

Trouble in the Garden:
Free Will and the Problem of Evil in *Paradise Lost*
by
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For Professor James Dawes, who supported my choices wherever they led.

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Abstract

Paradise Lost presents one of many possible answers to the apparent contradiction between a benevolent God and the enormity of human suffering. The complex theodicy laid out by the poem first renders God blameless using a series of legalistic proofs to place responsibility for the Fall of Man--from which all human evil stems--entirely upon Adam and Eve. The poem goes on to showcase Divine mercy and kindness in the form of His providence for future humankind. Although, as we see in the theological predecessors of Milton, this argument answers the paradox well enough to stand on its own, *Paradise Lost* goes one step further in its vindication of the Lord. The God of the poem privileges the integrity of free will over all other things, including human physical contentment as well as His own pleasure. Beyond merely excusing God from responsibility for evil, *Paradise Lost* argues that Divine love is apparent in the ability of humankind to make its own decisions, and to live with the consequences.

This thesis explicates the above arguments and themes in the above order. The first chapter focuses upon Adam and Eve and the prelapsarian nature of choice in the Garden. Given a prosecutorial approach to assigning blame for the Fall of Man, textual evidence must prove their decision to transgress against God was uncoerced and made with full knowledge of the consequences. Adam and Eve are in fact sufficiently provided for as to leave no incentive to transgress, and are provided with full information regarding not only their situation but that of the universe from the Almighty Himself. This chapter then begins tracing the importance of truly free choice by locating its origin in the reasoning faculty of humans, and its results in human accountability for the consequences of reasoned choice.

Having established the origin of evil in human freewill and explained its blamability upon humankind, the second chapter covers the intrusion of Satan and the influence of sin upon free will. While one might suppose Satanic interference would somewhat excuse the transgression of Eve, in fact Satan never impairs Eve's reasoning faculties, nor threatens her in a way that would abridge her free will. Through his introduction of contagious sin, he convinces her to ignore her reason, but that her own decision and therefore the weight of human suffering remains upon her and Adam. However, consuming the Forbidden Fruit does impair human reasoning, to the point that it is legitimately difficult for Adam and Eve to ration out the correct path. As such, their postlapsarian actions, as well as those of their descendants, receive more mercy from God and are capable of being corrected.

The third chapter focuses upon the actions of the God of the poem, and completes the theodicy by explaining why he allows evil to pass. Namely, the God of *Paradise Lost* does not interfere with the forewarned actions of transgression because consequences must carry weight in order to incentivize using rationality to make the correct choice. Even after humankind betrays its relationship with the Almighty, God continues to trust them with the power of free choice. This chapter goes on to explain the importance of free will to this God: namely, it is God Himself who possesses ultimate free choice, as well as the power and responsibility that goes with it. Humankind receives a miniature version of that Divine power, with accordingly lower influence and lower responsibility, and through experimentation and experience of consequence learn to use that power well. The reward of using one's rationality--which naturally points towards God as the highest good--is ascension to the ultimate contentment of Heaven.

In essence, the God of *Paradise Lost* allows for the possibility of evil choice, in order to give meaning to the choice to do good. However, it is humankind that actually brings evil into the world, in our process of atonement and redemption.

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INTRODUCTION

How can a good God allow the agony of terminal cancer and other painful diseases, the decay of the brain and personality in Alzheimer's disease, and the wickedness of the violent criminal or the torturer or those who undermine and destroy the developing personality of a child?

- John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (1985)

Centuries of Christian thinkers have struggled to explain why all humans face challenges which result in fear and suffering. Given the supposed omnipotence of the Christian God, it would seem that we must conclude that suffering is somehow intended by the Lord, and yet such a conception contradicts the omnibenevolence with which He is irrevocably associated. In Christian philosophy, this paradox is called the problem of evil, with "evil" referring broadly to the infinite ills, accidents, sufferings, and fears--both cruel and natural--which all humans suffer. The question as to why evil exists has fascinated such minds as Plato, Augustine, and Milton, and modern literature continues to grapple with it, using a variety of spiritual and logical approaches.

One of these modern philosophers, Alvin Plantinga, summarizes this pursuit in so many words:

some theologians and theistic philosophers have tried to give successful arguments or *proofs* for the existence of God. This enterprise is called *natural theology*. The natural theologian does not, typically, offer his arguments in order to convince people of God's existence; [rather,] the typical function of natural

philosophy has been to show that religious belief is rationally acceptable. Other philosophers, of course, have presented arguments for the *falsehood* of theistic beliefs; these philosophers conclude that belief in God is demonstrably irrational or unreasonable. We call this enterprise *natural atheology*.¹

This paper will approach the poetic opus of writer John Milton as a work of natural theology; that is, as a logical proof specifically focusing upon the problem of *theodicy*.

The German philosopher Gottfried Leibniz is generally credited with originating the above term, to describe a proposed explanation for the Christian problem of evil. Although the word “theodicy” would have been unfamiliar to the intellectual predecessors of Leibniz, its definition--explained here by the modern philosopher John Hick--describes a centuries-old logical practice:

The word [theodicy] is thus a kind of technical shorthand for: the defence of the justice and righteousness of God in face of the form of evil. The invention of the word (in its French form, *théodicée*) is commonly and credibly attributed to Leibniz.²

This paper will explicate an intricately constructed theodicy in the Christian fiction of the English writer, politician, and pamphleteer John Milton (1608-1674). His epic poem *Paradise Lost*, first published in 1667, adapts the first chapters of Genesis into a fictional narrative. The poem stars a broad range of characters, from angels and demons, to Adam and Eve, to Satan and

¹ Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, Harper and Row (Grand Rapids), 1974, 2-3. Italics original.

² John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, Harper and Row (New York), 1978, 6. Italics original.

God Himself. The poem further centers upon two forms of Original Sin: the fall of a host of rebel angels after an unsuccessful rebellion against God, and the consumption by Adam and Eve of the Forbidden Fruit in the Garden of Eden. The collective punishment of unborn humankind for this Original Sin must be justified by the God of the story, and through the events of the poem Milton constructs an argument for why an all-loving God allows evil to exist within His creation.

At this moment we pause briefly upon the word “justify.” Although used by Milton himself, one could argue that attempting to solve the problem of evil presumes unduly upon the mystery of the Divine. This argument suggests that the act of proposing the question is itself wrong. As modern natural philosophers go, I will have ample cause to cite John Hick’s exhaustive and thoughtful *Evil and the God of Love*. Hick also addresses the legitimacy of theodicy right out of the gate, and argues convincingly that

it is still proper, and indeed necessary, to ask how such deplorable irrationality could occur in a universe created out of nothing by infinite goodness and power. Even if we cannot hope to understand the motive or rationale of evil, we must still ask why God permits it; and any answer to this question will be moving in the realm of theodicy.³

As this work will demonstrate, Milton certainly realized the importance of theological examination to spiritual contentment. If necessary, we may follow the lead of Hick and replace “justify” with “explain” to emphasize how natural theology takes doctrinal stipulations and draws conclusions from these spiritual “laws.”

³ Hick, 8-9.

Like many of its predecessors, *Paradise Lost* locates the blame for modern evils in the Original Sin of Adam and Eve. Given God's power and foresight--neither of which are denied by the poem--the natural theologian might conclude that a good God would more stubbornly bar his beloved creations from disgrace. However, over the course of the poem Milton constructs a situation wherein the original humans are fully equipped to reject sin both logically and emotionally. All incentives and all rationales discourage consuming the Forbidden Fruit. As such, only Adam and Eve can be blamed for bringing sin into the world by transgressing; God is absolved of all blame.

At the same time, we learn early on in the poem that Milton's God not only knows that humanity will transgress, but also is aware that they will do so under the deception of Satan. Given these circumstances, one might fault God for keeping the Forbidden Tree in the Garden in the first place; we might equate this to leaving a child with an open flame.

How, then, to absolve God of allowing humanity to fall from grace? Milton fundamentally redirects the blame onto humanity's *choice* to transgress. Although God knows the Fall of Man is inevitable, said Fall is neither an accident nor a random event. To remove the Forbidden Tree from the Garden would be to deny Adam and Eve the ability to meaningfully choose to obey. The importance of human free choice to piety is even explained by Milton's God Himself in book three:

Not free, what proof could they have giv'n sincere
 Of true allegiance, constant faith or love,
 Where only what they needs must do, appeared,

Not what they would? What praise could they receive?⁴

In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve have no difficult choices and no bodily discomforts: in fact, no discontent whatsoever. Their choices--for example, where to tend the Garden each day--have no serious consequences. If not for the presence of the Forbidden Tree, their God-given rationality could be considered wasted: both are capable of thoughtful reasoning, but have little occasion to use it. Without the capacity to transgress against God, Adam and Eve might as well have been praise-giving robots designed to tend the Garden.

Instead, God provides early humanity not only with physical comfort but with the minds to appreciate it. Even before the Fall, Adam and Eve are capable of breathtaking love, eloquent speeches, and a more thorough understanding of the spiritual universe than is afforded to us today. As the above quote makes clear, their obedience to God is all the more precious for its being freely chosen. Therefore, although Milton's God could certainly have removed the Forbidden Tree from the Garden, to do so would be to deny humanity its ability to choose--even when that choice is disastrously wrong.

The consequences of sin prove to be evil; that is, this Original Sin is the Pandora's box which unleashes evil upon the world. After the fall, Adam and Eve become immediately, bodily aware of the existence of pain, death, shame, and fear thereof. The relationship between their fear and the release of evil upon the world is summed up nicely by the North African saint Augustine of Hippo (d. 430): "either that is evil which we fear, or the act of fearing is itself evil."⁵ Evil is, therefore, a painful byproduct of human choice gone awry.

⁴ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Penguin Books (London), 2003. So as to avoid repetition, all further citations to the text will simply be given in standard form of book number, period, line numbers (within said book). For example, the above quote is cited III.103-106. This represents that it comes from lines 103-106 of the third book. The poem contains twelve books overall.

⁵ qtd. in Hick, 27.

The negative consequences of sin will be proven, using textual and philosophical evidence, to be necessary to the integrity of human free choice. Negative consequences incentivize the rational mind against committing sin, and to remove them would be to deny human choice any weight.

The importance of maintaining the integrity of human choice is further illustrated in the moments after Adam and Eve's rationality is corrupted by the Forbidden Fruit. Fear and shame deprive early humanity of both its physical comfort and its ability to reason: Adam and Eve begin to worry about their physical bodies rather than their relationship to God. Milton's fictionalized version of the Lord, in His infinite mercy, forgives humankind, but does not restore its physical satisfaction: to have lost that was a forewarned consequence of transgression. Rather, God restores humankind's "lapsed powers" of reason,⁶ and places within them His "umpire conscience, whom if they will hear, / Light after light well-used they shall attain, / And to the end persisting, safe arrive [in Heaven]."⁷ By privileging humankind's powers of reasoning over its physical comfort, Milton's God provides ultimate evidence as to His valuation of free will. Humankind's powers of reason are a gift from a loving God, and although humans stumble and thus bring evil into the world, the ability to achieve Heaven by our own choice is a greater form of love than is the gift of bodily comfort.

The final chapter of this work will delve into exactly why free choice is so valued by Milton's God, and arguably also by Milton himself: namely, that rationality and choice are qualities which move a being closer to God. After all, who has greater liberty of choice, and whose choices are more meaningful, than that of the Almighty? With complete power and complete knowledge, and entirely free of sin and bodily concerns, God is rationality in

⁶ III.176.

⁷ III.195-197.

perfection. Scholars of Milton's period often subscribed to the theory of the Great Chain of Being, which held that certain beings were closer to God than others, from angels descending down to humans, then to animals, then to plants, and so on. From this perspective, the actions of an animal, a plant, or an insect are less reasoned, less informed, and less impactful than that of humankind. With our incomplete knowledge and our bodily concerns, human decisions are accordingly less informed, less reasonable, and less impactful than those of God or those of angels. Within the context of the poem, human ability to reason, understand, and decide is a microcosm of Divine power. Furthermore, we see human decisions result in small acts of creation and alteration of the world, as when Adam and Eve tend the Garden, or even when they consume the Fruit, and in that action fundamentally alter the nature of their descendants.

Humankind is thus capable of a kind of co-creation alongside God, and that power is the greatest gift that a loving Deity could bestow upon His favored species. However, although humankind is capable of minor acts of creation, sin proves that we do not always use it wisely; therefore, the negative consequences which might broadly be called *evil* teach humankind, over millennia, to use that God-given power in accordance with what is right.

This expansive view of divinity and morality is constructed within the text of *Paradise Lost* through a series of situations and results. Like all others, Milton's personal theodicy is arguably too complicated to be summed up in one sentence, but it centers upon the privileging of free choice over physical comfort in the specific context of the Fall of Man. Certainly modern humanity faces any number of painful and unreasonable circumstances, but neither the poem nor this paper will touch deeply upon this difficult subject. For the purposes of Milton's theodicy, locating the origins of evil in the Original Sins of humankind is explanation enough.

Recent scholarship has put forth a host of explanations for divine allowance of mortal disobedience in *Paradise Lost*. Arguably the most convincing of these is Stanley Fish's 1967 seminal work *Surprised By Sin: the Reader in Paradise Lost*. Fish's achievement was to reconcile two opposing camps of Milton scholarship: those who believed Milton was, intentionally or not, in agreement with his Satan figure and fundamentally upset with God; and those who saw *Paradise Lost* as a more conventionally Christian narrative about forgiveness and fallibility. Fish argued convincingly that as the reader's sympathies shift between the charismatic Satan and the innocent Adam and Eve, the reader themselves experiences a symbolic fall. The reader's choices and impulses thus become a part of the poem during each reading, and Fish suggests that this sounding of sympathies was an intentional conceit on Milton's part.

Fish's work speaks to the functioning of the poem on a meta level. Drawing on the free-choice scholarship of Fish and others, this thesis will dive into the logic of the text itself, specifically that of Milton's Christian God. While accepting the prerequisites of a loving, just, and generous God, this paper takes a midpoint between two competing theodicies of the past.

Along the way, this proposition as to Milton's personal theodicy will be supplemented by arguments from theological predecessors with which Milton would have been familiar. We shall see how the poem presents a theodicy which does not align with either of the central two put forth by early Church fathers. We shall also cover, in brief, how the poem's versions of Satan and Christ contribute to the thesis of free will, as well as the mechanics by which sin corrupts human rationality in the context of the poem. In sum, we shall come to understand how Milton, in his own words, wished "to assert Eternal Providence, / And justify the ways of God to men."⁸

⁸ I.25-26.

CHAPTER ONE

WITH GREAT POWER COMES GREAT RESPONSIBILITY

I. Choice With Ultimate Providence

Theodicy is fundamentally a problem of laying the blame for the existence of evil upon something other than God. A deity who allows His ostensibly-beloved creations to suffer would seem to contradict the precept, fundamental to Christian thought, that God is omnibenevolent and synonymous with love. Of course, given that the Christian God must necessarily be omnipotent and omniscient, we must then assume that He allows evil to exist for some oblique reason. This chapter begins our investigation into that allowance within the Christian microcosm of *Paradise Lost*.

A brief structural explanation is necessary here. *Paradise Lost* is a hexameral, or Genesis, narrative, and part of a tradition whose form dates back to before the birth of Christ. Grant McColley, a 1930s theological scholar, wrote credibly that “the Fifteenth, Sixteenth, and early Seventeenth centuries brought to [the hexameral narrative] a new wave of popularity, with further expansion and diversification.”⁹ Milton’s fictionalized Genesis narrative ought to be understood in light of this history. *Paradise Lost* is neither a perfect record of Biblical doctrine nor an entirely fictional work in the model of *Jesus Christ Superstar*; rather, the poem is an adaptation of Biblical history as its compositor understood it. The invocation of “sing Heav’nly Muse” in the Prologue signals an intent similar to that of Classical poets: like the Homeric epics with which Milton would have been familiar,¹⁰ *Paradise Lost* is a mythic-religious pseudo-fiction of a genre which was familiar to Early Modern contemporaries.

⁹ Grant McColley, “Paradise Lost,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 32 (1939): 181-235.

¹⁰ I.III.6.

I explain this background in order to make clear the division, for example, between the Christian God in whom Milton and his contemporaries believed, and the character of God within the text of the poem. As such, from this point on all mentions of Biblical events and characters refer, except when explicitly stated, to their counterparts in Milton's text. The arguments presented herein also apply exclusively to Milton's personal interpretation of the Christian myths depicted in *Paradise Lost*.

Here we turn to the first step in theodicy: determining the source of evil. Like many Christian thinkers before him, Milton locates that moment in the Original Sin of the Fall of Man. The first lines of the poem form a Prologue in the classical style, wherein an unseen storyteller--presumably Milton, given no evidence to the contrary--appeals to a divine muse for aid in telling his subject:

Of man's first disobedience, and the fruit
 Of that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste
 Brought death into the world, and all our woe,
 With loss of Eden, till one greater man
 Restore us, and regain the blissful seat,
 Sing Heav'nly Muse...¹¹

Our storyteller thus immediately signals the Fall as the central incident of the work, and makes clear its function: to explain the origin of "all our woe," the predominant emotional experience of postlapsarian humankind. However, assigning blame for the Fall to the original humans is not

¹¹ I.1-6.

immediately easy, given that they must contend with the influence of Satan. Our storyteller acknowledges this, in a series of questions:

...say first what cause
 Moved our grand parents in that happy state,
 Favoured of Heav'n so highly, to fall off
 From their Creator and transgress his will
 For one restraint, lords of the world besides?
 Who first seduced them to that foul revolt?¹²

In this passage we find the beginning of a textual pattern of striking importance. The two quotes above variously describe the Fall of Man as a “disobedience,” a “transgress[ion],” and a “revolt”: all verbs which emphasize the Fall as an active choice, rather than an accident or a happenstance. To this end, we shall see how, in spite of the influence of Satan, the poem is insistent upon placing the blame for the Fall upon Adam and Eve.

At the same time, to disobey a loving God and so lose paradise would seem to be irrational on its face; in order to explain Adam and Eve’s later decision to transgress, this chapter will examine the circumstances of prelapsarian life in the Garden, as well as the textual focus upon free will and therefore personal responsibility. If *Paradise Lost* is to lay the blame for evil at the feet of Adam and Eve, it is logically exhaustive in doing so.

Modern humankind has any number of confounding excuses for sins large and small: hunger, thirst, danger, illness, fear, misfortune, misinformation, and so on. Adam and Eve have no such excuses, and in fact are given every disincentive to abstain from the one sin available to

¹² I.28-33.

them. The Garden of Eden provides food, drink, amusement, and easy employment; the original humans socialize with not only each other but with the occasional visiting angel. In his first speech, Adam describes their happy state, and in a relevant turn of phrase, their “choice / Unlimited of manifold delights.”¹³ Not only are they physically satisfied--Milton even suggests that prelapsarian Eden includes intercourse, albeit in the privacy of the marriage bed--but Adam and Eve are free, even, from the mental tortures of fear and shame. Having been forbidden “to taste that only Tree / Of Knowledge,”¹⁴ Adam cannot even conceive of harm, fear, or death. In speaking to Eve, he ponders “whate’er death is, / Some dreadful thing no doubt; for well thou know’st God hath pronounced it death to taste that Tree.”¹⁵ Although Adam and Eve lack true knowledge of good and evil--a fact which Satan will use later in their temptation--that lack of knowledge here serves as a blessing. The original humans clearly understand the fierce importance of avoiding death, but lack our distracting fear thereof. Death will never come upon them unexpectedly, and as long as they follow this “[o]ne easy prohibition,”¹⁶ it is quite literally guaranteed to remain at bay. Absent pressing body concerns or any kind of threat, Adam’s description of their “choice unlimited” is strikingly accurate. We might even consider choice without limits synonymous with free will.

II. Choice and Rationality

In Milton’s Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve experience a latitude of free will arguably unknown to any later human; let us pause here to consider the elements thereof, in order that we might understand free will in the context of the decision to sin.

¹³ IV.434-435.

¹⁴ IV.423-424.

¹⁵ IV.425-427.

¹⁶ IV.433.

To *will* is to desire or intend, and in *Paradise Lost* is explicitly linked with the reasoning faculty. God speaks of creatures without free will as those “[w]here only what they needs must do, [appear], / Not what they would.”¹⁷ Animals, for example, were thought to act purely out of biological necessity, as opposed to reasoning creatures such as humankind. The final proof of this association comes bare lines later, with God once again speaking of theoretical creatures without free will, who worship Him because it is correct:

What praise could they receive?
 What pleasure I from such obedience paid,
 When will and reason (**reason also is choice**)
 Useless and vain, of freedom both despoiled,
 Made passive both, had served necessity,
 Not me.¹⁸

Free will, then, is the application of the reasoning faculty, and implementation of its conclusions, without impediment. The implication that God could not enjoy praise from creatures without free will also goes to the argument that reasoned choice carries with it the burden of responsibility. From this perspective, a wolf which kills a deer would not be considered a murderer, in that the predator is acting as needs must. By contrast, a human who kills another human may be punishable by the laws of their society, in that a rational killer holds the knowledge and ability to decide to do otherwise. The eleventh-century monk Saint Anselm of Canterbury, with whom we know Milton was familiar, explains this concept of rationality as follows:

¹⁷ III.105-106.

¹⁸ III.106-111. Emphasis added.

God wanted rational creatures to be as Godlike as it is possible for any creature to be, and hence to be not only just, but somehow *self-determined* with respect to justice. According to Anselmian action theory, however, a rational creature can will something *X* only insofar as *X* seems good for the agent (under the aspect of advantage), or insofar as *X* seems good in itself (under the aspect of justice). A rational creature can refuse maximum advantage only for the sake of justice, and it can refuse maximum justice only for the sake of apparent advantage.¹⁹

The Anselmian definition of rationality applies to sentient beings such as animals as well as humans; the Miltonic definition, by contrast, applies strictly to sapient beings such as angels and humans. These latter two are capable of making choices beyond the whims of biology, and furthermore are capable of understanding and weighing spiritual choices and consequences. To build off of the Anselmian definition, the reasoning faculty in perfection always directs towards God. Obedience to the Almighty is both good for the given being (under the aspect of advantage), as well as good in itself (under the aspect of justice). The Anselmian conception of sentient priorities--advantage and/or justice--is useful to bear in mind as we continue our discussion of rational choices.

The ability to reason begets the possibility of choices beyond physical necessity, but it also demands those choices be justified in their reasoning. To that end, knowledge of choices and consequences is an essential element of both reason and accountability. If a given action resulted in consequences which had been truly unforeseeable to the actor, said actor might shoulder less

¹⁹ qtd. in Hick, xv. Italics original.

of the blame. If negative consequences were truly unforeseeable, then said actor cannot be said to have chosen them: they are as happenstance.

Adam and Eve, by contrast, are provided with full information regarding their options and the consequences thereof. Not only do they clearly know from their first appearance that the price of transgression is the terrible thing called death, but God in fact sends the angel Raphael to provide additional information, such as the full history and motives of Satan. The importance of knowledge to responsibility is vividly described in the words of God to Raphael regarding Adam:

...tell him withal
 His danger, and from whom, what enemy
 Late fall'n himself from Heav'n, is plotting now
 The fall of others from like state of bliss;
 By violence, no, for that shall be withstood,
 But by deceit and lies; this let him know,
 Lest willfully transgressing he pretend
 Surprisal, unadmonished, unforewarned.²⁰

Note in this passage the deployment of *willfully*: that is, with desire and intent. God supposes that a transgressing Adam would “pretend” lack of responsibility in that Adam has clearly already been warned of the consequences; as such, Adam already bears responsibility for his actions towards the forbidden tree. This additional information is quite literally delivered in order to render God blameless, given that the God of the poem knows in advance that Adam and Eve will

²⁰ V.238-245.

eventually fall. This passage, wherein God sends Raphael “to render man inexcusable,”²¹ approaches metafiction as theodicy is literally performed onscreen.

We return once more to the quality of prelapsarian human free will. Having received this information directly from God and His messenger, the first humans can be certain of its veracity. At this point, Adam and Eve possess both the abilities and the knowledge to weigh the consequences of their actions with regards to the forbidden tree. Their choice is free by any standard, and rationality--the originator of free will--would point towards eternal obedience to their beloved God.

We have previously established that said obedience is of high value due to its being freely given; this also explains the necessity of the Tree of Knowledge being placed in the Garden. Beyond that one restraint, Adam and Eve have no real ability to transgress, and therefore their obedience could be considered forced. These lines from Adam’s speech to Raphael make clear that the original humans cannot conceive of anything beyond obedience on their own:

What meant that caution joined, *if ye be found*
Obedient? can we want obedience then
 To him, or possibly his love desert
 Who formed us from the dust, and placed us here
 Full to the utmost measure of what bliss
 Human desires can seek or apprehend?²²

²¹ V, “The Argument.”

²² V.513-518. Italics original.

In order for Adam and Eve to meaningfully choose obedience, they must have the choice to transgress. Providing both an accessible opportunity to do so, as well as all possible reasons to abstain, proves their loyalty to God is reasoned and chosen.

In the next chapter, we shall see how their eventual sin fits within this framework of will and reason, as well as finally consider the problem of Satanic influence. Sin and intemperate passions corrupt the reasoning faculty--as well as the rational dispensation of justice thereupon.

CHAPTER TWO

THE ROAD TO HELL IS PAVED WITH GOOD INTENTIONS

Having come to understand the generative relationship between rationality and free choice, we now turn to the problem of reasoning beings who sin. As we have seen, the God-given reasoning faculties of Adam and Eve ought to have worked in tandem with the plenty of the Garden to guide their choice to be obedient. Complete bodily satisfaction means that the original humans lack the fear, hunger, illness, or other necessities of survival with which modern humanity is burdened; furthermore, their complete knowledge of the consequences and circumstances of their choices renders them inexcusable with regards to the consequences thereof. At this moment, humankind is on track to someday “at last turn all to Spirit, / Improved by tract of time, and winged ascend / Ethereal,”²³ on the merits of their free choices. This chapter considers whether the same standard may be applied to the choices of the Fall, considering the intervention of Satan--and the prelapsarian introduction of sin to the Garden.

I. Enter Satan

If Christian doctrine traditionally locates the origin of human sin and evil in the Fall, it likewise identifies the figure of Satan as the origin of sin within Creation. *Paradise Lost* makes this association most literal, in personifying Sin as a female demon who sprung like Athena from the head of Satan at the time of his rebellion.²⁴ The importance of the devil to theodicy is here described by Hick:

²³ V.497-499.

²⁴ II.757-758.

In spite of...defections on its fringes the main stream of Christianity has stood by its understanding of God as the most perfect conceivable Being, and has thus insisted upon acknowledging the problem of evil as (in the Old Testament sense) the *Satan* that perpetually accuses faith.²⁵

To encapsulate the problem of evil in the existence of Satan is uncontroversial; certain interpretations even see his role as something of a divine prosecuting attorney who tests faith so that it remains all the stronger. That potential utility must have been known to the scholar Milton.

Within *Paradise Lost*, the role of Satan is to complicate the responsibility that accompanies free will. This complication occurs on multiple levels. By introducing misinformation and sin to the Garden, Satan is a confounding factor in the closed system which facilitates the obedience of Adam and Eve; we shall see how his actions obscure their reasoning faculties, and as such could arguably be used to “pretend / Surprisal” on the part of their defenders.²⁶ On the metafictional level, Satanic interference complicates the culpability question of theodicy: if the descendants of Adam and Eve must die for their Original Sin, how can we justify that punishment without discounting the undeniable influence of the devil?

To begin with, Milton ensures that his version of Adam and Eve are thoroughly warned regarding the motives and abilities of their enemy. The angel Raphael devotes nearly a third of the poem to telling the history of the universe, including a vivid, dialogue-filled narrative of the rebellion of Satan and the battle in Heaven. Although Raphael admonishes Adam more obliquely to remain obedient, he suggests the horror and consequence of human fall in describing that of the angels: “some are fall’n, to disobedience fall’n, / And so from Heav’n to deepest Hell; O fall

²⁵ Hick, 5. Italics original.

²⁶ V.238-239.

/ From what high state of bliss into what woe!”²⁷ The narrative thereof illustrates not only the qualities and actions of sin in the form of the rebellious angels, but through repetition of his speeches demonstrates the rhetorical and persuasive powers of Satan in turning others to his cause. This knowledge, as we have seen, is in fact delivered in order to render God blameless upon the Fall of Man, especially considering that the rhetoric which Satan later deploys against Eve is successful in its aims.

A number of the speeches of Satan demonstrate the ability of sin to obscure the reasoning faculty and, within that practice, to appear to harness reason in order to commit evil. John Hick, paraphrasing Augustine, expresses the nature of sin in simple terms: “a wilful turning of the self in desire from the highest good, which is God Himself, to some lesser good.”²⁸ The temptation of Eve provides an example of this turning. In disguise as a serpent of the Garden, the twisted logic of Satan suggests that the Forbidden Fruit will have the same effect as the “turn[ing] all to Spirit”²⁹ suggested by Raphael: “what are gods that man may not become / As they, participating god-like food?”³⁰ Satan here convinces Eve to privilege the lesser good of possible human ascension over the higher good of obeying God’s command. In his own words, Augustine clarifies how positive aims may lead to sin: “when the will abandons what is above itself, and turns to what is lower, it becomes evil--not because that is evil to which it turns, but because the turning itself is wicked.”³¹ The key word of this passage with regards to the poem is *will*. Although Satan utilizes misinformation, and appeals to the vanity and pride of the “Empress of

²⁷ V.541-543.

²⁸ Hick, 60.

²⁹ V.497-499.

³⁰ IX.716-717.

³¹ qtd. in Hick, 60.

this fair world” in a way no one has before,³² he in no way forces her hand. The fall of Eve here comes about entirely of her own will--even if perfect rationality would dictate otherwise.

II. Corruptive Sin

For example, transgressing against the Almighty in order to gain the reward the Almighty has promised for obedience seems basically irrational. To take the simpler example of Satan, waging war against the Omnipotent seems even more unreasonable. Such is, in fact, the nature of sin: in the words of Hick, “Sin, which is basic to all other forms of evil, is essentially irrational and indeed contra-rational. . . . It is an incomprehensible lapse from reason, as from adherence to the good.”³³ Given that the reasoning faculty, the *will*, is the source of free choice and therefore carries the burden of accountability, decisions which are made against divinely oriented reason could be argued unprosecutable. However, although the appeals of Satan to the vanity of Eve fascinate her to the point of ignoring reason, her powers of rationality are not crippled themselves. Eve is not intoxicated nor disabled; although she fails to use her powers of reason, she continues to possess them. She therefore retains responsibility for her lapse from reason. From the legalistic perspective of theodicy, God has fulfilled His responsibility by providing her with the will and the knowledge not to transgress. Her decision thus rests fully upon her shoulders as an act of mental negligence.

Arguably the only moot point of this conception is that of misinformation. The arguments of Satan are contra-rational, but up until his appearance, sin has been entirely absent from the Garden. All information which Adam and Eve receive from God and His messengers is objectively correct by virtue of its source. Although explained by Raphael, lying first enters the

³² IX.568.

³³ Hick, 8.

Garden alongside Satan. This argument collapses when followed to its terminus: the instructions of God are obviously more reliable than that of a mysterious talking snake. However, although lies seem absent from the Garden, misinformation--or at least misperception--seems present from a point preceding the arrival of Satan. Previous to the temptation, Adam and Eve variously describe the incidence of their first meeting, and their descriptions bear a marked difference in tone and events. A 2003 article by Peter Herman in *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1700* is devoted entirely to these “aporias,” and describes the discrepancies between the creation accounts of Adam, Eve, and Raphael as “truly astounding.”³⁴ These contradictory narratives in the midst of the poem have spawned a broad diversity of scholarship. Herman, not the least of these, notes that the problem remains unresolved in that “Miltonists tread gingerly around the issue of *Paradise Lost* and uncertainty.”³⁵ While the potential conclusions regarding these aporias vary widely, within the text these incidents set a precedent of imperfect information despite attempts to the contrary. Taking the Fall as the Original Sin from which springs all human evil, misinformation--or incertitude--seems omnipresent in the formulation of sin.

While the above incidents go to perhaps explain the lapse from reason which prompts the fall of Eve, they cannot excuse her decision to act against the express direction of her beloved God. Although powerfully persuasive, the speeches of temptation given by Satan are littered with blasphemous and fallacious red flags. He in fact invokes the problem of evil in order to claim that the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil not only cannot but will not lead to death:

will God incense his ire

For such a petty trespass, and not praise

³⁴ Peter C. Herman, “‘Paradise Lost,’ the Miltonic ‘Or,’ and the Poetics of Incertitude,” *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1700* 43, no.1 (2003): 197.

³⁵ Herman, 181.

Rather your dauntless virtue, whom the pain
 Of death denounced, whatever thing death be,
 Deterred not from achieving what might lead
 To happier life, knowledge of good and evil;
 Of good, how just? of evil, if what is evil
 Be real, why not known, since easier shunned?
 God therefore cannot hurt ye, and be just;
 Not just, not God; not feared then, nor obeyed.³⁶

Satan here claims that God must enforce theodicy against Himself, and like human institutions of government, adhere to logical bylaws in order to maintain His authority. The rhetoric here even evokes the later ideas of the social contract and the consent of the governed, which would not take named form until nearly a century after the publication of *Paradise Lost*. This argument stems from the repeated assertion of Satan that beings other than God, such as the fallen angels, may be “self-begot, self-raised,”³⁷ and therefore the rulership of the self-begotten God is a tyranny above his equals. The response of Satan to the problem of evil is that of the natural atheologian: the act of punishing proves that God cannot be omnibenevolent, and indeed no such figure can logically exist.

There are a number of points here which bear deconstructing: most pressingly, the assertion of Satan that God possesses equals in angels or humans is ludicrous *prima facie*. Satan asserts, in a moment that nearly breaks the fourth wall, that God must obey a logical proof. However, within the universe of the poem, the omnipotence, omniscience, and justice of God are

³⁶ IX.692-701.

³⁷ V.860.

not logical stipulations, but observable laws. To claim that natural features of the universe are illogical is equivalent to claiming that the Earth is flat; it is, like much of Satan's claims, and indeed in the nature of sin, contrary to reason in itself.

The above passage also provides another example of sin as turning from the highest good to an apparent lesser good. Satan argues that to consume the forbidden fruit would be an act of courage; one could argue that this is not untrue, but to do so runs counter to the will of God. Not only is the fruit forbidden by law, but the natural consequence of its consumption is death. Given divine omnipotence, natural law and divine law are synonymous, in that anything which happens must happen with the knowledge and by the allowance of God. All incentives therefore encourage abstention, and streamline the rational choice in favor of the highest good, which is obedience to God.

Another proof of Satan's fallacy, and of the corruptive power of sin, arises in the aftermath of the Fall. As we have seen, until this point, the rationing powers of Adam and Eve have remained intact, regardless of their attendance thereto; Adam and Eve are thus accountable for their decisions up to and including the moment of the Fall. Upon consumption of the fruit, however, they experience for the first time a kind of inebriation: "in [Eve's] cheek distemper flushing glowed,"³⁸ and "As with new wine intoxicated both / They swim in mirth."³⁹ Although this drunken state is not to last, its partial disabling of their faculties remains. Upon recovery from this state, Adam and Eve do not attempt to repair their relationship with God, or to do penance, but instead turn to "high passions, anger, hate, / Mistrust, suspicion, [and] discord," none of which had been before present in the Garden.⁴⁰ Having made sin part of their bodies by choosing and digesting it, they take on the quality of sin which is distance from God. They have

³⁸ IX.887.

³⁹ IX.1008-1009.

⁴⁰ IX.1123-1124.

betrayed the trust and generosity of their loving Creator, and yet in the aftermath “they in mutual accusation spent / The fruitless hours, but neither self-condemning, / And of their vain contest appeared no end.”⁴¹ The noted lack of self-condemnation is also a lack of nobly claiming responsibility for their sinful missteps; in sum, rationality appears to be confounded, if not absent, in this scene.

The final quality of sin thus becomes apparent: its ability to arouse the intemperate passions which impel rash action. The passions, in this context, are linked to the Early Modern concept of unbalanced bodily humours, resulting in anger, melancholy, and other unruly emotions. Passions are the source of sinful impulses such as lust, greed, gluttony, sloth, and wrath, and they join other bodily concerns such as hunger, cold, and pain in obscuring reason by demanding precedence. After God discovers and punishes the Fall, Adam and Eve each consider whether they should “seek Death, or he not found, supply / With his own hands his office on ourselves.”⁴² The idea of escape from the wrath of God via suicide is one lacking in reason, and we see here how sin begets sin among the fallen, especially given that suicide was a particularly grievous sin in the Early Modern period. In spite of this, the agonizing melancholy of Adam and Eve--to which Adam has previously devoted four straight pages of text--overrides their reason almost to the point of no return.

The argument of Satan, that to know evil is to more easily shun it, proves a fundamental misrepresentation thereof. To mortal humans, evil is not something distant to be academically understood, identified, and avoided; rather, comprehension of evil is bodily and terrifying nearly to the point of physical pain. The original humans’ lack of knowledge of good and evil was not unconsciousness of right and wrong: that much is prescribed by rationality. Lack of knowledge

⁴¹ IX.1187-1189.

⁴² X.1001-1002.

had protected them from the contagious power of sin, of which comprehension is toxic enough to ignite rash passions.

The postlapsarian actions of Adam and Eve are the result of their freely chosen transgression, which renders them blamable for all subsequent consequences. However, choices made without the reasoning faculty intact could be considered made under duress, and therefore bear somewhat less responsibility than the sin of Adam and Eve. Therefore, although Adam and Eve are ultimately responsible for human evil, the results of Original Sin which handicap truly free will--such as bodily necessity, misfortune, inequality, and uncontrollable passion--provide a minor cushion in the judgement of modern humans. The descendants of Adam and Eve remain accountable for their actions, but postlapsarian sin does not reckon as harsh punishment as does the Original Sin. Adam and Eve are inexcusable, having sinned with every possible provision in their favor; their descendants inherit a world in which sin is far more plentiful, but with greater opportunities to absolve themselves and to return to the bosom of God.

On that note, the next chapter will prove these claims with regards to a divine privileging of free will over bodily satisfaction. We shall finally explore the perspective and actions of the God of the poem, particularly in the aftermath of the Fall. Finally, we shall come to understand in full the Miltonic explanation for earthly evil: in which free will is not merely its sinister progenitor, but instead a guiding light against evil granted by a loving God.

CHAPTER THREE

YOU MADE YOUR BED, NOW LIE IN IT

The elements of theodicy explicated so far have focused first upon the role of Adam and Eve in originating evil, and second upon that of Satan in the same. However, the omnipotence of God demands the full depth of His involvement be plumbed: everything which occurs in Creation must necessarily exist at His conscious allowance, if not His active will. Having established the origins and nature of evil within the universe of *Paradise Lost*, we must now face down the question as to why a blameless God allows such a thing. For all our focus upon individual free will, the God of *Paradise Lost* is no clockmaker who merely watches His creation run. This chapter will examine the actions and inactions chosen by the God of the poem, and by way of their justifications identify that which this God values above even His personal satisfaction: the ability of His creations to choose for themselves.

I. The Values of God

The peculiarities of omnipotence and omniscience include the fact that God foresees and knows in advance how each being will use its own free will. He is aware of that which will displease Him and that which will bring harm upon His beloved creations, as well as His own capacity to prevent, alter, or even undo any event or circumstance. However, He makes clear in His own words that when reasoning beings transgress,

they themselves decreed

Their own revolt, not I: if I foreknew,

Foreknowledge had no influence on their fault,

Which had no less proved certain unforeknown.⁴³

The Almighty knowing what choice will be made is therefore not synonymous with the choosing itself. Certainly God must possess the power to prevent or undo any fault, but to do so would be to abridge the free choice of the given being. He goes on to make clear that His creations are “authors to themselves in all / Both what they judge and what they choose; for so / I formed them free, and free they must remain.”⁴⁴ Indeed, the actions of the Lord throughout the poem operate almost exclusively towards the promotion of reasoned free choice. His sending Raphael to Adam and Eve provides information which supports their reasoning faculties. Although this information is provided in the foreknowledge of their eventual transgression, the act of supporting their free will ensures their responsibility for that which follows.

The God of the poem clearly values such accountability, as well as the rationing faculty which bears it. We see this strict valuation in His refusal to undo the forewarned consequences of human transgression: “He with his whole posterity must die, / Die he or Justice must.”⁴⁵ The warning of death given to Adam and Eve is not merely a negative incentive or a threat intended to deter disobedience; God might as well have placed an electric fence around the Tree were He intending to appeal to fear and bodily passions. Rather, the warning of death counterbalances the potential reward of ascension: it is an alternate consequence to be weighed in rational judgement.

The aforementioned lack of human knowledge regarding the details of death also goes to the theory of rationality. We have seen how comprehension of death panics the first humans and causes them to turn away from the Almighty in favor of self-preservation. Knowledge of death as

⁴³ III.116-119.

⁴⁴ III.122-124.

⁴⁵ III.209-210.

merely negative consequence allows the reasoning humans to examine the choice deliberately and to come to their own conclusions with regard to the better course of action.

We furthermore witness Milton's God showing forgiveness to those whose rationality is impaired, as concluded by the previous chapter. Even before Satan arrives in the Garden to facilitate the Fall, God declares that the angels "by their own suggestion fell, / Self-tempted, self-depraved: man falls deceived / By the other first: man therefore shall find grace."⁴⁶ Although He makes clear that humankind must suffer the forewarned consequence, He is more willing to intercede where the reasoning faculty has been impaired: i.e., where free choice has been somehow curtailed. Another notable example is the moment when the Son of God volunteers to become human and to sacrifice himself for the sins of humankind. Certainly God Himself possesses the power to resolve human sin in any number of ways, and yet He asks for a volunteer: "Which of ye will be mortal to redeem / Man's mortal crime?"⁴⁷ To interfere Himself would be to nullify the weight of human choice, and to disincentivize reasoning effort for that God will correct human mistakes. The Son may originate in Heaven, but in redeeming humankind from the Original Sin, he is--magnificently, in the words of Milton--"one greater man."⁴⁸

This evidence all goes to suggest a God who values rationality in choice. Given that humankind is most favored among His creations, that faculty of will apparently represents a divine gift, in contrast with the unreasoning, necessity-driven animals of the Garden. God says as much of Adam: "he had of me / All he could have; I made him just and right, / Sufficient to have stood, though free to fall."⁴⁹ This passage makes clear that the God of the poem values free will

⁴⁶ III.129-131.

⁴⁷ III.214-215.

⁴⁸ I.4.

⁴⁹ III.97-99.

above physical or emotional satisfaction. God certainly could have provided Adam with a Garden absent a forbidden tree, or any mechanic of meaningful transgression, and produced a happy humankind in perfect obedience.

By contrast, “all he could have” specifically includes the freedom to transgress; its position in the text even suggests that the ability to act against God is among the highest forms of providence. While the act of disobedience is expressly sinful--to the point of angering the Almighty--the possibility thereof is explicitly necessary in order to provide weight to the choice to be obedient.

Without the possibility presented to him, and without the influence of Satan, it is not clear that Adam would ever have conceived of the possibility of sin. In the following lines, he questions Raphael in wonderment, regarding the rationale of sin:

What meant that caution joined, *if ye be found*
Obedient? can we want obedience then
 To him, or possibly his love desert
 Who formed us from the dust, and placed us here
 Full to the utmost measure of what bliss
 Human desires can seek or apprehend?⁵⁰

Adam wonders at how it is even possible that he and Eve might transgress; to do so clearly runs contrary to all reasoned judgement. Given this perspective, the Tree of Knowledge seems almost to be tempting fate as regards human transgression: why provide the possibility of falling to a human who shows no inclination thereto?

⁵⁰ V.114.513-518. Italics original.

In fact, God Himself explains that the inclusion of the Tree--and all the future evil contained in its indulgence--is a necessary dimension of truly free will:

Not free, what proof could they have giv'n sincere
 Of true allegiance, constant faith or love,
 Where only what they needs must do, appeared,
 Not what they would? What praise could they receive?
 What pleasure I from such obedience paid,
 When will and reason (reason also is choice)
 Useless and vain, of freedom both despoiled,
 Made passive both, had served necessity,
 Not me.⁵¹

Despite Christian doctrine focusing heavily upon the moment of Original Sin, and the fact that the Original Sin itself is a moment which tests the definition of free choice, the period of human abstention from the forbidden fruit is just as crucial as an example of the importance of free will. The actions which Adam and Eve partake during their obedience gain particular glory and importance, because each one is a moment of refusal to betray their relationship with God. Without the option to walk away from that relationship, the praise and obedience of Adam and Eve becomes “what they needs must do.” With the presence of the forbidden Tree of Knowledge--even without any inclination to indulge therein--that same praise and obedience becomes “what they would,” and takes on the power and responsibility of true free will.

⁵¹ III.103-111.

The possibility of sin and evil choice therefore exists in order to allow reasoning beings to take credit for--and God to take pleasure in--correct choice and pursuit of the highest good. Sin and evil are undoubtedly wicked, however, and their exercise is not necessary, only their possibility. Therefore the *possibility* of evil exists at the allowance of God, as being necessary to unlimited free choice, and the *existence* of evil results from the contra-rational decisions of free beings.

II. Why Choice Matters

Given these conclusions, we must now explain why the God of the poem places such heavy emphasis upon free choice, rationality, and the accountability that accompanies both. We have already covered how free will certifies obedience to God as independently chosen, but here I suggest a further dimension to this emphasis. Let us turn for a moment to the possessor of ultimate free will: God Himself.

Free choice was earlier defined as unobstructed ability to act according to one's will, and full information and reasoning ability in order to judge the proper action responsibly. These qualifications, taken to their extremes, may conclude in omnipotence and omniscience. Judgement of what is objectively correct may be said to rest in omnibenevolence, or the ultimate justice and love which is the hallmark of the Lord.

God has ultimate freedom by virtue of His unlimited power, as well as His being the moral benchmark of our universe. His rationality is not distracted by bodily concerns, threats, or undue passions. Although He is certainly capable of anger, as when He complains of Adam's disobedience, that anger does not move Him to unjust punishment or rash action. Finally, full

knowledge provides him with not only the ability to act with true freedom, but the judgement to do so according only to His will.

By the same token, of course, the responsibility of the universe rests upon His shoulders. The machinations of theodicy show how every one of His actions carries not only physical but theological consequences. Being perfectly infallible, God can be said to handle this power and responsibility with propriety, grace, and skill. By contrast, even the most educated, powerful, and just human cannot hope to reach His level of influence and wisdom; at the same time, human sin proves humankind is unworthy or unready to be trusted with that level of responsibility.

Instead, humans are gifted with a small piece of divinity in the form of our reasoning faculties. Within the scheme of the universe, our powers of influence are relatively minor, being limited to ourselves and to the earthly realm which surrounds us. God permits the consequences of human choice largely without interference, and the willful actions of reasoning beings affect the world around them in small acts of creation. The Original Sin of Adam and Eve is a larger example thereof, but even its negative consequences are a participation in the process of creation: Adam and Eve willfully change the lives of all their descendants. For God to allow these consequences to stand not only emphasizes the weight of human decision, but even seems an act of respect towards humankind as minor co-creators.

As evidence to this proposition, note the act of forgiveness on the part of God regarding the Fall: He does not restore humankind to Eden, nor erase the consequences of its willing, but instead declares that He will “renew / [their] lapsed powers” of reason,⁵² and “clear their senses dark.”⁵³ Even having witnessed humankind misuse its free will against Him, God improves the quality of that free will so that they may learn to use it better:

⁵² III.175-176.

⁵³ III.189.

I will place within them as a guide
My umpire conscience, whom if they will hear,
Light after light well-used they shall attain,
And to the end persisting, safe arrive [in Heaven].⁵⁴

Modern humankind faces choices more complicated than those of Adam and Eve, but the consequences of our actions are more gently received: “To prayer, repentance, and obedience due, / Though but endeavoured with sincere intent, / Mine ear shall not be slow, mine eye not shut.”⁵⁵ Despite the slings and arrows of mortal existence and preexisting evil, *Paradise Lost* ultimately concludes that sober and deliberate attention to just rationality, obedience and repentance, and responsible use of the power gifted to us by the Almighty will someday lead us into the land of His wisdom and power.

⁵⁴ III.194-197.

⁵⁵ III.191-192.

EPILOGUE

As my friend Julian puts it, only half winkingly: “God blessed me by making me transsexual for the same reason God made wheat but not bread and fruit but not wine, so that humanity might share in the act of creation.”

- Daniel M. Lavery, *Something That May Shock and Discredit You* (2020)

John Milton composed *Paradise Lost* late in life, in the wake of political and emotional turmoil. Being a fierce Parliamentarian, he had written in support of the public execution of the British King Charles I in 1649, and had hoped that the Parliamentarian victory in the English Civil War would usher in a new, more republican age. Alas, the next ten years saw Lord Protector Oliver Cromwell nearly begin a dynasty of his own, and by 1660, Charles II had returned from exile and resumed the throne. Milton, long since blind, was jailed and dispossessed, and seems to have only escaped execution by the help of some more politically moderate friends. In the last decade of his life, John Milton alternated residences between London and the small village of Chalfont-St-Giles in times of plague. Although Milton had been planning it for decades, *Paradise Lost* was first composed in this period, in the wake of its author having witnessed not only the failure of republican rule but the resumption of the old dynasty with its fallacious claim to the divine right of kings.

This tumultuous history is reflected in the complex approach *Paradise Lost* takes towards the concept of rebellion. We might too easily imagine Milton’s writings against the tyranny of kings in the mouth of his Satan; at the same time, both his poetry and his personal writings portray a deeply faithful man who merely viewed the royal institution as an inequality between

men, and a usurpation of the hierarchy between man and God. Much as we might imagine the firebrand Milton, much like Satan, raging at God for his failed rebellion, the text of *Paradise Lost* rather suggests the following three tenets regarding our fallen world.

First: sin and “evil,” in the broader sense, come out of the free choices of imperfect humankind. “Free” in this context means that God does not force our hands; Milton rejects the idea that political power comes from God, or that God has ordained one man, or family of men, to rule over all others. By the same token, the failure of a human rebellion against other humans is due to human fault, not because God has naturally favored one side over another.

Second: the free choice of humankind is naturally guided by rationality towards what is just, but too often is clouded by fear, confusion, coercion, anger, and intemperate passions. These intoxicants can poison any pursuit, and to ignore one’s powers of rationality in favor of them can and will lead one astray. While Milton clearly viewed the rebellion of the English Civil War as a positive development, *Paradise Lost* depicts an unjust rebellion spurred by sinful pride; no political movement is inherently just unless its rationale is so. The rebellion of Satan against the benevolent Divine is unreasonable and unjust; the rebellion of Abdiel against the conceited Satan is virtuous. Milton summarizes this succinctly in his personal writings: “no work of ours can be good except through faith, [for] it is faith that justifies...and only that which justifies can make any work good.”⁵⁶

Third: the rational use of free will can draw us closer to God. Humankind is His beloved creation, and as such is gifted with the capacity to either transgress or to obey. Although exterior circumstances may interfere with our free will and sin begets sin, even the trespasser is not unredeemable. Finally, Milton does not deny the terrible power of evil in the fallen world, but

⁵⁶ qtd. in Stanley Fish, “To The Pure All Things Are Pure: Law, Faith, and Interpretation in the Prose and Poetry of John Milton,” *Law and Literature* 21, no. 1 (2009): 79.

promises that physical suffering is less important than the peace which we may, by our own choices, attain in Heaven.

By the time the poem was published in 1667, Milton likely faced the probability that his goals for a more egalitarian government would not succeed in his lifetime. *Paradise Lost* begins with the problem of evil and uses theodicy to find its way to a hopeful future after death. The God of the poem promises that “[t]o prayer, repentance, and obedience due, / Though but endeavoured with sincere intent, / Mine ear shall not be slow, mine eye not shut.”⁵⁷ We cannot know if Milton ever regretted any of his actions during the Civil War and subsequent Restoration, but this belief that internal faith was powerful enough to counterbalance sin seems to have brought him some comfort. The great Miltonist Stanley Fish summarizes this in Milton’s own words: “[f]or the works of the faithful are the works of the Spirit itself’ and even if they ‘deviate from the letter...of the gospel precepts,’ they ‘never run contrary to the love of God...which is the sum of the law.’”⁵⁸ *Paradise Lost* reflects its author’s belief that just as the individual human must be held accountable for their sins, the faith of the individual human is also attributable to them, to their credit, and by their own will may find their way back to God.

This individualist approach to theodicy--that God allows evil as a necessary byproduct of human choice--echoes the long theological history which preceded it. Like Milton himself, this approach is iconoclastic in regards to the history of theodicy. We might see its components in the Catholic theodicy formulated by St. Augustine and the early church fathers:

The Augustinian theodicy, or response to the problem of evil, begins with the Fall of humanity through its own fault...we are all sinners, born into a sinful or

⁵⁷ III.191-193.

⁵⁸ Fish, 80.

‘fallen’ world. But being sinners we have to be forgiven and reconciled to God if we are ever to be ‘saved’ and to enjoy eternal life. We cannot bring this about ourselves, but it is done for us by Christ in his self-sacrifice on the cross.⁵⁹

Certainly we have seen how the poem agrees with sin originating in the Fall and in human choice, but--although Milton certainly believed in Christ--the human helplessness suggested in this formulation does not align with his personal individualism. Augustinian thought also holds that “evil can exist in God’s universe [because] God did not create it, but it has come about through the misuse of human freewill,”⁶⁰ which is functionally what I have argued here. However, “misuse”--which is Hick’s word, not that of Augustine, yet still captures the foundation of the argument--implies an irresponsibility, and that free will is perhaps something with which humanity should never have been trusted. By contrast, *Paradise Lost* emphasizes again and again the importance of free will not only to proper obedience, but to the essence of humankind overall. Freedom to choose, and the discernment to choose wisely, are the gifts of a loving God to His most beloved creations. Furthermore, in the context of *Paradise Lost*, humans are not a failed experiment, but rather an ongoing project--albeit with upsetting flaws--who must learn how to use their powers wisely in an arena of consequence before being allowed to ascend to the heavens.

Arguably Milton’s theodicy is more hopeful and deterministic than the Augustinian version; in addition, it bears marked similarities to what John Hick calls the Irenaean theodicy, stemming from the works of St. Irenaeus and the Orthodox church fathers in eastern Europe.

⁵⁹ Hick, xii.

⁶⁰ Hick, xii.

Although less unified and disseminated than the Catholic edition, the Irenaean theodicy sums up like so:

Instead of seeing humanity as having been created in innocent perfection and then falling, it sees us as having been created...as immature beings capable of growing through the experience of life in a challenging world. We are to grow gradually, in this life and beyond it, towards our perfection, which lies in the future, not in the past. Moral and spiritual growth can only take place in a world requiring our free decisions and calling for courage, self-sacrifice, determination, resourcefulness. This shows why this is, and has to be, an imperfect world, operating impartially according to its own laws, and containing what we call evil.⁶¹

The Irenaean theodicy has a notable absence of the Fall of Man as a major tragedy; rather, this theodicy argues for a *felix culpa*, or “fortunate fall,” wherein humankind moves from the static state of Eden into the classroom of Earth. It would be wrong to say that *Paradise Lost* adheres to the idea of *felix culpa*, given its repeated description of the Fall as a transgressive sin which angers the loving God; at the same time, the God of *Paradise Lost* says that He will “place within them as a guide / My umpire conscience, whom if they will hear, / Light after light well-used they shall attain,”⁶² which echoes the Irenaean idea of the development of the soul.

Paradise Lost seems to unite these disparate theodicies under Milton’s personal philosophy of religious self-determination. Certainly the Fall--and by extension, the existence of evil--is neither fortunate nor necessary to attain Heaven, as we know from Raphael telling Adam

⁶¹ Hick, xiii.

⁶² III.194-196.

and Eve that consuming the fruits of the Garden and remaining obedient may turn them to angels. And yet, this line from the angel Michael in the final book invokes, perhaps, a longing towards a more Irenaean theodicy, as well as summing up the essence of what I believe Milton is trying to say:

...only add
Deeds to thy knowledge answerable, add faith,
Add virtue, patience, temperance, add love,
By name to come called charity, the soul
Of all the rest: then wilt thou not be loath
To leave this Paradise, but shalt possess
A paradise within thee, happier far.⁶³

⁶³ XII.581-587.

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