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GSHU 123.02

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“You, Kant, Always Get What You Want”

Why Kant’s Deontology Trumps Emerson’s Self-Reliance in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*

Immanuel Kant’s *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* epitomizes moral orthodoxy, that all humans are bound to an absolute moral law and must obey that law for its sake alone. “Self-Reliance” is Ralph Waldo Emerson’s riposte *contra* orthodoxy, a bold defense of humanity’s need to reject moral conformity and be held accountable to oneself alone. This conflict, like a title fight or duel between champions, cries out for resolution – whether one subjects oneself to duty or whim has dramatic implications for all moral decision-making, and these diametrically opposed systems cannot stand side by side. A philosopher might attempt to explore the argumentative foundations of the two moral theories, but because Emerson does not offer an argumentative foundation for his belief, as does Kant, this option does not readily avail itself to the reader. Instead, I will provide an account of each theory and explore they unfold in John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. Because self-reliant ethics constitute the rebellion against God that unleashes a cataclysm of suffering, Sin and Death, whereas deontological ethics would have preserved a perfect paradisiacal state of cosmic harmony, in Milton’s world at least, moral agents are better off conforming to moral law and depending on God than relying on themselves. Insofar as Milton’s world resembles our own – if it is the case that we are presided over by an omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly good God deeply concerned with our moral decision-making – it is appropriate for moral agents to conform their moral decision-making to immutable moral law in the real world, too.

Kant's deontological, or duty-based, system of ethics has a number of principle platforms. Taken together, these state that all moral agents ought choose to do what is right for no other reason than because it is right, when "right" is taken to be an action the maxim of which could be universalized. Kant is clear that a morally laudable act is "not good because of what it effects or accomplishes or because or because of its competence to achieve some intended end" (Kant 10), so that the effects of a choice have no bearing on its moral weight. He acknowledges that by centering moral weight on intention rather than outcome he runs against powerful moral intuitions and that "suspicion must arise" (10) on this account. Still, by making outcome irrelevant, he removes culpability from circumstance and restores it to the only capacity over which the moral agent has full control, their will. A good will, "regarded for itself...is to be esteemed as incomparably higher than anything which could be brought about by it" (10). If the moral will is mitigated by any "admixture of empirical inducements" (27), like the desire to accomplish some particular end, then the moral will is compromised. Moral decision-making of this kind "can lead only accidentally to the good, and frequently lead to the bad" (27). This will become highly relevant later, as the empirical inducements of Satan to Eve's otherwise uncompromised respect for law do indeed lead to "the bad." That Kant's view requires respect for moral law for the law's sake alone and not because of any end it accomplishes has now been outlined; what exactly that moral law dictates requires further exploration.

Kant unfolds his view by grouping moral law and natural law, noting that "everything in nature works according to laws" (29). Uniquely, however, moral agents act "according to the *conception* of laws" (29) using the capacity of will. It follows that it is crucial for this conception of law to cohere with the law itself, or the decision-making that unfolds will be morally culpable. Only if "reason infallibly determines the will" (29) can one's subjective conception of the good

necessarily cohere with objective moral ontology of what is in fact good. However, as “is the actual case with men” (29), reason “does not sufficiently determine the will” (29) and “the will is subjugated to...certain incentives” (29). Though pure reason would allow rational beings to know what is good, often other factors (sensorial pleasures, for instance) can distract from and corrupt an otherwise good will. Under these circumstances, “a command (of reason)” (29) “constrains a will” to be in accord with reason, and “this command is called an *imperative*” (29). Imperatives are simply commands that constrain wayward wills so as to be in accord with what is good (31). Kant dictates that reason compels “practical good...not by subjective causes but objectively, on grounds which are valid for every rational being as such” (29). These imperatives only really constrain an imperfect will, since a perfectly good will is “necessarily in unison with the law” (30). Those imperatives which compel behavior based on an action “which is good to some purpose” (31) he calls hypothetical; these imperatives are morally bankrupt because they include the “admixture of empirical inducements” which corrupt a will that would otherwise seek only to do good for goodness sake. However, those imperatives which compel behavior that is “itself objectively necessary without making any reference to any end in view” (30) he calls categorical. Therefore, a categorical imperative is a command which constrains a will to bring about objective, practical good on grounds valid for every rational being for no other reason than that the action is the right thing to do. To ensure one acts in a way that constitutes practical good for every rational being, Kant insists one may “never choose except in such a way that the maxims of the choice are comprehended as universal law in the same volition” (57). The universality of this moral law indicates free agents ought only act so that the maxim of their choice could be adopted by all people, at all times, in all manners, without exception. Though

there are other formulations of Kant's categorical imperative, this will serve as a model to compare against Emerson's moral theories.

Perhaps ironically, Kant offers as an alternative title to his categorical imperative the property of "autonomy of the will;" whereas Emerson likewise encourages agents to behave autonomously, his view of autonomy is diametrically opposed to Kant's. Though Emerson's beliefs are somewhat less systematized than Kant's, it is still possible to extract a cohesive outline of what he considers morally commendable behavior from his essay "Self-Reliance." "The highest merit we ascribe to Moses, Plato and Milton," he writes, "is that they set at naught books and traditions, and spoke not what men, but what *they* thought" (Emerson 176). Self-expression is simply more commendable than imitation. His argument intensifies, though, stating that "we shall be forced to take with shame our own opinion from another" (176), that "envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide" (176). Thus, accepting one's beliefs from another is shameful, ignorant, and even able to bring about the destruction of the self. Briefly, for Emerson to ask his audience to believe what he is writing is self-referentially incoherent – to imitate Emerson by holding his views that taking our opinions from others is shameful, ignorant and suicidal would itself be shameful, ignorant and suicidal. Because one cannot accept Emerson without contracting the very thrust of Emerson's argument, it seems his work can promptly be set aside on that basis alone. However, to ensure a maximally charitable reading of the text, this inconsistency will be bracketed and set aside.

Up until this point, it is not manifestly evident that Emerson and Kant are diametrically opposed. Emerson argues that we must be our own masters, that no matter how much good exists in the wide universe one must "take himself for better or for worse as his own portion" (176), which is not incompatible with Kant's perspective that we must choose good actions for their

own sake. Presumably, if one independently arrived at a categorical imperative and used it to compel their will to be in accord with their reason, they could satisfy both Emersonian and Kantian requirements. The distinction is that Kant insists a person is accountable to a universal standard which objectively secures practical good for all persons whereas Emerson will continue by insisting that a person is accountable only to him or herself. He instructs that “nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind. Absolve you to yourself and, and you shall have the suffrage of the world” (178). Emerson does not draw the distinction between justification by reason alone and justification by empirical inducements, so presumably if one was satisfied by doing something because it felt good, or seemed to them to be right, they would satisfy their sacred obligation to themselves. Moreover, he cites power, which is the capacity to achieve ends, as “the essential measure of right” (191). Only one’s ability to achieve an end measures whether an action is just or unjust, a view diametrically opposed to Kant’s belief that ends have nothing whatsoever to do with the moral worth of an action. For Emerson, the “only right is what is after my constitution; the only wrong what is against it” (179). The implication of this belief is that if martyrdom, charity, apathy, torture or genocide are after one’s constitution, they are right. Though the implication that acts considered morally reprehensible by many could be right for some might spark condemnation of Emerson on these terms, he seems to be comfortable with other’s judgments of his moral worth. “If I am the Devil’s child,” he writes, “I will live then as from the Devil” (179). The most clear rejection of external law for internal desire comes with Emerson’s flippant repudiation of Deuteronomy 6:9, which recasts the biblical instruction to write the commandments of God on the door-posts of one’s home to state: “I will write on the lintels of the door-post, *Whim*” (179). For Emerson, the self is so paramount that even a sudden, passing, impulsive thought can take the place of so-called universal law so long as that thought

be true to the constitution of the self. His belief that moral worth is a subjective quality that changes relative to the constitution of the individual, and that one ought obey only internal standards and not change one's perspective on any external considerations, stands firmly against the Kantian view that one ought constrain one's will to conform to objective moral law which applies universally.

With both moral theories established, it is possible to explore how each perspective influences the major characters of Milton's epic poem, and what results unfold based on their choices. Satan's character is so eminently self-dependant that, taken in connection with Emerson's earlier stated respect for Milton, one almost wonders whether Satan was an influential model for Emerson's self-reliant ethics. Emerson insists that one must seek suffrage, that is, freedom from slavery, by having integrity in one's own mind; likewise, Satan declares "what matter where [i.e., in hell or heaven], if I be still the same...Here at least / We shall be free" (Milton 16). Regardless of external consequences, Satan is justified to himself by being un beholden to other wills – an epitome of Emersonian self-reliance. His famous declaration, "better to reign in hell, than serve in heav'n" (16), puts self-determination, self-rule, over any other quality. Satan's "inconquerable will" (11) is resolved never to "submit or yield" (12), that is, he is true to his own will even under the pressure of the omnipotent will of God. As Emerson notes that to be true to one's character is the only sacred duty, Satan notes that had he been created "some inferior angel" (87) he might not have aspired to rebel against God – implying that he behaved in accordance with his own superior nature by rebelling. As Emerson is willing to live "as from the Devil," reversing societal expectations about proper moral behavior to be true to his own internal standard, so Satan is willing to declare, "Evil be thou my good" (88), identically reversing moral expectations to further his will in preference to any other cause.

Milton's Satan is as close an incarnation of Emerson's "Self-Reliance" as can be had in literature.

If Satan shares Emerson's views and Emerson's views are diametrically opposed to Kant's, it should (and does) follow that Satan's example runs against the standards of deontological ethics. Recall that the categorical imperative is to "never choose except in such a way that the maxims of the choice are comprehended as universal law in the same volition" (Kant 57). To judge whether Satan obeys or rejects the categorical imperative, the maxim of his choice must be identified and judged to see whether it could be comprehended as universal law. As Satan rebels against God to secure his own power and satisfy his ambition, the maxim of his action might be rendered: "one may rebel against authority when one stands to gain power and prestige by doing so." First, because the action was carried out to achieve external ends (power and glory) and not done merely for its own sake, the imperative in question was hypothetical and not categorical, and therefore morally bankrupt. Moreover, it also becomes clear that the maxim of his action is non-universalizable. Recall that Satan's objective was to reign, and that he enjoys the faithfulness of his legions (Milton 27) even though he effects their expulsion from heaven. If rebellion were universalized, it would be impossible to gain power or glory from rebellion because there would exist no willing subjects over whom to exercise regnal authority. Thus, rebellion for the sake of power and glory cannot be comprehended as universal law because the ensuing anarchy would cancel out any possible benefit of attempting to secure additional authority. Satan's actions are decidedly opposed to any Kantian deontological ethics, as would be expected since he so closely mirrors Emerson's diametrically opposed ethic of self-reliance.

With Satan's ideological framework outlined, observing the outcome of his actions shows the outcomes of adopting an Emersonian self-reliant ideology in a Miltonian world – an eternity

of unmitigated suffering. Satan's rebellion deposits him in hell, a place of "torture without end" (10), filled with "a fiery deluge, fed / With ever-burning sulphur unconsumed" (10). The physical torments, though, are the most shallow implications of rebellion. All those who were drawn by Satan's beliefs to partake in rebellion with him "now misery hath joined / In equal ruin" (11). To risk oneself for the sake of a patently selfish cause is one thing; to risk one's comrades for the sake of that cause is a much more serious matter. Anyone who holds emotional attachment to his or her friends and allies would suffer in turn, and even Satan casts "signs of remorse and passion" (26) when he beholds the legions who are forced "for ever now to have their lot in pain, / ...for his faults" (27). The physical and emotional pain wrought by rebellion are inescapable, as Satan confesses "every which way I fly is hell; myself am hell" (87), and perhaps the cruelest aspect of his punishment is that it could be far worse than it already is. Satan knows "in the lowest deep a lower deep / Still threat'ning to devour me opens wide, / To which the hell I suffer seems a heav'n" (87). The worst pain Satan can imagine is itself a mercy; infinite woe is still infinitely less than the divine wrath God could have leveled against him. Satan himself willingly admits the cost of his aspirations to defy God and enthrone himself, as he despairs "under what torments inwardly I groan...the lower still I fall, only supreme / In misery; such joy ambition finds" (87). The 'joy' of self-reliance is to be supreme in misery alone. In a Miltonian world, then, self-reliance constitutes rebellion which warrants unimaginable torment.

If one example is insufficient to demonstrate the truth of the above claim, Adam and Eve provide a parallel example that self-reliance engenders woe whereas deontological decision-making effects prosperity. The initial behaviors of the pair seem deontological – they do what is right because it is right, from duty alone. Adam lives "for God only" (97), and Eve "for God in him" (97). Neither are said to offer their devotion as a means toward any peripheral, subjective



enticement, rather, they seem to love God merely for the sake of loving God. This is consistent with Kant's tenants that an action ought be performed because it is good in itself, not because the action allows one to secure some other good. Of the one prohibition which God levels, Adam says to Eve, "[God] requires no other service than to keep / This one...not to taste that only Tree / Of Knowledge" (97). Though he mentions that "God hath pronounced it death to taste that Tree" (97), he doesn't admonish Eve to obey God *because* they want to avoid death. If that were the case, their obedience would be based on inclination, not because it was right, and his action would not be morally laudable. Instead, he simple tells her to obey, the implication being that they ought obey because it is right to obey. Eve makes this implicit relationship explicit when she says to Adam, "what thou bidd'st / Unargued I obey; so God ordains, / God is thy law, thou mine: to know no more / Is woman's happiest knowledge" (102). Eve literally cannot conceive of a reason to obey other than that obedience is the law. Her will to conform to law for law's sake establishes the pair's condition as firmly coherent with Kant's deontological ethics. That their love for law directly sustains their enjoyment of the paradisiacal state is explained to Adam by Raphael, who says, "that thou continu'st [happy], owe to thyself, / That is, to thy obedience; therein stand" (127). In this state of obedience, they enjoy paradise together – but their enjoyment of that blessed state is contingent on their continued respect for law. When Satan's temptation unravels precisely this respect for law, paradise is unwrought.

The temptation of Eve is characterized by an attempt to make her abandon her respect for law itself, to hold her imperative to obey as hypothetical rather than categorical. Once her imperative is compromised, she falls. Note that after following the Serpent to the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, Eve tells the beast he could have spared her the trip, though it be "Wondrous indeed, if cause of such effects. / But of this tree we may not taste nor touch; / God

so commanded, and left that command / Sole daughter of his voice” (215). She both acknowledges the wondrous effects of the tree and refuses to partake of it because of the divine command. While she could have said she did not want to eat because God said it would kill her, she does not. The good or ill effects simply are not yet a part of her decision-making process. She abstains for respect for law alone – a universalizable act done for its own sake. Her declaration, “reason is our law” (215), puts her allegiance fully in the Kantian camp, since reason infallibly determines her will. The Serpent’s rejoinder seals her fate; by presenting analysis about the effects of the tree, telling her, “ye will not die” (216), that she will attain “life more perfect” (216) and even hear God “praise / ...[her] dauntless virtue” (216). Though Eve tries to debate further, her considerations are of whether or not she will actually die and of what benefits she may have if she does eat of the fruit. In short, her “desire, / ...now grown...solicited her longing eye” (217), which are precisely the “admixture of empirical inducements” about which Kant had warned. By holding to her duty only because of the benefits it provided (continued life and safety), she was able to weigh those benefits against the viper’s alluring offer and be swayed. Had she maintained her imperative categorically – obeying the law for its own sake – she would have resisted temptation. In this instance, the empirical inducements don’t just lead to “a bad,” they lead Sin and Death to ravage the world, and humankind is doomed to face a catalogue of indescribable horrors.

In a Miltonian world, to rely on the self, as does Satan, is to commit oneself to hell. To hold to a deontological standard and keep the categorical imperative is to secure Paradise – to abandon that standard, to lose Paradise. If our world is anything like Milton’s, one would do well to reject Emersonian self-reliance and embrace Kant’s deontology. Does our world resemble Milton’s? Is self-reliance worth the risk? I leave these questions to the reader to answer.

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