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Eve: “Defective by Design” or Disobedient by Decision?

The lofty goals of John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* are announced in the first book of the epic poem: to “assert eternal providence, and justify the ways of God to men” (*Paradise Lost* 1: 25-6). In accordance with the Biblical narrative, Milton portrays Eve as the first to break God’s commandment against eating the fruit of the tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, and then offering it to Adam. This has caused many readers to place the entirety of the blame for the Fall of humanity on women, personified in the character Eve. Furthermore, some might argue that Eve was made inherently flawed and destined to fail in her obedience. However, though Eve was created to be subordinate to Adam’s authority, she was not created fundamentally defective. In Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, the character of Eve is created perfect, but with God-given free will that she exercises poorly leading to the Fall.

The very first description of Adam and Eve in *Paradise Lost* highlights their physical characteristics and shows that God created them to be perfect. Milton says “in their looks divine / The image of their glorious maker shone” (*Paradise Lost* 4: 291-2). The subjects and pronouns he uses are plural, referring to both Adam and Eve. Both of them are made before the fall and before sin enters the world. They both possess “truth, wisdom [and] sanctitude severe and pure” (*Paradise Lost* 4: 293). However, Milton quickly points out that the members of the pair are not equal. Adam, he notes, is made “for contemplation and valour,” but Eve was made “for softness

and sweet attractive grace” (*Paradise Lost* 4: 297-8). Though Adam and Eve are created for different purposes and to fulfill different, complementary roles, they are both made perfect, *Imago Dei*, and with “spotless innocence” (*Paradise Lost* 4: 318). They are content in their marriage, “linked in happy nuptial league” (*Paradise Lost* 4: 339). Even Satan comments on their happiness and recognizes that “divine resemblance” radiates in them (*Paradise Lost* 4: 364). Their marriage is pleasing to God and its flawlessness is apparent even to other spiritual beings. This shows that before the Fall, both Adam’s and Eve’s behavior is a model of perfection.

Proponents of Eve’s “defective by design” condition point to her vanity and early descriptions of her behavior as evidence for her inherent flaws. However, Eve’s admiration of herself, though prideful, does not necessarily point to impending sin. When Eve first comes to consciousness, she “wonder[s] where / And what [she is]” (*Paradise Lost* 4: 451-2). Finding herself alone and newly created, she has only “unexperienced thought” to guide her (*Paradise Lost* 4: 457). Without any type of instruction from God her creator or another human, how can she be expected to know what is expected of her behavior, or even to look for another being in the garden? When she does receive instruction, she is obedient and compliant. The voice of God calls out to her and she acquiesces to his directions: “What could I do,” Eve asks, “But follow straight, invisibly thus led?” (*Paradise Lost* 4: 475-6). She unquestioningly follows God’s voice and does not attempt to resist his commands, showing that she is originally without defiance. When Adam’s “gentle hand” takes hers and effectively makes her his wife, Eve says that she “yielded, and from that time see[s] / How beauty is excelled by manly grace” (*Paradise Lost* 4: 488-90). Eve submits to Adam’s authority and does not display insubordination or waywardness.

This shows that Eve, though proud, is not so vain that she rejects authority. Instead, she acts according to her design as Adam's "help-meet."

Eve accepts Adam's authority because she was made expressly for him by God. After Adam asks for someone to share his life with, God proclaims that his next gift to Adam will "please" him, and she will be Adam's "likeness, [his] fit help" and "other self" (*Paradise Lost* 8: 449-50). Indeed, she will be Adam's "wish exactly to [his] heart's desire" (*Paradise Lost* 8: 451). Eve is created to be the perfect help-meet for Adam, precisely the ideal mate and helper. Adam says that God is "giver of all things fair" (*Paradise Lost* 8: 493). How could a benign, loving God give his beloved creation something flawed? Though Eve is made according to Adam's personal desires, she is still made by God with specific traits to benefit their marriage relationship. Eve was made specifically for the fulfillment of *Adam's* desires. Because Adam was without fault before disobeying God by eating the fruit, it stands to reason that his desires would also be pure. Adam's entire socialization prior to Eve's birth is direct communion with God, which would give him the most perfect model of relationship possible.

It is not that Milton's God gave Adam an imperfect gift, but rather that He gave Adam a rational being capable of exercising free will. Raphael reminds Adam and Eve in his visit that God made them faultless, but not unchangeable. He specifically tells Adam: "God made thee perfect, not immutable; / And good he made thee, but to persevere / He left it in thy power" (*Paradise Lost* 5: 524-526). Though Adam and Eve were created originally pure and blameless, they must continue to work to remain that way. Milton's use of the word "persevere" through Raphael implies that their actions must be deliberate and persistent, even in the face of adversity. Indeed, Eve will face their greatest adversary, Satan, and her ability to exercise her will, "by

nature free, not over-ruled by fate” is what allows her to make a wrong decision (*Paradise Lost* 5: 527).

In his essay “Blindsided: Finding the Good in *Paradise Lost*,” Johnathan Speer also explores the dynamic of good and evil as it pertains to free will. He also asserts that God gave his creations free will, as well as the ability to reason. This Reason God provides, he writes, is supposed to “guide them to his benevolence as the ultimate choice” (Speer, 3). Because God allows his creations to make their own choices, his creations “can choose to distort the good to suit [their] own blind ambition” (Speer, 11). This is what happens to Eve as a result of exercising her ability to choose. Though she was capable of exercising reason, her choice “distorted” God’s perfect plan for humanity and led to the Fall.

When Satan indwelling a serpent’s body confronts Eve in the garden, she comes to a choice to eat the fruit of her own reasoning process rather than a predestined flaw that fated her to disobedience. Eve has already displayed her reasoning skills in her conversations with Adam. She knows they have a lot of work to do in the garden, and logically suggests that they “divide [their] labours” to work efficiently (*Paradise Lost* 9: 214). Eve also makes the same argument that Milton makes in *Areopagitica* regarding licensing laws and allowing people to make their own choices—that “faith, love, and virtue unassayed” lose their value (*Paradise Lost* 9: 335). Her reasoning skills are a part of her God-given free will that God establishes, placing “no limits on their desires or motivations” (Speer, 9).

Just because she has the ability to reason does not mean that Eve always comes to the best conclusion or adheres to God’s “right reason” that brings “true liberty” (*Paradise Lost* 12: 83-84). Eve knows full well the singular restriction she and Adam must abide by in Eden. In the very first conversation Milton provides between them, Adam reminds Eve that she “well know’st

/ God hath pronounced it death to taste that tree” that is called the Tree of Knowledge (*Paradise Lost* 4: 426-427). Clearly she has previous understanding of God’s rule, and then is reminded again by an angelic messenger. Both Adam and Eve “the story heard attentive” when Raphael reminds them “not to touch the interdicted tree” (*Paradise Lost* 7: 51, 46). Eve even tells the serpent that she “may not taste or touch; / God so commanded” (*Paradise Lost* 9: 650-651). Milton makes it clear that Eve knows the only prohibition in the garden both from repeated reminders and is able to recall this fact when first presented with the tree. Because Eve clearly understands God’s restriction, it is not due to fated ignorance that she eats the fruit when offered by Satan, but rather by a choice informed by deception.

Speer writes that God establishes Reason and choice to “clear him [God] of imputation in the existence of evil in spite of his foreknowledge” (Speer, 2). Furthermore, according to Speer, Satan’s evil comes from a distortion of good that can “illuminate the path to God” (1). Though God knew before he even created humans that they would eventually be disobedient, his awareness did not mean that he *caused* their Fall. Eve’s choice to eat the fruit when offered by Satan does not stem from an inherent flaw created in her by God, but freely-made choice God allows to happen for the greater good. The very “enemy of mankind,”—Satan—deceives her (*Paradise Lost* 9: 494). Throughout her time in Eden, Eve has lived without anxiety and has no reason to fear any creature in the garden. If Satan, formerly Lucifer, was able to convince a third of the heavenly host to join him in rebellion against the Almighty God, how could Eve be expected to withstand the kind of guile and trickery employed against her, an inexperienced human? Milton writes that Satan in the form of the serpent flatters her, and “into the heart of Eve his words made way” (*Paradise Lost* 9: 550). However, Milton writes that Eve is “yet sinless” even after she listens to the serpent’s words and before she has eaten the fruit (*Paradise Lost* 9:

659). Satan continues to give her motivation to experience the fruit, including trying to reason with her. He makes a justification that if evil is real, it must be “known” to be “easier shunned” (*Paradise Lost* 9: 699). In addition, he declares that “God cannot hurt [her], and be just” (*Paradise Lost* 9: 700). Satan tries to convince her to yield to his temptation using logic, but it is not the “right reason” that comes from God, but rather a diabolical perversion of reason that causes Eve to sin.

Even with the temptation and deceitfulness of Satan through the serpent, it is Eve who makes the final decision to disobey God. She does so by exercising her free will, which allows her to make choices independent of fate and destiny. Satan’s “words, replete with guile” enter her heart (*Paradise Lost* 9: 733). She allows the “persuasive words” of the tempter to ring in her ears, which she finds “impregnated / with reason...and with truth” (*Paradise Lost* 9: 737-8). Because she has never heard someone distort God’s “right reason,” the words of Satan seem truthful and logical, trusting this creature that seems to display higher cognitive powers than other animals. Eve then contemplates the fruit, and notes that God’s “forbidding / commends [it] more” (*Paradise Lost* 9: 753-4). Just because it is forbidden to her, she finds that the fruit is all the more alluring. She also begins to use the same logic Satan presents—that God outlaws eating the fruit as a way to keep them ignorant of His ways. She decides, quite clearly, that she will eat the fruit, which she sees as “the cure of all” and a “fruit divine” (*Paradise Lost* 9: 776). However, Eve bases her logic and reasoning on the words of the serpent, who she erroneously believes to be “far from deceit or guile” (*Paradise Lost* 9: 772). She ultimately decides that she has no reason not to taste the fruit—apparently rejecting all that she has previously understood about God’s decree against that particular tree. Her “rash hand” plucks the fruit and eats, which leads to immediate cosmic ramifications for the whole earth (*Paradise Lost* 9: 780). Milton’s

description of her hand as “rash” suggests that she throws out rationalization and consideration, and acts impulsively without regard for lasting consequences. However, she still makes this choice for herself, as an implementation of her God-given free will, without being inherently flawed from her creation. She herself made the choice to eat the fruit after a rational reasoning process. Of course, her thought process was informed by Satan and his trickery, but those events occurred after her creation, when she was originally made pure.

Eve ultimately is disobedient to God and breaks His commandment not to touch or eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. She comes to this decision, however, based on a process of reasoning and rationale provided by Satan. Her analysis and logic demonstrate that she is not ignorant. Though she might have been made to submit to Adam’s authority and in accordance with Adam’s desires, she was made perfect by God and without blame from the beginning. Indeed, Eve was not “defective by design,” but instead deliberately chose her disobedience.