

Caliban upon Setebos: The Folly of Natural Theology

The subject of Robert Browning's poem, "Caliban upon Setebos", is a disgruntled minion named Caliban who seeks to understand the disposition of the deity, Setebos, that he believes presides over his island home. Caliban's position as slave to an island inhabitant named Prospero has made him bitter and inclined to complain, fear of reprisals from authority inducing him to seek a hiding spot from which safe location he may spout his fury. The main portion of the poem is dedicated to a lengthy monologue in which Caliban seeks to decipher the purpose of life and the cause of his suffering, yet amongst the numerous complaints against Setebos are several testimonies concerning Caliban's own unpleasant character and tendencies. Caliban attempts to understand Setebos by creating a profile for the god that bears frequent similarities to his own character in order to justify Caliban's own wicked deeds.

Caliban's method for seeking to understand Setebos is an example of the type of theology known as natural theology, which "derives its knowledge of God from the study of nature independent of special revelation" (Merriam-Webster). In other words, one attempts to understand God based on observation and experience. As Aaron Worth writes of Caliban's application of natural theology in his article "'Thinketh': Browning and Other Minds", "He imagines Setebos as a version of himself, extrapolating from his own embodied experience" (128). The poem can be interpreted as a reflection upon the scientific and religious ideas of the time in which Browning was writing, an age in which evolution began to affect how the God of the Scriptures was understood to relate to humanity and the world. In fact, the poem's epigraph that Browning uses is taken from the Psalms, which reads, "These things you have done and I kept silence; You thought that I was just like you; I will reprove you and state the case in order before your eyes" (Psalms 50:21). The use of this scriptural epigraph suggests that Browning disapproved of natural theology as a futile pursuit and attempted to outline its

errors by writing this poem, fictionalizing his peers as Caliban and the God of the Bible as the god Setebos.

Caliban is extremely discontented upon the island and questions the established order of life in general when he begins his comparison between Setebos and himself. Caliban recognizes Setebos as the creator of the island and of all living things; however, it is important to understand that all of Caliban's anger and frustration due to his lot is not focused solely on Setebos but stems largely from the dictatorship of his master, Prospero. The ladder of authority causes Caliban to shift blame between both Setebos and Prospero, yet the reader can see that any sympathy or tolerance that Caliban might feel will only rest with Setebos, who, as a deity, is supposedly free from moral dilemmas and has no bias behind His arbitrary decisions. He can behave kindly or cruelly, and it is this unconformity that allows Caliban to consider Setebos with an open mind. Furthermore, Setebos is also subject to another Higher Being, the Quiet, and therefore does not have total authority and is frustrated by His limitations. Caliban derives some comfort from this perception of Setebos because his concept of this god is very similar to Caliban's own disposition and situation, allowing him to gain some sense of satisfaction from the uncomfortable state that he is perpetually forced to endure as a slave.

Caliban decides that Setebos is a spiteful creator, pronouncing life to be "things He admires and mocks" (Browning l.64). Caliban believes that this spite stems from the fact that Setebos is subject to the Quiet and is subsequently jealous. The disgust that Setebos feels at His inability to usurp the Quiet's rule has made Him bitter, but it also causes Him to view Himself with contempt. Setebos considers Himself imperfect, evidenced by His refusal to create another Being like Himself, lonely and lacking in absolute power. The argument in favor of the slave's theory is that Setebos "would not make what he dislikes or slights" (Browning l.59). He decided to make creatures different to Himself, creatures that He would

wish to be. However, this provides a warped and jealous incentive for Setebos to sport with His creation, vindictively rendering their value meaningless in light of His power over them. As Caliban observes, “better though they be, / It nothing skills if He begin to plague” (Browning 1.66). Setebos evens the scales of His misfortunes by creating things to be in His control to admire and abuse depending on His mood, establishing the reality that even if His creation is somewhat worthier than He, it means nothing when they are in His power.

Caliban responds to this perception of Setebos with understanding instead of hatred. He appreciates how discontent Setebos is, for he is also subjected to less than satisfactory living and describes himself as also “unable to be what I wish” (Browning 1.75). He supposes that if he were to breathe life into anything, then the manner in which he dealt with such creations would surely be the same as Setebos’. He offers the example of a clay bird to whom he would give wings and life, a pleasing thing that will do Caliban’s bidding and kill the annoying grasshoppers. If the bird were to break its leg and cry for help, Caliban thinks of potential ways to respond, whether to laugh or assist and, if to assist, whether to restore the leg or to remove the remaining one. The purpose of such apparent cruelty would be to teach the little bird that “he was mine and merely clay” (Browning 1.94). Hence, the reader learns that if Caliban were in a similar role to Setebos, he would treat his creation with just the same lack of grace.

Now that one comparison between himself and the god has been made, Caliban alters his attitude and changes his rant to a friendly assessment. His analysis of Setebos becomes more focused upon recollections of what Caliban has done in order that he may compare those actions to Setebos’ own, whose separation from binding principles nullifies the condemning nature of sin. Since he and Setebos have characteristics in common, Caliban decides that because he would or does behave in exactly the same way as the god, there is nothing good or bad about such behavior. Any shred of accountability vanishes from this

moment, and this is where it becomes clearer that Caliban's monologue is not so much a tirade against an overbearing god but the reflections of a hampered slave who takes comfort in the knowledge that that same god has overcome similar adversities and makes up for past injustices and present pains by controlling creation.

According to Caliban, a deity's strength makes Him Lord and keeps Him from the boundaries of right and wrong. Browning writes, "Thinketh, such shows nor right nor wrong in Him / Nor kind, nor cruel: He is strong and Lord" (l.98). If power is above sin, then any action on a basis of authority is acceptable and such allowances should not be restricted only to gods; therefore, Caliban's superior strength compared to the small species on the island gives him the privilege and right to treat them as he wishes. Strength allows one to be unconditional because the opportunity to dominate will always exist and both sensations of benevolence and torment are marks of authority. Caliban describes the random torture he inflicts upon helpless crabs that "march now from the mountain to the sea" as an example of the benefits of strength (Browning l.101). Caliban exerts this strength over the crabs by randomly selecting individuals to mutilate, "loving not, hating not, just choosing so" (Browning l.103). According to him, there is no personal or emotional involvement in these decisions to inflict or bless. Nevertheless, mutilating a few crabs indiscriminately has no justifiable motive and is therefore completely senseless and cruel.

However, the detached and unconditional manner in which infliction is randomly meted out by Caliban upon helpless creatures cannot always be considered impersonal. Caliban contradicts himself. As mentioned earlier, it is made apparent that Caliban's reason for possibly permanently disabling the lame bird would be so that the creature would be reminded of its helplessness. In this case, Caliban's actions were entirely conditional, for even though they depended on his current mood, they had a clear purpose, the selfish desire to assert authority. Caliban has unconsciously exposed the reality that sometimes that which

we could call sin does affect him. The problem with this lies in the fact that he initially found similarities between Setebos' unconditional motives and his own. He first described Setebos as unconditional and, pleased with such an analysis, used this to render his own deeds objective; however, the reader cannot help but see that some of his actions are quite the contrary. If Caliban is sometimes conditional in his deeds, then he has mistakenly applied natural theology and must either revert to the theory that Setebos cannot be understood or continue to correlate Setebos' personality with his own by finding examples of conditional behavior in Setebos.

Since, in the above case, one can see that not all of Caliban's choices are unconditional, Setebos' character must be altered again to fit with Caliban's own characteristics. Neutral motives in Setebos are no longer emphasized, and the god's profile becomes negative, such as in an anecdote concerning a petrified reptile that Caliban discovers, commenting, "'Dug up a newt He may have envied once / And turned to stone, shut up inside a stone" (Browning l.214). Additionally, after the admission of cruelty concerning the crabs, Caliban seems to realize that such behavior might not be totally praiseworthy. He hints at this by criticizing Setebos, reflecting, "Well then, 'supposeth He is good i' the main, / Placable if His mind and ways were guessed, / But rougher than His handiwork be sure!" (Browning l.109-111). Caliban changes his tone from carefree and irresponsible to begrudgingly suggestive that since he mutilates creatures just as Setebos mutilates them perhaps there are faults in both of them.

This is only the beginning of a series of irregular rationalizations that Caliban proceeds to concoct, evincing the fallible quality of natural theology. Stuart Peterfreund writes in his article "Robert Browning's Decoding of Natural Theology in 'Caliban upon Setebos'", "One of the most obvious problems with Caliban's analogical mode of argument is that it leaves him playing God in the effort to understand God" (323). This creates the

complication as to which side of the analysis is based on which individual, for depending on the events that Caliban uses to make comparisons he decides whether those events are wrong or right and switches his attitude towards Setebos accordingly. Because he continues in his belief that whatever habit he shares with the god justifies the gravity of his actions, it does not matter exactly what Caliban does, so long as he continues to find resemblances.

Unfortunately, Caliban's knowledge of his god is limited by his own humanity, and it is Browning's purpose to reveal that such a foundation for theology cannot end with a satisfactory list of facts. All of Caliban's hypotheses have constructed an image of Setebos that makes Him out to be cold and detached, yet keen to cause suffering, bitter and revengeful, often sadistic, lonely and lacking in wholesome pride. These characteristics reflect the traits of the worst of humanity and show that an understanding of the supernatural should not be based on the experiences or emotions of the mortal. At the end of the poem when Caliban cowers in fear before the approaching storm sent by a wrathful Setebos, he realizes the folly of his presumption and berates himself for having been so stupid. It is imprudent of mankind to attempt to understand God based on his own understanding of himself. Ironically, by doing so to justify his actions and sins, he has committed the unjustifiable foolishness of attempting to understand God by rendering man equal to God.

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