

An Academic Review of Anton Lavey's Satanic Philosophy

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Abstract:

Satan has been a changing character for the last 2500 years. For most of its history, the Devil was represented as God's archenemy, the representation of absolute evil. By the 19th Century, this approach had begun to change with the Romantics, some of whom represented a more heroic character. In the mid-20th Century, in the mist of countercultural movements, the figure of Satan was once again apprehended by non-conformists. The most notorious of these was Anton LaVey, who founded the Church of Satan. This article reviews LaVey's approach to the figure of Satan, some of the rituals and symbolisms associated with this movement, and the way LaVey used Satan as a way to represent his particular philosophical views.

Key Words: Satanism, Anton Lavey, Church of Satan, Devil

The Satanic mystique

The history of Satan goes back to at least 2500 years. Yet, only in the 17th Century, was the Devil perceived in more sympathetic terms, in large part due to John Milton's *Paradise Lost*¹. In the 20th Century, Aleister Crowley assumed the title of "The Beast 666", and had no embarrassment in being considered "the wickedest man in the world"². But, it was during the second half of the 20th Century, when an open Satanic movement rose up, and it persists to this day, with significant presence in mass media. Its founder was the enigmatic and sensationalist Anton LaVey³.

LaVey, who was born in Chicago in 1930, was a young student from a middle-class American family. His family moved to San Francisco during his teenage years. During those times, San Francisco was becoming a vanguard's city, and soon it would become the cradle of the counterculture movement from which LaVey's eccentric Satanic sect would rise. From an

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early age, LaVey displayed musical talents, and his parents supported him in that endeavor⁴.

LaVey eventually had command of various types of organs, and very soon he used his musical talents throughout various jobs. Apparently, LaVey began by performing in a circus. At first, he tamed lions and other felines⁵; later, he played the organ during other artists' performances.

LaVey's eccentric personality was gradually developed in that carnival environment. With the passage of time once he became famous, LaVey enjoyed exaggerating the details of his first experiences with stories that are not entirely credible. For example, LaVey claimed that during his time in the circus, he had a romantic affair with a very young lady Marilyn Monroe, someone completely unknown to media at the time. This claim has been disputed by virtually all biographers, as there is no other piece of evidence to authenticate his story.

LaVey also claimed to have worked as photographer and psychic researcher in San Francisco's Police Department. It is (unfortunately) true that there were indeed psychic researchers in the police departments of many American cities, but there are no records that may allow us to confirm that LaVey participated in these activities, that is why most of LaVey's biographers dispute these claims. In fact many years later LaVey himself admitted he adorned many of the details of his biography but he claimed it was a necessary action in order to sustain his charm on his followers.

However, there is no doubt that in Sañ Francisco LaVey eventually became a prominent character largely due to his charisma and social skills. He was very much according to Aleister Crowley, an eccentric character but at the same time he had even better skills to gather followers and relate to people even out of his social surroundings. This was how LaVey managed to develop social connections and friendships. In that countercultural environment LaVey's personality was certainly magnetic to people dissatisfied with social conventions.

Soon after LaVey began to organize conferences on magic and hosted parties that contained prominent people as guests. One of them was film maker Kenneth Anger, who with the blessings of a common friend was in

touch with Charles Manson, the infamous killer who also led a sect in the 1960s countercultural atmosphere of California⁶. LaVey himself met Manson once and some conspiracy theorists wanted to make much of this fact by connecting Manson's criminal activity with LaVey's Satanic philosophy⁷. No real evidence supports this claim.

A group of followers gather around LaVey and in 1966 he realized he had enough resources to start a new religion. Thus he founded the Church of Satan on May 1st, the same day when according to European imagination, witches held their *sabbaths*. From the very beginning this move had an enormous media impact. LaVey had been mastering his publicity techniques ever since he was an obscure musician, and he used those techniques to scandalize not only San Francisco but the whole world.

Of course only a secularized, democratic and media saturated country such as the United States could guarantee such a spectacular situation. The most conservative religious groups were frightened by LaVey. The witch hunts or at least the religious witch hunts were a thing deeply buried in the past. The political witch hunts still existed, as there were some remnants of McCarthyism left. Consequently, someone openly claiming to be Satanic in a modern and democratic country could afford casting spells and invoking the Prince of Darkness without being in risk of legal prosecution. LaVey hungry for seeking attention, used this protection to exploit his creativity and imagination.

His sensationalist strategy paid off. He shaved his head and proclaimed himself high priest of the new Satanic religion. He invited journalists to attend the Satanic rituals that imitated the ceremonies of witch hunters as part of their imagination in the previous ages. Nude women served at altars in emulation of various aspects of the Black Mass⁸. However, the ceremonies did not incorporate all the repugnant elements that inquisitors attributed to the preceding centuries.

LaVey held a Satanic wedding for two of his followers and he also organized a baptism and a funeral. He began a new calendar taking the foundation of his Church as year one or the year of Satan. He wore horns on his head to resemble the Devil and in front of cameras he frequently

assumed a seductive and enigmatic gaze. He walked around with a leashed lion. He assumed the title of “Black Pope” (he was apparently not aware that this was actually a title used by the Superior General of the Society of Jesus).

To sum up it was a gigantic media circus. Predictably the public reaction was also carnival-like⁹. Most people felt curiosity and amusement with the new religion. In fact the new Church of Satan was more about aesthetics than about religion. Its members’ beliefs were not as important as the impact of its aesthetic manifestations.

The attraction was generated by its colorful rituals (again always law-abiding), the scandalous clothes and of course the counter-cultural stand that was quite popular during those times of juvenile instability. TV channels gave a lot of air time to the Black Pope, and Roman Polansky (whose wife, Sharon Tate, was murdered by Charles Manson, and hence some speculation has been made of the connection between Manson and LaVey) used that setting to promote *Rosemary’s baby*, the cult film about a woman who gives birth to a child fathered by Satan.

LaVey claimed that he was a technical advisor to the movie and even that he was the actor who played the part of the Devil in one of the film’s most important scenes¹⁰. But of course, it was yet another lie, very typical of LaVey’s histrionic personality.

Furthermore, LaVey incorporated a series of symbols that are frequently associated with Satanic groups even today. He frequently used himself the pentagram. In the Occultist tradition, the pentagram had been recurrently used by Eliphas Levi, and it is likely that LaVey took it from his writings¹¹. Yet the pentagram has also been used in many other traditions that value the number five. Even Christianity, at some point, used the pentagram to represent important sets made up of five elements. The traditional pentagram has one spike up and two down. LaVey, by contrast came up with an innovation. He was aware that during the witch hunt craze witches represented (or were so accused by inquisitors) many parodies of Christian rituals and symbols. Following that tradition, LaVey inverted the pentagram (two spikes up and one spike down) all with the sole intention of causing scandal.

LaVey also appropriated the image of Baphomet. This was an idol supposedly worshipped by the Templars (this accusation led to their doom), and its name may have actually been a corruption of “Mahomet”, in line with the medieval horror that Christians may renounce their faith and become Muslims¹². In the 19th Century, Occultist Eliphas Levi embraced the worshipping of this idol, and he designed an image representing it in the form of a human body with a goat’s head and an eagle’s wings. In Western imagination, the goat had a close association with the witches’ *Sabbath*, and it was natural enough for Levi to embrace that animal. LaVey took this image, and lightly modified it. This time, he incorporated the inverted pentagram in a Hebrew inscription with the name of Leviathan, the Biblical monster that during Biblical times had nothing to do with the idea of Devil but that eventually came to be associated with it and was finally incorporated as a demon in most demonologists’ list.

It is extremely unlikely that the Templars survived the persecution carried out by Philip IV of France, in the 14th Century. But even those contemporary cults that claim descent from the Templars, reject the Templar Satanic connection, as (with all historical probability) a gross distortion. LaVey instead claimed that the Templars were indeed worshipping the Devil. But of course unlike the successive conspiracy theories still claim that Templars secretly carry out ritual abominations, LaVey was sympathetic to the Templars’ alleged Satanic cult.

During the times of the witch hunt craze, inquisitors believed (that part of the Black Mass, in the Sabbats) that the Lord’s Prayer was recited backwards¹³. Supposedly, this was a strategy that Satan used to make parodies of the most sacred elements of Christian rituals. Once again with the sole purpose of causing scandal, LaVey tried to parody a sacred element of Christianity by inverting it.

This time instead of inverting the Lord’s Prayer LaVey sought to invert the Cross. That is how, in some juvenile subcultures the inverted Cross is used as a Satanic symbol. This of course, is very confusing as the inverted Cross was originally *not* a Satanic symbol (LaVey may have even been aware of this but let us recall that his eccentric personality took delight in

confusing and mystifying his followers). Long before it was associated with Satan the inverted Cross was associated with Peter, the Jesus disciple. As narrated in the *Acts of Peter* (a 2nd Century apocryphal text), Peter asked to be crucified upside down, because he did not consider himself dignified enough to die as his master.

The Satanic philosophy

Yet even if LaVey enjoyed all sorts of publicity stunts, and flattered himself with appropriating Occultist symbols and playing around with them, he was not contented enough with just being a showman. LaVey hoped that Satanism would be much more than just parties and sensationalist rituals. He had a philosophical agenda, and he wanted his ideas to be taken seriously. He thus developed a sort of Satanic philosophy that relied on the Romantic legacy.

The Romantics had embraced Satan as a sort of misunderstood hero that although ultimately and fatally proud, nevertheless inspires sympathies in readers¹⁴. Milton portrayed a charismatic Lucifer who opposes God's tyranny, Byron initiated the so-called "Satanic school", and Victor Hugo represented a very courageous Satan. Romantic writers did not mean to worship Satan. Yet they did use his character as a way to lionize many virtues like courage, individuality, audacity, persistence attributed to him, they also warned that these traits could lead to a tragic end. Satan thus became the subject of major works of literature in the 19th Century. However although LaVey was a marketing genius of his own, he had neither the literary talents nor the philosophical depth of his philosophical predecessors.

From the outset LaVey clarified that his new Satanic religion was atheistic and materialist (allegedly that was why he inverted the pentagram; i.e., he wanted the pentagram to point downwards to emphasize the mundane aspect). In other words, LaVey did not accept the actual existence of the Devil. LaVey at first had some inclinations for Occultism and magic (in that case he was not as materialist as he claimed for he seemed to presuppose that mysterious occult forces are at play in magic spells). Yet with the passage of time, LaVey moved away from Occultist philosophy and tried to be more consistent with materialism

that denies the existence of supernatural forces that act upon nature.

For LaVey Satan was not truly a real person but rather a symbol that represents the set of values that he was willing to defend and promote. Etymologically, Satan comes from the Hebrew *hā-Satan*, which means *the adversary*. LaVey was looking for a symbol that would best represent the counter-culture environment in which he was raised and where he thrived. He was on the search for an adversary and a nonconformist with the system. And of course just like the Romantics, he found such a figure in Satan.

LaVey's embrace of Satan was not really about worshipping a metaphysical entity who introduces evil in the world. He was not even concerned about absolute evil. In the religious history of Satan, before he became the manifestation of absolute evil as a result of Zoroastrian influence upon the Jewish religion after the Babylonian Exile in the 6th Century B.C.E., Satan was just an adversary. That is how he is portrayed in the Book of Job merely as an overzealous prosecutor in the celestial court but not really as the personification of all things evil. LaVey sympathized more with this purely Hebrew (i.e., prior to Zoroastrian influence) figure, and he thus used Satan to honor an adversarial ideology, a confrontation with any form of system or established order.

In LaVey's approach, the homage to Satan would not be about committing deliberately evil acts (such as, human sacrifice as they were imagined by inquisitors of previous epochs), but rather about assuming an attitude of rebelliousness against an oppressive system. In this regard, LaVey's Satan was much more similar to Milton's Lucifer, than to the Malign One who makes pacts with witches as imagined by witch hunters. Nevertheless as previously mentioned that did not prevent LaVey from assimilating ritual symbols supposedly used by witches.

Philosophical influences on LaVey

Philosophically speaking the foremost intellectual influence on LaVey's ideas was Friedrich Nietzsche¹⁵. Like LaVey, Nietzsche had little regard for Christianity. But, instead of formally arguing against a given system of beliefs, Nietzsche used the literary resource of promoting a cult to ancient Greek gods as substitutes to the Christian God. Nietzsche was

especially fascinated by Dionysus, the god of wine.

In the cultural history of the Devil's artistic depiction, Dionysus, along with Pan, is one of the predecessors of Satan in Greek mythology. As god of wine and excess Dionysus represented rage and hedonistic disinhibition, as opposed to the moral restrictions of Christianity. In his philosophy according to Nietzsche who admired precisely the values represented by Dionysus (furthermore, during his years of mental illness, Nietzsche signed some of his letters as "Dionysus"). Nietzsche did not believe in the literal existence of Dionysus as a god that should be worshipped. But Nietzsche did affirm the Greek god's values¹⁶. LaVey attempted something very similar, but instead of choosing Dyonisus from Greek mythology he chose Satan from Christian lore.

The values that LaVey highlighted in the figure of Satan also have a significant resemblance to the values that Nietzsche gathered from Dionysus. In that sense Nietzsche's philosophy and LaVey's beliefs do have some parallelism. Nietzsche believed that the traditional distinction between good and evil actually was due to a distortion imposed by early Christians. Nietzsche considered that the Christian ethical system that emphasized mercy, charity and helping out the weak constituted what he called a "slave's morality".

According to Nietzsche Christianity had limited humanity's potential for self-realization. By emphasizing mercy and by belittling the pleasures of life (to be suspended until the afterlife), Christian morality had severely harmed human vitality. Human beings have an animal instinctive drive towards domination but Christian morality permeated by resentment, continuously represses such a drive. Christianity has imposed an ascetic ideal of renouncing life's pleasures, and it has also suppressed the potential for action and life affirmation amongst human beings. In Nietzsche's view Christianity is fundamentally the religion of mediocre persons who are driven by masses. The liberation from this is represented by the symbol of Dionysus. This liberation is about reaffirming aristocratic virtues that allow individuals to resist the power of crowds, and are able to take their own initiative searching for pleasure and self-realization.

Nietzsche was not properly a nihilist (as opposed to his common characterization) instead he proposed a new set of values that may allow humans to revert the damage caused by the slave's morality promoted by Christianity. These new values would be part of a "master's morality", that would affirm the pleasures of life, domination, non-repressed vitality, and creativity.

LaVey took these philosophical observations very seriously, and he assimilated them as the basis to write his book. *The Satanic Bible*, which would be the doctrinal inspiration for his new religion. For instance LaVey set out to invert the typical blessings laid out in the Gospels. Instead of blessing the poor and the weak (as in Matthew ***), he writes: "Blessed are the strong, for they shall possess the earth - Cursed are the weak, for they shall inherit the yoke!... Blessed are the iron-handed, for the unfit shall flee before them - Cursed are the poor in spirit, for they shall be spat upon!"

Very much as Nietzsche, LaVey was not properly a nihilist as he did not call for the death of morality. Instead he called for a new morality that would replace Christianity and as opposed to the Ten Commandments, he proposed a set of rules, as laid out in *Eleven Satanic Rules of the Earth*:

1. Do not give opinions or advice unless you are asked.
2. Do not tell your troubles to others unless you are sure they want to hear them.
3. When in another's lair show them respect or else do not go there.
4. If a guest in your lair annoys you treat them cruelly and without mercy.
5. Do not make sexual advances unless you are given the mating signal.
6. Do not take that which does not belong to you unless it is a burden to the other person and they cry out to be relieved.
7. Acknowledge the power of magic if you have employed it successfully to obtain your desires. If you deny the power of magic after having called upon it with success, you will lose all you have obtained.

8. Do not complain about anything to which you need not subject yourself.
9. Do not harm little children.
10. Do not kill non-human animals unless you are attacked or for your food.
11. When walking in open territory, bother no one. If someone bothers you, ask them to stop. If they do not stop, destroy them¹⁷.

Obviously this new moral code is not so objectionable. As opposed to the representation of Satanism promoted by inquisitors of previous ages. In LaVey's commandments there is no explicit call to commit abominable acts. Living strictly under this set of rules would lead no one to commit any crime. LaVey explicitly requested respect for children, and he disapproved of any attempt at sexual violence. Opponents of Satanism have accused its adherents of inciting criminal activity, but in truth these accusations are grossly unfair.

Furthermore, LaVey's hedonistic approach seems to resonate more with Epicurus' philosophy than with Dionysian excess. There is no afterlife, the ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus recommended living life to the fullest. But in order to do so, it is necessary to have self-control and one must learn how to abstain from activities that could be potentially harmful¹⁸. LaVey seemed to agree with this Epicurean approach. Although he exalted life's pleasures, he rejected the consumption of drugs (as opposed to Aleister Crowley, the early 20th Century Occultist with whom LaVey is frequently compared). This is especially worthy of consideration, taking into account LaVey's counter-cultural surroundings in San Francisco, of which experimentation with drugs was a significant feature.

But precisely one of the virtues that LaVey exalted the most was the rejection of herd mentality¹⁹. LaVey frowned upon any collectivist attempt to regulate individuals' lives. Satan is a hero very much like Prometheus (a character much beloved by Romantic authors, especially those of the Satanic school), challenges conformity and opposes the establishment

even if that means becoming unpopular. In LaVey's philosophy, the truly virtuous person is not concerned about what others think of him. Instead he assumes consequences and does not evade responsibilities. The link of LaVey's ideology with existentialism has seldom been explored by historians of ideas but it certainly warrants further research.

Of course the emphasis on individual autonomy the seeking of pleasure and the rejection of collectivism, has a long history in Philosophy. And even if some individualistic and hedonistic philosophers have caused some discomfort with their views they have not caused great scandal. Epicurus Hobbes, Bentham, Helevetius, John Stuart Mill and others, proposed ethical systems that favored the search for personal pleasure and most readers have not been offended by them²⁰.

LaVey's position, however was more scandalous because as opposed to the conventional ethical hedonists, he did not favor cooperation. Most traditional ethical defenders of egoism such as Hobbes defended cooperation and charity on the basis of what has come to be known as "enlightened self-interest". Inasmuch as we are a social species, we need to help each other out in order to achieve greater pleasures. Cooperation is needed in order to satisfy our own desires. Philosophical egoists have defended the attempt to seek out one's own desire but they have always advised that the best way to get that satisfaction is by cooperating with others.

In LaVey's doctrine there is no emphasis on enlightened self-interest. LaVey's egoism is brutal as it has absolutely no contemplation for other people's well-being. For some time LaVey was interested in Aleister Crowley's ideas but he eventually lost interest. Nevertheless, throughout his lifetime, LaVey did embrace Crowley's libertine approach, outlined in his slogan, "Do what Thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law"²¹.

Furthermore LaVey had some very crude retributive ideas very much in line with "an eye for an eye" morality. In his Satanic rules and throughout his writings, LaVey does not even appeal to the Golden Rule of the vast majority of ethical systems, i.e., "do unto others as you would have them do unto you". Instead, LaVey defends doing unto others as they actually do unto us (*not* as we would want them to do unto us). LaVey had little

patience for second chances or even for negotiation. He requested immediate and firm retribution.

One of the greatest defenders of enlightened self-interest in the 20th Century was novelist and philosopher Ayn Rand²². LaVey explicitly professed admiration for her. But again even if Rand was extremely energetic in her defense of individual autonomy in the face of collectivist pressure she still admitted that cooperation was needed and generosity is the proper way to satisfy individual pleasures. LaVey did not seem to care much for this aspect of Rand's philosophy. His version of egoism we may insist was too rough. Although LaVey's Satanism may have some connection to the Epicurean hedonism that requires the postponement of immediate pleasures in favor of long-term satisfaction (such as abstaining from drugs), LaVey did not take into account the basic maxim defended by philosophical egoists, according to which the most rational way of getting our own desires is by cooperating and helping others.

Other literary influences on LaVey

Another relevant author from whom LaVey took much inspiration was novelist Jack London²³. London's work was very popular in his time, and his activities as novelist was financially productive. But precisely due to his attempts at adjusting to the readers' market, the quality of his works is not consistent, and his philosophical views were not altogether clear. In some of his writings, London embraced Marxist views and viewed himself as a representative of the working class. In other writings London represents characters that (although brutal) end up being heroes because of their powerful personalities.

LaVey was very much interested in this type of characters. London's *Sea Wolf* has been especially attractive to members of the Church of Satan. *Sea Wolf* tells the story of a philosophically-minded mariner who through severe beatings and punishments manages to impose discipline on his crew. This mariner puts in practice a vision of the world that favors the strong and favors eliminating any vestige of weakness in the world.

LaVey was a moderately educated person and had more philosophical leanings than common people. But, LaVey was not a scholar. And his movement was more about sensationalism than formal religious practice.

Writing the *Satanic Bible* was more about a publicity stunt than about firm philosophical conviction, that was why he rushed the writing of the book and in order to finish it sooner, he massively plagiarized a text that in his view, cohered well with his own ideas.

The book which LaVey plagiarized was “*Might is Right*” by an author under the pseudonym Ragnar Redbeard²⁴. If it were not for LaVey’s plagiarism this book would have fallen into oblivion. The book is mostly an extremely crude presentation of Social Darwinist philosophy typical of the late 19th Century. The book’s main thesis contains the idea that given their lack of biological fitness, the poor and the weak must disappear, the sooner the better. Furthermore the book makes frequent racist remarks, as it advocates that particular races must disappear given their biological inferiority. Redbear also claims that slavery should be reinstated because inferior races cannot govern themselves, and the book also advises against miscegenation.

LaVey was careful enough to remove those passages that were too rude. To his credit LaVey left out some of the most offensive remarks, and there are no racist passages in the *Satanic Bible*. Nevertheless LaVey’s plagiarism was massive. Indeed even if LaVey’s Satanic philosophy was never explicitly racist, and some people of African descent joined the ranks of the Church of Satan (most notably, Sammy Davis Jr.), LaVey’s Satanic philosophy has been used as inspiration by some Neo-Fascist groups that explicitly embrace an ideology of racial hatred²⁵.

Satanic philosophy and magical practices

LaVey also plagiarized part of a text popularized by Aleister Crowley, the *Enochian Keys*²⁶. In the 16th Century, the English occultist John Dee had attempted to recover an alleged language (he called it “Enochian”, because allegedly the Biblical patriarch Enoch was the last person to command such a language) in order to establish communications with angelic beings and the *Enochian Keys* were songs sung to conjure spirits. Crowley used these songs in his magic endeavors, and LaVey incorporated them in the *Satanic Bible*.

Although Nietzsche embraced Dionysus as a symbol, he did not go as far as to promote a bacchanal cult. His enthusiasm for Dionysus was

mostly concerned with literature and philosophy. Instead, LaVey was not a true philosopher (as previously mentioned he was much more of a plagiarist) but he did have a gift for scenic performances. It was therefore natural that he would go on to develop rituals that would represent his Satanic principles.

This raises a question that if LaVey was very insistent on saying that Satan does not literally exist as a person, then what is the point in developing the rituals? Nietzsche was aware that Dionysus did not literally exist and for that reason, he never really sought to organize a cult. Yet LaVey's relationship to Satan seemed different, as he did indeed organize a Satanic cult. At first LaVey incorporated many elements of magic and occultism in his rituals and even the seventh of his Satanic rules (as stated above) required to acknowledge the power of magic. But given his materialist vision of the world, LaVey ultimately leaned towards the idea that magic is useless. In that sense, it is understandable that LaVey used Satan as a symbol, but why go so far with such elaborate rituals that incorporate symbols of previous epochs, during which the literal existence of Satan was taken for granted?

To this query LaVey frequently replied that those rituals with Satanic symbols actually played a cathartic role in a psychodrama therapy. Given the collectivist repression imposed by society (as well as the exaltation of mediocrity and the restriction of pleasure and mundane things) whoever wants to be free from these limitations, may engage in the Satanic rituals as a way of release. Satan is just the counter-cultural symbol that allows the practitioner backlash against the system's collectivist oppression.

Nevertheless LaVey's relationship with magic and alchemy was still ambiguous throughout his lifetime. His beliefs were not as wild as Crowley's but he was not as thoroughly rational as he liked to think of himself. Long before the foundation of the Church of Satan, LaVey began to grow in fame largely due to his alleged paranormal abilities. He seemed to believe that indeed such powers existed and that he commanded them.

For example in one of his romantic affairs he developed an enmity with Sam Brody one of his lovers romantic partners²⁷. Brody died in a traffic accident but LaVey liked to tell that the previous night he had taken

a picture of Brody and he had made some conjures on the picture. Apparently at some point LaVey believed in the efficiency of his own magical spells.

LaVey's rationalism and legacy

Ever since rationalism began to be firmly established in Western civilization and the hysterical obsession with Satan cooled down most rationalist intellectuals have sympathized with the idea that the best way to approach the figure of the Devil, is by mocking him. In the past, the anxieties over Satanic conspiracies gave rise to inquisitions and witch hunts. Under the rationalist view to laugh at the Devil basically amounts to assuming that the Malign does not really exist.

To a certain extent LaVey was part of this rationalist stance. By adopting the Satanic paraphernalia not so much as an attempt to carry on with the irrationalities of Occultism but rather with the explicit intention of mocking the ignorance and fear of previous centuries. From a rationalist perspective LaVey's approach is praiseworthy. In a time when the Satanic scare persists with wild claims of Satanic ritual abuse LaVey's approach is healthy in the sense that it uses mockery as a way of expressing the idea that when it comes to Satan there really is nothing much to fear. LaVey had a particular talent for ridiculing religious fundamentalists obsessed with the Devil. Through his mockery LaVey was implying that the Devil did not really exist.

Indeed LaVey was always as critical of conventional theists as of those marginal Satanic groups that it seems did really believe in the literal existence of the Devil. Perhaps unwittingly LaVey carried on an intellectual exercise that Michel Foucault would have called "archaeology"²⁸. Probably as a way of proving that the Devil does not literally exist LaVey unearthed the different concepts of the Devil that have persisted throughout History (from simply an overzealous celestial prosecutor in the Book of Job, to God's archenemy to the hero of the Romantics). Portraying Satan as the manifestation of pure evil has only been one amongst many other representations, and it is not even the original one. LaVey wanted to convey the idea that Satan is not immorality as such but rather simply the disposition towards adversity. In

that sense any person that feels oppressed by an immoral system, may find inspiration in Satan.

To a certain extent LaVey's most relevant deed was to take to a farther extreme what Milton and the Romantics had originally set out to do regarding Satan. Rebellion in the face of despotism can be heroic. And far from just conforming to rules following the herd and allowing collectiveness to impose its will over the individual, LaVey believed it was desirable that there may be individuals who in emulation of Satan recover that sense of autonomous individuality, initiative and daringness.

Nevertheless LaVey's views are very disappointing to philosophers (not least to rationalists). Ever since the abuses of Communism and the rise of collectivist utopian projects, individual autonomy and egoism as ethical stands have been given a bad name. LaVey courageously sought to vindicate the notion of an individual who resists the pressure from the herd, who thinks and takes decisions autonomously and who seeks to live a pleasant life. But as opposed to Milton (who despite his alluring portrayal of Lucifer ultimately warned about the danger of his character) LaVey did not come to understand that rebelliousness has an aspect of vanity, that could turn out to be very harmful. Neither did LaVey come to terms with the basic philosophical idea that, egoism may be rational as long as it contemplates a calculation of life's pleasures mediated by cooperation with others.

In the end LaVey's Satanic philosophy is destructive and does not truly offer a good means to achieve its original goal of pleasure seeking. If all human beings were part of LaVey's Satanic movement the world would be in chaos as there would be no cooperation. This chaos would forbid us from achieving happiness. LaVey's emphasis on the immediate satisfaction of mundane pleasures ultimately leads to nihilism. And even though it would be grossly unfair to accuse LaVey's Satanism of some of the moral monstrosities that are frequently attributed to it (human sacrifices etc.) LaVey was nevertheless responsible for promoting an ideology very close to Social Darwinism which actively seeks out the elimination of the weak and feeble from society.

Furthermore there is great irony in LaVey's Satanism. His philosophy

proclaimed individual autonomy and the rejection of herd mentality. But, in many regards, his religion itself became a sort of charismatic cult (not dissimilar from many of the Occultist societies of the early 20th Century), and his followers blindly followed him. Those who enrolled in the Church of Satan hoped to get away from herd mentality but ironically they became part of a new herd with LaVey as its shepherd.

Some sociologists have studied LaVey's religious movement²⁹ and they have come to find out that the profile of a typical follower is a male teenager (women are almost entirely absent) who pretends to assume a fashionable intellectual pose but who in truth has little idea about the most elementary principles of sound ethical reasoning. Members of LaVey's Church of Satan feel special and believe themselves to be superior to the society from which they hope to escape but in their attempt to be autonomous, they wind up being absorbed by the commands of the Satanic cult.

Moreover, various testimonies attest that apart from his charisma LaVey had a strongly authoritarian personality. This eventually led to the awkward situation in which either his followers blindly followed him in every command or they ultimately broke with him.

Indeed there have been various schisms within the Church of Satan. LaVey had originally organized his followers in "grottos" (more or less the Satanic equivalent of a parish the name alludes to some of the fabled places where witches assembled) and of his closest associate Michael Aquino who had taken command of one of these group. But starting in 1975 LaVey decided to dissolve the grottos and he took a more active in the commercialization of the Church of Satan. Aquino was not happy with LaVey's decision and therefore decided to break up with the Church of Satan. He went on to found his own cult, the Temple of Set³⁰.

Set was the Egyptian god typically associated with evil. Although in the cultural history of Satan, Set may be seen as a remote predecessor (and some authors have even tried to establish an etymological link between the names Satan and Set). Most scholars agree that the two figures are not truly related. Nevertheless Aquino did uphold such a link, and founded a new cult that instead of focusing on Satan focused on Set.

LaVey's cult was atheist in the sense that members of the Church of Satan did not believe in the literal existence of the Devil. Aquino by contrast took Satanism on a more traditional path (or at least on the path as it has been traditionally imagined by outsiders). Aquino ultimately came to defend Set's literal existence and he organized Set's formal worship as a real god. Yet very much as LaVey, Aquino claimed that the entity he worshipped was not the actual representation of absolute evil but rather a god that personified individual strength in the face of collective coercion. Yet whereas LaVey was ambiguous regarding the efficacy of magic, Aquino did fully proclaim that he had magic powers.

After LaVey's death in 1997, the Church of Satan went into decline and for the time being it did not seem like its numbers will rise again. This is not at all surprising, since much of the cult's allure rested upon LaVey's charismatic personality. LaVey's legacy will probably be a colorful chapter in the history of American counterculture but nothing of the intellectual impact that he hoped for as his philosophical views were sloppily construed as well as heavily imbued with plagiarism.

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