounds for rejecting it. Smith concludes, upon reflection, that if she had been raised in Jones's community, she would be unperturbed by the relevant inequalities. Initially, she finds this thought distressing and somewhat disorienting, but, when the conversation ends, she returns to her ordinary routine and returns, with undiminished commitment, to the same socialist convictions. To be clear, this example involves disagreement about moral convictions, but we might imagine, instead, that Smith and Jones have a similar disagreement about *non-moral* convictions, say, convictions concerning whether certain cultural or religious traditions can serve as important sources of meaning in life.

In this first type of case, someone compares certain of her actual convictions to other, conflicting convictions that she would have adopted if she had been raised in somewhat different circumstances. She recognizes that at least one of these sets of convictions, namely, the actual convictions or the counterfactual alternatives, must be mistaken, but she does not have adequate grounds for deciding which set is mistaken. By contrast, in a second – structurally different – type

⁷ For discussion of epistemological worries concerning the arbitrary origins of our practical convictions, see Cohen (2000), Sher (2001), Street (2006), White (2010), Srinivasan (2019), and Schoenfeld (forthcoming).

⁸ For discussion of epistemological and moral worries concerning one instance of this phenomenon – namely, practical convictions held by women raised in patriarchal societies – see Card (1996). See also Audre Lorde's (2007, 123) claim that "the true focus of revolutionary change is never merely the oppressive situations which we seek to escape, but that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us, and which knows only the oppressors' tactics, the oppressors' relationships."

of case that I will now describe, someone comes to believe that some broad range of his *actual* convictions must be mistaken; but he does not have adequate grounds for deciding which of his actual convictions are mistaken, or to what extent they are mistaken.

This second case involves reflection concerning how social prejudice that pervades one's community tends to distort one's convictions. Frederick Douglass provides an instructive characterization of such prejudice in "The Color Line":

Few evils are less accessible to the force of reason, or more tenacious of life and power, than a long-standing prejudice. It is a moral disorder, which creates the conditions necessary to its own existence, and fortifies itself by refusing all contradiction. It paints a hateful picture according to its own diseased imagination, and distorts the features of the fancied original to suit the portrait. As those who believe in the visibility of ghosts can easily see them, so it is always easy to see repulsive qualities in those we despise and hate (Douglass 2016, 501).

In short, pervasive social prejudice both distorts our perception of the object of the prejudice and dulls our capacity to determine whether or how our perception has been distorted. Now, imagine that Gray comes to realize that entrenched social prejudice operates in this way. He then considers the fact that, say, a racist or sexist or ableist consciousness is deeply entrenched in the community in which he was raised, and of which he is now a member. He concludes, upon reflection, that some such prejudice has surely distorted some of his convictions concerning, say, criminal justice or the relation between work and family or the value of physical independence; but he cannot identify grounds, that he finds compelling, for giving up any particular conviction that he holds. Gray finds his predicament distressing at first, but when he ceases these reflections, he returns to his old convictions with equanimity.

Such examples make salient the arbitrariness and the distorting influences that lie at the root of our deepest convictions about how to live. This arbitrariness and these distorting influences render our convictions vulnerable to grave doubts, and we may feel the force of these doubts acutely when we reflect on our convictions' unruly origins. But, when we abandon these reflections and return to ordinary life, we return, also, to these same convictions, with undiminished enthusiasm. This discrepancy between the seriousness with which we take our practical convictions and the fact that these convictions are subject to grave doubts renders our lives absurd. Few, if any, of us can stop taking our own convictions seriously; indeed, few would *wish* to do so. But the arbitrariness of these convictions is an inescapable feature of human life; it is an aspect of human beings' status as creatures who are embedded in societies and who have biological and social origins. Furthermore, in the unjust and morally corrupt societies from which actual human beings emerge, the distorting influences of social prejudice are similarly inescapable. So, absurdity that is grounded in the unruly origins of our convictions is, for almost all of us, unavoidable.

2.3 The first two types of absurdity that I described, namely, the absurdity grounded in our cosmic insignificance and the absurdity grounded in the denial of oppressed people's humanity, are distressing for structurally similar reasons. Many of us need to lead lives that we find worthwhile upon reflection, and almost all of us need to affirm the moral status that we possess in virtue of our humanity, and to have this status recognized by people with whom we interact. Furthermore, as I said above, most of us cannot rid ourselves of these needs – nor can we stop struggling to satisfy these needs – without paying some grave psychic cost. So, when we come to believe that features of the human condition, or features of our form of life that we cannot alter, make it *impossible*

for us to satisfy these needs, we may worry that our circumstances are, in some sense, conspiring with our own attitudes and actions to make our lives, and the doomed strivings that are central to our lives, apt targets of ridicule. As I will explain in Section 3, Tolstoy was acutely sensitive to this worry.

But the absurdity that is grounded in the unruly origins of our practical convictions is distressing for a different reason. Return to the two cases that I described above, in which Smith and Gray, respectively, reflect on the factors that have shaped their practical convictions. Smith comes to recognize that she holds her socialist convictions, in some sense, because she was raised in a socialist community; and if she had been raised in a politically moderate community, she would have held other, more moderate convictions instead. Furthermore, she recognizes that at least one of these sets of convictions – namely, her actual, socialist convictions or the other, moderate ones – must be mistaken, but she does not have adequate grounds to determine which set is mistaken. And Gray comes to recognize that his practical convictions have been shaped by his upbringing in a community that harbors pervasive social prejudice. He recognizes that such prejudice has surely distorted his moral or political convictions or his convictions concerning what it means to live a good life, but he is poorly situated to determine which convictions are distorted, and to what extent.

When someone finds herself in either sort of case, her awareness of her predicament is apt to *alienate* her from her own deepest practical convictions. For example, Smith's awareness of her condition may alienate her from her convictions that certain forms of inequality are unjust and should be eradicated, that certain social reformers are highly admirable and well worth emulating, that she should be willing to make great personal sacrifices in order to support certain institutions, and so on. Relatedly, this awareness may render her less than wholehearted in her attachment to the ideals, people, institutions, and so on with which these socialist convictions are concerned. Similarly, Gray's awareness of his condition may render him uneasy about his reliance on his convictions concerning criminal justice or the relation between work and family. Finally, when we consider the fact that *our own* practical convictions are, to a considerable degree, arbitrarily adopted, and that they have surely been distorted to some extent by social prejudice, we are apt to become alienated from our own firmly entrenched judgments about how to live. And we are apt to become less than wholehearted in our attachment to the ideals, people, institutions, and so on with which these judgments are concerned.

To be clear, this sort of alienation from our own convictions might involve the worry that our convictions are irrational, but it need not. More precisely, when we reflect on the unruly origins of our convictions, we may worry that holding these convictions is irrational; and, provided that it is important to us to avoid irrationality, harboring this worry may contribute to our alienation from these convictions. But worrying that our convictions are irrational is not necessary for experiencing the alienation that I have in mind. Imagine that someone who reflects on the unruly origins of her convictions decides that, because her convictions must be the product of *some* upbringing or other, and because she has been, as far as possible, conscientious in adopting her convictions, holding onto these convictions does not involve any serious failure of rationality. She may nevertheless worry that, despite her being rational, her present convictions are subject to grave doubt; she may feel uneasy about relying on these convictions to guide and limit the pursuits that are most important to her, and to confront people who have other, competing conceptions of moral virtue or social justice; and she may feel disappointed that she does not – indeed, *cannot* – have anything better to rely on. Such worries are natural responses to the recognition that the factors that have shaped our deepest convictions are unruly in the sense I described, and, whether or not

we conclude that holding onto these convictions is irrational, we may be alienated from our own convictions in virtue of such worries.⁹

One might try to quell the worries that I just described by appealing to the view that the truth of our substantive judgments about how to live is *mind-dependent*; more precisely, one might claim that the truth of these judgments somehow depends on what we would believe if we engaged in subjectively ideal deliberation.¹⁰ Of course, the basic starting points of such deliberation are arbitrarily determined, different people have different starting points, and people who deliberate rightly from different starting points might arrive at very different conclusions. Nevertheless, on this view, the practical judgments that we reach through subjectively ideal deliberation cannot be mistaken. So, we may recognize that we hold our current practical convictions partly because we were raised in a certain community, and that, if we had been raised in some other community instead, we would have adopted other, conflicting convictions. But, provided that we consider relevant matters in a subjectively ideal way, we need not worry that our current convictions are mistaken, and we need not be alienated from these convictions in any important sense.

Some may reject this response because they find this sort of relativism about our practical judgments implausible, but, even if we set that worry aside, this response cannot adequately address the sort of alienation I am discussing. First, this response proceeds partly by shifting the locus of the problem, rather than resolving it. To employ this response, we must determine what it means to engage in subjectively ideal practical deliberation, and, in order to develop an account of such deliberation, we must engage in moral argument. But the judgments that we rely on in the course of making such arguments are *themselves* arbitrarily adopted, and our awareness of this fact is apt to generate the very same worries that this response purports to address.

Second, earlier in this section, I described two structurally distinct types of cases that make salient the unruly origins of our practical convictions, namely, the case in which Smith considers the factors that have shaped her socialist convictions and that in which Gray considers the factors that have shaped his convictions about criminal justice, the value of physical independence, and so on. The response that I am now discussing is designed to remedy the alienation that may naturally arise in the first type of case, in which we believe that either our own convictions or the convictions of peers who were raised in some other community must be mistaken, but we lack grounds to determine which convictions are mistaken. But this response does not even purport to remedy the alienation that may naturally arise in the second type of case, in which we believe that our own convictions have been influenced by factors that, *by our own lights*, should be regarded as distortions, but we are poorly situated to determine which of our convictions are distorted, or to what extent. In this second type of case, we believe we have failed to acquire our practical convictions in a subjectively ideal way, and we are poorly situated to root out whatever errors have resulted from this failure. So, the response I am now discussing, which insists that our convictions cannot be mistaken when we reach them through subjectively ideal deliberation, cannot remedy the alienation we experience in such cases.

Once we grasp the connection between being aware of the unruly origins of our practical convictions and being alienated from those convictions, we can understand why the absurdity that is grounded in this unruliness is distressing. When we recognize that our lives are absurd in this sense, we may worry that, as we struggle to cultivate a more virtuous character, we can do little more than mimic ideals that we do not wholeheartedly accept; as we strive to carry out our

⁹ Duncan Pritchard defends the related claim that Nagel's discussion of the absurd shows that we are unavoidably subject to some measure of "angst regarding whether our lives are meaningful" (Pritchard 2010, 13).

¹⁰ See Velleman (2013).

moral obligations and create a more just society, we must appeal to principles that are, to a considerable degree, alien to us; and as we work to build more meaningful lives, we must rely on our connections to ideals, institutions, and so on from which we are, in an important sense, estranged.

3 | THE CRISIS REVISITED

3.1 Tolstoy's account of his crisis and response in *A Confession* provides a kind of map of all but one of the philosophical problems that I just described.¹¹ More precisely, the account contributes in the following ways to our understanding of meaning and the absurd: (1) First, it conveys what it is like to confront the problem of meaning, the problem of the absurd as it concerns our cosmic insignificance, and the problem of the absurd as it concerns the unruly origins of our convictions. (2) Second, it illustrates how these problems, though conceptually distinct, may become intertwined. Put roughly, Tolstoy's crisis begins when he judges that his life is insignificant. He then considers his own attitudes and behavior in light of this judgment and concludes that his life also exhibits a kind of absurdity that is grounded in our cosmic insignificance. Eventually, he adopts religious convictions that, he believes, enable him to resolve these philosophical problems. But, as he reflects on the factors that have shaped these convictions, he comes to worry that his life exhibits *another* form of absurdity that is grounded in our convictions' unruly origins, and which we cannot escape. (3) Third, Tolstoy's account helps us understand how to cope with this latter form of absurdity.

Each of these contributions is sufficient, by itself, to make Tolstoy's memoir a worthy object of philosophical attention, and I will discuss them all; but I will devote special attention to the third contribution, which concerns our response to the problem of the absurd that is grounded in the unruly origins of our convictions. To be clear, Tolstoy does not even purport to resolve this problem, and, as I said above, I do not believe that it *can* be resolved. Rather, he suggests a way of living with the problem that is well worth considering, and which more recent discussions of the absurd have overlooked. I aim to provide an interpretation of Tolstoy's response that vindicates it, and helps us understand how it fills an important gap left by responses developed in these more recent discussions.

3.2 Tolstoy's crisis begins when he considers the inevitability and finality of death and decay, and, in light of these grim reflections, calls into question the significance of his life as a whole. Sooner or later, he observes, he and everyone he cares about will die, the world he inhabits will fall into ruin, and "nothing will remain but stench and worms" (Tolstoy 2005, 17). In other words, death and decay will eventually wipe out all discernable traces of his life, and of everything else that matters to him. So, in some sense, it will be as though these things had never existed. In light of this somber truth, Tolstoy asks why he should devote energy and attention to living his life at all, and this question plagues him as he tries to pursue his projects. When he manages his estate and considers his fortune, he is arrested by the thought, "Well . . . what next?"; when he considers plans for educating his children, he stops and asks, "What for?"; and when he considers his literary fame, he says to himself, "Very well; you will be more famous . . . than all the writers in the world – what of it?" (Tolstoy 2005, 14). Tolstoy grapples with these questions and finds that he cannot

¹¹ Tolstoy does not discuss the absurdity that is grounded in the denial of oppressed people's humanity. I will return to this form of absurdity in Section 4, when I discuss responses to the absurd.

provide satisfactory answers; it seems, to him, that inevitable death and decay deprive all human projects of their point and significance.

To convey the gravity of this problem, Tolstoy presents “an Eastern fable” about a traveler who is being chased across a plain by a wild beast (Tolstoy 2005, 17).¹² The traveler escapes from the beast by jumping into a dry well, only to discover that, at the bottom of the well, a dragon lies waiting to devour him. So, he clings to a twig growing out of the side of the well and remains there, unwilling to move up toward the beast or down toward the dragon. As he hangs there, two mice appear, and they gnaw at the twig, drawing him closer to annihilation. In his final moments, the traveler looks round and notices drops of wild honey on the leaves of the twig. He stretches out his tongue and licks them. Tolstoy claims that his own predicament is analogous to the traveler’s wretched condition. Like the traveler, Tolstoy

clung to the twig of life, knowing that the dragon of death was inevitably awaiting me . . . I tried to lick the honey which formerly consoled me; but the honey no longer gave me pleasure . . . I only saw the inescapable dragon and the mice, and I could not tear my gaze from them (Tolstoy 2005, 18).

He explains that the “drops of honey” that had occupied him before his crisis were his family and his literary work (Tolstoy 2005, 18). But, once he becomes vividly aware of his mortality, these concerns seem insignificant and fail to satisfy him. Indeed, Tolstoy judges that the story of the traveler conveys a terrible truth about the human condition: *all* of our lives are insignificant.

Furthermore, when Tolstoy considers his own attitudes and behavior in light of his judgment that life is insignificant, he comes to worry that his life is not only meaningless, but also *absurd*; and this apparent absurdity is a key factor that makes life intolerable for him. Tolstoy observes that, despite judging that his life is insignificant, he continues to devote tremendous energy and attention to it, for example, by working to secure whatever he needs for survival and striving to promote his projects. And he judges that this wild disparity between, on the one hand, the intense concern that he devotes to his life and, on the other, the cosmic *insignificance* of his life renders his life as a whole an apt target of ridicule – a “stupid and spiteful joke” (Tolstoy 2005, 16). He expresses this sense of the absurd when he notes that he feels as though there is some distant, cruel observer watching his ceaseless, pointless striving; and as Tolstoy reaches “the summit of life” and stands there “like an arch-fool, seeing clearly that there was nothing in life, and that there has been and will be nothing,” this observer is “amused” (Tolstoy 2005, 16–17).

Perhaps, Tolstoy suggests, if he had merely believed “that life had no meaning,” he “could have borne it quietly, knowing that that was my lot”; but the apparent absurdity of his life was more than he could bear (Tolstoy 2005, 19). If he had merely been, in other words,

like a man living in a wood from which he knows there is no exit, I could have lived; but I was like one lost in a wood who, horrified at having lost his way, rushes about wishing to find the road. He knows that each step he takes confuses him more and more; but still he cannot help rushing about (Tolstoy 2005, 19).

Once Tolstoy comes to believe that his life amounts to a cruel joke – a lot of mad rushing about – he decides that the best course is to escape the absurd by committing suicide. But he cannot bring

¹² Versions of this fable appear in many religious texts, but the earliest known version appears in the *Vāsudevahinḍī*, a Jain text written sometime before the 6th Century CE (Jain 1979).

himself to end his life, and so he finds himself trapped in an existence that he cannot tolerate, and driven to despair.

One might respond by claiming that Tolstoy's despair manifests some sort of confusion; one might insist, in other words, that considering one's life from a highly detached perspective, and then taking seriously the value judgments that one makes from that perspective, involves some error. There is something right about this response, but even so, Tolstoy's worries about the cosmic insignificance of human life cannot be so easily dismissed. The mere fact that Tolstoy considers and evaluates his life from a highly detached perspective does not, by itself, mean that he has made some error. After all, the thoughts that lead him to his gloomy conclusions are instances of forms of reflection that, as I explained in Section 2, are part of thinking responsibly about how to live. Of course, he entertains such thoughts repeatedly, from increasingly broad contexts, but, as Nagel (1979, 17–18; 1986, 220–221) points out, these forms of reflection do not have built-in stopping points. If Tolstoy has, indeed, made some error, that error lies not in his ascending to some great height to evaluate his life, but rather, in his being too acutely sensitive to the problems that he recognizes from that rarified perspective. His intense focus on the cosmic insignificance of life borders on mania and leaves him almost entirely unable to attend to, much less appreciate, the kinds of reasons for action and motivation to which we ordinarily respond when we are immersed in our pursuits. But this does not mean that the problems that he grasps from this detached perspective are mere illusions or that they are not distressing in any way.

3.3 Tolstoy tries to resolve the philosophical problems that lie at the root of this crisis, namely, the problem of meaning and the problem of the absurd as it concerns our cosmic insignificance, by identifying some activity whose significance can survive scrutiny from a highly detached perspective. In short, he tries to identify a way of life that may serve as a source of meaning. Ultimately, Tolstoy identifies what he believes to be a source of meaning by returning to core doctrines of the Russian Orthodox Church – doctrines that he had accepted during childhood, but abandoned as he grew older. More precisely, he adopts the following religious convictions, which include metaphysical claims and practical judgments (Tolstoy 2005, 46 and 61): (1) There is a God who desires something of him. (2) He – Tolstoy – should live in accord with God's desires. (3) Living in accord with these desires will result in eternal communion with God, while failing to do so will result in eternal torment. (4) He may determine what God desires by consulting Orthodox tradition.

Given that these convictions are *correct*, it may be that we can appeal to them to resolve the problem of meaning and the problem of the absurd as it concerns our cosmic insignificance. If adopting some way of life would enable us to achieve eternal communion with a supremely good God and avoid endless suffering, then whether we adopt this way of life is surely a matter of great importance. And given that adopting this way of life is of such great importance, devoting energy and attention to this task does not generate the absurdity with which I am now concerned. However, the problem, for many contemporary readers, is that they reject these convictions – for that matter, many educated Russians in Tolstoy's day rejected them – and Tolstoy offers little reason to believe they are, in fact, correct. To make matters worse, he repeatedly describes these convictions as “irrational” and expresses profound anxiety about adopting them (Tolstoy 2005, Chs. 8–16).

So, I will not try to determine whether Tolstoy's appeal to these religious convictions actually resolves the philosophical problems that he wishes to address. Rather, I wish to focus on Tolstoy's anxiety about adopting these convictions, and on his struggle to cope with that anxiety. More precisely, I want to consider how his attempt to address the problem of meaning and problem of the absurd as it concerns our cosmic insignificance makes salient a *further* problem which we cannot escape, namely, the problem of the absurd as it concerns the unruly origins of our

convictions. And I want to determine what Tolstoy's account can teach us about how to cope with this latter, inescapable absurdity.

3.4 Upon considering the origins of his own religious convictions, Tolstoy comes to recognize two features in virtue of which these convictions are subject to doubt. These features correspond to the two respects in which our deepest practical convictions are *unruly* in the sense I described in Section 2. First, Tolstoy observes that his religious convictions are, to a considerable degree, arbitrarily adopted. While *he* appeals to Orthodox tradition to determine what God desires of him, and so to determine how he should live, other people who were raised, say, in Catholic or Buddhist communities appeal to different traditions. As a result, these other people sometimes arrive at very different conclusions concerning what they should do, what God desires, or whether God exists at all. Tolstoy acknowledges that he does not have good evidence that the Orthodox tradition is more reliable than these alternatives, but he continues to hold onto the same Orthodox convictions (Tolstoy 2005, 70–71).¹³ Second, setting aside his assessment of other traditions, Tolstoy acknowledges that the Orthodox tradition that has shaped *his own* convictions contains “falsehood . . . mixed with the truth” (Tolstoy 2005, 75). It rests, in other words, partly on fears, superstitions, and other distorting factors that have been “handed down” through generations of Russian society, and which he is poorly situated to root out (Tolstoy 2005, 75). Nevertheless, after some fraught reflection on the matter, he returns to these same Orthodox convictions.

Initially, Tolstoy's recognition that his religious convictions have such unruly origins leads him to experience profound anxiety over his adoption of these convictions; and, in virtue of this anxiety, he becomes deeply alienated from the convictions. More precisely, Tolstoy's awareness of these unruly origins leads him to worry that his religious convictions are “irrational” – that they amount to “some despised pseudo-knowledge” – and he cannot bring himself to embrace such irrationality wholeheartedly (Tolstoy 2005, 43). Furthermore, when he acts on these convictions, for example, by participating in Orthodox rituals, he often feels either that his behavior is “completely incomprehensible” or, if he struggles to make sense of this behavior, that he is merely “lying” to himself (Tolstoy 2005, 67).

Nevertheless, Tolstoy comes to accept these religious convictions through a kind of *faith*. He recognizes that, due to “the limits of my intellect,” some of the grounds of his deepest religious convictions are “inevitably inexplicable” to him (Tolstoy 2005, 76). Put more broadly, because we are embodied creatures with biological and social histories, there are limits to our ability to identify and understand the grounds of our own convictions, and to disentangle the truths from the falsehoods that make up those convictions. So, Tolstoy decides not to “seek the explanation of everything,” but rather to seek the grounds of his convictions and root out falsehoods to the best of his ability; and insofar as human intellectual limitations prevent him from going further, he resolves to maintain his convictions through “the knowledge of faith” (Tolstoy 2005, 75–76). In the enigmatic closing passage of his memoir, in which he describes a dream that represents his reliance on such faith, he indicates that this faith quiets his anxiety, leaving him “glad and tranquil” (Tolstoy 2005, 74–79).

Tolstoy's response to his anxiety, namely, holding onto his religious convictions through a kind of faith, supplies an important part of the story of how to cope with the absurdity that is grounded in the unruly origins of our convictions – a part of the story that more recent work on meaning and the absurd has overlooked. To be clear, Tolstoy's response is not especially illuminating in virtue

¹³ Tolstoy notes, with frustration, that “all who do not profess an identical faith with themselves are considered by the Orthodox to be heretics; just as the Catholics and others consider the Orthodox to be heretics” (Tolstoy 2005, 71). He discusses this arbitrariness in greater detail in his novel *Anna Karenina* (2013, Part 8, Chs. 9, 13, and 18–19).

of the *content* of his convictions, that is, in virtue of the fact that he believes that God exists, that he should act in this or that way, and so on. Rather, given a certain plausible characterization of faith, which I will present below, the response is illuminating mainly in virtue of the *structure* of the attitude that sustains Tolstoy's convictions. This same attitude, with its characteristic structure, can also sustain our practical convictions, whatever the content of those convictions may be. I can best clarify Tolstoy's response and explain what we might learn from it if I begin by describing the main responses to the problem of the absurd in the philosophical literature, and by supplying a characterization of the structure of faith. I will turn to these tasks in Section 4.

4 | DEFIANCE, IRONY, AND FAITH

4.1 Two main responses to the problem of the absurd have dominated the philosophical literature, namely, *defiance* and *irony*. Camus (1991) recommends defiance as a response to the absurdity that is grounded in our cosmic insignificance. Put roughly, he claims that we cannot help striving to attain lives whose significance can survive scrutiny from a highly detached perspective. But, because there is no God, no lasting human achievement, and no system of objective values to which we can appeal, it is impossible for us to achieve this aim. Camus claims that, in virtue of this discrepancy between our intense striving and our cosmic insignificance, our lives are inescapably absurd. And he recommends that we respond to our wretched condition with defiance, that is, by showing contempt for our fate and stubbornly refusing to be driven to despair. Of course, such defiance cannot give our lives the sort of cosmic significance that we seek, but it *can* give our lives a kind of nobility in which we may find satisfaction.

Adapting Camus's work, James H. Cone recommends that Black Americans respond to the absurdity of their lives, which is grounded in their White compatriots' denial of their humanity, with a form of defiance (Cone 1997, 8–12). And he regards the Black Power movement – a revolutionary movement that advocated “the complete emancipation of black people from white oppression by whatever means black people deem necessary” – as a model of such defiance (Cone 1997, 6). Like Camus, Cone claims that defiance gives Black Americans' lives a kind of nobility, but beyond this, he argues that defiance makes it possible for Black Americans to achieve the freedom and recognition they seek. In other words, on Cone's view, defiance not only enables Black Americans to cope with the absurd, but also makes it possible for them to escape it.

By contrast, Nagel regards defiance as too “romantic and self-pitying” a response to the form of absurdity that he emphasizes (Nagel 1979, 22). More precisely, whether or not defiance is an appropriate response to the form of absurdity that is grounded in our cosmic insignificance or in the denial of oppressed people's humanity, it is not, he believes, an appropriate response to the absurdity that is grounded in the unruly origins of our practical convictions. Nagel claims that this third type of absurdity is merely a manifestation of our characteristically human capacity to reflect on our own thought and action, and on the limits of our own understanding. So, he concludes, our awareness of the absurd need not drive us to despair, and it need not “evoke a defiant contempt of fate that makes us feel brave or proud” (Nagel 1979, 23). Rather, he recommends that we respond to the absurd by adopting a form of ironic detachment from our own pursuits and from the practical convictions that shape those pursuits; he recommends, in other words, that we “approach our absurd lives with irony instead of heroism or despair” (Nagel 1979, 23).

Nagel's response to this type of absurdity is, at best, substantially incomplete. But to understand why, we must consider what kinds of value judgments Nagel attends to, how he frames his discussion of these judgments, and what kinds of judgments he neglects as he characterizes the

absurd and develops his response. To start, Nagel discusses variants of the judgment that it makes sense for us to alleviate our own discomfort (Nagel 1979, 19). This judgment is certainly deeply entrenched, but few of us would regard the alleviation of our own discomfort as central to our conception of ourselves, or to our search for meaning in life. When Nagel does discuss judgments concerning the projects that help constitute our identities and serve as sources of meaning, he focuses mainly on our preferences among such projects – for example, our decisions concerning which profession to adopt or which romantic relationship to pursue – rather than more basic judgments that certain projects merit our energy and attention, while others do not (Nagel 1979, 14). Furthermore, his discussion of our judgments about our identity-constituting and meaning-conferring projects is mingled with discussion of more obviously trivial judgments, like our worries about our appearance or about mundane details of our job performance (Nagel 1979, 15). Finally, Nagel says almost nothing about our deepest moral judgments, like the judgment that all human beings have certain rights or that certain forms of inequality are deeply unjust.

It may be that, with respect to many of the value judgments that Nagel discusses – for example, our concerns about our own discomfort, our handwringing about which career to pursue, or our worries about our appearance – adopting a form of ironic detachment is an appropriate response to the recognition that the judgments are arbitrarily adopted, or that they have been shaped partly by distorting influences. Indeed, cultivating ironic detachment from such judgments, like cultivating a disposition to smile and move on when our local circumstances become absurd in ways that I described in Section 2, may help us avoid the error of taking ourselves too seriously.

But, unlike Nagel's account, my account of the absurdity that is grounded in the unruly origins of our convictions has focused entirely on our deepest moral judgments and on our judgments concerning the worth of the projects around which we organize our lives. And cultivating ironic detachment from *those* judgments is precisely the wrong response to our recognition that the judgments are arbitrary or distorted in ways that render our lives absurd. As I explained in Section 2, the fact that our lives are absurd in this sense is troubling because it seems to mean that, as we work to become better people and create more just societies, we are doomed to rely on ideals that are alien to us; and as we work to build more meaningful lives, we are doomed to rely on our connections to ideals, people, institutions and so on from which we are estranged. Cultivating ironic detachment from our deepest convictions about how to live would only make this problem *worse*; indeed, becoming detached from my conviction, say, that justice demands certain forms of economic and social equality is precisely what I wish to avoid. Rather, if we are to provide a satisfying response to the problem of the absurd as it concerns the unruly origins of our convictions – that is, if we are to find some way of living with the absurdity that I am now discussing – we must identify some attitude or behavior that, in some sense, restores the wholeheartedness of our attachment to our deepest practical convictions, and to the ideals, people, institutions, and so on with which those convictions are concerned.

4.2 On one plausible characterization, faith, which tends to sustain our deepest practical convictions in the face of grave anxieties about the origins of those convictions, is such an attitude. Whatever the content of our deepest practical convictions may be, when we hold such convictions through a type of faith that has certain characteristic structural features, we thereby achieve a kind of wholeheartedness in our attachment to our convictions, and to the values with which those convictions are concerned. So, when it is suitably understood, Tolstoy's faith, which is distinct both from Camus's and Cone's defiance and from Nagel's irony, is an important part of a satisfactory response to the problem of the absurd, and it fills a significant gap left by these other responses.

In order to explain the connection between having the relevant kind of faith and being wholehearted, I must describe the structure of such faith; more precisely, I must describe the characteristic cognitive, volitional, and emotional elements of such faith.¹⁴ During the course of my discussion, I will identify examples of all three elements from Tolstoy's account of his response to his crisis. First, consider the cognitive element. When we have faith, say, in certain moral ideals or in some way of life, we have a defeasible disposition to make certain favorable judgments about those ideals or that way of life, even in the face of reasons for doubt. For example, someone who has faith in certain socialist ideals may be disposed to judge that she should strive to realize those ideals in her community, and to resist institutions that fall short of the ideals in certain key respects. And someone who has faith in a certain way of life may be disposed to judge that it is appropriate to devote considerable time and energy to cultural or religious practices that are associated with that way of life, and to admire people who excel in the performance of those practices. Of course, these judgments, like *all* of our substantive practical judgments, have unruly origins in the sense that I described above. So, we do not have adequate grounds to show that they are superior to certain other, conflicting judgments that we would have adopted if we had been raised differently. Nor can we rule out the possibility that whatever social prejudice was prevalent in the community in which we were raised has substantially distorted our present judgments. Nevertheless, when our practical judgments are sustained by our faith in our deepest values, we tend to hold onto these judgments to a degree that goes somewhat beyond what is supported by our available evidence.

Being disposed to make judgments that go beyond the available evidence in some way is, I believe, a characteristic mark of having faith in someone or something; and this may be a source of skepticism about the view that faith of any sort offers a satisfactory response to the problem of the absurd.¹⁵ So, I should add two caveats to this account of the cognitive aspect of faith. First, as I said above, the fact that our substantive practical judgments have unruly origins is an inescapable feature of human life that is rooted in cognitive limitations that we cannot transcend. More precisely, this unruliness is grounded in our status as cognitively limited creatures who have biological and social histories. So, if we are to make *any* sincere, substantive practical judgments – that is, any judgments that may serve as a basis for our decisions about how to live – then we must go beyond what our evidence supports in certain respects.

Second, our faith in our deepest values helps sustain the practical judgments in light of which we structure our lives, even though our cognitive limitations prevent us from ruling out some salient possibilities that are *incompatible* with the truth of those judgments. But, to be clear, someone who has such faith may nevertheless be responsive, to a considerable degree, to evidence concerning the truth of her practical judgments. Indeed, she may reject certain judgements if she encounters good evidence that they are mistaken, and her commitment to certain judgments may become attenuated if she comes to realize that they lack certain types of support. For example, someone who has faith in certain capitalist ideals may be disposed to judge that she should advocate for free-market solutions to a variety of social problems. But she may come to reject these ideals and the associated judgments if she encounters cogent arguments, based on premises that she firmly accepts, for the view that capitalist markets undermine valuable forms of community, and that socialist modes of organization can address the relevant social problems without

¹⁴ For discussion of these elements of faith, see Tillich (1957), Adams (1999), and Preston-Roedder (2013; 2018).

¹⁵ For arguments that the tension between having faith and responding appropriately to evidence is less pronounced than it may initially appear, see Buchak (2012), McKaughan (2016), and Howard-Snyder (2017).

undermining community in this way.¹⁶ Or, to develop the example differently, this person's commitment to her capitalist ideals and the associated judgments may become attenuated if she realizes that she has adopted these ideals uncritically, simply because others in her community accept them, but she has not thought carefully about these matters for herself. So, the kind of faith that I am describing does not yield practical judgments that simply float free from the available evidence. Rather – this point is crucial – it tends to sustain our judgments in the face of doubts that might naturally arise when we reflect on the limits of our own understanding.

The faith that sustains Tolstoy's religious convictions plays precisely this role in his cognitive life. As I explained in Section 3, Tolstoy recognizes that he cannot show that his Orthodox convictions are superior, say, to certain Catholic or Buddhist alternatives; and he recognizes that his convictions have been distorted by fears and superstitions that pervade Russian society, and which he is poorly situated to detect. Nevertheless, he continues to hold onto his religious convictions to a degree that goes somewhat beyond what his evidence supports. But this does not mean that he is simply insensitive to evidence of these convictions' correctness or incorrectness. Rather, he aims to identify the grounds of his convictions, and root out the falsehoods that help make up those convictions, to the best of his ability; and when human intellectual limitations prevent him from pursuing these aims further, he holds onto the convictions through faith, even in the face of lingering doubts (Tolstoy 2005, 74–76).

Now turn to the second element, namely, the volitional element of our faith in our deepest values. When our faith in cherished principles, institutions, and so on prompts us to make certain favorable judgments about the things we value, the truth or falsity of these judgments is not a matter of indifference to us. Rather, it is important to us that the judgments turn out to be correct; we are, in other words, invested in the truth of these judgments. So, our faith in our deepest values does not merely dispose us to give intellectual assent to certain claims concerning how we should live – it disposes us to hold certain practical convictions to which we are *committed*. Consider someone whose faith in some set of traditions prompts her to judge that these traditions are worth practicing, and to regard it as important that they are, in fact, worth practicing. Her commitment to this judgment disposes her to respond in certain characteristic ways when the judgment is challenged. First, if she comes to doubt this judgment – say, because she encounters arguments posed by adept critics of these traditions – but she does not yet find the critics' arguments decisive, she may cling to the judgment, at least for some time. Of course, she cannot maintain the judgment through a bare act of will, but she may cling to it *indirectly*, say, by attending to her grounds for the view that the traditions are worth practicing or by seeking the company of apparently clear-eyed people who practice these traditions wholeheartedly. Indeed, when Tolstoy's reflections on the origins of his religious convictions prompt him to doubt those convictions, he clings to his convictions in just these ways. He attends Orthodox religious services, performs Orthodox rituals, seeks the company of people who wholeheartedly accept Orthodox doctrines, and so on (Tolstoy 2005, Chs. 13–16). Second, if this person cannot quiet her doubts, and she comes to believe, say, that her cherished traditions are actually a waste of time, then she is apt to experience grave disappointment; she is apt to feel, in other words, that she has suffered some grave loss.

Finally, consider the third element, namely, the emotional element of such faith. When our faith in our deepest values leads us to hold certain practical convictions, acting on the basis of these convictions involves certain characteristic dangers. But such faith also disposes us to feel *encouraged* to face these dangers for the sake of certain worthwhile ends. More precisely, as I

¹⁶ See Cohen (2009).

just explained, our faith in our cherished principles, institutions, and so on disposes us to hold certain practical convictions, despite our inability to rule out certain salient possibilities that are incompatible with the truth of these convictions. If we are sufficiently reflective, we will recognize that these convictions may well be mistaken, and that, as a result, holding the convictions and acting on them involve certain risks.

Whenever we hold practical convictions that are sustained by our faith in our deepest values, we risk suffering grave disappointment if we come to realize that our faith has been misplaced, and that the associated convictions are substantially mistaken. Beyond this, when we *act* on these convictions, we may risk making unnecessary personal sacrifices, making fools of ourselves, or even becoming complicit in forms of wrongdoing. Consider someone who holds the conviction that he should observe certain highly demanding moral obligations, and imagine that he makes great personal sacrifices and imposes substantial burdens on his family in the course of carrying out these purported obligations. If it turns out that this moral conviction is mistaken, and that he accepts it largely because the people in his community accept it, then the sacrifices that he endures and the burdens that he imposes on his family may be wholly unwarranted. Or imagine someone who forms convictions concerning criminal justice, education policy, housing policy and so on while living in a community that has a deeply engrained racist consciousness. If this racist consciousness has subtly shaped her convictions in ways that she is poorly situated to detect, she may unwittingly serve deeply unjust institutions when she acts on these convictions.

Insofar as we are prudent and morally conscientious, we will behave in ways that mitigate certain of these risks to a considerable degree. For example, we may carefully consider available evidence that our practical convictions are mistaken, and we will remain responsive to new evidence that bears on the truth of these convictions. Furthermore, when we deliberate about whether or how to act on our practical convictions, we will take significant risks only when it seems that there is something of sufficient importance at stake. And if we decide to act in some way that involves taking on significant burdens or imposing significant burdens on others, we will try to limit these burdens. But, to be clear, we cannot eliminate such risks entirely. We face the emotional, moral, and material risks that I just described in virtue of certain of our cognitive limitations, namely, our inability to supply certain kinds of grounds for our own practical convictions. We cannot transcend these limitations, and so we cannot entirely escape the risks associated with holding and acting on the convictions that are sustained by our faith in our deepest values.

Nevertheless, such faith disposes us to feel encouraged to face these risks – while exercising due care – as we strive to lead meaningful and morally decent lives, and to create a more just society. For example, when Tolstoy adopts certain religious convictions in the course of trying to lead a meaningful life, he reflects on the unruly origins of these convictions, recognizes that the convictions may well be mistaken, and becomes plagued by anxiety; but he responds by identifying the grounds of his convictions to the best of his ability and holding onto these convictions through faith. This faith quiets his lingering anxiety and enables him to achieve some measure of tranquility (Tolstoy 2005, 76–79). We might say that when we have the kind of faith that I am now describing, and this faith sustains our deepest convictions about how to live, we have sufficient intellectual humility to recognize that our convictions may be mistaken, and so, acting on the basis of these convictions necessarily involves a kind of danger. But we also have sufficient courage to face this danger, while exercising due care, for the sake of worthwhile ends.

4.3 Once we understand these cognitive, volitional, and emotional dimensions of faith, we can grasp the connection between having faith and being wholehearted. Our recognition that our deepest practical convictions have unruly origins – and so, may be mistaken in ways that we are poorly situated to detect – threatens to alienate us from these convictions. But, when we have

faith in the ideals, institutions, and so on in light of which we structure our lives, and this faith sustains our deepest practical convictions, we tend to hold onto these convictions, even in the face of certain reasons to doubt or abandon them. Furthermore, we tend to be deeply invested in the truth of these convictions, and so, vulnerable to grave psychic harm if we come to realize that they are mistaken. Finally, we tend to feel encouraged to face, with appropriate care and concern, certain ills that may befall us, or even befall the people around us, if our convictions are, in fact, mistaken. Exhibiting these patterns of judgment, commitment, and emotion is a way of *standing by* our practical convictions, and standing by the ideals, institutions, and so on with which those convictions are concerned. It is, in other words, a way of casting our lot with our deepest convictions about how to live, and with those cherished values around which we organize our lives. When we stand by our convictions and our values in this way, we thereby achieve a kind of wholeheartedness about them.

I said above that finding a satisfactory response to the version of the problem of the absurd that is grounded in the unruly origins of our convictions is a matter of finding some attitude or behavior that enables us to be wholehearted about our deepest practical convictions, while retaining a clear-eyed recognition that these convictions have been shaped partly by arbitrary factors and distorting influences. This is, as I have just argued, precisely what our faith in our deepest values enables us to accomplish. Of course, such faith cannot enable us to escape the absurd. After all, the type of absurdity that I am now discussing arises in virtue of the discrepancy between the seriousness with which we take our practical convictions and the fact that these convictions are subject to certain grave doubts. And when we have faith in our deepest values, we are disposed to take our practical convictions seriously, although the grounds for doubt persist. Nevertheless, by counteracting the alienation that our awareness of the absurd may naturally produce, such faith enables us to live with the absurd; it enables us, in other words, to approach our absurd lives wholeheartedly, and with some measure of tranquility.¹⁷

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ORCID

Ryan Preston-Roedder  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8838-1554>

¹⁷ Kierkegaard (1983) endorses faith as a response to certain forms of absurdity, but his view differs in important respects from the view that I defend here. First, the absurdity with which Kierkegaard is chiefly concerned is rooted in distinctive features of the Christian doctrines and ideals that he accepts, and it arises when and because one believes these doctrines or conforms to these ideals. By contrast, the absurdity with which I am concerned is rooted in the unruly origins of our practical convictions, whatever the content of those convictions may be. Second, and relatedly, Kierkegaard regards certain figures who adopt these doctrines or realize these ideals – most notably, Abraham, who sought to kill his own son in order to carry out what he believed to be God's command – as models of a kind of faith that we may rightly admire. But, because I do not accept the ideals on which Kierkegaard's account rests, I reject his characterization of these figures. Third, the kind of faith that I characterize above is limited by considerations of due care in ways that, apparently, Kierkegaard's faith is not.

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