

Patrick Rogers

30 April 2012

Dr. Ainsworth

Final Paper

*Abstract: In this paper I will attempt to prove that Milton's God is justified in his lack of interaction with man.*

### Milton's God and his Eternal Providence

John Milton presents a truly unique God in his epic poem, *Paradise Lost*. Whereas modern interpretations of God view him as an entity that is constantly shaping human life, Milton's God is more closely related to a deistic interpretation, preferring to honor free will and allow human life to unfold from a distance. This separation raises a truly confounding question about Milton's God: is he justified in neglecting his creation? God's inaction during the fall of man is certainly irresponsible from a strict humanistic standpoint, but it is important to recognize the dangerously thin line between being a caring god and a tyrannical ruler that he must maintain. If God were to begin interfering in the events of man, he would not only break his most coveted rule, the preservation of his Eternal Providence, but also would certainly cross the threshold into tyranny. Although noble in concept, it is difficult to imagine a world in which a higher power constantly intervenes for "the greater good". Therefore, Milton's God is justified in his inaction, and through his installation of free will in man necessitates "neglect".

To understand both the nature of Milton's God and whether or not he is justified in his actions, it is important to first recognize Milton's purpose in creating his own god. It seems that Milton purposefully creates his god as a complicated one. I don't believe he designs his god so that he will be questioned, rather contemplated. Throughout his career, Milton is a proponent of

hard work, diligence, and especially critical thinking as necessary parts of life. The manner in which Milton has his god shape reality suggests that an individual must partake in a certain amount of inner-contemplation to understand the world around him. In her essay, “And He Saw that it was Good”, Jennifer Jeffcoat says that if all life were preordained “mankind would still be living in the Garden of Eden, conversing with God face to face. If God’s plan was forced upon us, we would all be living in total perfection, rather, God allows things to happen, because to deprive us of our ability to choose would be to negate His own perfect law” (Jeffcoat 1). Jeffcoat is here suggesting that if the future were set in stone, there would not be such thing as reason or choice. God’s creation would be stuck without novel thought. For this reason, Milton meticulously designs his god to be one who not only gifts man with the power of choice but also stalwartly defends it. This is certainly evident in many of his works but none more so than *Paradise Lost*. During his invocation of the muse in Book I, Milton states that his purpose for writing *Paradise Lost* is to “Assert [His] Eternal Providence, And Justify the ways of God to men” (*Paradise Lost* 1:24-5). Milton’s God is certainly all power. He possesses the ability to create and destroy anything on a whim. He created the angels in his image but through Satan’s rebellion many fell. God then chooses to create another race of beings: man. Despite possessing “foreknowledge” of what is to come, he creates man in the same image he did the Angels, bestowing once again the gift of free will. God’s retention of this trait in his creations reveals its divine importance; it suggests that free will is, in fact, God’s “Eternal Providence”. This notion is furthered in Book VII, in which Raphael relates the story of how God created Earth. It is here that God necessitates the need for man to have free will. “God saw the Light was good; And light from darkness by the Hemisphere Divided: Light the Day, and Darkness the Night he nam’d” (*Paradise Lost* 7:249-52). God’s decision to separate light and dark is integral to the justification

of his inaction. By merely separating the two and not destroying or hiding darkness, God creates a duality in the world: dark versus light, good versus evil. This duality suggests an innate balance exists in the world. Supposing God does indeed have the power to do away with evil, he clearly believes that this duality and the power of choice are more important than a world of absolute good. Whether this dichotomy is necessary for the world to exist or not is unclear. What is clear, however, is the extreme importance God places on it. Having created a world in which the concept of free will fits so perfectly, Milton's God legitimizes the existence of free will.

Jeff Davis, in his essay entitled "On Bending", takes a particularly intriguing stance on the way Milton's God's reality operates. He derives that "the epic, which claims that... evil only comes to exist through a bending of...virtue into a sub-divinely altered state of God's created material" (Davis 1). Though he recognizes God did indeed create both good and evil, Davis contradicts himself here by claiming evil spawns from perverting God's will. This stance inaccurately assumes that the good and evil binary functions similarly to the hot and cold binary. To be brief, there is no such thing as "cold". The word "cold" is merely used to represent a particular lack of heat, not a particular amount of "cold". What Milton has had his God create is a binary in which the two components can operate separately, functioning as individuals. Evil is not simply a lack of good and good is not simply a lack of evil. The two coexist and actively work in opposition to each other. Individuals' concepts of "good" and "evil" are certainly nuanced and therefore relevant to reception. But *that* is the point. God recognizes that there are multiple ways of conceiving what good and evil are despite his explicit definitions of the two concepts. In the world he creates, true good and, consequently, bliss can only come from *seeking* it *through* him; forcing his creation to see the concepts as such, however, achieves nothing. There would be no appreciation for *why* particular parts of life are good and others bad. And

that--the appreciation--is what satisfies God the most. God's "Eternal Providence" factors in after he decrees that if man were "Not free, what proof could they have giv'n sincere / Of true allegiance, constant Faith or Love, / Where only what they needs must do, appear'd, / Not what they would? what praise could they receive? / What pleasure I from such obedience paid" (*Paradise Lost* 3:103-107). In this way, Milton skillfully accounts for why God allows evil to exist in the world. The power of choice is God's most effective tool in teaching his creation about his boundless love, a truth Davis inadvertently undermines in his essay.

In his 2009 essay, "Evil as Justification for Redemption", Thaddeus Parker addresses the dynamic of good and evil in relation to the War in Heaven. He states that "While the rebellious angels are not necessarily winning during the battle in Heaven, they are equally not losing, at least when pitted against God's forces" (Parker 3). By proving that God is *allowing* Satan's forces to fight, Parker's assertion furthers the notion of an innate balance in the world. Clearly, if the dynamic was not necessary, God surely would have overwhelmed Satan's forces much sooner. Though, Parker continues by stating that God purposefully uses this dynamic as a means for salvation:

Therefore, the battle in heaven is a way through which God is able to redeem his angelic forces from the threat of Satan's rebellious angels. God allows Satan and his rebellious forces the ability to engage in battle, presenting a relevant threat to heaven, and then uses this battle as a chance to redeem heaven through the power he places in the Son. (Parker 3)

Parker's conclusions on God's intent are astute, but not entirely on point as they suggest that Milton's God is opportunistic. Throughout *Paradise Lost*, it is clear that God has a specific design in place for how his realms operate. Or, perhaps more accurately, Milton intends for his god to have a specific design. If Parker's statement were true, God certainly would be contradicting his Eternal Providence. For Eternal Providence to be maintained God must *not* alter

the innate rules he creates for reality or the binary between good and evil would necessarily fail. Furthermore, should God change the “rules”, his will would no longer be absolute. If God is not consistent as a stabilizing force for reality, his nature surely would be tyrannical; a scenario he takes many precautions to avoid.

God’s commitment to the preservation of his “Eternal Providence” on Earth often casts him in a negative light. God has the ability to see events that have yet to come, most notably, the Fall. “For man will heark’n to [Satan’s] glozing lies, And easily transgress the sole Command, Sole pledge of his obedience: So will fall Hee and his faithless Progeny” (*Paradise Lost* 3:93-6). It stands to reason that if God can see what is to come and has the ability to stop it, then he should. However, this sentiment works in direct contrast to his vision for the world and is an excuse for individual shortcomings, as made clear by God:

Whose fault but his own? ingrate he had of mee

All he could have; I made him just and right,

Sufficient to have stood, though free to fall

... They therefore as to right belong’d,

So were created, nor can justly accuse

Thir maker, or thir making, or thir Fate;

As if predestination over-rul’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,

Which had no less prov'd certain unforeknown. (*Paradise Lost* 3:97-119)

By so clearly presenting Adam and Eve's fallacies through God's speech, Milton shifts the "blame" from God to Adam and Eve. It is not God's ability to see the "future" that should be faulted; it is Adam and Eve's misuse of God's "Eternal Providence". Milton makes it clear that his interpretation of God does not predetermine *anything*. Although he can see the "future", it is clear by his statement "As if predestination over-rul'd/Thir will" that what he sees is not set in stone; it is merely a possible outcome. God has given mankind the tools it needs to overcome anything that may tempt it on Earth. He does so through channels such as scripture, divine inspiration, and Heavenly visitations. Through actively *not* intervening, God prevents himself from becoming a crutch for his creation. If he were available to respond and pay everybody's bail then there would be no concept of appreciative love. Although it seems to be a "tough love" method of teaching, God, in reality, does not have a fair or viable alternative. Again, Milton mimics this sentiment in his own life, purporting diligence over self-entitlement, making it clear both how and why his God retains these traits. Though for some, this still is not enough to justify God's inaction. Perhaps God should intervene in only "big situations", such as the Fall. But at what point does God's intervention become detrimental to free will? The line between appropriate and inappropriate intervention by God is impossible to place and God's direct intervention is improper no matter the severity of a situation. Although Milton's God seems to be absent from the affairs of man, he it makes clear that his absence is not out of neglect, rather necessity, when he declares "Though I uncircumscrib'd myself retire, And put not forth my goodness, which is free To act or not, Necessity and Chance Approach not mee, and what I will is Fate" (*Paradise Lost* 7:170-73). God here reveals the immense responsibility he bears. Despite

having the power to simply *will* anything in or out of existence, he possesses enough humility to give the world choice. He recognizes his own limitless nature and its distinct goodness and, instead of throwing the world he created out of balance by imposing his nature, determines to retire. God's situation is rather tragic. He withdraws for the good of the world and in turn seems to be most often criticized for being an uninterested, self-serving god. Often times it is easy to hold God to the same standards as men. The important distinction to remember is that God cannot be held to the same standards because he *is not man*. His actions and even his very existence both hold infinitely more consequences than those of any individual and must be acknowledged as such.

In order to preserve the balance he created, Milton's God must maintain a degree of impartiality. The very existence of free will complicates the concepts of "good" and "evil". Despite being "good" in essence, God cannot allow himself to provide more aid to one individual over another. "Good" and "evil" are concepts relative to *reception*. Therefore, when Sin divulges that God has tasked her with holding the key to Hell's gates, "The key of this infernal Pit by due, And by command of Heav'n's all-powerful King I keep, by him forbidden to unlock These Adamantine Gates" (*Paradise Lost* 2:850-54), it is wrong to suggest that God makes a mistake by doing so. How can God know that Sin will be resentful? In fact, God is leading by example and should be recognized for doing so. God has provided even the occupants of Hell with the same guidelines as Adam and Eve as they too are given a choice. He is not paving the way for Satan to leave Hell; he is giving Satan, Sin, and Death all another *chance* to listen to his decrees and understand that his ways lead to salvation and happiness. Once again, Jennifer Jeffcoat accurately deciphers God's justification for such actions:

If we are asking ourselves to consider what the definitions of good and evil are, we must ask if we could consider God to be good if He takes away our ability to

make a decision. God [explains]...that He specifically gave His creation free will to insure that any loyalty they paid Him would be sincere; saying that He would get no joy from praise that was given under requirement. The text clearly points to the fact that God viewed free will as a necessary means of allowing His creations to intentionally map out their course... (Jeffcoat 3-4)

It is clear that Milton's God views his relationship with Satan and his followers differently than how the relationship is often regarded. God does not define his relationship with the Fallen as one between competitors. He instead defines it as he defines *all* of his relationships: one between creator and created. He must exercise the same caution with *all* his creation if he is to preserve "Eternal Providence". An exception for any creature would undermine the structure of the world he has created and he would not be fit to function as a caring god. This is perhaps one of the more potent examples of God's commitment to the preservation of both free will and, by extension, the duality in *Paradise Lost*.

The role in which Milton's God functions is by no means uncomplicated. After having failed in preventing Lucifer's fall, he was essentially bound to try a new approach with man. Perhaps a new approach in deciphering God's justifications is needed as well. From his decisive creation of the dualities, unprecedented restraints of power and ultimately selfless withdrawal from the world, it is clear that Milton's God harbors no conceit. The greatest justification for Milton's God is his gift of reasoning to man. Without it, he is nothing more than an oppressor. But through it and his promise of salvation, he has granted man the opportunity to experience both the pleasures of Earth and the ecstasies of Heaven.



Works Cited

Milton, John. "Paradise Lost." *John Milton: Complete Poems and Major Prose*. Ed. Merritt Y. Hughes. New York: Macmillian Publishing Company, 1957. 211-469. Print.