Is Tolstoy Inconsistent?

By Alfred Russel Wallace.

In the June issue of the I.L.P. News, J. Bruce Glasier has a leading article the keynote of which is the glorious inconsistency of the great Russian teacher, with especial reference to his recent appeal to the Czar. But throughout the whole article I can find no proof of real inconsistency. Every statement of the kind only shows that his opinions have changed and developed during his whole life—as those of every independent thinker must change—and that his earlier acts are often opposed to his later opinions and beliefs. Not one fact is given to prove that Tolstoy has ever deliberately acted in opposition to the principles he held at the time. Probably, no living individual has more earnestly sought after the principles which should determine conduct, and, having arrived at what he believes to be such guiding principles, has so earnestly and so unselfishly adopted them to regulate his own life.

And the one special act which is supposed to form the culminating point of his inconsistency—his appeal to the Czar—is on the contrary perfectly consistent with all his later teachings; and it is to me very strange that neither Bruce Glasier, nor other writers, who have expressed the same view, have seen this. For what is this Appeal? If carefully read it will be seen that it is wholly and entirely in accordance with the fundamental principle of anarchism—the principle that government by force is wholly evil and is the source of almost all the unhappiness and misery of humanity. In accordance with this great principle he urges the Czar to forbid certain oppressive governmental acts, to repeal some of the most oppressive laws, and to abolish some of the most unjust, cruel, and degrading punishments. In no one case, so far as I remember, does he ask the Czar to do anything for the people, but simply to remove some of the fetters with which he has bound them, to leave them a little more free to do things for themselves. And yet Bruce Glasier can so mistake this grand appeal as to write—"The appeal to the Czar is an appeal to the State, and Tolstoy in issuing it has abandoned his anarchism. He has abandoned the principle that we must look to individual conversion and sanctification of life as the sole means of social regeneration, and he has thus definitely conceded the untruth of the central precept of his own Tolstoyan and anti-political creed." Here are strong and positive statements without any reference to facts in support of them, and, I venture to say, wholly opposed to the facts. Tolstoy advocates non-resistance, but he does not advocate dumb acquiescence in wrong. He maintains that the whole fabric of compulsory government is wrong and evil, but he never teaches that it is wrong even to ask the head of the State to undo some of its evil acts and allow the people a little opportunity to better their condition, to work out their own salvation. And he wisely limits himself to asking the repeal of a few of the worst and most oppressive of the governmental acts which a just and humane man, even though a Czar, might be supposed to be able to see were not only tyrannical and cruel, but absolutely useless. Where is the inconsistency here? Where is the abandonment of principle? On the contrary, it is the appeal to pure anarchism. Tolstoy says, in effect, "You think repressive and penal laws are necessary. I call your special attention to certain enactments, official acts and punishments, which, on consideration, you must see to be quite useless, very cruel, and highly injurious. Abolish these, and you will find that what I say is true. The people will be happier and more peaceable without them." If this appeal were successful—as it yet may be—it would bring about the first instalment—a very small and insignificant instalment but of vital importance as a matter of principle—of the abolition of government by force; in other words the first step towards Anarchism.

In conclusion, I wish to say that I am a great admirer, though by no means a disciple, of Tolstoy. On several points I differ from him. He is sometimes unfair to his opponents, though this is usually from imperfect knowledge. But of all modern teachers he is, I think, by no means a disciple of Tolstoy. On several points I differ from him. He is sometimes unfair to his opponents, though this is usually from imperfect knowledge. But of all modern teachers he is, to my mind, the one against whom the charge of inconsistency can with the least justice be made.

We socialists should especially be careful in depreciating the work of the great thinker and moralist who is doing more than any other living writer to expose the evils of all government by force, and who maintains, as we do, that human nature is even now good enough and sensible enough, by voluntary combination, to protect itself against evil doers and to work out its own moral and physical well-being. I am myself wholly opposed to any attempt to establish a compulsory socialism (the very term is self-contradictory) as to all other governments by force, and I owe this conviction mainly to Tolstoy. Here, as in Russia, what we need first, is the repeal of bad laws, and especially of all those laws which either enforce or permit the existence of privileged classes, and of any inequality of opportunities as between man and man. Just in proportion as we are relieved from the most oppressive of the bonds and shackles with which our government binds our bodies and our minds, shall we adopt that system of voluntary co-operation for production as well as for all other useful purposes which will inevitably result, by a natural process of development, in a true Co-operative Commonwealth. In all this teaching we should hail Tolstoy as a master, and as a co-worker with us for the salvation of down-trodden humanity; and we should therefore be especially careful to avoid any unjust criticism, or any depreciation of his life and work which may tend to diminish their influence for good.
It is for this reason alone that I venture to oppose my view to that of so good a socialist as Bruce Glasier, and to maintain that, among all the great moral and political teachers of our age, Leo Tolstoy is among the greatest, if not the very greatest of all, that he is the most truly consistent in his life and conduct, and therefore the most worthy of our admiration and respect. We need not hold him to be infallible. He should not be exempt from criticism. But when we do criticise we should deal with important matters only, and above all things we should avoid dwelling upon vague generalities which, while not affecting the great question of the truth or error in his main contentions, yet tend to diminish his influence upon the rising generation.

A charge of almost universal inconsistency between his principles and his conduct, if well founded, must certainly have this effect, and I have therefore thought it my duty to say a few words to show, that on the main point, the address to the Czar, and I believe also on most if not all other points, the charge is an unfounded one.

A Note of Explanation.

The foregoing contribution from the pen of Alfred Russell Wallace adds greatly to the interest of the present issue of the *I.L.P. News*; and I need not assure our comrade, whose life-work as a naturalist and social reformer reflects so much lustre upon our Socialist comradeship, that any words of his will be read with deep interest and respect by us all. I feel doubtful, however, if I should entice into further controversy in this little paper one whose time and energy are so valuable. I shall, therefore, only refer to a few points in the hope that the issue raised by my article, which Dr. Wallace disputes, may be made clearer between us.

And first let me say that I acknowledge to the full the immense genius of Tolstoy. In point of sheer mental capacity and moral bigness, he stands out among the greatest figures of the present-day world. Nor does the circumstance that he intuitively postures in the devilish garb of humility lessen to my mind his positive greatness as a teacher. It is, indeed, because I recognise the inordinate persuasiveness of Tolstoy's character and writings that I was tempted to write the article to which Dr. Wallace has, in quite kind terms, taken exception. Nor was it my intention to deny that Tolstoy has realised, despite his anarchism, hence his appeal to the State. Nor does it essentially matter whether he appeals to members of heads of the State as individuals. So long as he appeals to the State or society at all. Nor, further, does it matter whether he appeals only to the negative power of the State— asking the State merely to cease to act wrongfully by abolishing bad laws or privileges, or whether he appeals to the positive power of the State to make good laws. For every negative action involves a positive one. Thou shalt not be unjust, and thou shalt be just, are one and the same. The very giving and allowing of national freedom of any kind institutes a State law.

I hope I have made clear to Dr. Wallace that speaking of Tolstoy's inconsistency I was making "no railing accusation" against him.

J. Bruce Glasier.