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ENG 335

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4/28/2013

Fate and Free Will: The Decrees and Punishments from God

In *Paradise Lost*, written by John Milton, the reader is given a different account of the Genesis story in the Bible. Milton elaborates upon the story about the fall of Adam and Eve, creating parallel dialogue to the one found in the Bible. The reader gets to see a more vivid depiction of disobedience and the punishment stemming from the disobedience of not just Adam and Eve but Satan as well. In this essay I will break down the possibility of free will in the commands given by God and how the actions of Adam and Eve and Satan are determined by ignorance and a façade of choice concerning the entirety of their similar situations. I will also be dissecting two arguments made by Julia Miller in her essay titled *Is God Complicit in the Fall of Man?* I will argue that there is no blame to be attributed to God in the circumstance of Adam and Eve falling, but only the understanding that these events were fated by God for the final event of The Son saving all of mankind.

In the modern era there is a tendency to attribute the story of the fall to the depiction given by John Milton and not the Bible because of the dramatic nature of Milton's portrayal. When we have the fall in *Paradise Lost*, there is more of a challenge between free will and the command that is given by God than in the biblical depiction which has a fated characteristic. If we consider the fact that God has created the tree and an evil that will tempt Adam and Eve, then the possibility of the fall not taking place becomes less plausible. Those two obstacles make Adam and Eve's ability to shy away from the temptation of the fruit difficult. If there was just paradise and the known universe without Satan and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, there wouldn't have been any opportunities for Adam and Eve to disobey God, considering how the fall took place. There was motive from God to create the tree and Satan, and understanding that there was motive behind God's actions can help further understanding

the question of free will in this context. When God first creates Adam and Eve he gives them one command and this command is to not eat of the tree. "...But of the tree/ Which tasted works knowledge of good and evil,/ Thou may'st not; in the day thou eat'st, thou di'st;/ Death is the penalty imposed, beware," (*Paradise Lost* 7:542-545). The challenge of free will is created when God tells them what they can and cannot do. The issue that is created is whether or not their acts following this commandment are of their own free will or implanted by other factors?

We should first look at the obvious, which is that God created both Adam and Eve. Although this is an obvious factor to both the epic poem *Paradise Lost*, and the Genesis book in the Bible, it has much weight and significance to the outcome of Adam and Eve's fall. This is evident when Milton shows God's omniscience through his foreseeing of the fall.

And man there placed, with purpose to essay

If him by force he can destroy, or worse,

By some false guile pervert; and shall pervert;

For man will hearken to his glozing lies,

And easily transgress the sole command,

Sole pledge of his obedience: so will fall

He and his faithless progeny: (*Paradise Lost* 3:90-96).

When we have a creator, creating a creation, it can be assumed that free will still has restrictions even if it is created by an infinite, omnipotent and omniscient God. This can be assumed because the restrictions do not lie in the knowledge that the creation has but the knowledge that the creator has. It is God who understands his creations, as shown by Milton and God's foresight. If God can see what

Adam and Eve will do, then the restrictions have been set, and he can command them not to eat but their limitations are created without their knowledge. This is where the idea of obedience and disobedience comes into play. The pledge of obedience which Adam gives to God comes from the blind resources of the creation, not knowing that the tempter will first go to his wife and that God knows that he will be disobedient, so the only act of disobedience that takes place is when Adam disobeys his own pledge to God. If we closely look at the language used by Milton when God speaks about Adam and Eve falling, God does not speak of the disobedience that Adam commits but only that Adam transgresses against his sole pledge of obedience. So relative to the evidence given, free will exists only for the creation. The ignorance of the creation gives it the opportunity to believe that its decisions come from its own choice, when in actuality the creator knows what choice will happen. From the perspective of the reader in the case of Adam and Eve their obedience is not an exercise of free will and the commands are arbitrary on the part of God because their actions are already happening in a causal time frame, meaning that all of their actions come about due to causes predating their actions. The war in Heaven can be looked at as a causal factor in the fall of Adam and Eve because without it there would be no tempter.

Next we look at the command given by God to Satan and the other angels to obey the Son. This situation also seems arbitrary but the circumstances are different from Adam and Eve because Satan creates this opportunity for disobedience himself and it doesn't come from any outside factor. When Satan chooses to rebel against God it is the first emergence of sin. Satan creating sin from his head is also the first creature creating something from himself other than God.

In bold conspiracy against Heav'n's King,

All on a sudden miserable pain

Surprised thee, dim thine eyes, and dizzy swum

In darkness, while thy head flames thick and fast

Threw forth, till on the left side op'ning wide,

Then shining heav'nly fair, a goddess armed

Out of thy head I sprung: amazement seized

All th' host of Heav'n: back they recoiled afraid (*Paradise Lost* 2:751-759)

Satan is dismayed by the demoting of his status to be under the Son, after his high status in the hierarchal system of Heaven. What is to be made of this scene in reaction to the command given by God? Satan's form of rebellion to God is purely formed from an internal struggle taking place. If there is an understanding that God has foreknowledge over all situations due to his omniscience, then Satan's disobedience was also predetermined by God for the reason of exalting the Son. Which would also mean that Satan's inner struggle had a purpose previously known by God, bringing about the war, Satan's fall and his defeat. Consequently with God's foreknowledge playing a major role, Satan's will is limited to the choices of either following the Son or not following the Son. This means that Satan's obedience or disobedience is contrary to freedom because the freedom was revoked once a choice was created by God. Freedom would mean Satan had no predetermined choices in front of him and that his actions would be free to his desires but as soon as God tells his angels to obey the Son freedom is gone and only two choices stand before them.

Free will in *Paradise Lost*, concerning Adam and Eve and Satan, is completely arbitrary but only from the perspective of the omniscient. If we look at free will from the perspective of the three characters there is an opportunity to be obedient to God or in Satan's case to overthrow God. I believe the consequences given to the characters also play a role in the limited understanding the creations have. Giving the consequences created a duality for the characters to consider: their obedience had a

reward and their disobedience had a reward. In the third book, God makes an interesting point about free will in relation to Adam and Eve's fall. "I formed them free, and free they must remain,/ Till they enthrall themselves: I else must change/ Their nature, and revoke the high decree/ Unchangeable, eternal, which ordained/ Their freedom, they themselves ordained their fall" (*Paradise Lost* 3:124-128). I feel this passage is pivotal to understanding the arbitrary nature of God speaking commands to his creations and them disobeying the commands. When God speaks about forming his creations free, he speaks about forming with literal freedoms but also with inherent limitations. There is an idea of freedom created but Adam and Eve only reside in paradise, and their duties are to tend to the garden daily making sure it remains beautiful and the command is to never eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The freedom only exists in the minds of Adam and Eve. Their freedoms were subjected to external limitations which then created set choices. From the beginning the existence of Adam and Eve was chosen by a creator. All of these factors create constraints causing there to be, as I stated before, a blind freedom given to the characters. When Satan has an internal struggle with whether to obey the Son or not, the choices given to him by God were to follow the Son or rebel, they were not created by Satan, instead they were chosen for him by God. Relative to the choices presented by God in these commands he issues are the reactions taken by these characters, which then sets their reactions as causal actions based on the choices given by God with the results being foreseen by God but the foreknowledge of God playing no role in the outcome of these situations. For example, because God commanded the angels obey Christ, Satan rebels in turn causing sin to be created. Likewise, when Eve eats of the fruit she then causes Adam to eat of the fruit, causing both of them to be expelled from the Garden of Eden, with God knowing the result of the events.

When looking at the argument made by Miller we can first address what issue is present in the essay. The way free will is portrayed in the poem *Paradise Lost* seems to be based on a single blind premise, which means that the created being does not have any understanding of the future and with

that is not able to know its fate. The creator, which is God in this situation, knows past, present and future and with that knows what is fated for both Adam and Eve. From this type of premise, Adam and Eve may understand their actions as free will but it is understood by both the reader and God that their actions are predicated on the end game which is The Son coming to save mankind because of the fated actions of Adam and Eve's fall. "Although this command does not explicitly say God should be honored for Jesus' sacrifice, God still includes Himself in the speech. God is not the one who volunteers to give His life, but He denies His son the opportunity to be praised alone without shamelessly mentioning Himself" (Miller 4). The problematic aspect of this statement is the way God is being depicted concerning the honoring of Jesus and his sacrifice. I feel there is a strong misrepresentation of God and his relationship with the Son especially if we look at it through the eyes of Milton. We must lay down some attributes for God in this situation. God as depicted by Milton and in Bible texts is pure, good, cannot sin and allows for all things to happen through his foreknowledge. Giving an attribute like shameless would mean the character had ulterior motives in their presentation beyond what is accomplished in the end. Shameless would also link this God more closely to his creations which would make any foundation of morality problematic. In this poem God is the Supreme Being which makes all moral justifications based on God, this would also mean God gets the glory from whatever good may come from the Son. John Milton is known as an anti-Trinitarian, so in this scheme constructed by Milton it is God the Father who holds the most power and the Holy Spirit and the Son are subordinate to the Father in this hierarchical system. With these given guidelines it is easy to see how it is God who should still receive the recognition and glory for the Son saving mankind.

Let us once again take a look at fate and free will, but this time analyze it from the standpoint of how God sends down the punishments differently for the angels and humankind. When Satan first creates sin out of his head and begins to rebel against God and decides to go to war, God does not decide to punish all of the angels in Heaven but instead sends The Son to cast down the fallen angels

and Satan into Hell. Similarly when Eve eats of the fruit and gives it to Adam both of them are banished from paradise but the difference between the punishment of Satan is that all of mankind to follow will be punished because of this one act of fated disobedience by Adam and Eve. Why do these two events happen this way? The best way to deconstruct these two events is to look at what happens after they occur. If we take Satan and his rebellion, shortly after he falls with his angels they decide he will travel up to paradise and tempt both Adam and Eve to gain power. Satan eventually makes it up to Paradise and tempts Adam and Eve and makes them fall, yet God knows, because of his foreknowledge, that the Son will come back again after his death and resurrection and save mankind from the fall of Adam and Eve. It was not necessary for God to punish the other angels who were obedient to him because The Son coming back after his resurrection is not necessary for the angels only humans. The Son's sole purpose in both *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regain'd*, is to save man from his sin but this mission would be meaningless if only Adam and Eve were to be saved. For the Son's purpose to be carried out all of mankind had to suffer due to one transgression. If we look at this entire timeline of events as an arrow pointing toward the Son then the plan of Milton's God is fully successful. When we see the Son in *Paradise Regain'd*, unlike Adam and Eve he is not tempted by the ways of Satan and is able to rebuke them and continue on his quest to being crucified. The only way the plan of God would have failed is if the Son did not get crucified for the sins of all mankind including Adam and Eve. I believe that although the punishment of Adam and Eve seems to be arbitrary, the end result confirms the necessity of their consequences. Likewise the rebellion of Satan and his angels and the degree of their punishment was necessary for the eventual downfall of Satan and his army by the Son.

Deconstructing the language present in *Paradise Lost* concerning free will, fate, and predestination helps identify the motives behind those words. When looking at this poem, Milton's choice of words works to promote a one sided view of free will. This means that the creation is only able to substantiate its "choices" as free will because of the framework set by the creator. The framework

creates situations where the creation can only react to a choice already given, in anticipation of the next. Once a constraint is placed on "free will," it can no longer be classified as such but as something being carried out against or with the will of the acting force.