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Turning to Narrative: Generosity, Giving, and Gratitude in Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*[1]

Abstract

Quantitative approaches to the study of philanthropy often overshadow narrative approaches, especially in the professional literature. Quantitative approaches tend to speak in generalities and narrative approaches in particularities. When it comes to understanding why persons give and receive, narrative approaches have an edge. To illustrate this advantage, this article explores a single, especially thoughtful and beautiful act of generosity in perhaps the greatest novel ever written, Leo Tolstoy's Anna Karenina.

> Again, it is possible to fail in many ways (for bad belongs to the class of the unlimited, as the Pythagoreans conjectured, and good to that of the limited), while to succeed is possible only in one way (for which reason also one is easy and the other difficult – to miss the mark easy, to hit it difficult); for these reasons also, then, excess and defect are characteristic of failure, and the appropriate of excellence; for men are good in but one way, but bad in many.[2]

Natural though it may be that philanthropy should strive to adopt a data-driven approach to theory and practice, such a move carries with it inherent risks and costs. The costs include a tendency to deal with generosity, giving, and gratitude in aggregate, a turn from narrative, and likely, a loss of philanthropic inspiration. Evidence takes on a statistical form, leeching away the personal. In our quest to tell the story of everyone, or at least large groups of people, we lose the capacity to tell anyone's – that is, the narrative of any particular person. And while philanthropy's capacity to inform may appear to have been augmented, its capacity to move hearts and minds is typically diminished. There are limits to what figures, tables, and graphs can convey.

If philanthropy is to flourish, it needs stories – stories not instead of data, but stories in addition to data, and in many cases, stories in preference to

1 Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, trans. Louise and Aylmer Maude (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

2 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 2nd ed., trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1999), 37, bk. 2, ch. 6, §14; Bekker 1106b.14.

data. The great faith traditions that form the foundation of contemporary philanthropy, including the sacred texts of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, present very little in the way of data sets, but they are chockfull of narratives – Abraham hosting the divine strangers immediately before he and his wife Sarah learn that – against all odds – they will soon become parents; Jesus' parables of the rich fool, the good Samaritan, and the prodigal son; and the Prophet repeatedly giving money that he had planned to spend on himself to others in need.

One of the richest sources of philanthropic narrative is imaginative literature, and it is to great works of literature that we need to turn to appreciate fully the limitations of a purely data-driven approach to understanding philanthropy. For such methods necessarily leave out qualitative dimensions that come far nearer to the real, underlying purposes and consequences of generosity and gratitude. Data can represent the frequency and magnitude of acts of giving and receiving, but literature encompasses otherwise unaddressed features, such as the story behind a donor's capacity to give, the motivation for doing so, and the lived consequences of acts of generosity for givers, receivers, and whole communities.

Quantitative approaches tend to speak in generalities, while qualitative ones emphasize particularity. Especially in literature, we get to know what individual human beings are like through characters – who they are, where they come from, and what they aspire to in life. In novels, we not only see them in action but frequently gain access to their inner thoughts and feelings, getting to know how they see the world and their place in it. We get to see their relationships up close and personal. And with this degree of intimacy, we can understand more deeply not only acts of giving and receiving but the development or erosion of human excellences such as generosity and gratitude – not only what people give, when, where, and how, but also why. Are they giving to save face or build a reputation, or because they genuinely care about the welfare and flourishing of the person or persons they are intending to help? What, in their view, constitutes giving and receiving at their best, and why?

If we are to begin to grasp the claims of a narrative approach to understanding philanthropy, we must be willing to immerse ourselves in the qualitative instead of the quantitative, the particular instead of the general, and the narrative instead of the scientific. This means setting aside the quest for impersonal principles and conclusions, and instead looking at the story of a person, a family, or a community. We must resist the temptation to say what is true always and everywhere, regardless of who is involved, and instead look at what is so for a particular person or group of people. And instead of focusing on just anyone at random, based on the presumption that everyone is largely the same as everyone else, we would do well to choose especially illuminating persons and relationships, as represented in great works of literature.

Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* is considered perhaps the greatest of all novels. When the American novelist William Faulkner, winner of the 1949 Nobel Prize in Literature, was asked what he regarded as the three greatest novels in world literature, he responded, "Anna Karenina, Anna Karenina, and Anna Karenina." In 2010, Time Magazine surveyed 125 celebrated authors to compile its list of the 10 greatest books of all time, its list included works by but one author twice, Leo Tolstoy. Listed at number three was Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. And at number one, the best novel of all time, was *Anna Karenina*,[3] about which the novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky wrote, "*Anna Karenina* is sheer perfection as a work of art. No European work of fiction of our present day comes anywhere near it."

Released serially between 1875 and 1877, *Anna Karenina* focuses primarily on three sets of relationships – the devoted mother Dolly and her philandering, spendthrift husband, Stiva; Anna, Stiva's sister, whose passions lead her to abandon her husband and son to take up with a rich young military officer, Vronsky; and Levin, a landowning farmer and his courtship, marriage, and family life with Dolly's younger sister, Kitty. For present purposes, let us focus on the first and third of these relationships. The novel opens with upheaval in the household of Dolly, who has just discovered a letter that implicates her husband in an extramarital affair with the former governess of their children, a fact which Stiva cannot deny.

Stiva is distressed at the situation, but not for the reasons we might expect. He repents not of the affair, but the fact that he allowed it to be discovered. In his mind, he is not really guilty in the matter, since he was merely following the dictates of his own nature. After all, how could he repent that "he, a handsome, amorous man of thirty-four, was not in love with his wife, the mother of five living and two dead children?" How could she possibly begrudge him such a dalliance, since she, "a worn-out, aging, no longer beautiful woman who was in no way remarkable," could no longer inflame or satisfy his passions? Surely, he thinks, she, "the simple, merely good-natured mother of his family, ought to have indulged him, simply out of fairness."

Stiva makes for a poor shepherd. He repeatedly fails at stewarding what he has – his family, his career, and his money. His heart simply isn't in it. He feels no sense of ownership, at least not a consistent and enduring one. To be sure, when he is at home, he is able at least to recall, if not to take sufficiently seriously, that he is a husband and father. But when he steps out the front door and into the world, he thinks like a bachelor, not only open to, but eager for the charms of other women. Likewise, he thinks of his property, most of which

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3 Lev Grossman and Rebecca Myers, "Top 10 Romantic Books," *Time*, February 14, 2007, https://entertainment.time.com/2007/02/14/top-10-romantic-books/slide/anna-karenina-by-leo-tolstoy/#:~:text=By%20Lev%20Grossman%20and%20Rebecca%20Myers%20May%2013.

originated in his wife's dowry, as a resource to be expended for his own pleasure. Out on the town, he spends and tips extravagantly, while his wife lacks funds to buy winter coats for their children.

The turmoil in Stiva and Dolly's household extends beyond the discovery of his marital infidelity to his financial faithlessness. He has dug such a deep hole of debt for himself that his only apparent means of extricating himself is the sale of one of his wife's properties, a forest – a sale that he means to complete as quickly as possible, completely ignoring any concern to obtain a fair price. As a result, all hope for marital reconciliation is inextricably bound up with the need to obtain his wife's approval for the sale.

> The wood was to be sold; but now, until he and his wife were reconciled, there could be no question of this. Even more unpleasant here was the fact that this interjected his financial interest in the pending transaction into the reconciliation with his wife. The thought that he might be guided by this interest, that for the sake of selling this wood he might seek reconciliation with his wife – the very idea was offensive.[4]

The problem is not that Stiva has dug himself a pit into which, after he manages to extricate himself, he will never again fall. To the contrary, both his wandering eye and his profligacy will continue unabated, precisely because he refuses to take responsibility for them. He is fond of saying that it is not his will but his neurons that direct his behavior. Even after Stiva is reconciled with his wife, with the assistance of Anna, who will soon become ensnared in her own extramarital affair, he will continue to seek out the company of pretty young women. Likewise, even if some windfall erases his debts, he will simply carry on living beyond his means, soon burying himself all over again in debt. He is the life of every party he attends, but it is inevitable that he will mire his family in penury.

Levin represents a stark contrast. Since childhood, when he lost both his parents, he has longed to be part of a family. He thinks of finding a wife not as an end in itself but as a means to create a family. He falls in love at first not so much with Kitty, but her whole family and their kind of existence, for which he longs passionately. For Levin, it would be impossible to have a wife and children and yet engage in infidelities, since what he aspires to most of all is a loving family. To him, the idea of keeping a mistress is not only repulsive but incomprehensible, a betrayal of what he cares most about in life. Unlike Stiva, he is awkward, even amusing to some in high society, but the sanctity of the family is something it never occurs to him to question.

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4 Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, trans. Louise and Aylmer Maude (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 166.

When Stiva later visits Levin in the countryside, he is not paying a purely social call. He is also there to sell the forest. Levin is irritated, not just that Stiva has mired himself so deeply in debt that such a transaction is necessary, but also that he so carelessly negotiates the terms of the transaction. Levin knows that the forest is worth several times what Stiva is selling it for—he hunts there every year. When the greedy merchant who aims to purchase it complains that the price is still too high, a frustrated Levin intervenes, offering to buy the property himself and thereby quickly bringing the negotiations to a close. To Levin, the forest is a beautiful part of a family's heritage. To the merchant, it represents mere lumber. And to Stiva, it is nothing but a ready source of cash.

Stiva's profligacy imposes constraints on his family that he is unwilling to contemplate. Soon after the sale of the forest, he goes to Petersburg. His purpose in doing so is partly professional, though not in the way we might suppose. He goes there not to get work done but simply to "remind the ministry of his existence," a visit necessary to maintain his employment. While he is there, he "takes nearly all the money from the house," then spends his time "cheerfully and pleasantly at the races and various dachas," amusing himself in the usual ways. Meanwhile, Dolly and the children move to the country, "in order to reduce expenses to the bare minimum." Ironically, they stay in a village near the forest that Stiva recently sold.

Stiva had visited the property before them, to prepare it for their arrival. In fact, however, his efforts were doomed from the start, for "however hard he tried to be a concerned father and husband, he could never remember that he had a wife and children." His bachelor tastes prevented him from seeing the property from the point of view of his family, and as a result he ends up focusing his attention on decorations that resemble a bachelor pad, as opposed to necessities and conveniences for a mother and children. When Dolly arrives, the place is so poorly readied and in such a state of disrepair that she slips into despair. Only the efforts of a member of the household, who makes friends with the locals, rescue the family from their truly desperate situation.

Yet Dolly also experiences moments of joy. With now six children, she has many worries, yet these same worries – about the children's illnesses, their needs, and occasional signs of bad character – also constitute her "sole possible happiness." They distract her from thoughts of her husband, who does not love her. And the children themselves provide her many things to rejoice in. These joys were so small "they passed unnoticed, like gold in sand, and in bad moments, she saw only the sorrows, only the sand." But there were good moments, too, "when she saw only the joys, only the gold." Dolly might seem to some readers a doormat who lets her wayward and irresponsible husband walk all over her, yet in her devotion to and capacity to revel in her children, she is in fact one of the novel's most admirable characters.

To be able to see what Dolly sees, hear what Dolly hears, notice what Dolly notices, feel what Dolly feels, and enter into Dolly's joys is one of the most praiseworthy things that could be said about anyone. She truly loves her children with all her heart, and anyone who sympathizes with her must possess a similar capacity. And such a person is Levin. When he comes to visit her and the children, she is especially glad, because now he will see her "in all her glory." "No one," we are told, "could understand her grandeur and what it consisted in better than Levin." And she is right, for when he beholds them, he – a man who has longed for nothing in life more than a family – sees "one of the pictures of family life he imagined for himself in the future."

Yet there is also an awkwardness in Levin's visit, for he senses that his offers to help improve the family's situation might be embarrassing, a surmise in which he is correct. Dolly does indeed find it unpleasant "to find help coming from an outsider in a matter that ought to have been taken care of by her husband." She is ashamed and resentful of her husband's irresponsibility, "foisting his family affairs on others." Dolly and Levin are on the same page – Levin knows that Dolly is embarrassed, and she knows that he knows this. She "loved him for this subtlety of understanding, this delicacy." In fact, they love one another, not in an illicit way, but out of genuine admiration for what is best in each of them.

Here we see one of the most crucial features of effective philanthropy, at least in the universe of *Anna Karenina*. Levin can see that help is needed. He truly wants to be of service. But he also knows that it is not enough merely to provide what is needed. No less important than what he provides is how he provides it, in a way that does not draw attention to the family's unnatural situation or his own magnanimity in coming to their aid. He recognizes that Dolly and the children are not just mouths to be fed or heads to be covered, but persons possessed of their own dignity, who can be harmed, at least emotionally, by a failure to recognize the delicacy of their situation. Levin is able to care well for them because he knows them and loves them.

It comes as no surprise that, later in the novel, Stiva's recklessness has once again landed his family in desperate circumstances. By now, Levin and Kitty have married, and Kitty is deeply concerned with her sister's plight. "Do you know that Dolly's situation is becoming absolutely impossible?" she asks him. "She is in debt all around, and she has no money." Kitty intends to ask her other brother-in-law and Levin to confront Stiva about the matter, to convince him to turn over a new leaf. But Stiva has not changed, and there is reason to think that he will never change. Thinking first of the future, his family, and his own responsibilities as husband and father are simply not in his nature.

Yet Stiva is troubled by the situation and growing desperate. "Two-thirds of the money from the forest had already been spent, and he had borrowed all the remaining third from the merchant at a discount of ten percent." The merchant

refused to lend him anymore, and for the first time, Dolly had begun asserting her rights to her own property, "refusing to sign the contract in receipt of the money for the final third of the wood." Stiva has his salary, but all of it goes for household expenses and paying off his "petty, never-ending debts." There is no money, but he does not know what to do. All he can think of is to cajole and pressure his wife to sell off more of her property, which we realize by now would only delay the inevitable.

Instead of attempting to reform himself, which never even occurs to him, Stiva resolves to seek another position by which to add to his income. He does not care what ministry or business this position might be in. He has no true career, profession, or calling, and regards his work simply as a means of making money. He has no real work, in the sense of a craft or service to which he applies himself as a way of contributing to the lives of others. He is, in the truest sense of the word, a mere playboy, who lives for life outside of family and work, outside of all responsibility, where he can simply indulge his passions. He simply needs more money to maintain himself in the style of life to which he has become accustomed.

The contrast between Stiva and Levin is stark, and it is especially clearly revealed by the city in which each feels most comfortable. Stiva despises Moscow, a place where, if he spends too much time, he begins to worry about his wife's reproaches, the health and education of his children, and his debts. In Petersburg, by contrast, he forgets such cares, spending his time with people who "really live and do not stagnate." By contrast, when Levin is in Petersburg, he finds himself frittering away his time and money, feeling increasingly empty and frustrated. In Moscow, the home to Kitty's family, by contrast, he at least stands a chance of remaining himself, although he ultimately thrives only in the countryside, on his estate.

Having been married long enough to bear and begin raising a child with Levin, Kitty ponders her husband's nature. On the one hand, he is tormented by a lack of faith, and she knows that if someone asked her whether his failure to believe would damn him, she would have to say yes. Yet she also knows that she loves him more than anything on earth, and she finds his struggles with faith amusing. She can be amused because she knows that her husband is a good man. She does not need to weigh in her mind the various doctrines of the faith and Levin's positions on each one. She merely needs to reflect on a recent example of his goodness, the way he puts others before himself.

Two weeks prior, a letter from Stiva had reached Dolly. In it, he begged her to "save his honor and sell her estate to pay his debts." Dolly is in despair. She detests her husband, but she also pities him, and resolves that her only option is to divorce him. It is here that Kitty smiles, recalling Levin's consternation, how he kept returning to the matter over and over again, and how he eventually comes up with a solution that spares the feeling and dignity of all con-

cerned, yet resolves the financial difficulties of the family. His creative resolution is conveyed in but a clause in a rather long sentence, yet it constitutes one of the truly thoughtful and beautiful examples of generosity in world literature.

Kitty recalls how Dolly, having finally rejected divorce, agreed to sell part of her estate. Yet Levin knows there is something wrong with this, that it meets Stiva's needs but puts Dolly in an untenable situation, creating an unbreachable rift in an already fractured relationship.

> After that, Kitty, with an involuntary smile of emotion, recalled her husband's consternation, his frequent approaches to the matter that preoccupied him, and how at last, having come up with the one and only means of helping Dolly without insulting her, he suggested to Kitty that she give Dolly her part of the estate, something she had never thought of before.[5]

Kitty knows her husband less through what he writes or says, about which doubts frequently torment him, than by what he does – not by his mind but through his heart. "What kind of a nonbeliever is he?" she asks. "Everything for others, and nothing for himself." He is and has always been the steward for others, "and now Dolly and her children are under his wing." It is not in Levin's inability to complete the definitive book on Russian agriculture that his true character is revealed, but in the way he takes on responsibility for others who need his help, making their troubles in some sense his own. It is not in his means of making money, indulging his passions, or questing for fame or power that Levin distinguishes himself, but in his deep generosity and his sincerity in giving the very best he has to offer.

Thinking of their newborn son, Kitty has but one wish for him. "Yes, only be a man like your father, only a man like that," she murmurs. Levin is not the richest, most powerful, most dashing, or most famous man in the novel, but he is surely the most generous. His fundamental orientation is not one of exploiting others but contributing to them. He aims to lead a life of significance, not puffing himself up larger and larger but serving others. Even his property is something he protects not so much for himself but for his family, which he envisions not only in terms of those now living but also those yet to come. He leads a life of responsibility to something larger than himself, and as such he represents one of literature's great portraits of a truly philanthropic human being.

To those who have eyes to see, ears to hear, minds to know, and hearts to feel, the narratives of generosity, giving, and gratitude in Tolstoy's *Anna*

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5 Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, trans. Louise and Aylmer Maude (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 360.

Karenina illuminate dimensions of philanthropy – meaning, goodness, and beauty – that no chart, table, or graph could ever begin to represent. To be sure, such narratives operate on a much smaller scale and therefore limit our capacity to make macroscopic declarations about whole populations and societies. Yet because they draw our attention to real flesh-and-blood human beings, as opposed to impersonal aggregates, they also reveal what philanthropy can and does mean in daily life, the only context in which any human being ever really gives or receives. An education or career that focused exclusively on philanthropy's literary dimensions would omit too much, but one that failed to accord them their due would not qualify as truly philanthropic in the first place.

About The Author

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