

# Review Article: Daniel Rancour-Laferriere's *Tolstoy's Quest for God*

James P. Scanlan  
Ohio State University

**Rancour-Laferriere, Daniel. *Tolstoy's Quest for God*.  
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An undoubted virtue of the psychoanalytic approach to the study of ideas is that it encourages a broad and probing search for evidence of a thinker's convictions and their sources—an approach especially productive when the thinker had a life as rich, and as richly chronicled by himself and others, as Lev Tolstoy's. In *Tolstoy's Quest for God*, Daniel Rancour-Laferriere, well-known for his earlier psychoanalytic studies of Tolstoy, Gogol, and Stalin, uses the wealth of material available to him to produce a volume that, though barely two-hundred pages long and written in a sprightly, accessible style, must be judged (even by those suspicious of the psychoanalytic approach) as the fullest, best informed, and most nuanced account of Tolstoy's lifelong struggle with the question of God. To say that the work is amply documented would be a gross understatement: it boasts an astounding total of 882 notes (clustered conveniently at the end of each chapter) plus an eleven-page bibliography and an index.

One overarching truth that emerges from Rancour-Laferriere's provocative exploration of Tolstoy's religious consciousness is that the question "Did Tolstoy believe in God?" cannot be answered as it stands. It demands specification in at least three respects. First, we must specify a time period, for at different points in his life

Tolstoy held very different views about the existence of God. Second, we must say what kind of God we have in mind, for Tolstoy's concept of a supreme being also changed over time. Third, we must decide what modality of affirmation qualifies as "belief," for Tolstoy's various attributions of existence to God were expressed with widely different degrees of confidence, ranging from little more than hope to absolute certainty.

To give coherence to this daunting welter of ideas, Rancour-Laferriere employs two essentially independent but compatible principles of organization. The first is chronological—that is, his chapters roughly follow the course of Tolstoy's life, disclosing a trajectory of religious attitudes from childhood faith to doubt, atheism, despair, theisms of various sorts, and eventually a kind of pantheism. Close attention is given in this temporal progression to what Rancour-Laferriere considers the published works that best reveal Tolstoy's religious thinking: *Confession*, *Study of Dogmatic Theology*, *What I Believe*, and, to a lesser extent, *On Life* and *Path of Life*. Perhaps surprisingly, the best known of Tolstoy's religious writings—*The Kingdom of God Is Within You*—is mentioned only in passing. Tolstoy's diaries and other private writings, of course, are a seemingly bottomless well into which Rancour-Laferriere dives regularly throughout the book.

Simply by clarifying how Tolstoy's views of God evolved over time and identifying plausibly the various stages of that evolution, Rancour-Laferriere's book performs a valuable service. But

it is far more ambitious than that. Beyond presenting a conceptual description and analysis of Tolstoy's religious beliefs, Rancour-Laferriere wishes to explain them psychoanalytically—that is, to discover their correlation with persistent or recurrent personality traits exhibited by Tolstoy, and, to whatever extent possible, trace the origin and nature of Tolstoy's cognitive beliefs to his affective drives and moods and even beyond them to the life experiences that may have prompted them. This objective of explaining Tolstoy's religious beliefs psychoanalytically provides the second organizing principle that powerfully structures Rancour-Laferriere's use of data throughout the book.

In this effort, Rancour-Laferriere applies conceptual tools he used in a previous book on the writer—*Tolstoy on the Couch: Misogyny, Masochism and the Absent Mother* (London: Macmillan, 1998)—as well as in other works. All three of the concepts in his previous subtitle figure prominently in the present book as well, as do narcissism, depression, manic-depressive disorder, and to a limited extent sadism—all helpfully defined by the author, often with reference to the American Psychiatric Association's diagnostic manual. The central importance of the absent-mother theme (Tolstoy's mother died before his second birthday) in *Tolstoy's Quest for God* is evident from the closing sentences of the book:

[T]he grandiose pantheism of his later years aims at a reconciliation with his mother. She with her precious breast abandoned him early on, but she with her ubiquitous body is now with him forever. Tolstoy's quest for God thus begins and ends with his quest for his mother. (180)

The other psychiatric concepts mentioned are employed by Rancour-Laferriere in the hypotheses he offers to explain the various concepts of God Tolstoy entertained, his doubts and beliefs concerning God's existence, and related questions

such as the content of Christ's moral injunction to "Resist not evil."

It is not my objective in this article to offer a comprehensive assessment of Rancour-Laferriere's analysis, for which he presents a wealth of appropriate and sometimes fascinating evidence that would take another book to evaluate properly. I would, however, like to single out two points at which I find his treatment less than compelling because I believe that alternative interpretations are at least equally plausible. Each has to do with the supposed connection between a particular psychic mood or condition that marked Tolstoy's personality and a particular religious belief he held. In the first case, the connection is between depression and belief in the existence of God. In the second case, it is between masochism and the belief that God demands of us absolute nonresistance to evil.

Depression has a prominent place in Rancour-Laferriere's multi-faceted analysis of Tolstoy's religious beliefs. He finds in *My Confession*, an "oscillation between depressive ideas and (hypo)manic thinking," which he summarizes as follows: "When Tolstoy is in his depressive state of mind, God is nowhere to be seen. When he is joyful, God returns" (65). The language suggests that the affective moods are the determinants of the cognitive states: it is because he is joyful that he once again believes in God. In other statements the point is explicit: "What makes the difference is mood. Nothing else seems to matter" (39); in Tolstoy's *Confession*, Rancour-Laferriere writes, "God's existence was primarily a function of his [Tolstoy's] mood" (170).

But what is to prevent us from describing the functional relationship the other way around? What might be termed the "common-sense" interpretation of the "direct correlation between Tolstoy's theological position and his mood or emotional state" (38) is that the *position* is responsible for the *mood*—that Tolstoy is joyful because he once again believes in God. Tolstoy

himself seemed to subscribe to that interpretation when he wrote in his diary, as Rancour-Laferriere notes, “remember that there is God, and you become joyful” (40). Surely it is not surprising that happy, hopeful feelings would be prompted by the belief that the future is in the hands of a loving and powerful being or force, or that sad, despairing feelings would follow the loss of such a belief or the inability to hold it in the first place. Could not the moods be considered reasonable responses to the beliefs?

What rules out the “common-sense” interpretation for Rancour-Laferriere is his conviction that there is nothing “reasonable” about the link in Tolstoy’s life between depression and belief or disbelief in God. For Rancour-Laferriere the mood—depression—remains the driving force in generating Tolstoy’s religious beliefs because it provides the psychological “mechanism” that leads to them. Here is Rancour-Laferriere’s description:

From a religious viewpoint, Tolstoy needed some mechanism to clear a path back to God. Depression turned out to be that mechanism. [...] When he was depressed—especially when the depressive episodes reached a certain severity and duration—Tolstoy, willy-nilly, would start asking the big “What for?” question again (“Zachem?”), and he would begin wondering about the meaning of life (“smysl zhizni”). These questions would, in turn, bring him to a consideration of God. (24)

Although Rancour-Laferriere does not at this point carry his account beyond a “consideration” of God to actual belief in the existence of God, one would think that even in the process as described (and certainly in its continuation), some cognitive activity in the form of ratiocination would be present and relevant. But the air of mechanistic determinism in Rancour-Laferriere’s description (note the expression “willy-nilly”),

along with the fact that he goes on to describe the resulting religious beliefs as “antidepressants” functionally equivalent to Elavil and potentially useful in psychotherapy (40), suggest that he is indeed excluding ratiocination on the subject’s part from any determining role in the process. In fact, shortly after the comment “What makes the difference is mood,” Rancour-Laferriere adds, “Certainly rational thought processes do not make the difference, for Tolstoy mentions them explicitly, only to discard them” (39). The only support he offers for the last claim is that Tolstoy was “willing—irrationally—to accept the concept for the real thing, as long as it brings relief from his depression” (39).

This notion that Tolstoy accepted the concept for the real thing misses, I think, the distinction between a concept of God, on the one hand, and belief in the existence of God, on the other, that is implicit in the passages Rancour-Laferriere cites on pages 39 and 40. Tolstoy does report that, on occasion, at times of doubt and despair, the simple thought of God—that is, simply forming in his mind a concept of God, existent or not—has been enough to lighten his mood. But he also reports that, on those occasions, “my joy did not last long.” He would soon realize, he goes on, that “a concept of God is not God”: the concept, he explains, “is something that goes on within me ... something that I can evoke or not evoke in myself. *It is not this that I am seeking*” (39; italics added). In the cited passages that follow, he makes clear that what he is seeking is not simply a concept of God, which one can entertain or not at will, but *belief* in God—that is, conviction of the truth of the proposition “God exists,” independently of his will. Thus he tells us that he has truly lived “only in those times when I believed in God”—that is, believed that God existed; he advises us that at times of sadness we have only to “remember that there is God [remember that God exists], and you become joyful”; and he speaks of the salutary effect of being “conscious” of God,

which assumes that God exists as a possible object of consciousness—a “real thing” (39-40).

Rancour-Laferriere's equation of belief in God with the concept of God is evident when he writes of Tolstoy that “when manic he believed in God, that is, the very ‘concept’ of God was the functional equivalent of an antidepressant within the context of [his] mood swings” (40). But Tolstoy was not satisfied with the fleeting relief provided by the concept of God. He wanted the more durable relief that accompanies the belief that God exists.

What this shows, it seems to me, is that Tolstoy did not irrationally “accept the concept of God for the real thing.” He was well aware, as his comments quoted above show, of the difference between having a concept of something and believing that such a thing exists. An atheist has a concept of God in mind when he denies that there is a God. A belief, unlike a concept, is not something that one can “evoke or not evoke” because it presupposes a connection among concepts *in reality*; it states a commitment about the truth of some linkage of concepts with a “real thing.” I cannot simply “believe” in something at will—though I can think about it and, over time, might be able to talk myself into it.

The distinction between concept and belief has a bearing, too, on the question of the therapeutic use of religious ideas suggested by Rancour-Laferriere. A concept can be thought or not, just as a pill can be taken or not; a belief cannot be. Belief in God could still be considered an effective antidepressant, but not one that works mechanically like Elavil or could as easily be incorporated into a psychotherapeutic regimen, for beliefs cannot simply be administered like pills or “evoked” like concepts. They do not arise or function apart from a complex of cognitive processes and logical implications. But it is just *beliefs*, not concepts, that Tolstoy found significantly therapeutic.

That Tolstoy was capable of irrationalities is beyond question, but in this case Rancour-Laferriere may have found one too many. In any event, he appears to offer no clear evidence of the “irrationality” of Tolstoy's thinking at this particular point. Thus the “common sense” interpretation of the link between emotional moods and belief or disbelief in God—that the former are primarily a function of the latter—remains a viable candidate for explaining reasonably the psychic lure of certain religious beliefs. However prone Tolstoy was to manic-depressive mood swings, in the religious context may we not still consider his depression and its relief to be reasonable responses to particular cognitive states, including the rational comprehension of the content and implications of beliefs such as the belief in the existence of a just and protecting deity?

Turning to my second case—the purported connection between masochism and nonresistance to evil—we encounter what seems to me a still clearer and more significant instance in which an alternative analysis is at least as plausible as Rancour-Laferriere's—in this case, more plausible.

Some readers may be surprised to find the ethical doctrine of nonresistance to evil treated at all, much less at such length (pp. 93-125 and intermittently thereafter), in a work on Tolstoy's religious views. But Rancour-Laferriere quite legitimately points out that the question of what God demands of His creatures from an ethical point of view is certainly relevant to one's concept of God.

What Tolstoy thought God demanded, Rancour-Laferriere argues, was the “imitation of the masochistic, non-resisting Christ” (116)—the Christ who submitted, turned the other cheek, and welcomed suffering. He contends that Tolstoy, himself already “masochistically inclined” as a child (102), in the course of his life developed “unrelenting masochistic and narcissistic needs”

(167) that left him particularly receptive to “the message of moral masochism in the Gospels” (79), expressed in the idea of passive nonresistance, the acceptance of “suffering for its own sake” (125). It is on this basis that Rancour-Laferriere writes of “the obvious masochism of nonresistance” (109) and goes so far as to call nonresistance “a species of masochism” known as “moral masochism” as opposed to “erotogenic masochism” (94-95)—a view that, if true, would mean that nonresistance is masochistic by definition, as a square is a parallelogram by definition. As applied to Tolstoy, Rancour-Laferriere’s repeated use of expressions such as Tolstoy’s or Tolstoyan “masochistic nonresistance” (115-17, 149) reflect his belief that the link between masochism and nonresistance is so close and strong as to be essentially beyond question.

Before raising directly the question of whether Tolstoy did preach and practice “masochistic nonresistance,” it is worth asking how Rancour-Laferriere understands the Biblical injunction to “Resist not evil”—a question we can approach by considering some of his comments about Tolstoy’s moral behavior. He contends that Tolstoy sometimes violated Christ’s injunction by *resisting* evil, in evidence of which he offers the following examples (among others): (1) Tolstoy’s “public outbursts” and other modes of nonviolent activism against social evils; these, Rancour-Laferriere writes, are “utterly inconsistent with what nonresistance to evil is generally understood to be” (108, 113). (2) Tolstoy encouraged people, such as members of the military, to disobey when they were ordered to commit violence; the consistent course, Rancour-Laferriere contends, would be to submit to such orders (106-07). (3) Tolstoy believed in the immortality of his own consciousness; this is said to demonstrate resistance, not submission, to death (146). (4) When Tolstoy’s son was dying, he summoned a doctor (120); this example is not explained, but presumably it is

thought to express resistance to the course of nature.

An interesting thing about this set of diverse cases is that, although each of them is called a violation of the principle of nonresistance to evil, none of them involves the use of force, physical or mental. The “resistance” in each case is entirely nonviolent, and in some cases it is as passive as simply holding a belief. What this shows is that Rancour-Laferriere is employing an extraordinarily broad definition of “resistance,” apparently interpreting it to include not only the return of evil for evil or forcibly struggling against evil, but every variety of nonviolent opposition or contradiction as well, even purely passive, internal, and conceptual opposition. On this literal interpretation of “Resist not evil,” the principle simply prohibits all opposition, nonviolent as well as violent, to evil. Though Tolstoy did stray from the principle at times, Rancour-Laferriere admits, “[f]or the most part [... he] came down on the side of *absolute nonresistance to evil*” (108; italics in original).

The alternative understanding of this situation that I consider more plausible is, first, that the literal or absolutist conception of nonresistance to evil advanced by Rancour-Laferriere does not correspond, as he claims, to what is “generally understood” by nonresistance to evil and, second and more importantly, does not correspond to what Tolstoy preached or practiced.

The New Testament’s “Resist not evil” (Matthew 5:39) has long been understood as a paradox in imperative form. Taken literally, as simply commanding acceptance of evil, it is absurd as a moral injunction, for the very purpose of a moral injunction is to counter evil. Moralists from Confucius to George W. Bush have entreated us to reject evil, not accept it—though they have differed as to the form the rejection should take. But Rancour-Laferriere would have us believe that the arch-moralist Lev Tolstoy, overlooking the injunction’s paradoxical character, insisted that it

prohibits *all* resistance to evil, however benign, nonviolent, or even inactive the resistance may be.

Like any paradox offered as a truth, “Resist not evil” requires qualification; it is elliptical without it. In Mathew 5 the qualification is implicit in the context of active, forcible retribution in which it is presented, along with the immediately following supplemental injunctions to turn the other cheek and in general respond to evil without violence or any other form of evil. In explicit, non-elliptical usage, this qualification has been captured succinctly by appending the words “by force” or “with evil” to the formula “Resist not evil,” thereby indicating forms of resistance to be prohibited—violent or otherwise evil forms—not (absurdly) prohibiting resistance of every sort. Arguments remain as to whether a more accurate rendition of the New Testament Greek would have obviated the problem of interpretation, as *The Bible in Basic English* does by translating the injunction as “Do not make use of force against an evil man.” In any event, with the qualifications indicated the statement becomes a nonparadoxical, recognizable moral injunction that is now, I would say, almost universally accepted as the appropriate formulation of the New Testament imperative by those who discuss the matter, even when for brevity they use the unqualified shorthand expressions “nonresistance to evil” or even simply “nonresistance.”

Our principal question, however, is not what is commonly understood but what Tolstoy understood, especially given that he, too, used the shorthand expressions on many occasions. It seems to me that there is a great deal of evidence to show that Tolstoy held the non-absolutist view of nonresistance, which permits active but nonviolent resistance to evil, not the literal, absolutist view attributed to him by Rancour-Laferriere, which prohibits all forms of resistance. For convenience, let me divide this evidence into three sorts: Tolstoy’s behavior, his frequent explicit use

of the non-paradoxical wording of the injunction, and finally his explicit discussions of the scope of the injunction.

First, all of the evidence that Rancour-Laferriere adduces to show that Tolstoy occasionally acted or spoke in contradiction to the non-resistance principle is, from another point of view, evidence that he held to the non-absolutist interpretation of that principle, which allows nonviolent opposition. When Rancour-Laferriere writes that Tolstoy violated the principle by “aggressively fighting” evil, the examples he presents are no more “aggressive” than the nonviolent activities of raising funds to finance the Dukhobors’ emigration, helping peasants rebuild huts that had been destroyed by fire, and denouncing the pogroms among the Jews (107). This again demonstrates the unconvincing breadth ascribed to “resistance” by the absolutist interpretation.

Rancour-Laferriere regards these activities as exceptions to the generally submissive and self-sacrificial core of Tolstoy’s moral posture and not the norm, but reflection suggests that it is difficult to think of activities, especially in his later life, that did *not* involve nonviolent resistance to evil in the capacious sense of “resistance” that Rancour-Laferriere employs. Essentially all of his publications—his entire literary and publicistic output—were consciously directed against evil as he saw it; all of the social activism—the famine relief, the protests to authorities, the counseling of disciples, and much more, continuing for decades—expressed such “resistance”; his correspondence and reported conversations constantly reflected it. If all of this must be counted as “sporadic” deviations from the norm (118), what is left for the norm? What Rancour-Laferriere calls “sporadic” is more like expressions of the dominant theme of Tolstoy’s life. All of it is evidence for the nonviolent interpretation of the principle of nonresistance.

Second, if I am right that Tolstoy accepted qualifications to the injunction “Resist not evil,”

then one would expect him, at least at times, to state the full injunction explicitly—for example, to write in Russian not simply Не противься злу (or злomu, as the Gospel text has it) but Не противься злу насиллием. And so he does—though no one would know it from reading *Tolstoy's Quest for God*. If attention and memory serve me correctly, never once does Rancour-Laferriere use the expanded expression, either in a quotation from Tolstoy or in his own voice.

It is true that Tolstoy often uses the shorthand forms, but implicit and explicit versions of the qualifications “by force” or “with evil” occur frequently in his writings on the subject, published and unpublished. In *What I Believe* (1884), he states that he now has come to understand what is meant by “Resist not evil”: “It means never resist evil, that is, never use violence” (PSS 23: 313). In a letter of 1887 to Engel'gard he writes, “The commandment of nonresistance to evil by force [непротивлении злу насиллием] pervades the Gospels; without it, the teaching of the Gospels—for me, at least—would collapse” (after which, he adds this wonderfully narcissistic statement: “Even if Christ and his teaching had never existed, I would have discovered this truth myself—so simple and clear does it seem to me now” [*Vsemirnyi vestnik*, September 1907, 6]). If Rancour-Laferriere had dwelled on *The Kingdom of God Is Within You*, he could hardly have avoided the full expression непротивление злу насиллием (nonresistance to evil by violence), for it occurs repeatedly and prominently throughout the work, in the titles of three chapters and in the text. In Tolstoy's own translation of the Gospels in the early 1890s, he uses Не борись со злом (“Struggle not against evil”) in rendering Mathew 5:39, but Не противься злу злом (“Resist not evil with evil”) in the heading of that section of his text (PSS 24: 232-33). Near the end of his life, the focus on violence is again evident in the title he gave his work *The Law of Violence and the Law of Love* (1908) and in his capsule explication there of

Mathew 5:39: “That is, the use of violence against you cannot justify the use of violence on your part” (PSS 37: 168).

Third and still more compelling, Tolstoy on more than one occasion pointedly raises the question of what the injunction “Resist not evil” prohibits, and each time he indicates that it does not prohibit all forms of resistance. In a letter of January 1896 to his American admirer Ernest Crosby, for example, Tolstoy imagines the case of a “terrible robber” about to attack an “innocent and beautiful” child. A bystander is in a position to thwart the robber by force, but of course that would infringe the principle of nonresistance. What the bystander may do, Tolstoy goes on, is plead with the robber to desist, or even step in front of the child to shield him or her from the robber (PSS 69: 20). In a similar case sketched in *The Law of Violence and the Law of Love*, the villain has a knife and the bystander a pistol. Tolstoy's ethical analysis of that situation is that the bystander must not shoot the villain, for that would be an “evil deed,” but he suggests that other, unspecified intervention short of violence is not merely acceptable but morally obligatory, despite the fact that it might put the bystander's own life at risk: “One's conscience,” he writes, “may demand the sacrifice of one's own life, not the life of another” (PSS 37: 206-07).

Further, in the first chapter of *The Kingdom of God Is Within You*, Tolstoy approvingly reprints excerpts from the “Catechism of Nonresistance” by the noted American Universalist minister Adin Ballou, which include the question “Should the word ‘nonresistance’ be taken in its broadest sense—that is, as indicating that we should offer no resistance to evil?” The answer is the following: “No .... Evil should be resisted by all righteous means, but not by evil” (PSS 28: 11; italics omitted). Later in the book, in his own voice, Tolstoy berated some of his Russian critics for “understanding the doctrine of nonresistance to

evil ... as if it would prohibit all struggle against evil" (PSS 28: 35).

Finally, still more emphatic was a letter to Crosby later that same year (September 1896) in response to a question about the moral difference (if any) between the use of physical force and other kinds of force, such as the force of public opinion. In answer, Tolstoy wrote that the Gospel speaks only of responding with violence and says nothing about "nonresistance by any other, immaterial forces." "To attribute to Christ the prohibition of all resistance to evil," he concluded, "is a groundless sophism" (PSS 69: 142).

All these indications that Tolstoy considered nonviolent resistance to evil compatible with the nonresistance principle, and indeed practiced it actively himself, bring us back, finally, to the issue of masochism in his ethical thinking. Rancour-Laferriere's attribution of masochism to Tolstoy in the ethical sphere is predicated on the contention that Tolstoy, both in his teaching and for the most part in his practice, regarded nonresistance to evil as requiring absolute, passive submission to evil. This is the definition that permits Rancour-Laferriere, quite consistently, to call nonresistance to evil a "species" of masochism. But I have tried to show that Tolstoy rejected that definition. His definition prohibited only violent resistance. If that is true, "nonresistance to evil" can no longer be called simply a species of masochism, and in general the link with masochism becomes questionable, to say the least.

It seems clear even from the examples of Tolstoy's nonviolent resistance that Rancour-Laferriere cites—raising funds to aid the Dukhobors, helping peasants rebuild their huts destroyed by fire, urging civil disobedience, and so on—that nonresistance as Tolstoy practiced it has no significant masochistic content; Rancour-Laferriere himself draws a sharp line between those activities and "masochistic compliance" to authority (106). And if we extend the scope of such activities to the broad sphere that I believe

they occupied in Tolstoy's moral life, we hardly find there the pervasive impact of "unrelenting" masochistic needs, or indeed any substantial evidence of masochism in Tolstoy's moral judgments or actions.

Note that I am not rejecting the psychoanalytic principles to which Rancour-Laferriere appeals or the particular diagnosis of masochism in Tolstoy that he advances. Tolstoy may very well have been masochistically inclined from an early age and subject to masochistic needs all his life; certainly Rancour-Laferriere presents other evidence to support such conclusions. My concern is whether Tolstoy's conception and practice of nonresistance to evil qualify as significant expressions of masochistic inclinations.

Rancour-Laferriere admits that masochistic drives were not the only forces in Tolstoy's psychic life and that he often exhibited "ambivalence or conflict about his own masochism" (113), even to the point that his thinking became "a mishmash of resistance and nonresistance, obedience and disobedience, masochism and anti-masochism (or outright sadism)" (107). Rancour-Laferriere's contention is that, despite the frequent presence of other strains of thought, "for the most part ... Tolstoy came down on the side of *absolute nonresistance to evil*" (108; italics in original)—that is, on what to Rancour-Laferriere is the masochistic side. What I am suggesting is that, despite some evidence of masochism and ambivalence in Tolstoy's thinking, in the case of the principle of nonresistance he came down on the anti-masochistic side. Masochistic elements may be detected in some of his illustrations of permissible nonviolent resistance, such as placing one's body between villain and victim and being prepared to sacrifice one's own life; but on the whole such elements seem to be the exception rather than the rule. They are not sufficient to justify describing "masochistic nonresistance" as "pervasive in Tolstoy's thinking," at least in the moral sphere (115).

The question comes down to what Tolstoy believed. For the investigator the beliefs themselves must be primary, in the sense that prior to any psychological analysis of them, their conceptual content—what they assert about what—must be established, lest we explain a belief not actually held. And the content of the beliefs must be determined independently of the psychological hypotheses that will be used to explain them, lest the correctness of the explanation be built into the

statement of the beliefs. Such hypothesis-neutral identification may often be difficult. But in the case of Tolstoy's understanding of the principle of nonresistance to evil, since he explicitly states his conviction that the principle does not prohibit nonviolent resistance, and since he acts consistently and vigorously in harmony with that conviction, is that not powerful evidence of what he believed?