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How Good Led to Evil and Evil Created Good: The Relationship
between Good and Evil in *Paradise Lost*

The dilemma of “good” versus “evil” is a complex one, which stubbornly defies simple explanation. In *Paradise Lost*, Milton does little to solve this inborn spiritual struggle, creating a relationship between these concepts that forces the reader to re-evaluate any previously held opinion on the matter. In this epic, it is impossible to define good without referring to evil, and vice versa. On the surface, “good” can be defined as a state of being in agreement with God’s will and “evil” can be defined as a state of being outside of God’s favor. However, the idea of good is contingent upon the contrasting and complementary idea of evil. Without an opposite, good is nothing except the current state of being, which cannot truly be defined; it is synonymous with “existence.” In this way, evil is the creator of the concept we know as good. However, good, while existing without evil, is only existence with no real definition. Furthermore, there seem to be two distinct levels of good and evil. One of these is the existence of good and evil in the minds of the characters, and one is the existence of these concepts in a higher plane of reality in general. In this epic poem, Milton describes the interplay between these ideas through the symbol of the Tree of Knowledge as well as the characterization of his “good” and “evil” characters and situations.

The way in which good and evil may or may not exist varies throughout *Paradise Lost*. Whether they ultimately exist outside of the awareness of conscious beings is a completely

different question. What is most important in the context of *Paradise Lost* is how and if good and evil exist in the minds of the angels, Adam, and Eve. If the characters are ignorant of and not influenced by good or evil, then these things virtually do not exist. However, good and evil also exist on a level above these characters – on the same level as God and reality in general. Thus, for the purpose of this argument, the existence of good and evil will be defined here as the understanding of these ideas in the minds of the characters and simultaneously a natural attribute of reality.

However, the relationship between good and evil is still uncertain. It is perhaps most accurate to compare these two concepts to a balance. The question arises of whether God's original creation of existence should be seen as innately good or innately neutral. This is complicated in *Paradise Lost* by Milton's belief that all creation came out of God, and God is entirely good. Viewed this way, creation is set on one side of the balance, tipping the scale and creating an unstable reality. There is nothing to counteract this reality – no opposite of good to go on the other end of the scale.

At this point, creation simply *is*. Good is the default, and can exist without evil, but without evil it is "good" only in name. In fact it is almost completely neutral since good is defined as the opposite of evil and vice versa. However, if we apply basic governing principles of the universe to this concept of reality, creation will inevitably seek to reach a state of equilibrium. Thus, there must be something to put on the opposite end of the balance. In this way, God created the potential for evil when He created good. The manifestation of this potential was Satan. By falling from grace and becoming evil, Satan put a somewhat equal weight on the other side of the balance and restored equilibrium to the universe. This same process took place

in Eden. Adam and Eve lived in a state of goodness, which was unstable, so the natural conclusion was a restoration of balance – the introduction of evil.

If Adam and Eve had lived in Eden without the constant temptation of the Tree of Knowledge or any understanding of “evil”, they would have been living in a state of pure goodness and evil would not have existed in their reality. The introduction of the Tree provided a potential for evil. This is problematic because on some level that presence might imply balance. However, by using the creation of Heaven as a template, we can see that the potential for evil is not enough to create balance. This potential must be converted into action. The problem of existence once again presents itself: for good to exist to truly exist in a meaningful way, does the knowledge of evil (the potential for evil) or *actual* evil have to exist? The presence of the Tree clearly does not provide evil, but the knowledge that evil might be achieved through disobedience to God. This potential is converted into action when an outside force, Satan, intervenes to correct the balance of good and evil in Eden.

By looking at it this way, it was inevitable that Adam and Eve would fall because an outside force was impelling them to restore balance to the universe. Furthermore, it is implied throughout the poem that the fruit imparts knowledge of both good *and* evil. It is even described as offering “Knowledge of Good bought dear by knowing ill” (*Paradise Lost* 4: 222). This implies that without knowing evil, good cannot be completely understood. To take it one step farther, one could argue that the more evil there is, the more good there is, since balance must constantly be restored and each must compensate for the other. Creation and history is simply a balancing act. The balance in Heaven was achieved by the war and Satan’s subsequent fall just as it was achieved by Adam and Eve’s fall on Earth.

The idea that good is diminished by the absence of evil – or that the presence of more evil leads to good being more valuable is especially demonstrated by Adam and Eve’s attitudes before and after their fall. When they pray for the first time after eating the fruit, Adam remarks that “easily may Faith admit, that all / The good which we enjoy, from Heaven descends; / But that from us aught should ascend to Heav’n / So prevalent as to concern the mind / Of God high-blest, or to incline his will, / Hard to believe may seem” (*Paradise Lost* 11: 142-146). However, this presents the problem of whether good is actually made *more* good by evil or whether it just looks more valuable because there is a greater contrast. Once Adam and Eve have an understanding of sin they can appreciate the mercy and greatness of God, which would have been impossible without their new knowledge of evil. Basically, they fall victim to the cliché of “you don’t know what you’ve got until it’s gone.” The definition of existence is once again important. The existence of good and evil *for the characters* exists in their minds, so the increase in the value of good for them is equivalent to increase in its value in reality. This point is illustrated by the Son when he addresses God about the couple’s prayers. He argues that these prayers are “fruits of more pleasing savor from thy seed / Sown with contrition in his heart, than those / Which his own hand manuring all the Trees / Of Paradise could have produc’t, ere fall’n / From innocence” (*Paradise Lost* 11: 26-30). Good has become more valuable with the existence of evil.

The angels are no more immune to this struggle than men. Once again, it can be argued that without an opposing force, “good” becomes simply a state of existence lacking any real meaning. Therefore, it can be assumed that without Hell, Heaven loses some of its meaning. While it is still innately good, there is only potential for an opposite state of being. Good exists but is undefined, and reality is unstable. It is also questionable whether the angels had an

understanding of evil before the fall of Satan and his followers. They did not have the benefit of Adam and Eve. In this case, the potential for evil was hidden from view in Satan's mind.

However, it is undeniable that after Satan's fall and the war in Heaven, the angels do understand both good and evil. This is one of the main differences between the events in Heaven and on Earth. Adam and Eve already had knowledge of evil, while the angels were present before the very conception of it. After the fall of Adam and Eve, 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). In the end, Heaven is changed by Satan's and the other angels' fall. It is possible that it is improved in some way, since in the angels' minds good is perceived as more valuable and therefore on that level of existence *is* more valuable.

Here, the role of Satan becomes problematic. According to Christian tradition, Satan himself created sin (and therefore, presumably, evil). This character is also subordinate to God. Since he is the source of evil, can evil ever be a truly equal counterpart to good? Perhaps evil is innately weaker than good, which results in the constant attempt to compensate. This explains Satan's attitude throughout *Paradise Lost*. He promises, after his fall, to wage war with God through deception and through trying to thwart all of God's endeavors such as the creation of man. In order to seek balance between good and evil, he must constantly wage war against the stronger of the two. This is in agreement with the beliefs of Christianity.

Of course, the issue of free will is also very important to the arguments put forth by Milton in *Paradise Lost*. One of the main points is that all of God's creations have the ability to choose between good and evil. However, there also seems to be a deterministic level of creation. One could argue that this goes back to the idea that God already knows everything that is going to happen. Therefore, it could be possible that he created the angels, and later humans, in such a

way that they would choose to re-establish balance. This also raises the question of to what extent Satan was more equipped with the potential to be evil than the other angels. It is possible that he was not that much more likely to fall than the others, but was simply the first. If it hadn't been him it would have been another angel, and Satan and the same angels would have fallen.

Free will on Earth is also problematic. On one level, it seems that Adam and Eve have free will, but the situation is unfair since they don't understand the consequences of disobeying God. After all, they have no idea what "death" might entail, only that it must be bad. On another level, their free will was disrupted by Satan through his deception. They lost sight of true reality and their power to decide for themselves when Satan deceived them. In this way he took their free will and used it to his advantage. However, the existence of free will seems to contradict the idea that good and evil are two ends of a natural process. Once again, this goes back to the idea that God himself encompasses reality. This natural process is a part of God. Although this might be inconsistent with modern ideas of free will, it is in agreement with the ideas of Milton's era.

A very specific example of the relationship between good and evil can be seen in comparisons between the Son and Satan. It was because of the creation of the Son that Satan originally rebelled, which supports the theory that evil is a result of good instead of a completely different entity. Since evil comes out of good, then logically it has to be a part of good. A more complicated argument is how the Son would have been different if not for Satan. Would he have been as "good"? It is directly because of Satan's interference on Earth that the Son heroically steps forward to save humanity. This is a more concrete way in which a good character would be diminished by the absence of evil. On a more abstract level, without the appearance of evil, there would be no means of comparison by which to judge that the Son is particularly "good." Conversely, Satan could not be evil without the existence of good. Ultimately his goal is to be

everything that good is not, stating that his fight against God will consist of trying to frustrate all of God's endeavors, which hardly allows "evil" to have any individual meaning.

The issue of God's place in this debate is perhaps the most problematic. According to Milton, everything is made up of God's substance. Therefore, it logically follows that he must contain evil. However, it makes more sense to look at it as God being outside of either of these states of being. Both are simply consequences of existence, the essence of which is arguably neutral. In *Paradise Lost*, however, one must look at it as God being completely pure and good. Using this argument, it is quite apparent that good is the natural state of being and evil is its opposite, which is necessary to create balance and to give good meaning. On God's level, this balance is quite abstract. On the other characters' level it is more concrete, since good and evil acts are the only indication of the distinction between the two.

Ultimately, the relationship between good and evil is multifaceted. Before Satan's fall and virtual creation of evil, the state of being in Heaven could be referred to as "good", but this term would have little meaning since there was nothing to which to compare it. After Satan's fall, good and evil emerged as two opposing forces that made up one whole, changing the fabric of reality for the angels. Evil enabled the Son to be heroic and good even above the other angels, and it can even be argued that evil was responsible for the creation of Earth, since it was created to fill the void left by the fallen angels. The fall of Adam and Eve strongly resembles the struggle in Heaven. Before their discovery of evil, good could have little meaning and their reality was unbalanced. Only after their fall could they fully appreciate the goodness of God, and therefore good became more valuable in their reality. Good and evil may be opposites, but they are linked in such a way that they would be meaningless, virtually nonexistent, as individual entities.