

Clay Greene

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D. Ainsworth

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The Freedom of God and Man

The author considers the question in Paradise Lost of God's free will and justice as applied to the choices and experience of his creations and himself, clears his "justice and wisdom from all imputation," and establishes God as the seat of unities in the poem, whereby a full understanding of him can be the measure of all other aspects of the work.

Among the many peculiarities of Milton's God are the particular emphases on his freedom, or supernatural liberty, and on his perfection without support or adornment by later creation. In many writings, Milton established this absolute perfection of God in himself but just the same emphasized the importance of upholding his divine will and serving him as he would be served. In *Paradise Lost*, the extent of God's supernal perfection and unrestricted liberty shine through with startling brilliance, in analyses of the deity by other characters and in the meekly eternal voice of God himself. God's freedom, though, appears to have certain checks and bounds which he presumably decreed himself, specifically in the methods of his interactions with his creation. Other elements appear to be bound up in God's own self, incontrovertible and divine in dwelling eternal with the deity. God's justice, which one would assume is his own will, stands perpetually balanced with his other high decree, the freedom of his creations. These two elements, God's justice and his freedom, appear in some areas to contradict each other, from the mortal or fallen perspective, but analysis of his actions and designs reveals internal unity of his two great aspects. The creation and fall of man, like the creation of angels before it,

demonstrates again the coexistence of his two defining principles of justice and freedom. By allowing man, like angels, to share in his freedom, he must necessarily have them share in his justice as well, as these are the laws by which God exists himself and without which he would not be God.

One can observe God's justice and freedom in his punishment and restraint of the defeated rebel angel Satan. Expelled from the precipice of heaven, in Book I Satan has suffered and been made to recognize the justice of God in his own horrific punishment and that of his rebellious peers. Though he questions the fairness of God's punishment, he cannot now deny that God punishes the unfaithful, that his justice is exigent and all too real. Satan's punishment in "Adamantine Chains and penal Fire" is the natural result of his daring to "defy the Omnipotent to Arms" (*Paradise Lost* 1: 48-49). Satan's punishment and expulsion from heaven is an example of God's justice even he cannot ignore. He recognizes and registers each additional suffering which makes their eternal bereavement the deepest sorrow yet known in creation. Yet for all his dispense of justice, God cannot deny to any of his servants the equal gift of freedom, even to the apostate and corrupter of mankind. The narrator makes clear beyond question that Satan, where he lay chained on the lake of fire, would never "thence/had ris'n or heav'd his head, but that the will/and high permission of all-ruling Heaven/left him at large" (*Paradise Lost* 1: 210-213). Though simultaneously offering him eternal punishment, God refuses to deny him his free will, which he left indestructible beyond any restriction. God's two great principles—that disobedience necessitates destruction or suffering, and that created beings must be freely able to disobey—work in Satan's release from the lake of fire. Yet Satan's freedom will not distort the measure of eternal justice, as even his "dark designs" and "reiterated crimes" will only "heap on himself damnation" and further his punishment and illustrate the armed justice of God (*Paradise Lost* 1: 213-215). Even his attempts to corrupt mankind, though initially successful, will serve only "to bring forth infinite goodness, grace and mercy shown on Man," and "confusion, wrath and vengeance pour'd" upon

himself (*Paradise Lost* 1: 218-220). Satan, though free, cannot interrupt or otherwise destroy the immortal justice of God, as in his foresight and wisdom he has arranged for the survival of justice after the angels' fall.

Next can be seen the principles of divine existence in the words of the Father himself. In Book 3, God lays out clearly his plan for the redemption of man and the thwarting of Satan's attempts at man's corruption. First establishing that God observes "past, present, future" from his seat on high, the narrator makes clear God's vision is not limited to a single moment of time but each moment with equal clarity (*Paradise Lost* 3: 77). This statement along with God's later claims to future vision suggest something like perfect or at least supremely advanced foreknowledge. Yet as God continues to clarify in his coming speech, his foreknowledge never interferes with the decisions and destinies of mortals. His existence outside, thus unaffected, time seems certain. Only his justice manifests itself in creation, which does not determine mortal choices but only rewards or punishes them. God preemptively answers questions of Adam and Eve being 'designed to fail' by stating that he created man "sufficient to have stood, though free to fall" (*Paradise Lost* 3: 99). Clearly, the distinction between the fallen and the unfallen is not basic compositional faultiness but the difference of choice, or free will. Mankind are "Authors to themselves in all/both what they judge and what they choose" (*Paradise Lost* 3: 122-123). Though actions, thoughts, or dreams may seem derived from God, all that man considers on his own belongs solely to his own mind or other human minds. The "high Decree/unchangeable" of God occurred long before the individual decrees of mankind, which never endanger or dispel the eternal word of God (*Paradise Lost* 3: 126). That word, that divine commandment, "which ordain'd/their freedom" suffers nothing at the hands of men, nor can every truly be revoked (*Paradise Lost* 3: 127-128). Like his justice, the immutability of God's freedom, shared with humanity, cannot be separated from the reality extent in the created universe. To revoke it, as to revoke justice, would subvert the

nature of creation and creator both, a logical impossibility which presumably even God could not do. God's complicity in the Fall, at least from his own perspective, appears nonexistent. Speer writes in "Blindsided: Finding the Good in *Paradise Lost*":

He [God] establishes that Reason becomes a pointless attribute if he ordained how it is used. Reason acts as the conduit of choice for humanity and without freedom it's a passive and arbitrary quality. God may possess a perfect, omniscient understanding, but he did not declare a revolt, nor did he condone its occurrence; foreknowledge does not place God at fault for human desire. (Speer 2)

The revolt of humanity against the creator appears wholly emerged from humanity's mind, as Sin from the mind of Satan. To doubt this is to doubt the word of God, and in turn to doubt the narrator's claims that God is omniscient and views all time and space at a single glance. Doubts of this kind lead circularly around the question of whose authority should be trusted in the poem: if not God's alone, then surely God's when he is confirmed by the narrator to possess all those qualities of prescience and exclusion from time which he claims. The question of God's need to justify himself will be analyzed in a later paragraph.

To better understand the nature of divine justice it may be useful to consider pre-fallen conditions of the human characters, Adam and Eve. Morgan writes in "Prisoners of Fate: Man's Sudden but Inevitable Betrayal of God's Instruction" that:

Just as Eve was created from Adam, Adam's fall is "created", in part, from Eve's actions. This is where one can blatantly see that God, by neglecting to create Eve with prevention of the Fall in mind, has doomed Adam as well. Because of Adam's preordained love for Eve, he has no choice but to eat the fruit and remain with her. (Morgan 5)

This argument fails to convince in several key ways. First, evidence that the love of Adam for Eve is at

all “preordained” is at best subterranean but almost certainly absent entirely. God mentions nothing about the love of Eve as cause for the fall in any of his prophetic speeches. Indeed, he makes no distinction at all between the woman and the man on a level of free will or choice to abstain from sin. Further, though the creation of Eve was apparently in accordance with God's design, the idea begins independently with Adam who requests it. A similar distinction of choice and God's design will follow in the paragraph on the Son's choice to redeem humanity. Thirdly, it seems quite clear that Adam's choice to follow Eve in sin is exactly that. “Certain my resolution is to die” he monologues, indicating that it is his resolution, as it was Satan's to rebel, and no imposition of God to join his mate in sin (*Paradise Lost* 9: 907). Morgan's claim rebutted, now arises the question of what precisely is the unfallen state. The fruit appears to have a physical effect on the world of nature which “gave a second groan” and has also an intoxicating affect on the couple (*Paradise Lost* 9: 1001). Yet the tree, called of knowledge of good and evil, does not actually impart knowledge as the reports and speculations of Raphael or the destinies of Michael impart knowledge. Adam's strange objection to Raphael's speech about human to angelic ascension provides a clue of how exactly the two are ignorant. Adam in confusion asks “what meant that caution join'd, *if ye be found / obedient?*” (*Paradise Lost* 5: 511-512). Adam, though supposedly superior to Eve in wisdom, does not understand the concept of disobedience. This, then, is the revelation of eating the fruit: the revelation of disobedience. He has not yet received the story of the war in heaven but moreover he has no conception of himself separate from God's intention or justice. He rightly assays his free will to be the edict of God, but has difficulty parsing as Raphael explains how “good he made thee, but to persevere / he left in thy own power, ordain'd by will” (*Paradise Lost* 5: 525-526). The gap in Adam's knowledge is the knowledge of sin and a definition of the self separate from God. It does not take a theologian to see that as presented in the poem this knowledge is not worthwhile, indeed only a self-deception whereby one would, as Satan does

to Abdiel, deny the operation of God in one's creation and exaltation.

God's justice and freedom, if they had been obscured before, become clearer following the Fall. Though Adam attempts to indict Eve, and Eve the serpent, for the fact of their Fall, neither dare to blame the eternal Father, as his advisement and requirement left no room for doubt. Though endeavoring to repent his sin, Adam acknowledges that “prayer against his absolute Decree/no more avails than breath against the wind” (*Paradise Lost* 11: 311-312). God promised death to whomever ate the fruit, symptom of his justice, and Adam understands that God will not relinquish that punishment, even for a beloved son. God's Decree of justice, as of freedom described in Book 3, shall never be revoked, even by himself. Ascending into the “Visions of God” Adam and the archangel Michael rise to view the destinies of men, presumably as divinely foreseen (*Paradise Lost* 11: 376). With various rituals to clear his sight, Michael returns Adam to the unperverted physical vision which he possessed before the Fall. The visions then, though not his interpretation, must be seen as accurate to the eye of God, otherwise the anointing rituals served no useful purpose and the claim of their ascending to the Visions of God is meaningless. Michael explains that though Adam himself did not steal from the tree, the results of his crime have spawned “corruption to bring forth more violent deeds” (*Paradise Lost* 11: 428). Much like Satan's free will would lead to further damnations of his own self, so will the sons of Adam be free to sin more and increase the sorrow and punishment of mankind. In this way, justice and freedom conspire to increase the torment of mankind until the time of the Nativity. The horrible diseases described in Michael's speech on death confirm that as the sins of men are various, so will the punishments for sin be equally various. “If thou well observe the rule of not too much” Michael explains, “seeking from thence/due nourishment, not gluttonous delight,” then man will spared of these afflictions—or rather, not spared but neither chosen by himself (*Paradise Lost* 11: 530, 533). In this single description of temperance, Michael has outlined the coexistence of justice and freedom: by

abstaining from the sin of gluttony, man can avoid the punishment of gluttony, neither undeserved or unforeseeable.

God's justice and freedom appear to be coeternal with himself, his guides through the process of creation, and the laws by which all things in the created universe must operate. Neither can exist without the other. Without free will, justice would be tyrannical and cruel. Lacking justice, freedom would create a world of unresolved particulates floating in an unconstructed void, like Chaos. To blame God for the Fall is to accuse one or the other of these essential properties to exist without the other. God could not suspend his justice to allow unrestricted freedom to go unpunished, just as he could not restrain freedom to his will to serve his universal justice, in which act he would forsake his claim to justice itself. As the Son describes, God himself is not free to disrupt his divine justice, explaining that if the creator allowed his adversary to destroy his entire creation, God would forsake justice and “be question'd and blasphem'd without defense” (*Paradise Lost* 3: 166). God responds quickly that the Son's check on his eternal justice concurs with his own opinion on the Fall of man and with the justice that his “Eternal purpose hath decreed” (*Paradise Lost* 3: 172). Mercy might be long familiar to God, but mercy does not come at the expense of just punishment for the sins of man. The scales of justice still must be balanced. A sacrifice must be offered, “death for death” (*Paradise Lost* 3: 212). God's mercy, his desire to spare man from the eternal damnation required of the reprobate spirits, cannot supersede the necessities of divine retribution. Still, as Speer explains “God’s judgment acts as the leveling force which reveals evil’s place in relation to good” (Speer 10). God's justice, manifested in his wrath, must be directed at someone, even his only Son. “On me let thine anger fall,” the Son pleads, knowing that justice must be filled and that justice too will not abandon him “in the loathsome grave” (*Paradise Lost* 3: 237, 247). The Son, being next to God in wisdom though presumably not prescient, understands the intricacies of justice by which God must and will abide. Further, it is the free choice of

the Son which fulfills the justice of God, demonstrating once more that the two are far from mutually exclusive.

These points established, a question rises about God's justification of himself as presented in Book 3: why does an omniscient being, in whom justice and freedom compound to the utmost degree, need to justify himself at all? One can understand God's need to justify himself in at least one way that does not impugn his justice or his wisdom. First, it is useful to consider the word 'condescend' in the definition it developed beginning in the middle 15th century, being "to sink willingly to equal terms with inferiors." In a liberal society, the presupposition of inferiority is considered insulting and debasing to the supposedly inferior class. In a hierarchical one, a condescending aristocrat is one who regards it worth his time to converse with his lessers and his vassals in their own language. Milton's heaven, however liberally free, operates in accordance with strictly hierarchal principles. Though "Orders and Degrees / jar not with liberty, but well consist," as Satan explains, the distinction between greater and lesser creature in heaven is absolute to the extent that Satan's betrayal of this hierarchy is the cause and matter of his fall (*Paradise Lost* 5: 792-793). Further, as between human and angel, the distinction between archangel and angel must be considered "degree" rather than "kind." Despite this, the distinction between God and angel certainly consists in "kind" and not "degree." Indeed, considering Milton's antitrinitarianism—here enter millennia of religious controversies—the distinction between God and Son could be considered one of "kind" as well. Recall that at the moment of their Book 3 conversation in heaven, the Son is 'incarnate' just as he would in Judah later, but incarnate not as man but as angel. God has appointed him the "head" of all the angels in heaven (*Paradise Lost* 5: 606). God condescends to converse for the benefit of the Son and the angelic choir, just as he condescends to Adam and explains that he knows none "second to mee or like, equal much less," further that all are inferior by "infinite descents" (*Paradise Lost* 8: 406-409). The idea therefore that

God would have reason to justify anything to himself is profoundly ludicrous; that he might condescend to justify and even defend himself seems certain but in no way casts doubt on his otherworldly perfection and supreme justice.

Like Adam himself, after completing *Paradise Lost*, the reader may be inclined to blame some other character for the Fall, be it Satan, Eve, uxorious Adam, careless Uriel, or a cruel and manipulative deity. Following facts established about God, listening to his own words and designs, and observing those designs carried through in the aftermath of the fall, the innocence of the deity in the Fall appears certain. Should his innocence in this respect be questioned, the basic reality of the poem would decohere, the reality established by God's presence, expressed in his two aspects of justice and freedom. If he failed to enforce both freedom and justice, God may be wholly blamed for complicity in the Fall, as even the Son himself observes. As the poem stands, these twin aspects define God's existence and the powers of truth and reality in the text itself. The unities of good—which compose of will, justice, and their attendant qualities, including reason—find ultimate and inseparable expression in the divine person of God. His will must be understood as justice, and his decree of freedom is an example of his justice. Without either, the narrator's basic premise fails, as do the actions of all principal characters if understood in relation to a good and great deity. Justice and freedom permeate the actions of all trustworthy characters in the poem. The coexistence of perfectly good qualities in the divine person are part and parcel of the poet's theodicy. God's justice and his freedom are the bedrock of the poem's moral justification and are the two principles by which Milton here to his own satisfaction “justifies the ways of God to Men.”