

THE PHILOSOPHY OF NON-RESISTANCE.

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“The essence of (institutionalized) religion consists in this, that certain phenomena of nature and history, which according to time, and circumstances, acquired an unusual importance, have been personified and put on so high a pinnacle that they appear to be independent of time and place.”—Dietzgen, *Philosophical Essays*.

SIX hundred years before the Christian era and a century before the advent of Buddha, Lao-Tze, the venerable Chinese sage preached the doctrine of non-resistance as part of his more comprehensive philosophy of non-assertion. The latter doctrine, it may be remarked, is considered by some, despite the fact that it has enjoyed comparatively little circulation or renown, to be immeasurably superior in profundity and spiritual riches to many regnant philosophies of a latter day. Concerning virtue, Lao-Tze teaches in his *Tao-Teh-King*: “The good I meet with goodness; the bad I also meet with goodness; that is virtue’s goodness. The faithful I meet with faith; the faithless I also meet with faith; that is virtue’s faith.”¹

One hundred years later we find Buddha exhorting his disciples thus: “Let a man overcome anger by love, let him overcome evil by

¹ Lao-Tze’s *Tao-Teh-King*, p. 107 Open Court Publishing Co., Chicago.

good, let him overcome the greedy by liberality, the liar by the truth.”²

The classic formulation of the doctrine lies, however, as resurrected by Tolstoy, in the Sermon on the Mount where Christ pronounces the golden words of brotherhood: “Ye have heard that it was said, An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth; but I say unto you, Resist not him that is evil; but whosoever smiteth thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man would go to law with thee, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak also. And whosoever shall compel thee to go one mile, go with him two”.

Christianity renounced this cardinal principle of love when it entered into concubinage with the decadent Roman Empire and became the Church. Here the final betrayal of its heritage was wrought in the attempted suppression of dissenting sects which had taken the words of Christ to heart. It was not until the dying years of the nineteenth century when Tolstoy delivered his smashing blows at the foundations of orthodox theology, that the world was awakened to the full import of the doctrine of non-resistance. So interwoven is this philosophy in the structure of his dramas and novels that many an artistic passage is marred because of its naked didacticism. Tolstoy succeeded in bringing down upon his head the scathing criticism both reactionary and revolutionist alike. Both would say with Ambrose Bierce “The camel and the Christian take their burden kneeling”.

The common criticism levelled against the Tolstoyan philosophy holds that the practice of non-resistance would lead society into social stagnation and that its policy is inherently suicidal. Of course

² *The Gospel of Buddha*, “The Dharmapada”, Open Court Pub. Co.

this brings up the question concerning the literal implication of the Christian injunction: "Resist not Evil". There are some who have insistently maintained that the connotation of evil in this case embraces not alone the evil of man but also the evil of nature. Consequently, the adherents of this doctrine would be strictly enjoined from mitigating the rigors of the natural forces or reducing the discrepancies between what is and their ideal of what ought to be. Such an attitude obviously precludes any possibility of sanitation, mechanization, in short, of any effort designed to render this planet more inhabitable.

Tolstoy in strenuously combating this interpretation insists that these "irrelevant perversions" cloak either a cowardly reluctance or an utter impotence on the part of his critics to grapple with the larger problems of human conduct presented by the doctrine of nonresistance. Though he is somewhat justified in imputing the motives of those who shirk facing the salient features of the nonresistant philosophy, he nevertheless errs in failing to realize that submission to the ordering of nature is implicitly expressed in the theological Christian creed and was scrupulously observed by its early devotees. Lecky makes mention of a certain St. Simeon Stylites, one of the most revered anchorites of the fourth century, who had bound a rope around himself so that it became imbedded in the flesh which putrified and ulcerated around it. Whenever he moved worms dropped from him and when he was doing penance atop of his sixty-foot pillars he commissioned his followers to pick up the worms that fell from his body and replace them in the purulent sores, the saint saying to the worm, "Eat what God has given you."³

³ Lecky History of European Morals. Vol. 2, page 119.

Any belief in an omniscient extra-mundane creator makes superfluous all efforts to ameliorate conditions or alleviate human suffering. Yet even if the point made above is incontrovertible, the vitality of the doctrine of non-resistance is not seriously affected for it does not constitute an insuperable task to reconcile a truly Christian pacificism in the affairs of man with a sincere militancy in the affairs of nature.

The flaw in this social philosophy lies at its heart. When we direct our attention to the sphere of human activity we can readily note the inherent contradictions in the non-resistant attitude. To be genuinely “non-resistant” is equivalent to being totally “acceptant?”. Non-resistance implies that on no occasion can the individual who holds those views manifest the slightest trace of hesitancy or obduracy in complying with the demands of constituted authority of his fellow man. A non-resisting person, in the full sense of those words, would not only refuse to meet “*physical force*” with “*physical force*,” but to be consistent, he would also refuse to combat “moral suasion” with “moral suasion”. And so his very belief in the doctrine of non-resistance would vanish as soon as it encountered opposition in a hostile world. Yet how unflinchingly and steadfastly have the early disciples of Christ and Tolstoy clung to their faith—how often have they succeeded in kindling the inner light in the bosoms of their oppressors, radiating an ineffable calm and contentment as a balm to the wounded in spirit.

In view of all this, we may reasonably maintain that to justify life and make its existence possible adherents of this theory have been compelled to adopt an attitude of PASSIVE RESISTANCE. Passive resistance should not be confused with non-resistance. The early Christians in the Arena resisting the attempts of the Romans to compel them to abjure their faith, the Tolstoyans who endured

excruciating agony rather than render compulsory military service, mass sabotage on the industrial field—all these are splendid and inspiring examples of the passive resistant attitude.

Now the implications of the passive resistant attitude are very significant. The question is asked wherein lies the difference or rather the superiority of a doctrine of “passive resistance” to a doctrine of “active resistance”. Both terms connote an opposition to something definite—or an approach, let us say, to some social end. The difference between the anarchism of a Most and the anarchism of a Kropotkin lies in their different methods of executing what basically is a common plan or scheme. The doctrine of passive resistance is not an end in itself but merely a method of successfully coping with the exigencies of life, at most working towards a perfected social existence.

In answer to our question the passive resistant would respond that his philosophy was morally superior to that of active resistance in that it was more humane, less calculated to destroy society through strife. So it seems after all that the difference between these two types of conduct has been reduced to one of degree. This, I submit, invalidates the humanitarian basis of the doctrine of passive resistance for it can be shown that passive resistance, or rather the effects of passive resistance can be more injurious to the individual and the community, than the more active form of resistance. A general walkout in a key industry for instance may inflict greater privations upon the community “than a small riot. In our own experience, we know that an abject humbleness is not always more effective than a spirited defence. There are times when a tractable and yielding disposition provokes continued affronts instead of inducing a change in heart of the aggressor.

Both the utility and limitations of the doctrine we are discussing can the sooner be grasped if we delve into the genesis of its extended sway and influence. The period in which Christ lived had witnessed several persistent attempts by the Jews to liberate themselves from the galling yoke of Rome. These proved to be uniformly abortive. Soon, a direct, frontal attack upon an apparently impregnable Rome, came to be regarded as chimerical. A more subtle and insidious method had to be adopted to undermine the Satyr State. Passive resistance and seditious propaganda, the most effective instruments at hand, succeeded in rocking the Roman Empire to its very foundations. Meekness and resignation, in this instance, had accomplished what force had left undone. Christianity could only be conquered by being adopted.

The home of the great Christian revival in the nineteenth century was Russia—frozen in the icy clutches of a demented dynasty and deadening church; a land of perpetual darkness illumined here and there by the effulgent idealism of its revolutionary martyrs. The ruthless suppression of the Polish insurrection, the restoration of the “Nicholas” system, the seeming futility of “propaganda by the deed”—all these influenced Tolstoy.

Tolstoy repeatedly emphasizes the fact that the non-resistant attitude was the only one which could break through what he called the hypnosis of the press, the Church and the State; and his expectation that this attitude would proselytize society is sufficient evidence of a “method”. The general position of the Tolstoyan is voiced by Darrow today when he explicitly states, “I would not be so much opposed to force if I thought it would work”.⁴ The Quaker challenge to a world of force sets out to convince humanity that the

⁴ Marx vs. Tolstoy. Chas. Kerr & Co.

passive resistant attitude is invariably a more effective method than any other, even in wars of self-defence.

The philosophy of passive resistance originally was applicable to a certain, specific situation—it was employed as an instrument in remedying defects in the social organism. If as Prof. Kallen puts it, “We hypostatize our instruments of thought” or conduct, we are destined to defeat the very ends for which we forged them.

Would Belgium have had endured a worse fate if she had offered no resistance to her spoliator instead of arching her back? After the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk were the invading armies of Germany perceptibly humanized by the affable passive resistance of Russia? When Bertrand Russell abandons his faith in the necessity for armed insurrection on the ground that violence may destroy “the priceless heritage of civilization”, is he not called upon to show that the inevitable wars generated by the present industrial system are less devastating in their ravages, less destructive to art and beauty than any social revolution can be? If not, we may at least request enlightenment on how philosophical anarchism intends to prevent the destruction of civilization.

Every social philosophy including the philosophy of passive resistance has had its beginnings in some sort of pragmatic sanction. The danger to society arises when the pragmatic criterion is not retained, when those modes of conduct which are adapted to specific situations are reified above the dialectical flow of natural and social forces.

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