

Milton as Servant, Satan as Existentialist: Competing Conceptions of Freedom in

Paradise Lost

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In *Paradise Lost* Milton presents competing conceptions of freedom. These two main perspectives vary drastically, with the requisite condition on freedom being hotly disputed. Satan holds it to be autonomy, while Milton enlists God, Man, and the angels to argue that it is obedience. My purpose is twofold. After examining Milton's portrayal of the rival views, I attempt to cast doubt on his assertion that freedom as obedience to God is innately superior to a conception like Satan's, which hinges on self-determination. I then offer a more holistic objection to Milton's conception of freedom by arguing that it employs irreconcilable notions. These are free will in the libertarian sense and a determinate nature endowed by God. Drawing upon the thought of David Hume, I explain why these two notions are irreconcilable. I then examine the general tenability of the libertarian conception of free will in light of some interesting insights from existentialism and contemporary theology, arguing that if libertarian free will is indeed possible, it relies on the very conception of freedom as self-determination that Milton attempts to rule out. I conclude by emphasizing the dilemma Milton that faces and by affirming the proper conception of freedom in the sense he is after to be self-determination.

The freedom given to angels is the freedom to obey. God desires “voluntary service” (Milton 5.529) rather than obedience due to “fate / inextricable or strict necessity” (5.527-28). The latter God holds to be devoid of any real meaning, as is demonstrated by the posing of the question, “Not free, what proof could they have given sincere / of true allegiance, constant faith, or love”? (3.103-4). Fidelity toward God would be empty if the angels were unable to do otherwise. Therefore, he created them “sufficient to have stood though free to fall” (3.99), making their obedience a choice and thus granting it significance. The sole purpose of angels is fidelity to God. Rafael explains, “Freely we serve / because we freely love, as in our will / to love or not; in this we stand or fall” (5.538-40). However, it is also revealed that God grants his creations an initial nature when Rafael states, “good he made thee; but to persevere / he left it in thy power” (5.525-26). The faithfulness of both Man and angels rests in their natures, and it is this faithfulness or lack thereof alone that defines them.

Satan’s conception of freedom, by contrast, is one of absolute autonomy. He rejects all forms of external authority even to the point of conscious personal detriment, as expressed by the sentiment, “in my choice / to reign is worth ambition though in hell / better to reign in hell than serve in Heaven” (1.261-63). This choice leads him to shun the “easy yoke / of servile pomp” (2.256-7) for which he believes God to have created him in favor of “hard liberty” (2.256). Satan conceives of freedom specifically in terms of power, seen most clearly in the exhortation, “Our own right hand / shall teach us highest deeds by proof to try / who is our equal” (5.864-66) and ultimately expresses his chosen role to be “Antagonist of Heaven’s almighty king” (10.386-7). It is crucial, however, that we do not conflate the sort of freedom Satan represents with the way in which he uses that freedom. Freedom as power is the

particular manifestation of choice taken up by Satan. The principle that underlies this undertaking, though, is self-determination—the free selection of one’s own character and values. This focus on self-determination becomes evident when he implores his followers that the group must “seek / [their] own good from [them]selves” (2.252-53). The way in which Satan chooses to define himself is ultimately destructive and unpalatable, but this outcome alone should not cause us to reject the general principle on which his project is based. Only if self-determination itself leads to negative consequences should it be rejected as untenable. Milton indicts only a particular use of self-determination, and it is worth considering whether or not this judgment is sufficient for his purposes.

Like that of the angels, the primary purpose of the freedom conferred upon Man is the free worship and glorification of God. Man also, however, displays a high degree of autonomy. Though in “appointed work employed” (4.726), the fruits of these labors ultimately benefit Adam by keeping in order the Garden over which he has been given dominion. Man is provided with “manifold delights” (4.435), working not only for the glory of God but also for the betterment of himself. This secondary purpose, man’s “delightful task” (4.437) of pursuing his own well-being, seems to be allowed for with the understanding that he will “extol / [God’s] goodness infinite” as a result (4.733-34). Ultimately, though, Man is like the angels in that his primary function is to glorify God by fulfilling the role that God has prescribed for him. The additional autonomy that he is granted is noteworthy but secondary with regard to this crucial similarity. Its intended purpose is to glorify God to a greater degree by providing him the free worship of beings with a greater degree of freedom.

It would be all too easy to lose the fundamental principles of these competing conceptions of freedom in the contingencies that Milton uses to express them. In desiring self-determination, Satan becomes “enthralled” (6.181) to himself and “enamored” (2.765) with Sin, his very own image. This attitude seems to be connected to his undying quest for power over others; in the spirit of Dante’s *contrapasso*, his desire to dominate others brings about his dominance of himself in doomed self-slavery. We would be right to question, however, if defeat of this sort is typical of self-determination in general or merely results in Satan’s specific case. Because his self-defeat was due to the particular way in which he defined himself, the poem provides little evidence that contradiction is inherent to self-determination itself. Like any robust sort of freedom, self-determination can go awry. When we strip away the particulars of Satan’s case, though, it becomes clear that it was not self-determination but rather the precise method in which that self-determination was employed that made it problematic. There is no reason to suppose that self-determination itself necessarily leads to destruction. There is no evidence of an intelligible relationship between self-defining freedom and benefit or detriment to the agent. On the contrary, it seems implausible that there would be: freedom of any degree must be employable for either good or evil; this condition is inherent in the very notion freedom. We can easily conceive of a being who is wholly self-determinate yet does well for himself (and Milton even provides one for us—God). Self-determination, then, is not self-defeating in the way that Milton supposes. It happens to be in the case of Satan because of the particular way in which he exercises it, not because the freedom itself is inherently flawed.

Milton’s treatment of Man’s freedom is, at its core, like that of the angels in that it is freedom to obey. The temptation may be to focus on Man’s blissful state, but we cannot

overlook the fundamental character of his freedom, which is one of servitude. We must acknowledge, as contemporary scholar William Walker does, that

one of the deepest assumptions of the poem and the unfallen characters in it is that because God made man in this way, human nature has an end or purpose: it is to do the things God wills it to do, to live in the way God intended it to live when he created it and as he continues to sustain it over time. (Walker 8)

Man, like the angels, is defined by his faithfulness to God and by that alone. He may pursue other activities, but these are predicated on his commitment to God's higher purpose. When divorced from its consequences, then, freedom of this sort is inferior to the self-determination manifested in Satan insofar as we measure it by degree of actual autonomy. Self-determination allows for a much greater measure of freedom when examined in isolation. Milton's recourse is to put it in a specific context and to suppose that it results in personal detriment and a resulting loss of freedom, which in turn makes his account seem preferable. We have seen, though, that he does not substantiate the more general claim that freedom as self-determination is itself flawed. He shows the particular way in which Satan exercises self-determination to be problematic, but this outcome alone is not and could never be a reflection of the whole enterprise.

These considerations cast some doubt on Milton's account as innately superior to the fundamental principle of Satan's, but there seems to be a more decisive critique, namely that Milton's conception of freedom is incoherent. It includes two conflicting components, libertarian free will and a determinate nature instilled in created beings by God. Careful examination will show precisely why this claim is the case. We look first to the philosopher David Hume. His famous worry is that if God has endowed us with a defined nature that

includes certain dispositions (such as preferences, motives, and desires), choices stemming from this nature are not truly free:

If voluntary actions be subjected to the same laws of necessity with the operations of matter, there is a continued chain of necessary causes, pre-ordained and pre-determined, reaching from the original cause of all, to every single volition of every human creature. . . . The ultimate Author of all our volitions is the Creator of the world, who first bestowed motion on this immense machine, and, placed all beings in that particular position, whence every subsequent event, by an inevitable necessity, must result. (Hume §8.2)

Because the typical model of the will has it acting upon dispositions, those dispositions being out of Man's control is problematic. We would be free in the sense of acting uninhibited by external forces yet not free because we are encumbered by volitions that cannot really be said to be our own. We act upon our desires, but God is the one who decided what our desires would be. Thus, we are not free in the libertarian sense Milton posits, namely one in which Man acts upon his own motives in such a way that God is not responsible for Man's choices. God would be responsible because our choices, though free in one sense, are yet direct causal consequences of God's endowment of a particular nature. If either view proposed in *Paradise Lost* is to be vindicated, this problem must be overcome.

Ron Highfield makes an interesting theological move with regard to divine freedom, one which may help to illuminate our present task. He asserts that theology has traditionally accepted the "pagan presupposition" that God is divine due to his possession of an impersonal divine nature that gives rise to personal divine actions (245). Highfield defends an alternate view: that God does not have a nature in this pagan sense, but rather, the Triune God is defined by the relationship between the three persons that compose him. "The members of the Trinity enact their identity, not in isolation, but only in their mutual loving relationships," he explains

(252). This view can be traced back to the Cappadocian fathers, who “identified *prosopon* (person) with *hypostasis* (concrete existence)” and “thus... gave personhood an ontological status” (Highfield 250). God’s nature does not determine his person; on the contrary, his personhood determines his nature. Highfield asserts that “if God is to be God freely and not as a fate, his divinity must be his free act” (250). God is as he is freely, rather than by strict necessity. Determinism is overcome by reversing the traditional relationship between nature and will.

We find this talk of “the primacy of person over substance” (Highfield 251) in another branch of philosophical thought: existentialism, the mantra of which has come to be “existence precedes essence” (Sartre 20). This view can be succinctly characterized as follows:

What do we mean here by ‘existence precedes essence’? We mean that man first exists: he materializes in the world, encounters himself, and only afterward defines himself. . . . Man is not only that which he conceives himself to be, but that which he wills himself to be, and since he conceives of himself only after he exists, just as he wills himself to be after being thrown into existence, man is nothing other than what he makes of himself. (Sartre 22)

Just as God is freed from the constraints of a logically necessary nature through self-determination, so too can Man be freed from the causal constraints of determinism if this view is correct. The same sort of reversal that we see in Highfield’s theology of personhood is applied to Man by the existentialists. The possibility of responsibility-grounding, libertarian free will arises by placing human existence before essence. It might be pointed out that even Man as the existentialist conceives of him is not truly independent; he is still ontologically reliant upon God for his existence. Milton echoes this notion through Rafael, who informs Adam that “whatever was created needs / to be sustained and fed” (5.414-15). However, a dependence of this kind does not seem to entail that a created being’s very will is determined by God, and this

point is a crucial one.¹ Man can be dependent on God for his existence yet wholly free insofar as the volitions of his will are concerned. Though rival accounts of libertarian free will might vary in certain respects, it would seem that this characteristic is fundamental to any such view that is tenable. Only if Man's own will determines his nature, rather than his nature determining his will, can the libertarian free will Milton is after be achieved. In fact, because libertarian free will makes personhood prior to nature, it does not cohere with Milton's view that Man has an endowed nature. Our examination up to this point has shown them to be mutually exclusive.

Of course, there may be a fly in the ointment here: the choices of a will *simpliciter* without predetermined preferences seem arbitrary or random and thus exclude the possibility of responsibility (Hume §8.2). If decisions are not made on the basis of some endowed nature, on what basis are they made? The question is a difficult one, and there is not room enough to treat it here. If the objection stands, then libertarian free will is not possible after all. However, this possibility only puts Milton in even more dire straits: either libertarian free will is impossible and thus his account is untenable *prima facie*, or libertarian free will is possible but, if actualized, rules out the sort of determinate nature Milton ascribes to man because it requires self-determination. In this way, Milton has backed himself into a corner. He asserts that Man has a defined nature but also that he has unfettered, libertarian free will. These two claims, if this examination is correct, are incompatible. Only by being allowed to define his own

¹ It is only fair to acknowledge that Highfield does not apply his theology of personhood to Man in the way I have. His explanation of how person might precede nature, though, is peerless, so I have drawn upon it for that reason. He equates human ontological dependence with a reduced degree of freedom and thus cannot commit to a view of this sort. It seems to me, though, that there is no substantial connection between the two. Or, if there is, it does not seem to me to be a necessary one. Given the rich precedent for this sort of move in existential philosophy, it should be quite coherent and defensible.

nature and purpose could Man be free in the sense Milton is after, and the only way that this result can come about is through the sort of freedom Satan represents, self-determination. Thus, Milton's view cannot remain viable, and those components of it that could be viable will stand or fall with the tenability of freedom as self-determination. This conclusion, though, ought to be a happy one given that the relationship between a being's degree of freedom and the glory afforded to God should that being come to love and worship him. The possibility of a being coerced by no internal or external factors beyond its control that still comes to love God would be the ultimate testimony to God's perfection. I dare to hope that this particular sort of being is who we are.

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