

# Chaos and order in paradise lost

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In the manuscript, *On Christian Doctrine*, John Milton says of Chaos, " It was necessary that something should have existed previously, so that it could be acted upon by his supremely powerful active efficacy...Matter must have always existed independently of God, or else originated from God at some point in time... But if matter did not exist from eternity, it is not easy to see where it came from" (John Milton, *On Christian Doctrine*). This manuscript has since been described by C. A. Patrides as a " theological labyrinth" and as " an abortive venture into theology". In many ways, The notion of Chaos itself is just as complex, and critical response to Milton's portrayal of it has been widely varied in interpretation. Critics mainly argue over the depiction of Chaos as either good or evil, and many contemplate its supposed neutrality.

The subject of order is somewhat more tenable, as the concept is housed in Milton's own description of the Garden of Eden. Chaos, being neither Heaven, Earth, nor Hell, possesses a provocative ambiguity. It is separate from God, yet God created a perfect world out of it. Milton describes Chaos as ' a dark Illimitable ocean without bound, Without dimension, where length, breadth, and height And time and place are lost' (*Paradise Lost* 2. 891-4). Already, images of void emptiness are evoked. The true nature of the word ' chaos' is ruthlessly portrayed.

The limitlessness suggests a severe lack of security and direction. Milton describes these concepts as ' lost', which suggests they have not only ceased to exist, but they have ceased to matter, they have not only died completely, but never existed in Chaos in the first place. ' eldest Night And Chaos' (*Paradise lost* 2. 94-5) are described as ' Ancestors of Nature'

(Paradise Lost 2. 895). through his personification of complex ideas, Milton connotes Chaos as a state where nature, the very science and theory of being, everything relatable and understandable, is new and previously absent. Chaos, according to Milton, was around before nature itself even came into existence.

A. B. Chambers states that ' this disordered region clearly existed before the creation of Hell and Earth, but the time of its own generation is never stated' (Chambers 55), and that within Milton's description of Chaos, ' more questions are posed than are easily answered (Chambers 55). Hell is described as a physical place, as is Eden, where the vocations of order are numerous. Hell contains the worst of Nature, (the raging " perpetual storms," the rivers with their " waves of torrent fire") and Eden the best (the ' fresh fountain (Paradise Lost 4. 229) and ' all trees of noblest kind for sight, smell, taste' (Paradise Lost 4. 216)) which intrinsically links the two.

Chaos is not defined in terms of nature. Chaos is an ' ancestor of Nature', implying Chaos existed before nature, and that it cannot be defined in the same way. Chaos is ruled over by ' Rumour next and Chance, And Tumult and Confusion all embroiled'(Paradise Lost 2. 965). Heaven, Earth and Hell are defined as having boundaries, and leaders, God in Heaven and Satan in Hell. Whilst Heaven and Hell are opposites, one being good and the other evil, both are governed by nature. Hell is still in a state of order as opposed to chaos.

Being ungoverned by nature, then, Chaos cannot easily be defined as either good or evil. There are arguments for both. Chaos could be considered good

because God formulates a perfect world from its 'womb'. It can also be considered Evil because it is separate from God. It is on the boundary of Hell, and Satan is allowed to pass through it on his way to Eden, which ultimately catalyses the fall of man. Finally, it could be considered neutral, used by both God and Satan, much like a Neutral Country in a state of War. Critical opinion is very much divided over these ideas.

Chambers argues in his concluding paragraphs that "Chaos is as true an exemplar of hell as that state which everywhere prevails when the laws of providence are set aside, when the ways of God to man are opposed and overturned" (Chambers 84). He strongly advocates the stance that Chaos and Night are 'enemies of God' (65) and 'the material chaos of Paradise Lost is unmistakably opposed to God' (55). This is verified somewhat in the text, as Chaos bids Satan 'go and speed; Havoc and spoil and ruin are my gain' (2. 1008-9). Contrastingly, John Rumrich argues the notion of a 'positive chaos', and considers critics like Chambers who argue otherwise to "unjustifiably assume Milton's endorsement of traditional Western philosophy and religious attitudes towards matter" (Rumrich 1036). Crucially, he believes that Chaos is effectively 'disorder within the framework of an evolving order' (Rumrich 1038), suggesting it is a necessary component of the make-up of Order. These ideas are difficult to grasp, but one could describe chaos as the entity which order needs to define itself against.

Without the disorder of chaos, there would be no basis for defining order, and in that sense, it has some power of good; if it is indeed evil, then it is a

necessary evil. Jackson I. Cope argues in terms of light and darkness, being associated with Heaven and Hell respectively. He argues to the effect that being a dark abyss and therefore associated with Hell, Chaos is as an extension of Hell, and not a separate entity. This somewhat confuses the previous idea that Heaven and Hell, being governed by nature, are separate from Chaos, and indirectly contradicted in the text, which calls Night and Chaos ‘Ancestors of Nature’. We know that Chaos is in opposition to Order and Nature, rather than in opposition to Good or Evil, to Heaven and Hell. Hell is subject to order and nature, which is what links it to Heaven and Earth.

The distinction between Good and Evil is one that exists within Nature, and thus within order, embodied by Heaven and Hell respectively. Chaos is extrinsic to Nature and Order, and thus Extrinsic to the distinction between Good and Evil. God created Earth out of chaos, And Satan, In a sense created the fall of man, and introduced evil to Earth through Chaos. Thus good and evil both came out of Chaos, but are not contained within it.