

# Poetry as Education: Moral Attitude in Milton's and Shelley's Religious Poems

**Cao Shanke**

School of Foreign Languages, Hangzhou Normal University

58 Haishu Road, Cangqian Street, Yuhang, Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province, China

Email: caoshanke59@163.com

**Abstract** There are moral principles (or rules or standards) that are applicable to all people in all ages and areas, regardless of the diversity of their cultures. All literary forms or expressions, such as poetry, must be in accordance with the moral principles in that age and of that country, that is to say, both poets and their works must follow the development of that particular political ideology and social moral principles; if not, they will be driven away from the society. The religious poems, such as *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained* and *Prometheus Unbound*, etc., illustrate for us some ascetic life, which usually put the protagonists into a dreamy status or virtual reality. The dreams or virtual reality experiences that appear in the ascetics' meditation is just like the psychoactive drug, which can make the ascetics addict themselves to the factitious pleasures. The decline of morality, particularly in the modern society, has made readers turn to religious poems, in which awesome feelings will be aroused. They believe that apart from the man-made law, the divine-made law also can be the most important moral source. They are morally educated through the God-given love and human duty in some religious poems, from which they may find their soul and spirit in a pre-destined permanent solace and beauty.

**Key words** poetry as education; moral attitude; Milton and Shelley's poems; soul and spirit

**Author** **Cao Shanke**, Ph. D., is professor at the college of Foreign Languages, Hangzhou Normal University. His research area is foreign literature.

A form of life also has a moral order and, in the kind of cultures we frequent, there may be a multiplicity of interacting, overlapping and complementary moral orders. Literary works involve many different forms of life, therefore, they must deal with all kinds of moral problems. Moral principles provide the confirmatory

standards for our moral judgments, and any defensible moral judgment must be supported by a sound moral principle. The word *moral* or *morality* has a lot to do with religion. Any religion provides its believers with a world view, part of which involves certain moral instructions, values, and commitments. Let's take Christian tradition for example, it offers a view that humans are unique products of a divine intervention that has endowed them with consciousness and an ability to love. On one hand, we are finite, bound to earth, and capable of sin. On the other, we can transcend nature and realize infinite possibility.

Primarily because of the influence of Christianity, many westerners and others regard themselves as beings with a supernatural or immortal destiny, possessing a life after death. The purpose people have found in their life is to serve and love God. For Christians, the way to serve and love God is by emulating the life of Jesus, in whom they may find an expression of the highest virtue — love. They love when they perform selfless acts, develop a keen social conscience, and realize that human beings are creatures of God and therefore intrinsically worthwhile.

Religion involves not only a formal system of worship but prescription for social relationships. To do something good for others and to consider what is the best for others are the representatives of humankind's highest moral ideals and can be found in essence in all the great religions of the world. Although the law refuses to accept the idea that morality is based on the commands of God, many people believe that morality must be based on religion, either in the sense that without religion people would have no incentive to be moral or in the sense that only religion can provide us guidance. The religious world is but the reflex of the real world, which can, in any case, only then finally vanish when the practical relations of everyday life offer to man none but perfectly intelligible and reasonable relations with regard to his fellowmen and to nature. Karl Marx held this point of view (Mark 81), but the problem is that Marx's idea about religion and morality is some imagined ideal in a perfect society. As a matter of fact, the practical relations of everyday life offer man no perfectly intelligible and reasonable relations regarding his fellowman and nature. Since religion still plays a rather important role in human life, morality is certainly concerned with it. Anyone who fails to follow morality based on religion may have a phobic disorder, that is, in which he or she has an irrational, overwhelming, persistent fear of a particular object or situation.

There is more to living a morally good life, of course, than being good at your job. Many different ways of living our lives would meet our basic moral obligations. The type of life each of us seeks to live reflects our individual values, while the type of life each of the heroes seeks to live in the religious poems not

only reflects their individual values but also decides their individual values. No matter how people exist in the practical world or how the heroes exist in religious poetry, they tend to live a moral life for the purpose of showing their individual values through obtaining a sweet and virtuous soul, because

Only a sweet and virtuous soul,  
Like seasoned timber, never gives;  
But though the whole world turn to coal,  
Then chiefly lives. (Herber 1377)

### I. Asceticism and Morality

... in the Mount  
Moses was forty days, nor eat nor drank,  
And forty days Eliah without food  
Wandred this barren waste, the same I now:  
— *Paradise Regained*, B. I. L37

When discussing *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained* in his book *Authors in Their Age: Milton*, Esmor Jones points out that the fall of angels is ascribed to pride. They had turned from the worship of God to the worship of themselves (Jones 78). In order to prove his view, he cited a statement from an Elizabethan theologian Hooker on this point:

The fall of the angels, therefore, was pride. Since their fall, their practices have been the clean contrary to those just mentioned. For, being dispersed, some in the air, some in the earth, some in the water, some among the minerals, dens and caves that are under the earth; they have by all means laboured to effect a universal rebellion against the laws, and as far as in them lieth utter destruction of the ways of God. These wicked spirits the heathen honored instead of Gods, both generally under the name of dii inferi “gods infernal,” and particularly, some in oracles, some in idols, some as household gods, some as nymphs; in a word, no foul or wicked spirit which was not one way or other honored of men as god, till such time as light appeared in the world, and dissolved the works of the devil.

If Esmor Jones is correct, he only revealed one aspect of *Paradise Lost* and

*Paradise Regained*, more accurately, one of the aspects of *Paradise Lost*, and he ignored the most important fact: the asceticism hidden in these two poems. The word *asceticism*, originated from the Greek askusis, originally means “a course of self-discipline” such as that undertaken by athletes, and later was associated with rigorous self-discipline, abstinence, simplicity and the solitary and contemplative life popular in ancient society, early Christianity, and some forms of Buddhism and Hinduism. Some ascetics also follow exercises that consist in many means of tormenting themselves. Philosophically speaking, asceticism proposes that a person should repress desires. A strong version requires one to relinquish one's desires totally, while a weaker version demands only that one denies bodily or worldly desires. From a moral point of view, asceticism is seen as the way to free one's soul from the body's pollution, therefore, it is considered to be the way to gain truth or virtue and to be rewarded by God (Bunnin 81). Since the fall of angels is ascribed to pride (as Esmor Jones said), there must be a control over the pride in *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*, that is, the active propaganda of asceticism. When the man was created, God set up some obstacle, the tree of knowledge, to prevent human pride from developing:

...He who requires  
 From us no other service than to keep  
 This one, this easy charge — of all the tress  
 In Paradise that bear delicious fruit  
 So various, not to taste that only Tree  
 Of Knowledge, planted by the Tree of life;  
 So near grow Death to Life, whate'er Death is —  
 Some dreadful thing no doubt; for well thou know'st  
 God hath pronounced it Death to taste that Tree:  
 The only sign of our obedience left  
 Among so many signs of power and rule  
 Conferred upon us, and dominion given  
 Over all other creatures that possess  
 Earth, Air, and Sea. Then let us not think hard  
 One easy prohibition, who enjoy  
 Free leave so large to all things else, and choice  
 Unlimited of manifold delights;  
 But let us ever praise him, and extol  
 His bounty, following our delightful task,

To prune these growing plants, and tend these flowers;  
Which, were it toilsome, yet with thee sweet. (Lu 170)

Needless to say, the obstacle (the tree of knowledge) is predestined by God to prevent human beings from developing their pride, because it is the whole society then that needs a predestined obstacle to control people's ideology. As we know the age of Milton was a revolutionary one in which people sought freedom through religious reform. Take Calvinism for example. For Calvin the entire universe is utterly dependent on the will of the Almighty who created all things for His greater glory. Because of the original fall from grace, all human beings are sinners by nature, bound hand and foot to an evil inheritance they cannot escape. Nevertheless, the Lord for reasons of His own has predestined some for eternal salvation and damned all the rest to the torments of hell. Nothing that human beings do can alter their fate; their souls are stamped with God's blessing or curse before they are born. But this does not mean, in Calvin's opinion, that Christians should be indifferent to their conduct on earth. If they are among the elect, God will implant in them the desire to live right. Upright conduct is a sign, though not an infallible one, that whoever practices it has been chosen to sit at the throne of glory. Public profession of faith and participation in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper are also presumptive signs of election to be saved. But most of all, Calvin required an active life of piety and morality as a solemn obligation resting upon members of the Christian commonwealth. For him, good Christians should conceive of themselves as chosen instruments of God with a mission to help in the fulfillment of His purposes on earth, not striving for their soul's salvation but for the glory of God. In other words, Calvin clearly did not encourage his followers to sit with folded hands, serene in the knowledge that their fate was sealed (Lerner 471-72). These creeds of Calvinism really enraged Milton then. When he mentioned the creeds of Calvinism, he said: "Nothing can force me to respect the God of this kind, even though I may be sent into hell thereby (Weber 82)." Although we do not know if Milton was really angry about the creeds of Calvinism, he did not mean to hate them in his *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*. Obviously, there was a very sharp contradiction between Milton's view of Calvinism and what was described in his epic. On one hand, he pursued human freedom, on the other, as a puritan, he propagated ascetic ideas in his religious poems. We can find many examples of this kind from his *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*, and the following is one of them:

Full forty days he passed — whether on hill  
 Sometimes, anon in shady vale, each night  
 Under the covert of some ancient oak  
 Or cedar to defend him from the dew,  
 Or harboured in one cave, is not revealed;  
 Nor tasted human food, nor hunger felt,  
 Till those days ended; hungered then at last  
 Among wild beasts. (*Paradise Regained I*, L303-09)

.....

There he slept,  
 And dreamed, as appetite is wont to dream,  
 Of meats and drinks, nature's refreshment sweet.  
 Him thought he by the brook of Cherith stood,  
 And saw the ravens with their horny beaks  
 Food to Elijah bringing even and morn —  
 Though ravenous, taught to abstain from what they brought;  
 He saw the Prophet also, how he fled  
 Into the desert, and there he slept  
 Under a juniper — then how, awaked,  
 He found his supper on the coals prepared,  
 And by the Angel was bid rise and eat,  
 And eat the second tie after repose,  
 The strength whereof sufficed him forty days:  
 Sometimes that with Elijah he partook,  
 Or as a guest with Daniel at his pulse.  
 Thus wore out night; and now the herald lark  
 Left his ground-nest, high towering to descry  
 The Morn's approach, and greet her with his song:  
 As lightly from his grassy couch up rose  
 Our saviour, and found all was but a dream;  
 Fasting he went to sleep, and fasting waked. (Lu 82)

Here is a typical story about the ascetic activities of Jesus Christ. In order to do “Musing and much revolving in his breast / How best the mighty work he might begin / Of Saviour to mankind” (*Paradise Regained I*, Line24-25), he was led by the Spirit to walk into a wild desert, surrounded with rocks and far from the tracks of men. Through his ascetic activity, he wanted to be enlightened and to find out

some ultimate truth. Apparently simple and hard lives are usually regarded as ascetic activities, but behind which there is a factitiously concrete and living reality, which is obtained through the ascetics' meditation. Thus ascetic activities are not to give men a representation of the physical world but an imagined world full of dreams with which the individuals represent to themselves the world of which they are virtual members. In the above-mentioned lines of *Paradise Regained*, Jesus Christ was actually living in a virtual reality when he awoke he found it was only a dream. The dream or virtual reality that appears in the ascetics' meditation is just like a psychoactive drug, which can make the ascetics addict themselves to the factitious pleasures.

Why do I compare the dream or virtual reality in ascetic activities through meditation to a psychoactive drug? Because I think there is a striking feature both of them share, that is, both of them act on the nervous system to alter the ascetics' state of consciousness, modify their perceptions, and change their moods. From very early time on, when our ancient ancestors sat entranced around a communal fire, they began to search for some methods for producing pleasurable sensations and alter their states of consciousness. Among the methods that can alter consciousness are taking psychoactive drugs, such as alcohol, opiates, etc, and practicing meditation. Human beings are attracted to psychoactive methods because they can help them adapt to or escape from an ever-changing environment. Smoking, drinking, and taking drugs can reduce tension and frustration, relieve boredom and fatigue, and in some cases help people to escape from the harsh realities of the world. Psychoactive drugs provide them with pleasure by giving them tranquility, joy, relaxation, kaleidoscopic perceptions, surges of exhilaration, and prolonged heightened sensations.

Meditation is very common deep thought about spiritual matters usually in a very quiet situation, without being interrupted by any secular troubles. Only in this way, could Jesus Christ's mind become as transparent as a piece of glass, through which he saw meats and drinks, he saw "his supper on the coals prepared." There were no meats and drinks, and there was no supper prepared on the coals, of course, just a mirage — an illusion caused by some kind of purely imaginative daydreams.

The simplest and most convincing way of knowing the existence of anything would presumably be to meet it in experience. When the ascetic meets the existence of something or so-called mirage in an ecstatic state through meditation, he has actually the mystical experience. The ultimate purpose of meditation of any ascetic is to awaken him to know the existence of God. Then, is there really a way of knowing the existence of God that is like this way of knowing the existence of the

tre — equally immediate and indubitable? Of course God is not a physical object, and therefore is not to be sensed. Yet there may be another kind of experience, different from sense-experience in some way but like it in others, in which God is confronted directly, the way the tree seems to be confronted in vision. In such an experience, His existence and His nature, to some extent, would appear to the ascetics as clearly, as convincingly, as compellingly as the tree appears in daylight to the eye. This kind of way the ascetic come to have a direct experience of God in a meditative state is actually a mystical experience. If this experience is manifesting a radical difference from the experiences of daily life, it must be very hard for ascetics to have it. The purpose of it is to be an immediate acquaintance with some fundamental aspect of the nature of things lying beyond the natural world; it usually carries with it great emotional force and the power to transform the life of the experiencer. Jesus Christ seemed to get acquainted with some truth lying beyond the natural world: a feeling that there is a friendly power in nature, or an unseen spirit who is aware of him and concerned for him. In his most intense and compelling form of mystical experience, Christ found an overwhelming consciousness of communion with God, accompanied by visual imaginary and by sounds of superhuman speech. Then the consciousness of God becomes a transport of ecstasy, a feeling of utter oneness with the divine, of blessedness and more than natural aliveness. Christ was conscious of God, when he was in the wild desert, so he was in a great ecstasy, and he could survive the forty-day fasting. This story seems to be the reproduction of the ascetic life Milton lived when he wrote the epic:

When I consider how my light is spent  
 Ere half my days in this dark world and wide,  
 And that one talent which is death to hide  
 Lodged with me useless, though my soul more bent

To serve therewith my Maker, and present  
 My true account, lest He, returning, chide,  
 “Doth God exact day-labor, light denied?”  
 I fondly ask. But Patience, to prevent

That murmur, soon replies, “God doth not need  
 Either man’s work or his own gifts. Who best  
 Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best. His state

Is kingly: thousands at his bidding speed  
 And post o'er land and ocean without rest;  
 They also serve who only stand and wait. (Lu 82)

The poem shows us what an ascetic life Milton lived, and at the same time, it has raised a question for us: what is the significance of life? The answer to this question could also further explain the ascetic life of Jesus Christ. Reflections on the case of asceticism presented in the previous lines of the poem lead us to make clear what is the meaning of life. If we can mold our lives into a pattern whose instantiation we can regard as having intrinsic value, then we can have respect for ourselves as the partial embodiment of something worthwhile. Many people try to find such aims and fail. This is the predicament of the people, portrayed so perceptively by T. S. Eliot in *The Waste Land*. Of course, in our actual life, there are people who never bother to formulate some aims in their lives. They may live by a vague principle of minimal coherence. We cannot say that such persons must fail to live in a morally acceptable way, or they must fail to live happy lives. We do not encourage people to give up this way, even though we do not think it is a well-lived life. As far as we know, there are three features of a well-lived life that are more likely to be realized by some one with living aims than by some one lacking such. One of these is “the retaining of interest” in things. For instance, we talk of people having retained interest or losing interest: having the will to live, or having lost that will. If one’s interest fits into a general pattern, the interest is less likely to be lost. Another such feature is hope. If one has living aims in life, and thinks that one’s life leads up to something, then one can entertain hope even under adverse circumstances in which the prospects of doing well appear dim. Without living aims such hope is more difficult to sustain. Finally, an over-all conception of what is worthwhile in a human life enables us to find acceptance of conditions beyond our control (e.g. aging, death) without lapsing into phlegmatic inactivity that prevents us from working towards changing what is not inevitable (Moravcsik 68). These three features of well-lived life are the essential factors that decide the mystical life of the ascetics. Milton himself was the very person to retain the interest in things, to entertain hopes even under adverse circumstances, to accept the conditions beyond his control. In 1663, Milton, in blindness, poverty, defeat, and relative isolation, set about completing *Paradise Lost*, “justifying the ways of God to men,” which he had first envisaged many years before, and he got it published in 1667. It was recognized at once as a supreme epic achievement, despite the many difficulties

that it presented, despite its unfamiliar meter (blank verse was rare outside drama), despite the unpopularity of its attitudes and Milton's reputation as a dangerous man (Abram 1435). What is the dynamic power that drove him to insist on finishing his writing? Aims! In the poem on his blindness, he said: "my soul more bent / To serve therewith my Maker," and in another poem entitled *To Cyriack Skinner, Upon His Blindness*, he wrote: "yet I argue not / Against Heaven's hand or will, nor bate a jot / Of heart or hope, but still bear up and steer / Right onward. What supports me, dost thou ask? / The conscience, friend, to have lost them overplied / in liberty's defense, my noble task, / Of which all Europe rings from side to side" (Lu 84). Obviously, Milton had a very clear aim when he wrote *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*, that is, to work for God and to defend liberty, the noble task. It was just because of his clear living aim that he still had the will to live on even when he was blind, that he was full of hope that could lead up to something even when he was in a terrible situation, that he was brave enough to accept the conditions beyond his control (his blind eyes) and lived an ascetic-like life.

Like Milton, Jesus Christ had a very clear aim predestined by God in his life: But first I mean / To exercise him in the Wilderness; / There he shall first lay down the rudiments / Of his great warfare, ere I send him forth / To conquer Sin and Death, the two grand foes (*Paradise Regained I*, Line:155-59). This predestined aim has explained the ascetic spirit of Jesus Christ in *Paradise Regained*, which is closely associated with the requirement of early capitalism in Britain. Max Weber, the great German sociologist, noticing that the economically advanced territories of England, Holland, and North America had all been Protestant, argued that Protestantism, particularly in its Calvinist forms, was especially conducive to acquisitive economic enterprise. According to him, this was because Calvinistic theology, as opposed to Catholicism, sanctified the ventures of profit-oriented traders and moneylenders, and gave an exalted place in its ethical system to the business virtues of thrift and diligence (Lerner 476). The predestined aim exists not only in *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*, but also in *Prometheus Unbound*:

Three thousand years of sleep-unsheltered hours,  
And moments aye divided by keen pangs  
Till they seemed years, torture and solitude,  
Scorn and despair,— these are mine empire.  
More glorious far than that which thou surveyest  
From thine unenvied throne, O, Might God!  
Almighty, had I deigned to share the shame

Of thine ill tyranny, and hung not here  
 Nailed to this wall of eagle-baffling mountain,  
 Black, wintry, dead, unmeasured; without herb,  
 Insect, or beast, or shape, or sound of life.  
 Ah me! Alas, pain, pain ever, for ever! (Shelley 120)

.....

I would fain  
 Be what it is my destiny to be,  
 The saviour and the strength of suffering man,  
 Or sink into the original gulf of things:  
 There is no agony, and no solace left;  
 Earth can console, Heaven can torment no more. (Shelley 128)

Prometheus was one of the Titans, a gigantic race, who inhabited the earth before the creation of man. With the aid of Minerva, he went up to heaven, and lighted his torch at the chariot of the sun and brought down fire to man. With this gift man was more than a match for all other animals. It enabled him to make weapons wherewith to subdue them; tools with which to cultivate the earth; to warm his dwelling, so as to be comparatively independent of climate; and finally to introduce the arts and to coin money, the means of trade and commerce. Therefore, Prometheus has been a favorite subject with the poets. He is represented as the friend of mankind, who interposed in their behalf, and who taught them civilization and arts. Jupiter had him chained to a rock on Mount Caucasus, where a vulture preyed on his liver, which was renewed as fast as it was devoured. This state of torment might have been brought to an end at any time by Prometheus, if he had been willing to submit to his oppressor; for he possessed a secret which involved the stability of Jove's throne, and if he would have revealed it, he might have been at once taken into favor. From the above lines of *Prometheus Unbound*, we know that Prometheus would rather be chained to a rock for three thousand years than submit to his oppressor. Why could he endure such a miserable torment, or why must he live such an ascetic life? Aims! With the aim to set the suffering human beings free from the miserable world, and with the aim to realize his ideal society in which "*There is no agony, and no solace left,*" he would rather suffer for human beings, as if in this way he could bring human beings back to the Golden age. I cannot make comments on Prometheus this way without any reason. Milton once envisaged, in one of his early poems entitled *On the Morning of Christ's Nativity*, such a golden age:

## XIV

For, if such holy song  
 Enwrap our fancy long,  
 Time will run back and fetch the age of Gold;  
 And speckled Vanity  
 Will sicken soon and die;  
 And leprous Sin will melt from earthly mould;  
 And Hell it self will pass away,  
 And leave her dolorous mansions to the peering day.

## XV

Yea, Truth and Justice then  
 Will down return to men,  
 Orbed in a rainbow; and, like glories wearing,  
 Mercy will sit between,  
 Throned in celestial sheen,  
 With radiant feet the tissued clouds down steering;  
 And Heaven, as at some festival,  
 Will open wide the gates of her high palace-hall. (Lu 13)

Here, we can still find the aim of the ascetic spirit of Jesus Christ, that is, to find out the ultimate truth for the moral standard through the ascetic way of life.

## II. Sin and the Wrestling against It

For still they knew, and ought to have still remembered  
 The high Injunction not to taste that Fruit,  
 Whoever tempted; which they not obeying,  
 Incurred, what could they less, the penalty,  
 And manifold in sin, deserved to fall.  
 — *Paradise Lost*, B.X. L12

Why does there exist an ascetic life of the protagonists, as discussed, in the religious poems mentioned above? It is because of sin. All the Christians who try an ascetic life are actually fighting against sin.

Theologically, sin is taken to mean rebellion against God or to mean the

severe wrongdoing or faults in moral character due to disobedience of a Divine command or a violation of natural law. A person's sense of sin is one paradigm of religious experience. According to the *New Testament*, all men are sinful, because we inherited original sin from Adam and Eve, the common father of humankind. Christians believe that the death of Jesus was a sacrifice for human sins. A person after death will be sent to hell if judged by God to be an unrepentant sinner. In a loose sense, sin is synonymous with evil, but strictly speaking, sin is an evil committed towards God, rather than other persons. Only God may be asked to pardon sins. On some interpretations, sin results from our following of our sensory nature against our rational nature. It is committed when we do not do the good we know that God requires of us (Bunnin 930).

When sin is taken to mean rebellion against God, it seems to indicate that an individual and his God deal with each other so directly as to shut out relations of the individual with other individuals, but usually the relationship between an individual and God is taken to involve the relationship between the individual and his fellow men. As we know, individuals are not isolated individuals, but the social individuals, that is, they are the most important and decisive elements of the society. While society exists as an objective fact above and apart from us, it is also a social construction — created, reaffirmed, and altered through the day-to-day interactions of the very people it influences and controls. The interplay between personal and social forces is the defining feature of everyday life. The effect of social structure on our personal actions is often felt when we are compelled to obey the commands of someone who has authority over us, but the authority no bigger than that of God.

However widely or narrowly one's social relations and responsibilities may be interpreted as entering into one's relation with God and thereby affect the range of ideology, the consciousness of sin is felt. The test for sin is ultimately whether or not one has rebelled against God or one has committed the severe wrongdoing or has faults in moral character due to disobedience of a Divine command or a violation of natural law. Socially, morally and psychologically there are five types of sins.

### **Sin as a Particular Fact**

In our daily range of ethical interpretation, it is more likely for a person to interpret sin with reference to particular facts in his experience, rather than with reference to great drifts in his conduct. This is especially noticeable in the lives of children, but it is common in many persons of mature years and limited experience and outlook. For example, a child is often instructed that to take an apple from a

fruit-stand without paying for it is wrong and will be displeasing to God. Once that idea is firmly implanted, to take an apple from any fruit-stand anywhere will be felt to be wrong and displeasing to God; that is, it will be felt to be a sin. Similarly the child can be instructed and made to feel that to take something that belongs to a schoolmate is wrong, or that to pluck a flower without permission from the neighbor's yard is wrong. Although his experience is too limited to grasp immediately the significance of the moral law that to take anything that belongs to somebody else without paying for it or being given permission to take it, is wrong and sinful, he will grow into the appreciation of such a law inductively as he gradually accumulates enough experiences of particular things that are wrong to do so. In religious poems, the poets provide readers with many experiences of particular things so that they can make readers grow into the appreciation of moral laws quickly:

But he, the seventh from thee, whom thou beheld'st  
 The only righteous in a world perverse,  
 And therefore hated, therefore so beset  
 With foes, for daring single to be just,  
 And utter odious truth, that God would come  
 To judge them with his Saint — him the Most High, (*Paradise Lost*,  
 Book XI, L700-06)

.....

The brazen throat of war had ceased to roar;  
 All now was turned to jollity and game,  
 To luxury and riot, feast and dance,  
 Marrying or prostituting, as befell,  
 Rape or adultery, where passing fair  
 Allured them; thence from cups to civil broils. (*Paradise Lost*, Book XI,  
 L713-18)

.....

The floating vessel swum  
 Uplifted, and secure with beaked prow  
 Rode tilting o'er the waves; all dwellings else  
 Flood overwhelmed, and them with all their pomp  
 Deep under water rolled; sea covered sea,  
 Sea without shore: and in their palaces,  
 Where luxury late reigned, sea-monsters whelped

And stabled: of mankind, so numerous late,  
 All left in one small bottom swum embarked. (*Paradise Lost*, Book XI,  
 L745-53)

These are some descriptions of the experiences of typically particular things that are wrong to do. We might say that, in our first attempts at these lines of verse, we tried to formalize what they indicate, that is to say, we can find some truth from these lines of verse just like the case in which a child can find a moral law inductively from an apple and a flower. In trying to analyze these lines of verses as a particular thing, it reminds me of the seven deadly sins listed in medieval philosophy and theology as pride, covetousness, envy, gluttony, anger, sloth, and lust. These seven deadly sins have shown themselves as the permanence of some sinful patterns of spatial organization which the history of ideas and myths allow us to call the reference moral standards, against which the common moral laws have been formed into people's mind. The critical impact of the reference moral standards is not the fact of the model itself, but the difference between the model and reality; these differences being exhibited by the moral pictures. But this critical impact, which is a latent characteristic of all moralities, is not separated from the dominant systems of ideas and values: it expresses itself through the structures and the vocabulary of those systems by which readers can come to understand the real conditions of their existence. Against the reference moral standards, the existence of the these kinds of terribly perverse behaviors such as "All now was turned to jollity and game, / To luxury and riot, feast and dance, / Marrying or prostituting, as befell, / Rape or adultery, where passing fair / Allured them" is powerful enough to make people sinful, and God angry. Therefore He starts a flood to eliminate the immoral people as some severe punishment. It is this necessity of the particular description of *Paradise Lost* that makes people know what is wrong to do and what is right to do, and it is people's awareness of what is wrong and what is right that forms the foundation of the moral code.

### **Sin as a General Discrepancy in Oneself**

Another common form that the sin idea takes is that one is wrong in his whole relation to God, rather than in one particular or other. Sometimes this general discrepancy is sensed through a variety of misdemeanors, which conspire to convince one that his whole life is wrong; but sometimes the feeling arises in another way. If one is taught from infancy that all men are naturally sinful, the idea of his own inherent sinfulness will take root and work itself out in a conviction of sinfulness, which may have in it no reference to any specific acts. Even if one is not

taught from infancy, one can certainly get the same idea when he is old enough to read some religious poetry:

“Adam, now ope thine eyes, and first behold  
The effects which thy original crime hath wrought  
In some to spring from thee, who never touched  
The excepted tree, nor with the Snake conspired,  
Nor sinned thy sin, yet from that sin derive  
Corruption to bring forth more violent deeds.” (*Paradise Lost XI*, L423-28)

.....

Whereas he inly raged, and , as they talked,  
Smote him into the midriff with a stone  
That beat out life; he fell, and, deadly pale,  
Groaned out his soul, with gushing blood effused. (*Paradise Lost XI*, L444-47)

.....

“These two are brethren, Adam, and to come  
Our of thy loins. The unjust the just hath slain,  
For envy that his brother's offering found  
From Heaven acceptance; but the bloody fact  
Will be avenged, and the other's faith approved  
Lose no reward, though here thou see him die,  
Rolling in dust and gore.” (*Paradise Lost XI*, L454-60)

To read the above mentioned lines of verse from the religious poems, such as *Paradise Lost*, will make the reader conscious of the idea of his general sinfulness, just like John Bunyan, who became so imbued with the idea of his general sinfulness that he needed to go through some experience of conversion from general sinfulness before he could be at peace with himself. He wrote in *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* in this way:

Once as I was walking to and fro in a good man's shop, bemoaning to myself in my sad and doleful state, afflicting myself with self-aborrence for this wicked and ungodly thought, lamenting also for this hard hap of mine, for that I should commit so great a sin, greatly fearing I should not be pardoned; praying also in my heart, that if this sin of mine did differ from that against the

Holy Ghost, the Lord would show it to me: and being now ready to sink with fear, suddenly there was as if there had rushed in at the window the noise of wind upon me, but very pleasant, and as if I had heard a voice speaking, Didst ever refuse to be justified by the blood of Christ? and withal my whole life of profession past was in a moment opened to me, wherein I was made to see that designedly I had not ; so my heart answered groaningly, No. Then fell with power that word of God upon me, See that ye refuse not him that speaketh. This made a strange seizure upon my spirit; it brought light with it, and commanded a silence in my heart of all those tumultuous thoughts that before did use, like masterless hellhounds to roar and bellow and make a hideous noise within me. It showed me also that Jesus Christ had yet a work of grace and mercy for me, that he had not, as I had feared, quite forsaken and cast off my soul. (Bunyan 1855)

From Bunyan's psychological reaction towards general sinfulness, people will become aware that the feeling of general sinfulness may come about through some new vision which has broken upon an individual's consciousness of what holy living means. When we catch a vision of great personal superiority in another, the reflex feeling we are bound to experience is that of corresponding inferiority in ourselves. Let such a new ideal come into the consciousness of a person, and instantly he begins to feel that some kinds of behavior which he had before felt to be innocent are now sinful; and this feeling is retroactive, laying a more or less rigorous hand upon all of the individual's experience from his moment of enlightenment back to the days of childhood.

#### **Sin as Venial or Mortal**

In some theological theories a distinction is made between venial and mortal, or deadly, sin. The venial sin is that which may be forgiven or pardoned, whereas the mortal, or deadly, sin is that for which no forgiveness can be expected. Thus Prometheus on the part of a rebeler stealing fire from Heaven in favor of mankind is looked upon as the most venial of offenses. But such sins as pride, covetousness, lust, anger, gluttony, envy, and sloth, are looked upon (especially by the Roman Catholic Church) as the seven deadly sins that, if they become triumphant in human nature, mean spiritual death and utter banishment from the presence of God. Thus Satan on the part of a rebeler seducing Eve to eat the fruit from the tree of knowledge is always looked upon as the most mortal sin, for which no forgiveness can be expected, and thereby Satan was horribly punished:

...He wondered, but not long  
 Had leisure, wondering at himself now more.  
 His visage drawn he felt to sharp and spare,  
 His arms clung to his ribs, his legs entwining  
 Each other, till, supplanted, down he fell,  
 A monstrous serpent on his belly prone,  
 Reluctant, but in vain; a greater power  
 Now ruled him, punished in the shape he sinne  
 According to his doom.... (*Paradise Lost X*, L509-17)

Satan was no more pardonable, for he had committed unpardonable sin against the Holy Spirit. His seducing Eve to eat the fruit was directly to rebel against God and God's will under the drive of pride, envy and anger, three of the seven deadly sins. In *Paradise Lost Book IV*, when Satan saw the happy life of Adam and Eve, "Aside the Devil turned/ For envy; yet with jealous leer malign / Eyed them askance, and to himself thus plained: — / Sight hateful, sight tormenting! Thus these two, / Imparadised in one another arms, / The happier Eden, shall enjoy their fill / Of bliss on bliss; while I to Hell am thrust, / Where neither joy nor love, but fierce desire, / Among our other torments not the least, / Still unfulfilled, with pain of longing pines!" (*Paradise Lost IV*, L502-511) Satan had been imbued with the heinous idea of crimes before he seduced Eve. This kind of description is very powerful, for the fear that one may become the perpetrator of unpardonable sin sometimes acts as a powerful deterrent from sinful modes of behavior. Thus religious poems may often preach about the unpardonable sin, with the hope of implanting in their readers a desire to escape such a horrible condition of life.

### **Sin as Selfishness**

In so far as sin is held to involve one's relation with his neighbors, it becomes practically a synonym for selfishness. Selfishness may be an action or a kind of consciousness concerned with or directed towards one's own advantage without care for others. Deep inside the selfish person, there is an interests-centered motive drive. In its original form, drive theory was used to explain various biological functions such as eating, drinking, sleeping, and having sex. The hunger-eating cycle illustrates a presumed chain of event: food deprivation →hunger (drive) →seeking food and eating →drive reduction (Kasin 296). Obviously, drive theory can be applicable to some selfish behavior of the protagonists in the religious poems. The following is one example:

## Unreal City

Under the brown fog of a winter noon

Mr. Eugnides, the Smyrna Merchant

Unshaven, with a pocket full of currants

C.i.f. London: documents at sight,

Asked me in demotic French

To luncheon at the Cannon street Hotel

Followed by a weekend at the Metropole. (*The Waste Land*, L207-14 )

In these lines of verses from *The Waste Land*, the merchant, Mr. Eugenides is designed by the poet to live in an “Unreal City”. Because he is selfishness and because the merchant is usually selfish, just like Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*, Eugenides is to set himself against the will of God. Nothing can really happen against God’s will, and an omnipotent being who can not prevent the moral evils — the selfish acts he foresees is because of human beings' free will. It is not strange that the world Eugenides is in is a world full of human free will and far from the requirements of God. Free will derives from the natural feeling that we can choose what we do according to the dictates of our own soul, without being compelled (Bunnin 396). The dictates of our own soul, as a matter of fact here, refer to the motive drive in our mind. Eugenides must be selfish when he is in the "Unreal City," the dictates of his soul drive him to dream for more wealth. His desire (drive) for more wealth or money has brought him to a dreamy world, in which any success in money or wealth gain will make his psychological tension (caused by the desire or drive) relaxed, thereby he will be greatly satisfied through the drive reduction. Some readers would find that this argument only makes things logically worse, for if we say that God could will a person not to perform a certain selfish act, and yet that person, in his free will or in his motive drive, could still perform it, then we seem to be saying that God is not omnipotent (for not everything he wills to happen really happens). As a result, this argument has killed God. The death of God is certainly to cause a great deal of hallucination-like puzzlement, bewilderment and confusion in human beings, therefore, people, just like Eugenides who lives selfishly to set himself against the will of God, in *The Waste Land* live not only in the real waste land but also in the unreal city.

### **Sin as the Violation of Group Morality**

In the simpler stage of society, as we have noticed, there seems to be no clear idea of sin apart from the tribal mores. The principle customs of the tribe are embedded in religious sanctions, and they lay upon the members of the tribe a

religious obligation to observe them exactly. To break them is not merely crime, in the sense in which it is crime to break the laws of a civilized state or society; it is sin, for it threatens to bring upon the head of the offender the wrath of the god of the tribe, and not upon him only, but also upon his whole tribe. Even in our most developed society there is a marked connection between group morality and sin. The prevalent conception of what actions are sinful is based almost wholly upon standards erected, or at least recognized and adopted, by particular groups; and each group has more or less distinct ideas of what is right and fitting on the part of its members. As far as this point is concerned, we are the same as primitive men, that is to say, sin is a matter of violated social standards. Any violation of social standards is regarded as sin and must be horribly punished by God, the king of Egypt was cruel to the descendents of Adam and Eve and was punished together with his country and his people by God:

... Whence of guests he makes them slaves  
 Inhospitably, and kills their infant males:  
 Till, by two brethren (those two brethren call  
 Moses and Aaron) sent from God to claim  
 His people from enthralment, they return,  
 With glory and spoil, back to their promised land.  
 But first the lawless tyrant, who denies  
 To know their God, or message to regard.  
 Must be compelled by signs and judgements dire:  
 Frogs, lice, and flies must all his palace fill  
 With loathed intrusion, and fill all the land;  
 His cattle must of rot and murrain die;  
 Botches and blains must all his flesh emboss,  
 And all his people; thunder mixed with hail,  
 Hail mixed with fire, must rend the Egyptian sky,  
 And wheel on the earth, devouring where it rolls;  
 What it devours not, herb, or fruit, or grain,  
 A darksome cloud of locusts swarming down  
 Must eat, and on the ground leave nothing green;  
 Darkness must overshadow all his bounds,  
 Palpable darkness, and blot out three days;  
 Last, with one midnight-stroke, all the first-born  
 Of Egypt must lie dead... (*Paradise Lost XII*, L167-90)

Milton told us the story from Old Testament about how the descendents of Adam and Eve were put into slavery and how they were pitilessly slaughtered. The inhuman slaughtering act of the king of Egypt was, as a matter of fact, severely against the common standards of any society, and therefore it was a sin. After reading these lines of verses, we may allow that there is some room for the conviction of sin over and above this loyalty to the standards of the group, for occasionally some person will feel the very things which his group accepts as right to be wrong. We cannot say that the brutal act of the king of Egypt toward the Israelies failed to represent the interests of his people, that is to say, what the king had done was in accordance with the standards of that particular society in that particular time; and yet whatever the excuse might be, it is a sin against the common standards of a civilized society and God's will. Anyway, the civilized man's standard of what constitutes sin is certainly more comprehensive than the primitive man's, and it is adjusted to the higher demands of a broadened and more seasoned ethical temper, but nevertheless it is still largely formed about what the group thinks is right and wrong.

### Works Cited

- Abrams, M. H. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature (Vol. 1)*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1993.
- Bunnin, Nicholas and Yu, Jiyuan. *Dictionary of Western Philosophy: English-Chinese*. Beijing: People's Press, 2001.
- Bunyan, John. "Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners." *The Norton Anthology of English Literature (Vol. 1)*. Ed. M. H. Abrams. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1993.
- Herbert, George. "Virtue." *The Norton Anthology of English Literature (Vol. 1)*. Ed. Abrams. M. H.. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1993.
- Jones, Esmor. *Authors in Their Age*. London: Blackie & Son Ltd, 1977.
- Kassin, Saul. *Psychology*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1998.
- Lerner, Robert E. and Standish Meacham. *Western Civilizations: Their History and Their Culture*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1993.
- Lu, Peixian. *A Student's Edition of Milton (Vol. I: Texts)*. Beijing: The Commercial Press, 1996.
- Marx, Karl. "Capital." *Readings on Religion: From Inside and Outside*. Ed. Robert S. Ellwood, Jr.. New Jersey: Prentice-Hill, Inc., 1978.
- Moravcsik, Julius M. E. "On What We Aim at and How We Live." *Social and Personal Ethics*. Ed. William H. Shaw. Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1993.

Shelley, Percy Bysshe. "Prometheus Unbound." *The Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*. Ed.

Mrs. Shelley. Philadelphia: Crissy & Markley, 1839.

马克思·韦伯：《新教徒伦理与资本主义精神》，黄晓京、彭强译。成都：四川人民出版社，1986年。

[Weber, Max. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Trans. Xiaojing Huang, Qiangpeng. Chengdu: Sichuan People's Publishing House, 1986.]

责任编辑：李敏锐