

ON HARD LIBERTY: THE CONSIDERATION OF AN ARGUMENT FROM PARADISE LOST

SARA ECKERSON

The expression *hard liberty* appears in a rare moment of deliberation among Satan's peers, in the context of formal discourse. The devils' speeches take place in Book II of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, after Satan and the apostate angels have already been driven away from Heaven. A great hall—Pandaemonium—is constructed in Hell, which serves as the “high capital of Satan and his Peers.”^[1] Innumerable spirits, devils, and cherubim, gather there; some even reduce their immense forms so that every devil can join together in that place.^[2] The purpose of this great meeting is for the *Council* to decide on what to do next. A few notable figures thereby address the crowd with proposals.

Moloch suggests that they should all go to war again to re-enter Heaven; it is almost certain that they will annihilate themselves in the process, but it will be worth it. Belial offers a speech that has a less active solution: the devils of the Deep should sit, waiting around in “hope” for their situation to become better. Alienation from their ambition is hidden behind a veil of rhetoric in this speech. It becomes apparent that it is through their sloth that Belial believes God might take pity on them; he feels they should put their trust in chance that their existence will be better some day in the future, by God's hand.

Mammon presents the most convincing argument before the *Infernal Peers* of Pandaemonium. He issues a long-term plan, full of activity. In what follows, crucial moments in Mammon's speech will be considered to show the depth of his thought and the significance of *hard liberty* for the devils.

THE SPEECH

In his speech, Mammon's first, and perhaps greatest, problem is related to place: “for what place can be for us / Within Heav'ns bound.”^[3] If they do wait and hope (as suggested by Belial), and they are eventually allowed back into God's kingdom, they will have to serve God; for Mammon, this outcome is undesirable. Thus, rather than pursue an end that leads to “splendid vassalage” under God, he says that they (the devils of the Deep) should:

rather seek
our own good from our selves, and from our own
Live to our selves, though in this vast recess,
Free, and to none accountable, preferring
Hard liberty before the easie yoke
Of servile Pomp[4]

Mammon shows here that he wants to find a proper mode of existence that is right for himself and is right for all the other inhabitants of Hell. What he describes is ultimately a physical place and a mental place. By adopting this new mode of thought, they will not be subservient to an Other. Therefore, the devils must first look inward; they must find the good in themselves (and not from God).

The notion that they will find the good within themselves also suggests that the mind and reasoning of each *Infernal Peer* will be different. Milton emphasizes this with alliteration and repetition: *our own good from our own selves*, and *from our own / Live to our selves*. The “good” will be found within them, or at least something serving the same purpose as the good will be found there. But, of course, the absurdity of the argument is that we are not talking about a universal definition of good or evil for the community. Each spirit of the Deep will live in Hell, each living in accordance with their own good; by so doing they will be *free*. This freedom is then outlined in more detail. Mammon calls it: *hard liberty*.

At first, it seems that *hard liberty* in this sense is material, as it is found within each devil’s own being and depends wholly on themselves for its sustainability. It is as though they can touch their own liberty by merely touching their own outward constitution. (Imagine one of them would tap their chest, gesturing toward their heart and say that *that* spot is the seat of their “good.”)

But the grand project in *hard liberty* points toward a vision of a utopian state for the Deep. Mammon further describes how *hard liberty* turns material in their surroundings, in this utopia, where the desert of Hell will reveal its “hidden lustre, Gemms and Gold,” and (with their skill or Art) they will “raise Magnificence” in that place.[5] For ease of comprehension, Mammon’s utopian state can be described in the following way:

1. Firstly, the demons of Hell must make a state, where each one rules in accordance with their own “good”;
2. Then, they build *magnificence* out of the desert. (These may not be physical buildings necessarily, but a condition that is created through work or art and performed upon the soil.)
3. Finally, this process leads to an organic transformation where their “torments... become [their] Elements”; their *tempers* will be changed into the *temper* of the fires of Hell.[6]

In other words, the devils “earn” *hard liberty* by finding the “good” within themselves and not by looking to something external.[7] This is then transferred to a state where they use their genius or Art to create a *magnificent* place; and finally, they become

unified with their surroundings – their elements and their temper (their constitution and their disposition) fuse with that of the Deep – thereby eliminating any feeling of pain.

Mammon concludes his speech emphasizing the need for peace (over war [in reference to Moloch's proposal]) and a "settled State of order"[8] over chaos. He calls for the *Council's* best judgment "with regard / of what we are and where." [9] Milton's narration describes the great applause for Mammon's plan. Simply put, the proposal is to make a utopian Empire that emulates Heaven, but that is different in two fundamental ways (first, the notion of "good" is more akin to evil; second, there is no Godhead or explicit head of the Empire).

Policy and statecraft are not explicitly present in Mammon's speech, but they are implied for the order and maintenance of his utopian state (and Milton also refers to "pollicy," accompanying the founding of the new empire, in his narration). [10] The devils must be self-sufficient enough, and have a soundness of mind, to follow the "good" they find in themselves (respectively). Nevertheless, deliberating on a false sense of the good must result in a positive action to build up this utopian state. Their *magnificence* comes in the way that each one can act in accordance with themselves and, at the same time, work toward the same communal project (for example, building a pyramid in the desert of Hell.) As Mammon describes, they do not lack the skill or Art to build something magnificent, but the question is: how, and toward what, will they apply that great skill?

Becoming one with one's surroundings seems like the easy part of this proposal (as we learned in Book I, the spirits can change their shapes to become smaller). By living in a hot and miserable climate for an unspeakable amount of time on an Eternal continuum, it may be assumed that these demons will become so accustomed to that heat and unpleasantness that they will physically become an extension of that inhospitable environment. It is as though they will eventually look out over the deserts and fires of the Deep and recognize these as part of themselves, as though seeing a reflection of themselves in a mirror.

Mammon, importantly, does not advocate for the establishment of a single Evil power at the head of this new empire or utopian state. Mammon insists on considering how best to become accustomed to "our present evils" with respect to who and what they are. [11] His original suggestion addresses both of these components: "What we are" is solved by acknowledging that they can find the "good" within themselves as they all hold a perverted sense of the good; "and where" is addressed through a union with their surroundings as a way to control and relieve physical pain.

THE REACTION

The greatness of Mammon's utopia can be seen in the way that Beelzebub's speech (the true author of which is Satan) is fundamentally a reaction to it. Beelzebub speaks directly after Mammon. He suggests that they "find some easier enterprize," to locate this other "world" where there is a race called *Man*, who are favored more than the devils. [12]

Beelzebub claims that the devils of the Deep have greater “power and excellence” than humankind.[13] This claim of greatness also seems to speak to the fact that Mammon’s project, although difficult, might actually work. Only with great power and excellence could an exemplary state of order be possible. Nevertheless Beelzebub (from Satan’s design) proposes:

- They (the fallen angels) persuade God’s creation (humankind) to their side
- Or, waste the entire earth with Hellfire[14]
- And make the inhabitants of earth believe that God is their foe and have *them* destroy the earth (thereby not requiring the demons to destroy it).[15]

This short-term project (originally hatched by Satan) allows Beelzebub to plead his case, which at its root is deeply opposed to Mammon’s utopian state. The crowd is greatly taken by this prospect. Their eyes sparkle with joy.[16] Yet none of the devils desires to go on the voyage to the new world to undertake the plan. Satan rises above the other demons; standing with *transcendent glory* and *Monarchal pride* he offers to go on the journey. The other spirits praise him for putting his own safety at risk to carry out this project. And in this praise, Milton narrates “neither do the Spirits damn’d / Loose all thir vertue.”[17] The devils recognize the unimaginable courage this task requires and *rejoice* their *matchless Chief*. The issue here is the difference between Mammon’s utopia of equal powers and this short-term project that gives Satan a monopoly of power over the spirits of the Deep.

Before Satan leaves, he tells the devils to find a way to ease their pain in their current home, to render Hell more tolerable, and he says they should find a *cure* or *charm* for their pain.[18] This is his solution to their present predicament: successfully resolving the issue of their pain or fooling them into thinking they have found a cure are both equal ground. In this way, Satan shows he does not care what it is that they do, but they are allowed to do it. Milton has elsewhere called this kind of “liberty” under a tyrant: *license*. [19]

What this *license* means can be understood in how this is exemplified. Milton describes what the demons are doing in the meantime while Satan goes on his voyage: the narrative of *Paradise Lost* leaves them in Hell engaged in various activities. What can be found first is a general sentiment; the devils are in a new state of hope before the short-term mission:

Thence more at ease thir minds and somewhat rais’d
By false presumptuous hope, the ranged powers
Disband, and wandering, each his several way
Pursues, as inclination or sad choice
Leads him perplext, where he may likeliest find
Truce to his restless thoughts, and entertain
The irksom hours, till his great Chief return[20]

This resignation disguised in false hope, this pathetic wandering as “inclination or sad choice” would have it, paints a true picture of despair. There is nothing, truly, that will save them. Yet they must distract themselves from their pain until Satan gets back, just as Satan has instructed them to do. Their “freedom” beneath this license manifests in four activities:

1. The more active demons partake in sport;[\[21\]](#)
2. Other (artistic) demons compose beautiful music, singing of their fate, fooling their senses (as well as their audience’s senses), which suspends their pain;[\[22\]](#)
3. Devils with philosophical inclinations retire to a hill where they discuss good and evil, glory and shame, although all these debates are based on fallacious arguments;[\[23\]](#)
4. Devils that are adventurous types band together and explore Hell (to see if they can find a pleasant spot); to their horror they find only more awful things leading to the conclusion that they reside in a “universe of death,” in a place where *Nature breeds, perverse, all monstrous, all prodigious things, / Abominable, inutterable.*[\[24\]](#)

Sport, music, philosophy and exploration all maintain a touch of virtue here because they do not fall into the category of sloth. These activities all attempt to build up toward something. We can almost envision these activities undertaken in a positive paradigm where the devils are acting in accordance with their understanding of the good (no matter how demented it might be). These activities further reveal something about the devils’ personalities, their will, and their talent. Nevertheless, the outcome is always the same: the race will be won and over (leading to boredom), and the uproar caused by the spectators is likened to the intense pain Hercules felt when wearing the robe of Nessus; the music is not perfect and is simply distraction from pain; the philosophers are unable to make proper judgements on their themes but base their conclusions on specious reasoning; and the explorers realize that this kingdom of theirs is worse than they had first imagined.

The activities Satan has given the devils the license to do are all poisoned; despite what little virtue may still be active in the devils, in their inclination and choice, they are consistently led back to their unspeakable reality. They are fragmented from each other in the sense that they are not working together in the spirit of a true positive project. Their restless thoughts[\[25\]](#) are not directed toward a common goal to create a utopian state but reveal the dimming of the light of their minds before a greater darkness. It is through *sad choice* that the vassal identifies his master.

Despite the rhetoric of the speeches, it may be argued that the *Infernal Peers* do not make any real decisions at Pandaemonium. Their choice was already made for them, as the majority are unable to decide what is actually better for themselves. The other speakers each identify their minds (that is, through the articulation of their thoughts for the good of the many) and their bodies (through the explicit recognition of collective physical pain). Beelzebub’s speech does very little of either; he first tugs at their heartstrings by saying they will lose their titles as “Ethereal Vertues”[\[26\]](#) and suggests logical thought by presenting what would be most hurtful to God (and also by looking

for what is *easier*). There is no discussion of what might be good for all (or most); he focuses instead on what is worse for their enemy. In Mammon's articulation of *hard liberty*, freedom is identified as something that is earned (not given); what one does is seated in one's own reasoning.

In the end, however, Mammon's *hard liberty* utopian project was most likely doomed to fail. As the moment came and the devils of Hell revealed their collective pusillanimous character—unable to act, unable to volunteer for the voyage to earth that would grant them a status of grandeur over the other spirits—this shows that most likely the devils would not have been unable to carry out a project of endurance and *magnificence* through collective work. Their inaction at a crucial moment of choice identified an evil stronger than the one each devil could find in themselves; when they sat on their hands, their autonomy dissipated into vulgarity. It is this evil that drives them to despair and servitude, to an endless wandering; and when they peer into the depths of the Lethean Sound, they are confronted with the image of the chains that keep them bound to the Deep.

[1] For quotations from *Paradise Lost* see: John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, edited by Barbara K. Lewalski. Malden and Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007. The text of this edition is based on the second edition of *Paradise Lost* (1674) in twelve books using Harvard copy 14486.3 B as copy text. *PL*, vi. This specific quotation, I.755-7.

[2] I.789-90.

[3] II.235-6.

[4] II.252-257

[5] II.270-3.

[6] II. 274-8.

[7] Earlier in Mammon's speech he describes the deplorable existence they would have if, for Eternity, they had to praise God all day long (II 240-9). It is in a similar vein that they would not wish to find the Good as a perfection external to themselves.

[8] II.279-80

[9] II.281-2.

[10] II.297.

[11] II.281-2.

[12] II.348-51.

[13] II.350.

[14] II.364-5.

[15] II. 367-81.

[16] II.387-8.

[17] II.482-3.

[18] II.457-8.

[19] John Milton, "The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates: Proving, that it is lawfull, and hath been held so through all Ages, for any, who have the Power, to call to account a Tyrant, or wicked King, and after due conviction, to depose, and put him to death; if the ordinary Magistrate have neglected, or deny'd to doe it. And that they, who of late so much blame deposing, are the Men that did it themselves" (1650) in John Milton, *Prose: Major Writings on Liberty, Politics, Religion, and Education*, edited by David Loewenstein, Malden and Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2013, 246.

[20] II. 521-527.

[21] II.528-546.

[22] II.546-555.

[23] II.557-569.

[24] II.622-626.

[25] II.526.

[26] II.310.