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## The Actions of Good and Evil

*Abstract: My essay digs into the discussion of free will and the consequences of the actions chosen by Milton's characters in Paradise Lost. Free will is intrinsic and gives individuals the choice to build their own character, whether that is good or evil. Faith in God is a motivating factor of good choices, but does not determine that the good choice will always be taken. Milton's Satan and Adam are examples of actions at work and how their free will gives them the opportunity to be good or evil.*

The question of free will and what it means is a daunting question, especially in Milton's *Paradise Lost*. In Milton's epic, free will comes across in numerous instances, but its connection to the actions of the characters is explicit. God himself states early on in Book Three, line 102, that "Freely they stood who stood, and fell who fell", illustrating that all of the Spirits and future beings have free will that is God given through his creation, and all have the opportunity to stand or fall depending on temptation and their faith (*Paradise Lost*). God demonstrates an all-knowingness of the events throughout the epic, in regards to the fall of Adam and Eve, as well as the escape of Satan. This creates a problem because it forces the reader to distinguish to what extent there is free will, and if God's knowingness constrains free will. However, God's lack of action illustrates his reliance on the free will of his creations as the means to set forth actions. In *Paradise Lost*, God describes this relationship with the lines "As if Predestination overrul'd / Thir will, dispos'd by absolute Decree / Or high foreknowledge; they themselves decreed / Thir own revolt, not I: if I foreknew, / Foreknowledge had no influence on their fault." (*Paradise Lost*

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3: 114-118). This line expresses the fact that God would not interfere with the actions of his creation, though He has foreknowledge of their actions, even if the actions are not good.

In Milton's portrayal of Satan's fall, he describes an angel that is overcome with pride and ambition. In Book Four, line 40, Satan laments about his failings and states "Till Pride and worse Ambition threw me down" (*Paradise Lost*). Satan is created by God, thus one would assume that Satan is initially created as good and unable to fall from Grace. As stated by Becca Ansoerge in her essay "How Good Led to Evil and Evil Created Good", Milton complicates the theories of good and evil through *Paradise Lost* by writing his epic under the token idea that all creation comes through God, making it inherently good (Ansoerge 2). Satan, a few lines down in Book Four, states "yet all his good prov'd ill in me" further demonstrating that Satan crumbled from the initial good that he was birthed from (*Paradise Lost* 4:48). Satan is able to fall and he not only falls, but plummets. Ansoerge continues to explain this idea by using the illustration of creation as a balance. If creation is a balance, then there must be something on the other side to keep it equal, thus God established the possibility of evil when He first produced creation (Ansoerge 2). This is the first complication, which can be explained by Satan's free will. By having free will as a part of his being, Satan is able to make that choice between good and evil. Though Satan came from God, who is the epitome of righteousness and love, Satan is left with the option to delve deeper into his evil temptations.

By committing evil acts, Satan reinforces himself as an evil character. His free will gives him the opportunity to choose actions, but his actions mold his overall character and encourage further resistance to good behavior. Jeff Davis, in his essay, "On Bending", reaffirms that we as

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the reader are bound to assume that Satan is created as “an agent of good” but it is a shift within his behavior that perpetuates a transformation (Davis 2). His desire to become equal to God initiates his evil deeds. After Satan is banished to Hell, Satan considers the fact that he could redeem himself before God. However, during his own soliloquy in line 99 of Book Four, he proclaims that he can never truly reconcile for what he has done because “wounds of deadly hate” have made him unable to do so (*Paradise Lost*). By acting upon evil, Satan finds himself one step down into a hole. The option is still there that he could turn around and change his ways, but Satan decides to become completely involved in committing evil, making it difficult, if not impossible, to change the habitual cycle. The fleeting thought of repenting shows that Satan is not altogether evil at this point in the epic, but his later choices to persistently choose evil actions inhibit his chances of shifting gears behaviorally. By choosing to disobey God over and over again, he pushes himself further from God and loses that connection he had as an angel. His actions create a gap between his initial communion with God, and he becomes a product of his own patterns of evil. It is the disconnection from God that constrains his free will, not because of God’s intervention, but by Satan’s own actions.

Adam, however, illustrates these same points--the initial creation of being good with the possibility of committing sin and the idea of communion with God affecting free will--but has a different conclusion. Adam is also a product of God and shares the same qualities that went into creating Satan. Referring back to Anson’s illustration of creation as a scale, he too is balanced by being created inherently good, but with a possibility of sin. God tells his son in Book Three that “I made him just and right, / Sufficient to have stood, though free to fall” (*Paradise Lost*

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3:98-99). Adam is given all of the tools to be righteous and faithful, just as Satan is, but Adam also falls and commits an evil act. When presented with the fruit, Adam is given the choice to eat it along with Eve or do what he knows is right. Just as God states, Adam is “Free to fall” and knowingly disobeys God. This act is an example of his free will at work, which God gave him at his creation. Referring back to God’s ability to foresee the future, God tells the son in Book Three that “For Man will heark’n to his glozing lies / And easily transgress the sole Command/ Sole pledge of his obedience”, and demonstrates his foreknowledge (*Paradise Lost* 93-95). However, though He knows that Man will fall, He does nothing to stop it, arguably showing that it is Adam who is left with the decision.

The difference between Satan and Adam, however, is that Adam chooses to repent. Rather than continuing on the path of evil, like Satan does, Adam desires to make amends for what he has done. In Proverbs 16:9, it reads “A man’s heart deviseth his way; but the Lord directeth his steps” and this is the key motivation behind Adam’s choice (*KJV*). Adam’s faith in God motivates him to repent and pursue acts of goodness. He has the free will to choose one way or the other, but he has motivations towards certain decisions. Adam’s continuous communion with God draws him back from continuing to commit sin, though he has just broken the sole command given to him by God. Satan lacks that, though it briefly comes to light during his soliloquy. Satan’s obsession with himself causes him to have disdain for God and a belief that he should be equal to God, if not above him in Heaven. The rift within his relationship to God makes it nearly impossible for him to change his behavior. As Jennifer Jeffcoat explains in her essay “And He Saw that it was Good”, Satan and his followers were divine and existed

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completely in communion with God (Jeffcoat 5). This statement alone shows just how extreme Satan's disconnection with God becomes. Though he has seen the magnificence of God's creation at work, he desires revenge and destruction to such a degree that he cannot reconnect with God, all because he pursues the opposite of God's commands.

By choosing to repent, Adam is able to mold his character into that of goodness, rather than rotting himself through evil. Adam is able to learn about his own creation and God through Raphael. Adam has never before seen sin at work, so when Adam is placed in the position to obey or disobey God, the weighing of the choices is not so easy. It is when he eats the fruit that he struck by the disastrous effects of sin for the first time. After Adam's fall, God says "Oh Sons, like one of us Man is become / To know both Good and Evil, since his taste / Of that defended Fruit" (*Paradise Lost* 11: 84-87). As Anson sums up perfectly, Adam's epiphany is similar to "the cliché 'You don't know what you've got till it's gone'" (Anson 4). Adam is able to see the goodness of God and chooses to repent, seeing his God as someone he loves and who is merciful.

Satan, on the other hand, as mentioned previously, hates God for banishing him to Hell and desires nothing more than to destroy God's creation. In Book I, Satan tells a fallen Cherub "To do aught good never will be our task / but ever to do ill our sole delight / As being the contrary to his high will" (*Paradise Lost* 1:159-61) Satan chooses for himself that he will never adhere to the will or commands of God, and proposes that his followers shall do the same. This depth of Satan's desire for revenge makes him beyond certain that he will never choose to repent for what he has done.

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Satan and Adam are both perfect examples of free will and how actions have consequences. Adam's fall, along with that of Eve, gets them kicked out of Paradise. However, their desire to repent gives them another chance to recover and paint their own character with shades of goodness by following the commands of God. Satan's extreme disobedience gets himself banished to Hell, along with his follows. Satan's pride and hate of God digs into his soul, and it drives him to seek revenge against God, no matter what the costs may be. Satan's declaration is a perfect example of the character shift within himself, "So farewell Hope, and with Hope farewell Fear, / Farewell Remorse: all Good to me is lost; / Evil be thou my Good" (*Paradise Lost* 4: 108-110). Satan decides for himself that he refuses to repent because Evil is now his Good, that his faith and obedience to God is shattered. Satan and Adam choose to do certain acts and these acts lead to character shifts within themselves. However, the influence of God and faith help motivate Adam to come to a different conclusion than that of Satan. Satan's infinite disdain towards God pressures him into doing evil and the extremity of his actions cause his fall to be that much more fatal.

Neither Satan nor Adam is born inherently evil, but the possibility dangles there, and their free will allows them to choose one way or the other. Adam is able to step back from his deed and right his wrong because of his relationship with God and his faith. The single wrong act does not automatically make Adam evil, and his decision to commit an act of faith and repentance shows that Adam has not fallen to the same level as Satan. Satan's fall is more calamitous and harder to recover from due to his many acts of evil, which have layered over his nature.

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Free will is an intrinsic part of creation. Through God, creation is brought to life inherently good. However, to act as a parallel of creation, God creates the possibility for sin and evil. This is where free will comes into play. God's own words in Book Three state that though his creation is right, he leaves it with the ability to stand or fall. Milton's representations of Satan and Adam are able to maneuver between good and evil according to their actions. One's relationship with God and desire for repentance determines the ability to right one's wrongs. God's foreknowledge of things to come does not interfere with the will of his creation. Milton's epic demonstrates how far we as humans can fall, but also shows how we can rise from our failings. We are able to create for ourselves the kind of beings we want to be, and our relationship to God motivates us to pursue the path of righteousness.