

The background is black with several thick, gold-colored lines. One vertical line is on the left side. Two diagonal lines cross the page from top-left to bottom-right. Another diagonal line crosses from top-right to bottom-left. The text is centered and overlaid on these lines.

DOCTOR STRANGE AND LEO TOLSTOY: BROTHERS IN NONVIOLENCE?

BY KONSTANTIN PAVLIOUTS

Doctor Strange and Leo Tolstoy: Brothers in Nonviolence?

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Meet Stephen Strange, egotistical neurosurgeon, his life based on wealth and fame, master of his fate. In the 2016 film *Doctor Strange*, Stephen invites fellow doctor Christine Palmer to a dinner of the Neurological Society, where he has been invited to speak. Christine demurs, telling him that his speaking engagements aren't about the audience or medicine, but only about him:

“Stephen. Everything is about you.” Similarly, in the 2007 animated movie *Doctor Strange and the Sorcerers Supreme*, Dr. Gina Atwater tells Strange, “I am sick of this hospital feeding your monster ego. It's time you start giving back!”

On this score, Strange was not that different from the Russian author and philosopher Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910). A rich and successful writer, who distinguished himself at military campaigns as an officer, Tolstoy had respect among his peers, was popular with women, and spent his life at balls and endless celebrations. Understandably, he was proud of his accomplishments and felt his successes were deserved and sufficient for a full life.

Strange and Tolstoy both experienced significant changes in mid-life, though, that affected their worldviews and led them to reconsider the meaning of life. For his part, Tolstoy developed a strong opposition to violence, even when used in resistance to evil. This would seem to condemn the actions of Strange as he battles mystical threats to the Earth. But maybe there is something unique about Doctor Strange's world that can avoid Tolstoy's condemnation.

Strange Transformations

The changes that Strange and Tolstoy experienced led to transformations in the ways they thought about themselves and their roles in the world. For Strange the turning point was his car accident, after which he lost his ability to perform surgery, thus also losing the way he defined himself and the way he achieved the fame and wealth. Strange quickly and radically changed the

way he looked at the meaning of this life after he traveled to Kamar-Taj and began his mystical training with the Ancient One.

Tolstoy had more of a continuous change throughout his life, but by age fifty he had come to realize that “one can only live while one is intoxicated with life; as soon as one is sober it is impossible not to see that it is all a mere fraud and a stupid fraud!”¹ He clearly realized the futility of continuing to live a vapid life seeking glory and wealth: “I had as it were lived, lived, and walked, walked, till I had come to a precipice and saw clearly that there was nothing ahead of me but destruction.”² Eventually, every person will cease to exist, so any common, physical act of living has no meaning at all: “sickness and death will come (they had come already) to those I love or to me; nothing will remain but stench and worms.”³

Tolstoy clearly described the state of Strange’s mind after the accident when he wrote:

I now no longer care for the things that I had prized, and I have begun to desire things concerning which I had formerly been indifferent. Like a man who, going out on business, on his way suddenly becomes convinced of the futility of that business and turns back; and all that stood to the right now stands to the left, and all that was to the left is now to the right.⁴

However, Strange needed more than just a horrific car accident to reveal the transcendental nature of the world beyond the physical. While he was seeking Western medical treatment, he remained haughty and arrogant with people, and even after his introduction to the Ancient One these attitudes were on display. In the film the Ancient One tells Strange that “arrogance and fear still keep you from learning the simplest and most significant lesson of all: it’s not about you,” and Mordo recommends that he “forget everything you think you know.” It seems Tolstoy and the Ancient One, though from two very different worlds, would have the same lessons for Stephen Strange to help him comprehend the final, absolute meaning of life.

Tolstoy relates an Eastern fable in his autobiographical *Confession*: a traveler dives into a dry well to hide from a tiger. He discovers, however, that a hungry dragon lives at the bottom of the well. So he clings to a branch growing out of a crack in the wall—but there are two mice gnawing at the root of the branch. In the midst of all this danger, the man noticed honey dripping down from a beehive on the branch, and the honey was so delicious he shook the branch to get more, endangering his life even further. Tolstoy wrote that

I too clung to the twig of life, knowing that the dragon of death was inevitably awaiting me, ready to tear me to pieces; and I could not understand why I had fallen into such torment. I tried to lick the honey which formerly consoled me, but the honey no longer gave me pleasure.⁵

Stephen Strange is in the same situation, “licking the honey” of Western medicine in a vain and futile attempt to heal his hands in order to continue his egoistic and glorious life. Tolstoy used this fable to show that people, including himself, need to find a deeper sense of reality and meaning, each in his or her own way. Thankfully, Strange starts to do this in Kamar-Taj.

The Evil of Violence

A central focus of Tolstoy’s newfound philosophy is the evil of the violence practiced by humans throughout history. As he sees it, evil destroys the meaning of life itself: “to understand the meaning of life it is necessary first that life should not be meaningless and evil.”⁶ While he was skeptical of life centered on material pursuits, Tolstoy realized the importance of survival, which implies the evil of causing harm or death:

Thus, it is clear that life for oneself can never have any meaning. If there is a rational life, it must be some other kind of life; it must be one, the purpose of which does not consist

in securing one's own future. To live rationally, we must live so that death cannot destroy our life.⁷

In this spirit, Tolstoy regards violence as evil. In the broadest sense, violence makes others act against their will, and “consists in forcing others, by threats of suffering or death, to do what they refuse to do.”⁸

Naturally, then, the worst manifestation of violence is killing because it denies the sacred status of every human life. This includes violence as practiced by the state as well. In “Memoirs of a Soldier's Court-Martial,” included in his diaries from 1908, Tolstoy writes that the death penalty is an act that is impossible if you truly think about what it means, but is possible only if done mindlessly or mechanically, such as by a soulless state mechanism. This extends to state violence against other nations and peoples:

Not a single general, not a single soldier, would kill hundreds of Turks or Germans, and devastate their villages—no, not one of them would consent to wound a single man, were it not in war, and in obedience to discipline and the oath of allegiance. Cruelty is only exercised (thanks to our complicated social machinery) when it can be so divided among a number that none shall bear the sole responsibility, or recognize how unnatural all cruelty is.⁹

Therefore, every person should adopt a position of nonresistance to evil that rejects all violence against the will of others. “Do you not see that if you claim and exercise the right to resist by an act of violence what you regard as evil,” Tolstoy asked, “every other man will insist upon his right to resist in the same way what he regards as evil, and the world will continue to be filled with violence? It is your duty to show that there is a better way.”¹⁰

Evil in this World and Others

Tolstoy's profound and heartfelt views concerning evil and violence lead to more essential questions. What is the nature of evil? What are the foundations of violence? And where is the metaphysical "root" of evil in the world? Happily for us, the world of Doctor Strange gives a way to look at these questions from another angle.

In the 2016 film, the Ancient One sends Strange on a mental journey across numerous dimensions of the multiverse, and explains that there are "dark places where powers older than time lie ravenous... and waiting. Who are you in this vast multiverse, Doctor Strange?" But these worlds and dimensions are not available to most men; they are metaphysical by nature, and by extension, so is the evil they produce. Over time, Strange will become a sorcerer-defender of his world from this supernatural evil. As Wong tells him, "While heroes like the Avengers protect the world from physical dangers, we sorcerers safeguard it against more mystical threats." Like all the sorcerers, Strange acquires and develops the power to fight against "negativistic, nihilistic force."¹¹

Tolstoy maintained that metaphysical evil is much more dreadful than physical acts of violence. In one of his later articles, he wrote mainly of state politics, but we can easily extend this to a metaphysical sphere of reality:

In general, the government has allowed killing as a means of obtaining its ends. As a result, miserable people who have been perverted by that example now consider all crimes, robbery, theft, lies, tortures, and murders to be quite natural deeds, proper to a man. Yes! Terrible as the deeds are themselves, the moral, spiritual, unseen evil they produce is incomparably more terrible.¹²

Ideally, eliminating the metaphysical "root" of evil and violence would free humankind from the force of violence.

The metaphysical nature of evil is reflected in the amount of time Doctor Strange spends in such realms as the Dream Dimension, fighting the darkness that tries to take over human minds and souls. Bending people to evil's will is possible through control of the mind and, through that, the soul, as we see in the case of mind-controlled children in the animated film. In the comics, personifications of evil such as Dormammu and Satannish the Supreme seek to conquer human souls. As another evil being Xandu says, "Silence! When Xandu commands, others obey! My will is your will! Thus speaks Xandu!"¹³ In many of these cases, Strange leaves his physical body behind to engage in battle in his astral form against shapeless metaphysical evil.

Tolstoy dramatizes the conflict between good and evil with the metaphor of light and dark, writing that "we shall see in it one phase of the awful struggle between good and evil, light and darkness."¹⁴ In Strange's world, the sorcerers' mission is to use "the light" of goodness to stop the dark or black magic from destroying the world. As Strange says in one of his mystic incantations, "Now let the rising tide of power / From birth of stars to final doom / Reveal the place, the form, the hour / Where light's salvation forth may bloom / Where seen and unseen twine and blend—and darkness end!"¹⁵

Evil comes not only in the form of creatures from the other worlds, but also in the form of men who are willing to trade their souls to demons to get power to control other people's wills. In the film it is the "fallen" sorcerer Kaecilius, and in the comics it is Mordo, who work with the dread Dormammu to get what they want while sacrificing part of their world to the Dark Dimension. Both rejected their mission as sorcerers to defend the world from evil and instead became the part of evil themselves. As Strange tells Kaecilius, "Look at your face. Dormammu made you a murderer. Just how good can his kingdom be?"

Tolstoy wrote that society itself is violent because of people who trade their freedom and morality for power: "What supports the present order of society is the selfishness and stupefaction of the people, who sell their freedom and honor for insignificant material

advantages.”¹⁶ Even though the types of power are different—metaphysical and mystical in Strange’s world and political and social in Tolstoy’s and ours—the principle is the same. And when people who choose evil band together, evil becomes concentrated, not unlike the metaphysical Dark Dimension in the world of Doctor Strange. As Tolstoy wrote, “Men linked together by deception form, we might say, a compact body. In the compactness of this body lies all the evil of the world.”¹⁷

No Violence Means *No Violence!*

Tolstoy goes even further, arguing that we should not use violence to fight evil because every act of violence creates, multiplies, and strengthens evil: “‘Do not resist evil’ means never to resist evil, i.e., never offer violence to anyone.”¹⁸ It is necessary to end violence in all its forms, for only then we can rid our souls of evil. Tolstoy once again turns to social reality as an example of this metaphysical conclusion, citing

the erroneous idea that my welfare can be secured by defending my property and myself against others. I now know that the greater part of the evil men suffer from arises from this. Instead of working for others, each tries to work as little as possible, and forcibly makes others work for him. And on recalling to mind all the evil done by others and myself, I see that it proceeded, for the most part, from our considering it possible to secure and better our conditions by violence.¹⁹

As we know, Doctor Strange trained to become a master of the mystical arts to fight evil, even if he relied more on metaphysical or magical tools than physical ones. In the animated film, Mordo asked Strange if he had ever held a blade, to which the former neurosurgeon answered, “To save lives, yes. But not to take them.” In his physical form he was generally nonviolent, but that changed on the astral plane, where he didn’t fight evil creatures physically, but rather

eliminated them metaphysically, by destroying their essence or banishing them to other dimensions.²⁰ Often in the comics, Strange and other sorcerers repeat the phrase “We shall have no violence here.”²¹ In the animated film, Wong says to Mordo that they are sorcerers, not warriors, to which Mordo replies, “Yet, we fight a war.” They are both correct: it is a war, but a metaphysical war against evil that can be waged only by sorcerers.

Tolstoy’s position on nonviolent resistance was successfully adapted in the 20th century by Mahatma Gandhi in his campaign for Indian independence from Britain. Some philosophers, such as the great Russian thinker Nikolai Berdyaev (1874-1948), called Tolstoy’s philosophy “religious anarchism.”²² This label fits because in his later works Tolstoy attacks state and private property as the primary sources of evil in the world:

All that I had formerly prized – such things as riches, property, honor, and self-dignity – have grown worthless in my eyes... I dare not use violence of any kind against my fellow-creatures... nor can I now take part in any act of authority, the purpose of which is to protect men’s property by violence. I can neither be a judge, nor take part in judging and condemning.²³

Tolstoy expressed the practical side of his “anarchism” in calls to stop paying taxes, serving in the army, or working in every part of state administration. As he wrote, “Do not resist the evil-doer and take no part in doing so, either in the violent deeds of the administration, in the law courts, in the collection of taxes, or above all in soldiering, and no one in the world will be able to enslave you.”²⁴ However, we can’t understand this specific kind of anarchism without his fundamental metaphysical beliefs about the real essence of evil that appears in human souls.

But What about Doctor Strange...?

Nevertheless, violent resistance to evil, at least in a mystical or metaphysical sense, is regarded as necessary in Doctor Strange's world. What would Tolstoy have thought about Strange's situation in which evil could be defeated only by the use of magic force? Could he have accepted this idea, or was it simply inconsistent with his teaching?

The key is to recognize that Tolstoy protested only against the violence of man against man. So, what if the root of evil lies in some other form of reality? Might Tolstoy find it acceptable to use violence against acts of personified metaphysical evil to save humankind?

We can find a clue in a conversation between Tolstoy and the American journalist and explorer George Kennan (1845-1924), in which Tolstoy challenged the American policy of "forbidding the Chinese immigration" as a betrayal of their principles of freedom.

KENNAN: Suppose the Chinese should come to California at the rate of a hundred thousand a year; they would simply crush our civilization on the pacific coast.

TOLSTOY: Well, what of it? The Chinese have as much right there as you have.

KENNAN: But would you not allow a people to protect itself against that sort of alien invasion?

TOLSTOY: Why alien? Why do you make a distinction between foreigners and countrymen? To me all men are brothers, no matter whether they are Russians or Mexicans, Americans or Chinese.²⁵

From this, we clearly see that Tolstoy forbids violence against people, regardless of nationality.

Kennan then asked Tolstoy what he would do if a criminal attacks somebody. Tolstoy answered first in the context of his nonviolent philosophy, but then made an analogy with another vital form: an animal. Kennan wrote:

I asked him the direct question whether he would kill a highwayman who was about to murder an innocent traveler, provided there were no other way to save the traveler's life. He replied, "If I should see a bear about to kill a peasant in the forest, I would sink an axe in the bear's head; but I would not kill a man who was about to do the same thing."²⁶

If Tolstoy would kill a bear to save human's life, perhaps he would endorse Strange's use of magic violence against the dread Dormammu—especially considering that the bear is not morally responsible for his actions but Dormammu certainly is.²⁷ In his opposition to the evil of violence, Tolstoy was primarily concerned with the souls of humans, not other beings—and certainly not evil incarnate!

Leo Tolstoy, Sorcerer-Defender Supreme

Both Stephen Strange and Leo Tolstoy suppose that evil and violence are the main threat to humankind. In addition, both believe that evil and violence have metaphysical essence, and they regard violence against humans as unacceptable. They differ mainly in their methods and means of nonviolent resistance: Tolstoy chooses moral, social and political methods, while Strange uses magical methods against metaphysical evil. If Tolstoy were in the world of Doctor Strange, he might open the sacred Book of Vishanti, don the Eye of Agamotto, and become a sorcerer-defender of our planet from demonic evil. In multiple realities, everything is possible!

¹ Leo Tolstoy, *A Confession* (1882), trans. Louise and Aylmer Maude, chapter 4, available at [https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/A_Confession_\(Maudes_translation\)](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/A_Confession_(Maudes_translation)).

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Leo Tolstoy, *What I Believe* (1886), trans. Constantine Popoff, introduction., available at [https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/What_I_Believe_\(Tolstoy\)](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/What_I_Believe_(Tolstoy)).

⁵ Tolstoy, *Confession*, chapter 4.

⁶ Ibid., chapter 11.

⁷ Tolstoy, *What I Believe*, chapter 8.

⁸ Leo Tolstoy, *The Law of Love and The Law of Violence* (1908), trans. Mary Koutouzow Tolstoy, chapter 3, available at http://www.nonresistance.org/docs_pdf/Tolstoy/Law_of_Love.pdf.

⁹ Tolstoy, *What I Believe*, chapter 4.

¹⁰ George Kennan, “A Visit to Count Tolstoi,” *The Century Magazine*, June 1887, pp. 252-265, at p. 259, available at <https://www.unz.org/Pub/Century-1887jun-00252>.

¹¹ *Doctor Strange*, vol. 1, #175 (December 1968), collected in *Essential Doctor Strange Vol. 2* (2007).

¹² Leo Tolstoy, “I Cannot Be Silent” (1908), available at https://www.nonresistance.org/docs_pdf/Tolstoy/I_Cannot_Be_Silent.pdf.

¹³ *Amazing Spider-Man Annual*, vol. 1, #2 (October 1965), “The Wondrous World of Dr. Strange,” reprinted in *Doctor Strange*, vol. 1, #179 (April 1969) and collected in *Marvel Masterworks: Doctor Strange, Vol. 1* (2003) and *Spider-Man/Doctor Strange: The Way to Dusty Death* (2017).

¹⁴ Tolstoy, *What I Believe*, chapter 5.

¹⁵ *Doctor Strange, Sorcerer Supreme* #3 (March 1989), collected in *Doctor Strange, Sorcerer Supreme Omnibus Vol. 1* (2017).

¹⁶ Leo Tolstoy, “Thou Shalt Not Kill” (1900), available at http://www.nonresistance.org/docs_pdf/Tolstoy/Thou_Shalt_Not_Kill.pdf.

¹⁷ Tolstoy, *What I Believe*, chapter 12.

¹⁸ Ibid., chapter 2.

¹⁹ Ibid., chapter 12.

²⁰ For more on Stephen Strange’s limited and restrained use of physical violence, see the chapter in this volume by Wright and Zehr.

²¹ *Defenders*, vol. 1, #27 (September 1975), collected in *Essential Defenders Vol. 2* (2006).

²² Nicolas Berdyaev, *The Russian Idea* (New York: Macmillan, 1948).

²³ Tolstoy, *What I Believe*, chapter 12.

²⁴ Leo Tolstoy, “A Letter to a Hindu” (1908), available at <http://www.online-literature.com/tolstoy/2733/>.

²⁵ Adapted from George Kennan, “A Visit to Count Tolstoi,” p. 263.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 256.

²⁷ For more on whether Dormammu is truly evil, see the chapter by ???.

Pavliouts, Konstantin. *Doctor Strange and Leo Tolstoy: Brothers in Nonviolence?* // *Doctor Strange and Philosophy*, Wiley Blackwell, 2018, pp. 228-237