

Ivan Illyich and Autobiographical despair

Submission to: *Philosophy and Literature*

Abstract. In Tolstoy's novella, the middle-aged Ivan Illyich is dying. As part of his dying, he comes to recognise that his life has been self-absorbed and trivial; such a recognition is, however, the first step on the path to a Christian-style self-abnegation and redemption. So runs the traditional interpretation. Against this, I argue that Ivan's perception and deliberation were distorted by 'autobiographical despair': the tendency to downplay the genuine meanings of one's life, meanings that were also central to the dying person's identity. I argue that autobiographical despair is much more dangerous than the more familiar prospective despair.

The traditional reading of Tolstoy's novella *The Death of Ivan Illyich* runs roughly as follows.¹ Ivan leads a self-absorbed, conventional and frivolous life as a mid-career government bureaucrat. He contracts a mysterious illness and begins a long period of dying. For most of the dying period he experiences anger and fear and self-pity. At one point he undergoes an epiphany, he discovers the truth about his wasted life, but in so doing he loses his fear of death, rediscovers a love for his family, and dies in a blissful quasi-religious 'white light'. The epiphany allows him to partly redeem his life and the undignified first phase of dying.

I wish to challenge this traditional reading. First, Ivan's life is better, and his career more meaningful, than he judges it to be after the epiphany. Second, his misjudgement is caused by 'autobiographical despair', which is the phenomenon I want to investigate: the loss of hope that the sum of one's past life could amount to anything meaningful. Third, I will argue that autobiographical despair is actually much more dangerous than the more familiar despair about the anticipated future. Finally, I will suggest that however pleasant Ivan's 'white light' death, it was deficient in not being *his own* authentic death.

¹ Tolstoy L. (1885 / 1998) 'The death of Ivan Illych' (Maude and Maude trs.), on-line PDF version available with pagination at:

<http://shiraz.fars.pnu.ac.ir/Portal/File/ShowFile.aspx?ID=fba1286a-e3cf-4c5d-9614-3c4433a7cd17> [accessed October 2019].

I will be using the pagination from this on-line version. All otherwise attributed page references in the main should be taken as referring to this version of the short story.

The story of Ivan Illyich

To understand the traditional interpretation, we need more details about the story. Ivan Illyich is a 45-year-old judge in 1880s St. Petersburg. Despite some setbacks, his career has been successful.

Importantly, Tolstoy tells us that he is skilled, diligent and professional. He performed his duties “with an exactness and incorruptible honesty of which he could not but feel proud” (p. 13); he “never abused his power” (p. 14). Later in his career, Tolstoy describes “his success with superiors and inferiors, and above all his masterly handling of cases, of which he was conscious” (p. 18). It is true that Ivan seems to enjoy gossip, institutional politics, and social prestige a little too much, but this is hardly a serious or uncommon failing.

He has a wife and two children, but he does not seem very interested in them; his wife was more of a socially-required appendage. He spends most of the daytime at work, and many evenings playing bridge with male friends. Given the patriarchal standards of the time, however, I don’t think Tolstoy meant this to be understood as a serious dereliction of familial duty: what mattered was that he had enough money and prestige for his family to live comfortably in their social milieu. (Perhaps Ivan was lacking the rich intimacy that Levin and Kitty developed in Tolstoy’s novel *Anna Karenina*, but again, this is not a serious or uncommon failing.)

One day he injures himself while adjusting some home furnishings. Perhaps the traditional interpretation would describe this as symbolic: the downturn begins when Ivan is tending to trivial outward appearances. His injury leads to a general illness, forcing him off work, and with a series of doctors unable to explain it. He eventually becomes bed-bound, and his self-absorption turns to morbid self-pity and a deep frustration born of his original sense of progress and entitlement.

In his own discussion of Ivan Illyich, Gerald Lang provides a helpful taxonomy of death-related fears.² Type 1 fears concern the deprivation of past or future goods; Type 2 fears concerns extinction; Type 3 fears are about (a) having wasted one’s life and/or (b) lacking the time to correct past mistakes. At the beginning of his illness Ivan focuses on Type 1 and Type 2 fears, but he eventually comes to be dominated by the Type 3 fears, and these are the most philosophically interesting. After about six months of this slow decline, he accepts that he is dying (p. 36). The second phase of Ivan’s suffering begins with the sudden thought that “he might not have lived his life as he should have” (p. 51). He quickly banishes the thought and reassures himself that he has done everything “correctly” – this adds to his occasional resentment of God for the perceived injustice. But the thought of a wasted life returns again and again, more and more insistent, until he starts to take the possibility seriously.

² Lang, Gerald. "What does Ivan Ilyich need to be rescued from?" *Philosophy* 89.2 (2014): 325-347, p. 327. Lang actually expands on the original distinction made by Frances Kamm "Rescuing Ivan Ilych: How we live and how we die." *Ethics* 113.2 (2003): 202-233, p. 207. Kamm provides a subtle discussion of what I am calling the traditional interpretation.

Importantly, the thought is global but it is only negative: it is not an articulate regret about how he should have lived instead, e.g. what specific career he should have pursued instead, or what specific woman he should have married. During this phase he does not even mention the classic death-bed regret about not having spent enough time with his family.

The next stage in thinking about his life is to conceive it under a downward trajectory. “It is as if I had been going downhill while I imagined I was going up. And that is really what it was. I was going up in public opinion, but to the same extent life was ebbing away from me. And now it is all done and there is only death. (p. 51)”³

In his childhood “there had been something really pleasant with which it would be possible to live if it could return” (p. 50). After that, there were some moments of “light-heartedness, friendship and hope” at the School of Law, as well as “memories of love for a woman” (p. 51). Beyond that, however, he can only conclude: “the further he departed from childhood and the nearer he came to the present the more worthless and doubtful were the joys” (ibid.). The traditional interpretation takes Ivan’s perception to be veridical here, but also endorses it as a step in the right direction for spiritual growth in the little time he has left.⁴

The third stage in his journey involves his discovery of his wife and especially of his children as real people. For most of his life he has been conventionally affectionate from a distance. All of a sudden he is able to attend to them in their reality and in their grief. Rather than feel irritated, he feels sorry for his 10-year-old son, who is crying in front of him; he even comes to feel sorry for his wife for having to live with his self-absorbed suffering (p. 57). The last ‘act’ that he sees himself capable of, he decides, is to “release them” (p. 58). Only once he can see beyond his own interests and needs, only once he becomes truly open to the lives of others, can he enter the fourth and final stage of his journey. The physical pain and the fear finally ease, as does the anxiety of the inauthentic life. He sees a bright light, feels a profound joy and dies.

The traditional interpretation is influenced by Tolstoy’s evident Christian spirituality. One long-standing Christian ideal concerns the importance of self-abnegation before meeting one’s maker. Not only does one have to abandon all one’s worldly possessions and acquisitions, one’s projects and

³ See Velleman D. ‘Well-being and time’. *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* vol. 72(1) (1991). Velleman describes a strong intuition that a life characterised by improvement, including moral improvement, is better than one characterised by deterioration, *even if* the aggregate sum of goodness is the same in both lives. A second intuition would be about going out “in style” rather than in slow inexorable deterioration.

⁴ This traditional reading is supported by Tolstoy’s narrative frame, whereby the first thing he describes is Ivan’s funeral: Ivan’s wife Praskovya publicly expresses irritation at her husband’s long illness and about the financial predicament he has left her in. His putative friends, all of them work colleagues, openly jostle and speculate about the positive impact of Ivan’s death on their own careers. So this opening scene provides a rich irony for reading the rest of the story.

concerns, but also one's worldly achievements and relationships and identities. One should ultimately seek God not only naked in body but naked in soul. Striving toward such an ideal will also serve to partly redeem a putatively wasted life before it ends.

I want to challenge this traditional interpretation, just as I want to challenge the desirability of the self-abnegation ideal for Ivan. Ivan's life, I will claim, has not been as worthless as he has come to think it is. His perception and thinking are distorted by autobiographical despair. In order to understand this concept, I first need to say something more general about regret, and especially about long-term, 'momentous' regret; for such regret is most often the source of autobiographical despair.

Regret

I will start with some assumptions and distinctions, and in so doing depart somewhat from broader common usage.⁵ First, I am taking regret to be a *judgement* rather than a *feeling*: "I regret that I chose A over B, and now I am worse off than I would have been" is the characteristic content of the regret. (Of course the judgement of regret will usually be accompanied by the feeling of regret, and without the feeling there would be grounds for doubting that the agent *really* regretted the choice.) Second, only the *voluntary* can be regretted: it presupposes that I was free to choose either A or B, and so while I chose A, I really could have (and now see that I should have) chosen B.⁶ In contrast, I would use the term 'lament' to describe my present attitude to unfortunate past things that were out of my control, be they events on the other side of the world, or unchosen facts about myself such as my height or intelligence.⁷ Third, for the moment I am focusing on regret rather than remorse; remorse is essentially an awareness of having wronged someone else, whereas I am taking regret to be merely about longer-term enlightened self-interest, without a necessary moral element. Remorse has additional complicating elements which are beyond the scope of this paper.

The paradigm of short-term trivial regret is a recent voluntary choice such as the failed horse bet: this morning I freely put money on Abigail, but Boris went on to win it. Not only do I regret my choice, I can quantify my regret precisely: if I had bet the same money on Boris, I would be X dollars richer now than I am. It is important to see the U-bend movement of the imagination that underlies such

⁵ The following draws on a more detailed account in Cowley, Christopher. "Regret, Remorse and the Twilight Perspective." *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 25.5 (2017): 624-634.

⁶ I am ignoring deeper metaphysical questions in the concept of "could have." After all, if all my beliefs and desires inclined me to choose A rather than B at time T1, even if I was *physically* unobstructed in choosing B at T1 (i.e. the option really was available), then there is a real sense in which I was *psychologically* unable to choose B at T1.

⁷ This marks a distinction with Bernard Williams's famous account of regret, where he takes the defining thought to be *impersonal*; to paraphrase: "how much better the world would have been if X had not happened." Williams, Bernard. "Moral Luck". *Moral luck: philosophical papers 1973-1980*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

short-term regret, a movement best described by David Velleman.⁸ Here I am, in the present, I return back along one arm of the U-bend to the moment of choice in the betting shop this morning, I imagine myself placing the bet differently, on Boris instead of Abigail, and then I imagine myself moving forward along the other arm of the U-bend, back to the counterfactual present where I collect my winnings.

With that structure in place, let me turn to *momentous* and *long-term* regret. I borrow the term ‘momentous’ from William James:⁹ a momentous choice, as opposed to a trivial choice, is a choice that will affect many parts of one’s life, and more importantly, will change the chooser. Typical momentous choices will be those of career, life partner, and place of residence. Long-term regret concern choices made years or decades ago. In the case of 45-year-old Ivan regretting his choice of career, this is more complicated than the horse bet this morning because a career comprises a series of choices (or at least endorsements), any one of which might be individually regrettable. In addition, it is more complicated because the Ivan who launched the legal career at age 18 is very different from the Ivan who now regrets the launch – and many of the changes of Ivan’s identity were a direct result of the legal career. I do not mean a “change of identity” in any deeper metaphysical sense: clearly the 45-year-old Ivan would still be bound by e.g. a mortgage contract that he freely signed, and remembers signing, at 18. Instead, I mean the sort of change that is invoked when a 45-year-old reads the diary he wrote at 18: he remembers being that person, writing those things, but he is mystified, in the spirit of: “Who is this? What the hell was he thinking?”

The problem with long-term momentous regret is that it loses coherence and clarity when we apply the U-bend model. Let’s imagine the 45-year-old Ivan regrets his law career and now believes that he should have studied medicine instead. That means imaginatively travelling back 27 years along the first arm to re-inhabit his 18-year-old self, make the choice to study medicine, and then travel forward through a parallel counterfactual 27 years, along the second arm of the U-bend, living "as he should have," back to the counterfactual present, where he would be better off as a doctor than he is currently. I suggest that such an imaginative journey cannot be possible to carry out with any meaningful seriousness. It is already difficult enough for the 45-year-old Ivan to imaginatively re-inhabit his 18-year-old self; but the counterfactual 45-year-old must therefore be little more than pure fantasy. This is the point of Velleman’s discussion. As he puts it, “The person who might have been better off today if I had done different in the past [...] is inaccessible to my self-concern” (p. 96). As such, long-term regret about momentous choices is more or less meaningless.

⁸ Velleman D 'Persons in Prospect'. *Beyond Price* (New York: Open Book Publishers, 2015)

⁹ William James ‘The Will to Believe’, first published in *The New World*, Volume 5 (1896): pp. 327-347.

This conclusion is quite different from saying that there is no point in crying over spilt milk.¹⁰ Who knows whether Ivan would have been better off with a different career? Only when one's present life is *really* bad can one confidently predict that the counter-factual present life (*any* life) would have been better, and that is not Ivan's situation. To put the point another way, paraphrasing an argument about 'biographical identity' from Camil Golub:¹¹ for better or for worse, Ivan is *stuck* in his career; he is stuck in his "having had a law career for 27 years," in his "having become a lawyer". He cannot meaningfully get out of his present or out of his past, even in his regretful imagination. For the very perspective within which he looks out on the world, looks out on himself in that world, and looks out on the life he has led through the 27 adult years in that world – that perspective is shaped by his life, and a major identity-conferring component of that life was precisely his law career.¹²

Autobiographical despair

There is some irony in the *timing* of Ivan's death. If he had died soon after contracting his illness, he would still have been full of pain, self-pity and anger, but the subjective meaning of his life would not have been undermined: he would have remained proud of his professional achievement. So there is a sense in which he took too long to die, and had too much time to think about his life. Of course, in saying this, I would be denying Ivan the time to achieve the self-abnegation necessary for the traditional interpretation. But the bad timing of Ivan's death brings me to the main focus of this paper, the phenomenon of autobiographical despair. I am arguing that Ivan is particularly vulnerable not only to present physical suffering, loneliness and depression, not only to despair about the present and *future*, but especially to autobiographical despair about the *past*: such despair comprises the temptation to *misperceive* one's life as having been a waste, as being beyond repair. I suggest that Ivan has made exactly such a misperception, and that this is not something to be admired, even as a prerequisite for spiritual epiphany. Ivan is to be pitied for his illness and premature death, certainly, but *not* for his wasted life: rather, he is to be pitied most for the misfortune of living long enough to

¹⁰ There is usually an educational point to short-term regret, as when I learn from my horse-betting mistakes. But even if Ivan had enough time to launch a new career as a result of his regret, he is not thereby 'correcting' the mistake *made by the 18-year-old*. Rather he is choosing a new career as a 45-year-old.

¹¹ Golub C. "Personal Value, Biographical Identity, and Retrospective Attitudes" *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 97:1 (2019) 72-85.

¹² One corollary of this is that the 18-year-old's original free choice turns out *not to be free*, given its status as a necessary condition for Ivan becoming who he is at age 45. As soon as the 45-year-old Ivan recollects the 18-year-old Ivan's experience of choosing, that 18-year-old could not in fact have chosen any other career. Although the word 'fate' is a bit of a dirty word for philosophers, it would make sense to describe the 18-year-old's choice to study law as 'fated'.

fall into such autobiographical despair, and for the additional misfortune of lacking an old friend at his bedside who could help him struggle against it. Let me expand on this.¹³

In introducing this term, I am following up on a suggestion by Frances Kamm. In her discussion of Ivan Illych, she compares different hypothetical versions of him, depending on circumstances, depending on his life, depending on his beliefs or values as he lies dying. Here is one version: “what if [Ivan] would misevaluate his life – that is, he will, for the first time, think that it was a bad life when it was really good, and die in unrelieved agony?” (Kamm pp. 231-232). In a footnote she adds: “This could happen because impulses that the person who lived right has repressed or emotions he did not indulge get the upper hand when he is in a weakened state. Then ‘their’ view of his life is dominant. Someone who approved of Ivan’s life will say that this is just what happened to him” (Kamm p. 232 fn. 44).

I want to say yes, I approve of Ivan’s life, and I think he misevaluated it as a result of his autobiographical despair.

The more familiar kind of despair – which I will call prospective – focuses on the future, and then derivatively focuses on a present experienced as leading inexorably to that bleak future. Options are closed or closing, and there seem to be no rational grounds for hope. As the illness progresses, Ivan has plenty of grounds for prospective despair: “He wept on account of his helplessness, his terrible loneliness, the cruelty of man, the cruelty of God, and the absence of God” (p. 50). At this point he is ready to die, without any doubts yet about the value of his life; his only thoughts are about ending the suffering (“‘Go on! Strike me!’ he shouted” (ibid.)). However, Tolstoy clearly believes that it is *worse* for Ivan to die at this moment rather than later, despite the additional physical suffering compounded by the impending autobiographical despair, because only the spiritual epiphany can objectively redeem what Ivan and Tolstoy consider a wasted, inauthentic life.

I argue that autobiographical despair is actually a much more dangerous form than prospective despair. As Kübler-Ross notes, most of us can eventually resign ourselves to the fact of physical decline and imminent death. Indeed, prospective despair and resignation can be a useful stimulus for putting one’s affairs in order and saying one’s farewells. In a case of ‘good’ dying, part of the resignation to the fact of death will be the grateful realization that one has had a good life, or at least a

¹³ The most famous account of coming to terms with dying is of course Kübler-Ross E. *On Death and Dying*. (London: Routledge, 1969). She describes five emotional stages of denial, anger, bargaining, depression and resignation. There is a substantial literature about Kübler-Ross which I cannot engage with here. What is interesting is that the five stages all refer to the imminent death itself, and do not discuss the dying person’s view of their whole life. Perhaps autobiographical despair would take place alongside the ‘depression’ stage.

good enough life, that must now end, as all lives must. But underlying such gratitude is the belief that, while one's life ends, the meaning of one's life survives. Under autobiographical despair, in contrast, I lose my life and the meaning of my life.

Autobiographical despair also threatens my very identity. While the traditional interpretation encourages self-abnegation, I suggest that this will only really be appropriate for a committed Christian, someone who identifies closely with their Christian faith, and who is in a position to negate themselves as an expression and reinforcement of that faith. Ivan is not a committed Christian, however. Even if agnostics could be rescued by self-abnegation, there is a striking problem about identity. For I suggest that when self-abnegation or autobiographical despair go too far for Ivan, then the resulting person is *no longer Ivan* – in the full sense of the Ivan who has lived the 27 adult years. As in my discussion of regret, I am taking a looser notion of identity here, and not making a bold metaphysical claim. Self-abnegating Ivan is clearly continuous with earlier stages of his life, and he can still remember being in those earlier stages. But what is distinctive about Ivan is the degree to which he identifies with being a *judge*; if he loses that role, then he loses an essential component of who he is.

Tolstoy stressed that Ivan's understanding of 'correctness' was determined by "highly-placed people," with the implication that Ivan slavishly followed trivial conventions in so many matters of home and work, rather than seeking his own voice and his own style. But I would ask: is it so incorrect to defer to highly-placed people, especially when establishing oneself in a hierarchical legal career full of unknown rules, standards, and understandings? Any attempt by Ivan to be 'authentically' rebellious would surely have resulted in the failure of his budding legal career, without any of the value he subsequently achieved and was legitimately proud of. Second, and more generally, should we really mock Ivan for what is perhaps merely a poor choice of word? 'Correctness' suggests superficial imitation, but it can have a deeper meaning, something like moral emulation of legitimate exemplars. Surely his resistance to corruption was 'correct' too; his diligent attention to detail was 'correct'.

Identity in life, identity in death

Contrary to Tolstoy's intention, I argue that Ivan was at his most authentic when he was a successful judge. Even if Ivan's life was dominated by bourgeois convention, and even if Ivan stumbled into his career rather than chose it, there is an important sense that he embraced that career so intimately as to become a judge both institutionally and in spirit. Ivan's deep frustration at being bed-bound stems from the indignity and the fear, but also from the attenuation of his identity – for there was nothing wrong with this identity in the first place. Not all of us can be existentialist heroes, gleefully casting off all our identities in order to be a soul of pure freedom and potential. Again, Tolstoy tells us that Ivan enjoyed his career, he was good at it, he was not corrupt, and the job itself was useful and important for Russian society. (It is not as if Ivan was a gambling addict or a weapons salesman.)

This brings me back to the idea that Ivan would have been better off dying earlier, before the doubts set in, dying “with his boots on,” ready to meet his maker *as the judge* that he was, rather than as the denuded and self-abnegated soul described in the story. Such was his genuine achievement as a judge that he had earned the right to die without doubts, at the tail end of a life of meaningful memories, with his identity-conferring projects and relationships intact, with his understanding still structured by his long-held values and preferences. Despite Tolstoy’s, and the later Ivan’s, condemnation of his adult career life as inauthentic, I would argue that Ivan succeeded enough in living *his* life rather than someone else’s, and so it would have been more appropriate to allow him to die *his* death, rather than that of some idealised saint. In contrast, the beatific ‘white light’ described by Tolstoy, and endorsed by the traditional interpretation, strikes me more as a very pleasant but numbing sedative that has stripped Ivan of all lucid, self-conscious identity.

There is another point to be made about identity. Ivan looks back into his past, and discovers that the best time of his life was in childhood; all his genuine career accomplishments now count for nothing, since his life had been “ebbing away from him.” But why should we take Ivan at his word here? Lots of us have fond memories of childhood, but that is not a reason for thinking that that period was somehow the ‘best’ or the ‘real’ one, before the rot and decline set in. When the world gets too complicated, one can understand the temptation to revert to childhood, to a time of protected innocent goodness with no responsibilities, but that is hardly a morally mature temptation. If it is already difficult for Ivan to imaginatively re-inhabit his 18-year-old self during his attempt to regret his legal career, then it must be much more difficult to enter his childhood self – there we really would want to say that it is *not Ivan*, but only a child, unformed, untried, untempered. Again, Ivan was at his most authentic once he had become a judge, once he had “become who he was,” if I may be permitted the striking Nietzschean phrase.

It could be objected that in our normal lives, the *later* view of the world takes priority over the *earlier* view, for the simple reason that the earlier ‘version’ of that person is no longer around to deny it. So it is a basic principle of family law that the latest version of a last will is the only valid one. In medical law, an advance directive can always be overridden later if the patient is still competent. Could it not be the case, therefore, that Ivan has a better view of his life later on, not only when he is free of the urgent distractions *in medias res*, but also when he has gained some wisdom, and some objectivity to see the wood beyond the trees? I concede this might work in some end-of-life scenarios. But I would argue that the opposite might also take place: instead of wisdom and equanimity, the dying subject might be crushed by panic and fear and depression; and instead of objectivity and humility might come arrogant pride and the desperate urge to protect a legacy.

The tragedy of Ivan's decline is not only his suffering, not only his autobiographical despair. It is the absence of an old friend who could 'hold' his identity, to adapt a phrase of Hilde Lindemann Nelson's:¹⁴ who could remind him of the good times and the meaningful times, who could remind him that his life had not in fact been wasted, who would have the personal authority to help him deal with imminent and premature death, and who by their very presence could remind and reassure him of a deep friendship that was itself meaningful. Most of Ivan's friends seem to have drifted away, partly because he was such unpleasant company to be around during his illness, perhaps because he only cultivated the friendships among his colleagues mainly as a source of profit or amusement. In addition, he never developed much of a friendship with his wife, and only acknowledges any connection with her in the final moments.¹⁵ It is only here, in the wasted potential for close friendship and for real love with his family, that Ivan's autobiographical despair might seem most appropriate; although it is important that Ivan never reaches the point of articulating his despair and regret in those precise terms.

Conclusion

I have been trying to develop an alternative interpretation of the story of Ivan Illyich's life and death. Although Tolstoy did not use the word 'authenticity', I think the word is useful to articulate the distinction between my own interpretation and the traditional interpretation: instead of locating the authenticity at the extremities – in childhood and on the deathbed, I have located it in Ivan's working life, and part of the tragedy of Ivan's demise is that he succumbs to autobiographical despair about the real value of his life, and has no close friend who can remind him of the meaning of his life as he dies. In a good death, a person could undertake an autobiographical review that resisted the twin urges to self-aggrandizement and despair.

I have only been discussing Ivan, and I have been taking his life to be non-trivial and above all non-wicked. There is a separate question of whether a *wicked* person ought to be encouraged (for example, by a therapist) to feel both remorse and autobiographical despair, in a Tolstoyan spirit of facing the truth, and perhaps with a view to apologising or atoning in some way. For reasons of space, I have been concerned mainly with Ivan's prudential interests and not with more complicated questions of morality and guilt. But this would be an obvious direction for future work.

¹⁴ Lindemann, Hilde. "Holding one another (well, wrongly, clumsily) in a time of dementia." *Metaphilosophy* 40.3-4 (2009): 416-424.

¹⁵ Moreover, Ivan is described as having a sister and two brothers (p. 12). The younger brother was "considered a failure," and so perhaps the bourgeois 'correct' Ivan lost contact with him as an adult. It is odd, however, that Ivan mentions neither of the other two siblings in the rest of the story, and that neither of the siblings turns up at his deathbed, during a time when families typically pull together, even if only for appearances. (Ivan's sister is briefly recognised by Ivan's friend at the funeral, but she does not say anything.)

