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# Free Will and Knowledge Before and After the Fall

by David J. Tietge

There are certain ambiguities that impede a definitive reading of *Paradise Lost*, and this seems to be accepted as an occupational hazard for most scholars and students who undertake the task of coming to an intelligible understanding of the poem. Many of these interpretive problems result from personal convictions, a love or hate of Milton, or a need to approach the work from specific critical perspectives. In Milton's attempt to clarify human and cosmological origins, he seems to have (out of necessity) made the reading such that it requires us to push our intellectual and philosophical capacities to the limit. This is not surprising, for one generally accepted function of epic poetry is to wrestle with certain doubts and incongruities concerning issues that have long baffled the most insightful and dedicated scholars, philosophers, and theologians. This is why addressing the nature of human knowledge is such an interesting irony when reading *Paradise Lost*: we not only must reflect on the extent of human intelligence before the fall, but must decide for ourselves whether the fall functioned (from an intellectual standpoint) in our favor. Additionally, it is not at all clear what true bearing the actual eating of the apple had on Adam's and Eve's existing mental capabilities. In other words, what exactly is Milton asserting as an outcome for humanity on an intellectual level as a result of eating from the Tree of Knowledge? As Adam says to Raphael in Book VII:

Divine interpreter, by favor sent  
Down from the empyrean to forewarn  
Us timely of what else might have been our loss,  
Unknown, which human knowledg could not reach  
For which to Infinitely Good we owe  
Immortal thanks, and his admonishment  
Receave with solemne purpose to observe  
Immutably his sovran will, the end  
Of what we are. (75-80)

It has been argued that it was Free Will that determined the (fortunate?) fall of mankind. And while this is substantially supported as a strong factor within the text, it is my belief that it was not

Free Will, but knowledge that was the primary instigator of the fall. More specifically, the realization that knowledge, in the Renaissance/Enlightenment sense, could somehow make us godlike.<sup>1</sup> As a result, this essay pivots upon the philosophical implications of Milton's poem, and not necessarily upon strictly literary factors. It seems that Milton was every bit as much interested in the former as he was in the latter, otherwise such daunting topics and thoughtful characters would not be so prevalent within the work. Is it not true, for instance, that one of the most enticing lures Satan used on Eve in both Genesis and *Paradise Lost* was that "ye shall be as Gods" (9.710); or as the serpent insists in The Bible: "For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:5). The desire for this end shows not only a greed or envy in Eve, as will be discussed later in the essay, but something even more pertinent: she experiences these feelings while she is still considered (to use a relatively uncontroversial theological term) "prelapsarian."

In *Milton's Good God*, Dennis Richard Danielson argues that Free Will was an innately precious gift that God gave to men and women in His desire to allow for a creation that was capable of independent action. He also cites discourse that contends that Free Will in itself was adequate justification for the fall, and that God's intervention or determination need not come into play (104). Free Will alone, however, does not explain the cause that set this exercise of God's gift (often termed "right" reason) into motion. To disobey God simply because Adam and Eve were given the ability to do so does not make sense. And God's intervention or determination of Adam's and Eve's fateful outcome is an issue. If it were not, the question of answering to God for disobedience would not be raised. Also, given the premise of right reason, it is incongruent to expect any sort of disobedience towards the Creator, for this would imply that right reason, in fact, was not engaged in Adam and Eve prior to the fall.

The fact that both Adam and Eve have already been established as rational beings is shown to us clearly by Milton by the time we reach Book IX. In Book VI, for instance, Raphael appeals to Adam's sense of reason by laying out in an orderly, logical fashion the events that lead up to Satan's fall from grace, and warns Adam that the same spiritual demise lies easily in store for him. Also, there is a disturbing paradox in God's assignment to Raphael. God insists that Man be free willed, but he is not at all confident that he will make the correct choice. In Book V, God sends Raphael with tainted expectations, saying:

Happiness in his power left free to will  
 Left to his own free Will, his Will though free  
 Yet mutable; whence warne him to beware  
 He swerve not too secure . . . (235-39)

What is most striking about this message that Raphael carries is not so much the prophecy itself, but the fact that Adam understands the implications of this advice and rationally vows to follow it.

In Book VII, Adam continues to display his abilities of reason by asking questions of Raphael that revolve around this seemingly simple observation: "Great things, and full of wonder in our eares,/Farr differing from this world thou hast reveal'd" (70-71). This thoughtful and almost intuitive response not only reveals Adam's rational disposition, but his insatiable curiosity as well. However, it might logically be expected that Adam's desire for knowledge would not simply be confined to an oration from the angels. It makes more sense that he would desire a first-hand account of the intelligence he was receiving, for this is the nature of Adam's and Eve's intellect as it will burden them later. As a somewhat obscure example of this, let us look at the silver lining Adam finds for himself and Eve after the fall has occurred: "on mee the Curse aslope/Glanc'd on the ground, with labour I must earne/My bread; what harm? Idleness had bin worse" (10.1053-55). "Earning his bread" implies not only that he should labor for a living, but *think* as well. And while many scholars support the view that Adam and Eve do indeed work in Paradise as a response to opponents' alleged claims of idleness, I think this very admission from Adam shows that it was not in any way a humanly satisfying type of labor. Idleness comes in many forms, and Adam's and Eve's less than laborious existence in Paradise made them exempt from the physical as well as mental exertions for which they were obviously equipped.

Before the fall, Adam's thirst for knowledge was in many ways encouraged by Raphael. Raphael's warning Adam of the coming of Satan and the consequences of such an appearance not only prompted Adam to reflect on his own condition, but to anticipate a new phenomenon: evil. The angel here is, in effect, supplying Adam with an invaluable model for pragmatic prediction. Such a model might come in handy to Adam when, after the Fall, he is required to forecast certain physical, climatic, or biological outcomes. Is this intentional? On a fundamental level, these natural occurrences are evils, and by introducing Adam to the necessity for practical thinking, is not Raphael foreshadowing humanity's plight against natural malevolences as Michael would so graphically display them to Adam in Book XI?

Another obvious difficulty manifests itself in God's own way of dealing with his creations. Why does God allow free will and then send Raphael to *caution* Adam regarding the proper thing to do? If He is only sending Adam knowledge so that he might exercise his reason, does not this reinforce the importance of and desire to gain knowledge above and beyond that which reason is capable? God's intention is not for Adam to *think* upon receiving the knowledge of Satan's arrival; it is instead stacking the cards in God's favor, giving Himself and His creation the informed advantage by in effect advising Adam of the proper course to take. It is almost as if God has the happiness He speaks of as reserved only for those who obey His commands, in which case free will has become a nullified, inconsequential condition. One is either happy with obedience to God, or happy with free will only if it is in concordance with God's commands, which is not free will at all, but as Satan so adamantly insists, subservience to a higher authority.

To return to the initial point, we might reluctantly admit that while Satan is merely evil personified, the true evil will come about in completely different forms (i.e. natural cataclysms, war, poverty, disease, etc.). This knowledge serves only to increase Adam's appetite, and Raphael seems to hesitate only slightly before feeding Adam's insatiable hunger. Adam's response is one of gratitude:

What thanks sufficient, or what recompence  
 Equal have I to render thee, Divine  
 Hystorian, who thus largely hast allayed  
 The thirst I had of knowledge, and voutsaf't  
 This friendly condescension to relate  
 Things else by me unsearchable, now heard  
 With wonder, but delight, and, as is due,  
 With glorie attributed to the high  
 Creator; something yet of doubt remains,  
 Which onely thy solution can resolve.

(8.5-14)

One might point out that Adam refers to the thirst for knowledge that he *had*, implying that this thirst is quenched. Obviously, however, it is not, for he proceeds to ask more questions concerning things that have very little relevance to or bearing on his happy existence in Paradise. Once Adam had been informed of evil, one would think he would have no desire to learn more, but perhaps Adam feels, as a rational being, that such knowledge might be pertinent to his own best interests. This suggests that Adam was already intending to use his intellect in a manner which was presumably not intended by God: to be

self-sufficient. His probing into the inconsistencies of nature may well be an attempt to come to grips with natural phenomena on his own terms: "reasoning I oft admire,/How nature wise and frugal could commit/Such disproportions, with superfluous hand" (8.25-27). As Adam enters on "studious thoughts abtruse" (8.40), Raphael responds by more or less congratulating Adam for his deep interest: "To ask or search I blame thee not, for Heav'n/Is as the book of God before thee set" (8.66-7). He then satisfies what can hardly be called a whim on the part of Adam, for these are the very questions that would baffle humankind from that point onward.

In Raphael, it might be said, there is an indulgence towards Adam reminiscent of a rarely-seen uncle spoiling his brother's child. In effect, Raphael is supplying Adam with candy that is above and beyond the instructions given to him by God. To what extent the fault of this lies upon God's shoulders will be discussed below. More important for the immediate discussion is how Raphael deals with what he senses to be an over-stepping of the boundaries that God, albeit vaguely, provided him.

What he does, to cover his bases, is to check Adam with an important warning at the end of Book VIII:

Be strong, live happie, and love, but first of all  
Him whom to love is to obey, and keep  
His great command; take heed least Passion sway  
Thy Judgement to do aught, which else free Will  
Would not admit. (8.633-37)

Raphael's cautionary note seems to be aroused by some great sense of responsibility on the part of the angel, which of course seems only proper. However, the timing is so uncanny that it suggests an almost guilty afterthought on the part of Raphael that warns the angel that he should have stepped more lightly concerning the information he presented to Adam.

This brings up the issue of Raphael's instructive technique. After he feels that perhaps he has taken too many liberties with Adam's tutelage, he resorts to something a little closer to Adam's heart than mere caution: his own hide. While there is nothing that can be considered an out-and-out threat by Raphael, he does make it a point frequently to remind Adam of God's power: "Him whom to love is to obey, and keep/His great command;" (8.636-37). There is undeniable intimidation in these words, as elsewhere, and it serves to keep Adam at a respectable distance from that which might cause him harm if too

much desire for further mental expansion be his downfall (which I maintain it is).

Following from this, we might ask another question. Is this advice from Raphael in some way reliant on a sense of goodness on the part of Adam, and if so, is this goodness innate, like his capacity for knowledge? Granted, this is a question of enormous proportions, and is intended to be covered only one-dimensionally in this essay. However, it is important to address to what degree Raphael, God, Adam, and even Satan might assume innate goodness in Adam as it bears upon the way in which they treat him. Further, it seems that this is pertinent for determining the limits of knowledge as it plays a role in one's ability to sustain and exercise goodness. Can Adam use reason and knowledge to keep him good and virtuous? Or is knowledge the very thing that brings to light a concept of good and evil that may have otherwise been concealed in the protective shroud of ignorance? "Right" reason, as a result, seems only applicable if Free Will is strictly limited or even nonexistent as a factor within prelapsarian humanity, for such conditions simply are not logically compatible as a means by which to direct one's own conduct.

In some respects, the extent to which knowledge is knowledge of good and evil seems obvious. As Raphael says to Adam in Book VII:

. . . Fruit for food  
 (God) Gave thee (Adam) . . .  
 Varietie without end; but of the Tree  
 Which tasted works knowledge of Good and Evil,  
 Thou mai'st not; in the day thou eat'st, thou di'st;  
 Death is the penaltie impos'd . . . (7.542-45)

But this does not adequately answer the question of intrinsic knowledge of such things. It has been established, I think, that the capacity for knowledge was already present in both Adam and Eve on an *a priori* level. By this passage, we do not see any indication that knowledge of good or evil was inherited by Adam and Eve, but they are continually expected to recognize the former in God. Additionally, the very fact that it was mentioned at all serves to suggest that they are already expected to distinguish between the two. Their only intelligence of this phenomenon, therefore, was already supplied by the very entities that hoped to keep them ignorant of it (i.e., God and Raphael).

In Book VIII, for instance, Adam retells his first intuitions to Raphael—intuitions which were not in any way acquired, but were innate in Adam. His ability to speak before he even knows anything

of his surroundings or his origin is a prime example:

But who I was, or where, or from what cause,  
 Knew not; to speak I tri'd, and forthwith spake,  
 My Tongue obey'd and readily could name  
 What e'er I saw. (8.270-73)

This suggests that his knowledge is somehow more vast than he has any conception of, and imposes upon the reader ambiguous possibilities concerning the boundaries of knowledge. There is, additionally, a great deal of emphasis on the idea of *instinctive* knowledge. "By quick instinctive motion up I sprung," Adam declares (8.259), as if this form of knowledge were in some way more pure since it was activated by God Himself at the moment of creation without the moral muddling that the concept of Free Will produces. This realization, it seems, only reinforces the fact that God's hand in initiating the fall of humankind is more present than He is willing to acknowledge. Knowledge, in the instinctive sense, must include some sort of ethical bearing for it to be separate from the instinctive "knowledge" that beasts possess, lest humans be no more elevated by divine consideration than the serpent himself. In other words, human beings, as God's recompense for the loss of the fallen angels, require a more elaborate scheme of behavior in order to workably incorporate the use of reason. These stipulations, by necessity, have to be present prior to, as well as following, the fall.

This in fact seems to be the case. The model for this knowledge provided to Adam and Eve is God, and whether they know God to be good or not is beside the point: they know the opposite of God to be an undesirable thing. They have, then, already been provided with ethical stipulations and the knowledge of good and evil that has been the crux of Raphael's preventive intervention.

The next question we must ask ourselves, logically, is what real knowledge (or at least, anticipated knowledge) is actually gained through the "tragic" disobedience of humanity by eating from the tree? Since the knowledge of evil has, as previously determined, already been supplied by Raphael, there must be some other motive present for Adam and Eve so blatantly to disregard such a direct and ominous admonition from God.

Here is where Eve becomes so pivotal to the events that follow. It is unfortunate for her that she is considered by Satan to be such easy prey, and ironic that he happens to be in just the right place at the right time for his opportunity to capitalize on "her ruin" (9.493). But that aside, what is most significant about the entire episode is the technique

that Satan uses to persuade Eve into submission. After the Serpent (Satan) speaks to Eve her first question is a quite reasonable one: "What may this mean? Language of Man pronounc't/By Tongue of Brute, and human sense exprest?" (9.553-54). Eve has never before been spoken to by any of the animals, and Satan uses this to his advantage, adopting a rhetorical argument to tempt Eve. He tells Eve of the tree, and what it had done for him after eating his full from it. Here is Satan describing the effects of the apple upon him:

Sated at length, ere long I might perceave  
 Strange alteration in me, to degree  
 Of Reason in my inward Powers, and Speech  
 Wanted not long, though to this shape retaind.  
 Thenceforth to Speculations high or deep  
 I turned my thoughts, and with capacious mind  
 Considered all things visible in Heav'n,  
 Or Earth, or Middle, all things fair and good;  
 (9.598-605)

We can see several things transpiring here, all of which seem to relate not only to knowledge, but to knowledge that the Serpent claims can be gained from the tree. First, Satan brilliantly justifies the incongruities of his facade in a way that makes Eve desirous to learn more of the nature of this enticing fruit. Secondly, every quality the Serpent describes to Eve is in some way tapping at a burning need within her to expand her intellect. We can see the subtle forces of this argument tug at the corners of her psyche: we can almost understand Eve's temptation when she says: "The credit of whose vertue rest with thee,/ Wonderous indeed, if cause of such effects" (9.649-650). Thirdly, the form of the argument is, as alluded to before, rhetorical, and the success of this form of discourse is profoundly reliant upon engaging the desire of the participants for mental exercise. In other words, by adopting this type of argument, the Serpent is presupposing a rational disposition on the part of Eve that must be present in order to be manipulated.

This is not the full extent of Satan's argument, either. He continues to work Eve (as a proficient lawyer might work a jury or a witness) by pointing out possible logical inconsistencies with God's command. For example, Satan asks "wherein lies/Th' offense, that Man should thus attain to know?" (9.725-26), as if knowledge were the most natural and virtuous thing that a person could seek and seize. It would seem proper to assume that Eve is within her right to extend the gift that God has already provided. Likewise, Satan inquires: "What can your knowledge hurt him, or this Tree/Impart against his will if all be his?"

(9.727-28). Indeed, why *should* God fear mere mortals? Is this tree somehow beyond His sphere, placed here so that humanity could better itself if it were fortunate enough to comprehend its potential and courageous enough to follow through? Or, as Satan asks, "is it envie, and can envie dwell/In heav'nly breasts? These, these and many more/Causes import your need of this fair Fruit" (9.729-32). It is clear that Satan is relying on one fundamental premise: these arguments appear cogent. If he did not have faith in some sort of rational process on the part of Eve, he would never have attempted this type of deceit. Also, if he were not aware of Eve's Free Will, or if he knew it were strictly guarded by the restraining properties of right reason, such an attempt at seduction would be futile.

It might be pointed out that another basic issue surrounding Eve's seduction is realization that her intellect is undeveloped, and therefore prime ground for such an argument. But intellect is present, and by the end of this episode, we have two very important developments: the introduction of a temptation geared toward obtaining a godlike form of knowledge, and a logical thought-scheme designed to persuade someone who has the ability to reason. Here we might wish to draw the distinction between truth and rhetoric. God's "truth," as it affects Adam and Eve, is contingent upon faith in their Creator, with little else to support any such belief. The rhetoric that Satan incorporates, however, is much more based in Eve's ability to reason. The only way Eve might recognize Satan's arguments as fallacious is if she unconditionally adhered to the word of God, which may be Milton's essential point. But her young and untried intellect will not allow her to do so, which might suggest the possible relativism of truth: we have logical argument with Satan, and merely God's word as contender with Eve's reason. It is little wonder that Satan won out in this round.

Eve responds, of course, in exactly the way Satan had hoped: she succumbs to his elaborate sophistry. It is at this point that the reader must begin to question what sort of tangible difference in being for Adam and Eve this act entails. The verse immediately following Eve's submission reads: "Earth felt the wound, and Nature from her seat/Sighing through all her Works gave signs of woe,/That all was lost" (9.782-84). This, however, does not produce any evidence as to a great intellectual change in Eve herself, but only in her status with God and nature. There is a brief description of her euphoric state, "And high't'ned as with Wine" (9.793), but this does not indicate any increase in intellectual capacity at all. Later passages, indeed the rest of the poem, make specific reference to a change in Adam and Eve only so far as it implies a change in *emotional* disposition. For example, the first

indication to God that what he had feared was true comes in Book X, when he actually confronts Adam and Eve in Eden, and they hide in shame: "That thou art naked, who/Hath told thee? Hast thou eaten of the Tree/Whereof I gave charge thou shouldst not eat?" (121-23). (This is an almost verbatim transcription of the Biblical scripture: "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you that you should not eat?" (Genesis 3:11). All the admission to the crime against God does is prove that they have not in any way been brought to His level, for if they had, they wouldn't fear his wrath so.

That the Serpent lied in this respect is no great revelation. However, it does not answer the question of why the tree is referred to as the Tree of Knowledge. The bickering and pettiness that transpires between Adam and Eve only reinforces the fact that the change in them is somehow emotional. Does this suggest that the emotions they are experiencing are in some way a form of knowledge? This is quite possible, although it is interesting to note that the emotion that is expressly dwelt upon as the obstacle impeding their relationship with God is that of shame. Is this emotion somehow more reliant on knowledge than, say, hate? Anger? Envy? Lust? Although the latter emotions are graphically illustrated within the poem, they do not seem to occasion the same response from the Creator as does shame. And who is to say that these feelings were not already existing within the bosoms of Adam and Eve before the Fall. Prior to eating from the tree, they had not encountered the need to express such feelings. It seems, then, that the only true knowledge that is gained by Adam and Eve is the knowledge that they have knowledge (as it is postulated in emotion). They now must experience such things as inhibition, doubt, confusion, and disagreement. They must check themselves, and be cautious in what they say and how they act. Indeed such experiences are, at the risk of begging the question, the very ones we have come to refer to as human.

The other issue that surrounds this disobedient act is death. Adam expends a considerable amount of time and energy discussing death, but the irony of it is, he has no idea what death is. Throughout the poem, death is personified as an offspring of Satan's (except where it relates to Adam's and Eve's prohibition, where it is not defined, nor likely could be). Granting this, there has still been no empirical exercise of its true import. God, Angels, Fallen Angels, and human-kind alike have no concept of death because it has never been seen in practice; they, in fact, cannot die. The argument of the omniscience of God might exempt Him from this claim (as it does from most) but even

in this exception we might ask ourselves the important question: "Must something exist to be known?" (This, however, is a highly controversial question of tremendous philosophical import, but it nevertheless illustrates the theological inconsistencies contained within God's own motives as Creator). Death, regardless of these philosophical problems concerning it, has had no such introduction, in any form, so to talk about it as though it were some unspeakable consequence for disobedience seems an empty threat. However, it is not treated in this manner, not even by Adam:

... much more I fear least Death  
 So snatcht will not exempt us from the paine  
 We are by doom to pay: rather such acts  
 Of contumacie will provoke the highest  
 To make death in us live. . . (10.1024-28)

Adam speaks here of death as if he knows exactly what being dead entails, or at least how death compares to his plight, when actually he could have no such knowledge. It is not until Michael shows him what dead people look like in Book XI that he has even the foggiest notion of what death includes. Even then, it is only a foreshadowing of events, and the very newness of the concept of death could not possibly have a significant bearing on what meaning it could hold for him. For Adam, it could not function as anything except what it was for him before his creation: a state out of existence.

One could argue, from this, that human beings were created to die. Any other fate for them would be meaningless superfluity, for it would be merely maintaining existence for existence's sake. The implied knowledge of this may be the very reason Adam (and Eve) would rather die than endure what life has in store for them. But the extent of their knowledge of this is the very thing in question. It seems rather that this merges with the idea that they are exposed to concepts and phenomena that they would otherwise have been blind to as ignorant gardeners in Paradise.<sup>2</sup>

So with these explorations into various aspects of knowledge as presented in *Paradise Lost*, we are left with some important questions. Did the Serpent really lie when he said the Tree of Knowledge would make them more god-like? To what extent are God and the angels to blame for the Fall? And finally, and perhaps most importantly, were we fortunate because of this?

Ideally, a definitive answer should be given for all these questions. Instead, since Milton is so complex, we must, for the purpose of

this essay, stick with a relatively narrow reading of the poem. In effect, Adam and Eve were made more godlike in that they were exposed to knowledge that was originally reserved for God and the angels. To a great extent, the Fall is due to the (either intentional or unintentional) oversights of God, for he produced a species, *tempted* that species, and *equipped* that species with a desire to know. As to whether or not we are fortunate to have "fallen," Milton's position seems to be affirmative, as can be seen through discussions between Michael and Adam in Book XII. Indeed it is my belief that despite our suffering, what we became after the Fall is the very essence of what was intended for humanity – beings thinking, acting, struggling, arguing, and solving problems. In our former state, we could only be considered so many fish in a bowl. The application of knowledge is the only means at our disposal to wrestle with such colossal works as *Paradise Lost*, and with that in mind, I can only hope that it is what God and Milton intended.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Consider, for example, such philosophers as Francis Bacon (Renaissance) or Immanuel Kant (Enlightenment) or such pioneering scientists as Galileo.

<sup>2</sup> Although this account of how death functions in *Paradise Lost* is by no means a complete one, I believe that it displays to some degree the relationship between ignorance and knowledge and how one affects and breeds the other within the poem. This can, as implied above, relate not only to Adam and Eve, but to all the entities involved at the time.

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