

Karrie Elpers

Dr. David Ainsworth

English 335 - 001

29 April 2013

Choice in Milton's *Paradise Lost*:

A Discussion of Adam's Free Will

*Abstract: This paper defines free will as the ability to choose between two or more possible options. This definition is used to argue that Adam does have free will because his personality, specifically his devotion to Eve and his curiosity, motivates his choice to eat the forbidden fruit. While God may create Adam's personality in this way in order to cause him to eat the fruit and thereby fulfill His own design, because Adam is allowed to choose what he thinks is best, it is determined that he has free will even if he is fated to fall.*

In Milton's *Paradise Lost*, God claims he has made Adam "just and right, / sufficient to [stand], though free to fall" (*Paradise Lost* 3: 98-99). Raphael concurs, saying to Adam, "to stand or fall / Free in thine own Arbitrement it lies" (*Paradise Lost* 8: 640-641). According to Raphael, Adam is "Perfect within, no outward aid require" to withstand temptation (*Paradise Lost* 8: 642). While some critics blame "thir maker, or thir making, or thir Fate / as if Predestination over-rul'd / thir will" (*Paradise Lost* 3: 113-115), God declares, "if I foreknew, / Foreknowledge had no influence on their fault" (*Paradise Lost* 3: 117-118). This suggests that either God is lying and Raphael is being deceived, or that Adam really does have the freedom to refuse to eat the forbidden fruit. God fakes surprise at Satan's escape from Hell (*Paradise Lost* 3: 69-89) even though this escape would not be possible without "the will / and high permission of all-ruling Heaven" (*Paradise Lost* 1: 211-212), so it is plausible that God is lying. This

reason, among others, has led to an ongoing debate regarding free will in *Paradise Lost*.

Although many arguments have been raised on either side, it is impossible for one essay to adequately support or refute another without a standard definition of free will. By using the definition of free will below and comparing Adam's motives for deciding to eat the fruit of the forbidden tree and characteristics such as his devotion to Eve and his curiosity, it becomes apparent that Adam does, in fact, have free will.

To logically support or refute the argument for free will in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, one must first clarify the definition of free will. For the purposes of this paper, free will is defined as the ability to choose between two or more possible options. In this definition, choice requires that at least two of the available alternatives be physically possible. This means that if only two options are available and one cannot physically happen, choice never occurs. However, the above definition states that only the ability to choose is required for free will. This makes free will an intrinsic characteristic that is not defined by actions. Even if choice never occurs, as long as someone has the ability to make a choice, he or she has free will.

Based on this definition, free will is possible in a deterministic world. As long as someone is capable of choosing one option over another he or she has free will even if previous events influence this partiality. Julia Miller argues that "God's inaction regarding Satan's exit from Hell, His allowance for Satan to tempt Eve, ... His initial creation of a race He knows will fail and the choice to redeem that fallen race" (1) supports a reading of Milton's God as someone who causes the fall of man due to His "obsession with His own glorification" (3) in "Is God Complicit in the Fall of Man?". Although God may, as Miller suggests, purposefully set in motion circumstances that ensure the fall of man, this does not mean that Adam does not have the free will to choose. Even if Adam is created in a way that directly shapes his personality and,

therefore, directly shapes his motivations for his actions, he has the ability to choose what he wants to do based on his own personal preferences. Because he can choose what he would rather do, eat the fruit and stay with Eve or refuse and remain obedient to God in Eden, he has free will. In this way, God can foresee the actions of man, even create man to fulfill his overall goal, without removing free will. While Miller may be correct that God is partially at fault for Adam and Eve's fall, if He does not force Adam to do something that he does not want to do, this does not mean that He denies Adam free will.

This works in theory. However, in practice it is difficult to determine if someone has the ability to make a choice without investigation. For this reason, when Milton presents Adam's choice to eat the forbidden fruit offered by Eve, one must compare the decision, his choice to accept the fruit, and the possible motivations surrounding this decision, such as Adam's feelings towards Eve and his curiosity, to determine if Adam does have free will. This definition, in conjunction with experience in decision-making, would suggest that choices that occur as a result of free will are based on personal preference. For more complex decisions, choice also includes weighing alternatives and considering the consequences of each option. However, after this information has been measured, personal preference is still expected to determine which alternatives and results are most agreeable, thereby deciding which option is selected. Therefore, if Adam has free will, his motivations for choosing to eat the fruit instead of choosing to remain obedient to God should be consistent with his personality and previous motivations throughout the epic. Inconsistencies, on the other hand, suggest that Adam does not have free will, possibly due to God's inappropriate external interference.

To begin, one must examine Adam's character traits throughout the epic to determine if these traits can logically motivate his choice to eat the fruit. The most obvious of these

characteristics is Adam's devotion to Eve. Before Adam meets Eve – before Eve is even created – Adam knows that he is missing something. After naming the animals, Adam says, “in these / I found not what methought I wanted still” (*Paradise Lost* 8: 354-355). To address these concerns Adam discusses these feelings with God: “In solitude / What happiness, who can enjoy alone, / Or all enjoying, what contentment find?” (*Paradise Lost* 8: 364-366). When God responds that Adam is not alone, Adam argues with God, saying:

Among unequals what society  
 Can sort, what harmony or true delight?  
 .....  
 Of fellowship I speak  
 Such as I seek, fit to participate  
 All rational delight, wherein the brute  
 Cannot be human consort; (*Paradise Lost* 8: 383-392)

The fact that Adam argues with God, not once but twice, proves the extreme degree of Adam's sense of incompleteness without Eve. This is especially true considering that Adam says that “best are all things as the will / Of God ordain'd them” (*Paradise Lost* 9: 343-344). In addition, it also shows that Adam has already defied God for the sake of Eve, suggesting that it his choice to disobey God by eating the fruit is not out of character for Adam.

In addition to defying God, Adam also defies Raphael for Eve's sake. Raphael seems to predict Adam's vulnerability and warns him not to let “passion sway / [his] judgment” (*Paradise Lost* 8: 635-636). Adam, however, seems to reject this advice. Although he seems respectful during Raphael's cautions, as Raphael rises to Heaven, Adam returns to his bower (*Paradise Lost* 8: 653). Adam's movement towards the bower, which would require Adam to turn away

from Raphael and thereby turn away from the gates of Heaven that Raphael is moving towards, metaphorically suggests that Adam is disregarding Raphael's words – literally turning his back on Raphael's warning. Similarly, because the bower is a sort of marriage bed, it symbolizes Adam and Eve's emotional, spiritual, and physical relationship and, therefore, also symbolizes Adam's passion for Eve. The later is especially important in this moment since Raphael has just finished warning Adam to master this passion. In this way, by moving towards the bower, Adam is returning to Eve, returning to his passion, and defying Raphael.

Further emphasizing Adam's devotion to Eve, at the start of their relationship Adam says that he “wak[es] / to find her, or for ever to deplore / her loss, and other pleasures all abjure” (*Paradise Lost* 8: 478-480). He goes on to describe her as “adorn'd / with what all Earth or Heaven could bestow / to make her amiable” (*Paradise Lost* 8: 482-484). Yet it is not only her physical attractiveness that Adam admires. He is also fond of her “graceful acts ... words and actions ... which declare unfeign'd / union of Mind” (*Paradise Lost* 8: 600-604). To underline the extent of Adam's adoration of both Eve's physical beauty and her actions, God describes Eve to Adam, saying “Thy likeness, thy fit help, thy other self, / Thy wish, exactly to thy heart's desire” is fulfilled in Eve (*Paradise Lost* 8: 450-451). At one point Adam even confesses, “Nature ... from my side subducting, took perhaps / more than enough,” leaving him incomplete (*Paradise Lost* 8: 534-537). This reinforces the point that Milton establishes when Adam argues with God that he needs Eve: Adam loves Eve to the extent that he does not feel whole without her.

Keeping true to this trait, Adam's speech and actions immediately before accepting the fruit reveal his devotion to Eve as an obvious motivation. Despite Raphael's counsel, Milton says that Adam eats the fruit, “not deceiv'd, / but fondly overcome with Female charm”

(*Paradise Lost* 9: 998-999). In addition, Adam explicitly states that he disobeys God to prevent a separation from Eve: Adam tells Eve, “Certain my resolution is to Die; / How can I live without thee, how forgo / thy sweet Converse and Love so dearly join’d”? (*Paradise Lost* 9: 907-909). This may suggest that Adam eats the fruit, not because he loves Eve, but so that he will not be left alone in Eden. As Adam says, “In solitude / What happiness ... what contentment find?” (*Paradise Lost* 8: 364-366). However, it is possible that God will create a second woman for Adam if he withstands Eve’s tempting. Adam considers this point but rejects any replacement for Eve, saying, “Should God create another *Eve* ... loss of thee / would never from my heart” (*Paradise Lost* 9: 911-913). This confirms that “his Love / ha[s] so ennobl’d, as of choice to incur / Divine displeasure for her sake, or Death” (*Paradise Lost* 9: 991-993), not to save himself from loneliness.

A second motivation that may account for Adam’s decision to eat the fruit is his insatiable curiosity. Adam repeatedly reveals a “thirst” for knowledge of the world around him (*Paradise Lost* 8: 8). As Adam describes it, “apt the Mind or Fancy is to rove / uncheckt, and of her roving is no end” (*Paradise Lost* 8: 188-189). Raphael also notices this potentially destructive trait and alternately approves and criticizes Adam’s curiosity. First, Raphael assures Adam, “to ask or search I blame thee not, for Heav’n / is as the Book of God before thee set, / wherein to read his wond’rous works” (*Paradise Lost* 8: 66-68). On the other hand, Raphael also chastises Adam, saying to him, “Heav’n is for thee too high” (*Paradise Lost* 8: 172). Instead, Raphael advises Adam, “think only what concerns thee and thy being ... contented that thus far hath been reveal’d” (*Paradise Lost* 8: 174-177).

While Adam's natural curiosity is not as obviously associated with his decision to eat the fruit as is his adoration of Eve, there are signs that suggest that this trait may also play a part in Adam's choice. One of these signs is Adam's description of the mind:

... apt the Mind or Fancy is to rove  
 Uncheckt, and of her roving is no end;  
 Till warn'd, or by experience taught, she learn  
 That not to know at large of things remote  
 From use, obscure and subtle, but to know  
 That which before us lies in daily life,  
 Is the prime Wisdom; (*Paradise Lost* 9: 188-194)

This statement resonates both with Raphael's earlier warning (*Paradise Lost* 8: 174-177) and with the final books of *Paradise Lost* when Adam tells Eve, "would thou hadst heark'n'd to my words, and stay'd / with me, as I besought thee ... we had then / remain'd still happy" in Eden (*Paradise Lost* 9: 1134-1138). This suggests that Adam's description of the "roving" mind that learns to appreciate ignorance foreshadows Adam's feelings after the fall. In this way, Milton may be hinting that Adam's curiosity also affects his decision to eat the forbidden fruit.

Based on the definition of free will described above, Adam must have the ability to choose between two possible alternatives to have free will. Since decisions are usually made by determining which option's costs and benefits are preferred, it is logical to assume that Adam's personality traits are used to weigh alternatives. A close examination of Adam's personality does, in fact, yield two stable characteristics that may influence his decision to eat the forbidden fruit. Because Adam's motive for eating the fruit can be attributed to his character, it can be said that Adam has the free will to choose whether or not to fall.

Works Cited

Miller, Julia. "Is God Complicit in the Fall of Man?". 2012. 1-8. Web.

Milton, John. *Paradise Lost*. *John Milton: Complete Poems and Major Prose*. Ed. Merritt Y.

Hughes. New York: The Odyssey Press, Inc., 1957. 211-469. Print.