

The Ethics of Thelema

An essay examining the ethical implications of the Law of Thelema,
and a criticism of some common misconceptions of the same.

by

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Sun in 17° Virgo, Anno IVxv

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THELEMA is, at the end of all analysis, an individual rather than a social philosophy, and the concept of ethics, as commonly understood, is wholly absent from it; as Crowley says in his “new comment”¹ to AL II, 28:

There are no “standards of Right”. Ethics is balderdash. Each Star must go on its own orbit. To hell with “moral principle”; there is no such thing.

Yet, by examining what *The Book of the Law* has to say on individual conduct we can nevertheless draw some conclusions as to the type of “ethics” that are implied in Thelema, since other stars form part of the environment with which the individual must interact. And to do so is to clear up some widely held misconceptions on the subject.

The Book of the Law provides only one “commandment” to the individual by which he must (if he wishes to be taken seriously as a Thelemite, at least) govern his conduct, which is “Do what thou wilt”. Excluding the Comment, this phrase appears in two places in the Book, and is very closely paraphrased in a third:

Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law.²
So with thy all; thou hast no right but to do thy will.
Do that, and no other shall say nay.³
There is no law beyond Do what thou wilt.⁴

The language here is unequivocal; “Do what thou wilt shall be the *whole* of the Law,” and there “is *no law beyond*” that. Furthermore, not only is “Do what thou wilt” the only *commandment*, but it is also

¹Published as *An Extenuation of The Book of the Law* in 1926, and posthumously as *The Law is for All*.

²AL I, 40

³AL I, 42–43

⁴AL III, 60

the only *right*, and it is an *indefeasible* one since “no other shall say nay.” Crowley sums this up in *Liber II*:

Do what thou wilt — then do nothing else. Let nothing deflect thee from that austere and holy task. Liberty is absolute to do thy will; but seek to do any other thing whatsoever, and instantly obstacles must arise.

There is no scope for argument, here; the language in the Book itself and in Crowley’s commentaries is absolutely unambiguous, and this is crucial to understanding the subject. A thriving cottage industry has arisen providing a variety of divergent interpretations on verses from Chapter I such as AL I, 3 (“Every man and every woman is a star”), AL I, 22 (“Let there be no difference made among you between any one thing & any other thing”), AL I, 41 (“The word of Sin is Restriction”), and AL I, 57 (“Love is the law, love under will”) in order to twist the text to fit any number of wild and fanciful notions of “right conduct”, yet it is a plain fact that any such notions can only possess validity to the extent that they conform to — and arise necessarily from — the three verses quoted above. The only flexibility of interpretation that we have is in deciding exactly what “Do what thou wilt” means in the first place, which is a discussion for another essay.⁵

The single most widespread and systematic mistake that people make when considering the ethics of Thelema is to suppose that “thou hast no right but to do thy will” includes an obligation to allow everybody else the freedom to do their wills unhindered by you. It does not — all three of these quotes confine themselves to the second person. Not only is this concept absent from *The Book of the Law*, but the Book exhorts precisely to the contrary:

Compassion is the vice of kings: stamp down the wretched & the weak: this is the law of the strong: this is our law and the joy of the world.⁶

Beware therefore! Love all, lest perchance is a King concealed! Say you so? Fool! If he be a King, thou canst not hurt him. Therefore strike hard & low, and to hell with them, master!⁷

But the keen and the proud, the royal and the lofty; ye are brothers! As brothers fight ye!⁸

⁵Refer to my essay *True Will* for just such a discussion.

⁶AL II, 21

⁷AL II, 59–60

⁸AL III, 58–59

“stamp down the wretched & the weak: this is the law of the strong: this is our law” — we may reasonably suppose that the strong need neither our permission nor our assistance in order to do their wills, and the strong are given countenance to “stamp down” the rest. The strong are specifically released from any obligation to consider the will of another — “If he be a King, thou canst not hurt him.” If the wills of two Kings were to conflict, the guidance is straightforward: “ye are brothers! As brothers fight ye!”

Clearly, this libertarian and vaguely socialistic idea of avoiding getting in the way of anybody else’s will is just not in the Book, which expressly tells us to forget about anybody else’s will, to focus on doing our own, and to “stamp down” (or at least try to) anybody who gets in our way. Yet, this idea is so deeply ingrained, and so endemic, that in order to convince those who have gotten it into their minds it will be worthwhile examining the sources for it, and it turns out there are four primary culprits.

The first source is in *Liber II*, which we have already quoted, in the form of a commentary on AL I, 42–44:

Take this carefully; it seems to imply a theory that if every man and every woman did his and her will — the true will — there would be no clashing. “Every man and every woman is a star,” and each star moves in an appointed path without interference. There is plenty of room for all; it is only disorder that creates confusion.

It is the phrase “there would be no clashing” that causes the most mischief. Of course, this idea of “non-clashing stars” is flawed even in a basic astronomical context. Crowley himself recognised this, and said as much in his “new comment” to AL I, 41, as well as some more revealing comments on what he really thought of the idea of “non-clashing,” here particularly from the context of sexual ethics:

Physical constraint, up to a certain point, is not so seriously wrong; for it has its roots in the original sex-conflict which we see in animals, and has often the effect of exciting Love in his highest and noblest shape. Some of the most passionate and permanent attachments have begun with rape. Rome was actually founded thereon. Similarly, murder of a faithless partner is ethically excusable, in a certain sense; for there may be some stars whose Nature is extreme violence. The collision of galaxies is a magnificent spectacle, after all.

Here we have Crowley — in his most in-depth commentary to *The Book of the Law*, we must remind the reader — apparently sanctioning rape and murder if the “Nature [of the individual] is extreme violence,” and completing the astronomical analogy by pointing out that both stars and galaxies do, in fact, collide. This is a very different story to the one most usually proposed.

The key phrase in the original quote from *Liber II*, then, is “it seems to imply,” with the emphasis on “seems”; in fact, it does *not* imply that, as Crowley later recognises. Yet *Liber II* was a very succinct and precise summary of the Thelemic message — indeed, Crowley subtitled it “The Message of the Master Therion” — so we cannot just discard this passage as being dubious and suspect.

The correct interpretation was, in fact, in the verses being commented on all along: “thou hast no right but to do thy will.” It is true that *The Book of the Law* sanctions the “stamping down” of those who would get in the way of our will, but it is reasonable for us to assume that the vast majority of conflict does not occur for this reason. If I break a man’s jaw in a road rage incident over a parking space, I can hardly claim that it was my “true will” to occupy that particular parking space, at that particular time, and that it would be a thwarting of my true will if I was rendered unable to park there. Parking is a means to an end; if, rather, it had been my true will to visit a particular store, then any parking space would have done. Even a thirty or sixty minute diversion would likely have been insignificant in the scheme of my will, and certainly a far smaller impediment than the imprisonment and lawsuit which would probably have followed my hasty actions. The real cause of the violence would, in fact, be a direct *failure* to attend to my will, and instead to attend to imaginary notions of offended manhood or some such nonsense. And, indeed, if the other party had been attending only to *his* will, then the conflict would likely not have arisen regardless of my own attitude.

Thus, conflict in cases such as these arises from a direct breach of “thou hast no right but to do thy will,” from a straying from one’s path into trivial side-issues, and when we do this — as *Liber II* again tells us — “instantly obstacles must arise.” Of course, if the fulfillment of my will depended entirely on parking quickly there and at that exact time — perhaps it was a parking space close to the entrance to a hospital, and I had a critically ill relative in the car — then violence may indeed be both necessary and justified in order to secure that fulfillment (although in this particular case, leaving the car on the thoroughfare and avoiding the need to manoeuvre into a space at all would probably have been the optimal course).

Therefore, if everyone were to attend strictly to their wills, conflict would not disappear, but it is reasonable to assume that it would be *vastly reduced in frequency* if diversions into pointless trivia could be avoided. And to make the point nicely, this is exactly where the astronomical analogy leads us in any case, as we observe stars comfortably in their own orbits for the vast majority of the time, but with occasional spectacular collisions.

The second most likely source for the misconception arises in the Book itself, from AL I, 41: “The word of Sin is Restriction.” This is most often interpreted as “it is sinful to restrict the will of another.” We have already seen that the Book says nothing of the kind; if it meant “Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law . . . except thou shalt not restrict the will of another” then it would say so. Moreover, the context of that verse contains no such ideas. The phrase immediately preceding that is indeed “Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law,” suggesting that AL I, 41 is a *commentary* on or *elucidation* of that injunction, and not a *qualifier* to it. The remainder of AL I, 41 exhorts the man to “refuse not thy wife, if she will! O lover, if thou wilt, depart!” injunctions to allow the wife to “stray” if she feels like it, and to depart from a tryst once you’re ready to leave. To inhibit both of these things would constitute an “interference” in the way we describe in the next section.

Moreover, the wording itself does not suggest this. “The word of Sin is Restriction” — why not interpret this “it is sinful to restrict oneself,” and completely reverse the common notion? It is probably most sensible to translate “word” here as “logos,” the “principle governing the cosmos” according to American Heritage, and render the verse as “The principle of Sin, and its mode of operation, is Restriction.” In other words, the very concept of sin itself is a restriction, and should be discarded; if you find yourself thinking “it would be sinful to do this, that or the other, because it would restrict the will of another,” then abandon that fantastic notion, and just do your will. It takes a strangely constituted mind to read *The Book of the Law* and conclude that it countenances describing actions — any actions — as “sinful”.

The third most likely source is from the O.T.O.’s⁹ favourite Crowley document of all time, *Duty*, specifically, from “B3”: “Abstain from all interferences with other wills.” Here again we apparently (“apparently” being the key word) see the doctrine of “non-clashing” rearing its ugly head. Yet in fact this is not the case, as the document itself tells us right there. “B3,” not surprisingly, immediately follows “B2,”

⁹Ordo Templi Orientis

which is a straight quote of AL III, 59: “As brothers fight ye!” The comment to “B3” runs:

(The love and war in the previous injunctions are of the nature of sport, where one respects, and learns from the opponent, but never interferes with him, outside the actual game.) To seek to dominate or influence another is to seek to deform or destroy him; and he is a necessary part of one’s own Universe, that is, of one’s self.

In the very commentary to the quote we are describing, Crowley again sanctions the use of force and “war,” speaking of “the opponent” and describing conflict as “sport,” showing that the notion of “non-clashing” cannot be implied, here. Clearly “abstain from interference” is not — in Crowley’s mind, at least — synonymous with “abstain from conflict”.

Indeed, the comment itself once more provides the answer; he “never interferes with him, outside the actual game.” The implication is clearly that he does “interfere with him” *inside* the actual game, although it is interference *outside* the actual game that provides the meaning for “abstain from all interferences”.

To return to our parking analogy, the game in question is naturally the game of doing our will (indeed, how could it be anything else, since “thou hast no right but to do thy will”?) To the extent necessary to do your will, conflict is not only permitted, but *required*, since “Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law,” and if conflict is necessary in order to do that, then the Thelemite *must* fight, since he is required by the Law to do his will. Yet, to the extent not necessary to do your will, conflict is prohibited, since “thou hast no right but to do thy will,” implying that the Thelemite has no right to do anything not required to do that. If, out of a misguided sense of offended manhood, I take time out from doing my will in order to punch my imaginary detractor on the nose, then I have veered away from my own path and turned into his. I have stepped out of my own arena, and ventured uninvited into that of another, for reasons completely unconnected with the fulfillment of my will.

Critically, it is not this encroachment on the will of another that is verboten under Thelema; rather it is the *diversion from my own will that is necessary in order to do it*. If, in the course of doing my will, I come into conflict with the will of another — even the “true will” of another — then this conflict is of the nature described in AL III, 59, and I am perfectly entitled, even required, to see it through. When two wills genuinely collide, a fight ensues, and the strongest prevails.

This kind of conflict is not “interference” in the sense used in *Duty*; “interference,” in that context, is specifically a diversion from one’s own will in order to impinge on the will of another, since by definition that diversion removes the only Thelemic justification for any action at all — that it be in accordance with one’s will, and necessary for the fulfillment of that will.

As *Duty* continues: “To seek to dominate or influence another is to seek to deform or destroy him.” Under the Law of Thelema one is only justified in conflicting with the will of another in order to do one’s own will, and when that other ceases to be an obstacle, then one’s job with him is done. The justification for the conflict is to remove an impediment to the fulfillment of will; once that impediment has been removed, then to go further and seek to “dominate or influence” the other implies a diversion from will, and hence an interference. If you are focused on your own will, then you will not give two hoots what the other guy does, or what he thinks, so long as he’s not in your way — if he genuinely is, then you “stamp [him] down”. If you take an excessive interest in him, and try to control or change him, then by definition you have lost focus on your own way, and are firmly ensconced in the realms of interference.

The fourth and final most likely source of this misconception is the O.T.O.’s second favourite Crowley document of all time, and the perennial favourite of all kinds of Thelemic louts and *enfants terrible*, *Liber OZ*. This “declaration of the Thelemic rights of man” contains 22 separate declarations of “rights”, along with an overarching 23rd right to “kill those who would thwart these rights.” It is a well-known fact that every year, in late September, school begins and loon season with it, and the beautiful, haunting cry of the loon can be heard on Thelemic and occult discussion boards and blogs across the internet, wailing “You can’t ban me or block my posts: you’re thwarting my *Liber OZ* right to free speech!”

Despite the 23 separate rights which *Liber OZ* does grant, one very conspicuous omission from that document is the right to expect everyone else to let you have those rights. Sure, it gives you the *right* to “kill those who would thwart those rights,” but unfortunately for the majestic loon, it does not give anybody the *ability* to do that. There is no such thing as “natural right”; imaginary rights only become actual rights once one acquires the ability to enforce them, whether or not that requires the assistance of a legislative system. *Liber OZ* does not grant rights; it lists rights that are available to those who are able to enforce them. *Liber OZ* is a statement of freedoms available to the reader, not a statement of restrictions he has to undergo in order to

allow everyone else those freedoms. This is glaringly obvious. To take a trivial example such as “man has the right to eat what he will,” if I want to eat the last chocolate éclair, and you also want to eat it, then clearly we can’t both have the right to eat what we will. Barring some form of compromise, which represents a voluntary foregoing of those rights, I’m afraid it’ll just come down to “As brothers fight ye!” again.

Furthermore, the very first line of *Liber OZ* is “man has the right to live by his own law,” and if that law includes booting the loon from a discussion forum, then the loon is thwarting the booter’s “*Liber OZ* rights” by fighting against it. Either way, anybody claiming “*Liber OZ* rights” can have them turned back against them just as easily.

There are many other sources people will quote in order to support their fundamental misconception of Thelemic ethics, but these are the main ones, and the most substantial ones, and as we have seen a better and more thoughtful interpretation — and an interpretation in concordance with *The Book of the Law* — in all cases resolves the matter. The ethics of Thelema are indeed as simple as Crowley stated plainly in *Liber II* — “Do what thou wilt — then do nothing else” — but as we have seen this simple statement appears sometimes to be rather too simple to comprehend, and a more detailed and holistic investigation with reference to *The Book of the Law* itself is necessary before we can grasp the beautiful simplicity what it actually does mean. Only once we have this understanding can we grasp what Crowley meant when he said, in Volume III, Number I of *The Equinox*:

The psychology and ethics of Thelema are perfect.

For indeed they are; *The Book of the Law* succeeds in rendering all ethical questions trivially solvable, by banishing the concept of ethics altogether, and reducing all such considerations to a question of “is it in accordance with, and necessary for, the fulfillment of my will, or is it not?” The Thelemite is released from the requirement to consider others, and need concentrate only on his own nature. Of course, this does not mean he magically acquires the ability to “stamp down the weak” without any form of repercussion or sanction, but this always was and always will be the case; the lion cannot stalk the herd of wildebeest without risk. Similarly, if he happens to be the kind of person who enjoys pleasant and supportive company, then he will need to moderate his “stamping down” in order to encourage that. He is, however, released from all obligation to consider the “rightness” of his actions, and instead need focus only on the harmony of those actions with his will, which naturally includes a consideration of their likely consequences also.

Such a notion is, however, incredibly difficult for many people to come to terms with; a universe without absolute morality can be an unsettling, even frightening thought. Yet, like it or not, that is the universe in which we live, ethical qualities being an entirely imaginary human construct, and the Thelemite considers it advantageous to accept the world as it really is, rather than to pretend it is how he would like it to be. Furthermore, the absence of objective ethical qualities does not imply an absence of *values*; the Thelemite may still have no desire to commit murder, and may have even less of a desire to be murdered himself, regardless of whether or not he discredits the idea of there being any moral implications in the act. But by viewing such notions for what they really are, rather than ascribing to the notion of some kind of overarching and bizarrely unlikely system of “divine justice,” he becomes able to remove one more veil — and a very significant one — between his consciousness and his being, between what he fancies himself to be and what he actually is, and to do so is to bring him one step closer to the promise of Nuit given at the very beginning of *The Book of the Law*:

Worship then the Khabs, and behold my light shed over
you!¹⁰

For indeed, in order to behold the light, one has only to pierce the veils.

¹⁰AL I, 9

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