Letter to a Revolutionary

by Leo Tolstoy

By long and hard experience, I have come to the conclusion that it is useless to argue with people who do not see what they cannot help seeing. Such people are not guided in their reflections by the search after truth, but by the defense of their position, their past, and their present. To argue with such people is the same as arguing with a builder who has erected a house in which he has put all his pride and his life, and, finding that his angles are not right, does not want to know or see that a right angle is one-half of a straight angle. He wants the angle that he has built as a right angle to be right, and so he, a clever and serious man, will not and cannot understand the properties of a right angle. The same is true of the retorts that I constantly hear against the indubitable and obvious moral truth of nonresistance to evil, which are raised from two mutually hostile sides: by the governmental conservatives and by the revolutionaries!

One side began to build an obtuse angle: the other for the same reason began to build an acute angle. Both sides are angry at one another, and still more at the carpenter’s square, which shows them that they are both wrong. You are defending the angle that you have started against obviousness and indubitability. It does not agree with the right angle, which you know very well, and so I am not going to prove to you what you know as well as I do. But I will ask you for a moment to doubt that everything you have done was precisely what ought to have been done, and that what you intend to do is what ought to be, and from this abstract standpoint to look at the arguments of your letter and at their dear and direct purpose.

Your arguments reduce themselves to this: that a man, in the name of the love of men, may and should kill men, because there exist considerations, mysterious to me or else very incomprehensible, in the name of which men have always killed one another. These are the same considerations by which Caiaphas found it more advantageous to kill Christ rather than to ruin the whole nation. The purpose of all these arguments is the justification of murder. You even seem to be indignant, because there are some people who assert that it is never right to kill, just as I found people who were indignant over people who asserted that it was not right to beat women and children.

Humanity comes into being and moral consciousness grows in it, at first reaching a point when it sees the moral impossibility of eating one’s own parents, then of killing the superfluous children, then of holding slaves, then of making the members of the family mind by beating them, and then – one of the chief accomplishments of humanity – the impossibility of attaining the aggregate good by means of murder, and in general by means of violence. There are people who have reached this stage of the moral consciousness, and there are people who have not reached it. There is nothing to dispute or argue about. No matter how conclusively it may be proved to me that I shall attain a higher good for my children and for all of humanity if I teach my children by means of a whip, I shall not be able to do so, just as I cannot kill. All I know is that, just as I cannot fight and beat children, I cannot kill. There is nothing about it to discuss. All I can say is that those who want to defend violence, and especially murder, must not speak of love, just as people who want to prove that the acute angle of their building is a right angle must not speak of the perpendicularity of the sides, because, by
asserting this, they refute themselves. If we talk at all of love, no examples of robbers will ever lead up to the necessity of killing another, but only to the simplest and most inevitable deduction from love: that a man will defend another with his body, will give his life for another, but will not take the life of another.

I did not have any intention of arguing, but I seem to have begun to argue. All right, let it be. Your letter not only interested me, but even touched me. Under the thick bark (pardon me) of your superstitions I saw a serious mind and a good heart, and I should like to fraternally share with you the conception of life which gives me the good.

You say beautifully that the fundamental commandment is the commandment of love, but you are wrong when you state that all private commandments may impair it. You are here incorrectly confusing two different things – for example, the commandment not to eat pork and the commandment not to kill. The first may be in disagreement with love, because it does not have love for its object. But the second is only an expression of that degree of consciousness which humanity has reached in the definition of love. Love is a very dangerous word. You know that very bad acts are committed in the name of love for the family, worse ones still in the name of love of country, and the most terrible horrors in the name of love of humanity. It has long been known that love gives life its meaning, but in what does love consist? This question has continuously been answered by the wisdom of humanity, and always in a negative sense. It turns out that what was incorrectly called and passed under the form of love was not love. To kill people is not love. To torture and beat them in the name of something, or to prefer one class to another is also not love. And the commandment about not resisting evil with violence is a commandment that points out the limit where the activity of love ends. It is possible to go ahead in this matter, but not back, as you wish to do.

Here is a remarkable thing: you, who recognize that the meaning of life is in serving others in the name of love, murmur, because the safe and undoubted path of this service has been pointed out to you, just as though a man should murmur because the correct channel has been determined amidst shoals and submerged rocks. “Why must I be embarrassed? Maybe I shall have to run aground on a shoal.” Are you not saying the same, when you are provoked, because it is not right to kill a robber who is supposed to have killed someone? “But if it cannot be otherwise?” Well, if it cannot be otherwise than settling on a shoal? “Maybe I will settle on a shoal, but I cannot help but rejoice at having the path, and I cannot help but wish with all my strength to walk upon it.”

You adduce the comparison that the rule about not resisting evil is like the rule about not throwing children out of the window, when such may become a necessity, and from this you conclude that the proposition that it is not right to throw children out of a window is incorrect. It is only he who needs to torture children in general, who is concerned in an activity where this necessity presents itself all the time, that will insist that it is not right to prohibit one from throwing children out of a window because such a necessity may arise during a fire. Pardon me, but this is so in our present case. And it is this that is so terrible. You, who are unquestionably a clever man, are going directly against common sense, and, though you are unquestionably a good and self-sacrificing person, you defend violence and murder.

Let us say that violence and murder provoked you, you were carried away by a natural sentiment, and began to oppose violence and murder by using violence and murder. Such an activity, though closely resembling that of an animal, and being irrational, has nothing senseless or contradictory about it. But the moment the governments or the revolutionaries want to justify such activity on rational grounds, there appears the terrifying silliness and the inevitable heaping
of sophisms in order that the stupidity of such an attempt may not be seen. Justifications of this kind are always based on the assumption of that imaginary robber who has in himself nothing that is human, who kills and tortures innocent people. This imaginary beast, which is constantly in the process of killing the innocent, serves as a foundation for the reflections of all the violators as to the necessity of violence. But such a robber is a most exceptional, rare, and even impossible case. Many persons may live hundreds of years, as I have lived sixty, without ever running across this fictitious robber in the process of committing his crime. Why should I base my rule of life on this fiction?

When we discuss real life, and not a fiction, we see something quite different. We see people, and even ourselves, perpetrating the most cruel deeds, in the first place not alone, like the fictitious robber, but always in connection with other men, and not because we are beasts, who have nothing that is human, but because we abide in error and in offences. On the contrary, we see when we reflect upon life that the most cruel deeds, like the slaughter of men, bombs, gallows, guillotines, solitary confinement, property, courts, power, and all its consequences all have their origin, not in the fictitious robber, but in those men who base their rules of life on the silly fiction of the imaginary beast of a robber. Thus, a man who is reflecting upon life cannot help but see that the cause of people’s evil in no way lies in the fictitious robber, but in our own errors and in the errors of others. One of the cruelest errors consists in committing an actual evil in the name of the fictitious evil. Such a man, who has directed his activity on the cause of evil and on the eradication of error in himself and in others, and who has devoted his strength to this, will see before himself such a vast and fruitful activity that he will absolutely fail to see what his activity has to do with the fiction of the robber, to whom he will in all probability never fall prey. And if he shall see it, he will in all probability do something quite different from what he will do who, having never seen the robber, bears him a grudge.

Now I beg you to forgive me if I have written you anything that is blunt, and to try to understand me if I have not expressed myself precisely. Above all, I ask you to believe me that I had but one motive for writing you this letter: love and respect for you, and the desire to be useful to you.

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