Prob’ly Take It To The Pawn Shop: Bob Dylan and the Soteriology of Self-Hatred

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If there is one iron rule for thinking about Bob Dylan that every Dylan observer would probably instantly assent to, it would be never to take anything the man says about himself literally, or indeed even seriously. When it comes to talking about himself and his music, Dylan has always been a past-master of misdirection and evasion and downright lies, which is one of the things that arguably put his interviews and press conferences among the highest achievements of performance art of the 20th century, perhaps a close second to his actual musical performances. I am going to base my entire presentation today on flagrantly breaking this rule in the most egregious way. I am going to experimentally take one self-description Dylan gave to Anthony Scaduto deadly seriously, as the one uniquely privileged moment when, for whatever reason, Dylan felt like telling us and/or was able to tell us one of his most closely guarded secrets. The passage in question, quoted in Scaduto’s 1971 book, is as follows:

Before I wrote *John Wesley Harding,* I discovered something about all those earlier songs I had written. I discovered that when I used words like “he” and “it” and “they” and putting down all sorts of people, I was really talking about no one but me. I went into *John Wesley Harding* with that knowledge about all the stuff I was writing before then. You see, I didn’t really know before, that I was writing about myself in all those songs.[[1]](#footnote-1)

This is perhaps most safely taken as at best a partial truth, like anything Dylan says, a mere clue to one further dimension of the richness of his songwriting. It is perhaps not necessary to regard it as a denial that those accusatory songs were *at all* about other people, that he had no beef with any of his targets, that it was *all* veiled self-criticism. But in the spirit of the present experiment, I also would like to take this as a real insight Dylan had during the long hiatus and radically transformative period between *Blonde and Blonde* and *John Wesley Harding,* his viewpoint at that particularly fraught time on all his earlier work, and especially on his so-called “finger-pointing” songs. The reading that emerges if we take this remark seriously is not that there was nothing sincere about Dylan’s early social criticism and personal invective, but rather that that they infused with a certain special edge, a unique multidimensionality, because in all cases the target was chosen because Dylan the songwriter had unconsciously detected a disturbing similarity to himself in the victim. This is perhaps related to the special sort of empathy that informed Dylan’s scandalous remark at the Thomas Paine Award ceremony a week after JFK’s assassination: that he had “seen something of himself” in Lee Harvey Oswald. In that case, a national villain was viewed with a special fellowfeeling because Dylan saw him expressing some undeniable aspect of himself; in the case of the put-down songs, the terrifying intensity and clarity of the hatred for various pillars of respectability, for violent and pitiless men, for manipulating liars, for exploitative phonies, for arrogant frauds, must also be derived from a certain double-edged tension, a recognition that the monster in the crosshairs is also Dylan himself. This would apply to the unforgivable war profiteers of “Masters of War” and media manipulators of “Only a Pawn in Their Game,” to the denier of the humanity of others of “Blowin’ in the Wind,” to the hypocritical and callous time-wasting not-much-talking lovers of “Don’t Think Twice” and “I Don’t Believe You,” as well as the religious bigot of “With God on Our Side,” the reactionaries of “The Times They Are a-Changin’,” the cane-twirling death-dealing rich man’s son of “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carrol,” the shallow arrogant scene-crashers riding for a fall of “Leopard Skin Pillbox Hat” and “Like a Rolling Stone,” the clueless boob Mr. Jones who never really did get what the scene was all about, Robert Ford and Jesse James both in “Outlaw Blues”, as well as the more abstract targets like Ma and Pa in Maggie’s Farm (religion and the state), “Baby Blue” who has gathered from coincidence what he could and for whom it is now all over, and on and on. That would mean that Dylan is also not only the fraudulent hucksters and warmongering showmen of “Highway 61 Revisited,” and also one other character in that song: the jealous murderous God who demands the death of Abraham’s son, as well as the sacrificial son of Abraham Zimmerman himself, Bob Dylan.[[2]](#footnote-2) And crucially, in “I Dreamed I Saw St. Augustine,” written after Dylan claims he realized that he was the object of all his own critiques, we find this self-recrimination expressed more directly: “And I dreamed I was among the ones who dragged him out to death. / Oh, I awoke in anger, so confused and terrified. / I put my hands against the glass /and hung my head and cried.” This line would, on this reading, be Dylan’s first self-aware confession that in his dreamworld, in the depth of his poetic soul, he was himself the one always on the wrong side of the holy, the exploiter, the murderer, indeed pretty damned close to the “Judas” he had been called by the famous heckler at the Royal Albert Hall, the Jewish betrayer who sells out God, betrays the holy salt of the earth--the war profiteer, the media manipulator, the murderer of God, who “like Judas of old” even Jesus wouldn’t forgive. His response is anger, obviously well-attested in the finger-pointing songs, along with confusion and terror and above all—nose pressed to the glass—envy for the good, the Christians, the victims, the okies, the aw-shucks country bumpkins, the simple folks who are so easy to deceive, the blessed meek of the earth (a similar sentiment from an overarticulate Jewish folk singer can be heard in Paul Simon’s roughly contemporaneous “Blessed”).

What does Dylan’s special brand and special intensity of self-hatred reveal? We can perhaps see it, first of all, as the motor behind the constant transformations of this famous chameleon, the quick moves from phase to phase: as in the Hegelian dialectic, it is the immanent contradiction that drives each phase to break down and evolve into the next phase, an ever new attempt to escape “the persecutor within,” as Dylan put it in “Jokerman.” But of course every new attempt fails again, and he finds himself still on the other side of the hatred, both hater and hated, and must again move on. In each new position, he still defines himself against some hated other, and again and again finds himself equally on both sides. Dylan as know-nothing hayseed Guthrie who jocularly ribs the big city capitalists with homespun humor found himself also a capitalist and exploiter (of fans, of women, of his fellow singers); Dylan then becomes the fire-breathing Jeremiah/Guthrie protector of innocent children of the murderously finger-pointing “Masters of War,” the better to distinguish himself from the hated. But even here, in this very song, the hatred and the hated are coming together in a way that surpasses any intent to separate the two sides: the singer is as bloodthirsty as his targets, in fact he is *much more so:* the genius of the song is that the Masters of War are not bloodthirsty at all, but are rather calmly and blandly hiding behind their masks and their desks, whereas the singer is explicitly calling for death and blood. This is when Dylan becomes Dylan: when he starts to inhabit both sides, explicitly, flipping the form and content. At the time this was perhaps read as raw righteous anger at hypocrisy, anger adequate to the crime and with the virtue of sincerity which its targets lack in their duplicity. But I would instead like to read what works about this song as precisely the taking on of the duplicity, the doubleness, and that it is this that makes Dylan’s work so uniquely compelling. We could track many more examples as we trek through Dylan’s career: an identity is adopted which tries to distinguish him from something he didn’t want to be[[3]](#footnote-3), which he finds himself unsuspectingly all the more embroiled in precisely in the process of excluding and rejecting it. Then he transforms into something that excludes the previous self, now sullied by the realization that it too was the hated identity. But then the hated identity creeps in again. It is Dylan’s genius that very early on he began to not merely flip from one position to another, but like a true Hegelian to start incorporating the duplicity more and more in each stage. The process of the conscious acceptance of this doubleness, this inextricable inhabiting of both sides of a constant relation of revulsion and contempt—“where one’s nature neither honors nor forgives” as he puts it in the aptly titled “I and I”—leads finally into the spiritual preoccupations of Dylan’s later work. First we have of course the powerful resources of evangelical Christianity for integrating and making use of self-hatred: the acknowledgement of man’s utter corruption, “that every man’s conscience is vile and depraved” (“The Man in the Long Black Coat”), that “violence and greed and corruptible seed seem to be all there is” (“Blind Willie McTell”)—and also, crucially, that recognizing and accepting this is the very mechanism of redemption. In no longer trying to evade his guilt and corruption, Dylan here glimpsed a new way to embrace both sides at once: the purity now goes over to God, instead of being inhabited by the sinner, and one can revel fully in inhabiting one’s own corruption. God also now gets to be the one doing the hating of oneself, and in accepting its justice one is redeemed and forgiven and loved.[[4]](#footnote-4) Of course this still gives him plenty of opportunity to hate others, which is an added bonus: the old Dylan fury is now directed against the godless, the infidels. Here again we have the pattern repeated, but the structure is beginning to shift in that now at least to some degree the commonality of the hated and the hater starts to appear: we are all sinners, but I hate those sinners who don’t acknowledge that they are sinners, and my hatred is really just a proxy for God’s own hatred, some portion of which is also directed at me, albeit in the sublated form of the subsequent forgiveness.

However horrifying this psychological condition (Hegel called it “the unhappy consciousness” per se) may appear to some of us—and it is certainly horrifying to me—it is at least a step toward integrating the two sides, the hater and the hated, although it is blocked, in my view, by its theological presuppositions from fully accomplishing the task: God the hater is never hated, and the divide between believers and infidels reinstates the unidirectional division of hater and hated. It is perhaps possible to see a step beyond this position in Dylan’s post born-again work, although he very likely remains a monotheist and possibly even some variety of Jewish-Christian to this day. I mean here not the seemingly at-peace integration of the many sides of his character in some of the more relaxed later works, but rather the unredeemed but explicit self-hatred of works like “Highlands,” referenced in the title of this presentation, where the singer acknowledges that even if he did have a conscience, he would probably do nothing more with it than hock it for a few bucks (just what he sometimes said he was doing with his protest songs: commodifying his conscience to make a buck)—a ne plus ultra of corruption that is described and delivered with a resignation that nudges it over into a new sort of structure: corruption as necessary and unavoidable, but matter-of-fact disgust at one’s own corruption as equally necessary and unavoidable.

And this is really my main interest here. For I want to propose that it is this convergence of hater and hated, the seemingly impossible simultaneous coextensivity of true vileness as a human being with unquenchable contempt that vileness, that has given Dylan’s work its unique power and beauty from the beginning, even when he was struggling to evade it by transformation after transformation, failed solution after failed solution. He could not outrun it, and it is the essence of his art. This claim rests on the old intuition that beauty has something to do with the union of opposites. Kant saw it in the union of purpose and purposelessness: in purposivity without detectable purpose. Schelling continued this line of thought, seeing genius as the highest category unifying spirit and matter, intended meaning and blind causality, again purpose and purposelessness. A work of genius, Schelling thought, is not understood by its creator when he is making it, as a utilitarian tool or artifact is, where the aim is known in advance and the parts are designed with a clear awareness of how they fit that aim. But it is also the farthest possible thing from random activity: it is driven by an obscure purpose, making decisions constantly, from beginning to end. If he knew what he was doing, if he knew the point in advance, he’d be merely a manufacturer making a tool, not an artist, let alone a genius. But this approach sees beauty only as the union of the opposites of purpose and purposelessness. Dylan’s case is more specific and in some ways uniquely powerful, bordering on the religious, because his work is about the union of a somewhat different pair of opposites: self and other, but not just a friendly neutral other, but a truly detested antagonistic other. Dylan’s work is about the convergence of hater and hated. To understand the power of this particular structure, we need to borrow some motifs not from Schelling and Hegel, but from the Chinese Tiantai school.

Tiantai epistemology holds that to be definite is to be finite, and to be finite is to be caused to be as one is by factors that are always multiple, and hence not in the command of any one homogenously coherent factor, any one true controller or self. To be is thus to be inherently and inexorably unstable. This means that every person and every experience is ultimately incoherent, biased, unstable, needy, suffering, wicked, and ridiculous. However, this very instability also means that no state is really what it appears or claims to be, and none can keep up its faking forever: all are constantly collapsing and overflowing into whatever they are trying to exclude in order to come off as coherent. Since there is no way to limit the range of this structure of attempted-limit-and-overflow-into-otherness, this simple idea is taken in a very thoroughgoing way, so that in in the final analysis, each moment is one version of the entire unstable universe encountering another version of the entire unstable universe, and thereby producing another version of the entire unstable universe. The subject doing the experiencing is in this sense at once all unstable subjects, all states of mind, all unstable objects; the object is all unstable subjects, all states of mind, all unstable objects; the experience is all subjects, all states of mind, all objects. The split between the subject and the object is simultaneously ineradicable—inherently entailed at each locus—and overcome. We have not an undifferentiated continuum, where there is no subject and object, but rather unstable antagonistic subject-object faced with unstable antagonistic subject-object. The split is everywhere, but in this way it is also overcome in a distinctively Tiantai way, for since the subject-object contrast is on both sides of the apparent contrast, there is no contrast between them; each is everywhere, and the division is everywhere, but is also everywhere only as sublated: it is locally coherent, globally incoherent and all-pervasive. Subject and object are one because each is really the split “subject-object,” which thus faces only itself on the other side of the divide. And yet the divide is internal to it.[[5]](#footnote-5) Finitude and all its attendant evils is thus an ineradicable, universal condition, and it is the realization of this paradox that forms the hub of Tiantai praxis.

The process of Tiantai meditation is simply to see oneself as finite, to make one’s finitude explicit, and in so doing to experience the incoherence of this finitude and hence the inescapability of one’s particular form of finitude. Not just inescapable to oneself, which would still be a kind of definite coherence unique to oneself, but inescapable everywhere. One’s own peculiar finite craziness is universal and omnipresent. It is here that I hope to find a way to understand the genius of Dylan’s work. For what is accomplished here is the universalization of the sense of wrongness, of the unease of evil, anxiety, guilt, melancholia, finitude, which both preserves and overcomes it. The first step is to become acutely aware of this sense of wrongness, to accept it and develop the capability of recognizing it clearly in all its subtle manifestations, to feel it intensely precisely as this qualitative wrongness, infecting even the apparently good and pleasant things which circumscribe it and in contrast to which it is defined (the role of repentance rituals, combined with classical mindfulness contemplations, in traditional Tiantai speaks to this need). Then one investigates what this feeling feels like, what it is to feel this feeling. For it to exist in the way presumed in our preconscious emotional grasp of it—as just this and nothing besides—is what makes this suffering objectionable to us. But for it to be experienced this way is for it to be contrasted to something, to be bounded, non-all, finite, girded about by what is not-it. That sense of the edges of the feeling, the interface with its opposite, is sought. If the opposite feeling is not presently felt, this feeling itself cannot be felt; if the opposite feeling is felt, it is in some sense internal to this moment of feeling. This interface is then examined—does it lie on one side or the other? Is it an overlapping of two mutually exclusive qualitative feelings? None of these alternatives is found to be ultimately coherent, although the appearance of the feeling depends on their being locally coherent. But they cannot stand up to close attention, reconsideration, recontextualization, understanding of and meditation upon this interface. This feeling of wrongness is thus seen to be in a need of a certain kind of narrowing of awareness, a limitation of the horizon of relevances, in order to appear as a mutually exclusive entity. When awareness is opened up to allow further contexts to come into play, the meaning and felt identity of this sensation alters. In itself it has no certain identity: it is ontologically ambiguous (globally incoherent, Empty). This means that just by being itself, this wrongness, it is equally readable as all other possible local coherences, pervading and pervaded by them all (Intersubsumption). Among these, most importantly, is the opposite state. When seen merely as “simply located” local coherences, each of these states is considered a mere part of a larger whole, namely, the totality of suffering-and-non-suffering. But seen as also globally incoherent and intersubsumptive, each part subsumes the whole; suffering is “suffering/nonsuffering”, and non-suffering is also “suffering/nonsuffering.” Any one point subsumes all states. Thus the full realization of the being of this feeling of wrongness is also the overcoming of the feeling of wrongness, recontextualizing itself to reveal that it is always also a manifestation of freedom and immutable rightness, precisely by being the feeling of qualitative wrongness, not by evading this feeling. It is like the “funny-unfunny” deadpan setup to a joke, funny just because it is so unfunny.

I would here venture to describe the actual experience of this kind of psychological exercise in terms of an unorthodox simile. Imagine that you are composing an autobiographical novel bent on depicting yourself in the most unflattering possible light, a running narrative of yourself as a foolish, lazy, selfish, cowardly, greedy, spiteful, morally bankrupt, biased, confused, alienated, lonely and pathetic individual struggling to make his way in the world. In doing so, you must of course also describe this character’s environment, how he interacts with it, what it appears as to him; the entire world and each specific entity is seen as a function of this miscreant fool’s perception, aspects of his *Lebenswelt*, saturated with his delusions and appearing in the forms that are relevant to his particular greeds, hatreds and delusions. All events, history, conditions, characteristics of the world would be included in this account, but in the peculiar distorted form that speaks to the avarice and malevolence of this central character. The sun and the sky are his sun and sky—annoyances to him, objects of his curses and ingratitude and aesthetic neglect. The suffering of others is there too, but only as aspects of his own suffering, competing for limited ameliorations or as triggers to his self-pity or opportunities to exploit. Great events may come and go in the background, but coming through to his consciousness only to the extent that they impact on his own narrow preoccupations. In this way, his delusion is seen to pervade the world.

This sad existential condition is analogous to the situation of the natural man. The process of noting and transcribing this sad existential condition into a self-conscious narrative is analogous to Tiantai meditation. In the course of this noting and transcription, an interesting transformation occurs. On the one hand, nothing is changed: indeed, if anything everything is noted with greater vividness and precision than in the normal living-through of this kind of life. It is not a moving away from it to some idealized condition of liberation, but rather a moving into it, an intensification of it. One might even say that it becomes more itself in this process, more fully realized and explicitly what it is: selfish, lazy, alienated, and so on. But at the same time, by virtue of this very fact, a kind of transformation occurs. First, it has been “emptied,” i.e., a distance and framing have been established, a kind of derealizing that is simultaneously a hyper-realization; it becomes “fictionalized,” as it were. Simply by framing it, or making explicit the fact that it is framed, the possibility of reframing it has been revealed. Seeing the world explicitly as a function of the perverted consciousness of the protagonist simultaneously reveals it to be capable of being seen otherwise, seen as something else. Its emptiness, or ontological ambiguity, has been disclosed just by seeing illusion as illusion, rather than by dispelling the illusion. But at the same time, this perverted stream of experience becomes a recognizable style of being, which is applicable not only to the specific incidents that happen to occur in the narrative, but in principle to any event that might occur; once one grasps this style of being, an infinite number of incidents can be used to express it. Indeed, one can imagine any event at all as another instantiation of this pathetic protagonist’s view of the world; anything and everything can fit into this style. This style is now not a merely finite entity, but a flavor, a characteristic taste, which can be expressed “as” any concrete particular, and “as” which any concrete particular can be expressed. It is at once a particular something—this pathetic alienated style of being—and an all-pervasive category applicable to all particular somethings. But to be all-pervasive is also to lose the immediate character as a fixed, ontologically unambiguous, simply located entity. Since it is the whole of existence, all entities without exception, there is no longer anything outside of itself with which it can be contrasted, and which could thus fix its identity as this characteristic rather than another. In becoming all-pervasive, it is also emptied out, overcome, robbed of its original determinacy. To be a “this” is to be the all, which is also to be nothing in particular.

The Tiantai doctrine of intersubsumption holds that a certain disruptive rogue element is introduced in the process of subsumption. When an act of kindness appears subsumed into the selfish worldview of our protagonist, it is just one more instance of selfishness, a cunning bit of cynical windowdressing. But once the selfishness itself is made all-pervasive, and thus devoid of its power to definitively determine the entities it subsumes, this act of kindness begins to reveal other aspects of itself which destabilize the original reading of it as a deceptive form of selfishness. There is always, constitutively “more-to-it”: the overflow of its original determination infects the original subsumer (selfishness, greed) so that subsumption becomes intersubsumption. Liberation appears disguised as suffering finitude as finitude had appeared disguised as liberation. The presence of deviltry, upon examination, is not limitable to any one simple location. It pervades and suffuses, is findable in, all conceivable times, places and states. All the world is deviltry. Hence Buddhahood is also a kind of deviltry. But the presence of Buddhahood makes all the world Buddhahood. This reveals deviltry itself to be a kind of Buddhahood.

This is the Tiantai practice in a nutshell. An extra context is added to the normal angst-ridden state of neurotic consciousness. That extra context is Tiantai doctrine and contemplation. The neurotic consciousness is not replaced by it, but supplemented by it. As a result of this supplementation, the neurotic consciousness is more fully realized, totally actualized, becomes more explicitly what it is—i.e., neurotic and suffering--than it was before this supplementary context. As a result, it is also overcome as a state limited to one particular place and time, manifesting instead as a universal principle, indeed as the source, meaning, purpose and secret identity of all possible entities, the universal category into which all are subsumed. As such, it is unconditional in, as, its very conditionality. It becomes more itself than before, less itself than before, and the more completely everything else besides itself, and these are three names for the exact same process (the Tiantai Three Truths). One dwells in it fully, and hence one is free in it, as it, from it, fully. Viciousness is everywhere, glory is everywhere, each the constant excess that is internal to the other. Hate is everywhere, love is everywhere, loving the hate which hates the love which loves the hate and so on. Guilt is inescapable, and it is everywhere redemption. Redemption is inescapable, and it is everywhere guilt. Have we just described what is inadvertently achieved by the art of Bob Dylan?

1. Scaduto quotes this remark twice in the book, with some minor differences, so he is perhaps quoting from notes rather than a recording. The quotation here combines the two accounts. But Dylan did subsequently confirm that he had indeed said something like this to Scaduto. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Indeed it is one of the peculiarities of Dylan’s monotheism that he often has put himself in God’s shoes. In 1975 he remarked to interviewer Neil Hickey, “It must be wonderful to be God.” In 1977, objecting to the Time Magazine cover that read “Is God Dead?” in an interview with Ron Rosenbaum, he asked, “I mean, if you were God, how would you like to see that written down about yourself?” In “Blind Willie McTell” he actually says, “God is in his Heaven, and we all want what’s his”—which can be taken either to mean that we wish to be holy or that we blasphemously wish to usurp God’s place and possess all that he possesses, to be him instead of us, to be the one who gets to capriciously demand the sacrifice rather than be the sacrificial victim. I would suggest, along these lines, that the “Me” on whom the immigrant (lonely pilgrim in the world) turns his back in “I Pity the Poor Immigrant” is also God, speaking in the first person. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. What did he start out hating, what did he not want to become? At the risk of indulging in amateur psychoanalysis, it seems tempting to suggest that it may amount to no more and no less than basically everything his father was: Jewish, middle-class, businessman, family man, repossessor of unpaid-for ghetto furniture, ambitious careerist go-getter, all about achievement and security and orderliness and education and getting ahead as a respectable citizen, “city father at the chamber of commerce selling roadmaps for the soul.” *Dylan the prophet excoriates that mild-mannered city father as a hypocrite master of war—but his career is thereby advanced explosively, and he knows it, and finds himself uncomfortably good at consolidating it. Dylan the surreal poet and universally sneering ironist then emerges to up the ante, coming down against all who demand even anything as square and constructive as social change or contributions to a particular political movement, all of which is still too much a constructive rational serious project: “there are no truths outside the gates of Eden,” and dreams don’t mean anything. This is of course the most radical Zen Dylan, the enemy of sense itself, the emancipator of pure imagery as beyond meaning and liberating through its very strangeness and meaninglessness. Again there is a contradiction: the artistry and craft and knowledge, the rich implications and intertextuality and overabundance of meaning, belie the attack on culture, even as it makes Dylan an even huger electric success and cultural icon: constructive meaning and significance accrue even to the rejection of everything. The attacker of success keeps succeeding, and keeps finding that he craves success. As he puts it “Love Minus Zero,” tipping the hand: “There’s no success like failure, and failure’s no success at all.”* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. He also gets to be both more Jewish and less Jewish than his parents at once, most fully both the accuser and the accused, affirming both the chosenness and its rejection. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. A perception is thus viewed as the function of a capability. This capability is inherently entailed in the subject—and indeed, in all loci of time and space. That is, to see a car is to manifest an ineradicable capability to discern cars, and indeed to discern this very car in this very way. This applies also to memories and imaginings; the recollection of an image is a capability, not the retrieval of a virtual object stored in the mind. Indeed, to perceive X is to have the capability, by means of habits of framing and focusing, to see the All as X; to visualize or remember X is exactly the same thing, to have the capability to see the All as X. One is actually seeing in both cases, but in the locally coherent/globally incoherent form of asness—arranging the elements before one (always everything) into a particular Gestalt. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)