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Source: *The North American Review*, Vol. 182, No. 593 (Apr., 1906), pp. 524-541

Published by: University of Northern Iowa

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25105550>

Accessed: 29/07/2010 06:12

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TOLSTOY AS PROPHET.

NOTES ON THE PSYCHOLOGY OF ASCETICISM.

BY VERNON LEE.

IN his religious and philosophical writings, Count Tolstoy would seem to represent the prophetic temperament in such incarnation as is likely to become the commonest, indeed perhaps the only possible, one in the near future. For, in the gradual disruption of dogmatic creeds, the man born to the prophetic quality and function tends more and more to be a heretic and an anarchist; to practise an exegesis backed by no authority; and to benefit or harass mankind, to exhibit to mankind the spectacle of prophecy, more and more obviously without any inspiration save the unquestioned one of his own individual constitution. The Prophet, being a type of humanity, represents certain impulses for good and evil existing in numbers of his fellow creatures, is in fact a specimen of a human force of the universe; and he not only displays in crudest isolation special tendencies making for life's greater fruitfulness or sterility, but also directs the scathing light of almost monomaniacal perception on matters which the average routine of existence neglects to our disadvantage. The Prophet is useful as a teacher; but still more useful as a lesson. It is in this double capacity that the following marginal notes may help to put to use the prophet, not the artist, Tolstoy.

I.

"To the man perverted by the false doctrines of the century, it seems," etc., etc.

This form of words, perpetually recurring throughout Tolstoy's didactic writings, acquaints us with one of the chief draw-

backs of the prophetic mind: an incapacity so utter of conceiving any views different from his own, that they appear monstrous not merely in their results but also in their origin. "Perverse"—"False"—a kind of devil's spawn *in vacuo*. Now, the wonderful tenacity of *false* doctrines and *perverse* attitudes would suggest, to such as are not prophets, that there may be something to be said in their favor; that such *falseness* and *perverseness* may be an inevitable—nay, a necessary—stage of something else; that it is, in some fashion, in league with the ways of things. The theologians of the past could postulate Original Sin or the fundamental Abominableness of Matter; whereas one might expect that the prophets of our own day, Stirner and Nietzsche, quite as much as Tolstoy, would have forfeited this logical advantage and desisted from judging all things as if they had been intended to please just them. Not a bit: the prophetic temperament has remained unchanged; and all prophets—prophets of cynicism, quite as much as prophets of asceticism—display the same alacrity in seating themselves down *ad dexteram Domini*—or, indeed, on the throne off which the Lord has been hustled as some sort of idol. What unhesitating rapidity they display, those great nostrum-mongers, not merely in defining the world's contents and making plans for its complete overhauling, but in packing off everything which does not suit them to the bottomless pit! Mankind, in the mean while, like some half-hearted follower of Savonarola, shoves the *false* and *perverse* doctrines not into the destroying flames, but merely into the dust-heap, whence they are incontinently extracted, for exclusive use, by another prophet or another School of Prophecy. Let no one take these remarks for the raillery of scepticism: the thorough-paced sceptic of modern days (my ingenious friend H. B. Brewster, for instance) is just as much carried away by the spirit of prophecy as the dogmatists whom he scoffs at. I am speaking as a mere looker-on, vaguely conscious that, since they all exist, these various excessive views must each answer to some aspect of reality; vaguely regretting, also, that we, less specially gifted creatures, should waste so much of the little time given us for the application of truth in sorting the litter of exaggerations and the rubbish of anathema with which the great One-sided Ones have encumbered the earth.

The heap of valuable and worthless things constituted by Tolstoy's philosophical and moral writings is the better worth our

sorting that, in trying to understand this latest addition to the literature of prophetic asceticism, we shall be learning to understand, perhaps to select and profit by, some other ascetic doctrines, of so ancient an origin and such habitual repetition that we have almost ceased to look either for their psychological reason or for their practical application.

II.

“Like the penitent thief, I knew that I was unhappy, that I suffered, and that *all the human beings around me were suffering and feeling themselves unhappy . . .* and, even as the penitent thief (nailed to his cross) saw advancing the horrid darkness of death . . . so I saw the same prospect open before me.”

The words I have italicized contain the main postulate of all pessimism, and of nearly all asceticism, religious as well as philosophical, Buddhist and Stoical, of Schopenhauer as much as of the “Imitation.” The pessimist is unhappy: therefore every one else is; he sees no meaning in life save that of his ascetic formula: therefore there is none; he is afraid of death: therefore fear of death is in every breast. And this gratuitous classification of all mankind under one’s own headings is justified by the additional generalization, that those who imagine themselves to feel or think differently are perverted by false doctrine or sunk in beastlike indifference.

III.

After this follows logically the second postulate of such as think, or rather of such as are constituted, like Tolstoy:

“Why had I not earlier put in practice this doctrine which gives me happiness? *The answer is very simple: Because I did not know the truth.*”

At first sight, it seems strange that the creator of such marvellously living beings as Natacha, Peter Besukhoff, Princess Mary, Anna Karenine, Oblonsky or Levine should not have been able to think, what he so clearly felt and showed in them, that human beings do not *seek happiness* but obey instincts, and that the greatest mass of probable happiness in front has little attractive power save when it coincides with the *vis a tergo*, the forward push of cravings, tendencies and habits. One might imagine that in Tolstoy the novelist’s conception was so concrete and individual, the novelist’s genius so automatic and unreasoning, as to reduce

the powers of analysis and generalization to almost childish insignificance. Be this as it may, this greatest painter of human character, able to copy with faultless precision the soul's actual workings, seems not to know the rudiments of the soul's physiology or mechanics, on which those workings depend. It never seems to enter his head that, if this "knowledge," this paramount doctrine of such direct application and infallible virtue, has remained hidden, obscured, for near nineteen hundred years, there must have been, in mankind, but a very faint need for a remedy so near at hand; nor that this inefficacy in so long a past argues but small immediate result in the present; those selfsame interests which hid or distorted this doctrine of salvation showing, by their tenacity, that it is absurd to expect them to yield and disappear of a sudden and as by miracle. But the fact is that Tolstoy, much as he would disclaim it, not only admits of miracle, but bases all his hope upon it. His own experience is of miraculous nature, simply because, to his own powers of observation, the thing which really happened, the way it happened, is necessarily hidden. Tolstoy's conversion is one of those of which all religious autobiography is full, and of which Professor William James has put together so fine a volume of specimens. At a given moment in a man's life, either after a period of religious stress or with apparent total suddenness, *something takes place in the soul*: the doubts, scruples, fears, despair, have vanished; and in their place is a new set of hopes, a new vital certainty, or (as the doctor in Ibsen's play would call it) a new "Vital Lie." What has actually happened? The souls liable to such complete change and renovation, sudden or gradual, are those least likely to be able to tell us. For the concentration of one kind of feeling, the unfamiliarity of the elements formerly latent and now dominant, the very completeness of former despair and present joy, make him who experiences such a conversion incapable of observing, and perhaps of conceiving, its real nature.

The conversion of Tolstoy is not a sudden one; but it is characterized by the *mono-ideism* of such phenomena; the intensity and exclusiveness of his long and suicidal broodings did not leave in his soul the lucid, disinterested half which can understand and intelligently record: there is but one self at work, one self floundering in nightmare and suddenly lifted to beatific relief. Tolstoy fails to notice what strikes every spectator from the first—

namely, that in his least regenerate days, his most carnal and perversely thinking days, he dealt preferably with characters unknown to previous novelists, Peter, André, Levine, men haunted already by the very thought which was to overshadow his own mind, the eternal query: "Why live, since one must die?" That such should have been his heroes shows that he knew more of asceticism than other novelists perhaps capable of creating his other characters—say, Wronsky or Nicholas Rostoff. This, evidently, never strikes Tolstoy himself. Still less, of course, does it occur to him that the importance taken in his mind by that recurring "Why?" let alone the fact of its having, in the midst of prosperity, driven him to the verge of suicide, shows that he was constitutionally destined to concentrate on this problem: or, briefly, that the value of his conversion depended on his passionate need of it; the remedy was commensurate with the evil, and both were in himself, inborn.

This Tolstoy could not see. And, failing to guess that his was a very special and rare case, he attributed his own spiritual drama to the rest of mankind. A large number of his neighbors were visibly discontented and unhappy; a larger still he chose to consider as being so: well, then, their discontent and their unhappiness were due to the same causes as his own. They might, indeed, explain it by poverty, illness, cramped activities, thwarted passions, by anything or everything they chose; that, Tolstoy assured them, was but delusion, and the real matter with them was what had been the matter with himself.

There is in all prophetic persons a sadly comic side, reminding one of those valetudinarians who press the pills or waters which have relieved their liver or their spleen on all the people of their neighborhood with damaged heart, brain or marrow—nay, with poor bruised or broken limbs. Moreover, in the spiritual example, the recalcitrance of supposed fellow sufferers, their clinging to their own diagnosis, especially their making light of their own ills, is instantly set down as a sure sign that all sensation and all judgment have been perverted by the very malady they refuse to own up to. But, worst off of any, those who, in the face of the universal, infallible and painless panacea, actually maintain that, for the present at least, they have no ailments of any kind, that they are (shameless or deluded wretches!) sound in mind and limb—as to those, well, all Tolstoy can say is that, just in proportion to

their contentment with life, they are already dead and done for; galvanized corpses, set on end to gibber and to poison others with their putrescence.

IV.

Let us continue our analysis of Tolstoy's postulates; which, at the same time, is an examination of the modes of thought characteristic of the ascetic attitude and the prophetic temperament.

"Every human being lives in the name of some particular principle; and this principle, in whose name he lives in that given fashion, is no other thing than his religion."

The identification holds good only when the principle in question happens to be of the sort we all mean by "religious." If we accepted Tolstoy's statement without this rider, which makes it tautological, we should be obliged, like H. B. Brewster in his "*Ame Païenne*," to identify a man's religion, his God, with his dominant impulse or combination of impulses; and the most profane and wicked lives might thus be led—as Hoffmann imagines of the operatic Don Juan's—in the name of the *principle* of Leporello's catalogues. The *vital principle* of most men's lives has been given its right name only by Nietzsche; it is "My Inclination." But it is not of such principles as these that Tolstoy is speaking; and any other principle of life, any principle conscious, formulated and dominating all other impulses and habits, any principle which can be called a religion, exists only in a minority of cases, at least in the sense of constant intellectual reference and constant moral incentive.

V.

"Life is an aspiration after happiness; the aspiration after happiness is life."

This is psychologically false. In reality *life is*—that is, exclusively consists of—no more of this, than of any other very frequent item of consciousness; life being, to a large extent, absorption in this or that concern or interest to the positive exclusion of all "aspiration after happiness." Nor is there any reason why such "aspiration after happiness" should be more frequent; for, in the majority of cases, happiness itself is secured, and best secured, without any such conscious straining after it. Happiness

is secured, and with it life's furtherance for the individual and race, in that manner which Tolstoy, unable to deny its existence, condemns beforehand with the absurd epithet of "animal"; secured by the play of clashing or coordinated impulses, which, so far from being more particularly *animal*, may happen to be impulses of the highest moral or æsthetic or constructive or intellectual sort.

All pessimism, all asceticism, is founded upon the existence of what Tolstoy calls the "illusory thirst for enjoyment." Now, however numerous the cases where enjoyment proves impossible or mischievous, the continued existence of the human race shows that, ninety-nine times out of a hundred, neither the enjoyment nor the thirst for it is illusory, but, on the contrary, a genuine advantage, making subsequent enjoyment not less, but more, possible by perfecting the sensibilities. The healthy activity of the whole individual, with its inevitable hierarchy of impulses, both secures pleasure and forestalls cloying, and, by its inclusion of intellectual and sympathetic interests, its subordination of others to these, it diminishes conflict with others quite as effectually as does Tolstoy's Renunciation. And here let me say that there is surely something mean in this reciprocal renunciation, resulting in the cessation of struggle and disappointment. Such renunciation is often needful in our imperfect individual case: our eye gives us trouble, and we cast it from us. But such rough-and-ready, such wasteful, destructive methods are surely not admissible in a philosophy of life, in a *counsel of perfection!* The universal, as distinguished from the individual, rule for greater happiness is not self-diminution but assimilation, expansion, the non-ego becoming, in imagination and feelings, an integral part of the ego. Asceticism preaches voluntary impoverishment: my neighbors cease to steal because I possess nothing; I cease to covet, because they possess nothing; 'tis Epictetus's safety after the thieves had carried away his brass lamp. But the law of human life is barter: asking freely and giving fully; mutual enriching through each other's superfluity. Asceticism refuses to admit this law; for all asceticism moves in the logical circle of pain as cause and effect.

VI.

"Men, like all other living creatures, are forced by the conditions of life to live forever at one another's expense, devouring one another literally or metaphorically. And man, in so far as gifted with reason, can-

not blink the fact that every material advantage is obtained by one creature only at the expense of some other creature."

A series of quite gratuitous biological and economical assumptions, which are made more intelligible by a statement in another place that "the workman who wears out his body and hastens his death is giving that body as food to others."

Now, in all these premises, Tolstoy omits one half of the fact—namely, that, in the majority of cases, a human being, while *giving himself*, gets, or has got, something from others. *Taking* by no means implies *stealing*, nor is *benefiting by one's fellows* the same thing as preying on them. The workman is not breaking down his health and hastening his death any faster while working for others than while working for himself, except from occasional reasons quite independent of whom the work is to benefit most. He is not breaking down his health or hastening his own death more than if he were committing excesses of other kinds for his own sole satisfaction; and, except through the accidental or incidental misarrangement of the world, he is *not breaking down his health or hastening on death at all*, but rather the reverse. The detriment to the individual is due to excess as regards himself, not in the least to profitableness to others. The increase of the world's material and spiritual wealth depends upon activity; but activity, when not excessive, is an integration, not a disintegration, of individual life. The world is carried on upon the principle of barter and compensation; and, even in such low forms of life as those where animals or savages actually prey upon each other, the one who feeds upon his victim to-day is bound to be fed upon, as an individual or a class, to-morrow: the lion ends off as the sustenance of vultures, jackals and insects. But Tolstoy, for reasons we shall presently grasp and can already guess at, chooses to consider that all profiting by the existence of others represents an unwilling or a voluntary sacrifice. When it is voluntary, he calls it love; and here again comes a gratuitous assumption. Let us look at this question of Love and of Sacrifice, for it is important and one upon which ordinary thought (though luckily not every-day practice!) is in considerable confusion. Alongside of the sentence about the workman destroying himself for the benefit of others, is another example of what Tolstoy chooses to consider as self-sacrifice: the mother

suckling her baby. He could not have come by a better refutation of his own theory; for it is plain that the mother is giving life to her child, but it is also plain that her bodily health and her happiness gain by this supposed sacrifice, which is, in reality, an organic advantage. From such an example, however, Tolstoy concludes that "love is really worthy of that name only when it is the sacrifice of self." In one sense, this is quite undeniable; but that sense is not Tolstoy's. For *love is preference*; and love leads to self-sacrifice, that is to say, to sacrifice of greater or smaller advantages—nay, even of health, power or life—simply because all preference of one particular thing or group of things leads to sacrifice of other things or groups of things, whether that preference be socially beneficial (which we call "unselfish") or socially detrimental (which we call "selfish"); whether it happen to be duty, ambition, hatred, vanity, lust; whether it be the love of Cordelia or the love of Francesca; though, of course, the measure of every preference (since preference implies alternative) is not the measure more especially of love, and still less is it love's chief characteristic. The characteristic, the typical, fact of love must be sought for in that from which the highest love has, by analogy, borrowed its name, and perhaps, very literally, taken its origin: the union of two creatures who gain happiness in producing a third. The analogous process takes place in the spiritual domain: we give our thought, our fancy, our will, in union with the external world or with the will, the thought or fancy of others; and in so doing create new forms, new ideas, new modes of feeling, nay, new selves.

At the bottom of the Tolstoyan conception of love (which is but the usual ascetic one) is the old, savage notion of sacrifice: of a universe so evil that all happiness must be discounted in misery—"I did but taste a little honey with the end of the rod that was in mine hand, and, lo, I must die!" The implacable gods, the atrocious Cosmos, the Ogre Fee-Faw-Fum at the bottom of every Bean Stalk, insist on increasing suffering through every apparent alleviation or apparent enjoyment. It is worth while, especially in the face of a thinker like Tolstoy, to disentangle the notion of *giving* from the notion of *giving up*; to separate the notion of renunciation, as a choice between two positive or negative *desiderata*, from the notion of renunciation, as mere refusal of good and acceptance of evil. The really fruitful

act of giving oneself, one's strength, attention, thought or feeling, is not a loss, but the fulfilling of an organic need as essential as that of material or spiritual assimilation; it is, in fact, the inevitable sequel of real assimilation. If the sacrifice of something is often implied in this, it is merely the sacrifice by alternative, the preference of one need or desire or pleasure over another. Such preference as this is a principle of order in the moral realm: the fulness of life means, *ipso facto*, the constant checking of the less important by the more important; it means moderation because it means alternative, selection, subordination and hierarchy of the impulses of which life consists. The vanity of the pursuit of pleasure, of which Tolstoy, like every moralist, makes (and rightly, perhaps) so much capital, results from the absence of such a complex hierarchy of impulse: the larger part of the pleasure-seeker is sacrificed to a momentary desire, and that omitted bulk of his nature either upsets the satisfaction aimed at, or leaves the unruly desire to languish in isolation.

But Tolstoy, like all ascetics, seeks his remedy not in moderation, not in the development of other impulses, not in fact in the enriching of the individual life, but in its impoverishment. *Moral Good* is, according to him, that condition where man pursues nothing for its own sake or his own ends, and nothing for the interest and pleasure of the pursuit; but only for the sake of another human being, or of a vague sense of duty personified as God. Tolstoy's ideal of life is, like his notion of love, a notion of diminution, of sacrifice; and it seems likely that, even as in the ritual of primeval man, the ascetic conception of sacrifice as such, of sacrifice as loss, impoverishment, mutilation, is very closely connected with the fear of death; sacrifice being, however inexplicitly, a commutation, a partial, symbolical or vicarious death, instead of a total and actual one.

VII.

In the case of Tolstoy, there is the repeated and unqualified expression of the constant thought, the constant fear, of Death. Already, in his pseudo-autobiography, we find the following funeral oration on the old housekeeper Natalia Savichna:

"She accomplished the best and greatest act of the life of this world: dying without regret and without fear."

Now, this fear, whose absence thus seems a rare form of holiness, is, in a sense, a misconception, a misconception revealing the fundamental complexion of all asceticism. Let us examine it. *Life* and *Death* form together one of those false antitheses which have been pointed out by that subtle analyst, Gabriel Tarde. Life and Death are opposed in position; but not, so to speak, in the ground which they cover or the facts they respectively include. Because *what is alive* cannot also *be dead*, and *what is dead* cannot also be *alive*, we have, in our slovenly fashion, grown accustomed to think of the fact of being alive and the fact of being dead as of equal importance, intensity and extension. We overlook the real antithesis, which is between *death* and *birth*, the *two points without magnitude* between which extends life. Moreover, we have confused *death* with the process of dying, often accompanied by illness or preceded by decay, which is a portion, sometimes a considerable portion, of the processes of life. Nor is this all. The immense part played in our life by the death of others gives the notion of dying a frightful duration in our consciousness, and makes us think, by analogy, that our own death also is a wide blot or oil spot in our life. Hence death, which, being the limit of life, exists in reality outside it, becomes, so far as it is thought about and feared, a most important and terrible part of life.

Life is consciousness; and, except in consciousness, death is nothing; it becomes, in consciousness, grief or terror. But grief and terror are realities. Of course; since it is thanks to them that death, or rather the notion of death, has come to poison so much of life. Heaven forbid I should argue that either philosophy or religion can ever abolish grief or fear, abolish the agony of departing, the agony of being left behind. Loss is loss, and parting is parting, a fact, a horror, which nothing can efface. But let us not add to these the dread either of life or of death, deeply, indissolubly entangled as they become. And if philosophy represent any higher truth, and religion any higher utility, let them strive to diminish this hideous tangle, to hold our thoughts and feelings asunder; make us see things as they are, and make them, so far as our attitude toward them goes, a little more what they should be. Life, our own and that of our beloved, is good in proportion as it is safe and complete, as it is untouched by the chance, the fact, but worst of all, the *fear*, of death. And all

healthy life tends to cast forth from itself the vain and paralyzing thought of its own end.

VIII.

We have seen that the prophetic temper is characterized by a tendency to *mono-ideism*, and that mono-ideism invariably tends to jealousy of all that it excludes. One of Tolstoy's most characteristic pieces of such mono-ideistic jealousy, is his elaborate catalogue of sinful indulgences; of what, especially, he puts under the rubric "intoxication," including therein, as venial or mortal sin, the intoxication not merely by wine, tobacco or fleshly love, but by art, literature, "gestures and sounds," and even bicycling. The exaggeration is so gross that one fails at first to conceive how it could come about in a mind as originally excellent, and a life as many-sided, as Tolstoy's. But the explanation, furnished by comparison with the raptures of earlier mystics, appears to be that the ascetic has his own form of intoxication. Here is Tolstoy's account of his state of beatitude after his conversion has been consummated:

"All that seems evil to me does so merely because I believe in myself and not in God; and as, from this life where *it is so easy to do His will, since His will is mine*, I can fall nowhere except into Him, what I possess is complete joy and good. *And all I could write would fail to express what I feel.*"

Let us consider these seemingly simple statements. It is so easy for Tolstoy to do God's will! God's will is, after all, only Tolstoy's; Tolstoy can fall only into God! Is this presumptuous certainty of righteousness, this identification of the individual impulse and the moral law, this unmixed and ineffable joy, anything save an intoxication of a more insidious, but scarcely less unwholesome, kind? Taking in the full meaning of such words as these, one wonders whether there will ever arise a new habit of spiritual cleanness, of intellectual chastity, making men question and reject emotional self-indulgence like this, which sullies the reason and sterilizes the will. One doubts it. For, from century to century, mankind may be watched yielding, even as to lower kinds of self-indulgence, to the subtle and high-flown temptation of mysticism. This temptation consists in attributing to an emotional state of our own (the state of Nietzsche's Zara-

thustra, as much as the state of Kipling's poor old Lama) the name and the importance of a generalized objective fact; nay, of the greatest and most solemn of facts which man has thus generalized: the will of God, the Nature of things.

The very recurrence of such a process of spiritual intoxication implies, it may be said, a recurrent need of it. Yes; but a need which results from other needs being neglected. Between the cravings which produce science, art, laws—nay, food and progeny—and the mystical craving such as this of Tolstoy there is a fundamental difference: they are fruitful, and it is barren.

And this word "barren" suggests another of the drawbacks of asceticism. In its exclusiveness, its mono-ideism, its readiness to condemn all save itself, asceticism tends to waste much of the moral resources (so cruelly needed!) of ordinary mortals, and, on the other hand, to get its moral gifts rejected by those who require them most; its teaching is shelved as dead letter, or, at best, counsel of perfection.

Renounce the world, preaches Tolstoy; despise, cease to relish, such of the world's work, of the body's functions, as cannot be relinquished; let nothing touch you for its own sake or your own; eradicate self from your thoughts and feelings, and replace it by your neighbor, by mankind, by that impersonal personification of ideals which is Tolstoy's notion of God.

"If such be saintliness, chivalrousness, sentiment," answers the rest of mankind silently to itself, "by all means keep it on a shelf out of the way of ordinary life. Truthfulness, justice, chastity, mercy, are clearly quite unsuitable to the increase of wealth and the rearing of families; and is it not the saints and prophets, Tolstoy for instance, who tell us so?"

Now, as a matter of fact, to what save daily life can ideals, sentiment, saintliness, be profitably applied? Truthfulness, honesty, justice, chastity, mercy, are nothing but correctives of this world's ways; and it is only as such correctives that, save for the æsthetic pleasure of a divinity, they can ever be wanted. Unworldliness must be cultivated because our interests are legitimately worldly.

But holiness and heroism, precious because they are useful, have been considered as precious apart from use. Saints and heroes have been cultivated like rare and wonderful flowers, incapable of ever turning into fruit for food and seed. And, as a

result of such isolation and sterility, mankind has come to be divided—as we see it in Buddhism, in Christian monasticism and less crassly elsewhere—into the church and the world: those who accept life and sin, and those who kill the body, or all the body stands for, in order to perfect the soul. Like every other ascetic, Tolstoy, in preaching his doctrine of renunciation, is unconsciously giving in to the vicious automatism which sunders the natural man from the saint, and which discourages all application of higher feelings to ordinary existence on the score that ordinary existence can never be composed of higher feelings only. And in so far Tolstoy merely increases the modern tendency to question the efficacy of all moral teaching, to doubt the wholesomeness of sentiment and to consider ideals of conduct either as a mere symptom, an *epiphenomenon*, a fly on the axletree of progress, or (and human illogicalness reconciles both indictments) as a mischievous interference with the automatic ways of natural selection. It would, of course, be more philosophical to consider the continued recurrence of such ascetic or idealizing tendencies as a proof of their utility, despite all drawbacks, in helping on the practical existence of mankind. But ascetics have treated their especial soul-medicine or soul-food as the one panacea; and mankind (as prone to exaggeration as the prophets themselves) has developed a tendency to consider the dealers in panaceas as quacks or the victims of quacks.

IX.

The foregoing notes have attempted to set forth some of the chief peculiarities of the ascetic view of life, and of the prophetic temperament, as we may study them united in the person of Tolstoy. We have taken stock of the pessimistic basis of asceticism, its rejection of moderation, equilibrium of function, and such moral improvements as rest upon them, in opposition to wholesale renunciation; its passion for sacrifice and its preoccupation with death; finally, its tendency to a divorce between spirituality and life. In a similar manner, we have had occasion to verify the isolated and one-sided attitude of the born prophet; his attribution of his own moods and needs to the rest of the world, and his jealousy of, nay, hostility towards, every other mode of being; his incapacity for assimilating the ideas of others, for meeting them half-way and, of course, for feeling any correc-

tion or check to his own notions; briefly, his mono-ideism, and his mixture (odd, but so explicable) of complete self-belief and utter scepticism of received opinion.

And, having set these studies so far before the reader, I can forestall his question, and shall endeavor to answer it; to account for our instinctive sympathy with the seemingly useless teachings of asceticism, as I have had to answer it for myself in the course of my reading of Tolstoy.

This usefulness, these uses, result from the same peculiarities as the faults and the drawbacks. Isolation and mono-ideism give the ascetic and the prophet an extraordinary freedom of view, wherever his own definite attitude and limited idea are not concerned. Unconscious of those sympathizing and imitative impulses which compact other individuals with their fellows; untouched by any of the temptations which make others blink and compromise; inattentive to any other man's views and, therefore, perfectly sceptical towards them; and harassed, moreover, through and through, by organic dissatisfaction and unrest, this thinker, alone with his own thoughts and feelings (his eagle and his serpent, like Nietzsche's Zarathustra) is the most ruthless of critics and destroyers. Every ascetic is, in essence, an anarchist and a nihilist, a "sayer of 'No'" to the accepted life of the world—in the words (more significant than he, perhaps, knew) of James Hinton, a "Law Breaker," since the only law he believes in is the law of his own exceptional and isolated way of being. Hence he sees, as no laughing sceptic ever can, through every exaggeration, every "vital lie" save his own. The dominant and recurrent thought of all ascetics, from Buddhism and Ecclesiastes, through Stoicism and Christian Mysticism to the smallest modern revivalist, is *vanity*—the emptiness, non-existence, of everything save their own narrow wishes, needs and habits. Now, this attitude of mind corresponds to a great deal that really exists: in the happy-go-lucky, lazy, yet hurried, processes of life, there is quite an enormous amount which is dead letter, perfunctory, wasteful and mischievous; results of imperfect evolution, like those useless organs, those imperfect adaptations, which, according to the ingenious paradox of Dr. Metchnikoff, account for all disease, all vice and suffering, but which an instinct of social safety or individual laziness goes on admiring, as the Bridge-water writers admired the "harmonious designs of Nature." On to

all such perfunctory, dead letter, all such lying things, all such imperfect adaptations and mischievous survivals, the ascetic, the prophet, the marvellous anarchist, Tolstoy, directs his ruthless clear-sightedness. We all know his chapters on luxury, on the pseudo-work of the so-called intellectual classes, on the pseudo-morality of official religion, on so many of the idle activities which give us our daily bread or our daily ration of self-satisfaction. His immense and wearisome volume of art remains as a most useful *memento vivere* or *memento mori* to all of us who talk glibly of the holiness of beauty and its social mission. "The Kreutzer Sonata" probably aroused universal hostility less by its morbid and unchaste (monkish!) kind of chastity, than by its terribly true criticism of so much corruption and enervation hidden secure in the sacred mysteries of marriage and family life. And the writings on War are but the more moving and more explicit development of the remark of Tarde's, that, if the Past had not left us engines and institutions for warfare, the reciprocal destruction of national life and wealth would certainly never have originated in times as comparatively rational as ours. These and similar attacks on various forms of our smug moral callousness or vainglorious moral barbarism, are summed up in a thought which recurs throughout Tolstoy's works, beginning with his great novels:

"All this comes about, thanks solely to that social and administrative machinery whose business it is to subdivide the responsibility for evil done, in such fashion that no one should feel to what extent these acts are contrary to his nature. . . . *It is sufficient if a man free himself for an instant from this tangled net, in order to see the things which are contrary to his nature.*"

That is exactly what Tolstoy does for us. His unsociable and sceptical temper, his constitutional fault-finding, allow him to see, and to show us, one of the chief drawbacks (for every moral machinery, every human or cosmic arrangement has its drawback) of that normal automatic living from impulse to impulse, or, if you choose, from hand to mouth, which secures the continuance and improvement of the race, and, on the whole, the tolerable happiness of the individual. The question "Why?" "To what purpose?" which becomes, in the case of some of Tolstoy's heroes and in his own, misery and paralysis when applied to the

totality of existence itself, is salutary when we apply it every now and then to the detail of life. For it is then no longer: "What is the use of my being alive?" but the wholly different query: "Why, being alive, being what I am and wishing in a given way, am I nevertheless acting in this other way, which is inconsistent with my general life, personality and wishes?"

Yes; there is need of such occasional scattering of our best established habits and most necessary shams and shibboleths. Nietzsche is right in asking for a constant "revaluing of all standards of value." Only—what Nietzsche did not guess, and the world does not recognize—such has been the mission not of Epicureans and Cynics (falling in, as they do, with every-day habits), but of the far more ruthless, because more mono-ideistic and more unpractical, destructiveness of the prophets of asceticism.

Moreover, apart from its constant criticism of moral routine and its indefatigable exposure of perfunctoriness and hypocrisy, apart from its negative merit in demolishing so many cherished *vital lies*, and making the individual soul stand without shelter from the lightnings and the whirlwinds of the spiritual heavens; apart from its great functions of destruction (bringing, in Christ's words, "not peace, but a sword"), all progress owes a deep debt to asceticism of every denomination. For asceticism has given success to unworldliness, and made modesty and scrupulousness illustrious. The adoration of the *saint*, the triumphant enshrining of his poor bones, has been a salutary practice; since, even if that saint's virtues were mistaken, it was the desire for virtue, for acceptableness in God's eyes, which made him glorious in the eyes of men. It has been a help to progress that sanctity could compensate for poverty and weakness—nay, that poverty and weakness should have their disgrace removed; and more particularly in times when poverty was as often the result of one's neighbor's unscrupulousness as of one's own lack of initiative; and weakness was better for others than being a ruffian.

The school which has arisen in violent antagonism to ascetic self-denial, that of Nietzsche and the "Will to Power," bred, as it is, in times of comparative liberty and safety for the individual, has overlooked the fact that, in the past, a handful of stupid roughs, or the caprice of a delirious crowned degenerate, could in ten minutes destroy the results of years and years of industry, in-

genuity, self-command, in fact, of every combination of intellectual, moral and physical efficiency. In such a past,—and it is still at our door (I write within a week of the suppression of the St. Petersburg rising)—the saint is the necessary corrective, in mankind's judgment, for the atrocious success of the violent man or the intriguer. And, so long as we continue abetting success which is obtained to the detriment of others, so long shall we require the worship of the saint, as such. Asceticism is the inevitable outcome, because it is the natural corrective, of moral callousness. And, so long as the market and the home are no better than they are, we shall require to retire now and again into a church—built, if not of stone, then of reverent thoughts—in commemoration of some just, and gentle and austere man. Nay, we shall require to feel at times the impulse to self-chastisement, self-abasement and self-mutilation, so long as our daily life remains as thoughtless, mean, grasping and bestial as it often is.

And herein lies the secret of Tolstoy, as of all ascetics and prophets: of his exaggerations, his absurdities, his—let us call them by their rightful name—ravings; and of our listening, and feeling that we are right in listening, to them.

The destructiveness of asceticism is blind and excessive; it behooves our spiritual activity and discipline to make use of this dangerous moral force, as of any of the other forces of nature, bidding it work for our benefit and not to our hurt. But, even while we remain unable to direct it to our purposes, this disruptive energy of asceticism and prophecy is one of the necessary purifiers of our stagnating souls. It is good to be asked, "To what purpose?" by a Tolstoy, although our answer may differ so widely from the one he preaches.

VERNON LEE.