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Blindsided: Finding the Good in Paradise Lost

“For, were it not good that evil things should also exist, the omnipotent God would almost certainly not allow evil to be, since beyond doubt it is just as easy for Him not to allow what He does not will, as for Him to do what He will.”- St. Augustine.

Augustine penned his “Confessions” in part to resolve his doubts about the presence of evil in a world fashioned by a perfect, omniscient, and omnipotent being. Similarly, John Milton aims to justify the ways of God to man in his epic, *Paradise Lost*. The conclusions the two authors reach on the subject of evil mirror one another; the resolution of the conflict that evil presents in Milton’s work comes through viewing evil as a weaker counterpart to good which serves a necessary purpose in the redemption and grace of God’s creations in heaven, the need for which was brought about by the rebellion in Heaven and the fall of Satan from grace. Thus, evil is only an element of good itself, a cover that distorts purpose, which once exposed, illuminates the path to God.

God’s purpose in allowing evil to exist is clear early in the work. The Rebellion in Heaven proved the need for true faith, which stood tests of obedience and trust in God’s will. More importantly, God grants all his creations free will through reason and all his creations are born free to fall as they are to ascend to heaven through his grace. God argues that:

When will and Reason (Reason also is choice)

Useless and vain, of freedom both despoiled,

Made passive both, had served necessity,
Not mee. They therefore as to right belonged,
So were created, nor can justly accuse
Thir maker, or thir making, or thir fate
As if predestination overruled
Thir will, disposed by absolute decree
Or high foreknowledge; they themselves decreed
Thir own revolt, not I: (*Paradise Lost* 3: 108-17)

God's argument serves two central purposes: it clears him of imputation in the existence of evil in spite of his foreknowledge and it demonstrates that those of true faith are capable of serving him without necessity. He establishes that Reason becomes a pointless attribute if he ordained how it is used. Reason acts as the conduit of choice for humanity and without freedom it's a passive and arbitrary quality. God may possess a perfect, omniscient understanding, but he did not declare a revolt, nor did he condone its occurrence; foreknowledge does not place God at fault for human desire. More importantly, God establishes that his creations, free to choose evil, possess the reason to see its folly.

If I foreknew,
Foreknowledge had no influence in their fault,
Which had no less proved certain unforeknown.
So without least impulse or shadow of fate,
Or aught by me immutably foreseen,
They trespass, authors to themselves in all
Both what they judge and what they choose; for so

I formed them free, and free they must remain (*Paradise Lost* 3: 117-24).

He does not control the motivations or the distortions his creations might use to achieve their purpose and he does not block them from doing so. God explains that the human race ordains their own fate, they write their own story. God believes that it must remain this way so that his creations choose to serve him freely and their reason guides them to his benevolence as the ultimate choice. Regardless, the reader sees that God has placed Good in the ultimate seat of power, next to him, and evil a weaker choice and distortion of his creations who seek to serve their own will and not his, which constitutes the ultimate good.

Evil first presents itself in Satan's refusal to honor and obey the Son of God and its form is his obstinate pride. Satan believes that God's declaration of his son as "Messiah King" impairs and slights God's most divine creation, the angels. The passage after God's pronouncement to the angels highlights the distortion of good that gives way to the manifestation of evil.

Satan, so call him now, his former name
Is heard no more in Heav'n; He of the first,
If not the first Archangel, great in Power,
In favor and preeminence, yet fraught
With envy against the Son of God, that Day
Honored by his great Father...
could not bear

Through pride that sight, and thought himself impaired (*Paradise Lost* 5: 658-665).

Satan is presented as one of, if not the first Archangel; he is greatly favored and possesses one of the greatest forms of the spirit of God. He is the essence of all that is good and yet his spirit is distorted and beset by pride, which causes him to disdain the son in favor of himself and to seek

to create a separate Kingdom of Heaven in the north to challenge God's and thwart the new son. Satan's pride creates a barrier between his mission to serve God and his desire to be seen as preeminent. He employs his reason to serve himself, not God, and he forsakes any wisdom in God's choice of the son as second in command. Evil shows its roots in Satan's passions and desires. A being of supreme good, Satan experiences an uncontrollable resentment and malice at the thought of having to worship another who is thought higher and most eminent of all God's creations. "Deep malice thence conceiving and disdain,/Soon as midnight brought on the dusky hour/Friendliest to sleep and silence, he resolved/With all his legions to dislodge, and leave/Unworshipt, unbeyed the Throne Supreme,/contemptuous" (*Paradise Lost* 5: 666-71). Satan employs his reason (also described by God as the conduit of choice) to his own detriment. His contempt and malice at God's alleged injustice in favoring the son governs Satan's actions and he slowly loses control of his passions and sight of God's plans, allowing the first inklings of evil to intrude the heavens.

Satan's pride has blinded all that is good in him and causes him to distort the intentions of God in creating the son. His argument is thus,

Will ye submit your necks, and choose to bend

The supple knee? Ye will not, if I trust

To know ye right, or if ye know yourselves

Natives and Sons of heaven possessed before

By none, and if not equal all, yet free,

Equally free; for orders and degrees

Jar not with liberty, but well consist (*Paradise Lost* 5: 787-93).

The evil counterpart here presents itself in Satan's contempt of servitude; he forgets that all beings, even the angels, serve God. He believes it to be an issue of freedom, but God has not taken any privileges or rights away from the angels. Satan's anger lies in the fact that he does not wish to be put below God's son, since they are all sons of heaven and equal, but he forgets his mission to serve God in his pride. Additionally, the good in him is blindsided by the weaker counterpart that promotes his jealousy and thus brings evil into the heavens. He uses his reason and choice to promote himself, not God, and damages the good in him creating evil and showing its roots in misrepresentation. He argues,

Who can in reason then or right assume
Monarchy over such as live by right
His equals, if in power and splendor less,
In freedom equal? Or can introduce
Law and edict on us who without law
Err not? Much less for this to be our Lord,
And look for adoration to the abuse
Of those Imperial Titles which assert
Our being ordained to govern, not to serve (*Paradise Lost* 5: 794-802).

Satan presents several errors and the first inklings of evil to be analyzed to the reader. First, he questions God's purpose for creating the son. Since Milton establishes God as the first, the creator of all and all that is good, his purpose is beyond question and not to be questioned by his creations, especially not in anger over jealousy and pride which Satan clearly holds. Satan also errs in thinking that he is equal with God, his pride bloats his character and he sees the creation and choice of the son as second in preeminence as an abuse of authority and a judgment on

angels. Pride characterizes Satan's point of view. The evil the reader sees in Satan is a weakness brought about by his pride which displaces his good and blinds him to his duty to serve God and trust his will. Evil sprang forth from Satan's anger and pride and his inability to put aside these distorting emotions and have faith in the creator and his will.

Satan's first act of evil through his rebellion leads to the more heinous war that must be waged in heaven to put an end to Satan's folly against the throne of heaven. As the war plays out, evil strongly represents itself as the weaker counterpart that demonstrates the ultimate power of God and good. This is first revealed when Satan confronts Abdiel, an angel lesser than himself but united with God who found Satan's reasoning false.

Proud art thou met? Thy hope was to have reached...

The throne of God unguarded, and his side

Abandoned at the terror of thy power

Or potent tongue; Fool, not to think how vain

Against the omnipotent to rise in arms;

Who out of smallest things could without end

Have raised Incessant Armies to defeat

Thy folly; or with solitary hand

Reaching beyond all limit, at one blow

Unaided could have finished thee (*Paradise Lost* 6: 131, 133-141).

Abdiel realizes, unlike Satan, that his ultimate duty is obedience and respect to God, not to himself and his ambitions which blind Satan to his purpose as God's creation. He relays to Satan that faith and piety are the duty of God's angels and not vain pride in oneself. Moreover, Abdiel asserts that God did not have to raise war with Satan to defeat him; he sees that God could have

defeated Satan in a single stroke. However, to show Satan the error of his ways and the true purpose of the angels of God, God wages war to prove that those who ally themselves with the creator, ally themselves with good. "...but thou seest/All are not of thy train; there be who Faith/Prefer, and piety to God, though then/To thee not visible, when I alone/Seemed in thy world erroneous to dissent/From all: my sect thou seest, now learn too late/How few sometimes may know, when thousands err"(Paradise Lost 6:142-48). Abdiel's discourse highlights that all things, including evil are subordinate to God, the ultimate good. Those who fight on the side of good "preferred" not "obliged" to piety and trust in God. Abdiel is not blinded by his emotions and selfish desires. Evil exists as a distortion of God's good and serves a subordinate position, although all his creations are free to choose their own path.

The consequences of Satan's path are soon made clear as he should learn to eat his pride when he realizes that he is separate from the ultimate good, God, who protected him. Satan forsakes Abdiel's warning, saying "I see that most through sloth had rather serve,/Ministering spirits, trained up in Feast and song;/Such has thou armed, the Minstrelsy of heaven,/Servility with freedom to contend,/As both their deeds compared this day shall prove" (Paradise Lost 6: 166-70). He reasserts his pride once again placing the issue in contention with his freedom. However, God asks little of him but obedience and trust, and in arrogance, which blinds him he refuses. The reader may now see what happens when Satan does battle with Michael and what happens to his forces when they contend with the faithful who stood by God and good.

Uplifted imminent one stroke they aimed
That might determine, and not need repeat,
As not of power, at once; nor odds appeared
In might or swift prevention; but the sword

Of Michael from the armory of God
Was given him tempered so, that neither keen
Nor solid might resist that edge: it met
The sword of Satan with steep force to smite
Descending, and in half cut sheer, nor stayed
But with swift wheel reverse, deep entering sheared
All his right side; then Satan first knew pain...
From off the files of war: there they him laid
Gnashing for anguish and despite and shame
To find himself not matchless, and his pride
Humbled by such rebuke, so far beneath

His confidence to equal God in power (*Paradise Lost* 6: 317-27, 339-43).

Michael charges Satan with bringing “misery, uncreated till the crime/Of thy rebellion” and instilling “thy malice into thousands once upright/Now proved false”(*Paradise Lost* 6: 268-9, 270-1). He further warns Satan that “heaven, the seat of bliss brooks not the works of violence and war” (*Paradise Lost* 6: 273-4). Michael understands what Satan does not, that he draws his power from the God, the ultimate source of Good. Satan’s vain rebellion against the ultimate good will only cause him pain, which for the first time he experiences and in which he languishes. The weakness of his pride has corrupted his good and separated him from the eternal protection of God. Evil cannot withstand the force of those united with God, and Satan should see that his efforts and pride are blindness which blocks him from salvation and grace. Satan’s forces face a similar fate, they weaken and tire while the forces of heaven move forth uninjured. Although it is unbeknownst to Satan the reason is revealed: “Such high advantages thir

innocence/Gave them above thir foes not to have sinned,/Not to have disobeyed; in fight stood/Unwearied, unobnoxious to be pained/By wound, though from thir place by violence moved” (*Paradise Lost* 6: 401-5). Even though Heaven and perfect good are stained by Satan’s war with God, those who kept their faith were rewarded with the eternal grace promised by their obedience and respect. Satan wonders what makes the ranks unequal but because his wound closes he mistakenly believes that evil can remedy his weakness. He states that “Since now we find this our empyreal form/Incapable of mortal injury,/Imperishable, and though pierced with wound,/Soon closing...of evil then so small as easy think/The remedy; perhaps more valid arms,/Weapons more violent, when next we meet/may serve to better us, and worse our foes,/Or equal what between us made the odds” (*Paradise Lost* 6: 433-36, 437-41). Satan believes that his evil wills, stronger weapons, and more persistent violence can make up for the difference. His false pride blinds him to the subordinate position of evil. It was not force which made the difference in the war but the good brought about by the ultimate power of God. Satan’s pride distorts his purpose and he vainly persists in his belief that his power can test the almighty’s, but Michael’s blow, Satan’s resulting pain, and the weariness and pain of Satan’s forces are not enough for Satan himself to realize that separate from the Good he is weaker in spite of all his pride. The forces aligned with the almighty in heaven are faithful and through that faith they are given the diligence to subdue Satan’s forces.

The evil brought about by the rebellion of Satan is essentially a problem of the individual. Although God establishes that his creations are free to choose and he places no limits on their desires or motivations, he does place consequences on those choices. Satan, when succeeds in his vengeance on the throne of heaven, just as God foretold, relates a great victory and admits that it is through fraud, misrepresentation and distortion that he was able to bring evil upon the earth.

...man

Plac't in a Paradise, by our exile

Made happy: him by fraud I have seduced

From his creator, and the more to increase

Your wonder, with an apple; he thereat

Offended, worth your laughter, hath given up

Both his beloved Man and all his world,

To sin and death a prey, and so to us,

Without our hazard, labor, or alarm,

To range in, and to dwell, and over Man

To Rule (*Paradise Lost* 10: 483-93).

Satan admits unconsciously that evil is brought about by fraud. He had to seduce Eve into believing his lies and he induced in her, with the apple, the same desire, that distorted him from the purpose of God. Yet, although evil appears to have the upper hand here and Satan's victory final, God's judgment acts as the leveling force which reveals evil's place in relation to good. After Satan's triumphant speech he was greeted thus,

Thus was the applause they meant

Turned to exploding hiss, triumph to shame

Cast on themselves from thir own mouths. There stood

A grove hard by, sprung up with this thir change,

His will who reigns above to aggravate

Thir penance, laden with fair fruit, like that

Wwhich grew in paradise...

Now risen, to work them furdur woe or shame;

Yet parcht with scalding thirst and hunger fierce...

Their appetite with gust, instead of fruit

Chewed bitter ashes (*Paradise Lost* 10: 545-51, 555-6, 565-6).

Satan's triumph is dashed as God's judgment reaches into the seat of hell to punish him once and for all. He changes their form, and causes them to have a ceaseless hunger and perpetual temptation and desire that they cannot appease lest they taste ashes. This is the symbolic punishment for their war and their actions against man. The creation can choose to distort the good to suit his own blind ambition, but his choice comes with the awful realization that he separates himself from the seat of all good, God, and thus loses grace, redemption and salvation. Satan must now realize that his actions have consequences and the power of good renders him incapable of gloating in his distortion. However, in spite of all the success of good, evil becomes necessary so that those truly faithful to providence can clear their distortions and their choice will reflect a true and meaningful compliance with the will of God.