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On Bending

Like any work of art, John Milton's *Paradise Lost* seeks to imitate nature, or reality. His challenge is among the more ambitious of those ever attempted by literature, as it travels back to the conception of the plot of Man (according to Christian traditions) and continues until it encompasses the whole story of humanity's existence, its purpose being to "justify to ways of God to men" (*Paradise Lost* 1: 26). Permeating every instance within the tale is the chief conflict which drives the characters forward within the plot, the clash between good and evil. Nothing of significance happens, either in *Paradise Lost* or in real life, which is not a result of one of these two influences, and, in discussing beginnings, it is only appropriate for Milton to postulate a theory of their origins. God creates good—this much is certain—but does he also create evil, which is in all ways opposed to his ideals? Not according to the epic, which claims that morality finds its natural home in virtue, and evil only comes to exist through a bending of that virtue into a sub-divinely altered state of God's created material.

The obvious subsequent question addresses the possibility of such a process, wondering how such abnormal distortions can occur without the influence of an already existing evil, which forever implies an evil prior to any current one. It logically follows that there can be no original evil unless it existed from the establishment of reality alongside with good, which must accuse God of being evil's author. This cannot mix with Milton's portrayal of the Creator, which Adam expresses after his birth: "Thou in thyself art perfect [sic], and in thee / Is no deficiency found"

(*Paradise Lost* 8: 415-416); if such a mix of perfect God and imperfect creation were attempted, the philosophy of the poem would crumble into insignificance. Rather, *Paradise Lost* asserts that Satan is the architect of evil, taking what is intended to fulfill one of God's purposes and applying it to his own. This shift appears to occur via a bridge of sorts: some characteristic (perhaps different for each individual) which can easily change to serve a selfish purpose, effectively crossing over from well-intentioned to sinful. Satan's downfall is often said to be his pride, and it is easy to see how that could develop, and even possible to imagine that Satan was unaware of the change until the evil within him roared to life at the proclamation of Jesus' destiny. After God informed the Heavenly citizens of his plan for Christ, Milton describes the newly-christened Satan as "fraught / With envy against the Son of God, that day / Honor'd by his great Father, and proclaim'd / Messiah King anointed" (*Paradise Lost* 5: 661-664), and also says that Satan "could not bear / Through pride that sight, and thought himself impair'd" (*Paradise Lost* 5: 664-665). This reaction reveals not only envy, as the text explicitly states, but also disappointment, which seems many times too innocent an emotion to associate with the king of Hell. This disappointment appears to be the critical point in the transformation of Lucifer to Satan, the point which links these two very different personalities into one character.

One is bound to assume, if he or she uses the God of *Paradise Lost*, that Lucifer was created good, and operated as an agent of good in the periods before the chronological beginning of the epic (as far as chronology applies, at any rate), and only through an actual change of behavior does he become Satan. As Lucifer approaches this point of disappointment, his love of God and love of using his substantial abilities for God's purposes is mixing little by little with a certain satisfaction with himself, to the degree where he feels confident that he is the closest to being God's equal. When God introduces Jesus, that comforting scenario breaks down, and the

disappointment of the critical instant is a disappointment with the way God's plan has unfolded. This is not different from what many Christians experience in the midst of hardship, but it presents Lucifer with a choice to accept God's decision or resist it, and at this point evil is alive as a viable option. Lucifer could have repressed it, stifling evil's development, but he chooses to become Satan. This is obviously not spelled out in the poem, but it is only logical considering what one does know from the text and as the result of extra-literary reasoning. One knows God made all spiritual beings of the same, virtuous mindset, as he says (referring to the demons), "The first sort by thir [sic] own suggestion fell, / Self-tempted, self-deprav'd" (*Paradise Lost* 3: 129-130). Obviously all demons, including the king demon, must have been made pure in order for them to have a state from which to fall, and it was their own qualities (which must have been created as good qualities) which destroyed them. One also knows that Satan's first sin is one of pride, as he admits in his soliloquy that "Pride and worse Ambition threw me down" (*Paradise Lost* 4: 40). And third, one can tell that, with his Satanic conversion, Lucifer's love shifts focus from God to himself by a combination of passages, within the first of which God describes "Hellish hate" as being within "those who, when they may, accept not grace" (*Paradise Lost* 3: 300, 302), and the second of which being Satan's famous declaration: "So farewell Hope, and with Hope farewell Fear, / Farewell Remorse: all Good to me is lost; / Evil be thou my Good" (*Paradise Lost* 4: 108-110). If "Hellish hate," or hate of God, is refusing to repent and reconcile one's relationship with God, then Satan's final refusal reveals that hate. Though it would be natural to assume that the displaced love falls back to Satan himself, no such assumption is actually necessary, as Satan later claims, "For only in destroying I find ease / To my relentless thoughts" (*Paradise Lost* 9: 129-130), implying that his comfort is the motivation for his actions, and then, shortly after, his statement of his goal—"To mee [sic] shall be the glory sole"

(*Paradise Lost* 9: 135)—reveals that self-glorification drives his plans, which indicates self-worship. Taking these conditions as givens, one discovers the conclusion of the philosophy of *Paradise Lost* regarding evil's origin: that it arose from Lucifer's manipulation of what existed, having no original existence of its own. Resolving this, one might even conclude that this self-worship to which Satan succumbs is the only way which evil may arise, taking into account that, as God is the Creator of reality, reality's elements—Man in particular—must be designed for his purpose, or to obey his commands. Since good is God's product, the input, or motive, would presumably be positive as well. Whereas to worship God is to return his love, which is, according to the Christian Scriptures, achieved by obeying his commands, therefore the act of spurning God's will for one's own—the act of disobedience—must necessarily require a refusal to worship him, and an insistence upon following one's own desires would then be a manifestation of the self-worship similar to that to which Satan explicitly admits.

Satan makes an attempt to replicate this manipulation process in Eve when he makes the choice to spread evil to the human race, trusting that from there it will move on to infect Adam and any subsequent persons who may be born in the future. With Eve, Satan attacks reason, being careful to allow her first to admit that it is a gift from God. She tells him of its importance: “But of this Tree we may not taste nor touch; / God so commanded, and left that Command / Sole Daughter of his voice; the rest, we live / Law to ourselves, our Reason is our Law” (*Paradise Lost* 9: 651-654). She establishes her reason as being as valuable as the revelation which God grants her—using her reason is as important and as virtuous as refraining from eating of the forbidden fruit. Using her reason, therefore, is in obedience to God's command, which, according to Christianity, is the way humans show God love. Satan then convinces her that to search for knowledge, to feed the mind, is an exercise of that reason and cannot be a sin against

God. He asks, “will God incense his ire / For such a petty Trespass, and not praise / Rather your dauntless virtue” which would compel her toward “achieving what might lead / To happier life, knowledge of Good and Evil[?]” (*Paradise Lost* 9: 692-694, 696-697). He requests that she consider the reason God might prevent her from acquiring this new knowledge, phrasing the questions with a bias, of course: “Of good, how just? of evil, if what is evil / Be real, why not known, since easier shunn’d?” (*Paradise Lost* 9: 698-699). He makes her believe she has logically come to the point where to disobey would not be sin, which signals the distortion of the good within her. It really seems like Eve fails to see anything immoral about her meal of apple, as it is written that Satan’s words seemed to her “persuasive,” and “impregn’d / With Reason, to her seeming, and Truth” (*Paradise Lost* 9: 737, 737-738). Satan is not directly involved with the temptation of Adam, but Eve’s approach is to sully his pure emotions, as she exploits his love for her to convince him to sin. After she informs him of her action, he thinks to himself, “And mee [sic] with thee hath ruin’d, for with thee / Certain my resolution is to Die; / How can I live without thee” (*Paradise Lost* 9: 906-908). He even considers what steps God might take to preserve his personal paradise, but comes to believe that he could never recover from the pain of losing his first wife. Selflessness is without question a virtue—one for which Jesus receives extravagant praise in Book III (*Paradise Lost* 3: 272-417)—but its mutation into evil comes from the fact that Adam places higher priority on his relationship with Eve than his relationship with God. With the fall of Man, the failures of Adam and Eve, the entirety of the human mind—the combination of reason and emotion—is bent into an evil nature, and by the same forces which bend Lucifer’s reason before the beginning of time. The image of being a goddess-figure upon indulgence of the fruit seduces Eve into sin, while the self-worship which brings about evil arises in Adam through his desire to preserve the utopia after divine will has determined it lost, which

indicates that he senses within himself an inflated sense of nobility and power and seeks to exercise it.

To un-bend the evil back into good is a much more difficult process, as Michael's stories in Books XI and XII (and common experiences) show. This is not so illogical if one considers that God's definition of good is the true definition of good, as would be the expected view of a poem based on Christian theology. Consider this true good to be a flat geometric plane. This is an appropriate image, as in such a plane all points are purely configured in one alignment. There are an infinite number of ways to warp this plane into something not flat—not good—but only one way to re-transfigure it back to its original state. Similarly, if there is only one way to do good, then any other action would be one of an infinity of evil options. In other words, it is much easier to find an action that is evil than to find one that is good. Mathematically speaking, in fact, it would be impossible to choose one good option over an infinite quantity of evil ones, and in the case of the demons, God chooses to let the mathematics rule: he does not allow the fallen angels hope of salvation (*Paradise Lost* 3: 132). For Man, however, he offers “Love without end, and without measure Grace” (*Paradise Lost* 3: 142), which especially makes sense, as, to overrule the mathematical logic, a new infinity, something “without measure,” would have to be introduced. Despite the difficulty of finding it, however, there is mention of the idea that good can influence even the irredeemable, as demonstrated when Eve's purity leaves Satan “Stupidly good, of enmity disarm'd, / Of guile, of hate, of envy, of revenge” (*Paradise Lost* 9: 465-466), which implies a special power it holds over its opposition, which also is consistent with *Paradise Lost* and Christian theology, which always make clear the inevitable dominance of God over Satan. That power would seem to be the power to recall the origins, if only briefly, causing a blip-like moment of purity where no substantial purity still exists. For, like the

aforementioned flat plane, no distortion arises without a force to disrupt the stasis, but once that disruption occurs, these instants of frail equilibrium are the best result which can be achieved without the aid of the godly infinities of love and grace. In this way, both good and evil have power in certain circumstances to affect the other, making the essential conflict of humanity's plot the back-and-forth pulling of each soul between the two, with each side attempting to take advantage of the mutability of the other's state.

What enables such conflict is, of course, free will. God is adamant about allowing all his animate creations to make their own choices and decide for themselves to whom they will offer worship. It is his "high Degree / Unchangeable, Eternal" (*Paradise Lost* 3: 126-127), which serves the purpose, he claims, of ensuring that his followers are true: "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). The freedom to choose drives this conflict, gives good and evil their dynamic natures, allows the shift from one to the other, and even allowed evil to come about in the beginning, with the fall of Lucifer. Why God would create good is obvious; the trade-off of evil for free will (and therefore true fellowship) is the issue, and at the heart of the issue is the inevitable loss of souls to damnation, as some, even many, will surely choose to remain in the easy defiled state and therefore find evil to be the only conclusion of an existence which takes place in a universe created good. In an overall sense, however, the result of evil is ultimately good, according to Jesus, who, after predicting his death and victory over Death, states that he and his followers "Shall enter Heav'n," where "wrath shall be no more / Thenceforth, but in thy presence joy entire" (*Paradise Lost* 3: 261, 264-265). Evil will find itself contained in Hell, which is eternal death, by definition a non-existence, and all

that will remain in any sort of real arena will be the purified forgiven and the good which fills their eternities. The irony which so often characterizes the plans of divinity appears again, as the result of the Man's fall and his difficult journey through a fallen age will, in the end, be a perfect paradise regained and incorruptible, where the balance of present good and memory of evil protects the redeemed multitude from a relapse into sin and death. Good, it turns out, is both the original material and the final result, with evil being a derived mechanism to transport Man from the former to the latter.

Works Cited

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