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War and Peace: Possibilities for a New History

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WAR AND PEACE: POSSIBILITIES FOR A NEW HISTORY

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
History

by
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ABSTRACT

By piggybacking on the critiques of the historical discipline provided by Leo Tolstoy in his momentous novel, *War and Peace*, I assert that history may undergo a reconstruction. By ridding the historical discipline of the self-interest that has atrophied its ability to make a significant, positive impact on the world, and installing a metaphysics devoted to equality, freedom, and universality, I believe that it may be revitalized as a profession. I call for a new history, one built in the Hegelian-Marxist tradition, which will lead humanity into a future defined by love and self-sacrifice. It is a history explicitly opposed to neutrality; love is not neutral.

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INTRODUCTION

The human as a free agent, unbound by determinism and available for historical investigation, is foundational to the generally accepted structure of history currently dominant in the West. The modern historian (in broad terms) asserts that history is shaped by individual human actions, is knowable to historians through the construction of historical narratives, and is non-teleological. In his tremendous work, *War and Peace*, Leo Tolstoy challenged professional historians and the modern notion of freedom which undergirds the modern historical enterprise. The critique that he delivered in the novel covers every inch of the aforementioned ideological ground, from agency, to historical narration, to non-determinism. Tolstoy viewed history as none of those things; it consists of natural laws that determine the course of events through time. Natural laws impersonally dictate the course of events, in which humans happen to be involved. Humanity, in the meantime, naively believes that its existence possesses that grander meaning known as freedom. Tolstoy accused historians of essentially being false priests, proselytizers of a religion that peddles the dishonest narrative of human freedom, when Tolstoy knows that the only freedom humanity can attain is freedom from the desire for freedom. And, like so many other such proselytizers, Tolstoy accuses historians of selling their narrative of freedom for the sake of their own gain.

The self-interest of national identity, which Tolstoy exploited to its fullest when addressing the historical interpretations of the Napoleonic Wars during his time, is certainly prominent in his discourse. National identity as a form of political partiality has featured largely (something modern historians are more likely to admit to now than they

might have been then) in historical narratives, at least through the Cold War. Modern historians, and modern academics generally, now understand themselves to be much more international, inclusive, and globally minded. Conferences and organizations for the various historical subdisciplines take place on a regular basis, and include PhDs from universities the world round. Modern historians would therefore be either dismissive of, or offended by, the critique initially offered by Tolstoy. The self-interest of nationality is, however, only Tolstoy's starting point, and is used to illustrate a basic problem which is the focus of the rest of his polemic: historians write different narratives of past events because their finite nature as humans prohibit them from understanding the whole, the universal. And when historians do write different histories, attributing this or that event to this or that cause in contradictory ways, examples of which Tolstoy illustrated with a polemic concerning the French invasion of Russia at the beginning of the third volume of *War and Peace*, how must such a conflict be mediated? There can be no mediation between narratives under Tolstoy; the histories written thus far have all been false reconstructions of the past designed to preserve the self-interested error of freedom. Tolstoy characterizes the diversion historians attempt to make from determined history, or truth, as error within a determined system, although that description raises the question of how error is feasible in a determined system.

The most prominent answer to the question of competing narratives, an answer which diverges from Tolstoy, rests largely in Isaiah Berlin's famous essay *The Hedgehog and the Fox*. Massively influential on how Tolstoy's thoughts concerning history have been understood, Berlin would have had us believe that Tolstoy was resigned to the

different narratives he disregarded in *War and Peace*. According to Berlin, Tolstoy was an historical, empirical Skeptic who believed that history could only be found in the existence of facts, thus limiting the historical pursuit in its ability to make claims of certain truth. The type of empiricism described by Berlin avoids the elements of reconstruction and future action that could be part of the historical discipline, but instead places absolute primacy on historical data points, thus negating the potential for the construction and use of facts toward an end. Berlin used the analogy of the hedgehog and the fox as a dichotomy to understand artists and thinkers relative to their approach to knowledge and metaphysical truth. He characterized Tolstoy as someone who wished for a dominant unifying truth, but who knew too much about the world to honestly think such a metaphysical truth could exist (the fox who believed in being a hedgehog). Such a characterization was rather convenient for academics of the time, and provided only a partial look at Tolstoy's thought. Portraying Tolstoy as favorable to the historian who would recognize their own limited perspective without seeking something greater was a theistic narrative.

Berlin's portrayal of Tolstoy enshrined the particular as valuable and dismissed hope of the universal. It supported the academic system as bourgeois, since affirming the particular is also to affirm self-interest. The particular is that which can be identified as separate. The particular resides within the universal as a single point. The particular may be described, as it allows for comparison and disparity. Because it can only exist alongside comparison and disparity, the particular assumes the existence of opposition and conflict. The universal is that which is; it is comprehensive, all-encompassing,

without an opposition. The human is particular, its history is particular, and its expression thus far in its existence has all been particular. Tolstoy recognizes the universal through natural law, but places humans as subservient to those laws because of our particularity. We are self-interested, express desire, and take action for those desires and thus cause violence and conflict because our particularity restricts us from the universal. Berlin's approach to the particular-universal dichotomy, or perhaps tension as described by Tolstoy, lacks nuance, but the empiricism and pluralism he espouses are part of the particular. Whereas Tolstoy requests us to recognize the universal and submit ourselves to it, Berlin rejects the universal in favor of a floating realm of particularities.

Regardless of his prominence, Isaiah Berlin is not the only scholar who avoided the determinist argument in *War and Peace*, nor is he the only scholar to avoid the tension between the particular and the universal that Tolstoy portrays. Other historians and philosophers largely ignored the historical-philosophical stance offered by Tolstoy for the better part of a century. Even the most prominent Tolstoy scholar during that time, Boris Eikhenbaum, gave no evaluation to the argument itself, only placed it in the historical context of Tolstoy's life. Historians generally have not engaged with the polemic in *War and Peace*, the rare exceptions mostly consisting of factual critiques given by military historians regarding Tolstoy's account of battles during the French invasion of Russia. After Berlin's work, most scholars followed in the path he set out, including Gary Saul Morson, Hugh McLean, and Lina Steiner. In their works, Tolstoy is presented as pluralist and a Skeptic. In the last two decades, however, Jeff Love, a research professor in languages from Clemson University, has pushed an interpretation of

Tolstoy with more nuance. The Tolstoy characterized by Jeff Love retains the determinism insisted upon in *War and Peace*, and Love argues that Tolstoy was not only generally deterministic regarding the course of history, but deterministic in a pessimism regarding the results of human attempts to understand the universe. Realizing Tolstoy as a pessimist, who would rather humanity submit to the laws of nature in peace instead of attempting to overcome higher laws with action, is of great assistance in understanding Tolstoy's view of war, peace, and his polemic against historians. Historians advocate freedom of action by writing narratives which present individuals as agents, who cause conflict and violence.

While historians have not responded directly to Tolstoy's critique, they have explored the problems of the particular and the universal to some degree. Leopold von Ranke and his followers advocated for adherence to historical fact via the empirical analysis of historical documents in order to achieve a full knowledge of the past. While not philosophically oriented, the empirical approach was widely adopted as a way to achieve knowledge. R.G. Collingwood, and later thinkers along similar lines, Edward Hallett Carr and Hayden White, explored the problem of the particular-universal tension in more philosophical ways. They gave onus for the reconstruction of the past into narratives on the particular author, as well as the cultural context in which that historian developed. They characterized the historian as a particular agent creating their own history, thus particularizing historical writing itself. While each historian featured nuances of their own, the general theme of an historicization of the historian remained the same. Other historians have sidestepped the thorniness of philosophical discourse and

have attempted to methodologically perform history in such a way as to either overcome or nullify the tension between the particular and the universal. Steven Bednarski offers an excellent example in the microhistory *A Poisoned Past: The Life and Times of Margarida de Portu, a Fourteenth-Century Accused Poisoner*. Bednarski's book is an example of the historian attempting to nullify the particular-universal tension. The microhistory is written with a heavy emphasis on narrative descriptions and settings, and takes pains to ensure that the reader is given access to the approach Bednarski uses to write his historical narrative. He assures the reader that he could have used his sources differently, analyzed them for different information, and constructed a different narrative that could not be said to be any less true than his final draft. He wants to put his viewpoint and particularist perspective as prominently as possible, removing himself from any potential claim of universal knowledge. On the other hand, Yair Mintzker presents four different versions of the same historical event in *The Many Deaths of Jew Süß: The Notorious Trial and Execution of an Eighteenth-Century Court Jew*, in order to respect the different possible narratives available in the source documents. He also includes a new historical mechanic in the monograph: what he refers to as "conversations." The conversations are short pieces of dialogue between Mintzker and what he writes to be the reader of his work. He creates the dialogue for the reader from the questions, critiques, and comments from reviewers of his book, and writes the conversations to include as many perspectives as possible. He refers to the type of history he performs in *The Many Deaths of Jew Süß* as polyphonic history, which is an effort to overcome the particularity of writing history by including multiple voices.

While it is important to recognize that historians have attempted to explore and confront the question of knowledge in the particular-universal dichotomy, none have done so through Tolstoy, nor have they solved the central problem. Tolstoy, as interpreted by Jeff Love, calls us determined because we cannot help but seek universal knowledge as finite beings, and will suffer as we learn because we are finite. Tolstoy's avenue, the route he thinks worthy of pursuit for humanity in order to best live, is to submit ourselves to the laws of nature. Exploration of those laws is permissible and even admirable, but attempting to subvert or overcome them can bring nothing but conflict. Peace is acceptance of our place in the universe, whereas war is to take action in protest of our place under natural law. In order to attain Tolstoyan peace, self-interest must be given up. We are unable to think and act in accordance with ultimate law if we persist in efforts to put the self first; self-interest breeds desire, desire is expression of freedom, freedom assumes action, and action will bring conflict and violence. Thus Tolstoy's positive view of selfless attitudes in *War and Peace*, above all demonstrated by Platon Karataev. Karataev is Tolstoy's example of living life well, and serves as Pierre's role model late in the novel. Pierre observes that Karataev has "no attachments, friendships, or love, as Pierre understood them; but he lived lovingly with everything that life brought his way, especially other people—not any specific people, but those who were there before his eyes."¹ Karataev's character is a denouncement of the particular as well as of ownership, and a championing for self-sacrifice and love.

¹ Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, (New York: Random House Inc., 2007), 973.

Tolstoy's lesson is not to abandon metaphysical truth for the sake of an epistemological limbo, in which we are suspended in an eternal search for new facts. Such an empirical principle for a discipline could only serve to encourage the creation of new knowledge that is forever overwritten by the next generation of facts, resulting in a never-ending parade of non-attempts at knowledge. Rather, Tolstoy encourages us to search for knowledge and understanding that emerges through love and self-sacrifice; he desires history written for the sake of universal enlightenment and peace, divorced from the self-interest that so often typifies our own work. But Tolstoy is nevertheless pessimistic. He disbelieves in the possibility of human freedom, which could only be accomplished through the overcoming of the particular-universal dichotomy. His thesis is theistic. It places the universe at a distance from ourselves, and asserts our inability to ever fully comprehend it. He also therefore sentences us to eternal suffering; as finite, particular minds, we will never be able to approach the end of our limitation, and every reminder will cause us pain. Some historians, like those mentioned who have already explored the philosophical nature of the particular-universal tension, have already arrived at some agreement with Tolstoy in that regard. They view our particularity as final, unchangeable, and to overcome it as undesirable in most philosophical circles. History is written for its own sake and in order to maintain the bourgeois status of academia. In this regard, historians are in direct conflict with Tolstoy. By continuing to write historical narratives, historians proliferate some idea of freedom and agency unavailable to most of society. History serves no greater purpose for our species; the chronicles of suffering we hold, of which *War and Peace* is analogous, are recounted without the purpose of

bringing our species to a greater state of being. We neither attempt to push humanity into a universal state of being, an effort which Tolstoy opposes, nor do we advocate the eradication of the desire for freedom, which Tolstoy tried to do in *War and Peace*. We instead maintain the status quo, one of inevitable suffering and the illusion of escape from that suffering through individual, particular effort. We have transformed our discipline from a pursuit of knowledge to one of bourgeois limbo, chaining ourselves to suffering, death, and the tyranny of self-interest.

But there are other potentialities, which I wish to explore in this work. I grant Tolstoy that he identified a serious problem in history writing, that is, self-interest and the particular, but dismiss his pessimism. I see no reason to believe that we are all determined to the particular. I do not think that removing the possibility of our own freedom of self-determination as beings is constructive. Why would we bother to act, to imagine, to work, to think, if it were true that those activities could have no impact on the world? Why not give in to base instinct, interact with the world in a purely superficial manner, and abandon all hope for any greater possibilities? That is the inevitable end of pessimism: apathy, inactivity, and eventually violence, suffering, and destruction. We will abandon ourselves to a Heideggerian state, one in which there can be no moral wrong or right, no goal, and nothing beyond our own contemplation of suffering. We would be forever particular. Those of the conservative left, who draw greatly from Heidegger through thinkers like Foucault, would sentence us to the same. Foucault does not even retain any solution; he protests all attempts at a dominant narrative, even one of peace. The thoughts of Foucault can only lead to a so-called negative norm, in which

there can be nothing but critique of narratives vying for hegemonic power in praise of our individual and collective ignorance, an essentially non-constructive and pessimistic condition. Tolstoy's argument does not convince me, much less Foucault's, whose argument ignores even the possibility of peaceful submission to universal powers; if Tolstoy wished to convince me that our actions have no impact through will on the future, then taking action to persuade me to act in a certain way was a mistake. But I cannot deny that Tolstoy puts his finger on a central problem with the historical discipline. Self-interest, which plagues history as much today as it did 150 years ago, is certainly a problem. The historical discipline is bourgeois, and our narratives reflect that. We write for other historians, not the general public. Our narratives embrace no truth to work toward for our species, only the endless cycle of fact discovery, the slow atrophy of intellectualism fueled by empiricism rather than effort for a metaphysical end.

Tolstoy's solution to these problems is not mine. Tolstoy would have us embrace our particularity, and submit ourselves to the all-governing natural laws of the universe so that our course as a species may be characterized by peaceful passivism rather than any activity which may prove destructive. He scorned the historians of his time, the Rankians and Hegelians, who in all their German idealist sincerity believed in a determined positive end for our species that was manifested in our actions. He would also scorn the historians of today, who just as much as Ranke believe in the raw, discoverable fact, despite their loss of attachment to the grand, political narratives of nations and "history as it really was," so beloved to many historians Tolstoy would have read. But to scorn positivity is no constructive act, and I disagree conclusively with Tolstoy in his

determined pessimism. I believe in the possibility for positive ends for our species, that we may triumph over our particularity, and change the state of our being. I thus turn to the Hegelian-Marxist tradition, to the radical Enlightenment principles of equality, freedom, and attainment of the universal, though I do so with some departure from that tradition. The Hegelian-Marxist tradition posits the possibility for human freedom, for peace, for the end of suffering and even death, in this world, without gods, mythos, or an afterlife. It may instead be achieved through our own actions. This is praiseworthy. But significantly, those traditions often emphasize their own determinism; humanity will be the manifestation of Reason in the world through the motions of the World-Spirit, will overthrow capitalism and install a global communist community. Such determinism is yet more condemnation for the human, though they are much preferable to the sentences of Tolstoy, Heidegger, and Foucault. I see no need for a determined truth, a truth that exists with or without our will for it to be. I instead assert that our truths are those we will them to be, and our future will follow from those truths that we will. That is my departure; I do not believe in the inevitable culmination of Reason through the manifestation of the World Spirit, nor do I believe in the linear evolution of human civilization into the final state of communism.

Our state of being will be what we determine it to be. And the end which is worthy of such a possibility, the goal which would solve the problems that Tolstoy pointed out, not just within the historical discipline, but within our species, is perfect universality. It is the unification of our species, that which wills as it is, with all that is. It is the overcoming of suffering, fear, division, violence, and, ultimately, death; in short,

it is to become god. Our access to perfect universality will be achieved via will; the will to be self-defining, the will to choose one's being, to become without restriction of possibility, is universal because it is limitless. The continued efforts toward mastery of the universe, labor combined with focused intention, in order to fulfill our will to become, at present manifest in the sciences, is the practical path by which we may achieve that universality. History may serve in the philosophical path toward universality, which by necessity will only come through the complete unity of our species. We will first be unified in purpose, then being, and then with all that is. I propose that a reconstructed history would serve excellently to persuade humanity's individual members of the worthiness of universality. We, as new historians, desire peace and the end of suffering; to achieve those ends we must convince others that to be individual is to suffer, and that to overcome individuality and suffering toward the universal is not the end of the human, but merely a transition to a different state of existence for that which wills, one which is better because it fulfills the moral imperative to overcome our own violences. That moral imperative will be satisfied through love, love most similar to that exhibited by Christ himself; our love, the love of and for all, is manifest in self-sacrifice. The will to give up our individual selves for the sake of our entire species, for all those who will to freely, voluntarily undergo the transformation into a single will, to experience self-sacrifice and the end of the individual not unto death, not unto oblivion, but unto all others of our species, is love. It will be the last violence we experience as individuals, the violence of transformation into a single entity. New historians may act as the agents for such a change.

We are the keepers of humanity's failures, sorrows, sins, and disasters. Who else could serve better to entreat the other members of humanity to seek a better existence, to escape the inevitable suffering and violence we inflict on ourselves and others? It is true that all our narratives are constructed, as Hayden White wrote decades ago, and it is true that all our narratives serve our own interests, as Tolstoy mockingly noted time and again. But if we united under a single goal, if we subsumed the interests of our individual selves to the interests of our species, and used the chronicle of suffering that is human history to encourage humanity to reach for the universal instead of wallowing in the particular, we can be part of a greater project to overcome our very being. If we give up bourgeois life, epistemological pessimism, and existential complacency, and instead offer ourselves for the services of the species, we could serve as the proselytizers of a different kind of religion: the new history of universality. To introduce the new history, I begin by dissecting Tolstoy's critique of historians in Chapter 1. I divide his critique into three different mockeries: the mockeries of the actor, the narrator, and the narrative. At the end of the chapter, I give a brief evaluation of the critique, essentially deciding what of it is worth engaging with in order to restructure history along Marxist lines. Chapters 2 and 3 are two different historiographical excursions. In Chapter 2, I evaluate the way Tolstoy's critique has been received and judged since *War and Peace* was published, broken into two parts, the mistakes of omission and the mistakes of interpretation. In Chapter 3, I give a brief historiographical survey of how historians have thought about the historical discipline in light of the particular-universal tension in the first part, followed by two examples of historical monographs written with the particular-universal

tension in mind in recent years. In Chapter 4, I argue for the new history, informed and constructed by Tolstoy's polemic as well as the historiographies I cover in Chapter 2 and 3. I propose a way outside of both Tolstoyan pessimism and Marxist determinism in order to achieve peace and freedom for humanity, a way for which a new history will prove useful.

CHAPTER ONE

TOLSTOY AND HISTORY

Napoleon and the Mockery of the Actor

The first time the narrator of *War and Peace* directly attacks historians is at the beginning of the the third volume, six hundred pages in. Andrei has already nearly died at Austerlitz, Natasha has spurned Andrei for a brief but intense affair with Anatole, and Pierre has tried on the Freemason apron. The bones of the story have been built, and the main characters have already undergone life-changing occurrences. The key historical event of the novel, Napoleon's invasion of Russia, is the focus of the polemic, and Tolstoy introduces his topic of interest with considerable contextual argumentation. Quite directly, the narrator asks: "What produced this extraordinary event? What were its causes?"² They proceed to list the set of causes that historians of the time (the 1860s) generally set upon, a relatively unimportant list of other events and facts which hardly feature in the story at all, such as the theft of the duchy of Oldenburg, vague diplomatic errors, etc. But what relevance, the narrator asks, have such abstract and distant events to do with the invasion itself, in which "thousands of men from the other end of Europe should kill and ravage the people of Smolensk and Moscow provinces and be killed by them?"³ They find that there is no satisfactory answer, and thus begins their direct attack on historians. "For us descendants—who are not historians, who are not carried away by

² Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, 603.

³ Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, 604.

the process of research and therefore can contemplate events with unobscured common sense—a countless number of causes present themselves . . . equally correct in themselves, and equally false in the incapacity . . . to produce the event that took place.”⁴

The narrator is unimpressed by attempts from historians to explain the invasion. According to them, historians go about it all wrong, attempting to attribute causes for particular occurrences to other particular notions, whether individuals, actions, or events. There can be no particular causes in history. Instead, there are “billions of causes” coinciding, none of them “the exclusive cause of the events, but the event had to take place simply because it had to take place.”⁵ The narrator goes on to clarify exactly what they mean by necessary events: “Fatalism in history is inevitable for the explanation of senseless phenomena . . . the more we try to explain sensibly these phenomena of history, the more senseless and incomprehensible they become for us.”⁶ Naturally, in such a destructive narrative to the great men version of history that still had some popularity in the mid-nineteenth century, Napoleon can only feature as a clown, the focus of the novel’s direct attack on agency. The narrator states that in 1812, when deciding whether or not he wanted to go to war with Russia, he was deciding nothing, neither his fate nor the fates of all those who would be affected during the invasion. Rather, Napoleon “had never been more subject than now to those inevitable laws which forced him . . . to do for the common cause, for history, that which had to be accomplished.”⁷

⁴ Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, 604.

⁵ Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, 604-605.

⁶ Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, 605.

⁷ Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, 606.

The mockery of Napoleon in *War and Peace* is the most severe criticism of a single character featured in the novel; when he appears, he serves only to demonstrate his own ridiculous egoism and self-absorbed behaviors. His first scene is just before the battle of Austerlitz, a rout of the Russian forces for which Napoleon credits his genius the victory. His first appearance is without dialogue; the narrator only provides a physical and emotional description of Napoleon's state. He is content with his morning, happy that the anniversary of his coronation could align with a battle he predicted to be a victory. He only gives the order for the battle to begin once the early morning sun has illuminated the grounds for the coming engagement; to him, it was only possible for the thousands of men who were going to die within hours to do so once he was satisfied that the aesthetic appeal of the setting was adequate for his desires. Such drama and self-obsession is nearly unimaginable in the face of the horror that then took place, during which Napoleon himself was not in danger. He tours the field of battle afterwards, surveying the dead and wounded of both sides, and encounters Prince Andrei, who is near death and surrounded by other wounded.

Prince Andrei, heretofore an admirer of Napoleon, had been much the same in his desire for glory on the battlefield. Before the battle began, Andrei was thinking out his own battle plans, deciding how he would direct the actions of troops in order to achieve victory and bring himself glory. During the battle, when the Russian line is breaking and Andrei sees the standard fall, Andrei sees an opportunity to gain that glory by leading his battalion in a charge against the French, barely able to hold up the heavy standard as he did so and immediately being struck down. As Andrei falls, he understands that he is

approaching an infinite; whether it is the sacredness of life or death itself, or some synthesis of the two, is unclear. What he sees in the eternal sky could be neither, but is only brought about by his nearness to death and intense awareness of life. Andrei remains in contemplation of the infinite sky for hours, still bleeding, after the French victory has been secured. When Napoleon comes upon him, severely wounded and barely conscious, Andrei knows that Napoleon is there, and hears Napoleon say the words: “There’s a fine death.”⁸ Napoleon, of course, believes that he is giving Andrei’s death meaning with the compliment, as if an egotistical honor from some other mortal creature could bestow an immortal element upon a dying man. Andrei ignores him, remaining in contemplation: “He knew that it was Napoleon—his hero—but at that moment, Napoleon seemed to him such a small, insignificant man compared with what was now happening between his soul and this lofty, infinite sky.”⁹

Some of Tolstoy’s most beautiful prose in *War and Peace* is reserved for Andrei, in particular the times when Andrei approaches death. The implication of reverence for the awareness of life and death that Andrei had reached was only disrupted by Napoleon’s appearance. After Napoleon orders Andrei to be taken for first aid and Andrei wakes with more consciousness of his situation, Napoleon comes by the hospital to pay his fallen enemies more honor. When he reaches Andrei’s bed and asks after his condition, Andrei could not even respond: “all this interest that occupied Napoleon seemed so insignificant, his hero himself seemed so petty to him, with his petty vanity

⁸ Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, 291.

⁹ Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, 291.

and joy in victory, compared with that lofty and just, and kindly sky, which he had seen and understood, that he was unable to answer.”¹⁰ Napoleon does not comprehend Andrei’s lack of response, and simply moves on to other soldiers, eventually leaving on his horse happy with the recognition his personage had given to the wounded and defeated.

Napoleon’s self-obsession is also illustrated at the beginning of the French invasion of Russia, when his forces cross the Niemen River. A regiment of Polish uhlans, excited by Napoleon’s presence on the bank of the river, receive order to find a ford and cross. The colonel in command of the unit, “stumbling over his words with excitement,” is driven to such zealous rapture that he begs for the uhlans to be allowed to cross the river without a ford, hoping to demonstrate some prowess and make an impression on the Emperor.¹¹ When given permission by an adjutant, the uhlans charge into the water to disaster; dozens of men and horses drown, despite the presence of a ford a quarter mile away. But these worshippers are “proud to swim and drown in this river before the eyes of the man who sat on a log and was not even looking at what they were doing.”¹² Napoleon later names the colonel to the Legion of Honor, which was, naturally, headed by Napoleon himself. Aside from encouraging such ridiculous, self-destructive behaviors from his own officers, it is also remarkable to see how the narrator portrays Napoleon’s attitude to such rapturous performances: “For him it was no new conviction that his presence at all ends of the world, from Africa to the steppes of

¹⁰ Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, 293.

¹¹ Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, 609.

¹² Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, 609.

Muscovy, struck people in the same way and threw them into the madness of self-oblivion.”¹³

Napoleon possesses unparalleled confidence and self-satisfaction when events favor his desires. The French victory at Austerlitz, his situational superiority over his defeated enemies and subordinates, all enabled him to feel as though he was in control. As the invasion of Russia progresses, and events cease to manifest themselves as he wishes, his sense of control, and thus his confidence as portrayed in the novel, wane. The first time Napoleon begins to sense that his unshakeable certainty in his ability to shape the world may be unwarranted is at the Battle of Borodino, the most significant battle of the invasion. The Russian army, under command of Grand Marshal Kutuzov, had retreated from Napoleon along the roads to Moscow, and gave battle just before the city. Generally considered one of the casualty-heaviest battles in history up to that point, Borodino saw tens of thousands of casualties for both French and Russian forces. The Russian army chose to pull back after the action, and after significant debate retreated beyond Moscow, giving up that city without giving up the war.

In the view of the narrator, Borodino was a victory for Russia, or perhaps more accurately a defeat for Napoleon. His army was much reduced and exhausted for resources, and fell to looting and disorder shortly after Moscow was taken. Tolstoy provides a view of Napoleon that is far removed from the pomposity and arrogance the

¹³ Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, 609.

emperor felt earlier in the text as Napoleon learns of the numbers of casualties in the French forces and their inability to completely overwhelm the Russian position:

Napoleon was experiencing a painful feeling similar to that which is always experienced by a lucky gambler, who madly threw his money about, always won, and suddenly, precisely when he has calculated all the chances of the game, feels that the more he thinks over his move, the more certain he is to lose. The troops were the same, the generals were the same, there were the same preparations, the same disposition, the same *proclamation courte et énergique*, he himself was the same, he knew it, he knew that he was even much more experienced and skillful now than he was before, even the enemy was the same as at Austerlitz and Friedland; but the terrible swing of the arm fell magically strengthless.¹⁴

Napoleon's agency was taken from him; his will was not made manifest in the world, his enemies did not fall before him despite all his knowledge, skill, and experience. His defeat of the Russian army at Borodino did not gift him Russia's surrender, and only served to weaken his own forces while engendering greater hatred against his cause in the Russian people.

Napoleon firmly believes that Moscow would be formally handed over to him, and that peace negotiations (during which he would demonstrate his goodwill and civilized principles) would be initiated to end the war he had not even wanted. The narrator lists all the things that Napoleon wishes to accomplish in the city, among them designing a speech to the official deputation to receive him into the city and listing the ways he intends to name the charitable institutions in Moscow after his mother. The gentlemen of Napoleon's suite fear to tell their emperor the news; they are aware that the city is empty, but are so afraid to place Napoleon in "that dreadful position known to the

¹⁴ Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, 803.

French as *le ridicule*” that no one speaks to him.¹⁵ He eventually notices that the moment for a triumphant speech has passed, has the troops move in to take the city, and after officially being informed that Moscow was empty, grumpily retires to an inn in a suburb outside the city. The portrayal of Napoleon is as both an actor (or pretender) and a child. He is an actor in that he attempts to engage in a line of action that will have purely theatrical results. His thoughts on why he entered into the war, his carefully prepared speech, and his plan to justify peace terms favorable to himself have little to do with anything anchored in reality. He entered the war, wanted to give a magnanimous speech, and hoped for favorable peace terms for reasons of self-interest; reliance on principles of civilization versus barbarity, the justification he imagined to use when describing his actions in the war to the non-existent deputation, is merely an excuse to attain more political standing and ascend further in the hierarchy of men. Thus he is an actor on a stage whose moment never comes, completely ignored by the Russian people, who are intent on continuing the war. He is also a child in that he presumes there exists a set of circumstances, which he desires, without having any evidence of that state of affairs existing. His expectation is that Moscow will be formally given to him and its governance transferred to his control, and that there he will begin peace negotiations with Russia. Neither of those circumstances exists, and the fear of his suite to tell him the truth marks him as childish. Rather than take in stride events as they come to him, he

¹⁵ Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, 873.

expects events to occur according to his will time and again, and time and again makes himself a fool (*le ridicule*) as the invasion diverges from his vision.

The Mockery of the Narrator

Just as Tolstoy mocks the actor who supposes to have the power to influence the outcome of history, so does he mock the historian who supposes to understand the reasons for historical events. There is, of course, a set of wry notations the narrator makes concerning the biases of historians, especially concerning why the invasion happened, and how events like the Battle of Borodino may be interpreted. National identity inevitably raises its head; the aforementioned set of explanations for the cause of the invasion include a laundry list of possibilities convenient for any given perspective. Napoleon himself believed the war was started by the “intrigues of England,” and conversely to the English by “Napoleon’s love of power.”¹⁶ When Moscow burns, blame is tossed back and forth by Russians and French, both attempting to demonize the other for attempting to destroy an ancient and sacred city out of either the too-fierce patriotism of the Russians or the “savagery of the French.”¹⁷

There are also other, more individual biases to consider; the narrator often directs their attacks on historians who seek to support the great man interpretation of history, who naturally favor Napoleon and his individual agency. Introducing the Battle of Borodino, the narrator calls both Kutuzov and Napoleon fools for accepting battle; it

¹⁶ Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, 604.

¹⁷ Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, 897.

proved disastrous for both, though more so for the French. The narrator is more sympathetic toward Kutuzov, since Kutuzov represents the ideal of Russian spirit and maturity, patient and reluctant to engage aggressively with the enemy. But both are nevertheless moved by the same unintelligible forces that shape all events: “In offering and accepting battle at Borodino, Kutuzov and Napoleon acted involuntarily and senselessly. And only later did historians furnish the already accomplished facts with ingenious arguments for the foresight and genius of the commanders, who, of all the involuntary instruments of world events, were the most enslaved and involuntary agents.”¹⁸ The narrator completely counters the traditional narrative of historians. Kutuzov did not cunningly retreat until a strategic point at which to give a battle he knew would result in a Pyrrhic victory for Napoleon, or bumble his way into making a mistake by losing a third to a half of his army. Napoleon did not ingeniously chase Kutuzov with the goal of stopping at Moscow to finish the war, or sacrifice the quarter of his army at Borodino that he thought necessary to break the spirit of the Russians and finish them off in the countryside beyond Moscow. These arguments are constructions generated by the egos and interests of later historians, who are willing to ascribe some kind of genius to humans reacting to everything around them, rather than embracing the subservient position of humans in the natural order according to Tolstoy’s urging.

The narrator expounds on the criticism of great men and generals after the Battle of Borodino takes place. They detail specifically how ridiculous it is to assume any

¹⁸ Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, 754.

commander is in control of the events of war: “The activity of a commander does not have the slightest resemblance to the activity we imagine to ourselves, sitting at ease in our study . . . a commander in chief always finds himself in the middle of a shifting series of events, and in such a way that he is never able at any moment to ponder all the meaning of the ongoing event.”¹⁹ The commander has, by necessity, an incomplete account of the facts as they are coming to them, and constantly hears directly contradictory accounts, especially during battle. The commander’s lack of knowledge, but necessity to act, is reminiscent of both the tragedy of human agency already framed by the novel, and analogous for the effort of the empirical historian. Historical facts exist, but their meanings are constantly being transformed and shaped by events occurring within the passage of time. Just as the commander attempts to develop orders and strategies to address the facts as they understand them, but is unable to develop foolproof strategies, so the historian attempts to write accurate histories without knowing all the facts or their complete meanings. Both are the result of the desire for meaning to be derived from human agency. The commander wants to win the battle and influence the future, and in the same way the historian wants to produce a significant work for future historians. The futility of the actor is similar to the futility of the narrator, and both emerge from self-interest.

The futility of Tolstoy’s historical narrator is derived from both their methods and their motives. Methodologically, the historian writes histories based on the existence of

¹⁹ Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, 825.

empirical facts. If history is constructed from facts alone, which are understood as single units of information that refer to a specific moment in time, and describe or are related to historical events and persons, then the fault of empirical historians is twofold. First, in a practical sense, there exists the problem of limited perspective and information.

Archives, the storehouse for the materials of the historian, are inevitably incomplete; documents and evidences are lost or destroyed, or nonexistent about a relevant historical event in the first place. The result is a loop of disciplinary effort: the historian goes to the archive, uncovers a heretofore unknown fact about an historical event or figure (although still lacking a complete knowledge of their subject), and writes a new history about that event or figure incorporating the new fact. Often, of course, this is not the case. The new fact can't be found, so the historian will work to reinterpret the old facts, which are still limited, and assigns themselves/is assigned to a school of thought concerning their particular method or viewpoint. The historian will thusly be regarded as having still accomplished the goal of history by using facts to substantiate a new narrative.

Throughout this process, no one who is taken seriously suggests finding a way to reach a true, final conclusion about anything historical. There is the general presupposition that there are multiple truths, with differing validity based on the amount of used facts and political popularity, a conclusion inimical to Tolstoy's determinist conviction. In an empirical system, anything less than multiple truths supported by facts is a single truth, which is either religion or childish nonsense, and anything more than truths beyond just individual facts is postmodern relativism, lacking in both logical coherence and moral soundness. But the remaining procedure is an infinite loop of gradually deteriorating

authority. The historical discipline utilizing the empirical method lacks an end and creates the conditions for the rise of bureaucratic careerism. Without a universal truth to provide the guiding light for the efforts of historians, self-interest and the desire for a closed off community develop within the discipline. Historians become concerned with questions relevant only to other historians, write most chiefly for other historians, and focus ever more on niche historical events in and of themselves, without attempting to discover certain truths. Historians, writes Tolstoy in the epilogue of *War and Peace*, “without answering the essential questions of mankind, for some sort of purposes of their own, serve as current money for the universities and the mass of readers—lovers of serious books, as they put it.”²⁰

The second problem that Tolstoy raises for empirical historians is with regards to the nature of the fact being opposed to the nature of the human species. The fact, at least nominally, refers to a single point in history. It describes a finite extant thing or set of things, and is supposed to exist alongside other facts so that historians can attempt to reconstruct them to understand the past. But, the narrator asks, how useful is such a thing? Is it even compatible with the rest of our knowledge of how things work? Their conclusion is that the fact is similar to the unit of space described in Zeno’s paradox of Achilles and the tortoise. According to the Ancient Greek philosopher, if Achilles and the tortoise begin walking while the tortoise is ahead and both are continuously moving, even though Achilles is far faster, Achilles can never catch the tortoise. As Achilles

²⁰ Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, 1187

covers half the distance, the tortoise will add more distance, and so on forever; Achilles cannot cover the apparently infinite distance that the tortoise will inevitably keep generating as it moves. This paradox was meant to explain that motion and change are illusory; Zeno's belief was that the universe is static. Similarly, if the historian is consumed with the apparent infinite variety of individual facts as units, it will seem as though historical truth is illusory. After roughly two millennia of development in mathematics, calculus was invented by independently by both Isaac Newton and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz in the mid-17th century. The purpose of calculus, as the narrator delights in at the beginning of the third part of the third volume in *War and Peace*, is to mathematically describe motion, thus enabling mathematicians to refute Zeno's paradox.

History, according to the narrator, can be thought of in the same way. Facts can analogously be thought of as units of motion, as in calculus. But the investigation of calculus is not the particularities of individual units of motion, but rather the laws and governing principles which hold sway over motion itself. The presumption behind such universal laws is that all the instances of motion are connected. The narrator assumes that the movements of history function similarly: "The movement of mankind, proceeding from a countless number of human wills, occurs continuously. To comprehend the laws of this movement is the goal of history. But in order to comprehend the laws of the continuous movement of the sum of all individual will,

human reason allows for arbitrary, discrete units.”²¹ The efforts of modern historians, according to the narrator, have focused too much on individual instances in history rather than attempting to make sense of the whole of history at once. This error is due to an imagined separation between the existences of historical facts: “but however small the units that history takes, we feel that allowing for a unit that is separate from another, allowing for the *beginning* of some phenomenon, and allowing for the notion that all individual wills are expressed in the actions of one historical person, is false in itself.”²² The narrator thus urges historians to understand history mathematically rather than with the isolation of individuals in mind.

The preservation of individual analysis in historical methodology, rather than turning to a universal mathematics, implies a motivation for writing history which presupposes a desire for a history that assumes the freedom and influence of the individual agent. Assuming, as the narrator does, that history is determined, bound to natural laws outside human influence, then all human action is devoid of meaning. There can exist no great men to shape the world for future generations and who live forever in the glory of collective memory. There can be no historical accounts or analyses to change the way a historical topic is understood. All the efforts of historians to engage in empirical study and “fix” the histories that were previously written are childish assertions of an agency that does not exist. All these efforts are, for Tolstoy’s narrator, mere errors in the course of what nature has set out for our species. Action cannot lead where natural

²¹ Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, 821-822.

²² Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, 822.

law will take us anyway, and it certainly cannot take us outside the parameters of those laws, if we are indeed ruled by them. Thus the evaluation of historians Tolstoy directly illustrates in Part II of the epilogue, dropping the voice of the narrator, concerning how historians engage in their discipline. It is worth reading again with greater context. He defines historians who study the movements of people over time, or historians interested in political narratives and cultural changes, thusly:

General historians and historians of culture are like people who, having recognized the inconvenience of paper money, decide instead to make coins out of a metal that lacks the density of gold. And the money will indeed come out having the *clink* of coin, but only the *clink*. Paper money might still deceive the unknowing, whereas a coin that clicks but has no value will deceive no one. As gold is only gold when it can be used not for exchange alone, but also for real things, so, too, general historians will only be gold when they are able to answer the essential question of history: what is power . . . And as tokens that resemble gold can only be used among a group of people who agree to take them for gold, and among those who do not know the properties of gold, so, too, general historians and historians of culture, without answering the essential questions of mankind, for some purposes of their own, serve as current money for the universities and the mass of readers—lovers of serious books, as they put it.²³

The currency-based analogy Tolstoy uses to describe the motivations of historians reflects his sense of the self-interest that energizes the historical discipline. He is quite dismissive of historians and their serious books that ask all the wrong questions, and sees little to be gained from histories that focus on only a few people. The interest of such histories is to suppose that the source of power in history to cause events cannot be but vested in individuals, and thus constitutes a discipline-wide error.

²³ Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, 1187.

To err from the natural course of history is always an act of selfishness. To enfold one's self into the ultimate purpose of natural law and end childish self-assertion would be to take Tolstoy's words to heart. To laud the individual and assert their power to have influence on events; what could there be more self-interested? It is a political endeavor, an endeavor to escape natural law for the sake of one's own self. Histories of those deemed interesting, influential, important, who had meaning in their lives worth learning from after their death; these are all manifestations of the desire for agency in a world empty of freedom. Historians sense their inner desires to assert themselves on the world, recognize that others feel the same way, and write histories satisfying to those desires. To Tolstoy, what could such a historical discipline be but a group of self-aggrandizers, advertising freedom in their so-called "serious books?" They develop a vocabulary exclusive to their community and create a body of works that is substantially difficult for the rest of society to access because of paywalls and membership restrictions. They have control over what gets published as history through community self-regulation and disciplinary politics, and choose their own successors by having significant control over the education of future historians. Tolstoy's antipathy towards the early form of the modern historical discipline developing during his lifetime is unobscured in *War and Peace*; in the analogy from the epilogue he bluntly calls historians forgers and liars, effective enough only to trick the ignorant.

The historian may be forgiven for asking how Tolstoy justifies the polemic he delivers in *War and Peace*. Tolstoy's criticism focuses on the elements of self-interest he finds influential in history. However, a perceptive reader might point out that Tolstoy's

polemic itself is an act of self-assertion. The very act of writing, one may argue, is a form of self-assertion, or worse, according to Tolstoy's supposed adherence to natural law, a form of self-preservation in opposition to natural law. For what desire would he take the trouble to write a novel over a thousand pages long, have it published and distributed, and have the gall to criticize someone else doing the same thing, if not the desire to be read? Tolstoy still asserts his own voice and views, and if he hopes to be read after his own death, or to have his published works feature as some sort of memorial after his death, then the historian may be justified in calling him a hypocrite. Platon Karataev, Tolstoy's own paragon of selflessness, would hardly write and publish works espousing a determined truth. Such an act would have no meaning for someone who "often said something completely opposite to what he had said before."²⁴ Another problem that appears when considering the contradictions of Tolstoy's work is part of his own view of the natural course of history. If, as he says over and over, history really is bound to turn out in one particular way, and we have no freedom, then exactly what does he suppose to accomplish by writing a polemic about those who supposedly err in attempting to understand history? If history will be what it will be and events can only come true in a single way, then why would he attempt to persuade anyone of that truth? His attempt would garner exactly zero results; persuasion itself is part of the illusion of freedom. We can only act as nature has determined we will act. Even if everyone in the world read *War and Peace* and were convinced to give up their own self-interest, it would not be because of Tolstoy's work. It would occur because it would be the course

²⁴ Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, 973.

of natural law. The line of reasoning that reveals this contradiction in his effort also illuminates another contradiction: how can anyone err in a determined history? If history will be what it will be, then the historians he disparages are still serving to that end, and his polemic serves no purpose other than to feature in the same history alongside all the works he condemns as useless.

The Mockery of Historical Narrative

The contradictions of Tolstoy's effort weaken his argument about determinism. Nevertheless, exactly why he turns to determinism, and how he utilizes natural law to mock historical narrative, are still worth considering. In the book, the narrator uses mathematics as their starting point, enamored as they seem to be with Newton and Leibniz. In the same section the narrator describes the problem with the current historical profession in the third volume, the narrator likens historical reasoning to scientific observation of the world:

Peasants say that a cold wind blows in late spring because the leaf buds of the oak are sprouting, and indeed a cold wind blows every spring when the oak is sprouting. But though the cause of the cold wind that blows as the oak sprouts is unknown to me, I cannot agree with the peasants about the sprouting of the oak being the cause of the cold wind, if only because the force of the wind is beyond the influence of the leaf buds. I only see the coincidence of conditions that occurs in every phenomenon of life, and I see that however long and thoroughly I observe the hand of my watch, the valve and wheels of the locomotive, and the leaf buds, I will not learn the cause of the bells ringing, the movement of the train, and the spring wind. For that I must change my point of observation completely, and study the laws of the movement of steam, bells, and the wind. Historical science must do the same.²⁵

²⁵ Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, 823.

The narrator draws the conclusion that if history can be understood mathematically, wherein the movements of humanity may be better analyzed through a calculus-like set of formulations which cover the species as a whole rather than considering it to be broken up between individual factors, then those same formulas must hold true throughout time. Natural laws (especially in the times of Tolstoy, in which quantum physics and relativity were yet to be discovered) are consistent across time and are reducible to mathematical operations. Those basic natural laws, and the hypothetical mathematical formulations used to describe them, have therefore already determined the course of history into the future. The narrator is not so optimistic as to say that we may actually predict the future, but does affirm mathematical analysis of human history in its whole: “No one can tell to what extent it is given to man to achieve in this way an understanding of the laws of history; but it is obvious that the possibility of grasping historical laws lies only on this path.”²⁶

The narrator is thus justified in their attack on the freedom of the characters in the story by appealing to mathematical, unchanging natural laws. Under the premises given by the narrator, the conclusion that reveals itself is one that rejects historical narrative. There can only be, according to the narrator, a single path for history to take, which humans have thus far made little progress in discovering. Historical accounts have, it seems to the narrator, been little more than stories about important men who supposedly did important things. But since agency has already been dismissed as foolishness,

²⁶ Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, 823.

historical narratives are not works that recount history itself, but are rather self-serving stories created by historians. The narrator is quite clear to refer to the historical discipline, as outlined in the aforementioned section on mathematical history, as a science. The narrator presumes the historical discipline is not about stories, but about the discovery of indisputable laws that shape its progress. Umbrage is indeed taken with the deployment of narrative to recount history. Young Nikolai Rostov serves as an excellent character to make the point.

As a young man at the beginning of the novel, Rostov enlists in the Russian army as a Hussar, and dreams of glory for himself, his family, his country, and his emperor. Early in the wars against Napoleon's France, before the disaster at Austerlitz, Rostov engages with the enemy on the battlefield. During his first skirmish, when he charges a French unit alongside other Hussars, he experiences the confusion of battle and is wounded. His confusion and agitation in the midst of his first battle is so intense that he doesn't even remember how he is wounded during the charge. One moment he is charging on his horse, the next:

“‘What is it? I’m not moving ahead? I’ve fallen, I’ve been killed . . .’ Rostov asked and answered in the same instant. He was alone now in the middle of the field. Instead of moving horses and hussar backs, he saw the immobile earth and stubble around him. There was warm blood under him. ‘No, I’m wounded and my horse has been killed . . .’ Where ours were, where the French were—he did not know.”²⁷

²⁷ Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, 189.

The desperation he feels, the lack of awareness he has of his own predicament, are brutally communicated. There is no mitigation of his fear as he struggles to identify where his enemies and allies are, the results of the skirmish. He realizes that the French are continuing to advance: “He looked at the approaching Frenchmen and, though a moment before he had been galloping only in order to meet these Frenchmen and cut them to pieces, their closeness now seemed so terrible to him that he could not believe his eyes.”²⁸ He is even unable to process how they could be coming to kill him, his childish perspective still apparent through his own thoughts: “‘Can it be they’re running to me? Can it be? And why? To kill me? *Me*, whom everybody loves so?’ He remembered his mother’s love for him, his family’s, his friends,’ and the enemy’s intention to kill him seemed impossible.”²⁹ Rostov is pitiful, a child who has no place in the senselessness of war. His fear, his flight, are painful. There is no honor in the actions of him or those chasing him. There is only an abject fear of death with which Rostov had previously been unacquainted. The narrator is thorough in taking advantage of Rostov’s childishness as Rostov flees the field to the Russian line: “Quickly leaping over the hedges, with that swiftness with which he had run playing tag, he flew across the field, turning his pale, kind young face back from time to time, and a chill of terror ran down his spine.”³⁰

The Rostov that later appears when he recounts the tale of his first skirmish and injury (a dislocated arm) is quite different. When he, his future brother-in-law Berg, and

²⁸ Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, 189.

²⁹ Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, 189.

³⁰ Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, 190.

social climber Boris Drubetskoy meet by chance and Boris presses him to tell the story, the event that Rostov describes is far distant from the daze of fear and confusion he actually experienced. Rostov gives them a story he feels is expected, in which he certainly did not fall off his horse, dislocate an arm, and run back on foot. He gives them a story “of how he got all fired up, forgetting himself, how he flew like a storm at the square,” cutting down Frenchman with his saber left and right.³¹ Here the narrator is surprisingly gentle in their mockery. They assert Rostov’s attempt at genuineness: “Rostov was a truthful young man, not for anything would he have deliberately told an untruth.”³² Instead, the problem necessitating a factually inaccurate retelling rests with his listeners: “If he had told the truth to these listeners, who . . . had formed for themselves a definite notion of what an attack was, and were expecting exactly the same sort of account—they either would not have believed him, or worse still, would have thought it was Rostov’s own fault that what usually happens in stories of cavalry attacks had not happened with him.”³³ Narrative exists in Rostov’s account, certainly, and it does rely on facts. But the narrative is, by necessity of the context of its recounting, a self-interested one. Because Rostov maintains himself as the prime beneficiary of the retelling, his narrative becomes distorted to his benefit. Most obviously he wants to come off as having conducted himself bravely during the attack. But equally important is his consideration of how his peers will view his honesty. They would suspect him of lying

³¹ Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, 242.

³² Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, 242.

³³ Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, 242.

or error if the narrative turned out in a way they did not expect, or at least he fears that possibility.

The narrator also offers another reason that Rostov's story turns out differently from his experience: "in order to tell everything as it had been, one would have to make an effort with oneself so as to tell only what had been."³⁴ For events to be retold with exactitude, no evaluation can occur. Nothing may be given to the events which would constitute a greater meaning. Events could only ever be described as what they are if they are to be considered true to their unfolding. Rostov would have had to tell the story of his first skirmish without consideration of his self-image or the views of his peers. But narrative always gives values. Narrative is constructed from a particular perspective or set of particular perspectives, and particular perspectives can only ever be evaluative. The viewpoint of the particular is to see oppositions and understand the world as broken apart into distinct aspects to be considered separately. In Rostov's case, he could not help but first see the French as targets, then terrifying, battle as first exhilarating, then confusing and frightful. He can not help but see the judgments of his peers and how telling his story may impact himself. Rostov is aware of himself as distinct from the rest of the world, and he tells his story accordingly. The truth of the world, the natural laws which determine how events will continue to unfold into the future, cannot be described from a single perspective, and therefore cannot be described with narrative.

³⁴ Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, 242.

Tolstoy seems to see no substantive ways in which historians and their narratives are different from Rostov and his. Historians retell events in the past from their perspective according to their own self-interest and the expectations of their peers. Historians inevitably have self-interested goals, as the narrator never seems to cease pointing out, although in the current day less political weight is given to the cause of the Napoleonic wars. The narratives given then about the worthiness of the wars, who started them, if Napoleon or the Russian generals were military geniuses, all had political contexts. Even aside from a broader political value, the narratives given by historians still serve in the politics of the university and academia. Historians so often live to “serve as current money for the universities and the mass of readers—lovers of serious books, as they put it,” to once again quote that biting description. Put in Marxist terms, we pursue a bourgeois life of contentment by producing narratives that keep us in university jobs and satisfy the current culture of academia. There is no attempt to pursue a truth, a unifying element that may bring our species together under the natural law that Tolstoy holds up high. The narratives given by historians are therefore shallow for Tolstoy. If anything, Rostov has a greater claim to the value of his narrative. He at least experienced the event he retells, and invested the safety of his being to be able to retell it. This may explain why the narrator’s mockery of Rostov feels so gentle in comparison to the bed of coals they rake historians over.

Evaluation of the Polemic

Tolstoy critiques the historical discipline as primarily motivated by self-interest, which promotes the pursuit of bourgeois comfort, political maneuvering, and conflict.

His conclusion that the universe is determined negates the historical actor because individuals cannot act against natural law. Similarly, the narrator and narrative are condemned because they concern themselves with the particular rather than the universal. The stories of individuals are prioritized rather than the forces which manipulate all. The question that remains is whether the polemic offered in *War and Peace* is completely devalued by its internal contradictions. There are three significant problems: Tolstoy's personal hypocrisy of self-interest in writing the work at all; the contradiction of attempting to persuade anyone in a determined world; and the contradiction of how anyone could act incorrectly, or err, in a determined world.

The first is far less significant than the others. Despite what may be justly perceived as hypocritical about it, Tolstoy's work still provides an argument worth considering. Any argument must be considered on its own, regardless of its origin. Therefore, we historians must ask ourselves if we produce our narratives out of self-interest and political pursuits, a question due further consideration later in this work. So the first contradiction may be dismissed as immaterial. The other two contradictions are far more serious, and have significant impact on the coherence of Tolstoy's argument. If Tolstoy seeks to persuade his readers that there is a problem with the historical discipline, he must consider it possible for his readers to change their minds, thus enacting change in the world, as a result of his persuasion. As he points out numerous times in the text, the idea that any event in the world happens due to the actions of humans rather than deterministic natural laws is entirely mistaken. He contradicts one of the pillars of his argument by writing an argument at all. Thus, the whole premise of persuasion is

dismissible. In the same sense, the foundational point of the polemic against historians, that they're doing history incorrectly, lacks any coherence. How could they have been doing anything wrong if they were determined to do so by natural law? Such a premise becomes silly given some thought. If Tolstoy had been logically thorough about history as deterministic, then historians would be fulfilling natural law whether they know it or not. The common ground for each contradiction is determinist history.

To take the polemic into consideration assumes that we as historians may seek an understanding of it and attempt to create change within our discipline based on it if we find it compelling. To do so presumes the existence of agency on our behalf. Therefore, a serious reading of the text must consider the premise of determinism to be unnecessary. By disregarding determinism, we are free to take the text seriously and consider change to our discipline without the contradictions which hold back Tolstoy's polemic. This is all well and good, but the next step is to consider whether or not the polemic needs determinism as a premise to function as a worthwhile critique. The polemic in *War and Peace* attacks the notions of agency, the narrator, and narrative. The agent is ridiculous because they presume to influence future events, even though they are determined. The narrator (or historian) is ridiculous because they purport to explain a universal set of occurrences with particular explanations based on self-interest and particular facts. The narrative is a dysfunctional form of historical recounting because it is also particular rather than universal. Without determinism, it is obvious that the attack on the agent lacks the same convincing power. While it may be true that individuals have less influence on the outcome of events than they often think, to say there is no agency at all

is too strong a statement to make without the presumption of determinism. The attacks on the narrator and the narrative, however, are based on more than determinism.

A distinct aspect of the natural laws Tolstoy presumes guide the course of the universe is their universalism. They are all-encompassing. Nothing can escape their purview, thus his ability to rely on them to condemn the actor who claims to influence the future. He also relies on them to condemn the particular, because to prioritize the particular is to assume an exception to the rule, something that may be considered special or more important than other particulars. To prioritize the particular inevitably ends in evaluation and comparison. To prioritize a particular is to engage in self-interest. *War and Peace* does few things more frequently than condemn self-interest, especially among the aristocracy, of which Tolstoy was a part, much to his loathing. The parlor-room social gatherings devoid of substance, the immense amounts of wealth amassed by the aristocracy at the expense of the peasantry, Napoleon's drive to conquer Europe—all created by the error of self-interest. In Tolstoy's depiction, self-interest is cancerous and violent. Even well-intentioned assertions of self, as Pierre's efforts seem in the epilogue when he discusses governmental reform, inevitably lead to violence. It appears Pierre was attempting to convince his family and friends to side with the Decembrists, who in 1825 engaged in what is often considered a leftist revolt against the tsar. The revolt failed, and its leaders were executed. The reason Tolstoy depicts battle so harshly and realistically, and mourns his characters as they die from violence, is because of the disdain for violence that permeates the novel. At the core of Tolstoy's polemic is an urge

towards peace, one that asks us to put aside the particular so that we may consider ourselves as an entity altogether, as a single whole.

Even if Tolstoy's logical appeal to determinism to support a notion of peace is weak, it is still in order for us to ask ourselves if we as historians prize self-interest and the particular rather than the universal, so that we may fully explore the polemic given by Tolstoy. Do we function as little more than university currency? Are we motivated to bring our species to a better state of existence, or to make enough money so we don't have to worry about bills? Do we write history for the elucidation of all, or to appeal to readers of serious books? Do we invite conflict rather than work to create a worthy consensus? Depending on the audience and the conclusion, the question may also then be asked: Is it true that to prioritize the universal is good? Suppose we do prioritize the particular and our self-interest over the universal, as Tolstoy would lead us to believe. Is that wrong, and if so, why?

CHAPTER TWO

THE RESPONSE TO TOLSTOY

As befits an artist with the cultural impact and esteem of Leo Tolstoy, a number of publications have been written in response to his style and thoughts. In North America, there is an entire journal dedicated to him, the *Tolstoy Studies Journal*, which has been releasing publications since 1988. Articles about Tolstoy have been published in numerous other periodicals besides the eponymous one, and there have been countless books written about his work. As the best known of his works, *War and Peace* claims no small share of that publication pie. When *War and Peace* was first published, and for some time after, the polemic against history that Tolstoy delivered was, if not ignored, at least severely downplayed in significance. Isaiah Berlin wrote in 1953 that many who prioritized Count Tolstoy as a novelist rather than a thinker “have at times looked upon the historical and philosophical passages scattered through *War and Peace* as so much perverse interruption of the narrative, as a regrettable liability to irrelevant digression characteristic of this great, but excessively opinionated, writer, a lopsided, home-made metaphysics of small or no intrinsic interest.”³⁵

While this did not stay true, and Berlin’s interpretation of Tolstoy as a pluralist has proliferated in literary circles, there are two noticeable trends in the analyses offered. One is negative, in the sense that there have been mistakes of omission. Historians, and serious considerations of the historical science suggested by Tolstoy, are largely absent

³⁵ Isaiah Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), 5-6.

from the dialogue surrounding *War and Peace*. That absence is a decidedly strange one, considering the effort Tolstoy went to ensure his criticism of the historical could not go unnoticed, going so far as to drop the narrator voice in the second epilogue and speak in no uncertain terms about the errors of historians. But historians have not taken a great deal of trouble to respond to his criticisms, leaving that largely to the efforts of literary critics and philosophers. Equally so, there is little said about actually making an attempt to switch the focus of the historical discipline from the particular to the universal.

Keeping the status quo of the particular, or at least its approximation, informs the other important trend, which is one of mistaken interpretation. There is an alarming amount of written work assuring us that Tolstoy was a pluralist, in part due to Isaiah Berlin's work, *The Hedgehog and the Fox*, as well as other pieces written by the philosophically liberal-minded, which assign a sort of Skeptic-lite identity to Tolstoy in *War and Peace*. For Tolstoy to have been a pluralist, he would have needed to assert the validity of multiple narratives as holding some truth, which he emphatically does not. This occurs especially when the lives of the characters in *War and Peace* are brought to discussion. Many readers have interpreted Tolstoy as inconsistent, applying a deterministic worldview only with national politics and wars while allowing his individual characters (at least those who are not Napoleon or other important generals) the freedom to shape their lives at will. By interpreting an allowance for their free wills, those same readers are able to assert a plurality of truths with regards to the experiences of each individual character. Both these trends have resulted in the avoidance of the most important aspects of the

polemic: a serious re-consideration of the historical discipline, and an inquiry into the value of the universal over the particular.

The Mistake of Omission

It is, of course, difficult to write much about something that does not exist. In order to provide analysis despite the absence of substantive responses from historians to Tolstoy, responses from all critics of *War and Peace* will be utilized instead, regardless of profession. At the time *War and Peace* was published, the great man view of history was still quite popular, and Tolstoy's attack went largely ignored in the political climate of the time. Tolstoy scholar and researcher Jeff Love writes: "This romantic view [the great man view] prospered in the first half of the nineteenth century and offers a ready justification for autocratic exercises of power, suggesting a fascinating and largely unappreciated political dimension to Tolstoy's novel."³⁶ The notable exceptions to the silence of historians were military historians, who protested Tolstoy's apparent falsification of historical facts regarding battles in the Napoleonic Wars. Russian military historians S. Navalikhin and A.S. Norov took umbrage with Tolstoy's treatment of factual accuracy, as well as Aleksandr Nikolaevich Vitmer, who served in the Russian army in 1812 and provides the best critique.³⁷ Aside from clarification of factual events depicted by Tolstoy, the engagement of historians with *War and Peace* has been absent in English. Indeed, as philosopher, social theorist, and intellectual historian Isaiah Berlin

³⁶ Jeff Love, "The Great Man in *War and Peace*," in *Tolstoy on War*, ed. Rick McPeak and Donna Orwin (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2012), 86.

³⁷ Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox*, 7.

points out, philosophical engagement with *War and Peace* was absent for the better part of a century, even while the great man view died off in the historical profession. The immediate reactions of contemporary critics, that Tolstoy wrote excellent novels but lacked the abilities of a high-quality thinker, stood for some time. Philosophical engagement with Tolstoy at all mostly prioritized Tolstoy's later works, after he converted to Christianity and turned to religious contemplation. Writes Berlin: "Historians of Russian thought tend to label this [the assertions of determinism in *War and Peace*] aspect of Tolstoy as 'fatalism,' and move on to the more interesting historical theories of Leont'ev or Danilevsky."³⁸

Boris Eikhenbaum, a Russian-Soviet literary scholar and foundational thinker of Russian formalism, was the most prominent scholar of Tolstoy's works through the first half of the twentieth century. According to Berlin in the 1950s, Eickhenbaum "has written the best critical work on Tolstoy in any language," work which informs Berlin's own understanding of Tolstoy.³⁹ Eikhenbaum engaged in a large amount of research on Tolstoy, known as the "Leo Tolstoy project" by Russian language scholar Carol Any.⁴⁰ The majority of that effort went into the publication of three volumes—named after different decades of the nineteenth century—charting the interests which motivated Tolstoy, titled *Tolstoi in the Fifties*, *Tolstoi in the Sixties*, and *Tolstoi in the Seventies*. In those volumes, Eikhenbaum explores the correspondences Tolstoy kept, the projects he

³⁸ Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox*, 8.

³⁹ Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox*, 39.

⁴⁰ Carol Any, "Boris Eikhenbaum's Unfinished Work on Tolstoy: A Dialogue with Soviet History," *PMLA* 105, no. 2 (March 1990): 234.

worked on, and the interests which arrested him; passages concerning *War and Peace* are written in *Tolstoi in the Sixties*. Eikhenbaum's thesis is that Tolstoy was at heart an archaist who disliked the growing historicism of many of his contemporaries, and sought to subvert them by posing his contradictory philosophy of history. Eikhenbaum's take is, much like those of most previous readers of *War and Peace*, less than impressed. Eikhenbaum presents Tolstoy as a restless thinker with regards to historical philosophy. During the 1860s, as academic discussion for the establishment of a formal, unified historical discipline were intensifying, so too were debates about historical philosophy:

Earlier, with reference to Tolstoi's conception of *The Decembrists*, I pointed out a popular interest in historical books and lectures, in memoirs and biographical "montages." This was characteristic of the early 1860s. An interest in the philosophy of history began at the same time, and had become strong by the mid-1860s. This was an interest in generalizations as well as in facts. Of the general questions which were discussed at the time, two emerged as central: the first was about how individual freedom and historical necessity are combined, and the second was about causality in history.⁴¹

Eikhenbaum therefore finds little unusual about Tolstoy's interest in the philosophy of history, and places him in a rather small camp that developed as the debate over philosophy of history intensified: "A circle of 'original' thinkers was forming ties to Slavophilism and archaic 'populism.' This was a party of archaist-eccentrics in which the central role was played by Tolstoi's longstanding friend, S. Urusov."⁴² Tolstoy followed closely the works of Urusov and fellow "archaist-eccentrics" Y. Samarin and S. Yurev, as well as similar intellectual Mikhail Pogodin. Eikhenbaum analyzes passages

⁴¹ Boris Eikhenbaum, *Tolstoi in the Sixties*, trans. Duffield White (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Ardis Publishers, 1981), 195-196.

⁴² Eikhenbaum, *Tolstoi in the Sixties*, 199.

from those scholars and notes their similarities to some of the passages in *War and Peace*. Tolstoy had especially close association with Urusov with regards to the calculus of history, the laws behind which were inspirational for their intellectual group: “Tolstoy and Urusov were the leaders of this circle, which was combative and kept up the traditions of the old Slavophiles; Pogodin was their teacher and authority. They were carried away by their discoveries of the higher laws of history . . . For them, mathematics was more than a science; it was a party slogan.”⁴³ In particular, the kind of mathematics utilized in Tolstoy’s eccentric circle was Newtonian; the universe was uniform and knowable through patterns gleaned from sufficient observation. Newtonian physics was, in the lifetime of Tolstoy’s group, being subverted by questions of probability. In Michael Tondre’s work of literary analysis *The Physics of Possibility: Victorian Fiction, Science, and Gender*, Tondre emphasizes the way growing questions in physics about the nature of uncertainty in the universe (since experimentally substantiated in relativity and quantum mechanics) were eroding certainty and determinism in literature. He writes concerning the Newtonian assumption of a universe in which cause and effect is uniform: “Intellectuals like Bishop Berkely and David Hume noted the purely conjectural nature of Newton’s particles, and of course departures from Newton’s materialism were widely available in the two centuries leading up to the 1850s, including the theories of Baruch Spinoza, Gottfried Leibniz, and Immanuel Kant.”⁴⁴ Tolstoy rebelled against this movement, and thus his strong description and endorsement of a Newtonian, determinist

⁴³ Eikhenbaum, *Tolstoy in the Sixties*, 213.

⁴⁴ Michael Tondre, *The Physics of Possibility: Victorian Fiction, Science, and Gender* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2018), 21.

history. Eikhenbaum's conclusion about Tolstoy's philosophy of history is thus somewhat dismissive:

The enigmatic sources and the ideas of the philosophical-historical chapters of *War and Peace*, including even aspects of style and terminology, are beginning to become clear. Tolstoy's philosophy of history turns out to be "original" only in the sense that it opposes contemporary scholarly and publicistic views, and is the creation of a circle of "original" thinkers—eccentrics who kept alive the traditions and ideas of a past era and were antagonistic toward contemporary life. Although Tolstoy did not avoid historical traumas, he was still the most successful, and therefore assumed the most active role in this circle. *War and Peace* assumed the character of a partisan statement, a declaration on behalf of the "noncontemporaries."⁴⁵

Eikhenbaum's assessment, however, is far more biographical than it is philosophical. He passes no judgment on the coherence or applicability on Tolstoy's philosophy of history, and offers no analysis of its worthiness. Rather, he assigns the work Tolstoy did to reconsider the historical science to part of the political movements of the time, an historicist, empirical fashion of dealing with Tolstoy which avoids any sort of action.

Berlin hoped to take Eikhenbaum's vast body of research and use it to address the critique of history in *War and Peace* with his short work, *The Hedgehog and the Fox*. In it he attempts to take Tolstoy's philosophy of history seriously, and escape the dichotomy of Tolstoy as either an incredible novelist or Christian teacher. Berlin says that he cannot help but feel that Tolstoy provides a promising analysis of the historical endeavor.

Tolstoy has too much interest in history, and provoked such strong feelings of antagonism from "ordinarily sane and sympathetic critics—surely there is something here

⁴⁵ Eikhenbaum, *Tolstoy in the Sixties*, 208.

which deserves attention.”⁴⁶ Despite this declaration of purpose to take Tolstoy seriously, Berlin quickly begins to make an odd series of assertions. The first is that Tolstoy only saw epistemological value in empirical facts, and therefore saw history as only worthy of study if it could create a real history based on the detailed reconstruction of facts. He comes to this conclusion because of Tolstoy’s dislike for “romanticism, abstract formulations, metaphysics,” which is somewhat justifiable since the great men view of history falls under the category of romanticism.⁴⁷ However, to prioritize the historical fact as the principle element of Tolstoy’s search for truth in history is counter to the persuasive argument offered in *War and Peace* for a mathematical history. That argument decried the study of the discrete fact in favor of universal natural law, which Berlin fails to acknowledge.

The failure to acknowledge Tolstoy’s appreciation for the study of universality extends further. He describes Tolstoy as influenced by the “historicism of his time,” even though historicism is opposed to any linear or teleological history, which Tolstoy argues for.⁴⁸ Berlin later says that for Tolstoy, “History is plainly not a science,” despite Tolstoy’s specific nomination of the historical discipline as a science.⁴⁹ Berlin goes so far as to say, concerning the laws of history, that the sociological sciences “cannot possibly have found any, because the number of causes upon which events turn is too great for human knowledge or calculation.”⁵⁰ Berlin wholly misinterprets Tolstoy’s

⁴⁶ Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox*, 11.

⁴⁷ Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox*, 12.

⁴⁸ Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox*, 13.

⁴⁹ Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox*, 23.

⁵⁰ Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox*, 29.

message and ignores his exhortation. Let us revisit that exhortation, and read with

Tolstoy's narrator Tolstoy's take on the purpose of the historical discipline:

Any conclusion of historical science, without the least effort on the part of criticism, falls apart like dust, leaving nothing behind, only as a result of the fact that criticism selects as an object for observation a larger or smaller discrete unit, which it always has the right to do, because any chosen historical unit is always arbitrary . . . Only by admitting an infinitesimal unit for observation—a differential of history, that is, the uniform strivings of people—and attaining to the art of integrating them (taking the sums of these infinitesimal quantities) can we hope to comprehend the laws of history . . . To study the laws of history, we must change completely the object of observation, leave kings, ministers, and generals alone, and study the uniform, infinitesimal elements that govern the masses. No one can tell to what extent it is given to man to achieve in this way an understanding of the laws of history; but it is obvious that the possibility of grasping historical laws lies only on this path, and that on this path human reason has not yet made one millionth of those efforts the historians have made in describing the deeds of various kings, commanders, and ministers, and in setting forth their reflections on the occasion of those deeds.⁵¹

The political stance behind Berlin's interpretation becomes clear soon after his departure from Tolstoy's argument. He asserts not that Tolstoy truly urged us to search for the laws of history that govern all men, but to cease that search because we will all of us, equally, never understand those laws because they are outside our comprehension. Thus Berlin describes Tolstoy as democratic and egalitarian, but also places upon Tolstoy the mantle of a negative prophet. Berlin's Tolstoy believes that humanity is incapable of understanding the universal laws of nature, and therefore should never even attempt to seek them. Berlin refers to Tolstoy's proposal as nothing more than "an ideal historical science," worth praise as a beautifully written creation from a master thinker, and then declares that Tolstoy thought it could never be reached because of human limitation.⁵²

⁵¹ Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, 822.

⁵² Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox*, 34.

His evidence for the claim is based on how Tolstoy treats the agency of the characters. Berlin interprets Tolstoy's rejection of agency, and disparagement of the characters' self-obsessions, as an assertion of humanity's inability to investigate universal natural laws. While it is arguable that Tolstoy would deny absolute knowledge derived by finite minds, as scholar Jeff Love will do later, this is not the same as Tolstoy saying that all effort to explore universal laws is useless. Berlin combines a proclamation of universal fallibility with the earlier interpretation of Tolstoy as fact driven, resulting in an image of Tolstoy as a proponent of self-aware ignorance and empiricism. The Tolstoy drawn by Berlin is, as it turns out, far more similar to the historians disparaged by Tolstoy than the type of historians capable of creating the historical science envisioned by Tolstoy. Tolstoy's science of history assumes the uniformity of human striving in the past as well as a Newtonian, uniform universe, from which universal laws may be inferred. The historian who disbelieves in the search for universal laws and only seeks more facts could never approach natural laws, and would never seek to pursue them. They are the historians Tolstoy accuses of being forgers, the ones who invent falsified, particular truths when they think they should abandon pursuing any universal ones. They are the historians who would be worthless except as currency for universities.

And thus, for Berlin, and for many scholars after him, Tolstoy's attempt to create a historical science remained in slumber. Historians persisted to be largely absent from the discussion, and literary scholars made the most notable efforts to study *War and Peace*. Their findings mirrored Berlin's own. One notable literary scholar, Gary Saul Morson, posited a particularly negative interpretation of the calculus of history, in which

Tolstoy's critique is so complete and impossible to satisfy that it would destroy the enterprise of historical study. He bases the negativity of Tolstoy's position on the unattainability of knowledge in a determinist world:

Tolstoy refuted the usual interpretation of determinism not on metaphysical but rather on epistemological grounds. He believed that, by their very nature, the principles governing human events are incomprehensible to the human mind. To be sure, all events are determined; and, to be sure, if it is once conceded that life can be governed by reason, then life is impossible. But life *is* possible, because reason cannot understand the principles of events and therefore cannot predict as the underground man fears. Tolstoy's determinism excludes a "table of logarithms," or anything like it. Although determinism is presumably true, it is totally irrelevant to human life and the practice of historiography. There can never be a situation where determinism can resolve any sort of problem . . . Thus, determinism is an entirely empty truth.⁵³

Morson criticizes Tolstoy's articulation of history because Morson believes it necessitates complete and total knowledge of all events of the past. It must therefore be a nihilistic history, as some of Tolstoy's contemporaries complained, which does not stand to close inspection. Morson relies on many of Tolstoy's later writings, after his disillusionment with writing novels and his turn to Orthodox Christianity, to make the point that even Tolstoy was not persuaded by the arguments he had given. Thus Morson, who in all fairness is more concerned with the impact of Tolstoy's work in *War and Peace* on narrative than history, refuses to consider what the historical discipline might be if Tolstoy's broader criticisms were to be addressed.

⁵³ Gary Saul Morson, *Hidden in Plain View: Narrative and Creative Potential in "War and Peace"* (Stanford California: Stanford University Press, 1987), 92.

Despite the vast majority of the reception to *War and Peace* omitting a serious re-consideration of history, in the last two decades there has been a tonal shift in the discussion of Tolstoy's proposal, although historians have continued their absence from the conversation. The shift is due to the work of scholar Jeff Love, who in 2004 published a re-interpretation of Tolstoy's effort, *Overcoming History in War and Peace*. The second chapter is entirely devoted to explaining and exploring the calculus of history, framed by an introductory discussion of the Battle of Borodino. The Battle of Borodino is particularly useful, since it features numerous perspectives of the action which were then collapsed into a discussion of each character's inability to see the whole of the battle or enact change on the outcome of events. Love uses the battle to help illustrate Tolstoy's effort to turn history into the subjugation of individual, particularist narratives and viewpoints to universal laws. While Love does take Tolstoy seriously, and defends his proposal against its two most prominent detractors, Berlin and Morson, he is, as a literary critic, more concerned with the potential impact Tolstoy could have on narrative and art rather than the historical discipline, and thus the serious re-consideration of history as a discipline is still absent.

This is not to say that Love's interpretation of Tolstoy as advocating a different type of narrative is unimportant or useless for the purposes of this paper. Indeed, the work Love has done has reached outside his own circles. In the August-September, 2005 issue of *The American Mathematical Monthly*, mathematics professor Stephen T. Ahern published a short article about how he utilizes *War and Peace* in his classroom. Having been in correspondence with Jeff Love, Ahern finds the calculus of history to be an

intriguing concept, and describes the analogy to mathematics to be “rich and deep, requiring some knowledge of mathematics to fully comprehend their meaning.”⁵⁴ Ahearn introduces Tolstoy’s vision for a historical science to his calculus students in order to reinforce their lessons. He often finds the students easily translate their understanding of calculus to Tolstoy’s historical ideas, “and few reject Tolstoy’s use of mathematics as inappropriate.”⁵⁵ However, the type of narrative Love describes as possible under Tolstoy’s framework, one which attempts to escape temporality through an integration of perspectives, of subject and object, finite and infinite, will be more useful for us later on.

The Mistake of Interpretation

The mistake of omission with regards to Tolstoy’s history has, in turn, led to significant mistakes of interpretation. The interpretive mistake with the most significant and influential legacy undoubtedly lies within Isaiah Berlin’s *Hedgehog and the Fox*. Whereas Eikhenbaum was a loose inspiration for Berlin and is generally less widely read, Berlin has influenced countless readers to understand *War and Peace* in a particular way. He presented Tolstoy as a pluralist, who surrendered to the equal truth of each individual character’s story rather than be logically thorough with the deterministic world he described. By omitting a serious consideration of how history might be produced with a universalist approach, the terms of Tolstoy’s proposal were lost, and were thus lost for many other scholars because of Berlin’s influence. The interpretation given by Berlin

⁵⁴ Stephen T. Ahearn, “Tolstoy’s Integration Metaphor from War and Peace,” *The American Mathematical Monthly* 112, no. 7 (2005): 631.

⁵⁵ Ahearn, “Tolstoy’s Integration Metaphor,” 637.

also had a broader political dimension, even beyond academia, literary criticism, or the historical discipline. The Cold War offered a stark context for philosophy, along with the post-World War II desire for peace and stability. In some ways it is no wonder that scholars attempted to create knowledge that avoided change, knowledge that would easily be consumed in a political environment of liberal democracy. And although the historian may be forgiven for being sympathetic to those who were trying to construct a peaceful climate as quickly as possible when all the horrors of Nazism, Stalinism, and world war were so fresh in mind, sympathy does not free us from asking ourselves the same questions Tolstoy demanded we face, regardless of how conducive to change the answers to those questions might be.

When the global political setting is taken into consideration, it becomes apparent that Berlin's version of *War and Peace* is driven by an anti-Marxist, pro-liberalism viewpoint. Berlin sees in Tolstoy an affirmation of the particular because he thinks Tolstoy celebrates our ignorance as a species by tearing down great men and equating them with everyone else:

What are great men? They are ordinary human beings who are ignorant and vain enough to accept responsibility for the life of society, individuals who would rather take the blame for all the cruelties, injustices, disasters justified in their name than recognize their own insignificance and impotence in the cosmic flow which pursues its course irrespective of their wills and ideals. This is the central point of those passages (in which Tolstoy excelled) in which the actual course of events is described, side by side, with the absurd, egocentric explanations which persons blown up with the sense of their own importance necessarily give to them; as well as of the wonderful descriptions of moments of illumination in

which the truth about the human condition dawns upon those who have the humility to recognize their own unimportance and irrelevance.⁵⁶

Here Berlin delivers to us a strange equality, in which no one of our species stands above anyone else because all are denied ascent. It is an equality of ignorance and isolation.

We are only at our best when we know that we have no importance and affect nothing.

And, in fairness to Berlin, Tolstoy does declare all of us equally controlled by the movements of history; that powerful line, “Kings are the slaves of history,” delivered by Tolstoy near the end of his first polemical essay in *War and Peace*, comes to mind.⁵⁷

Berlin’s mistake is equating a recognition of our common ignorance with an affirmation of that ignorance. He omits the authenticity of Tolstoy’s exhortation that we continue attempting to find truth despite our ignorance, delivered with such passion and frequency in *War and Peace*. He equates Tolstoy’s polemic against those who at that time preached a false historical gospel with anyone who attempted to find truth:

Tolstoy arrives at no clear conclusion, only at the view, in some respects like Burke’s, that it is better to realise that we understand what goes on as we do in fact understand it—much as spontaneous, normal, simple people, uncorrupted by theories, not blinded by the dust raised by the scientific authorities, do, in fact, understand life—than to seek to subvert such commonsense beliefs, which at least have the merit of having been tested by long experience, in favour of pseudo-sciences, which, being founded on absurdly inadequate data, are only a snare and a delusion. That is his case against all forms of optimistic rationalism, the natural sciences, liberal theories of progress, German military expertise, French sociology, confident social engineering of all kinds.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox*, 30-31.

⁵⁷ Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, 605.

⁵⁸ Tolstoy, *The Hedgehog and the Fox*, 35.

But such a Tolstoy would never bother to write *War and Peace* in the first place. A Tolstoy who truly disbelieved in the human capacity to learn and make progress would not have worked so hard to convince us that there are truths governing the progress of the world. Berlin pits himself against Marxist ideals of progress and human achievement, as well as any other system, the natural sciences included, which takes on the responsibility of change to the human condition. And thus the final conclusion of Berlin's interpretation is made clear. It is an interpretation of pluralistic futility, an abandonment of any hope of progress for peace, a voluntary enslavement to an unidentified god.

Berlin's analysis has lined up fairly nicely with the course of western academic influences as well as of the globally political. Few would dispute that the humanities in the West went through significant trauma in the Second World War, and came out of that conflict with substantial aversion to any sense of active political radicalism, but more importantly to any sense of progressive change in the way humans exist. Dropping the nuclear bombs, the organized efficiency in death camps and utilization of scientific experiments on humans during the Holocaust, Stalin's crimes against humanity during industrialization while espousing the justification of progress; all these were markers of human technological advancement. But these advancements did not, as according to modernist sensibilities, result in better living conditions for humanity or promote unity in our species. And so, out of those traumas, the political sensibilities of the humanities began to shift, and narratives like the one given by Berlin became immensely popular. Berlin did not ask us, as the moderns and revolutionary thinkers from the Enlightenment to the early twentieth century so often did, to challenge what it means to be human, to

attain mastery over the natural world. Berlin was a preacher of a different sort. Berlin preached that the impulse to fight our ignorance is so inhuman it should be stifled. Because we know so little, reaching greater understandings will only result in the capability to cause more destruction, rather than produce any worthy results for our species. To make the point, Berlin relied on Tolstoy as someone with great artistic standing so it could seem as though there was an authority greater than Berlin who had already delivered the same gospel. The Tolstoy who urged humanity to seek universal natural law and submit our entire species to those laws is lost, and Berlin casts a Tolstoy who gave up on any chance for human universality, even the universality of submission. His strategy largely worked; he appealed to a large number of scholars in the humanities who possessed the same disposition toward potential progress, and his misinterpretation became the dominant interpretation of *War and Peace* in academic circles.

Gary Saul Morson's interpretation is quite similar to Berlin's. Morson relies heavily on Tolstoy in his later life, who became disillusioned with progress entirely, and Morson conflates progress and determinism to some degree in *Hidden in Plain View*. He thus offers essentially the same view as Berlin: that Tolstoy was resigned to some degree of relativism and, going further than Berlin, that Tolstoy had an entirely negative view of the historical enterprise. But, as Jeff Love points out in *The Overcoming of History in War and Peace*, Morson's interpretation of the calculus of history is subtly different from what is actually posited by the narrator:

The problem is to suppose that the narrator means calculus to apply to causes, "infinitesimally small causes," as a response to the demand that every single individual be described in some fashion. If that were the case, then one would

have little choice but to infer that the narrator's alleged solution to the problems of correct, i.e. holistic, historical narrative is empty and, perhaps, even deliberately so. Alternatively, one could simply hold that the narrator entertains contradictory points of view in regard to the possibility of knowledge of historical events. While the narrator clearly advocates the impossibility of obtaining knowledge by means of the causes of a historical event, he just as clearly does not leave the matter at that. Instead, he maintains that the proper object of history is the discovery of the laws that govern history. The unadorned nerve of the issue is that calculus applies to motion without regard to an enumeration of the relevant causes—the emphasis is on “how” not “why.”⁵⁹

Love is able to reconcile the Tolstoy who disbelieves in the human capacity to attain all knowledge and the Tolstoy who urges us to search for greater laws in history. The goalposts for Tolstoy's history, according to the interpretations of Berlin and Morson, had been moved to perfect knowledge of the entire past. Love moves those goalposts to a more reasonable and honest position: the search for governing laws of history. In mathematics, laws are not discovered through the meticulous and infinite process of subjecting all possible numbers to testing in the laws of mathematics. Laws are inferred through observation and reason. The same may be true of history, as Tolstoy's narrator points out, in a rebellion against the physical uncertainty being discovered by the sciences and thematically explored in the humanities in Tolstoy's own time. Such uncertainty might leave too much room for human action and freedom, antithetical to the submission urged by Tolstoy.

Even after Jeff Love's work to reconsider conventional interpretations of *War and Peace*, Berlin's version, as presented in *The Hedgehog and the Fox*, still remains dominant. In professor of Slavic literature Hugh McLean's 2008 *In Quest of Tolstoy*, he

⁵⁹ Jeff Love, *Overcoming History in War and Peace* (Amsterdam: Brill Academic Publishers), 81.

concludes the book with the chapter “Foxes into Hedgehogs: Berlin and Tolstoy.” The chapter is written as an explanation of Berlin’s essay, and draws out the themes Berlin saw in *War and Peace*. McLean also offers an analysis of Berlin’s writing, and writes that the same conclusion Berlin came to about Tolstoy was necessitated by Berlin’s own personality. He specifically cites pluralism:

The over-arching theory that Berlin-as-hedgehog eventually discovered was essentially a canonization of foxiness. He gave it the name of “pluralism” . . . Both liberty and equality are values, but they are at least partly incompatible. As Berlin puts it, “total liberty for the wolves is death to the lambs.” There is not and never will be a perfect world where all contradictions will be solved. All efforts to coerce mankind into a final solution are morally wrong because they present suffering in the name of abstract and probably unattainable happiness in the future. The answer, therefore, is compromise.⁶⁰

McLean’s finding is that Berlin was able to satisfy himself with this conclusion, whereas Tolstoy continued to live in pain and self-inflicted misery because he was unwilling to compromise as a Christian in his old age. He affirms Berlin’s interpretation that the message to be taken from *War and Peace* is a pluralistic truth that Tolstoy could not hold onto for long: “It was the image of this Tolstoy, a Tolstoy torn by terrible inner conflicts, that Berlin perceived so penetratingly and invoked so powerfully at the end of his essay . . . self-blinded in an intense, decades-long, but ultimately futile effort to stifle the rich, varied, *pluralistic* talent he was born with.”⁶¹

Philosopher Lina Steiner also offers a pluralistic understanding of Tolstoy in *War and Peace*. In 2009, she published the article “Tolstoy, Liberal and Pluralist: On “Personality” and the Protagonist in “War and Peace,” in the journal *Russian History*.

⁶⁰ Hugh McLean, *In Quest of Tolstoy* (Brighton, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2008), 223.

⁶¹ McLean, *In Quest of Tolstoy*, 226.

Interestingly enough, she does not reference Berlin's work, but her characterization of Tolstoy is quite similar to Berlin's and McLean's, and seems to follow in a similar interpretive tradition to that established by Berlin. Steiner's position is that Tolstoy drew inspiration for the formation of the protagonists in *War and Peace* from a strong affinity for liberal education. She illustrates the trips Tolstoy took to French, German, and English schools in order to acquaint himself with the forms of liberal education as the reason for his affinity with the Decembrist revolution, which featured more prominently in earlier drafts of *War and Peace*. Pierre Bezukhov, originally named Pyotr Labazov in those earlier drafts, was loosely modeled on Tolstoy's own Decembrist relative, S.G. Volkonskii.⁶² The reading Steiner presents, based on the way Tolstoy conducted research into liberal education and began writing *War and Peace*, is of *War and Peace* as an examination of "the rise of modernity in Russia by tracing the development of a modern individual," and "to give his compatriots a firm sense of identity and raise their morale by reminding them about Russian's [sic] glorious recent past."⁶³ In other words, Steiner's thesis is that Tolstoy wrote the book to advance the ideal of the liberal individual and portray a nationalistic sense of Russian identity. These, of course, are both particularist, rather than universalist, goals. She even characterizes Tolstoy's philosophy of history as particularist:

The new worldview that Tolstoy develops in the 1860s in conjunction with his elaboration of the architectonic of his narrative is pluralistic, by which I mean that Tolstoy no longer presents historical development as a single trajectory in the

⁶² Lina Steiner, "Tolstoy, Liberal and Pluralist: On "Personality" and the Protagonist in *War and Peace*," *Russian History* 36, no. 3 (2009): 425, 428-431.

⁶³ Steiner, "Tolstoy, Liberal and Pluralist," 432.

novel, but rather comes to see it as a complex system consisting of multiple “chronotopes” and multiple intellectual paradigms. History for Tolstoy is no longer an objective process that unfolds according to any specific predetermined scenario (that is, on which given the totality of causal factors, would always unfold the way it does). This indeterminacy makes it a genuine “semiosphere” populated by various cultural personalities, each of whom possess a unique project and identity.⁶⁴

This interpretation is in direct contradiction with the history that Tolstoy describes in *War and Peace*. Tolstoy spends a remarkable amount of time establishing history as deterministic in the novel, and Steiner ignores the calculus of history he formulates and all the other work he does to criticize the methods of historians. If anything, Steiner’s approach is even pre-Berlin, in that she intentionally ignores the essay on historical philosophy throughout *War and Peace* in favor of a literary analysis of characters. But her conclusion is nevertheless the same: Tolstoy writes *War and Peace* as a pluralist with liberal inclinations, and the way different characters have their own, highly differing stories with the appearance of agency and influence on their futures is the evidence for such a conclusion.

There are some works which have attempted to embrace the determinism and universalism that so many thinkers have ignored or dismissed in *War and Peace*. In 1962, RF Christian published a book called *Tolstoy’s War and Peace: A Study*. Christian’s focus is much more focused on the structures of the book’s writing, through a “complex series of antitheses, juxtapositions and repetitions” as Jeff Love writes.⁶⁵ But

⁶⁴ Steiner, “Tolstoy, Liberal and Pluralist,” 438.

⁶⁵ Love, *The Overcoming of History in War and Peace*, 13.

Christian nevertheless affirms “a thoroughgoing determinism which Tolstoy’s countervailing assertion of individual freedom does not contradict, since, for Christian, the latter is only a psychological perception, an illusion of sorts.”⁶⁶ But by far the most influential writer on a universalist Tolstoy is Jeff Love. *Overcoming History in War and Peace* offers a more intensely analytical effort at taking Tolstoy seriously with regards to a philosophy of history. Love’s thesis lacks the pluralist, liberalist, and defeatist conclusions of many of his predecessors in Tolstoyan scholarship; instead he argues that Tolstoy consolidates determinism and human effort, an argument that helps us understand the apparent contradictions posed by Tolstoy’s reason for writing the book in the first place. The word he uses to signify the consolidation is “striving.” He describes the tenuous balance thusly:

The distance of man from God is measured by freedom, an illusion of possibility and independence that deludes the finite mind to presume well beyond its capacity and so dooms it to learn by suffering, by recognizing its own limitation, a tragic shortness of breath. This path of learning, the great rhythm of *War and Peace*, vibrantly echoes the central conflict of Greek epic and tragedy between man and gods within the thoroughly Christian context of Tolstoy’s field of vision—the distance between man and God, different orders of being, is the space of Tolstoyan evil. For Tolstoy freedom and evil are intimately linked. Man’s illusion of freedom compels him to transgress, to ignore and profane that divine rationality to which he has scant access; it is the source and primary tool of his disobedience and the endless struggle that accompanies it. This struggle leads to pain—enlightenment is always a questionable gift—because through it man learns of his weakness and dependence, that he is but one “link,” to quote Pierre, in a great chain of being that he neither originates nor can hope to master. For Tolstoy, learning is precisely this education in human limitation, the realization that we are an integral part of a greater whole that functions according to the laws of a deity that always lies beyond the reach of rational explanation. The path from evil to good, from ignorance to knowledge, from falsehood into truth is marked by an

⁶⁶Love, *The Overcoming of History in War and Peace*, 14.

increasing acknowledgment of the mysterious linkage, the astonishing interconnection, of all living things.⁶⁷

The basis for Love's argument, as may be noted in the opening line of his conclusion above, is the finite mind. The finite mind is individual human's reason, capable of understanding the existence of higher laws, but incapable of completely grasping them in and of themselves because those laws are effectively infinite. But the finite mind nevertheless continues to strive to understand, a process of learning in which the finite mind is more and more impressed with its own infinite unimportance as an individual, and therefore a process that is inevitably painful. As Love notes, human striving is viewed in different ways throughout the novel. Napoleon's attempt to dominate Europe is evil because it arises from the selfish desires of an individual, whereas the efforts of calculus are held up as a glorious exploration of the universe which may benefit all. In a similar sense, as Love puts it: "For Prince Andrei freedom is power; for Pierre it is recognition of powerless, acquiescence to necessity, that allows one to be freed from the cycle of struggle that characterizes finite existence."⁶⁸ Both of the examples on the far sides of the spectrum, Napoleon and Platon Karataev, symbolize an incomplete human. Napoleon does not understand humility, and Karataev lacks the human drive for any understanding of the universal. Thus the determinism of humanity posited by Tolstoy is not only that we are predestined to live and die in some vague way. We are determined to ever attempt the impossible, to never be satisfied as finite beings in

⁶⁷ Love, *Overcoming History in War and Peace*, 182.

⁶⁸ Love, *Overcoming History in War and Peace*, 183.

the face of infinite understanding. And so, for Love, Tolstoy does not leave us with an empty philosophy of history that negates the historical enterprise. Rather, Tolstoy wants us to know why the historical enterprise exists at all, and encourages us to continue searching for truth despite our limitations: “That there is no way out, that the whole cannot be known but also not discarded as a goal of knowledge—here is the animate force of the novel.”⁶⁹

It is clear that Tolstoy favors the end of the spectrum on which Platon Karataev rests. Karataev exists without attachment, divorced from particularity. In the edited collection of essays *Tolstoy on War: Narrative Art and Historical Truth in “War and Peace,”* Love also wrote a chapter, titled “The Great Man in *War and Peace.*” He gives closer attention to what Karataev represents for Tolstoy: “Karataev’s life is a life without partial commitments or ties. In this sense it is a sovereign life—and a most estranged and estranging one . . . No other character in the novel quite achieves this sovereignty . . . Karataev represents a wisdom hardly practicable in the world, or, better, hardly tolerable in the world.”⁷⁰ But as Love notes, Karataev’s way of life, without particularity or attachment, is an impossibility for Tolstoy because of our finitude. The human is that which strives, which exists in the face of the universal with its own particularity. Tolstoy’s perfect solution is the wise man, who “is neither great nor a man. Indeed, he is neither god nor man, neither master nor slave, neither active nor passive. He retains

⁶⁹ Love, *Overcoming History in War and Peace*, 186.

⁷⁰ Jeff Love, “The Great Man in *War and Peace*,” in *Tolstoy on War: Narrative Art and Historical Truth in “War and Peace,”* ed. Rick McPeak and Donna Tussing Orwin (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2012): 95-96.

negatively the binary logic of either-or, of excluded middle, in setting that logic aside as undecidable.”⁷¹ Thus Tolstoy’s pessimism is demonstrated; his own paragon of peace and wisdom is unobtainable. Even the answer humans give to the universal as particular beings, our efforts to understand it, fall flat, the only possible recourse absolute submission and negative existence, without particularity or universality. Love’s description of Tolstoy’s wisdom is nuanced, and gives far greater use in understanding history. But Love’s analysis is chiefly important for elucidating the failure and pessimism inherent in that wisdom, providing us with a clear image of the route to be avoided if a new potential history is to live up to its claims of agency and choice.

It is no exaggeration to say that a great deal has been written about *War and Peace*. It is also no exaggeration to say that most of the literature has been quite similar due to basic mistakes of interpretation: *War and Peace* is an excellent novel, but far less excellent as a philosophical work, or can be reduced to a skeptical, pluralistic narrative. Very little written on *War and Peace* addresses any sense of the proposal Tolstoy gives to revitalize the historical discipline; i.e., end traditions of self-aggrandizement, maintain a higher goal of knowledge to which all historical effort is given, etc. The avoidance of Tolstoy’s critique is likely due in part to Tolstoy’s position in the midst of the debates on philosophy of history during his own time, a position of archaism opposed to the scientific developments occurring in history at the time. Eikhenbaum places Tolstoy in a very small, eccentric group of people with similar mindsets, and thus the perception of

⁷¹ Love, “The Great Man in *War and Peace*,” 97.

Tolstoy's critique as somewhat embarrassing. In later decades, Tolstoy's voice fell on the ears of those with exceedingly different political ends, such as Isaiah Berlin. Berlin's avoidance of the universalism Tolstoy illustrates seems to have been performed in order to affirm the pluralism of liberal democracy during the Cold War, and the majority of scholars of Tolstoy following Berlin have at the very least used his interpretation as foundational to their own. Even Love's work, insightful as it is, only gives enough of an interpretation to serve as the foundation for rebuilding the practices of historians. To be frank, Love need not do more; he is, after all, not a historian. We have not given Tolstoy's argument the consideration it deserves, and have essentially continued to engage in similar practices as he saw a century and a half ago, even before our discipline had been formally established. We are guilty of the mistake of omission regarding Tolstoy's encouragement that we seek the universal rather than continue on in pursuit through the particular. We have not even searched far enough to discover the pessimism Tolstoy encouraged after reaching for the universal, much less have we considered a way out of that pessimism. But that is not to say we have not understood some basic difficulty extant in the problem of writing history through particular means (the investigations of historical facts by particular historians). Historians have considered this problem in their own ways, though without taking Tolstoy's argument into account.

CHAPTER THREE

HISTORIANS GRAPPLING WITH THE PARTICULAR AND THE UNIVERSAL

Historians have not engaged with Tolstoy in *War and Peace* with the thoroughness Tolstoy's polemic deserves. Historians have not addressed the issues Tolstoy raises concerning the academic system history was involved in as self-interested, nor have historians been thorough in challenging Tolstoy's pessimism and determinism. The fall of the great man view was replaced with a general sense of agency over historical happenings possessed by all peoples, which does not address Tolstoy's problem with the presumption of agency in historical works. Other philosophers and thinkers have worked to address what Tolstoy has to say about history, but as illustrated in Chapter 2, most of their efforts fall short of considering the nuances demonstrated by Tolstoy in his argumentation. Jeff Love, as a literary scholar, comes closest by casting Tolstoy as deterministically identifying the human as finite, but that identification does not have the type of solution for the future of the historical discipline searched for in this work. Historians have not picked up where Love left off, and considered Tolstoy as an entry point with which to think about the human as particular in the midst of the universal, what that dichotomy means, and how the historical discipline may feature in that dichotomy.

However, to say that historians have not attempted at all to philosophize as to the epistemological nature of historical works would be unfair. It is rarely framed as clearly as by Love, or as strenuously as in *War and Peace*. But the tension identified by Love,

that of the finite in the face of the effectively infinite, the particular in opposition to the universal, has still been explored. Leopold von Ranke sought historical truth in textual evidence in German idealist fashion, and R.G. Collingwood saw history as an endeavor of self-investigation. Edward Hallett Carr has speculated as to the construction of the historical fact, and Hayden White wrote a now infamous book clearly identifying historical work as created narrative. Those scholars also tend to occupy an uneasy position with regards to the historian's view of action. Most historians focus on the past by investigating historical sources. The historians listed above, who undertake philosophical investigations as to the methods and purposes of history, emphasize the role of the historian's present context in understanding the past. Few historians, however, and none of those previously named, are overtly concerned with encouraging action for the sake of future humanity based on knowledge of the past. Historians are generally, therefore, passive. The knowledge they write is not for any path of action, but for its own creation. Not only are they passive, which hinders the creation of universal future for humanity, they also tend to be firmly entrenched in the tradition Isaiah Berlin so staunchly advocated for, namely, pluralist particularity. Historians generally do not see a significant problem with writing history from their own limited perspectives, as long as historical evidence can support the relevant argument.

There are, however, some historians who sense the problem of the individually produced narrative and seek different methodological approaches hoped to solve the problem of a finite mind characterizing the past. These attempts have been more notable for the nature of the challenge than for their effectiveness in dealing with the heart of the

problem. Such subversive works are nevertheless still notable, and the methods they demonstrate are worth analysis to investigate how close they came to overcoming the particular-universal tension, and why they were unable to do so. Histories have been written that embrace the fallibility of the particular and are written with qualifications and exposure of the method of research at every step, like Steven Bednarski's *A Poisoned Past: The Life and Times of Margarida de Portu, a Fourteenth-Century Accused Poisoner*. Some histories have been written which feature opposing narratives which are supported by historical facts. *The Many Deaths of Jew Süß: The Notorious Trial and Execution of an Eighteenth-Century Court Jew*, written by Yair Mintzker, is a recent and notable historical work which attempts to evade the issue of an individually-written history by incorporating multiple, opposing voices into the narrative constructed by the author. The exploration of these attempts is deserved both for the sake of the effort committed by their authors and for the sake of argumentative thoroughness. Both the historical-philosophical and historical works written for the sake of solving the particular-universal tension with regards to historical truth are thus objects of interest.

Historical-Philosophical Explorations

Leopold von Ranke, a German historian in the nineteenth-century, is largely credited with founding a scientific approach to history, through the collection of vast amounts of data from historical documents, and is regarded as one of the most the most influential historians on the professional historical discipline. In the 1973 edited and translated volume *Theory and Practice of History*, Georg G. Iggers and Konrad von Moltke introduce Ranke as one of the first historians to advocate the study of political

narratives as the most scientific form of history: “Ranke let the facts speak for themselves; and since history was past politics, these facts were contained primarily in the documents of state. The method of Ranke, it was believed, pointed above all to detailed monographic studies.”⁷² In the US and Britain, especially, the type of misconstruance defined by Iggers and Moltke, of Ranke as a pure empiricist obsessed with the endless collection of facts, has been massively influential. In the Anglo-American intellectual sphere, “He was viewed as the prototype of the technically trained historian and as a great representative of the positivistic scientific tradition of the nineteenth century, a contemporary of Lyell, Wallace, Darwin, and Renan.”⁷³ Ranke has thus been largely recognized only for his influence on the formation of the discipline and erroneously linked with an outdated methodological approach.

But, as Iggers and Moltke point out, Ranke’s history has greater nuance than pure empiricism. In *On the Relations of History and Philosophy*, an essay from the 1830s published in *The Theory and Practice of History*, Ranke describes the division between history and philosophy, as well as the appropriate analytical methods to be undertaken by the historian:

There are two ways of acquiring knowledge about human affairs—through the perception of the particular and through abstraction. The one is the way of philosophy, the other that of history . . . These two sources of knowledge are therefore to be kept clearly distinguished. Nevertheless, equally mistaken are those historians who view all of history merely as an immense aggregate of facts to be committed to memory, meaning that particulars are strung to particulars and

⁷² Georg G. Iggers and Konrad von Moltke, *The Theory and Practice of History: Ed. with an Introd. by Georg G. Iggers and Konrad von Moltke. New Transl. by Wilma A. Iggers and Konrad von Moltke* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1973), xvi.

⁷³ Iggers and Moltke, *The Theory and Practice of History*, xvi.

all of these held together only by a common moral principle. I am of the opinion, rather, that historical science at its best is both called upon and able to rise in its own way from the investigation and contemplation of the particular to a general view of events and to the recognition of their objectively existing relatedness.⁷⁴

Historians, for Ranke, must explore the particular facts of history in and of themselves (he says that a historian must have a “feeling for and a joy in the particular in and by itself”), but equally important to the investigation of facts and the discovery of themselves as they are is to analyze them and their connectedness to the whole of human history. Both the individual particulars and their connectedness explored by Ranke, in the tradition of German idealists, served in the greater plan of God, as pointed out by Iggers and Moltke: “Ranke’s conception of history, thus, involves not merely a method but a firm religious faith and a highly speculative philosophy shared by much of the German idealistic tradition in the *Geisteswissenschaften* in the nineteenth century.”⁷⁵ Ranke’s history, therefore, is still about discovery, despite its attachment to a unifying, divine plan. It neglects the focus necessary for future action to create history differently; Ranke’s theism, as theism influenced other German idealists, leads to an approach to history which ignores the need for future action. Nothing needs to be actively created in the present and future if the being of truth already resides in all temporality as a manifestation of God. Misunderstood and simplified by non-German scholars as he was, Ranke nevertheless lacked the action orientation necessitated by a history that can overcome the particular-universal tension.

⁷⁴ Ranke, *The Theory and Practice of History*, 30.

⁷⁵ Iggers and Moltke, *The Theory and Practice of History*, xlv.

English philosopher, historian, and archaeologist R.G. Collingwood, like most twentieth-century historical-philosophers, was in opposition to the pure empirical positivity held dear by many followers of Ranke. In his 1946 posthumously published work (for which he is now best known), *The Idea of History*, he charted the progression of philosophies of history through the mid-twentieth-century, and preceded the works of Edward Hallett Carr and Hayden White. He viewed the results of empirical positivism as unfinished. Only the first stage of that methodology, the collection of immense numbers of facts, was ever accomplished, and the next stage, the use of those facts to determine general laws of history was never achieved. Even the goal of greater knowledge about history ended in irrelevance for the sake of more fact collection: “The historical conscience identified itself with an infinite scrupulosity about any and every isolated matter of fact. The ideal of universal history was swept aside as a vain dream, and the ideal of historical literature became the monograph.”⁷⁶ Collingwood was one of the earliest historical constructionists who questioned how the historian actually creates history as a product of their own temporal context. For Collingwood, all of historical writing is an exploration of self-knowledge on behalf of the historian. The exploration holds both on the level of the individual historian and for the collective efforts of all humans in history, as Collingwood describes in the introduction of *The Idea of History*:

History is ‘for’ human self-knowledge. It is generally thought to be of importance to man that he should know himself: where knowing himself means knowing not his merely personal peculiarities, the things that distinguish him from other men, but his nature as man. Knowing yourself means knowing, first, what it is to be a man; secondly, knowing what it is to be the kind of man you are; and thirdly,

⁷⁶ R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 127.

knowing what it is to be the man *you* are and nobody else is. Knowing yourself means knowing what you can do; and since nobody knows what he can do until he tries, the only clue to what man can do is what man has done. The value of history, then is that teaches us what man has done and thus what man is.⁷⁷

Collingwood does not assert history as an avenue by which to create a humanity in the future. Historical thought is a path by which to understand human thought; our own exploration and reconstruction of the past motivations of humans teaches us about how we are now. Historical thought enables us to learn about the present state of humanity as informed by the past, and is not a tool to create a future humanity based on events in the past.

To say Collingwood does not view history as a tool to create a future humanity is to say that he disbelieves in the possibility of permanent progress. He affirms the use of history to create change, although he leaves mentions of that until the last paragraph of *The Idea of History*, as he is more concerned with history as a way to study the human mind as a present-focused object of experience. His view is pessimistic:

If we want to abolish capitalism or war, and in doing so not only to destroy them but to bring into existence something better, we must begin by understanding them: seeing what the problems are which our economic or international system succeeds in solving, and how the solution of these is related to the other problems which it fails to solve. This understanding of the system we set out to supersede is a thing which we must retain throughout the work of superseding it, as a knowledge of the past conditioning our creation of the future. It may be impossible to do this; our hatred of the thing we are destroying may prevent us from understanding it, and we may love it so much that we cannot destroy it unless we are blinded by such hatred. But if that is so, there will once more, as so often in the past, be change but no progress; we shall have lost our hold on one

⁷⁷ Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, 10.

group of problems in our anxiety to solve the next. And we ought by now to realize that no kindly law of nature will save us from the fruits of our ignorance.⁷⁸

The approach to history-as-informing-action taken by Collingwood is strikingly similar to that of Tolstoy. History may inform, but to act on it in an attempt to create something better for the future—to engage in the manifestation of desire—solves no problem.

Tolstoy adds greater nuance by including an explicit dialogue of the particular-universal tension as part of human nature, but Collingwood nevertheless echoes the pessimism so prevalent in *War and Peace*, alongside a dialogue about the individual as a knowledge constructor through the mind of the historian.

Collingwood quite elegantly describes the historian as a particular kind of investigator. The historical enterprise is concerned with the past, of course, but not the past generally. The historian is specifically interested in human history. Thus historical investigation has two dimensions according to Collingwood, the outside and the inside of an historical question. The outside of the question concerns the circumstantial elements of the relevant question, with regards to “bodies and their movements;” for example, as Collingwood writes, “the passage of Caesar, accompanied by certain men, across a river called the Rubicon at one date or the spilling of his blood on the floor of the senate-house at another.”⁷⁹ The inside of an historical question is more difficult to penetrate because it cannot be constructed from the evidence of documents alone. The inside is concerned with the motivations of the historical actors concerned. In Collingwood’s example, the

⁷⁸ Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, 334.

⁷⁹ Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, 213.

inside element of the investigation regards why Brutus would kill Caesar, that is, “What did Brutus think, which made him decide to stab Caesar?”⁸⁰ Thus historical thought is not only an investigation of the past, but an investigation of human thought, which Collingwood believes to be the primary importance that history has with regards to gaining humanity self-knowledge. The process by which this knowledge is generated is necessarily through construction taken on by the individual historian as a presentist enterprise: “But how does the historian discern the thoughts which he is trying to discover? There is only one way in which it can be done: by re-thinking them in his own mind. The historian of philosophy, reading Plato, is trying to know what Plato thought when he expressed himself in certain words. The only way in which he can do this is by thinking it for himself.”⁸¹ For Collingwood, the particular-universal tension has no solution because history is always an individual-driven enterprise which can only result in change, but never progress. Collingwood’s analysis is presentist and maintains the intellectual status quo of the historical discipline in practice.

In 1961, Edward Hallett Carr described historians and histories in *What is History?* as products of their own times, cultures, and places, following quite closely in the footsteps of Collingwood’s work. He explored what it means to produce historical works, and how “historical facts” come to be so. He opposed the common eighteenth-century principle that facts may speak for themselves and must only be discovered:

This is, of course, untrue. The facts speak only when the historian calls on them: it is he who decides to which facts to give the floor, and in what order or context .

⁸⁰ Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, 214.

⁸¹ Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, 215.

. . The only reason why we are interested to know that the battle was fought at Hastings in 1066 is that historians regard it as a major historical event. It is the historian who has decided for his own reasons that Caesar's crossing of that petty stream, the Rubicon, is a fact of history, whereas the crossing of the Rubicon by millions of other people before or since interests nobody at all. The fact that you arrived in this building half an hour ago on foot, or on a bicycle, or in a car, is just as much a fact about the past as the fact that Caesar crossed the Rubicon. But it will probably be ignored by historians.⁸²

Carr characterizes writing history as a matter of construction, of selection and interpretation of facts of the past by historians into a coherent narrative. Noting the tenuous position of objectivity considering those conditions, Carr attempts to mediate between the myth of historians as merely recounting historical facts and of historians as freely creating narratives suited to their tastes, regardless of the body of facts. The solution Carr shakily arrives at is to place historians in a purely historicist position: "The relation of man to his environment is the relation of the historian to his theme. The historian is neither the humble slave, nor the tyrannical master, of his facts. The relation between the historian and his facts is one of equality, of give-and-take."⁸³ Carr's analysis, however, is poorly expressed; if historians and facts give and take between each other, then why the previous characterization of facts as only relevant when decided so by historians? The attempt to historicize historians makes no sense without some other motivating force to adjudicate facts as having power in a context outside the historian's esteem.

⁸² Edward Hallett Carr, *What is History?* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961), 9.

⁸³ Carr, *What is History?*, 34.

Carr thus attempts to avoid the particular-universal tension by relying on “society” as a powerful, independent construct which can itself influence the outcome of historical writings, regardless of the efforts of individuals. He opposes even the notion of individuals as a functional unit with which to think of history, in the context of both historical individuals (actors) or historians (narrators):

The common-sense view of history treats it as something written by individuals about individuals. This view was certainly taken and encouraged by nineteenth-century liberal historians, and is not in substance incorrect. But it now seems over-simplified and inadequate, and we need to probe deeper. The knowledge of the historian is not his exclusive individual possession: men, probably, of many generations and of many different countries have participated in accumulating it. The men whose actions the historian studies were not isolated individuals acting in a vacuum: they acted in the context, and under the impulse of a past society. In my last lecture I described history as a process of interaction, a dialogue between the historian in the present and the facts of the past. I now want to enquire into the relative weight of the individual and social elements on both sides of the equation. How far are historians single individuals, and how far products of their society and their period?⁸⁴

As a socialist, Carr raises society up to be a force equal or even greater than the efforts of individual actors, a force that is impossible to control. Individuals cannot operate apart from society; they are subject to the collective. But Carr offers no groundbreaking path forward based on that evaluation. He does not advocate for performing history in a new or different way in order to explicitly orient the discipline to a universal future for humanity. In fairness to Carr, he wrote earlier in his career, during the Second World War, that there should be a massive economic overhaul to construct socialism in Western countries in his book, *Conditions of Peace*. In *Conditions of Peace*, however, he wrote

⁸⁴ Carr, *What is History?*, 41-42.

within the realm of international politics rather than the philosophy of history, and did not incorporate the two. In *What is History*, the work where he concerns himself with the philosophy of history, he states that historians write reconstructions rather than true accounts, and leaves his analysis at that. His final conclusions are disappointingly vague. He asserts himself as opposed to the many conservative voices present among politicians and historians during his time: “they have nothing to offer us but the warning to mistrust radical and far-reaching ideas, to shun anything that savours of revolution, and to advance—if advance we must—as slowly and cautiously as we can . . . this seems to me a singular blindness.”⁸⁵ But, on the other hand, Carr makes no commitment to action, to any plan or goal for historians. He is content with a passive optimism: “For myself I remain an optimist . . . I shall look out on a world in tumult and a world in travail, and shall answer [conservative opinions] in the well-worn words of a great scientist: ‘And yet—it moves.’”⁸⁶ So while Carr is not opposed to change, and even favors progress, he offers no concrete plan to reconstruct the historical discipline for the sake of universality.

In 1973, American literary historian Hayden White set out in *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in 19th-Century Europe* to expose the underlying linguistic structures which historians utilized in the nineteenth-century to create appeals for their histories. His method is to take different successful historians and philosophers of history and analyze the historical writing style of each using a Formalist approach to the linguistic constructions utilized in their works: “For arguments there are the modes of

⁸⁵ Carr, *What is History?*, 208.

⁸⁶ Carr, *What is History?*, 208-209.

Formism, Organicism, Mechanism, and Contextualism; for emplotments there are the archetypes of Romance, Comedy, Tragedy, and Satire; and for ideological implication there are the tactics of Anarchism, Conservatism, Radicalism, and Liberalism.”⁸⁷ He also includes a poetic analysis of the linguistic strategies used by historians, which he labels Metaphor, Metonymy, Synecdoche, and Irony. White also concludes there is no substantial difference between historical work and historical-philosophical work in terms of writing, only in terms of the emphasis placed on analyzing historical events as opposed to historical methods/thought. White’s general conclusions about writing history, and the different philosophical approaches used by historians, are alarmingly relativistic for some historians:

There are no apodictically certain theoretical grounds on which one can legitimately claim an authority for any one of the modes over the others as being more “realistic” . . . as a consequence of this, we are indentured to a *choice* among contending interpretative strategies in any effort to reflect on history-in-general . . . as a corollary of this, the best grounds for choosing one perspective on history rather than another are ultimately aesthetic or moral rather than epistemological.⁸⁸

Any attempts, therefore, to “scientize” history, to create a discipline which takes a mathematical, purely logic-based approach to the laws of history and use scientific methods (much like Tolstoy urged) “represents only the statement of a preference for a specific modality of historical conceptualization, the grounds of which are either moral or aesthetic, but the epistemological justification of which still remains to be established.”⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in 19th-Century Europe* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2014), xxx.

⁸⁸ White, *Metahistory*, xxxi.

⁸⁹ White, *Metahistory*, xxxi.

When White refers to the possibility for history to be written in terms of moral and aesthetic parameters, he refers only to the narrative constructed around the facts. White proceeds, for hundreds of pages after the preface in which he gives his thesis, to write a regressive history. He provides evidential support for his argument based on the historical documents of the historians and philosophers he studies, and supposes the evidences therein to be self-evident enough for his argument to stand. He writes a history that is based on the primacy of facts; as early as page five of *Metahistory*, he refers to the historian's task as the "arrangement of data from the *unprocessed historical record* in the interest of rendering that record more comprehensible to an *audience* of a particular kind."⁹⁰ The facts, the past, the evidences to be discovered, and thus the unaltered material of historical truth takes precedence over the interpretation offered by historians. Historians only differ in their arrangement of the data, which itself exists unspoiled by the individual viewpoints of historians. In his own work, his appeal is neither to logical reasoning nor philosophical argumentation, but to the evidence he finds from those writers. His own argument is declarative: writing history *is* a certain way, which can be demonstrated from evidence. He continues to argue for history written on the basis of discovered facts, implying a discovery of some truth on his own part, which leads to a pluralistic conclusion. White turns to an explicit advocacy for pluralism based on his own process:

It may not go unnoticed that his book is itself cast in an Ironic mode. But the Irony which informs it is a conscious one, and it therefore represents a turning of the Ironic consciousness against Irony itself. If it succeeds in establishing that the

⁹⁰ White, *Metahistory*, 5.

skepticism and pessimism of so much of contemporary historical thinking have their origins in an Ironic frame of mind, and that this frame of mind in turn is merely one of a number of possible postures that one may assume before the historical record, it will have provided some of the grounds for a rejection of Irony itself. And the way will have been partially cleared for the reconstitution of history as a form of intellectual activity which is at once poetic, scientific, and philosophical in its concerns—as it was during history’s golden age in the nineteenth century.⁹¹

The exact nature of the reconstitution that White references does not receive much attention in *Metahistory*. At the very end of the book, White argues that Irony has become dominant as the necessary perspective for historians in the twentieth-century, which contains an “inherent skepticism, which passes for scholarly caution and empiricism,” as well as “moral agnosticism, which passes for objectivity and transideological neutrality.”⁹² But the reconstitution of history that White hopes for offers no particular solution. He only wishes to see other perspectives to be viewed as useful, to not be dominated by Irony: “Historians and philosophers of history will then be freed to conceptualize history, to perceive its contents, and to construct narrative accounts of its processes in whatever modality of consciousness is most consistent with their own moral and aesthetic aspirations.”⁹³ His proposed solution is therefore pluralist and Skeptical. The freedom offered by the pluralist approach is, of course, much as with the interpretations of *War and Peace* presented, the freedom to generate conflict. Without a particular solution, a catch-all approach to writing and thinking about history that can encompass all viewpoints without conflict, there is a guarantee of conflict. As much as

⁹¹ White, *Metahistory*, xxxii.

⁹² White, *Metahistory*, 433.

⁹³ White, *Metahistory*, 436.

White's assertions lead in the direction of a values-based academic endeavor in the historical discipline, they fall short of that conclusion. White instead reiterates pluralistic arguments and truths as is now common for historians, at least in part to be evaluated based on the factual aspect of any given historical writing. The solution offered by White is a freedom from a dominant method through imagination. But the solution of freedom from dominance can only guarantee a finite degree of freedom if it chains us to inevitable conflict. White encourages no universal approach for history writing, nor does he advocate the use of history for political action toward a universal end for humanity.

Examples of Historical Writing in Recognition of the Particular-Universal Tension

Much like the majority of philosophers of history, most historians are particularists with regards to writing historical works. Historians overwhelmingly tend to write according to the particular facts and sources they are concerned with, concede their limitations as individual researchers and writers attempting to assert historical truth, and recognize the plurality of possible narratives as true if the facts and sources may support multiple narratives. Historians largely do so only in the background of their monographs, their philosophical approach given either light recognition or none at all. Simon Schama's 1995 book, *Landscape and Memory* provides an excellent example. In the seventeen page introduction to his work about the relationship between human history and nature, Schama writes two comments in passing. The first concerns universality; with regards to nature myths, Schama mentions the views of psychologist Carl Jung and anthropologist Mircea Eliade, who both make generalities about the human species in relation to nature myths. Schama states in some contradiction with those scholars that

“My own view is necessarily more historical, and by that token much less confidently universal.”⁹⁴ Schama assumes the particularism of history without discussion.

At another point, he writes concerning the use of his book as a tool for environmental politics: “Like all histories, this is less a recipe for action than an invitation to reflection, and is meant as a contribution to self-knowledge rather than a strategy for ecological rescue.”⁹⁵ The casual assertions Schama makes are of a particular, passive history, much reminiscent of R.G. Collingwood, whose work Schama is no doubt acquainted with. Schama neither broaches the topic of history writing’s flaws as dominated by particularism, nor posits the use of history for any political action, let alone the triumph of a universal humanity. There are, however, a few historians who are quite aware of the philosophical approach they take when writing an historical monograph. The particular-universal tension is examined in one form or another, and a solution to that tension is put forward. The mode of political expression in self-aware histories generally remains quite passive, encouraging little in the way of direct action, but some methodological philosophy is still utilized. Stephen Bednarski’s *A Poisoned Past: The Life and Times of Margarida de Portu, a Fourteenth-Century Accused Poisoner*, and Yair Mintzker’s *The Many Deaths of Jew Süß: The Notorious Trial and Execution of an Eighteenth-Century Court Jew*, are two such examples.

Stephen Bednarski writes his 2014 work, *A Poisoned Past*, in the mode of a particular genre of history: microhistory. The entire first chapter of *A Poisoned Past* is

⁹⁴ Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (New York: Random House Inc., 1995), 15.

⁹⁵ Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, 18.

devoted to defining microhistory, and placing it in the historiographical context of historical methodology. According to Bednarski, microhistory “takes a single, focused, historical “moment” and uses it to shine light on a broader world.”⁹⁶ Microhistory was formulated in the 1970s and 80s as a reaction to the Annales School of history, which advocated a “large-scale, quantitative, and statistical form of history,” and was popular in the mid-twentieth century.⁹⁷ The Annales School “focused on total or complete history (*histoire totale*), took a big picture, long-term (*longue-durée*) approach to the past, and saw large structures and enduring processes.”⁹⁸ Microhistory, then, advocates for the particular in history, and does so in order to avoid making assertions about history that are so general as to miss nuances. It is the epitome of particularist history, so much so that it not only avoids making general statements about history, but finds such universalist sentiments to actively repress elements of history and to be error in the historical enterprise. Microhistorians, like many contemporary historians, is focused on the “lived experience of the majority of the human population,” of which the macrohistorical approach utilized by the Annales School is little to no assistance.⁹⁹

Bednarski’s book provides an exceptional example of particularism in history. His methodological approach relies on microhistory, and he thus studied a single “moment” (Margarida de Portu’s trial) by using a relatively small number of documents, and focuses on a “little person” in history, who had no importance in the grand political

⁹⁶ Stephen Bednarski, *A Poisoned Past: The Life and Times of Margarida de Portu, a Fourteenth-Century Accused Poisoner* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2014), 2.

⁹⁷ Bednarski, *A Poisoned Past*, 3.

⁹⁸ Bednarski, *A Poisoned Past*, 3.

⁹⁹ Bednarski, *A Poisoned Past*, 4.

narratives of the past favored by Ranke and his followers. But even aside from Bednarski's methodological research approach, and the first chapter dedicated to explaining that approach, he affirms the particularity of his historical narrative in another way. Through his book, he interrupts his own historical writing to explain why he writes what he does. He breaks down the sources he uses, how he analyzed them, and includes possibilities for how the sources could have been read in such a way to create a different history that would be no less valid. For example, from pages sixty-six to seventy-five, Bednarski explains the context of legal documents in medieval Europe, how they were recorded, how legal historians analyze them, and how he himself analyzed them. In particular, Bednarski notes that in the context of legal documents, microhistorians have been criticized in the past for analyzing too few documents, per the general approach of the microhistorical school. He explains how he addresses that criticism:

To determine the significance of the trials pertaining to Margarida and the death of Johan [Margarida's husband], I have cast them against a systematic study of 1,644 other cases preserved from the court of Manosque between 1340 and 1405. I tracked these cases using a computer database, reducing each one to its constituent elements. I tracked individuals as accused persons, denouncers, witnesses, plaintiffs, or defendants, and noted their place of origin, current citizenship, sex, and marital status, as well as their craft, trade, or profession. Finally, I tracked specific charges, verdicts, and sentences. In addition to the database, I transcribed 873 typed pages of trial records. This material provides the filter through which I read Margarida's trials and informs my conclusions. It also provides me with wider familiarity about the characters who populate her tale.¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ Bednarski, *A Poisoned Past*, 74.

As Bednarski puts it, *A Poisoned Past* works “not . . . to remove the author. Rather, it lays bare the working method of the historian and highlights weaknesses, flaws, and dangers. The aim is twofold: first, to present the reader with a good historical yarn from which to learn; and second, to show how and why historians attempt to *do* history.”¹⁰¹

Bednarski’s effort in *A Poisoned Past* is, no doubt, in extremely good faith. There seems to be an honest attempt to write for a general audience, to educate as many readers as approach the book, to be honest about the methods and analytical styles used to write the novel, and to explain what historical writing is. Bednarski embraces the work written by Collingwood, Carr, and White, and recognizes the limitations of historical narrative as particular and restricted, barred from the universal. And while Bednarski does embrace the pluralism and particularism of narrative as explained by those philosophers of history, he does not fall into the trap of a simplistic relativism. He states, concerning the main character of his narrative, Margarite de Portu, that “There is much I do not know about this long-dead woman. But there is much of her I do know, or at least *think* I can know.”¹⁰² Bednarski recognizes his own limitations, and openly portrays them in his own narrative, but nevertheless asserts his authority as a historian over knowledge, at least in a qualified form. Here again we see the equality of pessimism as espoused by Berlin and others: even the individual who has devoted more research than any other than possibly a handful of other people on the planet to a particular subject must deny any certainty of their knowledge. Bednarski is likely alone with regards to his

¹⁰¹ Bednarski, *A Poisoned Past*, xviii.

¹⁰² Bednarski, *A Poisoned Past*, xviii.

research effort on Margarita de Portu, but still writes as though all his conclusions must be qualified. While there is an admirable thoroughness to his thought, and he does not exclude himself from conditioned knowledge, his philosophical approach nevertheless begs the question of why anyone would continue to write history. As Bednarski is clear to say, different histories may always be written about the same subject, whether they differ in philosophical approach, research method, or the “modern interests and priorities” always at play in the construction of an historical writing.¹⁰³ How, then, might those particular elements be overcome?

Yair Mintzker proposes to answer the question of particularism with what he refers to as “polyphonic history.” Mintzker reconstructs the historical events he is concerned with—the trial and execution of Joseph Süß Oppenheimer in the early eighteenth-century—by utilizing four different perspectives found in the historical documents tied to the event. Those perspectives shape the outline of his book; each perspective, and Mintzker’s analysis of each perspective, provides a full chapter on its own. He uses the perspectives of persons relevant to the case but with differing views, whose accounts are often contradictory and untrustworthy. While such a variety of sources is not unusual in history, depending on the relevant event, the accounts concerning Oppenheimer are particularly opposed to each other. Mintzker’s solution is to take the conflicting accounts—those of the judge-inquisitor for Oppenheimer’s case, the testament of some of Oppenheimer’s last visitors before his execution, the only

¹⁰³ Bednarski, *A Poisoned Past*, xvii.

contemporary Jewish account of Oppenheimer’s life and death, and one of the earliest biographers of Oppenheimer—and analyze each in its own right, only indirectly learning anything about Oppenheimer himself. But aside from the analysis of the accounts themselves, Mintzker uses a much more interesting method in his book to address the issue of a multiplicity of views. He introduces what he refers to as “conversations” between each chapter in order to address the view of the reader in his book. In his own words:

It [polyphonic history] is also manifest in my decision to include short dialogues between me and an imaginary reader after each chapter. It is highly unusual for this device to be used by a professional historian, and my employment of it is sure to cause some controversy. I use it, however, for a reason. Over the past several years, while presenting different parts of this book in the United States, Europe, and Israel, I was simultaneously fascinated and taken aback by my colleagues’ reactions to my polyphonic methodology. The author-reader dialogues in the book are by no means an attempt to tell future readers of this book what to think. Rather, they are my way of both of responding to some obvious objections to my methodology *and* of acknowledging their validity.¹⁰⁴

As Mintzker says, the conversations he writes between chapters are unusual. They are written in the format of dialogue, broken up into paragraphs stated by the Author and the Reader. Mintzker does not hesitate to use the first-person, nor does he shy away from making the Reader immensely perceptive and self-aware in order to emulate the critiques Mintzker has received from early drafts of his book. The Author in turns agrees and disagrees with the Reader, argues particular points, and both treats the Reader with respect and demands authority as the historical researcher. In a simplistic

¹⁰⁴ Yair Mintzker, *The Many Deaths of Jew Süß: The Notorious Trial and Execution of an Eighteenth-Century Court Jew* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 22.

sense, as Mintzker describes the conversations, they are a way to shake up typical historical prose and create a more interesting work for a reader to engage with.

Throughout the monograph, Mintzker makes a number of literary references, particularly Biblical ones, to which he draws attention through the dialogues, as he points out in the Third Conversation: “I also use the fictive nature of a dialogue with an imaginary reader to acknowledge and indeed draw attention to the literary elements in my own account.”¹⁰⁵

In the Afterword, Mintzker gives more context to the narratological variations he tries to include in a historical work. His dissatisfaction is both aesthetic and logical.

Aesthetically, most history writing still emulates the style of early-nineteenth century novelists, an area in which our evolution Mintzker finds to be inadequate considering the amount of literary changes to narrative structure that have taken place in the two centuries since. Logically, and more importantly, we are reluctant to put to writing the ways in which our opinions change, the ways in which we do not understand a concept or piece of evidence, the way in which our finished works have a single voice rather than the tangled woof of truth that would be a more honest depiction of our process.

Polyphonic history is meant to address those problems and ride the line between “the Scylla of false omniscience and the Charybdis of ‘post-truth’ relativism”, in which there lies “a whole world of possibilities.”¹⁰⁶ Much like Bednarski’s work in microhistory, Mintzker desires to humble the historian as a limited individual while asserting the possibility of a qualified knowledge about the past. But in Mintzker’s case, rather than

¹⁰⁵ Mintzker, *The Many Deaths of Jew Süß*, 174.

¹⁰⁶ Mintzker, *The Many Deaths of Jew Süß*, 285.

focusing on the particular so much as to prioritize it and eschew generalizations about humanity, he wishes to include multiple voices and perspectives into a single work. Mintzker's goal is to offer a multi-faceted view of Oppenheimer: "we are about to see Oppenheimer portrayed from different angles: from up close and far away; in public, in the interrogation room, and in prison; in a legal, social, and theological light; and in Christian and Jewish terms."¹⁰⁷ Without using multiple, highly contradictory sources, such a multi-faceted view would be impossible.

In a more complicated sense than Mintzker places it, his work attempts to overcome the particularity of perspective and narrative by featuring multiple perspectives and narratives. If knowledge cannot be a simple assertion by an individual, then a narrative in which multiple individual perspectives are explicitly incorporated, highlighting their differences, is Mintzker's answer. Mintzker is, certainly, on an interesting track. But polyphonic history, for all its interesting qualities, still falls short of overcoming the particular-universal tension. It may be narratologically refreshing in a field growing stale in its prose, but it still posits no truth. The best it can offer is a narrative with more explicit incorporation of differing perspectives, in both Mintzker's sources and the conversations, but of course the range of perspectives in *The Many Deaths of Jew Süß* is severely limited. The differing accounts of Oppenheimer must still be reconstructed by Mintzker's modern mindset. Mintzker featured the criticisms and praise he received during his writing process, but he can only hear, and more importantly

¹⁰⁷ Mintzker, *The Many Deaths of Jew Süß*, 21-22.

respect, so many voices. He is still the central element of the multi-vocal structure he builds. He listened to other academics and specialists, other people that he respects, loves, and dislikes. Everything said to him concerning his book was filtered through his own understanding and perspective, and what he chose to present in the conversations and how he presented them are inevitably shaped by him. In truth, the conversations in *The Many Deaths of Jew Süß* are Mintzker talking to himself; the guise of the Other as an object of correspondence is a guise of Mintzker's own creation. The conversations are largely a rhetorical strategy of persuasion rather than a revolutionary tool to change the methods of historians. By assuring the reader that other voices are present in Mintzker's own writing, the reader is supposed to be persuaded that a different type of history is being written. The conversations also serve as a way for Mintzker to be artistically indulgent while writing a professional history; in the fourth conversation, regarding *The Story of the Passing of Joseph Süß*, one of the four accounts of Oppenheimer and his trial, Mintzker uses the Reader to more liberally interpret *The Story* than would perhaps be generally accepted by other historians. Mintzker himself wondered if *The Story* was written along the line's of Oppenheimer's supposed request that people would view him as forgiven by God and read study the Torah after his death, an interpretation that must be read into the source itself and not featured in the chapter about *The Story*. In the fourth conversation, the Reader presents suspicion that Mintzker believes *The Story* to have been written sympathetically, and Mintzker, in faux delight, explores that possibility. As the Reader notes: "Surely, then, a book that holds these aspirations [to sympathize with Oppenheimer in the way Mintzker believes *The Story* to do] cannot be

considered a work of professional history?”¹⁰⁸ The conversations are thus, as rhetorical and narratological tools, self-serving for Mintzker, and unable to overcome the particular at all. Mintzker’s approach only further illuminates the restrictions narrative and particular perspective place on our knowledge and expression.

Historians and philosophers of history have engaged with problem of asserting knowledge about the past. They have been conscious that there is some problem with the declarations of the particular about the universal, and have had different solutions to this problem. None, however, even those which seem as radical as Hayden White’s or as narratologically unusual as Yair Mintzker’s, can overcome the particular. Each, with the exception of theistic solutions like Leopold von Ranke’s, concludes that history is in the end a particularist endeavor, and that there can be no alternative method which is able to overcome the particular-universal tension. And those historians would still refuse to say that history is an empty effort. They affirm the particular by continuing to write history for the particular, for various reasons. But none of those reasons is given as explicitly political; no action is urged by those historians. Philosophically wary historians see most of the views presented in this chapter as radical and destructive to the historical discipline. But instead the opposite is true; the views presented here (aside from Ranke’s) only affirm the empirical pluralism already predominant in the historical discipline. None of them posit complete relativism and moral emptiness, and none of them posit a solution which can overcome all particular ignorance and bring about a

¹⁰⁸ Mintzker, *The Many Deaths of Jew Süß*, 229.

complete universalism for humanity, an ascendance to certain truth. The philosophical urgings of the historians who have contemplated the particular-universal tension are overwhelmingly passive. They do not urge action, they do not urge putting the past to use in creating a better future. They either try and redeem the suffering of past humanity with lessons to make us feel better in the present, or lament the suffering of the past for its own sake. The first is small in scope and content with the general status quo of our existence, and the second is sickeningly passive, content to have knowledge of humanity's existential state of suffering as informed by the past without trying to do anything about it, or even urge the rest of our species that our suffering is good. Writing history can be more than impotent passivism and lamentation.

CHAPTER 4

A NEW HISTORY

The polemic raised in *War and Peace* against historians consists of an attack on human agency, a non-teleological history, and the validity of narrative as a way to gain knowledge about the past. Tolstoy also minces no words when accusing historians of being elitist and engaged in history largely for the sake of self-interest; in Marxist terms, bourgeois. Although we have determined that Tolstoy's attacks on agency and non-teleological history are useless given the exercise we undertake in analyzing them, his other critiques still stand with some substance. Tolstoy accuses historians of taking what Jeff Love characterizes as the core of Tolstoy's pessimistic determinism, our inability to comprehend the universal because of our particular finitude, and desecrating that essence of our being with efforts to benefit ourselves as individuals. In the words of Jeff Love in his chapter on Tolstoy and peace in *Tolstoy on War*: "the most radical aspect" of Tolstoy's polemic against history is "the elimination of narratives directed by particular views that have no ground other than a kind of collective self-interest."¹⁰⁹ Rather than giving in to the natural laws that govern us, and living in accordance with them, historians write narratives claiming knowledge about the past, which posit human agency and influence on the course of history, anathema to Tolstoy's universal determinist history due to the attachment to particular, individual self-interest. And while Tolstoy critiqued history as it was performed 150 years ago, the historical discipline has changed

¹⁰⁹ Love, "The Great Man in War and Peace," 148.

little since. Historians still posit human freedom in their histories, write narratives about the past with vested self-interest, maintain a bourgeois status, but all the same avoid a universal truth. And while historians tend to emphasize overarching political narratives and warfare less than they did in the 1860s and are more amenable to limited plurality, these are frankly cosmetic differences rather than substantive ones. Historians now differ little from the historians Tolstoy attacked in *War and Peace*.

It is unfortunately difficult to counter some of Tolstoy's claims, although the academics who received Tolstoy have most often ignored his arguments concerning the philosophy of history and the universal. Historians are, as is academia generally, bourgeois. The histories we write are rarely for a general audience. They are far more often for the sake of intra-disciplinary dialogue. They are written using sources most often inaccessible to someone not affiliated with a university. Most importantly, the histories we tend to write are particular and passive. No one writes history and frames it as part of a certain truth; we instead write from our perspective, recognize that historical narratives are always limited and shaped by their authors, and leave it at that. Tolstoy's characterization of historians as forgers, concerned with knowledge which has nothing to do with a central truth, maintains its relevancy today. Historians encourage no action to change the particularity of our species, nor do we seek a future universalism. Ranke, Collingwood, Carr, and White encouraged no action, and historians today are little different. Historians are concerned with the past and the present, and leave action and the future for others. We have embraced our particularity, we maintain our bourgeois status, and as such have fallen into a pessimism even darker than Tolstoy's. Tolstoy thought

submission to natural law, as a universal power, would keep humanity from the conflicts inherent in the particular. We instead have given in to the pessimism of inevitable ignorance and self-interest, and thus conflict.

But in the course of this work, we have decided that Tolstoy's attack on our freedom and ability to shape history as it unfolds is unworthy of the rest of his argument. Tolstoy's conclusion would pre-empt writing that conclusion out, arguing for it so passionately to persuade others, and even the exercise Tolstoy undertook to reach that conclusion. How could we take his advice seriously, when to consider whether it is worth taking seriously assumes some impact in the world on our behalf as a result of our judgment, an implicit example of agency? The answer he gives, submission to natural law, resignation to our suffering as inevitable, abandonment of any hope to influence our existence of our own will, is inherently pessimistic. Such pessimism and denial of our agency insults the human. We have instead decided that we are able to choose how we shape our future. If we wish, we may even choose to overcome our particularity and embrace universalism in the fullest way possible. History, and historians, may serve to bring about the future, should we choose to attempt it. To do so, historians must engage in an atheistic enterprise, where human freedom is unbounded and we choose to shape a future in which there is nothing which may dominate us. We must refuse the gods of our past and present, however they may manifest. We must refuse time, suffering, and death any hold over our existence as a species. Historians must embark on a truly universal project, in which every member of our species is sublimated to a single entity, and humanity achieves absolute mastery of the universe. The efforts of science and

technological advancement will be the chief mechanisms to reach a universal end, human ingenuity and tenacity their engines. But there is also a place for art in our effort, in which history and historians may become of significant assistance. Historians mourn the past because we are aware of the fullness of its suffering. We, better than any others, are aware of what humanity has undergone in our search for truth and knowledge. Our memories are full of the suffering we've witnessed from a distance, and we still do not know all that suffering. If a true universalism is to be brought about, then historians must engage every member of our species to that end. We must all make the decision for ourselves that our particular individuality is worth giving up in order for humanity to ascend beyond the gods which govern us, to overcome the limitations which generate the crosses we bear and the sins we commit. Historians may serve as proselytizers for a universal future by presenting exactly what it is that we are attempting to overcome, and persuading others to do the same. We may become the heralds of an atheistic religion, and cross all false boundaries between the members of our species in order to bring about a universal humanity.

It is no small thing, of course, to propose the restructuring of an entire academic discipline, let alone the development and dissemination of a new religion. We must ensure that we have a firm grasp of the logical grounds to do so in the first place. The philosophical quandary many historians and philosophers of history have been fixated on is whether or not a single, true narrative of history exists and can be told by historians. The vast majority of historians in the last century, especially since the Second World War, have felt convinced that if such a narrative exists at all, it is undiscoverable by we

historians, and thus historical narratives may all be respected according to the quality of their evidence from historical sources. It is a pluralistic position which allows for a certain degree of passivism on behalf of historians who wish to maintain history as a neutral profession, without particular inclinations which may be construed as political. While this is not a perfect description of all current professional historians, of course, it is still broad enough to cover the vast majority of their approaches to history. Some historians are more inclined to characterize historical narratives as value-driven in their creation, and some historians are more inclined to value the use of evidence in historical sources, but few if any are willing to completely disregard either element. What they all have in common is a sense of passivism; history is not *for* any particular line of action, but only for its own discovery.

But we are not interested in a pluralistic philosophy of history. We are interested in a philosophy of history that will end conflict and violence, and the only way to do so is to assist in the creation of universal world order in which individual identity is sublimated to the greater entity of humanity. Tolstoy is quite thorough in his depiction of self-interest in the *War and Peace*: self-expression and desire are harmful and lead to conflict. But we wish not for a humanity that subjugates itself to greater powers, as does Tolstoy, but rather a humanity which ascends above any power through the self-sacrifice of individuals to the good of the species. We therefore necessitate a philosophy of history which assumes the existence of our agency and freedom to influence history as humans, and also rejects a pluralism which will keep our species artificially divided. The only philosophy of history which may satisfy both those requirements is a political

philosophy. We assume the active engagement of historians in shaping our world from particular to universal, and to do so we must be willing to treat the past as a tool with which to actively create the future. Most historians refuse to see history as political. They instead favor a passive neutrality, in which the knowledge brought by history may be put to political means, but where history itself is constructed in a plurality of valid ways, none of which may be dominant. But there is still a dominance in the current history: dominance of the particular, which in turn leads to the dominance of self-interest and thus conflict.

Our logical foundation is strong. If we truly wish to end violence and conflict, we must attain the universal, and to do that we must put history to use and unify its writing under a single political narrative which affirms our own ability to change our future. But current historians fear the predominance of one historical approach, especially one which encourages action, out of fear of domination. In fairness, dominant, singular historical narratives that have been pushed in the past, especially in the twentieth-century, have been the tools of totalitarian states with violent ideologies, and have led to the deaths of tens of millions. Fear of a dominant political and historical narrative is certainly justified. Our history, therefore, must resist the simplistic temptation of dominance through violence from the outset. We must establish ourselves as not only aimed toward universal peace as our eventual end, but also during our journey to that end. Our tool to spread the message of universality must be one of logical and values-based persuasion, not coercion or the elimination of rivals. If we are to embrace history as constructed, based on the analysis of Hayden White, then we should be willing to be morally

conscious about the nature of our construction. If our cause should be for the betterment of our species, then the approach we take and the methods we use should encourage that betterment intrinsically. Our task is one of love; self-sacrificial, transformative, all-embracing love. To fall into a cliché, Machiavellian, means-justifies-ends trope would be inexcusable. If the new history were to do so, it would already be a lost cause, distanced from the goals we set out here and hypocritical to its stated purpose.

If we do not allow the new history to engage with humanity in terms of violence and coercion, and instead insist that it be a political movement of intrinsic peace, we risk becoming passive rather than pacifist. Change, especially the radical types of change proposed here, always brings with it an internal violence, at the very least. If we are to bring our species to the common task of attaining a universal state, we will have to change the minds of all individuals. To undergo a worldview change of that degree, from self-interest and pessimism to the optimism of unified humanity, is a violation of all previously held thought. This type of violence cannot be helped, and we should not be wary of it. It is violence every human must experience in order to engage in the political endeavor preached by the new history. To continue the analogy with religion, we must encourage the internal violence of conversion. Here is one of the most important points at which the new history diverges from Tolstoy; Tolstoy would have absolute peace through submission and passivity. There can be no violence due to action through conversion if humanity is surrendered to natural law. But in the new history, in a similarly pacifistic stance as Tolstoy, there can be no coercion to bring about the radical change inside all the hearts of humanity we desire. History avails us of all the suffering

had on account of forced conversion. We know better than anyone the perils of religious persuasion, whether they be the horrors inflicted on native peoples in conquered lands or the faux righteousness of the Crusades. If we want to encourage internal change in humans without coercion or violence, then the new history must have tools fit for the purpose.

To be in line with the motivations of the new history, a logical imperative which necessitates the universal for the sake of peace in tandem with a moral desire to end suffering and conflict, the new history should engage on those levels: reason and morality. Logical persuasion and public engagement are the necessary tools of the new history. If we do not open ourselves to the broader public, then our works will be unable to get the traction needed to persuade anyone of the importance of the universal. In a somewhat similar sense to Bednarski's work, our reasoning and motivation should be bared. At every turn, the reconstructions of history we write should be clear in their reasoning and purpose. And in a somewhat similar sense as Mintzker's work, we should be willing to engage directly with others in our reconstructions in order to demonstrate the value of collective inclusion and effort. The base appealed to for feedback should be far broader, but the work would nevertheless be a similar effort to Mintzker's. If our persuasion is open, honest, and morally driven, then our work should have no room for factual concealment or elitism.

A politically driven and engaged history would immediately come under criticism for being biased, dishonest as an institution of knowledge, and encouraging to relativism. The new history is capable of circumventing those criticisms. We have already embraced

bias; we recognize that all histories are constructed and that facts are only so valuable in the historical discipline. The weakness of historical narratives, in part illustrated by Tolstoy in *War and Peace*, thus far has been the way historians continue to posit biased narratives as true based on the factual appeal, to cast histories as discovered truth rather than constructed truth. Instead of embracing a plurality of already constructed and therefore “biased” narratives or refusing to concede the degree of their construction, the new history demonstrates the willingness to embrace construction as an element of human freedom. By doing so, new historians may respond to the criticism of their open bias by engaging in a values-based dialogue. If all historical narratives are already constructed and therefore “biased,” then what bias is bespoken in their narrative? If the new historian is biased with a desire to bring peace through nonviolence and a universal state, and is opposed to a critic who is biased with a desire for conflict and self-interest, then the dialogue is in some sense already resolved. The Holocaust-denier who will endlessly argue the Holocaust never happened, if questioned correctly, will eventually reveal a dislike for Jews and most likely other minorities. At the point of that revelation, nothing further needs to be done on behalf of the new historian; the narrative proposed is one of hatred and conflict, and is therefore not worth consideration. Rather than questioning a bigot’s historical method and throwing up endless facts that will fall on deaf ears, directly addressing the deficit of values at hand will go much further to deal with the problem. The dialogue about bias may be shifted from an issue of *whether or not* values influence historical narratives to *how they should* influence historical narratives.

There will be some critics who would judge a values-based history lacking in some sense of intellectual integrity; if history is values-based, then it becomes little more than moral conjecture, without basis in reality, and thus cannot be regarded as a rigorous institution of reason and knowledge. This problem again coincides with the issue of knowledge as discovered versus knowledge as constructed. As we have established with previous historians and philosophers of history, historical writings are reconstructed narratives, incapable of describing the past without involving the present. Writing history by using documents and reconstructed events of the past for the sake of a future purpose, as the new history seeks to do, in fact differs from the current method of writing history only in the reason for its writing. History is currently written for the sake of presentist concerns about current debates within the discipline, ensuring tenure, and other various forms of self-interest, which Tolstoy illustrated a century and a half ago. Harnessing the reasons for writing history and uniting all historians' reasonings under a single purpose does not demonstrate a lack of integrity as a discipline. Rather, it demonstrates an agreement on the overarching purpose of writing history at all, lending the new history greater integrity by recognizing both the reality of its method and the greater role for our species that it may serve. To presume a history unified for the purpose of political action lacks the integrity of a divided history, without greater purpose and used to enforce current societal structures, implies a misunderstanding of how historians write history.

The greatest potential criticism of the new history is of its perceived relativism. If historical knowledge is to be created based on values rather than independently existing-facts, the critic would ask, what stops anyone from declaring history to be any particular

way they like, regardless of any historical evidence? Would history not become a battleground for different values-systems to embroil themselves in, reminiscent of a Schmittian appreciation for war, in which conflict is affirmed as the norm? But this criticism, too, may be answered. To be for a values-based history, and against an empirical history, is not to reject historical evidence. Rather, it is to displace historical evidence as the pinnacle tool of history writing. If the new history is to concern itself with the future and therefore action, then it must regard its own dialogue of values as its primary impetus. Historical evidence is not to be ignored, only regarded as that which it is: another tool for writing history. It is certainly an important tool, but far from the most important. Narratives and facts, as constructed elements, do not rely solely on evidence, and the new history embraces the act of construction as an expression of human freedom and will. To claim evidence as king in historical writing, the empiricist position, is to ignore the primacy of human reconstruction, the unshakeable element which drives all historical writing, even with presentist, particularist philosophies. There is no universal truth to be found in evidence, only data points with which to build a greater truth.

The new historian, therefore, still relies on historical evidence to construct historical writings, but does so in order to write compelling narratives persuading others of the importance of attaining a universal state of being. Facts are not raised up as though to exist without the human; evidence is instead used to construct facts for the sake of the universal end. By recognizing the significance of values in the writing of history and dethroning empiricism from its elitist, bourgeois seat, new historians are forced to recognize all historical narratives. There is no longer a simple way for a new historian to

dismiss a proposed narrative wholesale because it uses the wrong evidence, no evidence, or comes from someone without a graduate degree. New historians will therefore have many more narratives to deal with, far outside the realm of academia. All historical narratives, regardless of their source should be sublimated to a universal narrative regarding humanity's past of suffering and potential future born of action. But rather than descending into a defeatist sense of relativism in the face of overwhelming numbers of historical narratives, new historians are instead motivated to persuade others of the importance of the universal; the new history is entirely bound up with bringing humanity to a singular point of victory. It therefore brooks no relativism, and is willing to continue working to persuade others of the importance of the future, the truth, of which new historians will aid in the construction. It is with regards to the relevance of persuasion for the sake of action that the new historian's critique of history differs with Tolstoy; Tolstoy paradoxically hoped to persuade us to act as though our actions have no meaning, while the new historian acts in full belief of their own power to change the future.

It may be noted by those with some acquaintance with philosophy that the project outlined here is quite reminiscent of history as described by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. Hegel is famous for framing history as "dialectical," that is, recursively progressive to an end goal based on the evolutions of human societies. The end Hegel foresees is complete human self-realization, which takes the form of Reason manifesting itself through humans in the shape of a universal, ethical community. Reason, according to Hegel, is the spirit of humanity, and manifests itself through us because Reason also underlies the functioning of the universe itself. Hegel refers to Reason in that context as

the Idea, or Spirit. It is our nature as humans to express the Idea by our own activity. All humanity's efforts should thus be guided to self-determinism, to the becoming-of-ourselves-in-the-world. Stephen Houlgate's book, *An Introduction to Hegel*, offers an excellent analysis of history and truth in Hegel:

Hegel is an 'idealist' (in his philosophy of history, at least) because he does not understand human character or identity to be some fixed, immutable 'reality,' but rather conceives of human beings as actively producing their character and identity in history . . . The goal of historical activity, for Hegel, is thus for human beings to become conscious of themselves as freely and historically self-productive and self-determining—not something fixed by nature—and for them to build their world in accordance with that recognition . . . Becoming aware of the true character of human existence does not mean for him simply becoming conscious of a given, fixed reality or gaining a more accurate picture of what we were like at the beginning of history. Rather, it means learning that we are in the process of producing and determining ourselves.¹¹⁰

Hegel thus defies any pessimism about the nature of humanity. The exact way our species expresses itself and becomes in the world is up to our own choices. We are what we create ourselves to be, which is itself, as a result of our choices, our true form. We are thus quite in line with Hegel with regards to our view of humanity and its future. In a loose sense, we are also aligned with Hegel with regards to action; while Hegel does not offer up how a professional historical discipline might conduct itself to assist in humanity's becoming in the fashion given here, to encourage human action for the sake of future betterment fits with his philosophy.

One of the senses in which there may be some divergence between the new history and Hegel is with regards to history as atheistic. Interpretations of Hegel

¹¹⁰ Stephen Houlgate, *An Introduction to Hegel* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 21.

concerning theism differ; there is a prominent leftist interpretation of Hegel as atheistic, in which Hegel encourages us to become without the use of a God, or at most with a God that is to be overthrown. In this interpretation, humanity transforms itself and increases its knowledge of the universe so that it might achieve complete mastery of reality, fulfilling our nature as manifestations of Reason by effectively becoming gods through scientific and technological achievements. There is also a rightist interpretation, in which the Spirit refers to the Christian God, and humans achieve the heights of their true natures through submission to that God, to the point of suicide. In the lectures concerning his philosophy of history, compiled by Hegel's students, he writes concerning God and the Spirit:

It is this final goal—freedom—toward which all the world's history has been working. It is this goal to which all the sacrifices have been brought upon the broad altar of the earth in the long flow of time. This is the one and only goal that accomplishes itself and fulfills itself—the only constant in the change of events and conditions, and the truly effective thing in them all. It is this goal that is God's will for the world. But God is the absolutely perfect Being, and He can therefore will nothing but Himself, His own will. The nature of His will, however—i.e., His own nature, that is what we are here calling the Idea of freedom (since we are translating the religious image into philosophic thought).¹¹¹

The exact nature of Hegel's relationship with God in the context of his philosophy of history has thus been the subject of much contention. Stephen Houlgate's position is that any such actual entity, a God rather than a metaphorical motivating force, is an invention of Hegel's critics, rather than a dominant being towering over humanity. Regardless of whether or not a God exists in Hegel's framework, we have no need of such a thing. We

¹¹¹ G.W.F. Hegel, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, trans. Leo Rauch (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1988), 22-23.

may learn from Hegel how to articulate the role of human self-determination in our future, and we assume our ability to accomplish that self-determination without the assistance of a deity. We assume that we may find freedom within our own universe and are capable of attaining that freedom by our own devices.

Aside from the issue of God, the new history may also diverge from Hegel in another way. Again, depending on interpretation, Hegel may only refer to the ethical community and the rational sublimation of individuals to the collective when he refers to the fullness of humanity. It is also possible that his rhetoric concerning choice is just that: humanity's freedom as beings of Reason consists only in what we freely choose for ourselves. But the new history advocates not just for human self-determination, but for humanity to have incredible influence on the structure of the universe as well. The new history is thus not only part of the leftist tradition regarding universality and the overcoming of self-interest, but also within the leftist tradition of interpreting Hegel, largely established by Karl Marx. Marx understood Hegel materially: humanity would reach for perfect universality and equality through material means, by the equal distribution of resources and technological development which will solve any conceivable problem regarding the production of goods. And in fairness to Marx, the communist society fulfills the ideal of the ethical community. But Marx views communism as a determined condition for humanity, a state it will inevitably reach in order to mediate between individuals. The new history is neither deterministic (departing from both Tolstoy and Marx), and seeks a state of being for humanity beyond individuals, a philosophical consideration almost entirely absent from Marx's work. The new history

understands the individual as an impediment to freedom; where there exists individuality there exists difference, desire, and conflict. Freedom is freedom from those things, in a similar way as freedom for Tolstoy is freedom from desire and conflict, but the new history goes further. Freedom for the new historian is freedom from all dominant forces which separate humanity and subject it to suffering, and thus even freedom from the natural laws Tolstoy urges humanity to submit itself to in *War and Peace*.

The freedom so keenly eyed by the new history will likely take a great deal of time and effort to create. Its exact path of evolution is not planned; its progression is in the hands of those alive at each step. But at all steps, new historians must provide themselves as the supporting element, reminders of the suffering which characterizes our species as individuals. To provide that support, to be the keepers of the suffering in our past, is our key contribution to the universal state of being. We can also, by implementing that action-oriented imperative needed to create our future, assist in creation by identifying those ideologies which would disrupt our progression to a universal state. These of course include the obvious examples of racism, fascism, nationalism, and the like, but also include capitalism, liberalism, and even democracy. The former three are easy to identify as disruptive to the universal because they often are bound up with violence, and presuppose differences among humans based on group identities, quite obviously opposed to a universal state of being. The latter three, however, need a little more nuance in explaining their opposition to a universal state of being. They all may be considered universal in a simplistic sense, in that all humans may participate under a single civil state organized by those systems and still function. There

could not be a single civil state framed by either fascism or nationalism, and racism assumes the existence of hatred for particular groups, subverting the possibility of universalism.

Capitalism is the easiest of the latter three to identify as disruptive to the universal; it affirms self-interest, and leads to class division and inequality. Liberalism is similar, though as a broader term is subject to more numerous definitions. In the context of our approach to the particular-universal tension, we may understand liberalism as a philosophical acceptance of self-interest, but with enforced regulation to ensure peace. Liberalism seeks no radical change in the being of humanity, but rather seeks to adapt the human to a peaceful state of governance based on the equality of individuals. It is thus opposed to bringing humanity to a universal state of being. Democracy is similar: it asserts the equality of individuals and advocates decision-making as a collective effort of individuals, and thus does not function in the context of a truly collective manifestation of humanity. This is not to say liberalism and democracy are not closer to universalism than fascism or nationalism, or that they lead to exactly the same types of violences and conflicts as fascism and nationalism. They do, however, allow conflict to remain, and are generally oriented to some type of regulated capitalism. They are unable to eradicate self-interest because they are founded on the human as a self-interested individual which must participate in society alongside other individuals. They are limited because they presuppose the human to be individual and particular. Liberalism and democracy should therefore be understood as temporary measures at most, stopgaps to prevent greater violence while we work toward better a better state of existence. It may be assumed that

as advocates of self-sacrifice and a universal being for humanity, new historians should be focused on a Marxist political state, in which the individual is disregarded for the sake of communal good. It is true that communism is the political system most closely connected to an ideal of the universal for humanity, and is thus in all likelihood a stage in the process toward universal humanity, but communism is not the final evolution to attain a true universal state. The political arena itself must be dissolved by the time the end goal of the new history is realized, that arena only useful insofar as there are multiple individuals which must cooperate under the same governing structure. Universal humanity, the end goal of the new history, does not entail the possibility for individuals, and thus politics will cease to have much meaning; there will be only decision, without debate or equivocation.

By bringing humanity together into a single entity and dissolving all forms of individual pursuit, humanity can begin the process of ending its own particularity. Our particularity, or finitude, is manifest in multiple ways. The most obvious, and the particularity mostly referenced in this work, is the particularity of individual identities. Our species is separated into individuals, with their own respective thoughts, beliefs, backgrounds, and desires. This separation causes conflict and violence when different individuals exert their desires on the world in different ways. We compare, judge, and seek to subvert each other as part of our separation. And certainly, overcoming our individuality is a massive step towards transforming humanity into a universality. But universality for our species is more nuanced than just ending individual identity. We are not only particular because we have different perspectives and desires; we are separated

by that which is most particular: death. There has been no philosopher better acquainted with death than Martin Heidegger, at least in the West. Heidegger refers to humanity as Dasein, which translates to Being-There or There-Being. For Heidegger, death defines all aspects of human existence. We exist in time as Beings-toward-death, with it always in front of us. Death defines us as present. A key passage from Heidegger's best-known work, *Being and Time*, is worth reading in full here:

Death is a possibility of being which Dasein itself has to take over in every case. With death, Dasein stands before itself in its ownmost potentiality-for-Being. This is a possibility in which the issue is nothing less than Dasein's Being-in-the-world. Its death is the possibility of no-longer-being-able-to-be-there. If Dasein stands before itself as this possibility, it has been *fully* assigned to its ownmost potentiality-for-Being. When it stands before itself in this way, all its relations to any other Dasein have been undone. This ownmost non-relational possibility is at the same time the uttermost one.

As potentiality-for-Being, Dasein cannot outstrip the possibility of death. Death is the possibility of the absolute impossibility of Dasein. Thus death reveals itself as that *possibility which is one's ownmost, which is non-relational, and which is not to be outstripped [unüberholbare]*. As such, death is something *distinctively* impending. Its existential possibility is based on the fact that Dasein is essentially disclosed to itself, and disclosed, indeed, as ahead-of-itself. This item in the structure of care has its most primordial concretion in Being-towards-death. As a phenomenon, Being-towards-the-end becomes plainer as Being towards that distinctive possibility of Dasein which we have characterized.¹¹²

In a sense unexplored by anyone in the same way before Heidegger, death is defined in philosophy as that which defines the human. And as Heidegger points out in the italicized lines (emphasis Heidegger's) death "reveals itself as that *possibility which is one's ownmost.*" Death functions as that which ends our possibilities for being, and it exists for all. Every single human is a Being-towards-death, shaped by the approaching

¹¹²Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford, Blackwell Publishers, 1962), 294-295.

end of our possibilities. And the death of Dasein is completely individual; no two people have the exact same possibilities for Being, and thus the threatened elimination of those possibilities, up to the point of death, is unique for Dasein. Heidegger demonstrates that we are particular not only because we are separate, but because we die as individuals. Heidegger thus shows us the most dominant theism of all: death itself as our god. Death cannot be experienced because the moment it comes is the moment Dasein ends as an experiencing being. Death dominates us all. We are defined by, and exist in light of, our inevitable death. Death shapes our species in every facet of our lives, because our lives exist in the context of their own ending, a result all Dasein are aware of. Death makes us particular; we cannot be but finite if we cannot but cease to exist. Heidegger urges us to accept Death as our god, though he calls himself atheist; for him, only the approach of Death, and the way we suffer in the face of it, allow us to be human. We would not be Dasein if we were not Beings-toward-death.

If we truly wish to attain a universal state of being, it would seem as though we must overcome death itself. Even were we to unite all individual humans into a single entity, if that entity could perish, it itself would only be one more particular among all other finite entities in the universe. But how might death be overcome? Death is not a thing which may be analyzed, nor is it a force which can be fought. As Heidegger says, death is a possibility of impossibilities for being. Death and the particular are intimately related, even beyond the context described in *Being and Time*. As long as something may exist outside an entity, that entity is susceptible to the possibility of its own annihilation. Without existing as an all-encompassing-state, in which there is no within

or without, only what is, completely and totally united, death, and thus particularity, persist. A singular humanity, in which all individuals are subsumed, is still particular if there is that which it has not assimilated. The universe is large; a completely united humanity remains vulnerable, particular, and deathful unless it itself attains the universal as a state of existence.

To unite humanity with the universe, and embed our will into every aspect of reality is the ultimate goal of the new historian's universality. We raise up human volition and self-determination, and place no limit our species' right to assert itself in the world. There should be no god over us, nothing outside us which may engage in a dominant role without our consent. By some set of circumstances, the exact details of which are beyond our current knowledge, our species evolved, and did so with the ability to imagine the future, engage in creative pursuits, and reach the self-awareness of sentience. We know ourselves as we are, and interact with the universe through our will. We have evolved to be thinking, reasoning creatures. There is no determinism to do with our condition, as Tolstoy would have us believe. We are simply as we find ourselves, and to reject our ability to will ourselves in reality is to reject the human. Hegel had it right when he said that history is the story of our own becoming. But as part of our ability to will, it is also possible to will ourselves into limitation, to place on our species some type of inescapable burden. Christianity settled for our sinfulness, Tolstoy settled for our particularity, Heidegger settled for our deathfulness, to name but a few prominent examples. To set a limit on our ability to will ourselves in reality is to declare a limit for our ability to better ourselves. I cannot help but ask why we do this. I cannot help but

imagine that there are things our species may do that are presently unimaginable, but still entirely within the realm of possibility. I am not willing to concede that all the suffering we are caused by ourselves, each other, and the conditions of reality as they are currently set is inevitable, inescapable, or even, of all the possible adjectives, good. To say that which leads to the suffering and pain of the human is good because of itself is to characterize all of history as the successful chronicle of human misery, and to set one's self against the human as willful. To call suffering and death good because of how they make us human is to condemn all those who follow us to the same fates as those who came before. It is to accept war, genocide, disease, suicide, and misery as that which not only does presently exist, but as that which should exist. What hubris! What pride, what arrogance, what callousness, to say that the suffering of all our species, as long as we should persist, is good, when we ourselves can never experience the suffering of those we would condemn.

To turn into suffering, to say that our deaths and trials in life are good, is not the supposed symbol of strength Tolstoy would have us believe. It is instead weakness, surrender, a failure of imagination and will. It is the cowardice of concession to that-as-we-are rather than the bravery to create a new existence. The concerns of the Heideggerians and others who advocate for human suffering are not of feasibility; such banal appeals to present practicality are weak, designed to blind us to the incredible progress our knowledge has gained in the last two and a half thousand years. For what reason may practicality be a true barrier to human progress? Such an assertion is a theism, a declaration of permanent, irreversible human limitation. And, like every other

assertion about human nature, the theistic response is a narrative in which the narrator has a particular interest. Those who encourage us to remain as we are, particular and deathful, fear to change our Being, our conditions as we exist in the universe. They believe that to be human is to be finite and mortal. Those parameters would indeed limit our species to particularity and death, and thus suffering. But if we are willing to instead characterize the human as that which is willful, then we have already demonstrated the truth we are trying to create. We are what we decide we are. To make ourselves into what we decide we are, we will need to engage in mastery over the universe. We thus challenge Tolstoy's determinism regarding universal law in domination over the human, regarding the human as deterministically particular in face of the universal, and part from him irrevocably. Tolstoy fears the Napoleon that causes destruction through action and will, while new historians subvert the threat of Napoleonic dominance through self-sacrifice. Action and change will occur for an ethical good, that is, the end of death and suffering and the attainment of universality, through love. While Tolstoy may be credited with attempting to encourage a path toward peace, and refusing to hold up military exploits and its associated suffering as was popular in history, his solution is nevertheless one of subjugation. Reaching our end will in all likelihood take an immense amount of time, and the process will be neither painless nor easy, but it nevertheless is a task that we must unite behind. To become the universe, to transform from beings that will ourselves in reality to a single being that both wills and is the universe, is the greatest state of being, the highest singularity. The end goal of the new history is one of singular atheism. Not only do new historians seek to eradicate the mythical gods worshipped in

human history for the sake of reason, new historians seek to eradicate any dominant force over the human, including death. The highest singularity is the ultimate becoming of the human as willful. If there is any god in this universe, it will be humanity.

But to attain the highest singularity, as previously illustrated, necessitates complete and total self-sacrifice. All individual humans must cast our individual consciousnesses into a greater entity. We thus cease to exist *as individuals*, but persist within a greater whole with which we are completely united, without division. Thus may Death be subverted; functionally, death is the absolute end of possibilities for Dasein and exit from the world, whereas self-sacrifice as described here is the choice of a single possibility in the world without reserve. Death is the annihilation of what is, while self-sacrifice is the transformation of the extant. We will of course lose all the charms of life that so many of us hang on to in order to avoid the suffering our particular existences bring. We will lose family, friends, all relationships as they are (hopeful bridges between distinct and separated entities). We will lose the experience of waking beside a loved one, of seeing a child's happy smile, of the memories associated with long friendships. We will lose the material comforts and simple pleasures we sprinkle into our days, the stylish clothes, video games, sweet foods and beloved possessions. We will lose the excitements and tensions of sexuality and physicality. We will lose all abstract art after we give up our selves, all those incredible expressions of individual genius in cinema, literature, music, and the visual arts. Self-consideration, interest in intellectual subjects, the type of writing which will belong to the new history, the inquiry I engage in here, all philosophical thought belonging to individuals, will also end. Inasmuch as the charms of

life are human but also particular, they will cease to be. It is natural to mourn their passing, as they are expressions of how we are now, often the greatest such expressions. They are indeed not to be given up lightly; without them, most of us would be mentally and emotionally bereft of positive experiences. But all those charms of life are particular, and must be given up on our journey to universality. Knowledge of their loss is important, but more so is our ability to let them go without resentment.

With regards to the issue of human influence on the world, there has been a universal history posited in recent years. In 2009, Dipesh Chakrabarty, an historian of postcolonial studies, published an article in *Critical Inquiry* titled, “The Climate of History: Four Theses.” In the article, Chakrabarty discusses the impact on history that global climate change is causing. There is no longer as clear a difference between natural history and human history, since humanity is actively shaping the natural environment on a global scale. As Chakrabarty notes, it has been proposed to refer to the current epoch of the Earth as the Anthropocene, in recognition of the massive impact humanity has had. But the Anthropocene is neither complimentary nor optimistic. The name is given in light of the negative consequences of human activity, most notable among them climate change. But interestingly enough, the Anthropocene also engenders a universal look at human history, at least in the context of the past, an effort mostly abandoned in the historical discipline. In Chakrabarty’s conclusion, he contrasts the Anthropocene and its universality with the optimistic universality of Hegel:

It is not a Hegelian universal arising dialectically out of the movement of history, or a universal of capital brought forth by the present crisis . . . Yet climate change poses for us a question of a human collectivity, an us, pointing to a figure of the

universal that escapes our capacity to experience the world. It is more like a universal that arises from a shared sense of a catastrophe. It calls for a global approach to politics without the myth of a global identity, for, unlike a Hegelian universal, it cannot subsume particularities. We may provisionally call it a “negative universal history.”¹¹³

A negative universal history is pessimistic, and must thus be subverted. The new history would do the same to recognize the negative impacts of human activity on the world as a negative universal history, but looks to future action to create a better world. The mythical global identity referred to in the article must be one we create. In order to create a universal future, we must be willing to recognize the mistakes of our past (indeed, they are the motivating element of the new history) without giving in to the pessimism that may so easily be engendered with a negative universalism.

In the arts, there are few better counter-arguments to a universal humanity than the 1995-96 Japanese television show, *Neon Genesis Evangelion*. On first sight a standard mecha anime in an apocalyptic future featuring young children fighting in giant robots against alien invaders known as Angels, the show demonstrates itself to be one of the most intense character dramas in television, filled with philosophical themes and motifs regarding the human condition. Amid incredible religious imagery and motifs from Freudian psychology, the somewhat obscure plot explores what human existence is, and comes to a determination for what it should be. The show is set in an apocalyptic future, in which giant aliens called Angels are invading our world with the intention of destroying humanity; the opposition is fronted by the organization NERV, and supported by the cabal SEELE. The main character, Shinji, is a lonely teenage boy recruited as a

¹¹³ Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses, *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 2 (2009): 222.

pilot for a biomechanical fighting robot, which are known as Evas. As the show progresses and more characters are introduced, including Shinji's father, Gendo, and Shinji's fellow pilot and object of his sexual attraction, Asuka Langley-Sōryu, among others, the struggles of each character become more and more the focus of the story. Each character is driven by some internal misery, a form of suffering that they cannot overcome. Shinji wants to feel the love of his father Gendo, who in turn was so broken by the death of his wife that he is incapable of giving Shinji the love a child deserves. Asuka found her mother's body after she committed suicide, and blames both her mother for leaving her and herself for not being able to keep her mother at her side. But as the show makes clear, the reason each person suffers is because they are all irreversibly lonely, completely isolated from each other. Episode 4 is named "Hedgehog's Dilemma," a reference to the work of philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer. The hedgehog's dilemma, as described by Schopenhauer (although he used porcupines) refers to the human need to provide each other comfort. As porcupines huddle together in winter to keep warm, they prick each other with their quills; after enough of this, they compromise by remaining a little apart. In the same way, when separate humans seek to comfort each other in their mental and emotional distress, they cannot but hurt each other as their differences collide.

The only character who seems to be at peace is the mysterious Kaworu Nagisa, a boy who becomes a pilot late in the show after Asuka becomes catatonic after a mental attack from an Angel. Kaworu immediately demonstrates his complete love for Shinji,

and expresses to Shinji his own understanding of the human condition. In episode 24, Kaworu notes Shinji's tendency towards social isolation:

Kaworu: "You are afraid of any kind of initial contact, aren't you? Are you that afraid of other people? I know that by keeping others at a distance, you avoid a betrayal of your trust. But while you may not be hurt that way, you mustn't forget that you must endure the loneliness. Man can never erase this sadness because all men are fundamentally alone . . . You know, pain is something that man must endure in his heart, and since the heart feels pain so easily, some believe life is pain. You are delicate, like glass; that is, your heart is.

Shinji: It is?

Kaworu: Yes, this is worth earning my empathy.

Shinji: Empathy?

Kaworu: I'm saying I love you."¹¹⁴

Kaworu urges Shinji to accept his own suffering and loneliness, to maintain what it means to be human in a static sense. Later in the episode, Kaworu reveals himself to be the final Angel, but allows Shinji to kill him out of love for Shinji and the human race.

Despite the death of the final Angel, the show does not end. The shadowy organization known as SEELE wish to create a forced evolution for humanity. They and their agents wish to unite all of humanity into a single entity, the process for which all the fighting had taken place. They refer to their goal as the Human Instrumentality Project; all humans would be united, leaving behind their individual bodies and identities and becoming a vast living sea known as the LCL Sea. By uniting all of humanity, SEELE wishes to end our suffering as individuals, believing that if we were not separate, then we

¹¹⁴ *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, episode 24, "The Final Messenger," directed by Hideaki Anno, aired March 13, 1996, on TV Tokyo.

could not hurt each other. The climax of the story is when Shinji is given the responsibility (through various plot mechanics) of choosing whether or not to force humanity's evolution in this manner, or leave humanity as composed of individuals. The final episode consists of Shinji's internal dialogue, mulling over his own suffering, the suffering of others, and why humans suffer at all. He eventually makes the decision that to evade suffering by forcing our evolution and abandoning our particularity is a demonstration of weakness, fear, and hatred, much like Heidegger. And like Tolstoy, he resigns our species to everlasting particularity. His reasoning, relying on the advice of Kaworu, is to justify suffering itself. Suffering may exist, but so too does love, of others and the self. Shinji says, "Maybe I could love myself. Maybe my life could have a greater value. That's right! I am no more or less than myself! I am me! I want to be myself! I want to continue existing in this world! My life is worth living here!"¹¹⁵ While Shinji's path to self-acceptance and love is moving, the show nevertheless affirms not only the particular, but specifically self-interest. Shinji makes the decision to keep humanity separate out of his own desires. Even SEELE engaged in the evolution toward humanity by force, without the consent and communal self-sacrifice of all humans. The show ends with Shinji surrounded by all the other individuals he knows inside his own mind, congratulating him on his journey to self-love. The music rises with hope and positivity, and the sky inside Shinji's imagination is clear and bright. The suffering that Shinji and Kaworu justify is nowhere to be seen.

¹¹⁵ *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, episode 26, "The Beast That Shouted Love at the Heart of the World," directed by Hideaki Anno, aired March 27, 1996, on TV Tokyo.

Many watchers were disappointed in the simplicity of the show's ending, and after a year the creators reimagined the ending as it took place in the world outside Shinji's mind in the movie *End of Evangelion*. As that movie ends, Shinji appears on the shore of the red LCL Sea under a night sky, having made his decision to remain an individual. Asuka is the first individual to leave the Sea, and lies next to him. Without dialogue or music, only the LCL Sea breaking on the beach behind them, while both characters stare wide-eyed, Shinji rolls over and begins to throttle Asuka. His breathing is shuddery, and his hands shake with effort. As he chokes her, she reaches up and gently caresses his face. He ceases throttling her, and begins to sob. The movie ends with Asuka, without inflection, saying, "How disgusting."¹¹⁶ No motivation for either Asuka's or Shinji's actions is given, but the scene serves as a microcosm for humanity as depicted in the story. Suffering, accompanied by love and forgiveness, will remain. The last scene of *End of Evangelion* better demonstrates the truth the story wants to impart to us than the last scene of *Neon Genesis Evangelion*. It provides a more honest and explicit depiction of what the story argues humanity should be; lonely, isolated, unexcused from suffering, but loved.

But for all that love is held up as the answer to humanity's problems, the story has a weak argument. It addresses the problem of suffering that is caused by other humans, often referred to as moral suffering, quite well. Love is indeed the best answer for individual beings. But what kind of love is it that Hideaki Anno's story advocates, but

¹¹⁶ Hideaki Anno, *End of Evangelion*, directed by Hideaki Anno (1997; Tokyo: Gainax, Production I.G/ING, 1998), Film.

the love of individuals? The story may very well satisfy us that through love and forgiveness, we can work through life by coming to peace with moral suffering, but the love between individuals will not help us overcome suffering, or bring us to a universality. More deeply extant than the suffering of individual humans in relation to each other, as is posed in *Evangelion*, is the suffering of that which is finite, of that which is faced with the end of possibilities. Tolstoy understands the suffering of the finite, and in like fashion to Anno can only see that love is the solution for enduring human existence. Tolstoy's broader sense of human suffering exists not only because of our individual beings; it exists because of self-awareness of particularity and death, which is the suffering that Heidegger wishes us to embrace as inevitable. Hideaki Anno's story fails to address the validity of this suffering in adequate fashion, but still attempts to negate the possibility of a universal humanity. Tolstoy wished for love as well, for peace and submission to natural law. But love in that form, love that is mere submission to what is, will not avail humanity from its suffering. The love that is needed to bring a universal humanity must be active and completely self-sacrificial; it must be love that is universal, all-encompassing, and transformative. Without such love at the core of the new history, we will fall to self-interest.

It may be noted that attaining a universal state of existence as described here is far beyond the type of universality defined by the likes of Hegel and Marx. It is admittedly in the realm of science fiction and religion in terms of present feasibility. But new historians look to the future; we seek action, influence, agency, and above all else enshrine the human ability to declare and create its own truth, its own existence. And

even aside from the general spirit of the argumentation heretofore presented, to unite humanity with the universe itself and attain complete mastery over it is the logical end of seeking the universal. While such a goal seems far-fetched at best, and laughable at worst, especially to we historians, whose tools to assist in reaching the universal will become useless as soon as individuals cease to exist, the efforts of science and technological development have already gained our species incredible developments. Our knowledge of physics has come so far in the last century and a half as to make physics in the nineteenth-century seem laughable. We have accomplished much to research the underlying structures of the laws of the universe. Though they still confound us, especially in the realm of quantum physics, we learn more and more, and are discovering how to control and manipulate reality in ever-more complex ways. Simulations of our own sentience and intelligence in the form of A.I. are becoming more and more similar to ourselves. In the near future, thanks to the medical sciences, robotics, computing, and artificial intelligence, we may very likely see the unification of human and computer, or human and machine. Genetic engineering is another avenue by which we may change the way we exist in the universe in the very near future, one which holds both promise and foreboding, as with all such avenues. From the most far-fetched to the already-on-our-doorstep, possibilities for changes to our being exist for us to choose or not. There are many, especially in the wake of industrialization, global capitalism, and massive climate change, who fear the potential humanity wields to shape the universe. There are some who would even halt our ability to progress, who would see the end of technological developments that would change our being in order to prevent

the destruction to the universe they see as inevitable. In some ways it is hard to blame those who only fear, those who are pessimistic about what humanity may do given the opportunity. Thousands of species have gone extinct or been significantly diminished because of human efforts and carelessness. Pessimism, combined with a submission to the natural laws which govern us, is the Tolstoyan message in *War and Peace*. But, of course, the only reason there can be so much fear is because there is so much potential for change in the human. And change is only what we make it, what we choose it to be through our own actions and the actions of those who follow us. Where there are huge, universe-changing potentialities for humanity to make mistakes and commit unforgiveable errors, there are equally universe-changing potentialities for humanity to get it right, and do things which create a universe better than the one we came into.

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