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Agonistic behaviour portrayed by Milton

(Extracted from a paper presented to a meeting of the European Sociobiological Society at Christ's College, Cambridge, August 3-6 1995)

Darwin gave a clear description of sexual selection, but he wrote little about the fate of those unselected by sexual selection, or of those who became deselected after once being selected. He spoke of them being killed or driven away, but he does not appear to have speculated on the behaviour of those who were driven away. He did not recognise the need for any behavioural strategies with which this group could deal with their situation, or any psychological or emotional state which might pertain to them. In particular, he did not consider them as a special case in his book on the expression of the emotions.

It is ironic to note, therefore, that his favourite poet, John Milton, who had been at the same Cambridge college 200 years previously, and a copy of whose "Paradise Lost" Darwin took with him on his voyage in the Beagle, was at least interested and one might almost say obsessed by the fate of those who were "driven away". In two of his major poems, "Paradise Lost" and "Samson Agonistes", he examines the situation of someone who is defeated by overwhelming force.

Paradise Lost

In "Paradise Lost" the rebel angel Satan, together with Beelzebub and his other followers, has been cast out of heaven because he challenged God, who:

> Hurled [them] headlong flaming from the'ethereal sky,
> With hideous ruin and combustion, down
> To bottomless perdition, there to dwell
> In adamantine chains and penal fire

and the action of the poem opens as they regroup themselves in Hell and consider their options.

There is no hint of remorse or submission in the mind of Satan, who mixes his "deep despair" with "obdurate pride and stedfast hate". Reconciliation with his victor is rejected:

> What though the field be lost?
> All is not lost; th'unconquerable will,
> And study of revenge, immortal hate
> And courage never to submit or yield
> And what is else not to be overcome;
> That glory never shall his wrath or might
> Extort from me : to bow and sue for grace
> With suppliant knee, and deify his power.

Tauntingly, he asks his followers if they have "sworn to adore the conqueror". Even though his first lieutenant, Beelzebub, points out tactfully on two occasions that, to have defeated the rebel army, God must be omnipotent, Satan determines to fight on with "force and guile", determined that it is:

> Better to reign in hell, than serve in heav'n.

Satan then calls a Council, at which he determines to set out in search of mankind, and to devote himself to undermining God's influence with them. While on this quest in Book IV, he soliloquises further on the impossibility of submission:

> Me miserable! which way shall I fly
> Infinite wrath, and infinite despair?
> Which way I fly is hell, myself am hell;
> And 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.
> O then at last relent: is there no place
> Left for repentance, none for pardon left?
> None left but by submission; and that word

Disdain forbids me, and my dread of shame
Among the spirits beneath, whom I seduced
With other promises and other vaunts
Than to submit, boasting I could subdue
Th'Omnipotent.....

And almost immediately he considers, only to reject, the possibility of regaining his former place by false submission:

But say I could repent, and could obtain
By act of grace my former state; how soon
Would highth recall high thoughts, how soon unsay
What feign'd submission swore: ease would recant
Vows made in pain, as violent and void.
For never can true reconcilement grow
Where wounds of deadly hate have pierced so deep;
Which would but lead me to a worse relapse
And heavier fall: so should I purchase dear
Short intermission bought with double smart.

At the end of Book V there is a further debate about submission. Satan says that he would not return to heaven on any other terms than equality with God, and certainly he does not want to be subordinate to God's Son, as has been commanded by the Almighty:

But what if better counsels might erect
Our minds and teach us to cast off this yoke?
Will ye submit your necks, and choose to bend
The supple knee?

One of the Cherubim, Abdiel, then takes issue with Satan, and advises him to submit to the one who created him, and thus has the power to uncreate him. Satan dismisses Abdiel's advice, maintaining that he was not created by anyone, but has always been as he now is.

In contrast to the intransigence of Satan, Adam and Eve show a capacity for reconciliation. Towards the end of the poem, they repent of their disobedience in eating of the Tree of Knowledge, and submit to God. Although they are escorted out of Paradise, they have achieved the promise of salvation.

Samson Agonistes

In "Samson Agonistes", Samson, betrayed by Delilah, blinded and imprisoned by the followers of the god Dagon, is visited by his father who is planning to arrange a ransom and who tells him to keep on fighting. But Samson rejects this advice, and expresses his depressive position:

All otherwise to me my thoughts portend
That these dark orbs no more shall treat with light,
Nor the other light of life continue long,
But yield to double darkness nigh at hand:
So much I feel my genial spirits droop,
My hopes all flat, nature within me seems
In all her functions weary of herself,
My race of glory run, and race of shame,
And I shall shortly be with them that rest.

Samson's father then tells him to be calm and to accept healing words from his friends, but Samson does not accept this advice; he expresses the idea that his mental torment is even worse than his physical torment:

O that torment should not be confined
To the body's wounds and sores,
With maladies innumerable
In heart, head, breast and reins;
But must secret passages find
To th'inmost mind,
There exercise all his fierce accidents,
And on her purest spirits prey,
As on entrails, joints, and limbs,
With answerable pains, but more intense,

Though void of corporal sense.

He gives a vivid description of psychosomatic affliction, and he contemplates the idea of suicide:

My griefs not only pain me
As a ling'ring disease,
But, finding no redress, ferment and rage,
Not less than wounds immedicable
Rankle, and fester, and gangrene,
To black mortification.
Though my tormentors, armed with deadly stings,
Mangle my apprehensive tenderest parts,
Exasperate, exulcerate, and raise
Dire inflammation, which no soothing herb,
Or medicinal liquor can assuage,
Nor breath of snowy air from snowy Alp.
Sleep hath forsook and given me o'er
To death's benumbing opium as my only cure:
Thence faintings, swoonings of despair,
And sense of heav'n's desertion.

Then Samson's father leaves, and he is visited by Harapha, a champion of the Philistines who was not involved in the previous battles with Samson. Here Samson is roused out of his depression and challenges Haratha, finally dismissing him with the words:

Go, baffled coward, lest I run upon thee,
Though in these chains, bulk without spirit vast,
And with one buffet lay thy structure low,
Or swing thee in the air, then dash thee down
To the hazard of thy brains and shatter'd sides.

The chorus then counsels him to an alternative course of action:

But patience is more oft the exercise
Of saints, the trial of their fortitude,
Making them each his own deliverer,
And victor over all
That tyranny of fortune can inflict:
Either of these is in thy lot,
Samson, with might endued
Above the sons of men; but sight bereaved
May chance to number thee with those
Whom patience finally must crown.

But patience, acceptance and reconciliation are not a part of Samson's reaction to defeat, and the poem concludes with his splendid act of vengeance in which he destroys both himself and his conquerors.

Discussion

In both these poems, Milton is exercised about the reaction of the man who is defeated and cast down. Does he fight back, in spite of his depression and his chains? Or does he accept his lot; in the one case to accept the advice of Beelzebub that his opponent is omnipotent, and in the other to accept the advice of the chorus which is to be patient? In both poems Milton portrays a fallen hero who is chained and in deep despair, but in both cases the despair does not inhibit pride or the determination to retaliate. He is portraying a society which does not admit voluntary submission and reconciliation.

That this determination to fight back, in spite of all mental and physical restraints, represents one basic human strategy is confirmed by other poets, for instance Tennyson describing the attitude of Ulysses:

We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved heaven and earth: that which we are, we are;
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

And Rupert Brooke in his poem Failure:

Because God put His adamantine fate
Between my sullen heart and its desire,
I swore that I would burst the Iron Gate,
Rise up, and curse Him on His throne of fire.

The message seems to be that the ancient way of man, illustrated in the tales of gods and heroes, is one of unmitigated fighting and retaliation - the only way to keep a defeated enemy down is to bind him in adamantine chains, and if, as in the case of Satan, this is not enough, to "transfix him with linked thunderbolts to the bottom of the gulf".

Whereas the new way, characterised by Christianity, is one of forgiveness, repentance, voluntary submission and reconciliation.

Depressed emotion or depressed mood

The human problem of how to conduct oneself as a subordinate is the subject matter of much of philosophy and religion. These disciplines usually counsel patience and self-abnegation, as did the chorus to Samson. But there is another way, which was taken by both Satan and Samson, and appears also to have been taken by Milton and Darwin.

In order to understand human subordination, it is necessary to appreciate that a decision between an escalating (fight) strategy and a de-escalating (flight) strategy is taken relatively independently at three levels of the mind/brain (Stevens & Price, 1996). There is a lower, reptilian level (MacLean, 1985) at which there is a decision to provide or withdraw the basic materials needed for fighting; here, the escalating strategy takes the form of an elevation of mood, giving energy, optimism and sense of ownership, while the de-escalating strategy of depressed mood takes away these armaments, leaving the individual tired, pessimistic and with no sense of entitlement. At a middle level, which MacLean called the neomammalian brain and located in the limbic system, the strategies take the form of emotions; escalation takes the form of anger, indignation and excitement, while de-escalation takes the form of depressed emotion, sadness, guilt, shame, feeling chastened, and other dysphoric emotions. At the higher level, in the neomammalian brain, another type of decision is made, and this is conscious, rational, voluntary, deliberative - and takes the form of deciding whether to give in or fight on. Even the individual who suffers the incapacity and torment of depression (metaphorically expressed by Milton as "adamantine chains and penal fire") can fight on by an act of will - even though willpower itself is sapped by the depression.

Satan was portrayed as escalating at the higher level: he would not submit, even though he preferred a devious escalating strategy rather than an all out frontal attack. He was portrayed as de-escalating at the middle level:

Me miserable! which way shall I fly
Infinite wrath, and infinite despair?
Which way I fly is hell, myself am hell;

Depressed emotion is focused on an object, whereas depressed mood is unfocused or self-focused (Davidson, 1994), and is associated with a lowering of RHP and resource value. Is Satan expressing depressed emotion or depressed mood? One could argue that hell is a metaphor for depressed mood, but I would favour the view that Milton focuses Satan's despair on his defeat, nor does he indicate loss of RHP or resource value, so that the diagnosis should be middle-level de-escalation. It is tempting to think that Milton knows of the possibility of lower-level de-escalation for someone in Satan's position:

And 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.

Whichever level the de-escalation is at, we can say that it is maintained by stubborn and inappropriate escalation at the higher level. In the case of Samson, the despair seems more unfocused and seems to indicate depressed mood as well as depressed emotion.

Milton and Darwin as non-yielding rebels

Milton rebelled against the State (he was the principle roundhead pamphleteer, attacking the monarchists) and lost; Darwin rebelled against the Church (the doctrine of Creation) and although he did not actually lose, his diaries and letters reveal his constant anticipation of losing, and as a result of which, he withdrew from the London arena and delayed publication of his theory for twenty years, suffering almost constant nervous symptoms. In spite of their real and imagined defeats, and in spite of their depressive

reactions to those defeats, they both fought on, Milton writing pamphlets and poetry, Darwin elaborating his theory of natural selection. They were both "blooded but unbowed". Of course, they were engaged not only in agonistic competition with church and state, but also in prestige competition for the respect and approbation of their fellow men, especially those on their own side (Price, 1995). Fame was the spur.

Acts of submission, or the giving up of goals, at the higher, neomammalian level would have pre-empted or relieved their suffering, but their resources of ambition, pride and courage enabled them both to bend their adamantine chains and make their unique contributions to the human record. It is this triumph of the will over the flesh which Milton celebrates in the first books of Paradise Lost.

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