

Reed Gossard

EN 335

Doctor Ainsworth

4th April, 2018

Paradise Lost: Definitions

Satan, the main antagonist of *Paradise Lost*, though presented as equal in power to the Archangels Gabriel, Raphael, and Michael, is radically different from his celestial brethren in how he views obedience to God. While the Archangels choose to serve God, and take the opinion that Satan is sinfully and sinisterly rebellious to Him, Satan considers his stance to be remarkably separate from the obvious binary of “good” versus “evil”. Focusing heavily on the nature and mechanisms of free will in his separate dialogues with each respective Archangel and other characters in the poem, Satan’s individual-centered, independent language marks him as his own moral agent. In doing so, Satan poses questions on good and evil that have massive implications on the theme of *Paradise Lost*.

Satan’s fall is not the main focus of *Paradise Lost*; rather, Milton writes an epic poem focused on Satan’s actions after his fall into Hell, specifically his ultimate revenge against God in introducing original sin into the world. However, the opinions of the Archangels on Satan’s fall are *heavily* relevant to the story. The entirety of Book VI alone is Raphael’s account of Satan’s revolt to Adam, to serve as a warning of man’s impending temptation at the hands of Satan. In this account, the battle between Michael and Satan is presented. The two foes engage in a dialogue; in their language, their markedly different philosophies are portrayed to the reader in poetic fashion.

Michael begins his address to Satan, “Author of evil, unknown till thy revolt / Unnam’d in Heaven... / ... how hast thou disturb’d / Heav’n’s blessed peace, and into Nature brought / Misery, uncreated till the crime / Of thy Rebellion?” (*Paradise Lost* 6: 261-262, 266-269).

Michael uses dramatic, pejorative language to communicate his disgust; he views Satan as a disturbance to “Heav’n’s blessed peace” while identifying Satan’s authorhood of evil with the misery of Satan’s rebellion. Satan is clearly viewed by Michael as a kind of disease or malignant force that needs to be pruned from Heaven; towards the end of the address he states, “Ere this avenging Sword begin thy doom, / Or some sudden vengeance wing’d from God / Precipitate thee with augmented pain” (*Paradise Lost* 6: 278-280). Here it can be seen that Michael ostracizes Satan because of his disobedience to God; Michael’s obedience to God and his service to Heaven marks him as different from Satan, who is seen as no longer part of the Heavenly fold. Michael, in distinguishing his sword but not himself, then referring to himself as Gods winged vengeance, appears to draw a parallel: he is to God as his sword is to him: an object to be used as its master pleases.

Satan’s response reflects upon Michael’s self-objectification as God’s tool, but it also marks a significant difference in how he and Michael regard each other. While Michael views himself as a part of a greater whole, and thus does not speak for himself personally, but rather for Heaven, Satan outright addresses the Archangel: “Or turn this Heav’n itself into the Hell thou fablest...” (*Paradise Lost* 6: 291-292). Satan acknowledges what Michael will not by directly addressing Michael; that both he and Michael are separate from God. In this line, by using the phrase “thou fablest”, Satan brings to the attention of Michael, through word choice, that he subscribes to a more personal philosophy than Michael. He is trying to force Michael to think from Michael’s point of view, rather than God’s point of view. He does this often; he says, “...

err not that so shall end / The strife which thou call'st evil, but wee style / The strife of Glory: which we mean to win" (*Paradise Lost* 6: 289-291). Here Satan subtly brings to the attention of both Michael and the reader the simple idea of a difference in opinion with God. Michael, in his outward, reflective language speaks from God's morality; Satan, in recognizing his own opinion, declares himself his own moral agent. Although this may seem small, it is the undercurrent that gives Satan's cause legitimate weight in *Paradise Lost*.

Satan, because his cause is internally and not externally compelling, differs on the opinion of his punishment in Hell from the Archangel Gabriel in Book IV and continues to push the idea that he is his own moral agent, separate from God's will. In Book IV, Milton writes of Satan's first excursion and temptation of Eve into the Garden of Eden; it serves as the basis for Raphael's warning in Books V-VI.

Upon his capture by subordinate angels, Satan is brought before Gabriel; much like Michael at Satan's Rebellion, Gabriel addresses Satan scornfully: "Why hast thou, *Satan*, broke the bounds prescrib'd / To thy transgressions, and disturb'd the charge / Of others who.../... question thy bold entrance on this place" (*Paradise Lost* 4: 878-880, 882). Again, Satan is ostracized; he does not belong in any sphere but the Hell proscribed to him by God. Perhaps the most interesting device in Gabriel's initial address here is Milton's choice to not explicitly qualify whom exactly Satan transgressed. Gabriel's language employed here implicitly states that Satan has transgressed God, certainly, but Gabriel's failure to identify himself as one who was transgressed mirrors Michael's view of himself as God's vengeance. Gabriel lacks original thought it seems; Satan is evil merely because God said so.

Satan's response highlights this theme; he accuses Gabriel of being unreasonable, because Gabriel does not consider moral viewpoints other than God's own: "To thee no reason;

who know'st only good, / But evil thou hast not tri'd: and wilt object / His will who bound us?" (*Paradise Lost* 4: 895-897). Satan is laughing in the face of Gabriel; he is asking Gabriel to deny God's supreme will, since it was God's supreme will that he stay in Hell, which he knows Gabriel will not. Satan strips Gabriel of reason, again in a direct address similar to the way he addressed Michael, in order to attempt to show Gabriel that he himself is capable of thought but chooses instead to be a servant of God.

Furthermore, Satan accuses Gabriel of being weak for his allegiance to God: "What thou and thy gay Legions dare against; / Whose easier business were to serve thir Lord / High up in Heav'n, with songs to hymn his throne, / And practis'd distances to cringe, not fight" (*Paradise Lost* 4: 942-944). He baits Gabriel; by calling him a coward to a greater power, Satan is attempting to force Gabriel to admit his weak servile attitude. The word choice by Milton here is important; words such as "dare", "easier" and "cringe" paint a portrait of Gabriel taking the easy way out. Gabriel fully agrees; he responds "Was this your discipline and faith ingag'd, / Your military obedience, to dissolve / Allegiance to th' acknowledg'd Power supreme?" (*Paradise Lost* 4: 954-956). "Acknowledg'd" is the hinge word; Gabriel assumes that God is the one true power. His service to God is revealed as contingent upon God's power over him; Satan's word play craftily broaches the subject of implicit threat of God's power not from his mouth, but from the mouth of one who serves God.

This topic of free will in the face of God's supremacy is explored many times in Milton's epic, and Satan is not the only character to reflect upon it. In his warning to Adam in Book V, Raphael speaks to Adam of his own free will: "Our voluntary service he requires, / ... To love or not; in this we stand or fall: / And some are fall'n, to disobedience fall'n, / ... From what high state of bliss into what woe!" (*Paradise Lost* 5: 529, 541, 543). The repetition of the pejorative

word “fall” and “fall’n” reveals that, obviously, Raphael and his brethren prefer their state of grace; but it also begs the question as to whether or not they have actual free will. Since Raphael holds that goodness is only tenable due to his obedience to God, he opens the door for deeper questioning into the actual nature of good and evil in respect to free will in a God dependent world.

This binary thought of good and evil by the Archangels begs the question as to whether or not God created evil in the first place, as he is the grand architect of all Creation in *Paradise Lost*. In his paper “On Bending”, Jeff Davis ascertains that this is not the case; “...if such a mix of perfect God and imperfect creation were attempted, the philosophy of the poem would crumble into insignificance” (Davis 2). This is valid, but it is valid only if the reader falls prey to the idea that evil is strictly disobedience to God. Davis himself champions this view of Satan as evil; he writes, “*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” (Davis 2). The “it” Davis refers to is virtue; he is claiming that to be un-virtuous, or to be disobedient towards God’s intention for Creation, is to be evil, a point laid out in his thesis, “...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” (Davis 1). Evil then, is not a creation of Satan or God, but rather a negative, binary lack of good as God defines it.

What Davis, and the Archangels, are actually reinforcing by following this logic is the idea that free will cannot exist in a universe where the binary of good and evil is defined by an omnipotent God. Davis unknowingly outlines this lack of free will under this binary in his closing statement, “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” (Davis 8) the “final

result” being a reference to Christ’s Death and Resurrection. He is making the claim that evil is a necessity, which therefore marks Satan as the necessary evil to God’s good, for the betterment of mankind.

The reason this argument falls apart in *Paradise Lost* is that Satan does not distinguish himself as God’s counterpart. Satan’s aim, superficially, is to overthrow God; however, on a deeper level, his goal is to gain equality with God. He does not manipulate God’s creation and thus create evil, as Davis claims, out of his own selfishness (Davis 3); Satan attempts to break the system that God has in place, and thus establish sovereignty for himself. Satan sees free will as something that needs to be earned independently and not granted from God; he states, “... and the fixt Laws of Heav’n, / Did first create your Leader, next, free choice / With what besides, in Counsel or in Fight, / Hath been achieved of merit” (*Paradise Lost* 2: 18-21). Satan views free will as completely separate from God; he is not part of a binary with God in good and evil, because his rationality drives him to believe that “good” and “evil” are concepts that are not dependent on God. He has earned free will by disobedience to God, but he does not view this disobedience as evil by his standards, because to do so would be to acknowledge God’s power over the definitions of good and evil, and thus follow the rationale deployed by Davis and the Archangels: that true virtue is dependent upon God and not the self.

Satan lays claim to freedom because he is *not* dependent on God and God’s definitions. He is different because he questions what Raphael will not; whether or not he is actually possessing free will. In Hell, he claims that, “...Here at least / We shall be free... / Here we may reign secure, and in my choice / To reign is worth ambition though in Hell: / Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heaven” (*Paradise Lost* 1: 258-259, 261-263). The power of the words “in my choice”, although lost upon the inattentive reader, can be felt throughout the entirety of

Paradise Lost; in choosing freely to defy God, Satan breaks free from the chains of binary servility that the Archangels suffer and posits that he, reigning in Hell, is possessive of *actual*, non-binary free will. In effect, Satan is free because he determines what qualifies as “goodness” and a “fallen state”, rather than depending on a higher God to determine it for him. Satan’s language is so inwardly reflective and un-contemplating of the consequences of disobedience that he separates himself from the Archangels and is shown to claim power of definition for his own self.

Satan displays this rugged devotion to an individual, rather than an external, definition of what it is to be virtuous in his persuasion of Eve to eat the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in Book 9. “The Gods are first, and that advantage use / On our belief, that all from them proceeds; / I question it...” (*Paradise Lost* 9: 718-720). Satan exposes his view that God defines good and evil to God’s advantage, then proceeds to question God’s seemingly sole power to define. Satan then begs the question to Eve, “...wherein lies / Th’ offense, that Man should thus attain to know? / What can your knowledge hurt him, or this Tree, / Impart against his will if all be his?” (*Paradise Lost* 9: 725-728). Satan is trying to lead Eve to the same realization he came to when he originally rebelled against God; that having individual thought, devoid of God-dependent definitions, is where one gains true free will. Satan is teasing both Eve and the reader with the idea that free will is found in the ability to both know and define, rather than blindly subscribe to the definitions of God. This is the breakdown of the binary; rather than setting one’s self against God and falling prey to a limited free will dependent on God’s power, which results in the binary of God-centered good and a disobediently centered evil, recognition that one can define what is good and evil for themselves separate from God does not set one against God, but on an equal plane with God in *Paradise Lost*.

Interestingly enough, God's descriptions of Satan are devoid of the good and evil binary. Satan himself is so enraptured with breaking, and therefore acknowledge that Satan has broken this binary. Jared Powell, in "The Language of the Spirit: An Analysis on Divine Diction in *Paradise Lost*" points to the fact that God's descriptions of Satan lead to important questions regarding the theme of *Paradise Lost*. Powell writes, "When one does analyze God's words about Satan, it is apparent that some key words that one assumes might be used are missing from the discussion, primarily the word 'evil'" (Powell 3). Powell, later, ruminates on the questions this lack of identification of Satan as evil by God bring forth, primarily, "If God does not explicitly state that Satan is evil, then does that make him not evil? Satan is certainly guilty of great sin (since sin is often literally defined as any action against God), but does that mean he is evil because of his sin?" (Powell 5). These questions are important because they lead the reader of *Paradise Lost* to the realization that God cannot define Satan in the good and evil binary because Satan is *not part of* the good and evil binary. Satan does not thirst to be good or evil; he thirsts for sovereignty, and in doing so is disobedient to God.

In Book 10, Sin and Death discuss the "empire" that their father, Satan left them. Death remarks, "To mee, who with eternal Famine pine, / Alike is Hell, or Paradise, or Heaven, / There best, where I most with ravin may meet" (*Paradise Lost* 10: 597-599). Death is discussing his hunger to kill; however, this logic is directly from Satan himself, who in Book 1 states, "The mind is its own place, and in itself / Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n" (*Paradise Lost* 1: 254-255). Satan does not desire for ruin; his philosophy merely breeds ruin in a God-centric world. Satan is sovereign because he does not operate as good or evil; he freely chooses his own actions and desires regardless of God's definitions, and thus is stripped from the yoke of servitude that the rest of Creation is under in *Paradise Lost*.

This is Satan's ultimate goal, to argue for the agency of God's Creation, free from God's definitions. Throughout his dialogues with Gabriel and Michael, his language teases and tempts both the Archangels and the reader with the idea of non-binary thought as to good and evil, right and wrong. Through his dialogue with Michael, Satan reveals his idea of individual thought, which Michael does not seem to possess; in his dialogue with Gabriel, Satan ascertains that it is reason, perpetrated from the individual, not God, that gives one power. Raphael's claims to free will only further cement in Book V what Satan so eloquently states in Book I; it is better to be master of oneself in Hell than to have the illusion of free will in servitude to Heaven. Satan's persuasion of Eve is a reiteration of the idea that God uses the power of definition to enforce servitude under a false-binary of good and evil, a tyrannical rule that Satan loathes.

Through giving Satan an individual, internally reflective language, Milton breaks philosophical and theological convention and questions what free will is actually present under an omnipotent God in *Paradise Lost*. Perhaps Milton wants the reader to consider his or her own servitude to God independently of the conventional binary of good and evil; like Raphael, Milton may want his readers to freely consider all of the implications present in choosing to turn away from or towards God, and to *actively* choose God, not unlike how Satan *actively* turned *away* from him. Perhaps Milton wants the reader to place themselves in the character of Satan, and recognize that true power, and true faith, come from the self and not the external.