

On the Significance of Science and Art

By

Count Lyof N. Tolstoi

ON THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SCIENCE AND ART--FROM "WHAT TO DO?"

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CHAPTER I.

. . . {169} The justification of all persons who have freed themselves from toil is now founded on experimental, positive science. The scientific theory is as follows:--

"For the study of the laws of life of human societies, there exists but one indubitable method,--the positive, experimental, critical method

"Only sociology, founded on biology, founded on all the positive sciences, can give us the laws of humanity. Humanity, or human communities, are the organisms already prepared, or still in process of formation, and which are subservient to all the laws of the evolution of organisms.

"One of the chief of these laws is the variation of destination among the portions of the organs. Some people command, others obey. If some have in superabundance, and others in want, this arises not from the will of God, not because the empire is a form of manifestation of personality,

but because in societies, as in organisms, division of labor becomes indispensable for life as a whole. Some people perform the muscular labor in societies; others, the mental labor."

Upon this doctrine is founded the prevailing justification of our time.

Not long ago, they reigned in the learned, cultivated world, a moral philosophy, according to which it appeared that every thing which exists is reasonable; that there is no such thing as evil or good; and that it is unnecessary for man to war against evil, but that it is only necessary for him to display intelligence,--one man in the military service, another in the judicial, another on the violin. There have been many and varied expressions of human wisdom, and these phenomena were known to the men of the nineteenth century. The wisdom of Rousseau and of Lessing, and Spinoza and Bruno, and all the wisdom of antiquity; but no one man's wisdom overrode the crowd. It was impossible to say even this,--that Hegel's success was the result of the symmetry of this theory. There were other equally symmetrical theories,--those of Descartes, Leibnitz, Fichte, Schopenhauer. There was but one reason why this doctrine won for itself, for a season, the belief of the whole world; and this reason was, that the deductions of that philosophy winked at people's weaknesses. These deductions were summed up in this,--that every thing was reasonable, every thing good; and that no one was to blame.

When I began my career, Hegelianism was the foundation of every thing. It was floating in the air; it was expressed in newspaper and periodical

articles, in historical and judicial lectures, in novels, in treatises, in art, in sermons, in conversation. The man who was not acquainted with Hegel had no right to speak. Any one who desired to understand the truth studied Hegel. Every thing rested on him. And all at once the forties passed, and there was nothing left of him. There was not even a hint of him, any more than if he had never existed. And the most amazing thing of all was, that Hegelianism did not fall because some one overthrew it or destroyed it. No! It was the same then as now, but all at once it appeared that it was of no use whatever to the learned and cultivated world.

There was a time when the Hegelian wise men triumphantly instructed the masses; and the crowd, understanding nothing, blindly believed in every thing, finding confirmation in the fact that it was on hand; and they believed that what seemed to them muddy and contradictory there on the heights of philosophy was all as clear as the day. But that time has gone by. That theory is worn out: a new theory has presented itself in its stead. The old one has become useless; and the crowd has looked into the secret sanctuaries of the high priests, and has seen that there is nothing there, and that there has been nothing there, save very obscure and senseless words. This has taken place within my memory.

"But this arises," people of the present science will say, "from the fact that all that was the raving of the theological and metaphysical period; but now there exists positive, critical science, which does not deceive, since it is all founded on induction and experiment. Now our erections

are not shaky, as they formerly were, and only in our path lies the solution of all the problems of humanity."

But the old teachers said precisely the same, and they were no fools; and we know that there were people of great intelligence among them. And precisely thus, within my memory, and with no less confidence, with no less recognition on the part of the crowd of so-called cultivated people, spoke the Hegelians. And neither were our Herzens, our Stankevitches, or our Byelinskys fools. But whence arose that marvellous manifestation, that sensible people should preach with the greatest assurance, and that the crowd should accept with devotion, such unfounded and unsupportable teachings? There is but one reason,--that the teachings thus inculcated justified people in their evil life.

A very poor English writer, whose works are all forgotten, and recognized as the most insignificant of the insignificant, writes a treatise on population, in which he devises a fictitious law concerning the increase of population disproportionate to the means of subsistence. This fictitious law, this writer encompasses with mathematical formulae founded on nothing whatever; and then he launches it on the world. From the frivolity and the stupidity of this hypothesis, one would suppose that it would not attract the attention of any one, and that it would sink into oblivion, like all the works of the same author which followed it; but it turned out quite otherwise. The hack-writer who penned this treatise instantly becomes a scientific authority, and maintains himself upon that height for nearly half a century. Malthus! The Malthusian

theory,--the law of the increase of the population in geometrical, and of the means of subsistence in arithmetical proportion, and the wise and natural means of restricting the population,--all these have become scientific, indubitable truths, which have not been confirmed, but which have been employed as axioms, for the erection of false theories. In this manner have learned and cultivated people proceeded; and among the herd of idle persons, there sprung up a pious trust in the great laws expounded by Malthus. How did this come to pass? It would seem as though they were scientific deductions, which had nothing in common with the instincts of the masses. But this can only appear so for the man who believes that science, like the Church, is something self-contained, liable to no errors, and not simply the imaginings of weak and erring folk, who merely substitute the imposing word "science," in place of the thoughts and words of the people, for the sake of impressiveness.

All that was necessary was to make practical deductions from the theory of Malthus, in order to perceive that this theory was of the most human sort, with the best defined of objects. The deductions directly arising from this theory were the following: The wretched condition of the laboring classes was such in accordance with an unalterable law, which does not depend upon men; and, if any one is to blame in this matter, it is the hungry laboring classes themselves. Why are they such fools as to give birth to children, when they know that there will be nothing for the children to eat? And so this deduction, which is valuable for the herd of idle people, has had this result: that all learned men overlooked the incorrectness, the utter arbitrariness of these deductions, and their

insusceptibility to proof; and the throng of cultivated, i.e., of idle people, knowing instinctively to what these deductions lead, saluted this theory with enthusiasm, conferred upon it the stamp of truth, i.e., of science, and dragged it about with them for half a century.

Is not this same thing the cause of the confidence of men in positive critical-experimental science, and of the devout attitude of the crowd towards that which it preaches? At first it seems strange, that the theory of evolution can in any manner justify people in their evil ways; and it seems as though the scientific theory of evolution has to deal only with facts, and that it does nothing else but observe facts.

But this only appears to be the case.

Exactly the same thing appeared to be the case with the Hegelian doctrine, in a greater degree, and also in the special instance of the Malthusian doctrine. Hegelianism was, apparently, occupied only with its logical constructions, and bore no relation to the life of mankind.

Precisely this seemed to be the case with the Malthusian theory. It appeared to be busy itself only with statistical data. But this was only in appearance.

Contemporary science is also occupied with facts alone: it investigates facts. But what facts? Why precisely these facts, and no others?

The men of contemporary science are very fond of saying, triumphantly and

confidently, "We investigate only facts," imagining that these words contain some meaning. It is impossible to investigate facts alone, because the facts which are subject to our investigation are innumerable (in the definite sense of that word),--innumerable. Before we proceed to investigate facts, we must have a theory on the foundation of which these or those facts can be inquired into, i.e., selected from the incalculable quantity.

And this theory exists, and is even very definitely expressed, although many of the workers in contemporary science do not know it, or often pretend that they do not know it. Exactly thus has it always been with all prevailing and guiding doctrines. The foundations of every doctrine are always stated in a theory, and the so-called learned men merely invent further deductions from the foundations once stated. Thus contemporary science is selecting its facts on the foundation of a very definite theory, which it sometimes knows, sometimes refuses to know, and sometimes really does not know; but the theory exists.

The theory is as follows: All mankind is an undying organism; men are the particles of that organism, and each one of them has his own special task for the service of others. In the same manner, the cells united in an organism share among them the labor of fight for existence of the whole organism; they magnify the power of one capacity, and weaken another, and unite in one organ, in order the better to supply the requirements of the whole organism. And exactly in the same manner as with gregarious animals,--ants or bees,--the separate individuals divide the labor among

them. The queen lays the egg, the drone fructifies it; the bee works his whole life long. And precisely this thing takes place in mankind and in human societies. And therefore, in order to find the law of life for man, it is necessary to study the laws of the life and the development of organisms.

In the life and development of organisms, we find the following laws: the law of differentiation and integration, the law that every phenomenon is accompanied not by direct consequences alone, another law regarding the instability of type, and so on. All this seems very innocent; but it is only necessary to draw the deductions from all these laws, in order to immediately perceive that these laws incline in the same direction as the law of Malthus. These laws all point to one thing; namely, to the recognition of that division of labor which exists in human communities, as organic, that is to say, as indispensable. And therefore, the unjust position in which we, the people who have freed ourselves from labor, find ourselves, must be regarded not from the point of view of common-sense and justice, but merely as an undoubted fact, confirming the universal law.

Moral philosophy also justified every sort of cruelty and harshness; but this resulted in a philosophical manner, and therefore wrongly. But with science, all this results scientifically, and therefore in a manner not to be doubted.

How can we fail to accept so very beautiful a theory? It is merely

necessary to look upon human society as an object of contemplation; and I can console myself with the thought that my activity, whatever may be its nature, is a functional activity of the organism of humanity, and that therefore there cannot arise any question as to whether it is just that I, in employing the labor of others, am doing only that which is agreeable to me, as there can arise no question as to the division of labor between the brain cells and the muscular cells. How is it possible not to admit so very beautiful a theory, in order that one may be able, ever after, to pocket one's conscience, and have a perfectly unbridled animal existence, feeling beneath one's self that support of science which is not to be shaken nowadays!

And it is on this new doctrine that the justification for men's idleness and cruelty is now founded.