
Tolstoyan Nonaction: The Advantage of Doing Nothing

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Few in the world understand the
teaching without words and the
advantage of doing nothing.

From Tolstoy's "translation" of
the *Tao Te Ching* (*PSS* 40: 353).

Almost since the beginning of Tolstoy's career critics have debated whether, in addition to being an artist of the highest caliber, he was a philosopher worthy of serious consideration. In 1875, in "The Right Hand and the Left Hand of Leo Tolstoy," Mikhailovsky could already offer as an age-worn chestnut the remark that Tolstoy's reputation was bipartite, "a far outstanding belletristic author [but] a poor thinker" (62). After more than a hundred pages in which he carefully examines the evidence supporting this opinion, Mikhailovsky concludes that the artist/thinker split has its roots in two opposed tendencies in Tolstoy himself, tendencies Mikhailovsky characterizes as Tolstoy's right hand and a left hand.

One side of Tolstoy, represented by his left hand, is a "weak, indecisive person" (166) who shies away from confrontation but is a highly talented artist. This left hand knows how to please readers by offering, for instance, a "most precise and detailed analysis of the various peripeteia of the mutual love of Anna Karenina and the aide-de-camp Count Vronsky" (121). What most people find likable in Tolstoy's works, writes Mikhailovsky, is actually this left hand, which is in fact a "lamentable deviation, an unwilling tribute to 'cultured society'" (122). In return for recognition and praise, Tolstoy's left hand ignores the inequities and injustices of "cultured society" and entertains it with beautifully wrought tales.

Tolstoy's right hand, contrariwise, represents for Mikhailovsky the "fresh and healthy" (93) side of Tolstoy, a "strong, brave and energetic man who decides in the name of truth and fairness, in the name of the interests of the peasantry, to challenge the whole history of civilization" (166). The "poor thinker" problem, muses Mikhailovsky, stems from the fact that Tolstoy's right hand lacks artistic refinement: the thought expressed by this right hand is exceptional in its "soberness, clarity, and vigour of thought" but its language is often "extremely unclear, incorrect, and sometimes completely clumsy" (63).

For Mikhailovsky, then, the "good artist—bad thinker" debate has its roots in a fundamental dichotomy in Tolstoy himself: his left hand is artistically talented but intellectually insipid, while his right hand is aesthetically handicapped but mentally vigorous. To make matters worse for Tolstoy's reputation as a thinker, Mikhailovsky remarks, much of his philosophy is an outright attack on the very critics who shape public opinion (and this remark comes five years before *A Confession* and a quarter century before *What Is Art?*).

Mikhailovsky was certainly not the only critic to note that critics have a troubled relationship with Tolstoy's philosophical writings. In "Leo Tolstoy and Culture" (1910), Andrei Bely humorously imagines intellectuals replying to the very Tolstoyan question "So what is Tolstoy?" in the following way:

If one were to meet three professors—one of sociology, one of art criticism, one of philosophy—each would try to foist off Tolstoy on the other. All three would admit his importance, but the philosopher would claim that the importance of Tolstoy lies in aesthetics while the art critic would claim that Tolstoy's importance was for sociology, and the sociologist would claim that Tolstoy was important as a philosopher. So all three reject Tolstoy and palm him off on religion. But we know how religious leaders felt about Tolstoy: in a literal sense of the word they disposed of him, chased him beyond the pale of religion. And so, Tolstoy stands before us as some kind of Eternal Jew, a restless exile from all settled ways of life in contemporary culture and government. (161)

Plainly there is something in Tolstoy's ideas that makes critics uneasy and reluctant to deal with them.

Although in the past two decades, several books (e.g., Orwin's *Tolstoy's Art and Thought*, Morson's *Hidden in Plain View*, and Gustafson's *Leo Tolstoy: Resident and Stranger*) have carefully reexamined certain elements of Tolstoy's philosophy and found them to be the product of a penetrating and sound mind, one idea in particular has been often "palmed off" if not outright ignored: Tolstoy's doctrine of "non-resistance to evil."

Despite the surprisingly little critical interest devoted to this tenet, it was the *sine qua non* of Tolstoyism. Although he later found other examples of non-resistance to evil in various religious and secular writings, Tolstoy claimed that the source of his own doctrine of non-resistance to evil was a very literal reading of the fourth rule of the Sermon on the Mount, which runs in the Revised Standard Version:

You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist one who is evil. But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also; and if any one would sue you and take your coat, let him have your cloak as well; and if any one forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. (Matthew 5, 38-41)

In *What I Believe* (1884), Tolstoy writes that this passage about non-resistance was the "key" to unlocking the teachings of Jesus as a practical guide for right living:

I immediately and for the first time understood this verse directly and simply. I understood that Christ is saying exactly what he is saying. It was not as though something new appeared, rather everything that had hidden the truth fell away, and the truth arose before me in all its meaning. (Biriukov: 2, 10)

For thirty years, Tolstoy—Mikhailovsky would say "Tolstoy's right hand"—unflinchingly proclaimed the importance of non-resistance to evil in the face of sometimes harsh criticism. Those few

critics who have discussed the doctrine have tended to reduce it to an absurdity approaching "what would happen if a country declared a war and no one showed up." They then hurriedly dismiss it as an uninteresting eccentricity that is best passed over in silence, confirming Gustafson's remark that "much of what is central to Tolstoy seems embarrassing to Western critics" (xiii).¹ I will argue that non-resistance to evil has been particularly discomfiting for Western critics precisely because it confronts some of the most deep-seated convictions of modern, Western thought. To accept the tenet is to reject culture itself.

Let me first propose that Tolstoy's interpretation of the injunction against active resistance to evil is too narrowly understood if considered only in the context of war and state authority. When his literary, political, economic, social, and psychological writings are all considered together, non-resistance to evil emerges as an inescapable conclusion to which Tolstoy is led given his thinking on the human condition, and is therefore better understood as an epiphenomenon of his *Weltanschauung*. Tolstoy's model for the way we come to know the world (epistemology) shapes his belief in what is possible for us to know (we could call this science, in its widest—or Russian—sense), which in turn shapes his program for what we ought to do or ought not to do (call it Tolstoyan ethics or practical conduct). I suspect that Tolstoy's quick and enthusiastic acceptance of Christ's injunction derived, at least in part, from his innate cynicism toward any attempt to resolve problems through direct and premeditated action. When the world is mired in evil, "non-resistance to evil" quickly ramifies beyond the narrow understanding of non-resistance as dodging obligatory military service. In the place of the Renaissance faith in man's capacity to change the world for the better, Tolstoy advocated, as an ethical and *practically useful* stance, a kind of radical epistemological humility and a concomitant recommendation for, if not outright quiescence, then in the very least profound passivity and submissiveness to fate.²

God Finds

This recommendation of quiescence as an efficacious mode of being is particularly clear in Tolstoy's 1885 tale *Two Old Men*. The story is about the search for grace, or more precisely how we can never find grace so long as we actively seek it. It is introduced by a biblical epigraph from the Gospel according to John (iv. 19-23) in which Jesus responds to a woman's question about where she should worship. Her fathers worshipped in the mountains, she says, while the Jews say to worship in Jerusalem. Jesus responds: "The time is coming, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such worshippers does the Father search."

The action then begins with the two old men in question, Elisei and Efim, deciding to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem after years of planning. They set off on foot, and after five weeks reach Ukraine. One day, Elisei turns off to a small farmstead to ask for a cup of water while Efim continues on, assuming that Elisei will catch up shortly.

Upon entering the cottage, Elisei discovers that the inhabitants have been struck by illness and famine and are now near death. He sets about helping them and finds himself unintentionally caught up in their struggle to survive. Over the course of several days, he attends to the needs of the family: buys them food, cooks and cleans for them, petitions the landlord on their behalf, etc. Resting one evening after a day of labour, Elisei realizes that, because of the time and money lost helping the family, he may have lost his chance to get to Jerusalem:

He prayed and lay down but could not fall asleep: he felt he must be going, he had spent too much time and money, he felt pity for the people. "There seems to be no end to it," he said. "First I only meant to bring them a little water and give them each a piece of bread, and just see where it has landed me. You've gone and gotten all tangled up, Elisei Kuzmich. Your anchor's come loose and now you'll never find your way!" (*PSS* 25: 89).

After a few days aiding the family, Elisei decides that they can finally manage on their own,

and leaves on the sly to catch up with Efim. After a few miles, however, he gives up and turns back toward home, realizing that he has spent all his money and that Efim is too far ahead. He returns home but tells no one what happened in the Ukraine, merely humbly admitting to having lost his way and money and ruing his missed chance to see the Holy Land.

The plot shifts to Efim, who arrives in Jerusalem and begins to pray at all the pilgrim sites. At the Holy Sepulcher, he is amazed to see Elisei praying beneath the lamps at the very front of the chapel. Wondering how Elisei could possibly have reached Jerusalem first, he tries to catch up to his friend but fails when Elisei suddenly disappears in the crowd. This experience is repeated throughout Jerusalem: Efim sees Elisei at all the holy sites, but can never catch up with him.

Finishing his tour, Efim sets off for home. On his way through the Ukraine, he stops at the same farmstead where he and Elisei had parted ways and learns from the family the story of how his acquaintance had saved them from death. Efim realizes the significance of Elisei's presence in Jerusalem: "God may or may not have accepted my pilgrimage, but He has certainly accepted his" (*PSS* 25: 97). He returns home and begins to question Elisei about what had happened at the hut, but the latter replies only: "That's God's business, friend, God's business" (*PSS* 25: 99). Thus ends the story.

I bring up this simple, rarely read tale because what is true in the tale about the search for God is likewise true for nearly all instances of searching in Tolstoy's works. *Two Old Men* is Tolstoy's exegesis of Jesus's answer about how to find God. The pilgrim who seeks God actively in Jerusalem may or may not find Him, while he who gives up his pilgrimage to God and stays and acts spontaneously as a Christian—"in spirit and in truth"—is found by God. Tolstoy understands the biblical epigraph as an injunction: God dwells everywhere, so to search for Him somewhere other than here—in the mountains, in Jerusalem—is to misunderstand Him, and therefore not to recognize Him. Searching for Him somewhere else obscures His dwelling here and everywhere.³

God is never found by seeking Him; instead, He finds "true worshippers." The tale's simple plot illustrates the expediency of the unsought and the unintended, which Tolstoy repeatedly opposed to the uselessness or harmfulness of direct, conscious action. We have to understand the probable failure of Efim's deliberate and premeditated search after communion with God in its widest sense, as a metaphor for the questionable efficacy of *all* planned and calculated action. Elisei's success, his finding of grace by accident after forgetting his intended search for grace, should likewise be seen as a general model for acting. Success comes with cessation of intentional activity, when we stop trying to succeed and begin acting unpremeditatedly, unreflectively, and unselfconsciously. Our desire and exercise of will is the source of our misdirection, and this diagnosis logically enough leads to the belief that our orientation toward life should be one of passive readiness: readiness, like Elisei, to participate in and to submit to what Berlin calls the "intuitively grasped direction of things" (259).

Such laissez-faire notions may suggest, to some, the sybaritic Bohemianism of a wealthy Count—which is how it struck the businessman and very English Aylmer Maude—or, perhaps, it might strike others as resembling Burke's humanistic skepticism. Tolstoy, though, was neither. He was a radical cynic and critic of humankind's capacity to shape the course of events, to change things for the better, to find what is sought. He "disliked culture" as Kvitko plainly expresses it (71). He preached the necessity of rendering to the divine the fiat for becoming and change. In an 1898 diary entry, he mused about man's place in the divine plan: "The universe moves, perfecting itself. Man's task is to take part in this movement, to submit to it and collaborate with it" (Gustafson 107). If the universe is a self-correcting mechanism, it logically needs no human intervention. Such an orientation toward the world calls for an ethical program fundamentally at odds with modern Western thought, with "culture" itself, and Tolstoy found his model in Taoism.

Tolstoy, Taoism and the Protestant Ethic

The connection between Tolstoyan non-resistance and Taoism is perhaps most clearly articulated in "Nonaction," published in 1893. The article was Tolstoy's response to a recent dispute in France between Dumas and Zola over the capacity to improve society through individual effort. In an address to the Parisian Student Union, Zola predictably appeals to the youth of France to devote themselves selflessly to the pursuit of science, while Dumas, in a separate article, counsels his readers to put their faith in brotherly love.

Tolstoy devotes the first half of the article to his response to Zola, and to give his readers a fair idea of the Zola's remarks he translates them into Russian and quotes them *in extenso*. The gist of the French author's message is a warning to his readers to beware "shepherds of the soul" who preached "vague and ill-defined beliefs." Zola ardently recommends his youthful readers to forget about vague spirituality and to devote themselves tirelessly to "work" as a means for personal salvation (in a secular sense) and for improving the world. This is how Tolstoy translates the end of Zola's address to the Parisian students:

And so, I conclude my remarks by offering you also a faith, beseeching you to have faith in labor. So work, young people! I know how banal this must sound. [...]

Labour! Just think, gentlemen, that this is the single law of the world, that regulator that draws organic material to its certain end! Life has no other sense, no other reason to be, we all exist in order to fulfill our duty and disappear. [...]

Let each of you take up his own chore that should fulfill his life. No matter how modest it may be it will still be useful, no matter what it might be, so long as it lifts you up. And I am convinced that the sole faith that can save us is faith in the accomplished deed. It is pleasant to dream of eternity, but for an honest man it is enough to live life having accomplished his own task.

In keeping with his faith in morally salubrious effects of work, Zola ends his speech with the statement: "A man who works is always a good man" (*PSS* 29: 179-181).

Tolstoy immediately observes that the French author's comments seem to typify a Western European attitude toward labour:

[...] I have always been amazed by the opinion, particularly upheld in Western Europe, that labour is a sort of virtue, and even before reading the speech in which Mr. Zola expresses this opinion, I have several times been surprised at the meaning ascribed to labour (*PSS* 29: 186).

Tolstoy was not the only observer who, at the close of the nineteenth century, noted and critiqued the effects of a tendency in modern Western society to equate labour and moral righteousness. The subject received its most notable and extensive treatment in Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, published just over a decade after Tolstoy's article.⁴ Zola's statements about the sanctity of work typify Weber's conclusion about the Protestant ethic and the "spirit" (*Geist*) of capitalism to which it gave birth. According to Weber, modern Western civilization is underwritten by the belief that a lifetime of labour is proof of an individual's innate goodness and worth, a "sign of election." Contrariwise, for the Protestant ethic all inaction, hesitation, and interruptions—like what Zola calls "dreaming of eternity"—are seized upon as outward signs of some inner moral flaw.

Expressed very simplistically, Weber's argument turns on his claim that, as a direct result of the Calvinist theology that was exerting, during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a significant influence over Northern European and British thought, labour underwent a transformation from merely an economic means for survival into a spiritual end. What originated as a religious belief in prestidigitation and devotion to a life of service to God, however, quickly gave direction to practical conduct and mores. By the time Weber described it at the turn of the twentieth century, the Protestant ethic had lost all or nearly all of its religious nature while the psychological condition

it engendered remained intact. The notion of labour as a virtue, albeit a secular one, had become the framework of much of Western society (Weber 180).

The similarity between Zola's exhortation to work and Weber's analysis of the Protestant ethic is made particularly clear by comparing Zola's remarks with Weber's interpretation of Richard Baxter's seventeenth-century Protestant classic *The Saint's Everlasting Rest*:

Not leisure and enjoyment, but only activity serves to increase the glory of God, according to the definite manifestations of His will. Waste of time is thus the first and in principle the deadliest of sins. The span of human life is infinitely short and precious to make sure of one's own election. [...] It is infinitely valuable because every hour lost is lost to labour for the glory of God. Thus inactive contemplation is also valueless, or even directly reprehensible if it is at the expense of one's daily work. Accordingly, [*The Saint's Everlasting Rest*] is dominated by the continually repeated, often almost passionate preaching of hard, continuous bodily or mental labour. But the most important thing was that even beyond that labour came to be considered in itself the end of life [...]. Unwillingness to work is symptomatic of the lack of grace. (157-158)

Since success in calling was considered a mark of certain salvation, any departure or distraction from attending to the divine plan would be tantamount to hindering one's salvation. Virtue and labour in one's calling became coincident, while idleness or inaction was identified with sin.⁵

Having established at least some basic similarities between Zola's rhetoric and Weber's Protestant ethic, we can return to Tolstoy's rebuttal of the French novelist and analyse it as I believe it is meant to be analysed: as a critique of both modernity and the West through an attack on the fundamentally occidental notion of the necessary utility and morality of labour. Tolstoy responds to this equation of work and grace as follows:

Labour is a necessity, the deprivation of which causes suffering, but it is in no way a virtue. [...]

Labour is not only not a virtue, but in our deceitfully organized society it is, for the most part, a morally anaesthetizing agent, something not unlike smoking or wine, a means for hiding from ourselves the disorder and depravity of our lives. (*PSS* 29: 187).

Tolstoy reverses Zola's claim that labour is a sign of righteousness by returning to one of his favourite themes, the idea of willful "moral stupefaction" that obscures innate moral consciousness, an idea he discussed at length three years earlier in "Why Do Men Stupefy Themselves?"⁶ Constant labour and activity are not manifestations of grace. They serve rather as a semi-conscious escape from the immorality of one's life. Tolstoy reinforces this point when he observes that the "the greatest miscreants of humanity, Nero and Peter the Great, were constantly especially active and preoccupied, never for a moment pausing without an occupation or amusement" (*PSS* 29: 186).

Tolstoy does not reject, of course, all labour and activity. From the end of the 1870s until his death, he famously embraced an agrarian self-sufficiency and simplicity of affairs not unlike the kind advocated by Thoreau and (a little less sincerely) Rousseau, or, more contemporaneously, practised variously by the Amish and latter-day environmentalists like Wendell Berry.⁷ Tolstoy, like Thoreau, embraced what the latter called in *Walden* the work "necessary of life" (15): work essential for maintaining a life of simplicity and contemplation. Tolstoy makes this distinction between necessary and unnecessary work—between morally neutral work and work that obscures our conscience—clear in a letter to Chertkov from the same period as "Nonaction":

Were man to abstain from all his personal acts, there would nonetheless be other acts from which he would be unable to abstain, and these would be the acts of God. If, however, man pursues his own affairs, then because of these, and because of the turmoil they produce, he will not see the acts of God, he will not recognize them. (*PSS* 86: 218)

We return to this idea, essential to Tolstoy's later thought, that the only proper human role is to

respond to the inner dynamism of things and be a part of their flow, not to superimpose on them an order disturbing their pre-established harmony. Zola, on the other hand, assures his listeners that ascetic work and devotion to one's calling "no matter how modest" is the sole way to improve both the individual and society.

Tolstoy and Zola agree on one point, however: the need for improvement in society. Tolstoy believes that the importance ascribed in the West to labour as a means for change offers no real chance of ameliorating the world. It mostly serves as a kind of narcotic that clouds our judgment and interferes with our moral decision-making. He is left, therefore, with perhaps the most typical Russian question. What is to be done? How does one effect change in "our deceitfully organized society" without relying on work or activity?

Tolstoy replies to Zola with a paradoxical proposal for social change drawn from Eastern thought, namely from Lao Tzu's (or whosoever) *Tao Te Ching*.⁸

There is a little-known Chinese philosopher named Lao Tzu (the first and best translation of him is *The Way of Virtue* [sic]⁹ by Stanislas Julien). The essence of the teaching of Lao Tzu is how to achieve the highest happiness for individual people, and especially for groups of people, for a union of various peoples. This happiness can be attained by a comprehension of the *Tao*—a word that is translated as 'path, virtue, or truth.' However, an understanding of the *Tao*, according to Julien's translation, can only be achieved through nonaction, "le non agir." The misfortunes of humanity arise, according to Lao Tzu, not because men neglect to do things that are necessary, but because they do unnecessary things. And therefore people would be relieved of their personal calamities, but also especially of all government or social problems, which is the subject dealt with by the Chinese philosopher, if they would but practice nonaction (*s'ils pratiquaient le non agir*). (*PSS* 29: 185)

Reversing Zola's "faith in work" as a solution to all problems, Tolstoy suggests that calamities on the public and private level in fact have their roots in a *superfluity of activity*. If this observation

is true, then one way, perhaps the only way, to be relieved of our personal and collective “misfortunes” is by rigorously practising nonaction, the Taoist practice called *wu wei*, what Julien translates as *le non agir* and Tolstoy renders as *nedelanie*.¹⁰ Given the initial belief that problems arise from an overabundance of human activity, it stands to reason that any action taken to solve a problem caused by some earlier action will only compound the problem since the root cause of a problem cannot also be its solution—a claim based on an analogy to other self-destructive actions. For instance, if drinking vodka is the source of my misery, then drinking another bottle is the one act that, beyond a doubt, will not solve the problem.

In a letter (15 May 1893) to D. A. Khilkov, Tolstoy sums up his objection to Zola’s article as follows:

[...] For genuine progress in life, vain activity is not only not necessary, but is harmful. [...] We are all so mired in evil, so accustomed to it, that the point of equilibrium at which there won’t yet be good, but where there won’t be evil either, is for all of us the nearest landmark on the path of the ideal towards which we ought to strive. (Christian 495)

This prejudice against human activity thus has its roots in what I called above Tolstoy’s radical epistemological humility. Our knowledge is too limited and our moral judgment is so impaired that we have little chance of correctly divining what is necessary for true improvement or progress. The harm we might likely cause, however, is so grave that, given a choice between inaction and action, we should always decide to do nothing. At least in doing nothing, we will not make things any worse than they already are. For Tolstoy, human activity itself is the chief, if not only, source of the problems that plague humanity. Nonaction becomes the best and most expedient action.

It is vitally important to distinguish Tolstoyan nonaction—and Taoist *wu wei*—from the notion of neglect. Neglect *ipso facto* entails an unawareness or carelessness that leads to inaction or

inappropriate action; nonaction, on the other hand, is a conscious and studied practice. Chen offers “do not act against” as another possible translation of *wu wei* (127), while Derk Bodde suggests “non assertion” and defines the concept as “the avoidance [...] of such activity as does not accord with the universal *Tao*; in other words, of all activity “that is forced, artificial and self-assertive, rather than natural, spontaneous and unpremeditated” (82). In his discussion of the *Tao-te Ching*, Duyvendak explains *wu wei* in much the same way when he remarks that the “Taoist Saint”¹¹

keeps to the weak and lowly, and refrains from any conscious effort, any striving after a set purpose. In a sense therefore he may be said to have a purpose. His *Wu wei* is practiced with a conscious design; he chooses this attitude in the conviction that only by so doing the ‘natural development’ of things will favor him. (Creel 42)

Duyvendak’s description of the practice of *wu wei* has a very Tolstoyan ring to it (“Only unconscious action bears fruit...”). We must consciously abstain from conscious striving, since conscious striving and activity are invariably corrupted by narrowly personal and worldly concerns and desires that, ultimately, interfere with the providentially good “natural development” of the world, that is to say, the faith in a supreme power that is always and everywhere active and with which we should seek to join.

In the context of Bodde’s and Duyvendak’s remarks on *wu wei* and Tolstoy’s own interest in the subject, let us return to the meaning of inaction in Tolstoy’s *Two Old Men*. We could say that, at least as Tolstoy understood it, Christ’s admonishment not to search for God in the mountains or in Jerusalem but to worship “in truth and in spirit” because “such worshippers does the Father search for,” bears more than a passing resemblance to the practice of *wu wei* aimed at allowing the “natural development” of things to arise. Elisei discovers God by practising nonaction, by foregoing his premeditated striving after God, and finds himself found by God. What obstructs Efim’s search for God is precisely the effort he applies to finding Him.¹²

Two Old Men is an extended parable, and as such contains a lesson, but it is important to consider the story's intended addressee because it reveals the subtle distinction between Tolstoyan nonaction and Elisei's story. Elisei, a peasant untainted by "culture" and education who would probably never read a work of fiction by Tolstoy, is capable of submitting naturally and unpremeditatedly to the *Tao*. He does not need to learn the lesson of the tale—he knows about them intuitively that all the toil of man is so much "striving after wind." The addressee of *Two Old Men*, on the other hand, was in all likelihood an educated non-peasant who belonged to the ranks of what Tolstoy considered the alienated and morally unanchored parasites that made up (and arguably still make up) the bulk of Tolstoy's readers. There is a residual irony, one that Tolstoy was highly aware of, inasmuch as the reader of *Two Old Men* can at best *self-consciously* imitate Elisei's unself-conscious nonaction.

Taoism and Christianity

As one of the central concepts of Taoism, *wu wei* is meant to be the guiding practical principle on both the individual and the collective level. The reader is constantly lectured on what he ought not do, if he is to remain one with the flow of all, for instance in the aphorism: "Therefore the sage manages his affairs without action [...]" (Chen 55, 2:3). Responding to this and similar aphorisms in the *Tao Te Ching*, Creel quips that "in terms of common sense, [*wu wei*] may well seem absurd" (55), since a rigorously pursued policy of inaction would be tantamount to suicide: eating and breathing are, after all, actions. Tolstoy, on the whole, offers a much more balanced or at least generous understanding of the meaning of *wu wei*, namely, that the best moral guide always emphasizes the negative commands of restraint and moderation rather than positive instructions.

In this particular sense of practical morality as founded primarily on negative injunctions, Tolstoy found much in common between the Gospels and Taoism. He repeatedly claimed that the quiddity of Christianity, what makes it a truly

revolutionary movement, is that its moral code is chiefly negative. Commenting on the crucial difference between Socialism and the doctrine of Christ, he remarked that the former contains rules that are

for the most part positive, enjoining certain acts, by the performance of which men are to be made righteous, whereas the Christian precepts (the precept of love is not a commandment in the strict sense of the word, but the expression of the very essence of the doctrine), the five commandments of the Sermon on the Mount, are all negative, only meant to show people who have reached a certain degree of development what they cannot do. (PSS 28: 79-80)

Like Taoism's doctrine of *wu-wei*, the essence of Christ's teaching from the Sermon on the Mount, according to Tolstoy, is its enjoining men not to act, its forbidding of direct actions.

As Bodde (84-85) and E. I. Rachin (159)¹³ have pointed out, *wu wei* likely proved such an attractive concept to Tolstoy because it neatly dovetailed with his emphatic and literal interpretation of Christ's teaching on the Mount, especially Christ's admonishment against resisting evil by force. Tolstoy believed that this law was the chief means for delivering the world from its current plight and realizing the Kingdom of God on Earth. Tolstoy saw Christ's and Lao Tzu's doctrines as mutually reinforcing and necessary, remarking in a diary entry from 1884,¹⁴ that without Lao Tzu, "[...] the Gospels are not complete. And without the Gospels, Lao Tzu is not complete"¹⁵ (PSS 49: 74). A few years later, in 1891, Tolstoy listed Julien's translation of Lao Tzu as having had "an enormous" influence on his thought, ranking it with *Lalita Vistara* (tales about Buddha), the Gospels, Pascal's *Pensées*, and Epictetus. Under-scoring the close association in Tolstoy's mind between Taoism and Christianity is the fact that, when working on his several translations of the *Tao Te Ching*, Tolstoy usually translated *Tao* as "God" (Bodde 56).

Taoism and the doctrine of *wu wei* played an important role in Tolstoy's thinking on political, social, and artistic issues for the last thirty years

of his life. For instance, *The Path of Life*, which Tolstoy worked on most of his final decade, is obviously a reference to the writing of Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu, the philosophers of the path or *Tao*. The idea of nonaction as an ethical stance figures prominently in this compendium of aphorisms. A chapter is devoted to a series of simple but paradoxical observations on the subject like the following:

A man can learn what he must do only when he clearly understands what he must not do. Not doing what he should not do he will unavoidably do what he should do, although he will not know why he does what he does. (PSS 45: 345)

Anyone who correctly understands the practice of nonaction will, by default, come naturally and unconsciously to do the right thing. Based on the above aphorism, we could sum up Tolstoy's thoughts on the matter by neatly reversing Zola's pronouncement: "A man who does not do is a good man."

War and Nonaction

At first glance, this concept of *wu wei*, of achieving everything through doing nothing, seems at best paradoxical and at worst, as Creel has it, "baffling" (55). Tolstoy provides, however, numerous examples in his literary works for how *wu wei* serves to accomplish what would be unachievable through direct action. Although his first explicit formulation of the doctrine of nonresistance to evil by force dates to his *Translation and Harmonization of the Four Gospels* in or around 1880, and his acquaintance with Lao Tzu's writings waited another four years, we can find examples of *wu wei*, at least in a nascent form, in earlier texts.

Most notably, Tolstoy's analysis of the events surrounding Napoleon's defeat in 1812 led him to attribute the victory of the Russian armies to the "strategies" of General Kutuzov. In *War and Peace*, the Russian general explains what constitutes his "plan of action" to Andrei Bolkonsky immediately before the battle at Borodino:

You know, dearie, there is nothing stronger than these two warriors—*patience and time*: they accomplish everything, while the advisers *n'entendent pas de cette oreille, voilà le mal!* Some want to do one thing, others another. "What's one to do?" he asked, evidently expecting a reply. "Come, what do you bid me do?" he repeated, and his eyes twinkled with a profound, shrewd expression. "I'll tell you what to do," he said, since Prince Andrei still did not answer. "I'll tell you what to do, and what I do. *Dans le doute, mon cher*" he paused, "*abstiens-toi*," he drawled. (PSS 11: 172)

Kutuzov intones the classic Russian question four times: "What are we to do?" He answers his own question: know your ignorance and, when in doubt, *do nothing*, or, more exactly, *abstiens-toi*, deny yourself, hold yourself back, actively do nothing.

Kutuzov's advice to Andrei has a long history in Tolstoy's thought. In a letter to Chertkov written two decades after *War and Peace*, Tolstoy repeats Kutuzov's plan of action, only this time attributing them to Lao Tzu and directly linking the aphorism with *wu wei*: "I really love the saying: *Dans le doute abstiens toi [sic]*. I consider this a wise Christian rule. It is the same as the highest virtue in Lao Tzu, '*le non-agir*'" (PSS 86: 218). Tolstoy liked the aphorism so much that he repeated it, this time in Russian, twenty years later in *The Path of Life*: "If you don't know how to be, whether to do or not to do, then know beforehand that it is always better to abstain than to do something."

Concluding his conversation with Kutuzov, Andrei returns to his regiment "reassured as to the future course of the war" precisely because he realized Kutuzov's plan was to do nothing:

[Kutuzov] will impose nothing of his own self. He will contrive nothing, will undertake nothing," thought Andrei, "but he will hear everything, will think of everything, will put everything in its place, will not hinder anything that could be of use, and will not allow anything that could do harm. He knows that there is something stronger and more important than his will—that is the inevitable course of events, and he can see them, can grasp their significance, and, seeing their sig-

nificance, can abstain from participating in these events, from following his own will, and aiming at something else. (PSS 11: 173)

If one believes Tolstoy's version of events, Kutuzov was a successful general during the battles of 1812 because the Russian general systematically and conscientiously refused to act and make decisions, and thus avoided interfering with Andrei's "inevitable course of events." Rather than planning with his generals, he sleeps through war councils—and not solely because he worries about his alertness the next day, but also because he recognizes that the "course of events" is "inevitable." What little positive action he undertakes is aimed merely at "putting things in their place," i.e., where they would have been had someone else not interfered.

When Kutuzov does act in *War and Peace*, his acts are more precisely describable as non-acts. He decides not to defend Moscow and leaves it to Napoleon's troops, and he decides not to mount an offensive against these same troops when they retreat westward across Russia *en masse*. Such "strategies" could have been drawn directly from the section on military advice from the *Tao Te Ching*:

A good captain does not exhibit his martial prowess.

A good warrior does not get himself angry.

A good conqueror of the enemies does not instigate a combat.

A good employer of people puts himself below them.

This is called the power (*te*) of non-contention. (Chen 211, 68:1-2)

Kutuzov (or at least Tolstoy's Kutuzov) was a consummate practitioner of *wu wei* in battle long before Tolstoy read Lao Tzu.¹⁶

Celibacy, Suicide, and Society

Passivity is, for Tolstoy, the remedy for human "calamities" because it voids and avoids the harm that attends virtually any act. Consider Pozdnyshév's rigorously logical call in *The Kreutzer Sonata* (especially in the edition commonly

referred to as the lithograph version) for everyone to practise celibacy as an example of applied nonaction. Replying to the narrator's equally logical cry that this sudden cessation of this particular activity would inevitably bring about the demise of humanity, Pozdnyshév calmly replies:

And why live? The Schopenhauers, the Hartmanns, and all the Buddhists, declare that the greatest happiness is not to live. And they are right in this sense,—that human happiness is coincident with self-annihilation. Only they do not express themselves correctly. They say that humanity should destroy itself to rid itself of its sufferings, that its goal should be to destroy itself. That is wrong. *The aim of humanity cannot be to escape from suffering by self-destruction, because sufferings are the result of activity, and the aim of an activity cannot be to escape from suffering by self-destruction, because sufferings are the result of activity.* The object of man, as of humanity, is blessedness, and, to attain it, humanity has a law that it must carry out. This law consists in the union of people. This union is thwarted by the passions. Of the passions, the strongest and the most evil is sexual love, and if all the passions are destroyed, including the last and strongest sexual love, the union will be accomplished. Humanity then will have carried out the law, and will have no reason to live. (emphasis mine; PSS 27: 306-307)

Pozdnyshév agrees with the "Schopenhauers, the Hartmanns, and all the Buddhists" that human activity is the cause of suffering, and that the best and most expedient solution to human suffering is to end humanity—"human happiness is coincident with self-annihilation." He finds, however, a logical contradiction in their pragmatic advice to commit suicide. If "suffering is the result of activity" then, reasonably enough, the solution to suffering cannot be produced by more activity since "the aim of activity cannot be to destroy its consequences." If what we are doing gives rise to a certain problem, then doing more of this same action is unlikely to improve the situation. Any direct steps that we take toward self-annihilation can only make us further suffer precisely because acting is the problem, it is what makes us suffer in the first place.

How, then, to do away with ourselves without doing anything? Tolstoy proposes another solution to the problems of mankind, and his logic is scrupulous if unpalatable. The solution to the riddle lies in nonaction, in suppressing the activity that is the root cause of all our problems, that is, sex. Tolstoy is undeniably correct. We could efficaciously and effortlessly solve the entire gamut of human problems with one collective non-act, universal chastity.

Anarchy, Eschatology, and Authenticity

Tolstoy's "Christian anarchy," expounded most clearly in *The Kingdom of God is Within You*, is yet another manifestation of his belief in the efficacy of nonaction, and it too bears great similarity to certain ideas in Taoism as a whole.¹⁷ The *Tao Te Ching* is in many respects a political treatise, one that concerns the proper relations between those ruling and those ruled (Chen 22). Its ideal republic is one in which government rules through nonaction, and thus cedes its authority to that of the *Tao*. The best government, in other words, blends in so naturally with the natural course of events that its actions are indistinguishable from the natural course of events—it submits, and disappears.

In a letter dated December 22, 1897, to his English admirer and publisher of *The Crank*, C. W. Daniel, Tolstoy quotes approvingly what the *Tao Te Ching* has to say about the characteristics of an ideal government, linking it directly to his own belief in anarchism:

Reading your very good note to the word 'anarchism' I remembered on the same matter the saying of Lao-Tze; he says: "When great sages have power over the people, the people do not notice them; if the power is in the hands of sages (not great ones), the people like them and praise them; if those who govern are less sage, the people are afraid of them and where those who govern are still less sage, the people despise them." (original in English, Christian 664)¹⁸

People do not even realize the existence of a government when great sages are in power because such leaders submit themselves, like Kutu-

zov, to the "inevitable course of events" (Chen 97-98). Unwise rulers, on the other hand, try to affect the natural development of things, and therefore are despised. Nonaction is thus directly linked, for both Tolstoy and the *Tao Te Ching*, to anarchy, to the nonexistence of any laws or rules (that is to say manmade laws or rules).

One recurring theme in Tolstoy's later political writings is his transformation of nonaction into a means for social and political change. Near the end of *The Kingdom of God is Within You*, for instance, he advocates nonaction as a revolutionary means, noting that every government has the means to defend itself from revolutionaries and their violent *modus operandi*. But what can a government do, Tolstoy asks, against men who declaim against all authority as useless and superfluous but who offer no opposition, merely rejecting the government's offices and services, refusing to participate in it? Government, like any authority, relies for its existence on the recognition of those governed, and active rebellion is undeniably an implicit acknowledgement of a government's power that, Tolstoy argues, serves only to radicalize that authority, a lesson plainly learned during the reign of Alexander III. If, on the other hand, a sufficiently large group of people were to refuse *peaceably* to recognize an authority, were simply to ignore its existence entirely, this authority would, in time, collapse. Such a victory through non-resistance was plainly demonstrated in the Indian national revolution led by one of Tolstoy's disciples, Mohandas Gandhi.¹⁹ (It might be argued, though, that such victories could only be obtained when those in power have a conscience that prevents them from, say, beating a prostate protestor, as the British clearly hesitated doing.) The opposition set up in *The Kingdom of God is Within You* is between those who, like Zola and Russian revolutionaries, see the individual's capacity to act deliberately as the dynamo for social change, and Tolstoy, who sees the individual's capacity *not* to act as the more sure and sage agent for revolution.

The logic behind Tolstoy's plan to bring about the end of all government by doing nothing—we could call it the Ivan-Durak revolution—differs little from his plan to bring about the end to

humanity and its suffering through chastity. The way to solve problems is to do nothing. *The Kingdom of God is Within You* can thus be read as a perverse reply to Chernyshevsky's seminal question: What is to be done? Tolstoy answers: Consciously and intentionally do *nothing*. Whatever fills the void of human governance must be the divine order, the Kingdom of God, which was always already there, "inside of you" as Tolstoy's title and the Gospels promise, waiting to assume its rightful place.

Notes

1. Two of Tolstoy's contemporaries, Lenin and Aylmer Maude, can serve as barometers of this embarrassment. In "Tolstoy as the Mirror of the Russian Revolution," Lenin splenetically writes:

On the one hand, merciless criticism of capitalist exploitation; exposure of government violence, the farce of the courts and the state administration; and unmasking of the profundity of contradictions between the growth of wealth and the achievements of civilization and the growth of poverty, degradation and misery among the working masses. On the other, the preaching of submission, "resist not evil" with violence, like some holy fool. (17: 205)

On a similar note, Maude, Tolstoy's friend, biographer, and translator, writes:

I am convinced that Tolstoy's misstatement of the theory of Nonresistance has served, more than anything else, to conceal from mankind his greatness as a thinker, and I always regret to find people devoting special attention to that side of his teaching. (2:367)

Gustafson himself no more than mentions non-resistance. Certainly the best discussion of the content of Tolstoy's doctrine and its development in the author's later philosophy is found in Maude, especially 2: 352-367. Perhaps R. V. Sampson alone among modern academics finds Tolstoy's doctrine convincing and significant, though his analysis oddly relies mostly on the discussion of history in the essays of *War and Peace*, and not on Tolstoy's religious writings after 1880. See also Edgerton's account of Tolstoyism's historical importance in Russia from 1885-1925 (1993: ix-xvii).

2. There is an obvious irony—or hypocrisy—in Tolstoy's recommendation for quiescence, the resolution or discussion of which interests me little. Anyone who takes the trouble to sort out his or her own system of ethics will invariably find it, to a greater or lesser degree, at odds with his or her behavior. "Great men" wear these inconsistencies on their sleeves and are scorned or rebuked for them, while the rest of us discreetly sweep our inconsistencies under the carpet.

3. Gustafson describes Tolstoy's God as follows:

Tolstoy's doctrine of God is pantheistic (all-in-God). His God is in everything and everything is in God, but God is not everything and everything is not God. Rather, God is everything taken together as "one live whole." This God is beyond the world of space and time but includes within Him all the world of space and time. This God is not personal, although He contains within Himself everything personal. [...] God lives, He "lives with us and through us, all beings in the universe" (55, 92; 1904). Tolstoy's God, thus, holds all creation in His one living and loving embrace. (101)

4. For some background remarks on Tolstoy's exposure to Protestantism, see Jones, esp. 137-140.

5. With its increased emphasis on personal gain—not for one's own glory, of course, but for God's greater glory—Calvinism shifted the onus of moral behaviour from love of brother to service to society:

Brotherly love, since it may only be practiced for the glory of God [...] is expressed in the first place in the fulfillment of the daily tasks given by *lex naturae*; and in the process this fulfillment assumes a peculiarly objective and impersonal character, that of service in the interest of the rational organization of our social environment. (Weber 107)

Weber's point here is that the Protestant ethic de-emphasizes acts of compassion or pity and replaces these essential Christian virtues with the notion of "rational service" in God's order. Neither personal ties nor individuated love for the other is rewarded; only devotion to work and constant activity insure salvation. As Zola says, no matter what your work might be, it is useful inasmuch as it "lifts you up."

Weber's point in analysing the Protestant Ethic is, at least in part, to uncover the origins of the ideology of

self-reliance and the gradual loss of community in the Western world since the late Middle Ages. This loss, he claims, is the product of the final divorce between the rational organization of production, politics, and personal life that characterize modern capitalism on the one hand, and the religious meanings that once legitimated such rationalization on the other. What began as an essentially religious and moral movement—Protestantism or, more exactly, the extremity of it represented in Puritanism and Calvinism—resulted, argues Weber, in a social organization inimical to spiritual values. This situation is the referent in Weber's famous metaphor for technical and economic conditions as an "iron cage" in which modern man finds himself trapped. Weber's points are of great interest for Tolstoy as well, for instance, in chapter six of *What Is Art?* or *Well, What Then Must We Do?*.

6. For a discussion of this article, see Morson (1987), 219-221.

7. Berry (96-102) has profoundly astute things to say about Tolstoy's attitude toward labour in *Anna Karenina* and *War and Peace*. For the clearest distinction between necessary and unnecessary labour, see Tolstoy's introduction to T. M. Bondarev's *Трудолюбие и тунеядство, или Торжество земледельца* [Трудолюбие и тунеядство, или Торжество земледельца] (1888). See also Maude's discussion, 2: 209-211. Writing on this same division between necessary and unnecessary work in *Anna Karenina*, Morson notes: "In this novel, the right sort of work must be grounded in the essential things of life; it must seem so necessary as to be almost inevitable; and its purpose must not be of questionable value" (1997, 36).

8. Tolstoy began reading Chinese philosophers immediately after completing his translation of the Gospels in or around 1884. Tolstoy was something of a dilettante and autodidact, and it might tempt a critic to dismiss his knowledge of Asian philosophy and culture as unserious. However, it suffices to quote from Derk Bodde, a respected Sinologist who wrote an excellent book on Tolstoy's interest in China:

[Tolstoy's] knowledge and appreciation of Chinese civilization, and especially of Chinese philosophy and religion was, if not wholly objective, certainly deep and sincere. Among all the intellectual figures of the nineteenth century, in fact, there was probably none, outside of the narrow circle of sinologists and others whose lives

were linked with China through personal circumstances, who read as widely and intensively on that country as did Tolstoy. (6)

9. Julien actually translated *Tao Te Ching* as *Le Livre de la Voie et de la Vertu*, i.e., *The Book of the Path and of Virtue*. *Ching* is perhaps best translated as Canon (Chen 45).

10. The term in the *Tao Te Ching* is *wu wei*, usually translated in English as the neologism "nonaction" or as "doing nothing." My discussion of *wu wei* owes much to Chapter 4 of Creel's *What Is Taoism?*, "On the Origin of *Wu wei*," 48-78 and to Chen's discussion of the term, esp. 169-170.

11. "Taoist Saint" is Duyvendak's translation of *sheng jen*, usually translated as "sage ruler." Remarking on the aptness of Duyvendak's decision, Chen writes that the term "saint" correctly captures the religious aura to the political figure (22).

12. It might be argued that Elisei in fact *acts* in helping the unfortunate family, though this objection ignores the vital difference in motivation: Elisei surrenders his personal interest—finishing his long planned pilgrimage—and undertakes a wholly unpremeditated and selfless task. This sort of activity is, I think, what we are to appreciate as an instantiation of what Tolstoy understood Jesus to mean by "worshipping in spirit and truth."

13. In his discussion of Lao Tzu's influence on Tolstoy, Rachin translates *wu wei* as "недеяние" 'the non-deed' (Tolstoy always opts for the more correct *недеяние*). See Shifman 46, who likewise draws parallels between Tolstoyan non-resistance and certain tenets of Taoism, though not directly with *wu wei*. See Chen 22-43 for a discussion of the religious and ethical meaning of Taoism.

14. This is to say soon after he finished his translations of the Gospels from Greek and immediately after his first acquaintance with Taoism.

15. The diary entry concerns both Confucius and Lao Tzu. Tolstoy further develops the mutual sympathies between Taoism and Christianity in "The Teachings of Lao Tzu" 'Uchenie Lao-Tse' (PSS 40: 350-351). Bodde very intelligently points out numerous other

parallels between Tolstoy's doctrines and Lao Tzu's, including their mutual anarchistic tendencies and their shared belief in a pantheistic afterlife (Chapter Six). See also Shifman's discussion of the various parallels between the two thinkers, as well as an overview of Tolstoy's translations of Lao Tzu, 41-50.

16. Shifman offers an excellent analysis of another parallel between Tolstoy's theories of history in *War and Peace* and various dicta from *Tao Te Ching*, specifically the parallel between the Taoist belief in "strength in weakness" and "weakness in strength":

As is well known, the writer enunciated the same thought long before his reading of Lao Tzu. In *War and Peace* he averred that in every seeming weakness of the Russian people during the War of 1812 lay their victory and in the terrible might of Napoleon lay his weakness and his defeat. (46)

17. For the best discussion of Tolstoy's anarchism, see Kvitko 38-43.

18. The quotation is Tolstoy's free rendering of the first part of Chapter 17 in the *Tao Te Ching*.

19. Mohandas Gandhi was an excellent student of *The Kingdom of God is Within You*, translating it into Gujarati and preaching its methodology from his base of operations at the Tolstoy Farm in India. See Green 85-103 for an analysis of Tolstoy's influence on Gandhi's religious and political thinking. See also Markovitch *Tolstoi et Gandhi*.

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