

# The ethical conception of Leo Tolstoy in the interpretation of Maximilian Voloshin

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**Abstract.** The article examines the interpretation of Leo Tolstoy's ethical conception provided by a Russian poet Maximilian Voloshin. A brief exposition of Tolstoy's ethical conception position of a person's concern for their soul is provided. In this regard, the requirements of love and nonviolence are not of value in and of themselves but are subordinate to the main cause of salvation, the improvement of a person's soul. This is the point on which Voloshin focuses his criticism reproaching Tolstoy for selfishness. Non-resistance to evil by violence is paradoxically interpreted by Voloshin as evasion from evil. Voloshin emphasizes that Tolstoy's understanding of evil is simplified due to his failure to understand the sinful nature of mankind. Voloshin opposes Tolstoy's ethics interpreted by him in this manner with his own ethical conception suggesting that it is necessary to not move away from evil in the world but, on the contrary, take it into oneself and strive to transform it with the internal forces of good. In conclusion, it is examined that despite their differences both thinkers agreed that responding with evil to evil is unacceptable from the point of ethics. Both Tolstoy and Voloshin were also characterized by the implementation of their ethical provisions in their personal lives.

**Keywords:** Leo Tolstoy, Maximilian Voloshin, ethics, non-resistance to evil, good, evil.

Leo Tolstoy's doctrine of non-resistance to evil by violence was widely interpreted and criticized in Russian philosophical literature of the early 20th century. Maximilian Voloshin also expressed his attitude towards Tolstoy in the article "The Fate of Leo Tolstoy" timed to coincide with the death of the great writer and published in 1910 in the "Russian Thought" journal along with articles and memoirs about Tolstoy by Z. Gippius, V. Bryusov, P. Struve, S. Frank, S. Bulgakov, and others.

At the basis of Tolstoy's ethical conception lies his understanding of the Christian teaching as a way of individual salvation of the soul. Jesus Christ himself was viewed by Tolstoy not as God but as a teacher, a great spiritual and social reformer destroying the old and giving new foundations of life [1: 316]. Therefore, unlike in case of F. Dostoevsky, the value of Christianity for Tolstoy is not so much the person of Jesus himself but rather his

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teaching which, according to Tolstoy, is the metaphysics and ethics of love [1: 316] and in the rejection of which he accused ecclesiastical Christianity. Tolstoy considered the acts of the church not a mere distortion but a direct denial of the teachings of Christ the Man who predominantly taught the way of life and moral principles [2: 109]. It is the law of God as a moral model of truly human existence and by no means the ontological reality of the presence of God in the world that Tolstoy considered and a priori obvious basis for human existence [3: 255].

The prevailing concern of man, according to Tolstoy is concern for the salvation of one's soul achieved by striving for divine perfection. "In the human soul, there are not moderate rules of justice and philanthropy but the ideal of complete, infinite divine perfection. Only striving for this perfection deviates the direction of man's life from the animal state to the divine as much as it is possible in this life" [4: 79].

In accordance with the evangelical postulate that God is love ("God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him" (1 John 4:16)), the perfection of the soul presupposes reaching such a state when it only radiates love: "The essence of human life and the highest law that should govern it is love" [5: 166]. Hence follows the moral ideal of Tolstoy: love as the norm of human relationships and doing good as an expression of this love. At the same time, the sought-for perfection belongs only to God while a person can only strive for perfection understanding the impossibility of achieving it. The further a person moves along the path of improvement, the more they realize their imperfection including moral imperfection since their attitude towards other people is not always based on the law of love and kindness.

What Tolstoy considered the beacons on a Christian's spiritual way are the commandments given by Christ in the Sermon on the Mount among which the most important, from his viewpoint, was the commandment "do not resist evil" which Tolstoy and his followers interpreted as the inadmissibility of resisting evil by violence. In Tolstoy's understanding, the prohibition on violence is absolute since violence as compulsion is essentially opposite to the fundamental law of spiritual life – love. "Do not resist evil means do not do violence, that is, an act that is always opposite to love" [6: 313]. In this regard, Tolstoy views the commandment of non-resistance as a negative formulation of the law of love. "To love means to do as the other wants, to subordinate one's will to the will of another. To violate is to do as I want, to subjugate someone else's will to mine" [1: 318].

A specific feature of Tolstoy's ethical conception is that the primary moral maxima – to never do evil – not so much follows love for another or sincere concern for them as it presents a sort of preventive measure on the path of improving one's soul. S.L. Frank notes that "Tolstoy here strictly follows the position of moral individualism: the first and last task of a person relates to the person themselves, to their improvement and moral development" [7: 436]. In a sense, Tolstoy proceeded from the egoistic attitude as the primary basis of human actions believing that "every person lives only to make their life good, for their own sake" [8: 324]. A.A. Guseinov concludes: "If we consider these two projections of the attitude towards God – the attitude towards others and towards oneself – the initial and fundamental, from Tolstoy's point of view, is the attitude towards oneself. A moral attitude towards oneself sort of automatically guarantees a moral attitude towards others" [1: 314].

Thus, the ethics of non-resistance is essentially a requirement obliging every person to think about the salvation of their soul. Even an involuntary evil-doing leads the soul off the path of salvation. Therefore, a categorical prohibition on any possible infliction of evil including violent opposition to evil is introduced as violence itself is evil. Paradoxically, exactly due to its categorical nature, Tolstoy's ethics allows for conniving at the evil done by other people. This allowance was a serious flaw in the conception and Tolstoy tried to justify non-interference in an atrocity committed by another with the argument of the epistemological inferiority of a person. A limited human mind can not completely understand

the motivation of another person even if they are a murderer caught in the process of their crime: “justifying violence used against a neighbor to protect another neighbor from the worst violence is always wrong because when using violence against an evil that has not yet been committed one can never know which evil will be greater – the evil of my violence or that from which I want to protect” [4: 28]. One cannot resist the evil done by another person as one can never be sure that they are doing evil especially since there is no consensus among people as to what is good and what is evil and often what some people consider evil others view as good, and vice versa [4: 37]. In contrast to this, a person must turn to their own soul, fight against evil in themselves, of which, according to Tolstoy, they are capable. In his diary, Tolstoy writes: “There is only one thing in my life that is in my power: it is its internal change – getting closer and closer to moral perfection, and this is the only necessity for me and the main change in my life that is always in my power” [9: 360].

Tolstoy’s ethics were subjected to the most varied criticism, the traditional elements of which were reproaches of individualism, rationalism, anarchism, etc. This criticism was joined by Voloshin, however, from a very unexpected angle accentuating the motives of egoism and self-centeredness in the conception of the great writer. Attitude towards another person is motivated not by concern for them but by taking care of oneself. In his article “The Fate of Leo Tolstoy” written on the occasion of the death of the great writer, Voloshin highlights the egoistic nature of this conception with the following paradoxical phrase: “do not resist evil and evil will not affect you” [10: 532].

Voloshin emphasizes that the termination of resistance to evil provides a person with “security from external evil”. The poet writes about a sort of “ring of security and prosperity” that surrounded the writer from all sides and was impossible to escape. Voloshin interprets Tolstoy’s conception as separating oneself from the world evil, alienating oneself from it, enclosing oneself in a magic circle of security in which one can safely engage in self-improvement without fearing the vicissitudes of the world: “If I stop resisting the evil outside myself, it only creates security for myself from external evil but, at the same time, I enclose myself in selfish self-improvement” [10: 532].

Such a paradoxical interpretation eliminates the moral significance of Tolstoy’s conception. It is no longer so much a way of relating to evil as it is self-removal, isolation from the problem of evil in the world. In Voloshin’s interpretation, Tolstoy is separated from evil, is not aware of it, and does not encounter it in any way. He seems to go beyond the bounds of the world placing himself “on the other side of good and evil”. What side exactly? The following words of Voloshin explicitly clarify this: due to Tolstoy’s position of removing oneself from evil, around him, there “has formed security similar to the intolerable painlessness of a paralyzed part of the body when the patient cries out for joy at the first sensation of pain” [10: 532]. This moral anesthesia obtained by a person who has isolated themselves from evil demonstrates that, according to Voloshin, they regress into the pre-human world, the world of preconsciousness where there is still no separation of good and evil and no subject of morality. This world is a world of elemental principles close to the chaotic fundamental principle of the world, the primitive will of A. Schopenhauer or the Dionysian abyss of F. Nietzsche. This unconscious foundation of the world or the “ancient chaos”, according to F. Tyutchev, is ambivalent. It is inhabited by both evil and good creatures characterized by an undecided, semi-potential state so that the same entity can act as a carrier of both evil and good actions. Therefore, there is no clear distinction between good and evil, no manifested logos, meaning, and knowledge. This initial chaotic world lacking shaped objects and categories was pushed aside as consciousness developed but did not disappear and continues to exist at the foundation of the world. It can be sensed by select people – poets and mystics who have a particularly developed “night side” of the soul but the closest to it are children. Voloshin was especially attentive to the world of childhood in relation to the problem of child psychology that interested him. Voloshin characterizes

children's consciousness as dreaming. Children are pre-conscious beings, they are natural, and the element of their life, as Voloshin demonstrated in another essay "Revelations of Children's Games" (1907) is games and dreams. The dreamlike nature of children, according to Voloshin, manifests in that they seem to be daydreaming, sleeping with open eyes [11: 499, 503]. By this expression, the poet implies that in the minds of children, there is an indissoluble mixture of reality and fantasy similar to that which was present in the minds of primitive humans when all of mankind was in its infancy. A dreaming person is not capable of an analytical division of the world and clear identification and fixation of opposite categories. For this reason, children do not know good and evil, their world is a world in which good and evil have not yet manifested. This state is characterized by the concept of innocence. Objectively, children certainly face the evil and good of the real world but can it be stated that they suffer in the true sense of the word? Hardly so, because suffering requires a subject, a self-conscious "I". Children, on the other hand, perceive the manifestations of good and evil, suffering and pleasures as the natural elements of the surrounding reality. In one of her stories, Voloshin's acquaintance, poetess Adelaide Gertsyuk describes the mental states of her heroine who never left the world of childhood as an adult: "She lived as if in a dream"; "There was some kind of torment similar to the sensation of pain in an operated patient under anesthesia usually not reaching consciousness" [12: 145]. We compare this description with Voloshin's characteristic of the existence of Tolstoy as "the painlessness of a paralyzed part of the body" to understand that to Voloshin, Tolstoy's ethical conception invites back into the prehuman, spontaneous, fused-undivided world, into a world where the human personality has not yet been born.

In contrast to this world, the world a developed personality of an individual lives in is structured and divided, a world of not dreaming but rational consciousness. The transition to it is like waking up from sleep, dropping the dreams of the night soul, and the birth of the daytime consciousness dividing the world into clearly defined entities, stable and distinct, which are easy to operate. Such an analytically dismembered and structured world opens up prospects for goal-setting activity based on an analysis of reality and a conscious choice from the available alternatives. In the categorical composition of the "adult world", the most important place is occupied by the categories of good and evil. Their emergence is due to that with a person's awareness of themselves as an individual, an "I" with its own goals and needs, they gain the ability to consciously align their actions either with the good of another (good) or with their own good to the detriment of another (evil). The biblical tradition links the birth of the human "I" precisely with the awareness of the categories of good and evil. Consciousness, and with it the human personality, is born at the moment of distinguishing between good and evil. Cognition of the first categorical pair allows choosing between them. Therefore, the birth of the human person is marked by the freedom of choice, specifically, moral choice. The initial choice made is the exit from the womb of nature, the birth of the world of freedom, that is, the human world. In this regard, morality is the very ontology of the human personality that does not exist before this choice and disappears if such a choice is abolished. Personality is always born as a result of an existential act bringing a real person to life from a pre-human potential being, specifically as a result of the implementation of a moral choice, consciously taking the path of good or evil [12: 145].

The world on this side of good and evil, the real world inhabited by self-conscious individuals, presupposes a person being doomed to be making a constantly renewed choice between good and evil under their full responsibility. A person is always free to choose but they are not free to not make a choice. Even if a person evades the choice between good and evil, they still objectively make a choice, and this choice – alas! – will always be in favor of evil. This point was expressed with great force by one of Tolstoy's critics, VI. Solovyov: the world of man is moral, permeated in its entirety by the battle between good and evil for the reason that evil is aggressive and actively opposes good. Evil would not be evil if it were

neutral [13: 71]. Accordingly, a self-aware person cannot observe neutrality. They are obliged to choose, take the side of evil or good. However, within the situation of choice, a person is free to choose between good and evil and nothing can force them to choose one or another against their will. This provision lies at the base of the norms of Christian ethics that postulate that a completely developed human person must make a conscious and free choice in favor of good. According to the biblical tradition, at the moment of birth of the human personality, man chose evil, and this determined his fall. The task of a human is to overcome the sinful corruption of their nature, the consequences of that fatal wrong initial choice. This task is also postulated by Tolstoy – in this, he and his critics do not diverge. The differences begin in the means of carrying it out. In this context, it is appropriate to consider Voloshin's second main critical thesis regarding Tolstoy's ethical concept, namely Tolstoy's insufficient understanding of the complex nature of evil [10: 532].

From Voloshin's point of view, Tolstoy interprets evil in a more simplified manner compared to its understanding in Christianity. The reason for this is that Tolstoy viewed Christianity exclusively as ethical teaching and not as a religious and metaphysical doctrine. Not recognizing the divine mission of Christ, Tolstoy does not accept the fundamental Christian position on the sinful corruption of human nature. From this follows his simplified understanding of evil as he considers the complete elimination of evil from a person's soul by their own efforts possible. In particular, Tolstoy adheres to a literal understanding of the words of Christ that the kingdom of God is within man and interprets them so that each person can open the embryo of the Kingdom of God within themselves with their own strength and create the Kingdom of God in their soul with their own effort following the literal fulfillment of the commandments of the Sermon on the Mount. In turn, this also clarifies the so-called "egoism" of Tolstoy's teaching: if each person can create the Kingdom of God in their soul by their own efforts, that is, achieve a state of experiencing only love and doing only good, it is exactly that (and not the improvement of the outside reality) that should be their primary task. An untransformed person is unable to radically improve the world and other people but they can transform themselves, build the Kingdom of God in their soul, and only then such a person will be able to exert a truly transforming influence on the world.

We cannot but note certain similarities between the ethics of Tolstoy and the ethics of I. Kant which is also of categorical and abstract nature and, therefore, difficult to put into practice. Kant suggests that a person should behave as if the kingdom of goals has already been realized even though the real world is far from such a state. Tolstoy essentially proclaims a similar idea: guided by the commandments, each person should behave as if the Kingdom of God had already come, and then it would be achieved. However, the "as if" strategy only works if all people follow this rule. If everyone without exception behaves as if the Kingdom of God has already come, then it will come. Yet if someone does not accept these conditions and does not act in alignment with all others, the Kingdom of God will not come, the world will remain submerged into evil, and the efforts of those developing according to the principles of Tolstoy or Kant will not reach the goal. "If people do not fulfill one of these commandments," notes Tolstoy, "the world will be broken. If people will fulfill all the commandments, the kingdom of peace will be on earth. These commandments exclude all evil from people's lives" [6: 371].

Tolstoy substantiates the non-interference in the evil taking place in the world by the fact that a person is unable to know the train of thought and the direction of the will of the other, that the other is not transparent to their mind. However, Tolstoy believes that a person is completely transparent for themselves and is, therefore, able and obliged to fight the evil within themselves and, perhaps, even entitled to exercise coercion in relation to themselves. As a rationalist, Tolstoy believes that his "I" is completely under his control. Yet through this, he ignores the complexity of the human soul, its unconscious which was already broadly revealed by psychoanalysis in the 20th century but was always known by people as

evidenced, for example, by the words of the Apostle Paul that while subjectively desiring good, a person is attracted to evil, as well as Goethe's famous dictum that two souls live in a person. The complexity and non-transparency of the human soul were described by Tolstoy's contemporary Dostoevsky who provided a much more subtle understanding of evil residing in man. In his article on the production of *The Brothers Karamazov* on the stage of the Moscow Art Theater, Voloshin characterized the main collision of this work as follows: "the evil that they (the Karamazovs) must overcome and destroy in themselves is their father" [14: 367]. Such a formulation most certainly testifies to an understanding of the immanent evil in man that is far from being problem-free.

Ignoring the metaphysical meaning of Christianity, Tolstoy also does not accept the true meaning of Christian love. In Tolstoy's ethics, not doing evil to another is a negative formulation of love. However, a negative formulation cannot replace positive. Not inflicting harm on another does not yet mean love for them. It appears that Tolstoy believes that love is only possible once perfection is achieved. For Tolstoy, love is an ultimate idea a person needs to be guided by following Kant's rule "as if" the whole world is already living in accordance with the law of love. This rejects the truly Christian understanding of love for man exactly as an imperfect, sinful, and fallen being with his weaknesses and vices; such love presupposes effective participation and not just refraining from coercion.

Thus, Voloshin rejects Tolstoy's formulation for the reason that "Tolstoy did not understand the meaning of evil on earth and could not solve its secret" [10: 533]. In terms of Christian metaphysics, this means that one cannot live in a world of sin as if they were sinless. The Christian metaphysics view sinlessness as only possible for the God-man while Tolstoy believes that a person can achieve sinlessness by their own efforts. According to Christian ethics, such an attitude leads a person to pride and deviation towards evil. Uncoincidentally, in his essay on Tolstoy, Voloshin writes that Tolstoy had "mystically" succumbed to the second temptation of Christ by the devil traditionally considered as the temptation of pride: "The devil led him to Jerusalem and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down from here. For it is written: "He will command his angels concerning you to guard you carefully; they will lift you up in their hands so that you will not strike your foot against a stone". Jesus answered, "It is said: "Do not put the Lord your God to the test" (Matthew 4:6). "Was not Tolstoy's entire life the miracle refused by Christ?", the poet asks. Characterizing Tolstoy's overall conception, Voloshin describes its consequences as follows: "I deprive myself of the experience of earthly life, the possibility of necessary weaknesses and falls which alone teach us forgiveness, understanding, and acceptance of the world. "He who has saved his soul will lose it, but he who has lost his soul for my sake will save it" [10: 532–533].

In the conclusion of his article, as an opposition to the teachings of Tolstoy, Voloshin examines a different ethical ideal which he considers to be filled with a genuine Christian spirit: "By not resisting evil, I sort of surgically separate evil from myself and by doing so, I violate the deepest truth revealed by Christ: that we are here on earth not at all to reject evil but to transform, enlighten, save evil. And we can save and sanctify evil only by taking it into ourselves and within ourselves, by sanctifying it with ourselves" [10: 533]. This way of relating to evil was provided to Voloshin not so much by the teaching as by the very person and life of Christ who, being holy and sinless by nature, came into the world to sinful and untransformed people. Christ did not reject evil but took it into himself, according to Voloshin's expression, or took upon himself the sins of the world, according to the traditional Christian formulation. Unlike Tolstoy who recognizes only the Christ of the Sermon on the Mount, Voloshin primarily recognizes Christ the Creed (without rejecting, of course, his ethical admonitions), the Christ who sacrifices himself descending into the world of evil and taking its sins upon himself to atone for them. Factually, Voloshin sees no other way to fight evil aside from this self-sacrifice. Not self-isolation from evil but an active movement

towards it, confrontation. At the same time, opposition to evil by force is not allowed here either. Although Christ did expel the money changers from the temple by force, his true mode of action was revealed during his arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane when he commanded Peter to sheathe the sword saying that all who took the sword would die by the sword. These words of the Savior contain the main condemnation of the struggle against evil with violence – those who fight against evil with violence take the path of evil themselves. Evil must be actively opposed with good which, as Tolstoy rightfully noted, is nonviolence and love. Overall, Tolstoy's maxim of non-resistance to evil can be understood not only traditionally as "non-resistance to evil by violence" but in reverse as "resistance to evil by non-violence" – and in this form, according to Voloshin, it will fully correspond to the spirit of Christian teaching. Christ sets an example by actively fighting against evil not by force but by non-violence through sacrificing himself.

The moral ideal of Voloshin – fighting against evil by accepting it into oneself for transformation – is extremely harsh as it does not create that magic circle of protection that Voloshin associated with Tolstoy's teaching but, on the contrary, endangers one's existence in the face of powerful forces of evil. Accepting evil, confronting it is like inoculating oneself with a disease in the expectation that the forces of immunity will be able to defeat it. However, the opposite might also be the case. There must be great forces of love and good in the soul for one to be able to take evil into themselves without harm. Factually, in the Christian tradition, this can only be done by the Savior. Thus, for a regular person, fight against evil is a feat that cannot be accomplished on one's own. However, one of the key elements of Christian culture is the awareness of the insufficiency of man's own powers and the hope for divine help with the support of which it becomes possible to perform deeds exceeding the measure of a person.

In conclusion, similar to Tolstoy, Voloshin sought to put his moral maxim into practice. The appeal of such personalities as Tolstoy and Voloshin lies in the fact that they tried to live in accordance with the norms of ethical existence they proclaimed. M.L. Gelfond argues that "Tolstoy the philosopher invariably acted as a radical reformer of his own life which became a space for the direct normative implementation of the principles he preached" [15: 179]. According to another modern researcher V.V. Varava, "the titanism of Tolstoy ... did not fit into the framework of any earthly reality, let alone cultural reality"; the incomparable artistic talent of the writer helped him "feel the untruth of the present life in all its manifestations – from everyday and religious to cultural and bohemian" [16: 172]. Tolstoy's way of life and behavior have always drawn no less attention than his works. In the article "In Memory of Leo Tolstoy", S.L. Frank writes that love and reverence for Tolstoy oblige "to reject everyday life, the meaningless drowning of life in the temporal and external, the irreligious attitude to life" [17].

In the same way, Voloshin is appealing not only due to his creativity but also due to his life, especially his actions during the civil war when he risked his own life to engage in saving people from court and reprisals from both of the main forces at war. This activity was based not only on strong convictions but also on strong will. Following his ethical ideal, Voloshin did not rise above the battle during the years of the civil war but rushed into the very thick of evil reaching an unprecedented scale to act there, in its very center, in accordance with the norms of love and goodness. The position that Voloshin occupied during the civil war was formulated by him as follows: to be in the thick of the struggle among the warring ones, that is, among the triumphant evil not supporting any of them but steadily following his own socio-ethical ideal – the creation of such a social system that will agree with the spirit of Christ: "when everyone will work for others for free and receive what they need for themselves in the form of alms. So that everything is a blessing and a gift" [18: 583]. That was true self-sacrifice in the process of which the poet himself was repeatedly threatened with death (more than once, he saw his name on the execution lists of both the Reds and the

Whites) but which became a remarkable example of not only civic courage but also the practical implementation of an ethical position.

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