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Free Will in *War and Peace*

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In the next to last paragraph of *War and Peace* Leo Tolstoy makes the following rhetorical statement, "true, we are not conscious of our dependence but if we were to allow that we are free we arrive at an absurdity, whereas by admitting our dependence on the external world, on time and on causality we arrive at laws" (1444).[1] The statement is a relatively straightforward summary of a *reductio ad absurdum* argument graciously given to us by the author himself. Yet, given the sheer breadth of the work, a very natural question to ask is whether this summary is fair. And more importantly does the argument from *reductio* work as prescribed? On the one hand, it is the author himself who summarizes the argument. So, at the very least, Tolstoy intended to demonstrate that assuming the existence of freewill leads to an absurd conclusion, and that the opposite assumption must be true—that we are governed by deterministic laws. On the other hand, if one assumes that the *reductio* argument is a central argument of the text, then surely many more assumptions, postulates, and side arguments went into this larger argument than just those regarding freewill. If so, then any one of these assumptions might as well have been the source of the 'absurd conclusion'. Hence, we come to the second part of the problem: does Tolstoy's *reductio* argument actually demonstrate that an assumption of freewill is erroneous? The intention of the present essay is to argue for a negative response to this question, and to show that rejecting another of Tolstoy's latent assumptions circumvents the 'absurd conclusion'. Moreover, it is

[1] This book will be cited simply by the page number.

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actually this other assumption that leads Tolstoy to reject freewill and embrace determinism throughout *War and Peace*.

The presupposition responsible for Tolstoy's erroneous conclusion must have been so fundamental to his thinking that doubting it was for him impossible. Otherwise, it would be necessary to challenge his reasoning and competence as a thinker. This course, besides being overly ambitious, would most likely fail. Instead, it will be fruitful to investigate the concerns that drive Tolstoy's inquiry and to uncover features of the paradigm from which these concerns arise.

In the explicitly philosophical portions of *War and Peace*, Tolstoy inquires into the unfolding of history and criticizes contemporary historians. With regard to the War of 1812 he asks, "What brought about this extraordinary occurrence? What were its causes?" (715); and similarly with respect to the Battle of Borodino Tolstoy asks, "Why was the battle of Borodino fought?" (895). In the epilogue Tolstoy arrives at the conclusion that certain laws govern behavior of masses of people. Whether these laws are known or even knowable are legitimate questions for Tolstoy, questions that he addresses at different parts of the novel (1168). However, at this point, it is more important to examine the framework required to pose these questions of 'causes' in the way that he does. Whether the answers to these questions are the sums of infinitely many causes, laws governing human history, or the one cause responsible for reality as such, each question presupposes an answer that simply exists out there in the world. Thus, for Tolstoy, there is some actual cause or law or reason responsible for the War of 1812. Whatever Tolstoy's answer is, its correctness or incorrectness is a function of the actual state of affairs in reality.

Such a paradigm of thought might be considered a truism, one from which the very act of questioning arises. Hence it may be argued that Tolstoy is not only justified in adopting this axiomatic stance, but rather that he could not avoid adopting it same as anyone else. Yet for Tolstoy, postulating a reality that exists in a specific state in its entirety is not merely a prerequisite for inquiry, but moreover it is a direct source of some of his conclusions. As when he states:

> The problem lies in the fact that if we regard man as a subject for observation from whatever point of view -theological, historical, ethical or philosophic- we find the universal law of necessity to which he (like everything else that exists) is subject. But looking upon man from within ourselves -man as the object of our own inner consciousness of self -we feel ourselves to be free (1427).

Tolstoy seems to regard it possible to refer to the entirety of what exists and to make generalizations about the whole of reality. Further, he must think that there is something like an actual state of all existent things at any given time—a totality of being. These two axioms are interdependent and imply much more than the mere statement that one can be correct or incorrect about the state of affairs in the world outside one's body. It is as if one could clearly inscribe within a boundary the set of 'all existent things'. Otherwise, without this kind of boundary, referring to reality as such—in its entirety—seems difficult to comprehend. As when one refers to the 'set of all tulips' one has in mind a criterion for discriminating between these particular flowers and everything else that isn't a tulip. In that case, the criterion itself does meaningful work. However, the set of 'all existent things' is a special referent to say the least, primarily because it is hard to comprehend its implied criterion for discriminating between members and non-members.

At this point the reader might object that Tolstoy is being dragged into an abstract metaphysical debate, one in which he would not want to take part. This is not borne out by the text, however, as Tolstoy himself uses the phrase 'external world' in his summary of the *reductio* argument. It is possible that he intends to refer to everything that is not us, but again it is the entirety of the external world that he does refer to. Therefore, it is safe to say that Tolstoy entangles himself in this cumbersome metaphysical debate. One clue which might shed light on why this entanglement occurs is the subject matter that he begins to address as the metaphysical questions begin to mount: freewill and determinism. Quite quickly, in the transition from discussion of history and historians to that of free will, Tolstoy is led to make difficult and often puzzling statements. He must introduce a

distinction between consciousness and reason, which, according to him, are separate from each other and can yield independent and often incompatible self-knowledge (1427). Nonetheless, he writes, "man learns from a succession of experiments and reflections that he, as the object under observation, is subject to certain laws" (1427). These claims seem to be dubious, since a man is a conscious entity that cannot become entirely an object of his own observation for the simple reason that consciousness is itself implicated in the process of observation. Hence, it is difficult to discern what being an object of observation really means.

Even Tolstoy's hypothesized science of history—one that would sum up an infinite number of factors contributing to an event—belies a belief in a finite limit as well as a general conception of a specific state of all such factors at any given moment in time. Consequently, he conceives of reason as having limited access to objective knowledge of actual states of affairs. Reason of the sort discussed towards the end of *War and Peace* goes hand in hand with a certain view of science and of physical law—a view which was prevalent in Tolstoy's time. Within this philosophical framework laws are descriptions of natural phenomena (1427), and through knowledge of these laws, the principles that govern objects may be disclosed indubitably. In this sense laws are similar to rules that relate the movement of reality from some initial state to a subsequent state. Based on such an understanding of science, reality is a necessitated progression of states of all existent things, and through reason we become adapt at discovering laws that govern this progress of reality. Tolstoy seems to have internalized this view, as evidenced by his statement "reason gives expression to the laws of necessity" (1438). Hence, according to him, questions of 'why' and 'what' with respect to events must be resolved by answers given in terms of laws. Causal factors are then just conditionals that connect temporally separate states of reality.

Given the outlined network of axiomatic beliefs regarding the nature of reality, reason, and laws, it follows necessarily that reality is deterministic. So much so, in fact, that one who adopts these views may be led to a very hard-lined form of determinism: a view that if all of reality is in a particular state **N** at time **t**=0, then one and only one state **N'** will correspond to a particular subsequent moment in time **t'**, so that the initial state of

reality **N** determines all subsequent states. If the following three conditions hold: 1) all of reality is governed by laws, 2) the whole of reality is in some definite initial state, and 3) human beings are part of this reality; then any state of a human being is necessarily determined by the initial state of reality and the laws that govern its unfolding. Tolstoy comes into very close contact with this hard-lined view, and at times he adopts it outright. For example he writes about causality:

> The third element influencing our judgment is the degree to which we can apprehend that endless chain of causation demanded by reason, in which every phenomenon capable of being understood (and therefore every human action) must have its definite place as a result of what has gone before and as a cause of what will follow (1434).

However, he avoids full commitment to this ultra-determinism when he says that, despite our best attempts, it is impossible to "conceive of either complete freedom or complete necessity" (1436). Thus, Tolstoy appears to be acutely aware of the complexity and indeterminacy of the questions regarding freedom that he raises. Despite this intuition the conceptual framework within which he operates constantly pulls him in the direction of determinism. He is so entrenched in the distinction between reason and consciousness that he does not stop to ask what faculty is involved in the act of 'conceiving' of man as either free or determined. Is it the limit of our reason that prevents us from conceiving of complete necessity or is it our consciousness? The uncertainty, which he himself admits and which he must face, may itself be the result of an ambiguity in the distinction between reason and consciousness.

Tolstoy's predispositions form a metaphysical bedrock that constrains the philosophical approaches available for addressing the problem of freewill. His views of reason, laws, and reality spur each other on in such a way that one supposition necessitates the others. At the heart of Tolstoy's metaphysics lies an unyielding clarity of what 'totality of existence' actually means. It stands to reason along these lines that if all of reality is in some definite state at any given moment, then all things that constitute this reality must posses a definite nature. In turn, the definite nature of things

dictates that there must be laws governing the way an entity exhibits its inherent nature. In other words, the two beliefs—that laws disclose the nature of things and that reference to the entirety of existence is in principle possible—mutually support and necessitate one another, and Tolstoy embodies both. From this position a clear conception of knowledge and description of reality sprouts fourth in a natural way. It becomes easy to suppose that reason is able to trace the nature of things and subsequently, in the limit of infinite reason, to know the future states of all of reality. Tolstoy discloses as much about his metaphysical views when he discusses infinite summation of causes and taking account of all conditions underlying an event (1437). He imagines that, at least in principle, a complete description of reality is feasible.

It is difficult to understand what justifications are given for accepting Tolstoy's metaphysical beliefs. He provides almost no justification for his most fundamental metaphysical convictions within War and Piece. Instead, they seem to be paradigmatic and indispensable for his thought, and so it is likely that in his mind they did not require support at all. Yet, these assumptions are the very ideas that push him towards his conclusions regarding determinism; however, a *reductio ad absurdum* argument requires that other possible assumptions of the original position are examined as well. The most difficult of these assumptions to accept is the idea of the totality of being—the capacity to refer to everything that exists. For one, there appears to be no good empirical reason to suppose that such a reference is meaningful. After all, we always refer to some part of reality in relation to some other part, and we ourselves partition the range of possible experiences in order to make our discourse meaningful. Hence, we talk of experiences of a house or a tree, rather than all the sensory data available at a given moment. When one smells a flower it would be distracting and absurd to have to mention the feel of the ground as it exerts pressure on one's feet. Just taking a closer look at everyday sensory experience demonstrates the implausibility of referring to everything that exists. Furthermore, such reference involves a logical leap which consists in extrapolating from human capacity to refer to particulars, universals, and sets of universals, an additional ability to refer to everything that exists. Although such a leap may go unnoticed and feel very natural, extending a given capacity out to infinity may lead to numerous philosophical traps.

In addition, the idea that the entirety of reality can be referenced and held in one's mind is not supported by physical science. Neither is it supported by the physics of today, nor was this conceptualization any more plausible on physical grounds during Tolstoy's own time. One of the better attempts along this line lies in conceiving of the totality of all the energy in the universe; this would make as reasonable a boundary for physical reality as anything else. From the law of conservation of energy, which was accepted in Tolstoy's time, it can be supposed that a constant unchanging amount of energy is always present in the universe. From this supposition we can formulate the boundary of all existent things in terms of this constant.

The first difficulty for such an approach is that a circular definition underlies the attempt. The concept of energy depends on the conservation law for its meaning. In other words, energy is typically defined as the quantity which is conserved under certain changes. Thus defining the bounds of reality in terms of energy depends on the definition of energy, which in turn depends on where the boundary of the universe is drawn for which a certain value is constant; this is a clear case of circular definition. Not to mention, the constant value of total energy is zero according to the leading science. Hence, in light of this approach, the state of reality **N** at time **t=0** exactly determines all subsequent states of reality for the simple reason that the amount of energy in the universe is always the same—mainly zero.

In any case, the remainder of such a generous attempt to circumscribe 'everything that exists' is nothing like what Tolstoy could use for a discourse on determinism. In fact, referring to everything in terms of energy is almost completely uninformative for the issues of history and personal freedom addressed in the epilogue of *War and Peace*. In the epilogue the attempt to meaningfully discuss the set of all existing things becomes even more perplexing. Tolstoy seems to want to refer to all the people, all the bullets, all the cannons as well as all the planets and atoms in one sweeping shot. Another implication is that he would also need to refer to all those things we currently don't even know about. Thus history would need, like physics and mathematics, to "set out upon the new process of integrating the infinitesimal unknown" (1441). This of course assumes that history would deal with converging sums. Even with his apparent awareness

of the issues' complexities, still Tolstoy believes that "however accessible may be the chain of causation of any action we shall never know the whole chain, since it is endless, and so again we never get a conception of absolute necessity" (1437); a statement that further demonstrates Tolstoy's inability to part with the assumption that referring to 'it' as a single chain of causes is meaningful and justifiable.

Throughout the epilogue of *War and Peace* no support for this dubious assumption is ever attempted. Yet it has several significant implications for the discussion presented at the end of the book. Reason, as conceived by Tolstoy, must be something that operates in transcendent space where it can gaze at all of 'it'—the entire chain of necessitated causality. Though human beings don't have full access to such omniscient reason, enough reason is nonetheless postulated that we can know that reality as a singular entity may, if only potentially, be taken up in a single gaze.

One implication that follows directly from believing that there is such a thing as 'totality of reality' is that all events are determined and states of all entities are necessitated. Essential to note are those notions that are excluded by this assumption. Specifically, it is impossible that spontaneous self-caused events can take place. Otherwise the possibility of referring to a definite state of affairs of reality would be undermined. At any given moment, a spontaneous event—one uncaused by previous states of reality—may take place, and then the actual state of reality becomes otherwise than the one being considered right at that very moment.

Furthermore, self-causation would run counter to every acceptable conception of law, natural or otherwise. Description and prediction of nature in terms of laws would have to cease, since any such prediction would be susceptible to erratic alteration and falsification, thereby making predictions worthless. As Tolstoy himself points out, "if there is even one heavenly body moving freely then the laws of Kepler and Newton are negated and no conception of the movement of the heavenly bodies any longer exists" (1440). He then goes on to say in the next line, "if there is a single human action due to freewill then not a single historical law can exist, nor any conception of historical events" (1440). This is a very curious yet definitive statement, which unequivocally discloses the meaning of freewill as it stands for Tolstoy. He thinks of freewill as a self-caused force

arising out of nothingness: "consciousness says: ...I am independent of cause, since I feel myself to be the cause of every manifestation of my life", and "to imagine a man perfectly free and not subject to the law of necessity we must imagine him alone, outside space, outside time and outside dependence on cause" (1438). At this point the set of claims becomes a bit overwhelming. Why should anyone imagine freewill as a self-caused act arising out of nowhere? It is unclear why Tolstoy feels that self-consciousness provides us with a feeling of instantaneous self-causation. On the contrary, as is frequently evidenced by the mental life of the characters in *War and Peace*, people perceive themselves as making decisions for which they construct justifications based on past events, future aspirations, and the affairs of the world. Never does a feeling of being in a mental vacuum overwhelm any one of the characters in the epic. In cases of amnesia due to shock of a wound or a paralyzing event, one grasps for memories in order to feel oneself back in control. So, if anything, consciousness seems to give us a feeling of being in control of ourselves. As Tolstoy skillfully argues, this perception of control is most often overestimated, but not because people feel themselves in possession of a spontaneously arising force.

In connection with the question of freewill, another very ancient philosophical question is raised. The issue of personal freedom is closely tied to the problem of personal identity. Who is Napoleon or Czar Alexander? What does it mean to refer to a particular person? These questions naturally arise whenever it is debated whether any person exhibits freewill; it then must be examined whether memories are parts of a person or not. If memories are parts of a person's identity, and hence precedents for decisions, then freewill no matter how conceived is not spontaneous and unprecedented. Rather, there is a chain of causations and interconnections among memories, which constitutes another realm of causal interaction. These issues are never taken up explicitly by Tolstoy, and it is hard to see how the *reductio* argument may be convincing without addressing such concerns.

Returning to the *reductio* argument, it is long overdue to examine what 'absurd conclusion' Tolstoy could have in mind, which for him follows from the assumption of freewill. Given the larger agenda in *War and Peace* of discrediting historical methods which rely on powers of individuals

for explanation of events, it is likely that Tolstoy means that assuming freewill leads to the absurd conclusion that individuals are responsible for the development of history. More specifically, if freewill is allowed then history does not follow laws, but is erratic, spontaneous, and chaotic. This absurd conclusion does follow if freewill is completely severed from the unfolding of reality. If man is attributed an unmitigated capacity to cause change in the world without himself being affected, then this stands in stark opposition to laws of history. In that case, it would be impossible that "the number of births or of crimes is subject to mathematical laws" (1442).

On the contrary, discarding the assumption that reality can be meaningfully referenced in its entirety undermines determinism while leaving room for a possible reinterpreted version of freewill. If the whole of reality cannot be meaningfully ascribed a single state at some instant, then laws are always a function of other laws which dictate when specific laws are applicable. Although laws may be universal, they must always apply to subsets of reality and never to the whole of reality for the simple reason that there is no such thing as all of reality. So, for example, although we have laws that dictate the interaction of masses, these laws apply only under those conditions where it is masses alone that are being considered. Thus, the movement of masses is absolutely determined by laws of mechanics under the condition that objects are considered as masses. Similarly, whether an apple will fall at a given moment is absolutely determined with respect to some state of a tree, but not determined with respect to the gusts of wind that will topple the apple at another moment. Analogously, a person may be absolutely determined with respect to certain specifiable factors, but it does not follow that this person is absolutely determined with respect to all those factors that can influence his future states. In this sense, laws that govern anything from atoms to civilizations are inseparable from carefully outlined conditions under which these laws apply. The inadequacy of the notion of 'totality of reality' places doubt on the possibility of laws that completely determine a given event.

After reducing determinism to a local phenomenon, nontrivially specified and often too difficult or even impossible to identify, it follows that actions and behaviors of human beings are determined in varying degree with respect to a multitude of factors. These factors conflict with

each other and jostle for influence. Consequently, there isn't a totality of all factors that exhaust all the possible influences on a human being. In conclusion, by rejecting Tolstoy's metaphysical assumption about reality as one conceivable whole, one avoids the absurd conclusion of a spontaneously occurring force of will. Without this axiom it is possible to imagine people in control of actions to varying degrees. Some more influential factors contributing to human action may on occasion fall within the boundary which we call 'that person', while on other occasions a person is more dependent on those factors that fall outside of him or her.

The assumption that there is anything like a totality of all relevant factors that determine an action or an event is at the very least unjustified by Tolstoy. Instead it is more prudent to think that identifying the degrees of relevance of any one factor for determining action is always a subjective approximation; drawing the boundary of all relevant factors is always arbitrary and in itself as indeterminate as the boundary of reality. In this light, contrary to Tolstoy's aspirations, history may be doomed to remain a humanistic rather than a natural science, and in turn natural science may be doomed to be quite humanistic as well.

Works Cited

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