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# STOP AND THINK!

Translator’s Note:
This essay was written by Tolstoy in 1893, first in Russian and then (after a mutilated version had appeared in France) again in French. It is from the latter that this version is made. — E. J. W. Warren

## STOP AND THINK!
(Zola and Dumas; Le Non-Agir)
By Leo Tolstoy

### I

The editor of a Paris review, thinking that the opinions of two celebrated writers on the state of mind of the present day would interest me, has sent me two extracts from French newspapers—one being a speech by M. Zola, delivered at the banquet of the General Students’ Association; the other a letter from M. A. Dumas to the editor of the Gaulois.

These extracts did indeed interest me profoundly, both on account of their seasonableness and the renown of their authors, and because it would be difficult to find in current literature, in a more succinct, vigorous, and brilliant form, an expression of the two fundamental forces, the resultant of which impels humanity along. I mean, on the one hand, the force of routine, which tends to keep humanity in its present course; and, on the other, that of reason and love, which impels it towards the light.

M. Zola disapproves of that faith in something vague and ill-defined which their new guides are recommending to the youth of France, and counsels them to believe in something which is neither clearer nor better defined—namely, science and work.

A little-known Chinese philosopher and founder of a religion, named Lao-Tze (the first and best translation of whose book, The Way of Virtue, is that by Stanislas Julien), takes as the foundation of his doctrine the “Tao,” a word meaning “reason,” “way,” or “virtue.” If men follow the law of Tao, they will be happy. But the Tao, according to M. Julien’s translation, is only attainable by “not acting.”

All the ills besetting mankind arise, according to Lao-Tze, not from man’s neglect to do what is necessary, but because he does what is unnecessary; so that if men would practise what he calls “not acting,” they would be rid not only of their personal calamities, but also of those inherent in every form of government—the latter being the subject of which the Chinese philosopher particularly treats.

Lao-Tze’s idea appears strange, but it is impossible not to agree with him if one considers the results of the activities of the great majority of the men of our century.

“Let all men apply themselves to work,” says M. Zola, “and work will give them health and happiness, and will free them from the torment of the Infinite.” Work, yes—but at what are we to work? Manufacturers and sellers of opium, tobacco, and brandy; every

gambler on the Stock Exchange; all inventors and manufacturers of engines of destruction; all the military; all gaolers and executioners—all work; but it is evident that humanity must be the gainer if all these workers cease their work.
But perhaps M. Zola's recommendation has reference only to such work as is inspired by science? As a matter of fact, the purpose of the greater part of M. Zola's speech is to uphold science, which he thinks is being attacked. Well!
From various unappreciated authors I am continually receiving pamphlets, treatises, printed books, and manuscripts—the results of their scientific work. One has finally decided the question of Christian nosology; another has written a book on the cosmic ether; a third has solved the social question; a fourth, the Eastern question; a fifth edits a Theosophical Review; a sixth (in a thick volume) solves the Knight's Tour problem in chess.
All these people work assiduously and in the name of science, but I have no hesitation in saying that the time and work of my correspondents have been spent in a manner not only useless but even harmful. Thousands of people have been occupied in making the paper, the type, and machines needed to print their works, and in feeding, clothing, and housing these scientific labourers.
Work for science? But the word science is a term so vague and ill-defined that what some consider science others regard as utterly futile—even among scientists themselves.
While those savants who favour a spiritual explanation of life regard jurisprudence, philosophy, and even theology as the most important sciences, the positivists consider these very sciences childish nonsense devoid of value. Conversely, sociology, which positivists consider the science of sciences, is regarded by theologians and philosophers as arbitrary and useless.
Even within one branch of knowledge, each system has ardent defenders and equally ardent detractors.
Every year brings discoveries which excite admiration, enrich their inventors, and are later recognised as errors—even by their authors. What the Romans once regarded as supreme science—rhetoric—is now treated with derision. The scholasticism of the Middle Ages is equally incomprehensible to us.
It is therefore certain that many pursuits now considered scientific will later be regarded as equally absurd.

## II

M. Zola's speech is chiefly directed against those attempting to restore religious belief among youth; yet, in reality, he stands on the same foundation as his opponents: faith.
Religion and science are commonly thought opposed—but only at a given time. What was once science becomes religion; what is now science becomes future superstition.
What we call religion is often the science of the past; what we call science is often the religion of the present.
Ancient beliefs—creation in six days, miraculous healing—were once accepted as scientific truth. Today's beliefs—evolution, heredity, microbes—are held in the same unquestioned way.
Men do not truly believe these theories; they believe in those who proclaim them—the "priests" of science, just as earlier men believed

priests of religion.
Much of religion is past superstition; much of science is present superstition. The proportion of truth and error is similar.
To devote one's life entirely to religion or to science is dangerous: one may discover too late that the principle one served was false.
Even before reading Zola, I was always struck by the belief that work is a virtue. Work is no virtue; it is a necessity. To elevate it to virtue is as absurd as praising eating.
Work often serves as moral anaesthesia—like tobacco or alcohol—distracting us from reflecting on life.

III
There is a great difference between the speech of M. Zola and the letter of M. Dumas.
Zola reassures men that what they know and do is sufficient. Dumas shows them their ignorance and faults.
Zola encourages continuation; Dumas calls for change.
Dumas predicts that men will eventually apply the law of love and that this change is nearer than expected.
The objection is obvious: if love has been known for thousands of years, why has it not been practised?
Men recognise the truth but do not follow it. Why?
Because they are too busy.
All great changes begin in thought. Action follows thought as a ship follows its rudder.

IV
In His first sermons, Jesus did not say "love one another," but called for repentance—metanoia—a change of understanding.
"Change your conception of life, or you will perish."
Life's meaning cannot lie in personal, family, or national welfare, because such aims lead to conflict.
The illusion of personal happiness is now impossible to maintain.
Thus the same call remains urgent today:
Stop. Reflect. Consider what you are and what you ought to be.

V
In earlier times, institutions such as war and oppression could be justified. Today they cannot.
Men must change their thinking before they can change their lives.
They must stop, reflect, and listen.
For centuries, people have avoided reflection—too busy with work, ambition, and distraction.
But once a man asks:

- What am I?
- Why do I live?
- What is the purpose of reason and love?

—he begins to understand.

VI
Once a change of thought occurs—from selfish to Christian understanding—love becomes natural.
No great effort is required; only the cessation of harmful effort.

If even a small part of human energy were devoted to truth and conscience instead of material pursuits, transformation would occur rapidly.
The promise remains:
“Seek the Kingdom of Heaven, and all else will be added unto you.”

## CONCLUSION

### LETTER ON THE PEACE CONFERENCE
(Translator’s Note by Aylmer Maude, April 1899)
Tolstoy later rewrote his response to a Swedish inquiry about the Tsar’s Peace Conference, refining it extensively.

### LETTER
Dear Sirs,
Your view that universal disarmament can be achieved by individuals refusing military service is correct. It is the only way to escape the evils of militarism.
However, your belief that the Conference might support this is mistaken.
The Conference itself is a deception—not aiming at peace, but at hiding the true path to it.
Governments cannot reduce armies voluntarily, because armies are the basis of their power.
As long as force governs society, armies will persist.
Peace cannot be achieved by diplomacy, arbitration, or agreements—these depend on the very force they claim to restrain.
The only real path is simple:

- Refuse to kill
- Refuse to serve in armies
- Refuse to participate in violence

Governments tolerate many forms of opposition—but never this, because it strikes at their foundation.
When public opinion begins to honour those who refuse military service, and condemn those who obey, armies will disappear.
And that time is near.
Leo Tolstoy