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The Will and the Good

Abstract: This essay seeks to establish an understanding of the Son in Paradise Lost through his relationship with Satan at specific, parallel moments of apparent 'pause.' Both characters are inextricably linked to this essay's definitions of 'Good and Evil' in their respective adherence to the Father's will. Ultimately, the Son is argued to be the epitome of Goodness and Satan the epitome of Evilness; both their examples have implications upon the conduct of the Christian individual in relation to the Father's moral system.

John Milton's *Paradise Lost* bears the enormous burden of attempting to reconcile the complex and multifaceted traditions of Western thought – from their beginnings in ancient cultures and mythologies to the political and scientific theories of Milton's age – with that of an often-paradoxical Christian theological tradition. But the primary purpose of *Paradise Lost*, I would argue, lies in the text's relationship with the reader: by addressing such a complicated endeavor within a work of epic poetry, Milton is not only passionately articulating *his* understanding of Christianity, but pushing the audience to engage with the text's ideas and dialogues to further test and expand *their* understanding of the Christian identity. This essay will attempt to interpret the Son as a character through his connection with Satan, focusing the analysis on their relation to 'Good and Evil' at two specific 'pauses' – narrative moments not necessarily of hesitation, but deliberate reflection and irreversibility. In doing so, the Son and Satan can be understood as the definitive models of two opposite extremes, the precedents for

‘Good and Evil’ within the Father’s system of morality. ‘Good’ is measured by adherence to the Father’s will – the Son is therefore maximally ‘Good’ and the embodiment of Goodness itself, an example for the Christian person to strive towards in the conduct of life. ‘Evil’ is measured by deviance to the Father’s will – Satan is therefore maximally ‘Evil’ and the embodiment of Evilness itself, an example for the Christian person to guard against in the conduct of life. Although such an observation may seem glaringly obvious from a theological standpoint, the way *Paradise Lost* approaches this distinction is not so apparent; it forces the reader to carefully evaluate the depictions of a seemingly relatable, sympathetic, and even heroic Satan against that of the otherwise tyrannical and oppressive Father-Son pair.

The Son’s first moment of ‘pause’ happens in Book 3. After the Father makes a call for humanity’s redeemer, Milton writes of a prolonged silence in Heaven which only the Son’s offer to volunteer breaks: “[The Father] ask’d, but all the Heav’nly Choir stood mute, / And silence was in Heav’n... / ... had not the Son of God... / ... thus renew’d” (*Paradise Lost* 3: 217-226). In His prior conversation with the Son, the Father states that in grace “Man shall not quite be lost, but sav’d who will, / Yet not of will in him, but grace in me / Freely voutsaf’t” (*Paradise Lost* 3: 173-175). This statement illustrates how in the proper orientation of the individual’s life, one’s will must come to recognize and embrace the Father’s grace as a gift of love. Furthermore, the Father explains the proper behavior regarding the individual’s life and relationship to Him:

To prayer, repentance, and obedience due,
 Though but endevord with sincere intent,
 Mine ear shall not be slow, mine eye not shut.
 And I will place within them as a guide
 My Umpire *Conscience*, whom if they will hear,

Light after light well us'd they shall attain,

And to the end persisting, safe arrive. (*Paradise Lost* 3: 191-197)

Here, we have the individual's conscience – the capacity for proper self-reflection and reason in making choices – described as an important, if not fundamental, aspect of conduct. The Father does not praise the mere expression of prayer, but the individual's internal, authentic devotion towards the Father and His love which is made manifest through their actions – a notion that proves incompatible with Satan's pride. Grace is something that is not only given by the Father to every person but is left to be *found* within the individual; the internal revelation of grace comes through a type of self-discipline and self-discovery in one's conduct *towards 'the Good'* as the Father's will. This is an important concept not only in the Christian's relationship to God but also the Son's desire to please the Father in *their* relationship. For the Son to become the epitome of Goodness, every action he takes must be made in absolute accordance with the Father's will – the Son *chooses* for his own will to be whatever the Father's will decrees. The Son even directly says this to the Father at a much later point in the narrative: “That thou in me well pleas'd, declar'st thy will / Fulfilled, which to fulfil is all my bliss” (*Paradise Lost* 6: 728-729).

In breaking the silence in Heaven by responding to the Father's call for a redeemer, the Son is described as “In whom the fulness dwells of love divine” (*Paradise Lost* 3: 225-226). It must be recalled that before this, the Father calls the Son “My word, my wisdom, and effectual might” and therefore acknowledges the Son's choice to be an extension of His own will – the Son is the “word” of the Father and the “word” of the Father is that which becomes the Son's will. (*Paradise Lost* 3: 170). Knowing this is important when attempting to understand the tone

behind the Son's series of declarations after he made the promise to the Father to serve as the "rigid satisfaction" on humanity's behalf:

Under his gloomy power I shall not long
 Lie vanquisht; thou hast giv'n me to possess
 Life in myself for ever, by thee I live,
 Though now to Death I yield, and am his due
 All that of me can die, yet that debt paid,
 Thou wilt not leave me in the loathsome grave. (*Paradise Lost* 3: 242-247)

The tone of this excerpt connects to the idea of the Son in his 'pause' and desire to bring "Joy" to the Father himself. Although the Son is speaking declaratively, the confidence behind the statement does not arise from a definite or direct knowledge of any future outcome, but rather an absolute faith in the omnipotent, omniscient Father and his will. The 'pause' by the Son – at the very least understood to be the lack of an immediate reply to the Father's call for a redeemer – implies that the Son does not have direct omniscience regarding actual events, nor can he escape the promise once made by answering the Father's call thus demanding time for reflection. Therefore, the Son chooses to attain merit in pleasing the Father by proving his complete adherence to the Father's will. Merit demands that the individual prove himself as deserving of something: in the instance of the Father's succession, for the Son to prove his worth of the Father's throne. In order to attain merit, one must take on responsibility, and for the Son to have responsibility, he must not have absolute certainty in the outcome of his sacrifice – or else he would just be following orders and not truly testing himself. The statement "Thou wilt not leave me in the loathsome grave" doesn't reveal the Son to operate from an absolute foreknowledge of events (for example, directly knowing that he will be resurrected), but that his absolute faith in

the Father leads him to act *through belief* – a knowledge derived from a perfect alignment with ‘the Good.’ Therefore, the Son does not merely act as a type of evidence for the Father’s omniscience; instead, the Son places his absolute faith in ‘the Good’ resulting in a type of *secondary and indirect omniscience through* the Father. The Father’s following statement supports this sentiment of the Son's merit as arising through his Goodness:

By Merit more than Birthright Son of God,
 Found worthiest to be so by being Good,
 Far more than Great or High; because in thee
 Love hath abounded more than Glory abounds. (*Paradise Lost* 3: 309-312)

Thus, the Son is proven to operate on the basis of his reciprocal love for the Father, striving in absolute accordance with ‘the Good’ (the Father’s will), and therefore becoming the embodiment of Goodness – this is a greatness that cannot be given by “Birthright,” but only worked towards and earned as merit through the Son’s own choices. Furthermore, the individual Christian cannot successfully act towards ‘the Good’ after the Fall without the Son having made his promise to die as a sacrifice for humanity:

He with his whole posterity must die,
 Die hee or Justice must; unless for him
 Some other able, and as willing, pay
 The rigid satisfaction, death for death. (*Paradise Lost* 3: 191-197)

A system of morality must have definitions – examples for judgment – not only for the epitome of Evil (Satan) but the epitome of Good (the Son). To neglect the exemplary Good and not the exemplary Evil would be to permit condemnation but deny redemption in the judgment of the

individual's life, therefore eliminating the possibility for the gift of Heaven in death. Satan, as opposed to the Son in this morality of 'Good and Evil,' could then be understood as 'Evil' in his desire to disprove the Father's will by proving the greatness of himself.

The Son's first 'pause' is best paralleled with Satan's 'pause' in Pandemonium at the Council of Hell during Book 2, building upon this connection between the two characters. Before elaborating upon this new moment of 'pause,' it is important to note Satan and his brethren's ultimate and explicit objective – to resist and corrupt 'the Good' at all costs:

But ever to do ill our sole delight,
 As being the contrary to his high will
 Whom we resist. If then his Providence
 Out of our evil seek to bring forth good,
 Our labour must be to pervert that end. (*Paradise Lost* 1: 160-164)

This passage characterizes Satan as a willful corrupter, with 'willful' holding a double meaning: Satan makes a *choice* towards acting upon his *own will* – the desire to do 'Evil' by deliberately disobeying the Father's will in altering whatever *His* ends may be. The Council eventually agrees that the most impactful way to pervert 'the Good' is to corrupt humanity and "Seduce them to our Party, that thir God / May prove thir foe, and with repenting hand / Abolish his own works" (*Paradise Lost* 2: 365-370). This proposal is a call to corrupt humanity by repositioning the individual's will away from 'the Good' and towards deliberate 'Evil' – to not only disobey the Father but to *willingly disobey*. The Council's call for a volunteer to set this proposal in motion is met by a prolonged silence, constituting the 'pause' which parallels with that described for the Son in Book 3: "... all sat mute, / pondering the danger with deep thoughts; and each / In

other's count'nance read his own dismay" (*Paradise Lost* 2: 420-422). The silence of this 'pause' is only broken by Satan, who is then described as a "transcendent glory rais'd / Above his fellows, with Monarchal pride / Conscious of highest worth" (*Paradise Lost* 2: 427-429). This description signifies Satan to operate upon the basis of a solely self-interested glory – "transcendent" as meaning above all others – and therefore a pride that is *consciously aware of* and *actively strives against* the Father's will and the interests behind His desired ends.

What is even more revealing of Satan's character after the 'pause' is the nature of his volunteerism, one he despotically declares to be a necessarily individual task:

... I abroad

Through all the Coasts of dark destruction seek

Deliverance for us all: this enterprise

None shall partake with me. Thus saying rose

The Monarch, and prevented all reply. (*Paradise Lost* 2: 464-467)

The concept of volunteerism is inseparable with that of choice. Here, Satan explicitly admits to pursuing the purely individual path which, at its core, is only in relation to 'the Good' in his desire to pervert it. Ironically, the Fallen Angels wholeheartedly accept Satan's offer, with Milton describing them as having "[won] cheap the high repute / Which [Satan] through hazard huge must earn" (*Paradise Lost* 2: 472-473). This description exposes the Fallen Angels as having avoided the burden of enacting their own vengeance by placing a sort of 'faith' in Satan as indicated by their "bowing" to him – a notably hypocritical concession given their refusal to "bow" to the Father. To connect Satan's conduct back to the Son, the Father in Book 5

introduces the Son to Heaven's Angels in a manner which refers to "bowing" while simultaneously alluding to Satan's fall:

At my right hand; your Head I him appoint;
 And by my Self have sworn to him shall bow
 All knees in Heav'n, and shall confess him Lord:
 Under his great Vice-gerent Reign abide
 United as one individual Soul
 For ever happy: him who disobeys
 Mee disobeys, breaks union, and that day
 Cast out from God and blessed vision, falls
 Into utter darkness, deep ingulft, his place
 Ordain'd without redemption, without end. (*Paradise Lost* 5: 606-615)

To "bow" towards something is to express where your beliefs lay: the Angels bow to the Son as an extension of the Father's will (therefore in a type of union of the will); the Fallen bow to Satan in the hopes that he act on behalf of their own interests; and Satan bows only to further *his* own ends (like when "bowing" to Uriel as a form of deception in Book 3). The Father, in the last two lines of the excerpt, indicates what happens to those who fail to orient themselves towards 'the Good' by instead pursuing 'Evil': they fall into "utter darkness ... without redemption." This is not only a literal type of Hell such as in Books 1 and 2, but a perpetual *mode of being* as carried by Satan throughout the work. However, this is not a consequence of the Father himself, but of the individual's own choices, a notion best exemplified by the 'pause' for reflection Satan takes outside the walls of Eden at the beginning of Book 4:

And like a devilish Engine back recoils

Upon himself; horror and doubt distract
 His troubl'd thoughts, and from the bottom stir
 The Hell within him, for within him Hell
 He brings... (*Paradise Lost* 4: 17-21)

Although this is only the beginning of Satan's much larger 'pause' in the lament over his own condition, this moment comes to signify a complete misapplication of Satan's "Umpire *Conscience*." Satan in this 'pause' later raises a multitude of objections as to the unfairness of his seemingly irreversible state, – often ironically associating blame with those other than himself – presenting a logic which justifies the persistence of his doing 'Evil' by going against the Father's will. This type of 'rationalization' leads Satan to *attempt* to absolve himself from the personal responsibility of orienting himself towards 'the Good'; therefore, it is Satan who *perpetually bars himself* from the possibility of redemption through his *chosen* state, one willingly oriented towards 'Evil.'

Reed Gossard's seemingly similar conclusion about Satan from his essay "Paradise Lost: Definitions" requires me to further elaborate upon both the nature of Satan and the Son. Gossard writes that "Satan's individual-centered, independent language marks him as his own moral agent" insofar as "Satan attempts to break the system that God has in place, and thus establish sovereignty for himself" (Gossard 1,6). Gossard's conclusion, although also emphasizing Satan's rigid individuality, proves incompatible with the framework I have proposed: the Son and Satan are inextricably related to the concepts of 'Good and Evil' within *Paradise Lost*; therefore they themselves necessarily become – through their choices – part of the Father's "system" of morality. On the one hand, Satan acts upon his own interests and attempts to absolve himself from 'the Good'; yet his interests still find themselves in relation to the Father's will in the desire

to interfere. This necessitates that Satan remains within the morality of ‘Good and Evil’ insofar as he deliberately and purely operates upon the basis of ‘Evil.’ If Satan were to operate as his own “moral agent,” – implying him to be ‘*beyond* Good and Evil’ – then he would not care for perverting the Father’s will at all, that is, to have his own interests stem from the conscious corruption of ‘the Good’ by ‘Evil.’ Satan could only be perceived as “breaking the system” of the Father’s morality in his attempt to skew the balance towards ‘Evil’ entirely. Satan’s essence is his absolute Evilness – his complete adherence to his own interests as willfully striving against ‘the Good.’

On the other hand, the Son places faith in the Father’s will as being what is best not only for him but for *all* others as well. The Son’s absolute accordance with ‘the Good’ leads him to be perfect in his ‘Goodness’ – he seeks to act upon the Father’s will and thus chooses to concede any potential for developing his own interests beyond pleasing the Father. The Son’s essence is his perfect Goodness – the complete adherence to ‘the Good’ as his own will is a characteristic which persists in his transition from the Son to “Jesus.” Both figures become perfect examples of Goodness and Evilness respectively; their interests are both ultimately implicated as opposite extremes within the Father’s system of morality.

In the conduct of Satan, the audience may see one whose reason *willfully* strives against faith in ‘the Good.’ Opposingly, in the conduct of the Son, the audience may see one whose reason *consciously acts towards* faith in the Father’s will as ‘the Good.’ The Son, one whose conduct is always in absolute accordance to the Father’s will as its end, may be understood as ‘the possible impossible’ – an exemplary mode of being impossible to attain after the Fall yet still strived for by the Christian as a necessary possibility. Satan, one whose conduct is always in absolute deviance with the Father’s interests, can be understood as the ‘impossible possible’ – the

possibility of living by 'Evil' as a mode of being, yet the impossibility of doing so to Satan's extent due to his absolute, self-imposed unchangeability and complete relinquishment of Christian personal responsibility. It is by the examples set through the characters of the Son and Satan that one may interpret the Christian life as being in accordance with the Father's will: the acceptance grace – and those gifts inherited with it – is achieved within the individual who strives to orient their will towards a harmonious balance with 'the Good' itself. And yet, after the Fall, humanity's perception becomes fundamentally altered: the mortal individual now knows that there is 'Good and Evil,' but is left to search *within* to find the Father's will – to understand 'Good *by* Evil.'

Works Cited

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