Philosophy of Management
https://doi.org/10.1007/s40926-026-00389-z

A Life Most Terrible at Work: Moral Collapse and Ethical Renewal in *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*

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Received: 19 November 2025 / Accepted: 16 April 2026
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Abstract
Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* presents a profound examination of how conformity erodes moral life and how renewal becomes possible. This paper reads the novella as a philosophical case of moral collapse and recovery, integrating existential ethics with moral psychology. We reframe the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory as a moral-existential account, in which catalysts transform crises of conscience into a renewed moral life. Within this structure, Gerasim, Ivan's young caretaker, functions as a catalyst and moral center. By accepting finitude and practicing unadorned care, he restores coherence where avoidance prevails. Ivan's death exposes the emptiness beneath social success and opens a path to clarity through honest confrontation. We connect this vision to organizational life, where busyness, bureaucracy, and procedural thinking mirror Ivan's mistaken ideals. We conclude by proposing a cyclical model of moral balance that links philosophy, literature, and management practice, showing how the Catalyst can trigger regression back to Avoidance if ignored and how Authenticity can still emerge within systems of disengagement.

Keywords Moral collapse · Authenticity · Existential ethics · Moral disengagement · Meaningful work · Tolstoy

Introduction

Ivan Ilyich was not evil. He was ordinary.

He followed the rules, pursued what was proper, and wore his professionalism like a tailored suit, shaped by expectations and pressed each day by habit. In the quiet progression of his life, career, marriage, promotion, and decorum, there was nothing remarkable. Nothing, at least, that would indicate collapse.

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Published online: 06 May 2026

The Death of Ivan Ilyich is more than a moral fable. It can be read in its nineteenth-century context and in its twenty-first-century relevance, serving as a mirror for how we understand ethics in the workplace. Tolstoy begins with death rather than life, presenting a man stripped bare by his own mortality. Ivan Ilyich, a respected judge, has done everything that convention and propriety demand. Yet as he lies dying, he realizes that his outwardly correct life has been inwardly hollow. *"What if my whole life has been wrong?"* he asks (Tolstoy 1886), p. 121. His "most terrible life" warns that professional success without self-reflection leaves the spirit hollow rather than whole. His death becomes a revelation, showing that authenticity requires courage, humility, and honesty within systems that often reward pretense.

Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* feels uncannily modern because it is not simply about death but about the moral and existential emptiness that takes root when a person stops living authentically. Ivan's life follows a familiar pattern of decline: it begins with **Avoidance**, the quiet denial of inner truth; deepens into **Alienation**, as he loses connection and meaning; and ends in **Collapse**, when illness strips away the illusions that once sustained him. Yet even within this descent lies a **Catalyst** for change, found in both his suffering and Gerasim's compassion, which pushes Ivan toward **Confrontation** with reality. From that reckoning, he begins to rediscover **Authenticity**, a moral recovery grounded in truth rather than appearance. When the **Catalyst** is ignored or dismissed, the cycle restarts with **Avoidance**, and the descent resumes. Ivan's tragedy lies less in the illness that ends his life than in the quiet self-deception that defines it, the steady refusal of moral awareness, and the retreat from authenticity that (Sartre 1943) describes as bad faith. In this avoidance, Ivan reflects the struggle of many modern professionals and leaders who appear successful yet feel a profound moral exhaustion and spiritual detachment beneath the surface.

Modern management often treats morality as a set of procedures, including ethics training, codes of conduct, compliance programs, and corporate values statements, while neglecting the inner life where people form moral meaning. This gap between institutional ethics and lived experience enables moral disengagement (Bandura 1999): people justify their indifference through systems, hierarchies, and roles that distance them from responsibility. Tolstoy's Ivan confuses obedience with goodness and measures virtue by efficiency.

We argue for an integration of moral psychology and existential ethics that shows how external conformity and inner authenticity diverge and how their reconciliation can restore moral balance. This paper reads *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* as a philosophical case that illuminates the dynamics of moral collapse and renewal in organizational life. We develop a theoretical model of moral collapse and renewal informed by Tolstoy's narrative and applied to contemporary organizational contexts. In this approach, the narrative functions as a qualitative case that illustrates the model in practice, while the model itself is grounded in existing philosophical and psychological theory. Drawing on existential ethics (de Beauvoir 1948; Murdoch 1999; Sartre 1943) and moral psychology (Bandura 1991; Reynolds 2006), the model traces the movement from Avoidance to Authenticity and how this process shapes moral experience at work. Tolstoy's narrative highlights a broader pattern: Avoidance deepens into Alienation and, if left unexamined, culminates in Collapse. Yet reversal remains possible. When individuals see through the façade they have constructed to meet social expectations, they can begin to live truthfully. Ivan's confrontation with his life restores a fragile yet genuine clarity, aligning with research on self-determination and meaningful

work, which connect authenticity with awareness and deliberate choice (Deci and Ryan 1985; Michaelson 2021; Yeoman 2014).

This paper begins with an analysis of Tolstoy's narrative; however, its aim extends beyond mere literary interpretation. We present the Moral Balance Model, which unifies existential ethics, moral psychology, and Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, elucidating the processes of moral depletion and renewal within organizational contexts (Hobfoll 1989). On a practical level, we translate this framework into actionable strategies, such as design levers, ethical culture diagnostics, moral imagination routines, alignment with meaningful work, and leadership development focused on authenticity. These tools enable organizations to maintain moral attention that transcends mere compliance-based ethics systems.

A demanding but straightforward question drives this inquiry: What does it mean to live a morally coherent life within systems that reward appearance over substance? Management research reveals how this tension gradually wears people down, manifesting as burnout (Maslach et al. 2001), moral fatigue, and disengagement from the organization. Philosophy reminds us that people sustain morality through more than policy or structure. It begins within the self, in those quiet moments when a person feels the full weight of their own choices (Sartre 1946). Ivan's story gives this private struggle form and voice, turning moral reflection into lived experience. We propose a conceptual model, known as the Moral Balance Model, to describe this cycle. The following sections trace this movement through Avoidance, Alienation, Collapse, Catalyst, Confrontation, and Authenticity, forming the progression of moral balance shown in Fig. 1.

Methodological Posture: Philosophical Case Analysis and Integrative Interpretation

We adopt a philosophical case analysis that places Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* in conversation with existential ethics and moral psychology. The approach is interpretive rather than empirical, treating the novella as a qualitative case that offers rich insight into the lived experience of work, responsibility, and moral agency. The narrative functions as a form of data, through which characters' actions, reflections, and relationships reveal moral dynamics that can be theorized and interpreted. This method is well-suited to philosophy and management scholarship, where literary texts can illuminate moral experience, decision-

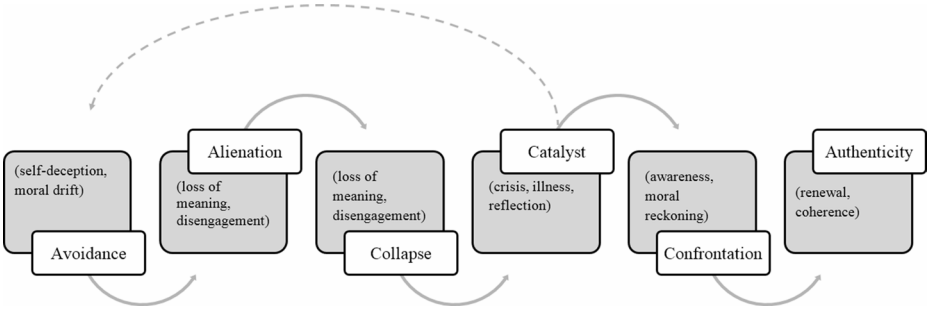


Fig. 1 The moral balance model: *From avoidance to authenticity.* Note: Figure developed by the author to illustrate the dynamic and cyclical process of moral balance and renewal. The dashed arrow represents the potential return from Catalyst to Avoidance when reflection and moral reckoning are avoided

making, and meaning in organizational life, a tradition reflected in prior narrative-based ethical analyses (e.g., Freeman 1997; Nussbaum 1990; Seele 2021). Existential ethics provides the conceptual language of authenticity, ambiguity, vision, and freedom (de Beauvoir 1948; Murdoch 1999; Sartre 1943).[1]

Moral psychology, in turn, identifies the mechanisms that allow disengagement to be rationalized and sustained within organizational life (Bandura 1991, 1999; Detert et al. 2008; Tenbrunsel and Messick 2004).

We proceed abductively, moving between Tolstoy's narrative and existing theory in moral psychology and existential ethics to reveal the structures underlying moral experience. Narrative scenes expose the phenomena, while philosophical and psychological frameworks clarify their process and meaning. The result is a theoretical model of moral collapse and renewal that informs both management theory and practice. As an interpretive approach, it does not aim to generalize statistically, but to deepen conceptual understanding and offer a transferable lens for organizational reflection. This orientation aligns with scholarship that links moral imagination to systems of action (Werhane 2002, 2008) and conceives meaningful work as coherence between inner purpose and outer practice (Michaelson 2021; Michaelson et al. 2014; Rosso et al. 2010; Yeoman 2014).

Historical Context: From Late Imperial Russia to the Modern Managerial World

Tolstoy wrote during Russia's late nineteenth-century transition from tradition to industrial modernity (Berlin 1953). Understanding this context clarifies how Ivan's moral crisis reflects a broader cultural shift in values and work, rather than an isolated personal failure. Despite the distance, today's digital bureaucracy repeats the tension between conformity and authenticity, efficiency and attention (Botha and Freeman 2023; Fleming 2022).

Tolstoy's Russia moved by hierarchy and habit. Bureaucracy prized obedience over reflection and composure over honesty, shaping Ivan from the start. In his courtroom, rank matters more than truth, and etiquette replaces genuine feeling. People learn to hide their doubts and maintain appearances, believing such restraint to be sufficient. Life becomes a performance of manners rather than a matter of conviction. (Murdoch 1999) notes that moral failure often begins not with cruelty, but with blindness, a gradual refusal to face what is real. Ivan's world turns that blindness into routine, trading attention for ritual and depth for display. (Botha and Freeman 2023) show how such disengagement becomes habitual when systems favor compliance over conscience. When illness intrudes, the polished surface fractures. What once seemed proper now feels hollow, stripped of meaning.

Modern organizations, while speaking the language of democracy, innovation, and progress, often follow the same exhausting patterns. Terms have evolved, efficiency replaces propriety, and productivity stands in for duty, but the underlying rhythm remains unchanged. Many professionals experience a quiet weariness reminiscent of Tolstoy's insights, which can lead to burnout (Freudenberger 1974). This state arises not only from overwork but from moral depletion in systems that prioritize performance over purpose. Ivan built his world

[1] While this analysis is grounded in existential ethics, the central argument is compatible with other normative traditions. From a virtue ethics perspective, Ivan's transformation may be understood as the emergence of virtues such as honesty, compassion, and moral courage. In this interpretation, Gerasim functions as a moral exemplar who discloses these possibilities through practice.

Table 1 Comparative Contexts: Late imperial Russia and the United States in transition

Theme	Russia (1880–1900)	United States (2005–2025)
Economy	State-led industrialization under Sergei Witte: fragile growth, famine, and uneven modernization.	Tech-driven, post-industrial transformation; deep inequality, gig work, and economic volatility.
Society	Traditional hierarchies and low literacy; new industrial classes and intelligentsia emerging under repression.	Fragmented pluralism; higher education, but growing digital divides and identity-based polarization.
Politics	Autocracy, censorship, and underground ideologies; resistance grows beneath stability.	Polarized democracy, populism, and distrust challenge institutional legitimacy.
Foreign Relations	Expanding empire and rising great-power ambitions; seeking modernization through rivalry.	Global hegemon managing relative decline and multipolar competition.
Administrative and Managerial Technologies	Expanding bureaucracy, paper-based record keeping, hierarchical procedures, and formalized etiquette as tools of social control.	Data-driven management, algorithmic oversight, HRIS systems, surveillance capitalism, and platform-based governance are shaping work and behavior. Emerging AI-mediated decision-making, automated performance evaluation, and generative AI tools are further reshaping professional roles, identity, and the boundaries of human judgment at work.

from paper and ink; we make ours from screens, software, and increasingly algorithmic and AI-mediated systems, yet the same patterns persist.

To motivate our theoretical bridge, we present Table 1 comparing late imperial Russia (1880–1900) with the United States in the early twenty-first century (2005–2025) across five dimensions: economy, society, politics, foreign relations, and administrative and managerial technologies. This comparative framing highlights structural similarities in how social change shapes moral norms and expectations of work. The goal is not to claim direct equivalence, but to recognize an echo, to see how progress can conceal new forms of alienation beneath its polished surface.

Both societies faced shocks to their moral foundations. Here, moral foundations refer to shared assumptions about duty, dignity, responsibility, and what counts as a good life. In late imperial Russia, modernization under autocracy strained attention and authenticity. In the contemporary West, rapid technological change within bureaucratic capitalism echoes this tension. In each case, disengagement becomes routine: institutions define meaning, and people perform roles rather than heed conscience. As (Seele 2021) notes in his reading of

Forster's *The Machine Stops*, advanced systems can carry seeds of moral disintegration. When convenience and control replace judgment and attention, agency erodes in favor of efficiency. Tolstoy's nineteenth-century diagnosis and Seele's twenty-first-century warning converge: progress, left unexamined, can harden into servitude.

This confrontation between system and self sets the stage for moral awareness to return. The following section introduces a conceptual model of this movement, showing how Avoidance leads to Alienation and Collapse, and how crisis, as a Catalyst, can reawaken Confrontation and Authenticity.

Theoretical Foundation: Existential Ethics and Moral Disengagement

At the center of *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* is a question philosophy and management rarely ask together: how to exist rightly within systems that reward conformity. Moral collapse begins with a socially accepted drift from authenticity (Botha and Freeman 2023; Sartre 1943). Existential ethics and moral psychology offer complementary lenses for this problem: one examines the meaning of moral agency, and the other explains how people may turn away from it. Existential ethics clarifies the philosophical roots of avoidance, while moral psychology reveals the cognitive and social mechanisms that sustain it.

Existential Ethics: The Demand of Authenticity

Sartre, de Beauvoir, and Murdoch each remind us that moral life begins not with rules but with the recognition of freedom. (Sartre 1943) argued that we are *"condemned to be free*," meaning that no system or authority can determine the moral rightness of our actions *(in workplace terms*, *no policy or procedure can substitute for personal responsibility)*. What remains is the responsibility accepted through the choices we make. (Jackson 2005) extends this insight into business ethics, showing how Sartrean authenticity challenges managerial conformity and exposes the limits of procedural morality. For Sartre, moral failure begins when individuals surrender responsibility to roles, institutions, or habits that dictate their behavior. Ivan gives this failure a human face. His faith in order and propriety appears virtuous, yet it conceals a quiet withdrawal from agency, a yielding of the self to appearance and professional identity rather than authenticity. The result is a life that slowly drifts away from moral awareness. Together, these existential perspectives form a crucial part of the theoretical foundation for our grounded interpretive model, clarifying why freedom, responsibility, and perception are central to understanding moral agency in organizational life.

(de Beauvoir 1948) described moral life as a continual search for meaning within uncertainty. She argued that people must continually renew their freedom. When people stop asking what their conformity costs them, moral life begins to stagnate. In organizations, this stagnation often manifests as professional detachment, where competence supplants conviction and routine supplants reflection (Ashforth and Humphrey 1993; Kahn 1990). Recent work by (Dashtipour et al. 2024) revisits de Beauvoir's ethics of ambiguity in the context of business ethics, emphasizing that ambiguity is not a sign of moral weakness but the condition that makes authentic choice possible. For Ivan, the pursuit of respectability becomes a cage of his own design, one that prevents him from seeing himself clearly.

(Murdoch 1999) expanded existential ethics through her idea of moral vision. Goodness, she argued, is not obedience but attention, the effort to see reality without the distortions of ego or habit. Evil begins with inattention, the quiet refusal to notice what is real. Ivan's blindness is precisely this failure. He cannot look past the polished surface of respectability long enough to perceive moral truth. Tolstoy's case study shows that moral growth depends less on rules and more on clear vision. To see others and oneself truthfully restores the possibility of authenticity.

Moral Psychology: Disengagement and Rationalization

(Bandura's 1986) social cognitive theory links moral reasoning to self-regulation, and his later work specifies *moral disengagement* (Bandura, 1991, 1999). Behavioral ethics extends this, showing how organizational contexts and biases shape (un)ethical behavior (Treviño et al. 2014). Through moral justification, displacement/diffusion of responsibility, and dehumanization, people act against their values while maintaining a moral self-image. These mechanisms numb, rather than erase, morality, making self-deception sustainable.

(Reynolds 2006) showed that people perceive moral issues differently depending on their role and the context in which they act. When people treat a question as policy or procedure, they often strip it of its ethical weight. In organizations, this happens easily. Professionalism becomes an armor that shields self-examination. Traits like control, composure, and efficiency become a moral cover, allowing people to feel upright while ignoring harm. Ivan mirrors this pattern. His careful obedience to rules offers comfort, yet closes his eyes to what truly matters.

Integration: From Detachment to Collapse

We integrate existential ethics and moral psychology to trace the anatomy of moral collapse. Existential thought exposes the philosophical roots of self-deception, while moral disengagement theory explains its psychological workings (Bandura 1999; Sartre 1943). Both perspectives reach a shared conclusion: alienation is not only social or economic but moral, a key stage in the slide from Avoidance to Collapse. This erosion begins when people no longer see themselves as responsible agents within a shared moral world. Empirical evidence reinforces this claim. When people deplete their self-control resources, their moral attention and restraint weaken, increasing the likelihood of unethical behavior (Gino et al. 2011). This theoretical integration does not aim to predict behavior in all contexts, but rather to provide a conceptual framework that illuminates how moral agency weakens over time.

Ivan's fixation on status and appearance dulls his sense of being, producing what (Sartre 1943, p. 286) called *"a being for others,"* an inauthentic self defined by how others perceive him. (West 2008) carried this insight into organizational life, demonstrating how modern institutions often reproduce Sartrean bad faith by rewarding conformity over reflection and status over sincerity. The cost of such conformity is moral exhaustion, a quiet fatigue that ultimately leads to a state of collapse. Tolstoy presents this collapse in its most absolute form: a breakdown that consumes both moral and physical life. In Ivan's death, illusion finally gives way, and the story exposes the endpoint of disengagement. That reckoning becomes the first movement toward renewal, a confrontation no rule or role can soften.

This foundation establishes the interpretive frame for what follows, and we introduce the Moral Balance Model next. Existential ethics clarifies the meaning of Ivan's collapse, while moral psychology reveals the mechanisms through which it unfolds. Together, they show that moral disengagement is not a failure of knowledge, but a failure of courage, a refusal to face the freedom and finitude that make moral life possible. This progression from Avoidance to Collapse, and the possibility of reversal through moral confrontation, sets the stage for the Moral Balance Model introduced next. As shown in Fig. 1, Avoidance, Alienation, and Collapse trace the movement of moral depletion, while a Catalyst can interrupt this drift and open the path to Confrontation and, ultimately, Authenticity. When this reckoning is resisted, the cycle loops back to Avoidance and begins again.

Moral Collapse and the Ordinary Life

Ivan's life, viewed through existential ethics and moral psychology, represents a slow moral disintegration hidden within the routines of success. Tolstoy demonstrates that collapse does not arrive as a catastrophe, but rather as an accumulation (Bandura 1999; Reynolds 2006). The moral self erodes not through sudden transgression but through countless small evasions, each justified by the logic of professionalism and propriety. This pattern echoes modern organizational life, where status, competence, and performance can mask quiet ethical depletion, whether in consulting, healthcare, or academia, where doing one's job well can gradually replace asking whether one is doing what is right. Ivan's world mirrors our own, a system that prizes composure over conscience and performance over presence.

From the beginning, Ivan lives in what (Sartre 1943) called bad faith: a denial of freedom disguised as virtue. He never questions the structure of his life because it rewards him for not asking. Each promotion, polite dinner, and bureaucratic victory reinforces a moral anesthesia that detaches him from the reality of others and himself. (de Beauvoir 1948) described this as moral stagnation, the refusal to engage ambiguity or risk oneself in pursuit of meaning. Ivan's tragedy is that he mistakes avoidance for stability.

This avoidance is not neutral. It drains what might be called moral resources, the inner capacities for awareness, empathy, and authenticity that sustain an ethical life. Reframed through COR theory (Hobfoll 1989), Ivan's story becomes a study in depletion. Every compromise of conscience is a withdrawal from an account he never replenishes. He invests his energy in maintaining a professional façade, but the interest compounds in alienation. When illness strikes, the balance comes due.

The illness is more than physical decay. It is the moment when the scaffolding of his identity collapses, revealing the hollow core beneath. What (Bandura 1991, 1999) identified as moral disengagement, rationalization, displacement of responsibility, and dehumanization appears here as existential unraveling. Ivan's justifications no longer hold. The system that once affirmed his worth now treats his suffering as an inconvenience. His colleagues calculate how his death will affect their promotions. His wife views his illness as an interruption to her social calendar. Confronted with this indifference, Ivan experiences what (Murdoch 1999) called the *"shock of reality,"* the painful recognition that he has lived among illusions of goodness.

Tolstoy presents this realization through the body itself; the more Ivan clings to propriety, the more his body rebels against it. Pain becomes the one truth he cannot explain away. It cuts through the polite illusions that shaped his life, showing that what he called duty was

often fear, and what he called success was escape. His illness becomes a mirror of moral exhaustion, the breaking down of a self that spent its strength avoiding honesty. (Frankl 1946) described this as the *"defiant power of the human spirit,"* the capacity to find meaning even in unavoidable suffering. Ivan's pain, stripped of excuse or reason, becomes that act of defiance, a moral awakening born from what he most wanted to escape.

This collapse remains all too familiar in organizational life. Many professionals, particularly those in bureaucratic environments, experience a gradual and subtle decline in moral energy. Roles, rules, and expectations begin to wear them down. People turn ethical judgment into a box to check and reduce empathy to just another task. (Reynolds 2006) noted that when people treat morality as merely a matter of technical compliance, they weaken its force. Over time, this leads to moral exhaustion, a depletion of the inner strength necessary to act with integrity. People stop feeling personally accountable because the system convinces them they are doing things correctly. In that setting, moral disengagement is no longer the exception; it becomes the routine.

Ivan's alienation grows from this same source. His sense of self rests on procedural virtue, not conviction. Once he can no longer perform his routines, nothing remains to sustain him. The conversations that once affirmed his worth now expose his distance from others. His family's politeness feels sharp, and his doctor's confidence sounds hollow. Each exchange reminds him he has been acting a part instead of living a life. (de Beauvoir 1948) warned that a self defined by others' approval becomes trapped by their indifference. Ivan's collapse makes that truth visible.

Tolstoy depicts this enslavement with startling precision. Ivan's downfall is not a dramatic fall from grace but a gradual drift away from what is real. Pain deepens his isolation, yet it also begins to wake him. Confronting death strips him of every excuse, leaving only the awareness of his own finitude. (Sartre 1943) referred to this as the moment when a person recognizes freedom not as comfort, but as a weight, the point at which responsibility becomes inescapable. Within that weight lies the first glimmer of authenticity.

The crisis becomes a turning point. Within COR's framework, loss carries the potential for renewal. The depletion of one resource can compel the discovery of another. When the pursuit of external validation collapses, awareness turns inward and begins to rebuild. Ivan's confrontation with death marks the start of this reconstruction. The pain that once seemed destructive becomes the ground of awakening. In losing everything that supported illusion, he begins to recover what is real. A similar insight appears in the modern cultural narrative of *Fight Club*, where the protagonist's breakdown forces him to confront the emptiness of the identity he built around success, image, and social expectation. As (Palahniuk 1996) wrote in *Fight Club*, *"It's only after we've lost everything that we're free to do anything."* Tolstoy reaches the same conclusion: freedom begins not in mastery but in surrender, not in control but in the courage to see truth.

Tolstoy's final scenes show this reversal with theological clarity. As Ivan's pain deepens, his resistance fades. He stops performing. In surrender, he glimpses reconciliation with himself, with others, and with life. The change does not come as an argument but as illumination. To live rightly, one must first see truthfully. (Murdoch 1999) wrote that moral change depends less on will than on attention, and Ivan's awakening proves the point. Facing his condition without disguise, he regains a measure of agency that convention had long silenced.

The idea of moral resources explains this shift. Ivan's avoidance drains his inner reserves, but his subsequent honesty begins to restore them. What he gains is not reward but coherence. He cannot change his situation, yet he can change how he meets it. Tolstoy anticipates what modern theories of meaningful work (Michaelson et al. 2014; Yeoman 2014) and moral imagination (Werhane 2002) describe as the recovery of purpose through reflection. Ivan's final act is neither professional nor social; it is ethical. By acknowledging the façade he built around his life, he acts for the first time from his truth rather than appearance.

Tolstoy's warning still speaks to today's workplaces. Many professionals build identities on institutional stories, confusing compliance with virtue and success with worth. The exhaustion often labeled burnout (Maslach et al. 2001; Schaufeli 2017) runs deeper than fatigue. It signals a loss of meaning beneath the demand to perform. Collapse, though painful, can clear the ground for honesty. It shows how routine can distance us from authenticity and how the drive to do things right can eclipse the desire to live well.

This resource-based account also resonates with Aristotle's concept of catharsis, the clarifying transformation that occurs when suffering is confronted rather than avoided (Aristotle 335 BCE 1996). For Aristotle, catharsis occurs when a tragic protagonist — like Oedipus or Lear — is forced to witness the full consequences of their actions, producing not despair but a purifying shift in understanding. In our model, catharsis functions as the dynamic arrow between Confrontation and Authenticity: it is the transformative process by which unflinching acknowledgment of one's moral collapse becomes the passage toward renewed agency and meaning. Read alongside COR theory, Ivan's collapse represents not only depletion but a moment of moral and existential reorganization. The loss of externally valued resources such as status, control, and professional identity creates space for a reordering of attention, compassion, and agency. In organizational life, similar disruptions can temporarily restore moral perception by interrupting routinized disengagement and forcing individuals to confront the human meaning of their actions. As the Moral Balance Model suggests, however, such clarity is fragile. The same crisis may either support renewal or provoke defensive regression back into avoidance.

The Catalyst: From Disruption to Moral Awareness

We argue that moral renewal begins with disruption, either catastrophic or quiet, that exposes the gap between appearance and reality. In *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, the body defies the script. In organizations, burnout, moral injury, or purpose drift play a similar role (Maslach et al. 2001; Schaufeli 2017). Catalysts interrupt avoidance, sharpen attention, and reawaken agency.

Moral psychology helps explain this turning point. Mechanisms of disengagement operate most effectively when routines remain stable and social reinforcement is predictable (Bandura 1999; Detert et al. 2008). Catalysts destabilize that predictability. They puncture rationalizations and require reappraisal. Existential ethics clarifies the opportunity that follows such a shock. In Sartre's language, the subject confronts freedom as both burden and possibility. In Murdoch's account, attention shifts back toward reality. For de Beauvoir, the self can reclaim responsibility within ambiguity. The catalyst is therefore not merely a stressor, but the critical turning point at which perception changes and the range of real options for ethical action expands, enabling movement toward Confrontation in the Moral Balance Model.

Tolstoy presents this transformation through Gerasim, the peasant whose quiet compassion unsettles the sterile routine of Ivan's household. Ivan's illness marks the beginning of the body's decline, but it is Gerasim's steady presence that begins to heal something deeper. He accepts death as part of the human condition and views service not as a performance, but as care. In simple acts, holding Ivan's legs, listening without judgment, and saying softly that *"It is God's will. We shall all come to it one day"* (Tolstoy 1886), p. 120, he reveals what authentic goodness looks like. Through Gerasim, Ivan glimpses a life lived without pretense. That encounter marks the beginning of his release from illusion. In contemporary organizational terms, Gerasim resembles the rare colleague or leader who models integrity through humility and genuine presence rather than image management. Read through a modern lens, he becomes a moral counterweight to systems that reward appearance over sincerity, a reminder that integrity often survives in the most ordinary gestures.

In this model, catalysts are not moral guarantees. They open a path rather than determine an outcome. Individuals and institutions may respond by doubling down on avoidance or by entering a cycle of reflection that leads to coherence. The process that follows shows how Avoidance leads to Collapse, while Confrontation initiates renewal.

Tolstoy renders this turning point not as an abstraction but as an encounter. Gerasim embodies the living form of the catalyst, a presence that restores truth where systems have numbed it. Catalysts are often ignored when fear, organizational norms, or incentives make honesty feel costly. If people ignore such a presence, they move back toward Avoidance in the moral balance progression.

Conceptual Model and Propositions

We present the Moral Balance Model in Fig. 1, From Avoidance to Authenticity, which illustrates the cyclical process of moral renewal. The left descent traces the movement from Avoidance to Alienation and Collapse. The right ascent shows the progression from Confrontation to Authenticity. At the center lies the Catalyst, the moral disruption that breaks routine and reopens awareness. A progression rather than a simple cycle or linear path reflects that moral life does not return to the same point, but deepens or diminishes as experience accumulates, allowing for growth, learning, or further depletion. Moral life unfolds as a continuous process in which individuals and organizations move through depletion and renewal. The dashed arrow represents regression: when people resist reflection or reckoning, they loop the cycle back from Catalyst to Avoidance, reinstating disengagement. In organizational life, this regression is seen when a crisis sparks brief self-examination, but cultural pressure to *"return to normal"* quickly restores old habits, preventing meaningful change. We translate the model into theoretically grounded propositions that can guide future conceptual or empirical work.

P1 Avoidance reduces moral attention and increases reliance on disengagement mechanisms. When people treat ethical tension as a technical or compliance issue, they become more likely to rationalize, displace responsibility, or diffuse accountability (Bandura 1991, 1999; Reynolds 2006; Tenbrunsel and Messick 2004).

P2 Prolonged avoidance depletes moral resources and heightens alienation. Substituting appearance for authenticity drains empathy, meaning, and agency. COR theory explains that chronic strain weakens moral and psychological capacities, which aligns with prior research (Hobfoll 1989; Maslach et al. 2001; Schaufeli 2017).

P3 Alienation increases the risk of collapse under stress. As moral resources diminish, people lose the ability to align their values with their actions. Performance may continue while significance declines, leading to increased ethical fatigue and potential failure.

P4 Catalysts disrupt routine and create openings for moral confrontation. Illness, loss, or dissonance puncture rationalizations and invite reflection. When dismissed or neutralized, they trigger regression, and the cycle repeats.

P5 Confrontation renews moral resources by grounding the self in agency and coherence. When individuals acknowledge dissonance and take responsibility, autonomy deepens and moral clarity emerges, reflecting well-established self-determination dynamics in meaningful work research (Deci and Ryan 1985; Michaelson 2021; Yeoman 2014).

P6 Authenticity represents a temporary restoration of moral balance. Meaning and moral vision realign, but authenticity is not static. Without continued attention and supportive conditions, it tends to erode and revert to Avoidance.

P7 Moral renewal stabilizes through imagination and culture. Sustained authenticity depends on systems that reward reflection, candor, and care. When organizations cultivate moral imagination and an ethical culture, renewal becomes more durable (Kaptein 2008; Michaelson et al. 2014; Werhane 2002, 2008).

Gerasim and the Mirror of Authenticity

If illness exposes Ivan's collapse, Gerasim reveals the possibility of coherence. Amid the hypocrisy of Ivan's household, he is the only one who meets suffering without denial. His compassion is not sentimental but grounded in truth. He accepts death as part of life and performs the plain work of care without shame or fear. In one of the story's most striking moments, Gerasim tells Ivan, *"We shall all die someday, so why should I be afraid?"* (Tolstoy 1886), p. 119. That quiet acceptance cuts through the false morality that has shaped Ivan's life.

Gerasim stands in sharp contrast to the moral disengagement of Ivan's family and colleagues. While they retreat behind excuses, he remains near and faces suffering directly. His care reflects what Murdoch (1999) called moral attention, the ability to see another person clearly, without distortion or self-interest. Through this steady presence, Gerasim reawakens Ivan's sense of goodness. He becomes a living answer to the bad faith that has ruled Ivan's life, showing that moral clarity begins not with doctrine, but with perception, the way we see one another.

In virtue-theoretic terms, Gerasim's presence also reveals moral courage as a practical virtue. He faces suffering and finitude without evasion, and his steady honesty makes it possible for Ivan to confront what he has long avoided. Ivan's late-life transformation can

therefore be understood not only as a movement toward existential authenticity, but also as the emergence of moral courage in the face of fear and denial.

In existential terms, Gerasim represents the authentic other, the person through whom Ivan glimpses moral reality for the first time. (Sartre 1943) wrote that human relationships can either confine or free us. In Gerasim, Tolstoy presents the freeing kind, a meeting that restores humanity instead of draining it. Gerasim does not pity Ivan; he simply sees him. That act of recognition marks the beginning of Ivan's moral renewal after a lifetime of evasion. In contemporary organizational life, such figures resemble the rare colleagues or leaders whose presence restores dignity and clarity rather than performance pressure.

Viewed through the lens of COR theory, Gerasim functions as a restorative force that replenishes Ivan's depleted moral resources, particularly empathy, meaning, and a sense of agency. His quiet attention steadies Ivan, returning meaning through connection and care. Gerasim offers no instruction, only presence. In that presence, he embodies the Catalyst of moral balance, the person or moment that interrupts Avoidance, initiates Confrontation, and sets the progression toward Authenticity in motion.

Yet the model also warns that Catalysts are fragile. They invite renewal but cannot guarantee it. If ignored, their clarity fades and the cycle reverts to Avoidance, and moral life slips back into stagnation rather than renewal. Tolstoy shows that Gerasim offers not a command but an invitation, a moment of truth that endures only when met with courage.

Moral Renewal and the Possibility of Authenticity

Ivan's awakening begins when his strength fails. When he can no longer keep the mask of composure in place, he must face the truth he has long avoided. His weakness opens the doorway to moral clarity. Through that exposure, Tolstoy demonstrates that authenticity does not stem from mastery or control, but from the courage to acknowledge one's own vulnerability. Seeing life truthfully takes courage because it demands releasing the comfortable illusion of virtue that conformity provides.

Existential ethics understands this moment as the recovery of freedom. (Sartre 1943) argues that authenticity emerges when individuals confront the contingency of their existence and assume full responsibility for their choices. Ivan's recognition that *"what had seemed impossible before, namely that he had not lived as he ought to have, might in fact be true"* (Tolstoy 1886), p. 119 marks liberation rather than defeat. Seeing that his life has been an illusion does not destroy him; it releases him from it. In his last moments, he stops performing and meets himself honestly, without disguise. That meeting marks the culmination of his moral and existential journey, the point at which a divided self becomes whole through the discovery of truth.

(de Beauvoir 1948) described this renewal as an awakening grounded in connection: to will oneself free is to will the freedom of others, a view echoed in contemporary work on relational authenticity in organizations (Dutton et al. 2010). Ivan's compassion in his final moments, his effort to comfort his family rather than condemn them, reflects this shift. He moves from isolation to empathy, from resentment to reconciliation. What was once self-pity becomes moral vision. (Murdoch 1999) would call this a redirection of attention: turning outward toward what is real rather than inward toward self-justification.

Within the metaphor of COR theory, Ivan's renewal transforms suffering into moral insight. The depletion of external resources, status, health, and social approval creates space

for internal recovery. Meaning, empathy, and awareness reemerge as new forms of moral capital. This transformation aligns with (Deci and Ryan's 1985) self-determination theory and later elaborations (Deci et al. 1994), which describe how autonomy and authenticity restore vitality once dependence and external validation have failed. Tolstoy captures this through spiritual imagery: Ivan's cry of terror becomes a cry of release, the passage from denial to acceptance.

This renewal is not sentimental. It does not erase pain; it gives pain meaning. Suffering becomes a revelation. The pain that once marked Ivan's alienation now becomes his teacher, showing him what no success ever could: that life's worth rests not in control but in connection, not in mastery but in meaning. *"He was sorry for them,"* Tolstoy writes. *"He must act so that they should not be pained; release them and himself from these sufferings"* (Tolstoy 1886), p. 131. In that compassion, his awakening comes full circle. Moral truth, when lived authentically, transcends mortality itself.

(Frankl 1946) deepened this insight by showing that meaning arises not from the avoidance of suffering but from the willingness to face it. His view parallels Tolstoy's: freedom and moral clarity emerge only when pain is confronted rather than escaped. In both accounts, suffering is not a denial of life but one of its most profound teachers.

For management and leadership, this sequence carries deep significance. Many organizations still define resilience as endurance, the capacity to absorb strain and continue performing. Tolstoy offers a different view. Renewal grows not from resistance but from reflection. Integrity returns when people face their weaknesses rather than conceal them. Leaders who acknowledge moral exhaustion create the conditions for renewal, both within themselves and within their institutions. As (Wong 1992) observed, coping with moral conflict means remaining within ambiguity instead of escaping it, allowing uncertainty to become a space for reflection and growth.

In modern terms, moral renewal calls for cultures that encourage moral perception and genuine dialogue. (Werhane 2002) used the term moral imagination to describe this capacity to see beyond habit and structure, but Ivan's change is best understood as a shift in perception. He begins to see truth where illusion once stood, and that clarity alters how he lives. This renewed perception restores meaning to a life that bureaucracy had drained of substance. Within organizations, perceptual shifts like this can help rehumanize systems that have become mechanical.

(Michaelson 2021; Yeoman 2014) extend this idea through the concept of meaningful work, where inner purpose aligns with outward action. (Bailey et al. 2019) support this view, showing that meaningful work research consistently links coherence, purpose, and moral engagement with well-being and ethical behavior. Ivan's reconciliation at death is the clearest expression of this alignment. For the first time, his actions, comforting his family and accepting the truth, match his awareness. In that harmony lies redemption. Meaningful work is not merely managerial rhetoric; it is a moral condition that emerges when moral and existential resources converge.

Viewed through this model, burnout is the inverse of authenticity. (Maslach et al. 2001) and Schaufeli (2017) describe it as the erosion of emotional and moral energy within systems shaped by estrangement. It is more than fatigue; it is the loss of meaning itself. Tolstoy's story reframes burnout as a moral signal. Efficiency without reflection leads to emptiness, yet within that emptiness lies the potential for renewal. Recovery begins when people and institutions confront the gap between appearance and authenticity, between performance

and purpose, such as when a team pauses after high turnover to reassess whether its goals, culture, and daily practices align with the values it claims to uphold.

Ivan's awakening offers a guide for ethical life within systems that often obscure it. His insight provides not a formula but a posture. To live authentically in a structured world is to resist reducing conscience to mere compliance and selfhood to a mere role. Sartre and Murdoch remind us that authenticity is not an endpoint but a practice we renew through continual attention.

Tolstoy closes not with triumph but with peace. The fear that once ruled Ivan fades into light. His final breath becomes an act of release, a moral restoration rising beyond the life that came before it. For anyone working within systems that prize composure over conscience, the message is simple: moral renewal begins when we stop performing and start perceiving. It begins when truth, however painful, reorders what matters most.

In the end, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* does not present death as defeat but as revelation. Even within collapse lies coherence. Moral authenticity, once lost, can be recovered through the courage to face illusion. Tolstoy's enduring message for management and for life is clear: meaning is not inherited from systems but created in the space between suffering and awareness, where the self chooses to see truthfully and to live accordingly.

Implications for Management and Moral Practice

Drawing on Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, this paper invites contemporary management scholars and practitioners to reconsider the moral foundations of professional life. Its power lies not in offering rules for conduct, but in revealing the conditions that allow moral agency to take root within organizations. The story exposes a familiar paradox: systems designed to preserve order can just as easily foster moral blindness. When efficiency and control outweigh reflection and empathy, work begins to lose its meaning, and people, like Ivan, mistake a polished façade of conformity for integrity.

This insight reaches into the psychology of modern organizations. Studies on moral disengagement (Bandura 1999; Detert et al. 2008) and ethical fading (Tenbrunsel and Messick 2004) show how daily routines can normalize moral distance and dull responsibility. Leaders design rules, hierarchies, and performance metrics to promote fairness, yet these systems often separate ethics from lived experience, as when healthcare staff prioritize meeting throughput targets or documentation requirements at the expense of attentive caregiving. In such settings, morality becomes something to follow rather than practice. Ivan's bureaucratic world makes this plain: his colleagues mourn not his death but the disruption it causes.

Management discourse often celebrates composure and adaptability, yet Tolstoy reminds us that moral growth begins in discomfort. Progress unfolds when people confront their complicity in systems that prize appearance over authenticity. (Reynolds 2006) observed that moral awareness depends on how it is framed. When organizations treat ethics as a technical or administrative issue, they weaken reflection and moral courage. Recent studies show that even moral expression can carry social and professional costs in unsupportive climates, prompting silence rather than honesty (Chen and Treviño 2023). Organizations can treat moral discomfort as a developmental resource rather than a threat to stability. Ivan's awakening offers the opposite example: the courage to look beyond procedure and rediscover purpose.

The restoration of moral balance depends on what (Werhane 2002, 2008) referred to as moral imagination, the ability to envision alternative possibilities for ethical action. Moral imagination resists the pull of habit by helping people view the familiar in a new light. It allows managers to recognize systems not as fixed structures but as human creations open to change. Tolstoy illustrates this through Ivan's final clarity. When he stops pretending, he begins to see. That shift from performance to perception restores connection, moving him from a state of alienation to one of compassion.

This insight reshapes how organizations build themselves. Workplaces that welcome reflection, dialogue, and honest questioning give moral imagination room to grow. Leaders can foster that atmosphere by showing vulnerability, questioning familiar routines, and creating space for genuine ethical exchange. Recent work by (Dashtipour et al. 2024) suggests that organizations should view ambiguity not as a flaw to manage but as a moral resource that fosters reflection. (Michaelson et al. 2014; Yeoman 2014) show that meaningful work arises when inner purpose aligns with outward action. That kind of coherence depends on institutions willing to reward authenticity instead of punishing it. These practices parallel the forward movement in the Moral Balance Model, where Confrontation creates the conditions for sustained renewal.

We further propose that this perspective reframes burnout. Instead of treating burnout as fatigue, it can be seen as a moral and existential signal, a symptom of disconnection from meaning (Freudenberger 1974; Maslach et al. 2001; Schaufeli 2017). Organizations that respond with wellness programs or productivity fixes address the symptom rather than the cause. Tolstoy's story suggests that genuine recovery requires moral renewal: the reawakening of purpose and empathy that comes when people face the pretense built into their routines. In the Moral Balance Model, burnout marks collapse, while reflection and awareness catalyze renewal.

Authentic leadership, commonly conceptualized in psychological terms such as self-awareness, consistency, and relational transparency (Alavi 2024; Frémeaux and Pavageau 2022), can be enriched by a moral and existential perspective. This view shifts authenticity from a set of behavioral skills to a reflective ethical practice grounded in meaning and responsibility. Empirical work already hints at this deeper dimension: authenticity is associated with a sense of purpose and moral meaning at work (Ilies et al. 2005). From an existential standpoint, authenticity requires leaders to resist detachment and remain present to ambiguity, which (de Beauvoir 1948) saw as essential to ethical life. When leaders accept that uncertainty, they help create workplaces where honesty, rather than denial, becomes the ground of trust.

Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, together with the philosophical traditions it evokes, reminds us that management is never neutral. Every policy, rule, and metric reflects an assumption about what it means to live a well-lived life. The challenge is to keep those systems from obscuring the people within them. Ivan's tragedy reveals the cost of losing sight of that truth. His renewal shows the way forward: to see, to care, and to act with awareness.

Design Levers for Moral Renewal

We translate the progression of moral balance into practice through structures that reduce avoidance and encourage authentic confrontation. The model (see Fig. 1) shows how individuals and organizations can drift from Avoidance to Alienation and Collapse, and how a

Catalyst can redirect that movement toward Confrontation and Authenticity. Drawing on this model and our analysis of Ivan's story, we propose four design levers that organizations can use to foster renewal in practice.

These design levers function as resource builders in COR theory, replenishing the attention, empathy, and agency required for moral renewal. By strengthening these resources, they stabilize the ascent from Confrontation to Authenticity within the moral balance model. Rather than treating ethical recovery as a rare or accidental outcome, these levers shift organizations from reactive correction to proactive moral cultivation, making renewal part of the system's design.

Ethical Culture Diagnostics The Corporate Ethical Virtues model identifies cultural qualities that sustain ethical behavior: clarity, discussability, feasibility, and accountability (Kaptein 2008). Regular assessment and transparent feedback narrow the gap between policy and practice, helping ensure that ethics remain lived rather than abstract.

Moral Imagination Routines Reflection practices, narrative dialogues, and scenario-based conversations build the capacity to see alternatives and resist narrow scripts (Werhane 2002, 2008). These routines should be intentional, recurring, and tied to real decisions so that reflection becomes a habit rather than an emergency response. Moral imagination is not only a disposition but a capability that develops through practice. Repeated engagement with ethically ambiguous situations helps individuals recognize moral dimensions that might otherwise remain hidden and supports the development of more adaptive ethical judgment over time. Organizations strengthen this capacity when structured reflection is embedded into routine decision processes rather than reserved for moments of crisis. Narrative texts such as short works of fiction can support this process by helping individuals recognize patterns of avoidance, moral tension, and responsibility through guided discussion and shared reflection.

Meaningful Work Alignment Roles that enhance autonomy, connection, and significance strengthen coherence between inner purpose and outer action (Lips-Wiersma and Morris 2009; Michaelson 2021; Michaelson et al. 2014; Yeoman 2014). Metrics should include both qualitative indicators of meaning and moral engagement, as well as measures of efficiency or output.

Leadership Development for Authenticity Programs that integrate moral identity, self-examination, and nontraditional leadership pathways foster honest agency rather than the performance of virtue (Alavi 2024; Ayaz et al. 2024; Frémeaux and Pavageau 2022; Shao et al. 2008). Reflective leaders make moral attention sustainable.

Bringing together existential ethics and moral psychology provides a more human approach to management. It treats moral agency as fragile and in need of steady renewal. Like the rhythm of loss and recovery in COR theory, moral life depends on how people move between depletion and repair. Avoidance leads to Alienation, and honesty restores authenticity. When awareness returns, it rarely stops with one person; it spreads through culture and leadership alike.

Tolstoy offers no formulas, only a demand: to live truthfully. For managers and scholars, this means treating ethics not as a constraint but as a creative practice, a continual act of attention. The lesson of *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* endures because it collapses the distance between life and work, as well as between philosophy and management. To live rightly is to work rightly, and to work rightly is to live with awareness of one's freedom and responsibility. In that awareness, moral life, like Ivan's final illumination, ceases to be a burden and becomes a release.

Boundary Conditions and Counterarguments

We address four anticipated objections to clarify the scope, limits, and appropriate application of our proposed Moral Balance Model.

First, Virtue Extends Beyond Inner Coherence (MacIntyre 1981) reminds us that virtues are not private traits but patterns of excellence shaped within shared practices and traditions. A focus on inward authenticity alone risks neglecting the communal standards that give moral life its meaning and purpose. Renewal, therefore, occurs within practices that define the goods internal to the work itself. Authenticity becomes sustainable only when supported by a moral community that recognizes and cultivates virtue.

Second, Procedures Can Embody Moral Value Arendt (1958) argued that public life depends on stable institutions capable of limiting arbitrary power. We must balance critique of bureaucracy with recognition that procedural order protects dignity and fairness. The problem is not the procedure itself, but the procedure without attention. Systems retain moral worth only when animated by care and reflection rather than habit and control.

Third, Reflective Narrative Sustains Moral Identity (Nussbaum 1990; Ricœur 1992) show that storytelling enables people to integrate suffering, agency, and responsibility. (Freeman 1997) extends this insight into business ethics, arguing that narrative integrity grounds moral authority by uniting the personal and professional dimensions of ethical life. Renewal endures when individuals and groups narrate their experiences in ways that unite hardship with growth. Not all narratives support this process: stories framed through blame, victimhood, or defensiveness can reinforce avoidance rather than foster moral agency. Tolstoy's story provides a model, illustrating how self-understanding emerges through narrative coherence, a process that leaders and organizations can adapt through reflection and development practices.

Finally, Alienation also has Material Roots (Marx 1844) located moral exhaustion in the structure of labor and exchange, emphasizing that alienation is not only psychological or existential but economic. The Moral Balance Model incorporates this by treating resource depletion as both structural and personal. Moral renewal, therefore, requires attention not only to internal awareness but also to the external conditions that shape it.

Future Research Agenda

Drawing on our proposed Moral Balance Model, we recommend several avenues for future empirical and theoretical development. Each direction translates the model's stages into testable propositions and organizational interventions. Future research should also examine the boundary conditions under which disruption produces moral clarification rather than defensive avoidance. Experiences such as burnout, ethical conflict, or organizational crisis may function as catalysts for reflection in some contexts, but trigger intensified disengagement in others. Organizational factors such as the strength of ethical culture, psychological safety, role framing, and the availability of structured reflection practices may determine whether disruption leads to renewed moral agency or a return to avoidance. Longitudinal and experimental designs could clarify when crisis functions as a source of moral reorientation versus a mechanism of regression within the Moral Balance Model.

Mixed-Method Studies of Catalysts Longitudinal qualitative research can trace how professionals narrate catalysts such as illness, burnout, or ethical conflict, and examine which contextual factors predict movement toward confrontation rather than deeper avoidance. Quantitative measures can complement narrative findings by identifying patterns of moral recovery over time and across different contexts.

Experiments on Framing and Moral Awareness Building on (Detert et al. 2008; Reynolds 2006), experiments can test how framing identical tasks as technical or ethical influences moral attention, disengagement mechanisms, and willingness to speak up. This stream can clarify how language and structure shape ethical perception and moral courage within organizations.

Cultural Interventions and Ethical Outcomes Field research can evaluate how moral imagination routines and ethical culture diagnostics influence unethical behavior, silence, repair, and recovery from moral mistakes (Fida et al. 2024; Kaptein 2008). These interventions would operationalize moral renewal within existing systems and assess which design features support sustained moral balance.

Leadership Identity Development Survey and diary methods can explore links among moral identity, authenticity, and ethical voice, drawing on studies of authentic leader emergence and atypical leadership trajectories (Alavi 2024; Ayaz et al. 2024; Shao et al. 2008). This work aims to clarify how leaders replenish moral resources and sustain authenticity under pressure and during career transitions.

Burnout as Moral Depletion Multi-wave studies can explore whether burnout serves as a bridge between ethical fading and unethical behavior, and whether interventions that promote meaning can weaken this link (Maslach et al. 2001; Michaelson 2021; Schaufeli 2017; Yeoman 2014). This research would integrate resource depletion theory with insights from moral psychology and existential ethics.

Together, these studies would refine the Moral Balance Model, clarify its mechanisms, and identify design features that enable organizations to transition from Alienation to

Authenticity. Integrating philosophical insight with empirical rigor can extend Tolstoy's moral vision into practical frameworks for ethical management and human flourishing.

Conclusion: The Progression of Moral Balance

This paper has argued that The Death of Ivan Ilyich offers more than a meditation on mortality; it provides a lens for understanding the dynamics of moral depletion and renewal in organizational life. We developed the Moral Balance Model to describe this progression: Avoidance deepens into Alienation and Collapse, while disruption can function as a Catalyst that opens the possibility of Confrontation and, ultimately, Authenticity. Interpreted through COR theory, this movement reflects a cycle of moral loss and recovery in which the erosion of meaning, agency, and attention can be reversed when individuals confront dissonance rather than conceal it.

Theoretically, this article contributes to philosophy of management and organizational ethics scholarship in three ways. First, it integrates existential ethics with moral psychology to explain how moral disengagement unfolds not only as a cognitive process but as a gradual withdrawal from responsibility and meaning. Second, it reframes COR theory as a moral–existential framework, showing how depletion and renewal operate within ethical life at work. Third, it advances a narrative-based approach to theory development by treating Tolstoy's novella as a philosophical case that reveals the lived experience of moral collapse and recovery within institutional settings.

Managerially, the model suggests that moral deterioration in organizations rarely begins with overt misconduct; it begins with routine avoidance, role-based distancing, and the gradual replacement of judgment with procedure. Leaders can respond by prioritizing four design principles:

1. Diagnosing avoidance, including ethical fading, silence norms, and role framings that reduce moral attention;
2. Recognizing disruption as diagnostic, treating burnout, moral discomfort, and value conflict as signals for reflection rather than problems to suppress;
3. Institutionalizing confrontation, through structured dialogue, psychological safety, and practices that support ethical voice; and
4. Sustaining authenticity, by aligning roles, leadership behavior, and performance systems with sources of meaning, autonomy, and moral responsibility.

Together, these practices shift organizations from compliance-oriented ethics toward conditions that sustain moral attention over time.

Societally, the model highlights the risks created by increasingly mediated systems of work. As performance metrics, digital platforms, and algorithmic decision tools expand, individuals may become further distanced from the human consequences of their actions. Without deliberate structures for reflection and moral imagination, such environments can normalize disengagement even while appearing efficient and well-managed. The challenge for contemporary management is therefore not only to improve performance, but to prevent institutional conditions that make moral blindness routine.

Future research can build on this framework by examining the boundary conditions of moral renewal. Longitudinal and experimental studies could investigate when experiences

such as burnout, ethical conflict, or organizational crisis serve as catalysts for reflection rather than as triggers for defensive regression. Organizational culture strength, psychological safety, and the availability of structured reflection practices may determine whether disruption leads to renewed agency or a return to avoidance.

Tolstoy's narrative ultimately reminds us that moral collapse rarely appears dramatic; it accumulates quietly through accommodation and self-deception. Renewal begins when that pattern is interrupted by the courage to see clearly. In Ivan's final recognition and in Gerasim's steady presence, the story reveals that authenticity is not an abstract ideal but a relational and practical possibility. For management, the implication is straightforward but demanding: the task is not merely to regulate behavior, but to design conditions in which people can remain attentive, responsible, and fully present within the systems that shape their work.

"He sought his former accustomed fear of death and did not find it. 'Where is it? What death?' There was no fear because there was no death. In place of death there was light." (Tolstoy 1886), p. 132.

Funding The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

Declaration

Conflict of Interest The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

Research Involving Human Participants and/or Animals This manuscript does not report on or involve researchwith human participants or animals.

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