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# *Infecting, Simulating, Judging: Tolstoy's Search for an Aesthetic Standard*

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Tolstoy's thoughts on aesthetics had gestated for fifteen years before he was able to set them down in his treatise *What is Art?* Even as he prepared the work for publication, Tolstoy worried that parts of his aesthetic worldview were still not fully formed.<sup>1</sup> But one desideratum had long been clear to him: he insisted upon the need for an absolute, non-arbitrary standard by which to judge aesthetic value. Tolstoy expressed this thought in a letter to his children, written while he prepared his *Preface to the Works of Maupassant*:

[Maupassant] himself says, that the aim of art is to *faire quelque chose de beau*. But *beau* is *une convention humaine*, i.e. whatever is somewhere considered *beau*, is *beau*. And everyone thinks thus: the Repins, the Kasatkins, the Chekhovs. When in fact, it is necessary to demonstrate *what* is beautiful in essence (*istinno prekras-*

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<sup>1</sup> L. N. Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 90 vols. (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo "Khudozhestvennaia literatura," 1928–58), 70:124, 1897. Hereafter PSS. I use the Alymer Maude translation of *What is Art?* and the V. Tchertkoff translation of *Guy de Maupassant*. I depart from these translations only in rendering the word *vydumanno*, not as "artificial" but, more literally, as "thought up." All other translations are mine, unless noted otherwise.

*noe*) and *what* is conventional (*uslovnnoe*). How many times have I returned to this matter, and still I'm unable to express it clearly.<sup>2</sup>

Tolstoy admits that he cannot yet articulate what separates truly excellent art from works merely consecrated by convention. Nonetheless, he asserts that such a distinction must be made, and he returns to this problem in his 1897 treatise on art.

Tolstoy's dramatic denunciations of the most beloved masterpieces of Western culture, including his own works, undoubtedly fueled interest in *What is Art?* As Caryl Emerson observes, "Tolstoy condemned far more, and far more damningly, than the nihilists." Critics were thus left to consider what led Tolstoy to the radical opinions put forth in his treatise.<sup>3</sup> Much of the previous scholarship on *What is Art?* has examined the criteria Tolstoy uses to judge works of art. In this article, in contrast, I interrogate his argument for the very possibility of aesthetic judgment at all. On what grounds does he claim that one artwork ought to please everyone more than another? I argue that many of the paradoxes and contradictions of Tolstoy's aesthetic worldview grow out of his attempt to establish a non-arbitrary, universal aesthetic standard. By identifying the aesthetic problems Tolstoy hopes to resolve and explicating the logic of his arguments, I intend to show that his writing on art can be regarded as a defense—however successful—of the autonomy and irreducibility of aesthetic judgment. There is an affinity here between the aesthetics of Tolstoy and Kant. Both recognize the profound connection between the aesthetic and the ethical without reducing one to the other. But each seeks to preserve the autonomy of aesthetic judgment precisely so that it may inform moral judgment.

Tolstoy begins his treatise on art by asserting the need for an objective aesthetic standard. His own professed preference of peasant song to Wagner or Beethoven may have preceded the formulation of his aesthetics in *What is Art?* But in the scheme of the treatise, Tolstoy's definition of art as well as the aesthetic hierarchy he puts forward follow from this initial mandate. Society should not continue to expend the immense sums of money and labor devoted to artistic pursuits without first evaluating the worthiness of the cause, he argues. Tolstoy details the sacrifices undertaken for art's sake, highlighting the injustice he perceives in dedicating the efforts of many to the enjoyment of a few. He suggests that the elucidation of a

<sup>2</sup> PSS, 67:60, 1894. Original emphasis.

<sup>3</sup> Caryl Emerson, "Tolstoy's Aesthetics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Tolstoy*, ed. Donna Tussing Orwin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 243.

universal aesthetic standard would help to make artistic labor more equitable. And whether or not he is correct to think so, this notion makes the question of aesthetic judgment all the more urgent for Tolstoy:

[It] is necessary for a society in which works of art arise and are supported, to find out whether all that professes to be art is really art, whether (as is presupposed in our society) all that which is art is good, and whether it is important and worth those sacrifices which it necessitates.<sup>4</sup>

Tolstoy also hints at a personal stake in establishing a standard by which to distinguish excellent art: "It is still more necessary for every conscientious artist to know [what good art is], that he may be sure that all he does has a valid meaning."<sup>5</sup> In other words, an artist must evaluate his own work by referring to a universal aesthetic standard.

Tolstoy's extensive reading on the subject of aesthetics familiarized him with the debate surrounding aesthetic judgment and the question of taste. Like many aestheticians before him, Tolstoy had to confront two seemingly contradictory strands of everyday aesthetic discourse. The first, expressed by the proverb *de gustibus non est disputandum*, holds that there are no laws or principles that govern our preferences. The second states that our aesthetic judgments are genuine judgments, and not simply expressions of a personal sentiment. When we pronounce an aesthetic judgment we intend to make a claim about the thing itself, to assert that everyone *ought* to feel about it as we do. Mary Mothersill contends that Kant was the first to present this opposition in formal philosophical terms with his "Antinomy of Taste."<sup>6</sup>

Although he may have had only secondhand knowledge of Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, Tolstoy was well acquainted with the general problem that Kant formulated in the "Antinomy of Taste." The nature of aesthetic judgment is a centerpiece of William Knight's *The Philosophy of the Beautiful*, which Tolstoy often cites in his treatise. Initially, Knight acknowledges the variability of aesthetic preferences: "That tastes differ, and must do so, has become a proverb." Ultimately, however, he posits that tastes are not so different "as to negative [*sic*] the existence of a standard of taste."<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Leo N. Tolstoy, *What is Art?* trans. Alymer Maude (Indianapolis: Liberal Arts Press, 1960), 16. Hereafter WIA.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Mary Mothersill, *Beauty Restored* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 209.

<sup>7</sup> William Knight, *The Philosophy of the Beautiful, Being a Contribution to its Theory and to a Discussion of the Arts*, vol. 2 (London: Murray, 1893), 34.

Knight defends the existence of a universal standard, and argues that as civilization reaches the masses, and they become educated, a consensus of taste will emerge. Needless to say, this answer could not satisfy the author of *Who Should Learn to Write from Whom: The Peasant Children from Us or We from the Peasant Children?*

Unlike Knight, Tolstoy rejects the possibility that taste can be anything but subjective. He conflates the empirical claim of laws of taste, which would predict and explain what gives pleasure, with the normative claim of principles of taste, which would justify an aesthetic judgment. It is the normative claim he means to dispute with his argument that judgments based on pleasure are arbitrary because they are founded on social conventions. Ignoring this distinction, however, Tolstoy dismisses the notion of laws of taste as well: “[A]ll attempts to define what taste is must lead to nothing, as the reader may see both from the history of aesthetics and experimentally. There is and can be no explanation of why one thing pleases one man and displeases another, or vice versa.”<sup>8</sup> Tolstoy claims that since aestheticians have not discovered any laws about what pleases everyone, the pleasure of some will be valued above the pleasure of others. “[T]his science of aesthetics,” Tolstoy writes, “consists in first acknowledging a certain set of productions to be art (because they please us), and then framing such a theory of art that all those productions which please a certain circle of people should fit into it.”<sup>9</sup> We do not build a canon according to aesthetic laws, but rather come up with theories to justify the pleasures of a certain select group, he argues. And if we judge aesthetic quality according to the opinions of critics or precedents set by a canon, we rely on the authority of arbitrary social conventions that favor the tastes of the elite. For Tolstoy, these “experts” (*avtoritety*) only muddle the distinction between real and false art. “Nothing so confuses the concepts of art as the recognition of authority,” Tolstoy writes.<sup>10</sup> The education of taste, on Tolstoy’s view, is nothing but the imposition of the pleasures of the elite on the masses.

All extant aesthetic systems, Tolstoy argues, ultimately identify art with pleasure. He painstakingly catalogues the ideas of prominent German, English, and French aestheticians in order to show that each notion of art boils down to “the same subjective definition . . . that art is that which makes beauty manifest, and beauty is that which pleases (without exciting

<sup>8</sup> WIA, 44.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> PSS, 53:124, 1896.

desire).”<sup>11</sup> Tolstoy contends that the “insufficiency and instability” of a subjective definition based on beauty has led aestheticians to ask why something pleases, consequently “[converting] the discussion on beauty into a question concerning taste.”<sup>12</sup> He assumes that since beauty is understood as a kind of pleasure, it must be merely subjective and cannot be the foundation of a normative claim regarding aesthetic merit.

Tolstoy overlooks the fact that Kant defines beauty as a special kind of pleasure, one that can indeed serve as the foundation for a claim to universal agreement. He thus fails to see a crucial affinity between Kant’s attempt to distinguish the Beautiful from the Agreeable and the Good, and his own attempt to characterize aesthetic experience. Like Kant, Tolstoy differentiates the effects of art both from the banal excitation of the senses (the kind that results from a tasty meal, for example) and from gladness at the utility or fitness of an object (“Art . . . is bounded on one side by the practically useful,” he writes).<sup>13</sup> Tolstoy resembles Kant in what Allen Wood describes as Kant’s endeavor to “transcend the opposition between ‘rationalism’ and ‘empiricism’” in his aesthetics.<sup>14</sup> According to Wood, Kant rejects rationalist aesthetics because “it locates the distinctively subjective and non-conceptual character of beauty only in the mode of its apprehension, whereas these features belong to the nature of beauty itself.” But Kant is no more satisfied with empiricist aesthetics, which cannot account for the normative aspect of aesthetic judgments.<sup>15</sup> Tolstoy similarly seeks to navigate between what he calls the “metaphysical” definition of beauty—one that would ultimately equate aesthetic merit with the Good, Absolute Reason, God—and an “experimental definition” that relegates the question of aesthetic value to the purely subjective realm. Tolstoy calls the first definition “fantastic” and “founded on nothing.”<sup>16</sup> And the second definition does not suit him because it affirms that aesthetic judgments cannot be universalized.

Tolstoy proposes that the seemingly contradictory aspects of aesthetic judgment—the subjective and the normative—can in fact be reconciled if we stop identifying art with the pleasure produced by beauty. His solution is to recast art as the communication of a feeling. Successful art, Tolstoy contends, is an exchange in which the feeling of the artist “infects” the

<sup>11</sup> WIA, 43–44.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>14</sup> Allen W. Wood, *Kant* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2004), 154.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> WIA, 42.

appreciator, who re-experiences this feeling. Tastes may differ, but if an artwork is infectious we can still claim that others ought to acknowledge its aesthetic merit. Such a solution, however, raises new questions: Can the success of an “infection” be judged objectively? How does this infection model of art help Tolstoy in his pursuit of a non-arbitrary standard of aesthetic value? In order to argue that the “infectiousness” of an artwork can be judged objectively, Tolstoy must posit a universal human nature, making the case that if we apprehend a work of art intuitively, purging our response of cogitation, we will all experience the very same feeling: the feeling the artist experienced and wished to express. The feeling produced by the artwork is therefore something that can be universally shared, and one can thus make a normative claim that others *ought* to share one’s own feeling about the artwork.

Having identified Tolstoy’s point of departure—the problem his definition of art as infection intends to resolve—the rest of this article will aim to elucidate the reasons Tolstoy believed he had found an adequate solution, to present some challenges to his aesthetic worldview, and to draw out its consequences.

### ART AS SOCIAL INTERCOURSE

The fact that Tolstoy thought we could develop an objective aesthetic standard only if we reject a definition of art based on beauty helps to explain one of the most controversial and perplexing elements of *What is Art?*: Tolstoy’s seemingly negligent treatment of craft. Emerson notes that Tolstoy “does not address in any detail the rigors of the craft or the perfections of the artifact,” focusing instead on “the action and effects of art, thereby defining art not by what it is but by what it does, or should do.” She adds that examining art under the rubric of “expression of emotion” is not uncommon to Western aesthetics.<sup>17</sup> But unlike other aestheticians, Tolstoy defines art in terms of affective communication not only to analyze art’s function, but also to address the question of aesthetic judgment. As he says toward the end of *What is Art?*, “All that I have written I have written with the sole purpose of finding a clear and reasonable criterion by which to judge the merits of works of art.”<sup>18</sup> Tolstoy does not simply neglect the artifact to focus on other aspects of the aesthetic experience; rather, he

<sup>17</sup> Emerson, “Tolstoy’s Aesthetics,” 243.

<sup>18</sup> WIA, 157.

argues that if we hope to arrive at a non-arbitrary aesthetic standard that does not rely on unjust social conventions perpetuated by the elite, we cannot separate the intention and feeling of the author from the standard by which we judge the excellence of an artifact.

According to Tolstoy, art is “one of the means of intercourse between man and man”: he locates the function of art in the realm of affective exchange. Ordinary speech conveys “thoughts and experiences,” while art transmits “feelings” and enables one man to adopt another’s “state of mind.”<sup>19</sup> Gary Jahn argues convincingly that feeling (*chuvstvo*) for Tolstoy includes not only “basic” emotions (sorrow, happiness, anger) but also “general physiological conditions: haleness, being in pain,” and “general attitudes of mind: decisiveness, amazement, respect, contentment.”<sup>20</sup> Tolstoy’s notion of feeling also appears to include beliefs (i.e. the belief in the brotherhood of man). I suggest that the broad term “mental state” most closely captures what Tolstoy means by *chuvstvo*.

Tolstoy contends that affective communication, conducted through art, gives such insight into others as could not be gleaned from ordinary conversation. “The chief purpose of art,” he writes in his diary, “is to express the truth about a person’s soul, to express such secrets as cannot be expressed by a simple word.”<sup>21</sup> Tolstoy likens affective communication to “infection” (*zarazhenie*), and claims that people are always engaged in this kind of exchange. We perceive and are infected by the mirth, sadness, and pain of others. But crucial to art is the capacity of man to “infect” another not passively and indirectly but deliberately, through a representation of a particular feeling.

Tolstoy’s emphasis on affect, and the immediacy implied by the term “infection,” seem at odds with his claim that communication through art is in fact purposive. It is perhaps due to this apparent contradiction that scholars have disagreed on the question of intention in Tolstoy’s aesthetics. Some scholars acknowledge a purposive aspect; Emerson, for example, emphasizes that infection, for Tolstoy, “is a craft.”<sup>22</sup> Others (Michael Denner, Richard Gustafson) insist that a lack of intention, on Tolstoy’s view, is a mark of true art.<sup>23</sup> But Tolstoy does assert that the artist infects his audi-

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 49–50.

<sup>20</sup> Gary R. Jahn, “The Aesthetic Theory of Leo Tolstoy’s *What Is Art?*” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 34 (1975): 62.

<sup>21</sup> PSS, 53:94, 1896.

<sup>22</sup> Emerson, “Tolstoy’s Aesthetics,” 239.

<sup>23</sup> Michael A. Denner, “Accidental Art: Tolstoy’s Poetics of Unintentionality,” *Philosophy and Literature* 27 (2003): 292; Richard F. Gustafson, *Leo Tolstoy: Resident and Stranger* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 373.



ence by *intentionally* creating an artifact to convey his mental state: “If a man infects another or others directly, immediately, by his appearance or by the sounds he gives vent to at the very time he experiences the feeling . . . that does not amount to art.”<sup>24</sup> Art is not contagious as a yawn is contagious, nor does the immediate outward expression of sorrow, pain, happiness constitute art. According to Tolstoy, “Art begins when one person, *with the object of joining another or others to himself in one and the same feeling*, expresses that feeling by certain external indications.”<sup>25</sup> These “external indications” are the formal aspects of the artwork (movements, lines, colors, sounds), which must be selected and composed in such a way as to enable the artist to trigger the experience of his original mental state once again in himself and in others. Art is not simply the transmission of feeling; it is the recreation of feeling through such formal elements as correspond precisely to a particular mental state. Thus the artifact is by no means irrelevant to Tolstoy’s conception of art, but its value depends not on its own attributes (its outward beauty, for example) but rather on how well it evokes the specific mental state that the artist wishes to convey.

Subordinating the artifact to the intentional state of the artist allows Tolstoy to divorce the question of aesthetic merit from the question of taste. The form of an artwork, according to Tolstoy, must always be motivated by the artist’s need to transmit his particular mental state with the greatest possible precision. If form is not founded on the author’s sense of this necessity, arbitrary artistic conventions will inevitably govern form. Similarly, if we base our judgments on form as *independent* from the author’s feeling, we will rely on conventions established by the tastes of those in power instead of qualities innate to the work itself. N.F. Filippova examines Tolstoy’s hostility to “arbitrary” formal conventions, particularly those of poetry and opera, and argues that whenever pressed to explain his disapprobation of either he reverts to “socially oriented” rhetoric.<sup>26</sup> Tolstoy believes poetry is at its best when its formal elements become “imperceptible,” Filippova argues, citing his approval of Pushkin: “You do not feel the poem in Pushkin; despite the fact that he has rhyme and meter, you feel that it could not have been said otherwise.”<sup>27</sup> Tolstoy’s comment deserves consideration not because it sheds light on Pushkin—the poet was not concerned primarily with private expression, and rhyme and meter were not

<sup>24</sup> WIA, 50.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. My emphasis.

<sup>26</sup> N. F. Filippova, “Voprosy uslovnosti iskusstva v ponimanii Tolstogo,” *Iasnopolianskii sbornik* (Tula: Tul’skoe Knizhnoe izdatel’stvo, 1972), 197.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 192.

incidental to his work—but because it reveals an important aspect of Tolstoy's own aesthetic worldview. Tolstoy regards an evaluative standard based solely on an artwork's internal coherence (the correspondence of form to feeling), and not on its relation to other aesthetic objects or experiences, as the way to ensure that neither artistic production nor aesthetic judgment relies on conventions.

Since form acquires the secondary role of a conduit for feeling in Tolstoy's scheme, he can conclude that the artist and the audience always attend to each other rather than to the artwork itself. In his essay on *Maupassant*, Tolstoy describes a reading experience as an interview:

In reality, when we read or examine the artwork of a new author, the fundamental questions which arise in our mind are always of this kind: "Well, what sort of man are you? What distinguishes you from all the people I know, and what information can you give me, as to how we must look upon our life." Whatever the artist depicts, whether it be saints or robbers, kings or lackeys, we seek and see only the soul of the artist himself.<sup>28</sup>

We read to access the soul of the author, Tolstoy claims. The author's inventions are important not in content, but only in their capacity to stimulate in the audience the mental state experienced by the author. It is now apparent how Tolstoy arrives at such an account of our aesthetic experience. But can we really accept that when we look at sculpture, read poetry, or listen to music, we attend only to the author's feeling and not to formal features like texture, meter, or tone? As if to preempt objections to his unorthodox argument, Tolstoy adds that it is only artistically insensitive people who mistakenly believe the presence of a certain character or plot (formal features) unifies the elements of an artwork. In fact, it is the author's relation to his creation: "The cement which binds together every work of art into a whole and thereby produces the effect of life-like illusion, is not the unity of persons and places, but that of the author's independent moral relation to the subject."<sup>29</sup> By "independent moral relation" Tolstoy indicates something like the author's intentional attitude. He contends that nothing can be art if the artist is uncertain of his feeling toward his creation.

Tolstoy's redefinition of aesthetic success does help him account for the

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<sup>28</sup> Leo Tolstoy, *Guy de Maupassant*, trans. V. Tchertkoff (New York: Haskell House, 1974), 24.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 23–24.

unpredictability of our preferences in form. As long as an artwork conveys the feeling of the artist to the appreciator, it can take any of a multitude of forms, and one need not refer to a law or principle of taste or of composition to assert its success. But it is not yet clear how this redefinition can accommodate the normative aspect of aesthetic judgment. Would not people's susceptibility to certain mental states conveyed by different artworks vary just as tastes vary?

## SIMULATION

On Tolstoy's view, although an aesthetic moment is defined by a *feeling* aroused in the appreciator, this feeling should not be equated with a subjective sentiment. If an artist creates something that corresponds to a feeling he truly experiences, the artwork will re-evoke this very same feeling in everyone who encounters it:

A real work of art destroys, in the consciousness of the receiver, the separation between himself and the artist—not that alone, but also between himself and all whose minds receive this work of art. . . . If a man is infected by the author's condition of the soul, if he feels this emotion and this union with others, then the object which has effected this is art.<sup>30</sup>

When contemplating an artwork, the mental state of the appreciator is identical to the one experienced by the artist, and to that of every fellow appreciator. Richard Gustafson notes that an aesthetic moment for Tolstoy is one in which "each in his own way feels the same thing all together as one."<sup>31</sup> In other words, an artwork inspires the same mental state in its author and all observers, but each achieves this state in himself, using his own psychological mechanism. Tolstoy asserts that our ability to be affected by art is founded on the essential similarity of our natures and hence the capacity to be infected by the feelings of others: "The only reason that different dispositions expressed in art touch us is that in each of us there exists the potential of all possible dispositions."<sup>32</sup> Our organisms are such that the same infection can develop in each of us. And since we can

<sup>30</sup> WIA, 140.

<sup>31</sup> Gustafson, *Resident and Stranger*, 372.

<sup>32</sup> PSS, 53:125, 1896.

experience the very same mental states, Tolstoy asserts that one can claim an artwork *ought* to inspire a certain feeling in everyone.

Tolstoy attributes our ability to share a feeling to our common relation to God. Justin Weir points out that for Tolstoy, “Comprehension is authorized by man’s relationship to God.”<sup>33</sup> This essential similarity between us makes it possible for us to arrive at an aesthetic standard based not on conventions of taste but on something intrinsic to all people, Tolstoy contends. His account of the *way* we apprehend others’ mental states, however, resembles a contemporary, *secular* theory that suggests we can understand the behavior, beliefs, and emotions of others by “simulating” their psychic experiences in ourselves.

The question of how we assess mental states has a long history and continues to be debated in philosophy of mind, among other disciplines. Some philosophers have argued that our mindreading practices depend on a “folk psychological theory,” a set of beliefs that helps us infer certain internal states or predict behavior based on our observations. Peter Carruthers explains that folk psychology consists of basic “common-sense generalizations” that “hold good independently of context and culture.”<sup>34</sup> The belief that injury causes pain or that actions that will result in a desirable outcome will be performed are among his examples of folk psychological beliefs.<sup>35</sup> This account of our mindreading practices is called the “theory-theory,” because it is a theory that we rely on a theory. It should be noted that theory-theorists differ on the question of whether our folk psychological knowledge is innate or acquired. Some posit that human beings have an innate theory of mind that develops as a person matures; others argue that this theory is acquired through learning, enculturation, or both.<sup>36</sup>

So-called “simulation” theorists suggest an alternative explanation. They argue that our mindreading relies less on deduction based on folk psychological theory than on our ability to use our own cognitive mechanism to “simulate” another’s mental state. On the simulationists’ view, we grasp the mental states of others not by reasoning or calculation, but by pretending to *be* another person, assessing *our* experience in his situation, and then ascribing the mental state associated with the experience to him.

<sup>33</sup> Justin Weir, *Leo Tolstoy and the Alibi of Narrative* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 201.

<sup>34</sup> Peter Carruthers, *Human Knowledge and Human Nature: A New Introduction to an Ancient Debate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 115.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Peter Carruthers and Peter K. Smith, eds., *Theories of Theories of Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 5.

The key distinction between theory-theory and simulation theory is not that the former argues our mindreading practices are acquired while the latter maintains they are innate. The crucial difference is that simulation theory proposes we apprehend the mental states of others by *re-experiencing* them in ourselves, while theory-theorists assert that we do not *experience* the mental states of others in ourselves; we simply make deductions based on our observations and our set of theories regarding human psychology.<sup>37</sup>

My intention is not to take sides in the debate between the two theories of mind, but only to suggest that the simulationist account is akin to Tolstoy's notion that we access other minds through self-projection. While at work on his *Maupassant*, Tolstoy makes the following epistemic observation in his diary: "[By] transferring yourself by thought [*mysl'*yu] into another person, animal, plant, even a stone. By this method you know from within and form the whole world as we know it. This method is what is called poetic talent; it is also love."<sup>38</sup> Although Tolstoy refers to self-projection as "transferring yourself by thought," he does not claim that this happens by way of ratiocination. The Russian word *mysl'* can just as easily mean imaginative reflection. In fact, Tolstoy suggests that it is not ratiocination but sense perception that facilitates our imaginative self-projection.

Tolstoy maintains that our ability to employ perceptual stimuli for self-projection is precisely what makes communication through art possible: "The activity of art is based on the fact that a man, receiving through his sense of hearing or sight another man's expression of feeling, is capable of experiencing the emotion which moved the man who expressed it."<sup>39</sup> Another's feeling is apprehended with the aid of our senses. Simulationist Robert Gordon similarly argues that while we are often unable to decode (and hence theorize about) a certain facial expression, tone of voice, or gesture, we can nonetheless perceive it and thus incorporate it into our simulation.<sup>40</sup> But Tolstoy goes even further, suggesting that one need not observe someone directly to re-experience his mental state. The perceptual stimuli generated by an individual's artistic production can likewise enable our self-projection. An artist can "infect" others by creating a set of perceptual stimuli (an artwork) that will inevitably elicit the same response in all observers, allowing them to achieve a perfect simulation of his mental state.

Tolstoy's perplexing assertion that an artwork is unified by the artist's

<sup>37</sup> Robert M. Gordon, "'Radical' Simulationism," in Carruthers and Smith, eds., *Theories of Theories of Mind*, 11.

<sup>38</sup> Gustafson's translation in *Resident and Stranger*, 226; PSS, 52:101, 1893.

<sup>39</sup> WIA, 49.

<sup>40</sup> Gordon, "'Radical' Simulationism," 13.

intentional attitude, and not by its compositional features, is thus made comprehensible by what one might anachronistically call Tolstoy's 'simulationist' account of our mindreading practices. If the formal features of an artwork do not correspond to any specific mental state of the artist, then the appreciator cannot use them to generate any specific feeling in himself. Unsure of what he is meant to experience, he will be thrown into confusion. In *Maupassant*, Tolstoy describes an exchange between an artist whose work does not reflect any particular mental state and the baffled observer (himself) who, as a result, cannot make sense of the work:

I remember a celebrated painter showing me a picture of his representing a religious procession. It was beautifully painted, but no relation of the artist to his work was perceptible.

"Well then, do you regard these ceremonies as good, and necessary to be carried out, or not?" I asked him.

With some condescension to my simplicity, he told me he did not know about that, and did not think it necessary to know; his business was to represent *life*.

"But at least you sympathize with this?"

"I cannot say I do."

"Well, do you then dislike these ceremonies?"

"Neither the one nor the other," answered with a smile of compassion at my silliness this modern profoundly cultured artist, who represented life without understanding its purpose, neither loving nor hating its phenomena.<sup>41</sup>

The painter, uncertain of his attitude to his subject, conveys no feeling, and his work can thus be judged solely on its form. But such a judgment is arbitrary and meaningless on Tolstoy's view. Since the painting does not communicate a feeling, to him it is not only a failure—it is not even art.

The simulationist notion that we can re-experience another's mental state in ourselves might tempt us to think that Tolstoy's account of our aesthetic perception need not stand or fall with his religious worldview. After all, if the communication of feeling happens by virtue of simulation, then there is no need to ground our ability to share a feeling in our common relation to God. But Tolstoy's claims are (characteristically) bolder and more ambitious than those of the simulationists. Tolstoy claims that self-projection enables us to grasp another's experience *in its entirety*, while the

<sup>41</sup> Tolstoy, *Maupassant*, 19.

simulationists typically caution that we can only gain *some* insight into other minds. They would not sign on to the Tolstoyan assertion that art blurs the distinction between the audience and the artist (between “simulator” and “simulated”). For Tolstoy, this is precisely art’s function: art allows one person to unite with another.<sup>42</sup>

Tolstoy’s claim regarding the primacy of knowledge obtained through self-projection aided by art is one that even his disciple Vladimir Chertkov appears to have doubted. In his diary, Tolstoy disagrees with Chertkov’s assessment that the contents of another’s soul are as inaccessible to us as the future, the past, and events that happen in our absence. Chertkov is correct about the inaccessibility of the other three domains, Tolstoy writes, but wrong about our inability to access the experience of others: “[T]hat which happens in the souls of other people, this wall we must break down using all our powers—[we must] aspire to merge with the souls of other people.”<sup>43</sup> Presumably, Chertkov is not arguing that we have *no* knowledge of these four domains. We simply do not have the same immediate access to them as we do to our own experience in the present moment, and consequently cannot know about them with the same degree of certainty. Tolstoy, however, affirms that through art we *can*, in fact, be certain about the contents of another’s soul.

An objective aesthetic standard based on the successful communication of a feeling thus appears possible to Tolstoy because he considers knowledge acquired through self-projection (facilitated by art) to be more certain and universally shared than any other type of knowledge. Knowledge through self-projection or, as he puts it, “knowledge from within,” is closely linked with aesthetic experience. Tolstoy likens it to poetic talent. But its primacy is not limited to the realm of art. Tolstoy elevates it above empirical knowledge, and knowledge obtained through deduction is still lower in his epistemic hierarchy. Gustafson observes that the most profound knowledge for Tolstoy is knowledge of oneself, which is followed by knowledge obtained by feeling (*chuvstvo*), then “sense data” (*chuvstvet*), and finally by knowledge based on reason and deduction (*rassudok/rassuzhdenie*). He cites the following diary entry from 1904:

The first: I feel sad, pained, bored, happy. This is certain.

The second: I smell violets, see light and shadows, etc. Here there can be error.

<sup>42</sup> WIA, 140.

<sup>43</sup> PSS, 53:126, 1896.

The third: I know that the earth is round and revolves, that Japan and Madagascar can exist, etc. All this can be questioned. Life, I think, consists in transferring the third and second kinds of knowledge into the first, when one experiences everything in himself.<sup>44</sup>

Tolstoy suggests that knowledge (of people, of things) acquired through sense perception and reason should be turned into feeling, a higher order of knowledge. This excerpt echoes his much earlier argument that we come to know stones in the same way we come to know people, through self-projection and feeling from within. Art, in Tolstoy's view, performs this conversion of sensory knowledge into feeling. It lets the observer use sense stimuli to "inhabit" another person and understand his experiences from within. Kant struggled to determine how one could claim a necessary liking without relying on concepts. Tolstoy finds it far easier to eschew concepts. His epistemology allows him to conclude that judgments based on feeling make a stronger claim to necessary liking than judgments based on a concept: the former are more universal and less prone to error.

Some sympathetic readers of *What is Art?* have suggested that Tolstoy's aesthetic and moral criteria can be considered separately. Israel Knox, for example, argues that "Tolstoy's philosophy of art consists of two distinct elements: the first is esthetic in purpose and meaning, and defines art as the infectious communication of emotions; the second is socio-religious, and is concerned with the moral value of the emotions or experiences transmitted by means of art."<sup>45</sup> Tolstoy calls art that conveys emotion "real art," while art that does not is termed "false." Real art is then further subdivided into moral ("good") and immoral ("bad") art, depending on its content. Since Tolstoy's moral criteria apply to content, one might initially regard his socio-religious ideas as expendable and agree with Knox that it is "proper to grant full autonomy to that part of Tolstoy's theory which is purely esthetic."<sup>46</sup> Examining Tolstoy's treatise in light of the question of an aesthetic standard, however, reveals that even the criterion of "infectiousness" is ultimately grounded in Tolstoy's religious worldview. His solution to the opposition of the subjective and the normative aspects of our aesthetic experience hinges on his idea that unlike our reason, our feel-

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<sup>44</sup> Gustafson's translation in *Resident and Stranger*, 227. PSS, 55:29, 1904.

<sup>45</sup> Israel Knox, "Tolstoy's Esthetic Definition of Art," *Journal of Philosophy* 27 (1930): 65.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*



ings tap into a universally shared and *certain* knowledge that proceeds from a common “religious perception.”<sup>47</sup> It is by way of an epistemology derived from his theological convictions that Tolstoy’s aesthetic and moral criteria become inextricably linked.

## OBJECTIONS TO TOLSTOY’S SOLUTION

Tolstoy’s account of aesthetic judgment faces two significant problems. The first is that any account conceiving of art in terms of its *effect* places the artist in a potentially manipulative relation to his audience, since the artist is understood to be purposefully acting on the feelings of others. Tolstoy was wary of the artist’s power of coercion; he expressed this concern in many of his literary works. He saw the need, therefore, to distinguish art that manipulates its audience from art that merely aspires to affect (infect) it. Tolstoy’s solution is to call intentional but non-coercive artistic productions “sincere art” (*iskrennee iskusstvo*) and claim that only sincere art is worthy of admiration.

How should we understand the criterion of “sincerity”? Michael Denner proposes that Tolstoy’s “sincerity” means unintentional creation by the artist and unintentional apprehension by the audience: the artist creates as if by accident, the audience receives as if by “eavesdropping.”<sup>48</sup> In Denner’s interpretation, Tolstoy’s concept of sincerity resembles John Stuart Mill’s answer to art’s capacity for coercion. Mill famously wrote that “eloquence is *heard*, poetry is *overheard*.”<sup>49</sup> But it is difficult to defend Mill’s argument that poetry is “overheard” rather than simply heard; poetry, after all, is written to be read or performed, and one rarely encounters it by accident. Moreover, the idea of “unintentional” art is at odds with Tolstoy’s own definition of art as a conscious activity in which the artist produces “with the object” (*s tsel’yu*) of infecting others with his own feeling.<sup>50</sup> One should also recall the question Tolstoy imagines a reader putting to an author: “Well, what sort of man are you?”<sup>51</sup> The reader attends purposefully—not accidentally—to the artwork.

Tolstoy’s distinction between “sincere” and “insincere” art—a distinc-

<sup>47</sup> WIA, 143.

<sup>48</sup> Denner, “Accidental Art,” 292.

<sup>49</sup> John Stuart Mill, “What is Poetry?” in *John Stuart Mill: Literary Essays*, ed. Edward Alexander (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967), 56.

<sup>50</sup> WIA, 50.

<sup>51</sup> Tolstoy, *Maupassant*, 24.

tion with which he insists on a non-manipulative and yet intentional relation between artist and audience—becomes more intelligible when one considers his “simulationist” view of affective communication. Sincere art is not distinguished by the author’s lack of intention but by the fact that concepts do not play a role either in its creation or its apprehension. The works Tolstoy considers particularly “infectious”—a peasant women’s choir, a theatrical performance by a Siberian Vogul tribe—were not made or enjoyed unintentionally. The peasant singers he extols performed for his daughter, and it is not by accident that the Voguls gathered together to watch a play.<sup>52</sup> What sets them apart, rather, is that these artists do not *calculate* how best to generate a certain state in the audience. Instead, they find the most precise way to express their own jubilation, sorrow, remorse, and enable others to experience it with them. The sincere artist does nothing more than invite the audience to grasp his own experience from within, by simulating his mental state.

Thus in order to create a sincere artwork, one that infects without manipulating, an artist must proceed from his own feeling and not from inferences about the values of others. In his essay *About Art*, Tolstoy exhorts each artist to be inspired by only that which he loves “with his own heart and not another’s, not to pretend that [he] love[s] that which others acknowledge or consider worthy of love.”<sup>53</sup> If an artist creates according to his pet theories about what pleases an audience, then in addition to being insincere, his work will not be invested with a feeling; consequently, it will not allow the observer to simulate any particular mental state. Perhaps this is why Tolstoy insists that a “real” artwork, one that communicates a feeling, is *always* sincere.

Tolstoy blames the proliferation of insincere artworks on the professionalization of art. He argues that artists forced to work on demand cannot wait patiently for that rare inner feeling worthy of being communicated, and instead try to surmise what might please others. Tolstoy asserts that most artists of his day labor under one of “three main false theories of art” (*lozhnye teorii iskusstva*). Here “theory” means something like an aesthetic conception or outlook. According to Tolstoy, the first false conception is that “the merit of an artwork depends primarily on content,” by which he means topical subject matter. The second is that of “art for art’s sake.” And the third is what Tolstoy calls the “theory of realism,” which “is all about cordiality, verisimilitude.”<sup>54</sup> He contends that these aesthetic

<sup>52</sup> WIA, 134, 137.

<sup>53</sup> *Ob iskusstve*, PSS, 30:213, 1898.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

conceptions, along with artistic techniques developed to suit the pleasure of an upper-class audience (borrowing, imitativeness, striking effects, and diversion), lead to false art.<sup>55</sup> The life of Maupassant, Tolstoy argues, illustrates the ruinous effects of calculation on artistic creation. Maupassant yielded to “the theory, dominant in his circle, that the object of art consists only in making ‘quelque chose de beau,’”<sup>56</sup> and under the influence of this theory, he spoiled his later works, which became artificial and “thought up.” “From the time of ‘Bel Ami’ this stamp of hurriedness, and still more, of thought up-ness (*vydumannosti*), is upon all Maupassant’s novels,” Tolstoy laments.<sup>57</sup> He argues that by creating according to an idea of what art is, Maupassant became like all “common hack novelists,” producing what he thought would best entertain his audience instead of making sincere art.<sup>58</sup> In *What is Art?* Tolstoy concludes that due to such false aesthetic conceptions art has “ceased to be either natural or even sincere, and [has become] thoroughly thought up and brain spun” (*vydumanno i rassudochno*).<sup>59</sup> The Russian word for “brain spun” (*rassudochnoe*) shares a root with the word for “deductive reason” (*rassudok*), and “thought up” (*vydumannoe*) is similarly related to the verb “to think” (*dumat*). The fact that Tolstoy here opposes brain spun and thought up to sincerity reinforces the notion that sincere art—in his view—is art that has not been created according to a concept or a calculation.

A more troubling problem for Tolstoy’s account of art is that people are in fact “infected” by works he considers false and insincere. In order to support the normative claim he wants to make—only sincere art *ought* to infect everyone—Tolstoy makes the empirical claim that only sincere art *does* infect everyone. In *What is Art?* he argues that Wagner’s works do not proceed from feelings the artist truly experienced and are therefore “thought up,” insincere, incapable of communicating a mental state. According to him such works should leave the audience baffled; indeed, Tolstoy himself claims to experience nothing but confusion upon encountering Wagner’s music. Yet he cannot deny that many people are moved by Wagner’s works and do not share his own confusion. Tolstoy must therefore explain how people can be affected by what he considers to be insincere art. Initially, he tries to assert that no one is *truly* affected by Wagner’s music. People merely pretend to appreciate Wagner because they “have

<sup>55</sup> WIA, 100.

<sup>56</sup> Tolstoy, *Maupassant*, 25.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 13–14.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>59</sup> WIA, 72.

come to the conclusion in advance that what they are going to see is excellent and that indifference or dissatisfaction with this work will serve as a proof of their inferiority and lack of culture.”<sup>60</sup> He blames critics for disseminating harmful notions about how one ought to relate to certain artworks and thus perpetuating the lie. But Tolstoy must have sensed the inadequacy of such an explanation. Many people do respond intuitively to Wagner’s music, and their responses seem indistinguishable from Tolstoy’s positive account of an artwork infecting someone with emotion. Tolstoy then tries a different tactic, distinguishing the positive “infection” from what he calls “hypnosis.” He likens the effect of Wagner’s art to hypnosis, but ultimately fails to provide a distinction between “infection” and “hypnosis” that does not rest on his own authority.<sup>61</sup>

## CONSEQUENCES AND CONCLUSION

If the notion of “sincere art” is understood properly—as art made without recourse to an idea of what art ought to be or a calculation about what pleases—one sees that for Tolstoy, just as for Kant, aesthetic judgment is distinct both from judgment based on sensual pleasure and from judgment based on concepts. The expulsion of concepts, however, creates an additional problem for Tolstoy, who wants to judge not only the success of communication (infectiousness) but also the quality of the feeling communicated. According to his scheme, art can just as easily infect with bad, immoral feelings as with good, moral ones. And while he is willing to grant that an artwork can be successful even if it communicates an immoral feeling, he would not wish to call this artwork *good*. But how can one distinguish between “good” and “bad” feelings without relying on a concept of goodness?

Significantly, Tolstoy offers not a concept but a *perception* as the ground for normative judgments about the “goodness” of a feeling communicated through art. It is due to our common “religious perception,” he argues, that we can claim that a particular artwork ought to be considered “good”:

In every period of history, and in every human society, there exists an understanding of the meaning of life which represents the high-

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 129–30.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 130.

est level to which men of that society have attained. . . . And this understanding is the religious perception (*religioznoe soznanie*) of the given time and society. . . . And it is by the standard of this religious perception that the feelings transmitted by art have always been estimated.<sup>62</sup>

Our religious perception does amount to a kind of knowledge, but it is not knowledge obtained by reasoning. It is the apprehension of life's movement that is "more or less vividly *perceived* by all the members of the society" (*zhivo chuvstvuemo vsemi*).<sup>63</sup> Tolstoy likens religious perception to the direction of a river's flow and suggests that a shared apprehension of our movement gives us a common point of orientation.

The notion of life's "flow" is by no means an ad hoc prop in Tolstoy's aesthetic scheme. This idea appears much earlier in his work; Isaiah Berlin, for one, identifies it in Tolstoy's great novels. Berlin characterizes this "flow" as a medium of life in which we are immersed and which we cannot "classify and act upon by rational, scientific, deliberately planned methods." It is this flow, he argues, which "determines our most permanent categories, our standards of truth and falsehood, of reality and appearance, of the good and the bad . . . of the beautiful and the ugly."<sup>64</sup> Our common apprehension of this medium of life serves as a point of departure for all of our standards of value, including aesthetic value. In Tolstoy's later thought, according to Inessa Medzhibovskaya, the "vital force that decides man's life and where he belongs is finally identified as *razumenie*." *Razumenie* is Tolstoy's neologism for "divine logos," a term equally evocative of "understanding," "awareness," and "agreement" as it is of divine reason.<sup>65</sup> Our common religious perception—our sense of life's flow—is thus related to our capacity for *razumenie* rather than deductive reasoning (*rassuzhdenie*). It has less to do with conceptual knowledge than with our attentiveness and attunement to our surroundings and to ourselves.

Kant's own tentative answer to the "Antinomy of Taste" relies on the idea of a "common human understanding" (*sensus communis*), which bears some resemblance to Tolstoy's notion of a common religious perception. Kant argued that when we engage with some object of beauty our feeling is

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. My emphasis.

<sup>64</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox: An Essay on Tolstoy's View of History*, new ed. (Chicago: Dee, 1993), 68.

<sup>65</sup> Inessa Medzhibovskaya, *Tolstoy and the Religious Culture of His Time: A Biography of a Long Conversion, 1845–1887* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2009), 201.

“*universally communicable* without mediation by a concept.”<sup>66</sup> In his reading of Knight’s aesthetics compendium, Tolstoy must have come across the following summary of Kant’s thought:

[Kant] held that the only ground on which we can universalize our judgments as to the Beautiful, or regard them as valid for others, was that they were the outcome of the Universal Reason. We could not expect any one to agree with us in our judgments as to Beauty unless we ourselves discerned this universal reason in Nature, and saw in it, not a blank pleasure-producing apparatus, but a mirror which reflects our own nature at its highest point of development.<sup>67</sup>

Such an interpretation of Kant, in which beauty is identified as a reflection of our reason and nature at the apex of its current development, resonates with Tolstoy’s own notion that art sanctioned by the highest level of human understanding will be universally admired.

Furthermore, Kant and Tolstoy both recognize a profound connection between art and morality. Wood argues that students of Kant often overlook the fact that he defends a separate sphere of aesthetic experience so that it may serve to complement our moral experience. For Kant, “the real significance of beauty and taste for human life is chiefly a moral significance,” Wood contends.<sup>68</sup> In Tolstoy’s case, it is readily apparent that he believes art serves mankind’s moral development. What needs to be brought to light, however, is that in elaborating on how this moral task might be accomplished, Tolstoy endows the aesthetic with a certain degree of autonomy. He distinguishes the aesthetic experience from other types of experience and may even be more radical than Kant in proclaiming the autonomy of aesthetic judgment. “Art is not a pleasure, a solace, or an amusement; art is a great matter,” he writes. “Art is the organ of human life, transmitting man’s reasonable perception into feeling.”<sup>69</sup> Tolstoy draws sharper distinctions between judgments based on pleasure, judgments based on concepts, and aesthetic judgments. For example, Kant argues that concepts cannot be adduced to demonstrate deductively that

<sup>66</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 162. Original emphasis.

<sup>67</sup> William Knight, *The Philosophy of the Beautiful, Being Outlines of the History of Aesthetics*, vol.1 (London: Murray, 1891), 58–59.

<sup>68</sup> Wood, *Kant*, 160.

<sup>69</sup> WIA, 189.

something is beautiful, but we need not interpret this as a prescription to purify ourselves of all conceptual understanding in order to apprehend something aesthetically. Tolstoy, on the other hand, claims that such purification is precisely what is needed. According to him, conceptual knowledge is often tainted by erroneous and arbitrary conventions. What some critics call knowledge and training in art are, in his view, nothing but habituation. And “people may habituate themselves to anything, even to the very worst things,” he argues.<sup>70</sup>

More than thirty years before the publication of *What is Art?*, Tolstoy’s contemporary Dmitry Pisarev proclaimed that the science of aesthetics should be discarded along with alchemy and astrology. In his famous essay “The Destruction of Aesthetics,” Pisarev argues that a clash between two critics over a work of art leads either to a trivial expression of personal sentiments (what each finds agreeable in the artwork’s form) or to a substantive debate based on concepts: how well does an artwork’s content address a human being’s interests and concerns?<sup>71</sup> Tolstoy’s attempt to redefine art as “infection,” and to use this as a stepping-stone toward an objective standard of aesthetic merit, can be regarded as a kind of rebuttal. In the process of trying to understand the role of art in society, he ends up defending the idea that our aesthetic experience is something distinct and irreducible.

Tolstoy is no destroyer of aesthetics. But his quest for an objective aesthetic standard is not without casualties. His desire to distinguish aesthetic experience from pleasure and his attempt to expunge all concepts and calculations from his account of aesthetic perception leads Tolstoy to some rather questionable and self-contradictory conclusions. He claims that as appreciators we attend only to the soul of the author and not to the artwork itself. He argues that a person less knowledgeable about artistic techniques would produce works of greater merit than a trained practitioner: peasant tales are thus preferable to the works of Shakespeare. And while he begins *What is Art?* by rejecting the authority of canonical works and the idea of educating taste, he concludes the treatise by championing an aesthetic education based on “the examples of the great masters.”<sup>72</sup> Beyond these obviously problematic assertions there is also the greater question of whether it is ever possible for us to discard all conceptual knowledge from

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>71</sup> D. I. Pisarev, “Razrushenie estetiki,” in *Literaturnaia kritika v trekh tomakh*, vol. 2 (Leningrad: Khudozh. lit-ra, Leningradskoe otd-nie, 1981), 327–47.

<sup>72</sup> WIA, 175.

our assessment of people and art alike. Contemporary philosophers of mind suggest that this is unlikely.<sup>73</sup> Tolstoy appears to have sensed the dubious outcome of his treatise when he wrote to his daughter Tatiana, “I’m still busy with the final editing of *Art* and I still can’t figure out whether it is very good, very bad, or insignificant.”<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Gregory Currie, *Arts and Minds* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 168–69.

<sup>74</sup> PSS, 70:166, 1897.