

One Made for Exceptions Not for Laws: Wildean antinomianism in de Profundis

Sven Davisson

Antinomianism has diverse historical precedents and, one may suspect, reaches back to the first moral codes and religious strictures. Structured taboos and religious edicts have often give rise to counter-doctrines of transgression. This can be seen in certain Gnostic sects as well as the Tantrik practitioners of the *vama-marga*, or “Lefthand Path.” Shri Mahendranath, last guru of the Nath line of Tantrism, describes the role of the seeker as based on amorality, “a path, way, or outlook which is neither moral nor immoral.” (cited by Belarion, 19) The leader of a twentieth century Ophite-Cainite Gnostic church speaks of Carpocrates’ theory of “salvation by reincarnatory fulfillment” as a notion “that if one does not commit some immoral act in *this* lifetime, he or she will likely commit it



in the *next*.” (Belarion, 19) In these doctrines it is the goal of the adept to reach a point that is beyond good and evil, free of social conditioning. For the adept to attain this higher vantage point, he or she must experience the evil as well as the good, for one cannot leave behind what one does not know. One cannot truthfully reject what one has not experienced; rejection without experience is based on conditioning, not personal knowledge, and therefore can never be complete.

In *De Profundis* Wilde rejects morality, saying, “I am a born antinomian.” (Wilde, 583). In light of the spiritual nature underlying much of his work, it is certainly arguable that Wilde means here more than just simple moral transgression. He appears to acknowledge a purpose within his antinomian stance. In his piece “The Soul of Man Under Socialism,” Wilde writes, “Disobedience... is man’s original virtue.” In 1891, Wilde links disobedience with rebellion, but by the writing of *De Profundis*, he had given up rebellion as being too debilitating. In 1897, Wilde states, “He who is in a state of rebellion cannot receive grace,” for “rebellion closes up the channels of the soul, and shuts out the airs of heaven.” (Wilde, 595) He sees antinomianism, then, as more than just rebelling against social norms; he is attempting to utilize his suffering and degradation for spiritual purpose.

Early in *De Profundis*, Wilde states “that the fools in the eyes of the gods and the fool in the eyes of man are very different.” He continues, “The real fool, such as the gods mock and mar, is he who does not know himself.” (Wilde, 511) Since the fool to the gods is one who lacks self-knowledge, it seems that Wilde is implying that the one who seeks to know himself is likely to be a fool to man. Wilde is very careful to avoid entangling self-realization with a moral requirement for goodness. At the root of his literary device, the transgressive paradox, resides a theory that one must know all sides of life to pass beyond their social definitions. He stresses the soul’s ability to transform all that one does and

experiences, even evil and suffering, into something right. “The supreme vice is shallowness. Everything that is realized is right.” (Wilde, 511)

Wilde describes his friendship with Lord Alfred Douglas, “an unintellectual friendship, a friendship whose primary aim was not the creation and contemplation of beautiful things,” for his fall from Art. (Wilde, 511) He blames his fall from the graces of proper society on his turning to that society to protect him— “The one disgraceful, unpardonable, and to all time contemptible action of my life was my allowing myself to be forced into appealing to Society for help and protection against [the Marquess of Queensberry].” (Wilde, 624) What most consider his true fall, making his name, as he says, “a low byword among low people,” Wilde construes differently. (Wilde, 566) Wilde had used those acts hidden in the dark parts of London, as a means of stimulating his art and as a vantage point to look upon the Beautiful. He explains, “Tired of being on the heights I deliberately went to the depths in the search for new sensations. What the paradox was to me in the sphere of thought, perversity became to me in the sphere of passion.”

Later in the work, he writes:

*People thought it dreadful of me to have entertained at dinner the evil things of life, and to have found pleasure in their company. But they, from the point of view through which I, as an artist in life, approached them, were delightfully suggestive and stimulating. It was like feasting with panthers. The danger was half the charm... They were to me the brightest of gilded snakes. Their poison was part of their perfection. (Wilde, 626)

The darker side of life, constructed by society as sinful, seems to have formed the grounding for Wilde’s exalted privileging of Art and Beauty. He states this explicitly in this description of Dorian Gray, “There were moments when he looked on evil simply as a mode through which he could realize his conception of the beautiful.” (Wilde, 305)

These three examples appear to hark toward a higher, more spiritual, definition of antinomianism.

What distinguishes Wilde's theory, of experiencing beauty through evil, from Lord Alfred's appetite-driven search for pleasure and Dorian's fall toward degradation is that Wilde sees in it a path toward realization. Wilde places his faith not in a higher power, but rather in the ability of the soul to transform actions. For Wilde the Soul is the ultimate spiritual alembic. In Wilde's opposition to denial he argues that the Soul "can transform into noble moods of thought, and passions of high import, what in itself is base, cruel, and degrading. (Wilde, 586) This reflects itself in the refrain of *De Profundis*, "The supreme vice is shallowness. Everything that is realized is right." (Wilde, 511) In Wildean morality there exists no pure evil; nothing one does or undergoes can be inherently bad. One always stands in relation to one's actions and possesses the ability to shape and reshape their reflexive meaning. Like his near contemporary, Nietzsche, Wilde levels out the constructed difference between good and evil and envisions a metaphysical space beyond their duality. In Wilde's cosmology the transformative capacity of the Soul is dependent on one's self-defined relation to one's actions. In *De Profundis*'s refrain "realized" is the key word—"Everything *realized* is right." (emphasis added)

Wilde places no emphasis on what is traditionally considered good or what is oppositionally conceived as evil. In his eyes, he sees that God, or the gods, do not distinguish between the two. "The gods are strange," Wilde writes. "It is not of our vices only they make instruments to scourge us. They bring us to ruin through what in us is good, gentle, humane, loving." (Wilde, 537) This sentiment is echoed later in the same text, and with more certitude, "I must accept the fact that one is punished for the good as well as for the evil that one does." (Wilde, 587) Wilde's acknowledgement that one is punished equally for all actions, regardless of their conventional definitions, does not lead him to a

conclusion of nihilism. Surprisingly, it brings him instead toward a heightened, spiritually centered transcendence of the good/evil binary paradigm. For Wilde the gods indiscriminate punishment is not so strange after all. He actually possessed “no doubt that it is quite right one should be [for] it helps one, or should help one, to realize both, and not to be too conceited about either.” (Wilde, 587) Here again Wilde places his importance on the act of “realizing.” It is through the act of realization that the Soul becomes capable of transforming actions into deeper significances—a level where all conditioning, such as social constructions of good and evil, are removed or transfigured. For Wilde, “one only realizes one’s soul by getting rid of all alien passions, all acquired culture, and all external possessions be they good or evil.” (Wilde, 602) Wilde places this power of realization and the Soul in a concept of subjectivity and the seemingly paradoxical requirement of repentance.

When describing his philosophical outlook, Wilde adopts a skeptic’s philosophical stance toward the notion of subjectivity: “I said in *Dorian Gray* that the great sins of the world take place in the brain, but it is in the brain that everything takes place.” (Wilde, 609) As Wilde continues he could easily be paraphrasing from the dialogues of Sextus Empiricus or one of his successors. He bases his subjectivity on Sextus’ argument of the senses, as he continues:

We know not that we do not see with the eye or hear with the ear. They are merely channels for the transmission, adequate or inadequate, of sense-impressions. It is in the brain that the poppy is red, that the apple is odorous, that the skylark sings. (Wilde, 609)

From his theory of subjectivity, he posits his quest after “realization” internally. He writes, “If I may not find its secret within myself, I shall never find it.” (Wilde, 584) The relation between Wilde’s subjective self and the Soul’s transformative capabilities is self-definitional. For Wilde, the act of repenting, or “realizing,” one’s actions is essential.

Though Wilde does not place a judgment on particular actions, he does make an important differentiation between various modes of relating to one’s own actions. He argues “that there is nothing wrong in what one does,” but “there is something wrong in what one becomes.” (Wilde, 584) Wilde centers spiritual importance on a differentiation between one who remains in a singular realm of degradation, a slave to his appetites and drives (such as Lord Alfred), and the person who repents, thereby recognizing or “realizing” his actions. This separation is the crux of Wildean morality. “Of course the sinner must repent,” Wilde states in *De Profundis*, “simply because otherwise he would be unable to realize what he had done. The moment of repentance is the moment of initiation.” (Wilde, 616) Wilde’s trial taught him, in retrospect, that it is not important to have one’s actions recounted to one, or to be forced to confess them. In Wilde’s conception, these are all spiritually meaningless. It is not what is said that is important, but that one says it oneself. Wilde defines “man’s highest moment” as “when he kneels in the dust, and beats his breast, and tells all the sins of his life.” (Wilde, 641) This marries nicely to *De Profundis*’s signature couplet; shallow people are the fools of the gods and it is the process of realization that distinguishes right from wrong.

When one looks at Wilde’s own analysis of his scandalous fall, during and after his trials, one finds a developed cosmology based on antinomianism, transcendence, repentance and realization. Wilde’s antinomianism is constituted in a knowledge of “evil” and “sin” based on a sense of active exploration, rather than passive acceptance of one’s

actions. He feels that “there is not a single degradation of the body which I must not try and make into a spiritualizing of the soul.” (Wilde, 585) For Wilde amorality is both artistically and spiritually stimulating. Wilde relies on a subjective stance relative to good and evil, where antinomianism allows one to remove oneself from a position of moral conceit. Repentance is the fulcrum of Wilde’s relativist morality. It is through the act of repentance that one realizes one’s actions and can learn from them. Ultimately Wilde’s philosophy is one of action—“people whose desire is solely for self-realization never know where they are going.” (Wilde, 617) Wilde’s understanding of antinomianism is based on a requirement to experience all sides of life, just as Wilde accepts the importance of suffering as well as pleasure, one must learn equality from good as well as evil.

References:

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