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Manual Labour and Intellectual Activity

Leo Tolstoy

1889

You ask me why manual labor presents itself to us as one of the unavoidable conditions of true happiness. Is it necessary voluntarily to deprive ourselves of intellectual activity in the domain of science and art, which seems to us incompatible with manual labor?¹

I have never regarded manual labor as a special principle, but as a very simple and natural application of moral bases an application which before all is presented to every sincere man.

In our perverted society in the society called civilized we need, above all things, to speak of manual labor, because the chief fault of our society has been, and up to the present time still is, the striving to rid ourselves of manual labor, and without mutual concessions to profit by the labor of the poor, uneducated, and indigent classes who are in a state of slavery akin to that which obtained in antiquity.

The first indication of sincerity on the part of the people of our class, professing Christian, philosophical or humanitarian

¹ Entitled, "Letter to a Frenchman" in the Geneva edition which contains several paragraphs not in the Moscow edition.

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principles, is the endeavor, as far as possible, to avoid this injustice. The simplest and most available means of attaining this is manual labor, which begins with each man attending to his own wants.

I never believe in the sincerity of the philosophical and moral principles of a man who compels a servant girl to wait on him.²

The simplest and shortest rule of morality consists in a man compelling as little service as possible from others, and serving other men as much as possible, in demanding as little as possible from others, and in giving others as much as possible. This rule, imparting to our existence a reasonable meaning and blessing, as its consequence resolves simultaneously all difficulties equally with that which presents itself to you. This rule points out the place which ought to be occupied by intellectual activity, by science and art. Following this rule I am happy and satisfied only when I am indubitably convinced that my activity is advantageous to others.

The satisfaction of those for whom I am working is already a superfluity, an excess of happiness, on which I do not reckon, and which can have no influence on my actions.

My firm belief that what I am doing is advantageous and not harmful, but is good for others this conviction is the chief condition of my happiness. And precisely this causes a sincere and moral man involuntarily to prefer manual labor to scientific or artistic work.

For the advantage of my literary labors the work of composers is required; for the completion of my symphony I need the cooperation of musicians; for the production of my experiments I require the help of those who make apparatus and instruments for our laboratories; for the pictures which I paint, I depend on men who prepare colors and canvas; and meantime the works which I am producing may be useful for men, or as

² Not in Moscow edition.

I am a being, a man, and reason gives me the law of universal well-being. And I ought to follow this law of my reason, I ought to love others more than myself.

And a man has only to come to this conclusion, for life suddenly to present itself to him from an entirely different standpoint from what it did before.

Beings annihilate one another, but at the same time beings love and assist one another. Life is subjected, not to the passion of destructiveness, but to the feeling of mutuality, which, in the language of our hearts, is called love.

However much I may see development in the life of the world, I see in it only the manifestation of this principle of mutual help. All history is nothing else than an ever clearer and clearer display of this unique principle of the common agreement of all beings.

This opinion is supported both by historical experiment and by personal experiment. But beside the opinion, man finds a most convincing proof of the justice of this opinion in his inner immediate consciousness. The greatest good which man knows, the consciousness of fullest freedom and happiness, is the condition of self-denial and love. Reason opens up to man the only possible path to happiness, and feeling directs man along this path.

If the thoughts which I have tried to present before you seem to you obscure, do not judge them too severely. I hope that sometime you will read their development in a clearer and simpler form. I only wanted to give you an idea of my views of life.

happens in the majority of cases may be perfectly useless and even injurious.

How can I occupy myself with actions, the use of which is entirely dubious, and for the accomplishment of which I must compel others to labor when in front of me, around me, is an infinite number of things all of which are indubitably useful for others, and for the production of which I need depend on no one? For example, to carry a burden for one for whom it is too heavy, to plow a field for a sick farmer, to bind up a wound, and the like, not to speak of the thousands of things surrounding us, for the production of which extraneous help is not needed and which give immediate satisfaction to those for whom you produce them, and besides these there are a host of other actions: for example, to plant a tree, to raise a calf, to clean out a well and all these things are unquestionably useful, and a sincere man cannot help preferring them to actions which require the labor of others, and are at the same time of doubtful utility.

The calling of a prophet, of a teacher, is elevated and noble. But we know the good of priests who consider themselves the only teachers, because they have the opportunity of forcing themselves to be considered such.³ Yet not the teacher that receives the education and training of a teacher, but the one that has an inner conviction of what he is, ought to be and can be anything else. This condition is rarely met with, and can be proved only by the sacrifices which the man makes for his calling.

The same is true both for true science and true art. The violinist Lulli, at the peril of his life, escaped from the kitchen to the attic in order to play on his violin, and by this sacrifice he proved the truth of his calling. But for a conservatory teacher, a student, whose only obligation is to accomplish the task set before them, it is impossible to prove the truth of their calling.

³ This sentence not in Moscow edition, nor the word prorok (prophet)

They only take advantage of the position which presents itself to them as favorable.

Manual labor is a duty and happiness for all; the activity of the mind and of the imagination is an exclusive activity; it is a duty and pleasure only for those that are called to it. The calling may be recognized and shown only by the sacrifice which the savant or the artist makes of his ease and well-being in order to devote himself to his calling. A man who continues to fulfill his obligation, the subjugation of his life to the work of his hands, and, notwithstanding this, takes hours from his rest and his sleep in order to produce something in the domain of intellect and imagination, proves thereby that he is called to it, and produces in his own domain something useful to men. He who holds aloof from the universal moral obligation, and, under the pretext of a special bent to science or art, arranges for himself the life of a sluggard such a man merely produces a false science and a false art.

The fruits of true science and true art are the fruits of sacrifice, but are not the fruits of certain material advantages.

But what then will become of science and art?

How often have I heard this question from men not at all interested in science or in art, and not having the slightest comprehension of what science and art are. It would seem that nearer than anything else to the heart of these men was the good of humanity, which, according to their conviction, could not be attained in any other way except by the development of what they call science and art.

But what a strange thing to defend the usefulness of the useful! Can there be people so foolish as to deny the usefulness of that which is useful? And furthermore, can there be people so foolish as to consider it their duty to defend the usefulness of the useful?

There are workingmen who are artisans; there are workingmen-farmers. No one ever made up his mind to deny their usefulness. And never will a workman need to

My innermost feeling tells me that I wish well-being, happiness, for myself, for myself alone. Reason says to me: All men, all creatures, wish the same thing. All beings which, like me, seek their own personal happiness, evidently tend to crush me. And so I cannot attain that happiness which my life is striving toward. This striving toward happiness is my life, but reason shows me that this striving is idle, and that, therefore, I cannot live.

Simple thought shows me that in this terrestrial order of things, while all beings are striving only for their own personal happiness, I, a being who am also striving to the same end, cannot attain this well-being. And I cannot live. But notwithstanding this clear opinion, we do live, and we seek happiness and well-being.

We say to ourselves: I could attain well-being, could be happy, only in the chance that all other beings should love me more than they love themselves.

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This is impossible. But nevertheless we all live, and all our activity, all our strivings for wealth, for family, for fame, for power, are nothing more or less than attempts to make others love us more than they love themselves.

Wealth, fame, power, give us something like that condition of things, and we are almost satisfied; for a time we forget that this is only an illusion and not the reality.

All beings love themselves more than they love us, and happiness is impossible. There are men and the number of them is increasing every day who cannot solve this difficulty, and who kill themselves, declaring that life is an empty and stupid jest. But in the meantime the solution of the riddle is more than simple, and offers itself. I can be happy only in a worldly order where all beings should love others more than themselves. The whole world would be happy if all beings loved, not themselves, but their fellows.

himself: I can think except in the domain of the Holy Scriptures and Tradition which govern the truth in its fullness and unchangeability. The believer in civilization says: My opinion stops before the two bases of civilization science and art. Our science, he says, is the association of the true knowledge of man; if at the present time it does not command the full truth, in time to come it will do so. Our art, together with classic art, is the only true art.

Religious superstitions say: Outside of man exists the Ding an sich the absolute as the Germans say that is the Church.

Men of our society say: Outside of man civilization exists in itself.

It is easy for us to see the lack of logic in religious superstitions because we do not share them. But the religious believer, the Catholic, for example, is fully persuaded that there is no other truth except his. And it seems to him that his fountain of truth is proved by reason.⁶

And when we are misled by the false belief in our civilization, it is almost impossible for us to see the illogicalness of our opinions, which are all directed to proving that in all times ours is the only time, that among all nations only so many millions of people inhabiting the continent called Europe command genuine civilization composed of genuine science and genuine art.

In order to comprehend the true significance of life, simple as it is, there is no need of positive philosophy or of deep learning, it is only necessary to have one negative quality: it is necessary not to have prejudices. It is necessary to enter into the state of a child or of a Descartes. It is necessary to say to oneself: I know nothing and I wish nothing more than merely to comprehend the true significance of life that life which I must live.

And the answer was vouchsafed in the earliest times, and this answer is clear and simple.

⁶ The three paragraphs preceding are not in the Moscow edition.

prove the usefulness of his labor. He produces, and what he produces is essential and is good for others. They make use of it, and no one doubts its usefulness, and what is more, no one proves it. The laborers in art and science are in the same position. Why are people found compelling themselves to prove their usefulness?

The reason is that true laborers in science and art do not trouble themselves about their rights; they give the productions of their labors. These productions are useful, and they do not need rights and the ratification of them.

But the great majority of those that consider themselves scientists and artists know very well that what they produce is not worth what they expend. And they employ all possible means to prove that their activity is essential for the well-being of humanity. True sciences and arts have always existed and always will exist, like all other branches of human activity, and it is impossible and idle to deny or defend them.

The false position which is occupied in our society by science and art merely proves that men calling themselves civilized, with scientists and artists at their head, constitute a caste with all the vices characteristic of every caste. They bring down from its height and diminish the principle in the name of which the caste is composed. They lay a heavy burden on the people, and, moreover, shut off the light, idly striving to prove that they are disseminating it. And what is worse than all, their acts always contradict the principles which they preach.

Not counting those that uphold an insufficient principle science for science's sake, art for art's sake they are all required to prove that science and art are essential, because they subserve the weal of mankind.

But in what consists this weal? By what signs can the weal be separated from the evil? The partisans of science and art dodge this question. They even suppose that a definition of well-being blago is impossible, and is outside of science and outside of

art. Well-being in general, they say, is goodness, is beauty, but cannot be defined.

But they lie.

In all times humanity has only accomplished in its onward march that which has determined the good and the beautiful. Goodness and beauty were determined a thousand years ago. But this definition was insufficient for them, for the priests, it displayed their emptiness and the perniciousness of what they called science and art opposed to goodness and beauty. The Brahmin, the Buddhist, and Chinese sages, the Hebrews, Egyptians, the Greek stoics defined good in the same accurate way. Everything that promotes unity among men is goodness and beauty; everything that separates them is evil and ugly. All men know this definition it is imprinted in our hearts.

Goodness and beauty for humanity is what unites men. Thus if the partisans of science and art actually have in view the good of humanity, they ought to advance only such sciences and such arts as lead to these ends; and if this were so, there would not be so many sciences, the aim of which is the advantage only of a few societies and the injury of others. If good were actually the aim of arts and sciences, never would the investigations of the positive sciences, since they often have no relation to the true advantage of mankind, attain such an inexplicable importance. The same may be said of the productions of art, which are suitable only as an excitement for depraved old men, and the pastime of idle people.

Human wisdom is not wholly included in the number of the sciences. There is an infinite quantity of things which we cannot know. Wisdom does not consist in knowing as much as possible. Human wisdom consists in a knowledge of the order in which it is profitable to know things; wisdom consists in the knowledge of what is most important, and what is least important to know. Of all the sciences needful for men, the chief one is the knowledge of how to live, doing as little harm as possible;

and of all arts, the most important is that which teaches how to avoid evil, and how to produce good with the least violence.

And now it has come about that among all the arts and sciences which claim to advance the good of humanity, those first in importance not only do not exist in reality, but are even excluded from the list of arts and sciences.

What in our society is called science and art, is only a monstrous soap-bubble, a superstition into which we usually fall as soon as we free ourselves from other superstitions.⁴ In order clearly to see the route by which we must go, we must turn back to the very beginning, we must take off the cowl which keeps our heads warm but prevents us from looking up. The temptation is great.

If we are not placed in this position by birth, we strive, by cleverness or hard work, to mount the highest rounds of the social ladder to the privileged social position of the priests of civilization, and we need much candor and much love of truth and goodness to question the principles that condition such a lofty position.

But for a serious man who tries to settle the question of life there is no choice: in order for him to begin to see clearly he must free himself from superstition, even though it may be to his advantage.⁵

This condition is a *sine qua non*.

It is unprofitable to quarrel with a man as to what he takes for his faith. If the field of thought is not perfectly free, one can indulge in long disputes, long criticisms, and never move one iota toward the knowledge of truth. Every reasonable opinion meets with shipwreck on preestablished positions.

There is a religious faith and there is a faith in the progress of civilization. They are absolutely alike. The Catholic says to

⁴ From "The Superstitions of the Church." Geneva edition.

⁵ These twenty-three words and the next paragraph but one are not in the Moscow edition.