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Is Free Will Damning?

Abstract: This essay asserts that Eve is capable of making her own decisions due to free will. By using texts from Paradise Lost, I prove that it is not free will that corrupts humanity, but certain choices of the individual.

To consider John Milton's Eve in his epic poem, *Paradise Lost*, a pawn used by God to prove his ultimate glory and power is, initially, a reasonable conclusion. Readers abiding by this interpretation might claim Eve to be "defective by design," or made for no other reason than to ultimately fail, causing all of humanity to depend upon God. But this assertion allows for no guilt or blame to be placed on the Mother of Mankind; it implies that she is given no choice but to eat the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge, and this interpretation of the text is skewed. Through a thorough examination of the poem, the reader will find that Eve is a self-sufficient, independent woman who is able to reason right from wrong, at times conveying a keener understanding of reality than Adam. Milton's God, as well as other characters throughout *Paradise Lost*, stresses the importance of free will. Although he is omniscient and, consequently, knows the results of all situations before they develop, God offers members of his creation the ability to choose an outcome for themselves. Eve may appear unable to rationalize for herself due to her submissiveness to her husband, but this appearance is merely a façade. Due to a free will policy determined by God, Eve possesses the insight and wit needed to

formulate a rational decision, proving she is capable of refusing the fruit from the forbidden tree.

God is aware of what will befall his creation well before his most beloved angel wages war against the heavenly divine; He also foresees the choices to be made by the first parents. Yet, even with this knowledge, God does not intervene. Some readers might consider God's inaction as part of his infinitely narcissistic plan to control a universe by being the sole provider of goodness. But, as Milton goes on to explain in his poem, this God, though he knows of the good and bad that is to unfold, grants liberty to all his creation. God refuses to rule over automatons that are forced into a particular existence, for "what praise could they receive? / What pleasure I from such obedience paid?" he asks (*Paradise Lost* 3: 106-107). Rather, he offers free will to his creation so that through choice they may prove their sincere love and loyalty to their creator. God knows that some will select evil over good, yet he cannot interfere with their choice, for "I form'd them free, and free they must remain (*Paradise Lost* 3: 124);" otherwise, any proof of love for the Creator would be lost. Instead, with the foreknowledge of a rebellion and fall, God plans to transform evil into good by displaying his grace and offering an alternative.

Following this alternate route of attaining perfection for his creation, God frees Satan and his followers from the burning lake so that "he might / Heap on himself damnation, while he sought / Evil to others, and enrag'd might see / How all his malice serv'd but to bring forth / Infinite goodness, grace and mercy shown / On Man by him seduc't (*Paradise Lost* 1: 214-219)." Milton then introduces Adam and Eve to the reader – through the eyes of Satan. The entire description of Eve is filtered through Satan's perception as he watches from the Tree of Life, creating questionable assumptions.

According to Satan, not the narrator, “thir sex not equal seem’d; / For contemplation hee and valor form’d / For softness she and sweet attractive Grace (*Paradise Lost* 4: 296-299).” The appearances of these humans are “seem’d” and not verified because the perceiver knows very little regarding this new race. Satan presumes that Eve is inferior to Adam by merely appraising the outward appearances of the humans, and the reader is not instructed otherwise. Because of this fallen angel’s conclusion about these first humans, the reader automatically understands Eve to be the weaker of the two due to her soft and sweet complexion, as well as her apparent lack of intelligence. But Satan does make an accurate assessment as he continues to observe the couple: he detects Eve’s “coy submission (*Paradise Lost* 4: 310).” Yet again, the archangel is quick to refer to Eve’s supposed inferiority. But he also senses a playful nature in the woman, one that most often alludes to the flirtatious guiles used by women to persuade their male counterparts. Satan is not mistaken in his perception that Eve submits to Adam. However, he does not fully recognize Eve’s power. She chooses, through free will, to remain with Adam, to call him her husband, and submit to his guidance. But Satan misunderstands this choice as Eve’s inferiority; instead, it should be recognized as her ability to present herself as inferior, but use her intelligence when necessary to influence Adam.

Eve gradually begins to unveil her true behavior through her own words. She describes her first awakening into the world; her first instinct was to question her existence, her location, and the happenings around her. Rather than be paralyzed by fear of the unknown, she immediately wanders through the land to find the source of the sound of flowing water. The pool that reflects her beauty fascinates her, though she does not realize the image gazing back at her is her own. She admits to being so entranced by

the image that she could have “pin’d with vain desire (*Paradise Lost* 4: 466)” for eternity; she quite literally admires her appearance. Milton creates this monologue for Eve to explain her humanness. She possesses the same qualities of all mankind, like curiosity and pride, thus making her relatable to readers. But because no sin has been committed yet, none of these descriptions can refer to their negative connotations in effect today. Today, pride connotes arrogance and curiosity fosters a lack of discipline, whereas, before sin entered the world, both of these traits were unblemished. Instead, Eve’s story demonstrates her daring spirit; she is content and independent, offering no evidence to suggest that her survival depends on another.

Upon seeing Adam for the first time, Eve unashamedly chooses herself over a partner. Adam must make a longing appeal and seize her hand before she chooses to “yield” to this male counterpart, and by yielding, Eve freely submits to Adam. Therefore, the submission previously described in Satan’s interpretation of the couple is justified. Eve has the opportunity to remain completely independent, yet she chooses to submit to a life of inferiority by giving herself to man. Even in her submission, she maintains a bit of her previously mentioned resistance by interacting with Adam in a coy and reluctant manner. This capacity to resist demonstrates her ability to evaluate a situation and rationalize its outcome, thereby proving her capacity to formulate sensible decisions as a part of free will.

Though Eve may not be aware of the concept of free will by Book 9, she understands that certain boundaries are keeping her from her desires. She presents the most significant questions of this section after suggesting that she and Adam work separately to better tend to the untamed garden. Eve proposes a reasonable and valuable

idea, for she and her husband are the only two bodies in Eden able to prune the vast overgrowth of plants. Furthermore, her recommendation allows her to roam freely about the garden, an adventure that she has been denied since her submission to Adam. When Adam pleads with her to remain by his side and out of harm's path, Eve astutely replies, "If this be our condition, thus to dwell / In narrow circuit strait'n'd by a Foe...How are we happy, still in fear of harm?...And what is Faith, Love, Virtue unassay'd / Alone, without exterior help sustain'd?...Frail is our happiness, if this be so, / And Eden were no Eden thus expos'd (*Paradise Lost* 9: 322-341)." This is one of the most riveting questions posed in *Paradise Lost*, and Eve is the brilliant source. She realizes that living a life in constant fear of the enemy is no life at all. She also asserts that love and loyalty untried are essentially nonexistent; they become nothing more than memorized words that contain no sincere meaning. Living a life according to these standards, Eve explains, is a passionless life not worth living. This gripping message, applicable to every generation, displays Eve's wise reflection. From this compelling argument, perhaps more so than anywhere else in *Paradise Lost*, Eve reveals her rational and prudent discernment. By exhibiting these qualities, Eve proves she possesses the most basic characteristics needed to distinguish right from wrong and, therefore, that she is competent to refuse Satan's temptation. But just as Eve complied with Adam's pleas because of his adornment of flattering remarks, so she succumbs to Satan's persuasive advice and becomes responsible for the Fall of mankind. As described in Book 4, Eve's decision to remain with Adam is due to the enticing remarks he bestows upon her. As Eve turns to leave what she considers to be a lesser form of herself, Adam cries out:

Return fair Eve,

Whom fli'st thou? Whom thou fli'st, of him thou art,

His flesh, his bone; to give thee being I lent

Out of my side to thee, nearest my heart

Substantial Life, to have thee by my side

Henceforth an individual solace dear;

Part of my Soul I seek thee, and thee claim

My other half (*Paradise Lost* 4: 481-488).

Only after Adam admits to giving a part of himself to enable Eve's existence and explains his ardent desire to be with this beautiful creature does Eve choose to stay. It is through Adam's expression of desire for the woman that Eve concedes to remain with him, therefore, revealing Eve's inability to disregard flattery. In the same manner, Satan succeeds in conquering Eve through a similar type of adoration. He immediately gains her trust by showering her with compliments, saying that she, more than any other creature, shares the closest resemblance to God, whom Eve knows to be the most powerful and beautiful entity in the entire universe. Satan goes on to tell Eve it is she that "all things living gaze on," including himself, who "gaze[s] insatiate[ly]" (*Paradise Lost* 9: 535-539)." Eve cannot resist the sensual compliments the serpent pours on her. She initially dismisses Satan's words when she discovers the tree to which he is referring is the Tree of Knowledge. She astutely explains the instructions she was given, forbidding her to taste the fruits of this tree, and logically concludes to ignore the serpent's suggestion due to the negative ramifications. But, just as she was previously enticed by alluring words, Satan persuades Eve by telling her of the god-like state she will attain once she eats of the Tree. Though she skillfully debates with the Serpent as to

why she should not eat the forbidden fruit, her humanly desires outweigh her wisdom. She chooses to taste this luscious fruit with the intent of gaining ultimate power, glory, and the praise of all creatures. Given the choice by God through free will, Eve prefers desire to obedience and, consequently, releases sin into the world.

In his essay "On Bending," Jeff Davis asserts that Eve chooses to go against God's command due to reason – that she sincerely believes eating the fruit is a way to search for knowledge, which, in turn, is a form of reasoning, and to reason is to use one's gifts given by God, thereby proving one's love to the Creator. But this argument renders Eve as innocent of any crime, as if she eats the apple in hopes of glorifying God, which is an inaccurate portrayal of Eve. Earlier in the passage, Eve reveals that she knows not to eat from the Tree through explicit instructions, for "God so commanded, and left that Command / Sold Daughter of his voice; the rest, we live / Law to ourselves, our Reason is our Law (*Paradise Lost* 9: 651-654)." To eat from the Tree of Knowledge would be to blatantly disobey God's only rule. Eve even states that she is in fact allowed and supposed to use her Reason to guide her life, except in regards to the Tree. She is well aware that eating fruit from the Tree will not please God. She does not use reason to justify her decision, but simply disregards God's commandment so that she may gain ultimate power and knowledge. Milton describes her ears as ringing with the sound "of [Satan's] persuasive words, impregn'd / With Reason, to her seeming (*Paradise Lost* 9: 737-738)." Although his words resonate with reason, Milton is quick to also remind the reader that this is all "seemed." This last phrase that Milton chooses to include in the passage is very important, for it proves that beneath the appealing voice of reason, Eve knows truth. She tries to justify her choice by lying to herself, but she is aware of the

disobedience she will be committing by eating the fruit. Later, Davis deduces that “the image of being a goddess-figure upon indulgence of the fruit seduces Eve into sin (Davis, 5).” This is a more accurate analysis of Eve’s actions, for it presents Eve as knowingly disobeying God for the sake of vanity. She is warned of the dangers that will befall her if she eats of the Tree, yet chooses to bite into the apple in an effort to gain power and grandeur. This choice is not due to her love for God, but her love for self.

Milton’s God bestows free will to all his creation so that all will have an opportunity to prove themselves to their Creator. According to his plan, God leaves man “to his own free Will, his Will though free, / Yet mutable (*Paradise Lost* 5: 236-237),” warning that although God created man in a state of perfect happiness, man’s condition may change according to the individual’s choices. Eve proves throughout many of the books of *Paradise Lost* that she is capable of making intelligent decisions. In her pensive manner, Eve questions the validity of her love and loyalty towards her creator. And this is a legitimate question; both God and Eve agree that virtue contains no value unless tested. But when she tests her virtues, Eve unintentionally causes the catastrophic Fall. Because of her evident ability to reason and her application of free will, the Fall of mankind is brought about simply by Eve’s choice to disobey.