

The conflict between free will and the divine

[Literature](#), [Poem](#)



In an attempt to defend both divine providence and free will, Milton's God justifies the inherent discrepancy between destiny and free choice.

Supporting the belief that Man is created with sufficient qualities to withstand on his own, Milton's God effectively detaches himself from the implications of Man's fall upon Adam and Eve's eating from the Tree of Knowledge. Although Milton's God foresees what the future will bring, he does not manipulate the fate of Man. Not only is free will compatible with the doctrine of Milton's God, but also it serves as the epitome of God's purity and uncorrupted nature.

By no means does Milton's God predetermine the destinies of Man. In a seemingly defensive yet compelling speech, God claims that he "made [Man] just and right, / Sufficient to have stood, though free to fall" (III. 98 - 99). Man is created with distinctive characteristics that complement his virtue, and God gave him "All he could have" (III. 98). These characteristics can lead to either Man's acceptance or rejection of obedience to God.

Milton's God convincingly defends the notion that Man's virtue does not necessarily protect him from falling, but merely allows him to act freely. The plethora of archangels that falls from Heaven is a testament to the truth that even the sinless angels who once served God in the Heavens are susceptible to fall. Created by Milton's God, "the Ethereal Powers / And spirits, both them who stood and them who failed," (III. 100 - 01) control their own respective destinies because "Freely they stood who stood, and fell who fell" (III. 102). All-knowing God, on the other hand, though aware of the futures of his creations, has no influence on their individual fates and thus

preserves his righteousness. Those who ‘ stood’ embraced God’s obedience while those who ‘ fell’ rebelled and were the causes of their own demises.

An omnipotent and flawless figure, Milton’s God esteems those who abide by his doctrine. Nevertheless, he permits Man to act in whichever manner his character will guide him. Valuing “ true allegiance, constant faith, [and] love,” (III. 104) Milton’s God grants Man a choice of whether or not he will embrace such qualities. Regardless of what the repercussions may be should Man discount God’s values, the mere reality that Man is given a choice to select his destiny verifies God’s granting of free will. The fallen angels, “ authors to themselves in all, / Both what they judge and what they choose,” possess no right to dispute God’s judgment, as formed free, “ free they must remain” (III. 122 – 24). Free choice is thus, conspicuously, the determining factor which dictates the destiny of Man. Meanwhile, God remains a flawless, virtuous bystander who simply grants Man free choice.

Milton’s God does not seek satisfaction by witnessing the downfall of his subjects. On the contrary, he is appalled by such circumstances and wishes for the most glorious futures for those beneath him:

What pleasure I, from such obedience paid, When Will and Reason (Reason also is Choice), Useless and vain, of freedom both despoiled, Made passive both, had served Necessity, Not me? (III. 107 – 11) Any feeling of “ Necessity” that may emerge is not a feeling of necessity of obedience to God, but rather it is a feeling of temptation to obey Satan. No sense of compliance to God exists in the fact that Man is created with free choice. However, those individuals that are enticed by Satan’s corruption are

accountable for their own misfortunes in that free will enables them to choose between complying with God and complying with Satan.

The forgiveness of Milton's God applies only to those who are willing to accept it. Man can choose to be saved by God's will, should he desire.

However, the fallen angels " themselves ordained their fall. / The first sort by their own suggestion fell, / Self-tempted, self-depraved" (III. 128 - 30). These demon angels, on the contrary, cannot be saved by God's grace; their temptation is a result of their ambition. Man's temptation, however, is a result of Satan and consequently, he " shall find grace" (III. 131). However, Adam attempts to prevent Eve's temptation through his belief that " God left free the Will" (IX. 351). Adam's futile persuasion is insufficient to keep Eve from sinning as the influence of Satan is far more commanding than that of Adam. Not only is Adam convinced that his decisions are wholly dependent upon free choice, but also he comes to sway Eve into believing the very same principle. They, as a result, are expected to make the appropriate decisions on the basis of their own standards, without external influences from God.

Initially convinced that she should refrain from eating the fruit from the Tree, Eve experiences a startling turn of events. Eve, remaining loyal to God's one stipulation, trusts that she and Adam must live with " Law to [them] selves; [their] reason is [their] law" (IX. 654). Living with free will, Adam and Eve are expected to remain obedient to God's single wish in order to remain sinless. In attempting to do so, they eventually give in to Satan's temptation and eat the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. Meanwhile, Milton's God maintains his

purity and incorruption through his detachment from the temptation of Man and his granting to Adam and Eve free choice. Nonetheless, those “persuasive words” (IX. 737) of the Serpent, “impregned / With reason, to her seeming, and with truth” (IX. 737 – 38), influence Eve into believing that eating from the Tree is harmless and poses no repercussions. Little does she know, the free will that she is granted by God ultimately becomes the prey upon which Satan corrupts.

The incongruity between divine providence and free will confounds readers of John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* while it prompts them to consider its deeper implications. God relinquishes his belief of predestination in order to maintain his flawless, righteous character in granting man free will. Upon Adam and Eve’s temptation and subsequent eating from the Tree of Knowledge, Milton’s God is perceived as sinless, having given Man the ability to choose freely. Satan, the steadfast tempter, on the other hand, brings out the flaws in the character of Man, once again alluding to God’s utter perfection and contrasting it with Man’s susceptibility.