

Concept of Reason and Free Will in Paradise Lost

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Abstract

Milton in Paradise Lost understands and dramatizes the human freedom to believe and to act. He believes in producing ethical men governed by reason. Paradise Lost advocates Milton's prophetic vision and the poem conveys a deep conviction of justice in God's ways and insists on man's freedom to choose the right path or the wrong one. He grounds this freedom in reason and his understanding of freedom, reason and faith conforms to the rationalists. Milton's God gives the freedom to believe in reason, and he does not ask his creatures who are endowed with reason, to believe in Him without that faculty. Free will leads individuals to the right path under the guidance of reason and faith.

Keywords: Reason, Passion, Free Will.

Introduction

Milton's epic 'Paradise Lost' in the process of expounding and justifying 'the ways of God to men' allows penetrating insight into the debates and anxieties of 17th century England. It was a period of religious transition and was ridden with disorder and loss of faith. Milton has used the term 'Reason' as the law of Right or the will of God and 'reason' as the intellectual faculty in man. He has stated in 'De Doctrina Christiana' that God has envisaged freedom of creatures from eternity. Inner freedom is conditional upon the right action of the will, i.e. the act of obeying the dictates of reason. Human reason operates in multiple dimensions in 'Paradise Lost' as indicated by the distinction between the modes of reasoning employed by Adam and Eve.

Objective of Study

The question of human freedom has haunted Milton as a humanist. What Milton asserts in Paradise Lost is the potential of fallen humanity to retrieve what is lost. The mystery of man and his nature cannot be understood unless there is a single distinctive principle. This paper addresses the power and nature of reason, its varying degrees which enables man's relationship with God in Milton's epic poem Paradise Lost. It emphasizes temperance between passion and reason through discourse and prayer. Reason is the creative and operative principle; it maintains and restores the harmony of the universe.

Review of Literature

1. A.G George, Milton and the Nature of Man, Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1974 (The author learnt via this work that God's image in man signifies the principle of rationality whereas his likeness refers to the native righteousness which was impaired at the fall of man: could be repaired by exercise of man's rationality, which is the image of God in his work.)
2. Basil Willey, The Seventeenth Century Background: Studies in the thought of the age in relation to poetry and religion, London: Chateau and Windus, 1950. (The author relied on this work because Willey confirmed that to follow reason is to follow God. He also stated that 'Man in virtue of his reason has the unique responsibility of moral choice.)
3. John Milton, 'De Doctrina Christiana', Complete Prose Works of John Milton, New Haven, Yale University Press; 8 Volumes (This work helped the author in corroborating Milton's belief in the principle of moral control rather than of intellectual enlightenment.



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Research Methodology

This research is a qualitative study that shall use secondary sources of information like books, articles in academic journals and academic thesis to investigate the concept of Reason and Free Will and its manifestation in literature. The method used in this research is content analysis. To conduct this method data is systematically collected from books, articles, web content and interpreted accordingly

In the world represented by *Paradise Lost*, no human action can be freely performed unless it is grounded in reason's governing will. Since the belief in God that Milton calls "faith" is a freely performed human action, it is not independent of reason but grounded in the exercise of reason. Milton's emphasis on free will in *Paradise Lost* is an instrument to reiterate God's authority as supreme and absolute. As Diane Kelsey McColley puts it, "Free will allows subjects to respond creatively to their calling for obedience and love and interpret it in their personal way." The concept of man's soul is central to Milton's thought and approach to human experience in both *De Doctrina Christina* and *Paradise Lost*. Milton's general principles are grounded in the ancient ethics and from there he derives the idea of conflict of reason and passion in the soul of man and a conviction to the foreknowledge as an instrument to virtue. This can be seen in the treatment of the story of man's fall as narrated in *Genesis* - which Milton views as an allegory illustrating the obscuration of reason by passions- which in effect causes spiritual death and the loss of freedom to choose right.

Milton in *Aeropagatica* observes that God gives to man the gift of Reason. Adam was given the reason to choose, therefore, he says passionately 'Give me liberty to know, to utter and argue freely according to conscience, above all liberties.' *Aeropagatica* serves as a monumental example of Milton's love for liberty. Milton firmly believes in the capacity of man being tempted, tested and no one exempted from this testing. Grierson observes that *Aeropagatica* still "remains a splendid prophetic hymn 'to all those' whose hope for humanity is still centered in reason." (Grierson 55) In Book III of *Paradise Lost*, before the fall, God speaks to the Son about reason and free will:

What Pleasure I From such obedience paid,
When will reason (reason also is a choice)
Useless and vain, of freedom both despoiled,
Made passive both, had served necessity,
Not me. (107-110)

In this passage God explains the necessity of "will and reason" as "proof.. / Of true allegiance" (104-105) to Him; God would not receive pleasure from "obedience paid" out of necessity." He equates reason with choice, echoing the idea in *Aeropagatica*; without freedom, will and reason are "[m]ade passive" and become "[u]seless and vain." Thus, reason before the fall is the proof and sign of man's allegiance to God. Just as the freedom of reason symbolizes man's obedience to God, it also challenges the idea that man is "sufficient to have stood" (III.99) As reason enables man to freely obey, it also exposes man to error and sin. Adam and Eve should have refrained

from eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge as a sign of their obedience. Thus, their transgression after the fall is not simply eating the fruit, but choosing to eat it. Raphael explains that reason resides differently in celestial and earthly bodies. In Book V, he explains that in angels' reason is intuition but in man it requires discourse, and that man cannot reason alone, but in conversation with others. Milton highlights moments where Adam and Eve use reason rightly and wrongly.

M V Rama Sarma, in his comprehensive study of Milton writes that "With Milton liberty does not mean licence, it is a willing submission to God. Milton holds the view that God purposely exposes men to trials and temptations, so that the best in them come out"(31). Milton believes that God in his omniscience has foreknowledge of man's fate but he leaves his will free. No one has been singled out for special emittance good or bad. He is in fact projecting man to be: "noble by nature; owing obedience to his Creator; free to choose and hence capable of actions morally good or bad, for which he is alone responsible; beset by a strange mental perverseness or levity which thwarts his native endowment and opens him to the rule of passion over reason" (Tillyard 229).

Milton, thus, believes in producing ethical men governed by reason, not by passion. *Paradise Lost* advocates Milton's prophetic vision and the poem conveys a deep conviction of justice in God's ways and insists on man's freedom to choose the right path or the wrong one. In Book IX before Adam and Eve are deceived, Adam reminds Eve that but God left free the will, and reason he made right. (351-52)

However, a question arises from this that is whether the fall changed Adam and Eve's ability to reason freely. When we examine Eve being tempted by the serpent, we may find a clearer answer Eve says:

But of this tree we may not taste nor touch:
God so commanded and left that command
Sole daughter of His voice. The rest we live
Law to ourselves: our reason is our law.

(651-54)

Milton highlights the peril of rhetoric and Eve's disability to distinguish pure reason from sinful reason, which ultimately leads to her fall. Reason is not only her law, but also, as stated from Milton's *Aeropagatica* and Book III, Reason is the basis for choice: Free Choice. It is here that Eve must choose to be obedient to the Law of God. If she follows the Law of God, she will not submit to her desire for autonomy, and as a result remain free from sin. Although reason should still be her guide and should direct her will to submit to the will of God, she decides to become autonomous. When she makes her decision, her perception of reason changes, and perhaps even the state of human Reason itself.

As a consequence of Eve's choice to obey the Serpent, instead of God, a dual nature develops within the faculty of human reason. For example, when the serpent tempts Eve, we are told:

Fixed on the fruit she gazed, which to behold
Might tempt alone, and in her ears the sound
Yet rung of his persuasive words, impregn'd

With Reason, to her seeming, and with truth,
(735-8)

Here in this passage, Reason and the Serpent's lies merge, since the Serpent's persuasive words rung and were "Impregn'd / With Reason, to her seeming and with truth." When she later recounts her unreasonable act to Adam, she informs him that she felt a change happen within her that led her from the state of " Reasoning to Admiration...that I /Have also tasted, and have also found" what the serpent has found. That is the change in the faculty of Reason. And if Reason and deception have merged, then the human condition is no longer the same as in the Garden before the fall. Although reason should still be the guide and should direct her will to submit to the will of God, Eve has begun to employ reason in ways of the enemy. Thus the very process of being led to the tree is process of being led astray. Milton's whole epic affirms to the fact that Man is able to stand, though free to fall, so it was necessary for him to project Eve as capable, independent, freely thinking individual, who can counter whatever argument the Serpent offers. Stella. P. Revard, too, observes that "Milton resists giving us an Eve who yields to Satan because she is intellectually and morally unable to reply to him. By adding a scene of dialogue with Adam on the the very day that Eve meets the Serpent, Milton demonstrates that Eve could have used her reason to engage in fruitful debate and to carry her own arguments against the Serpent by applying the same skills she has used in debate with her husband. Eve is not a weak woman bested by superior adversary, but a capable woman who fails to carry through and defend the reason, faith and love that she has only newly won, the freedom to defend."

Milton provides a solution to the plight of Adam and Eve in Book XI and reveals an idea of free will:

Thus they, in lowliest plight repentant stood
Praying, for from the Mercy - seat above
Prevenient Grace descending had remov'd
The stony from their hearts, and made new flesh
(II.1-4)

The 'Preventive Grace' is not imposed upon Man. It is offered as a "choice" solution to Man's tragic predicament. The Son in Book XI reveals that it is an "implanted grace in man" which reminds Man that there is always a way out of sin, if he desires.

Milton's God is a God of free will. In Book XI, Milton's God Offers even the Son a choice to either accept or refuse to provide a way out for Man, when he says "To whom the Father without cloud, serene / All thy request for man, accepted Son / Obtain, all thy request was my decree" (45-47) Milton makes it clear that Adam and Eve must live with consequences of their choices. Milton, thus, believes in producing ethical men governed by reason, not by passion. Reason is the creative and operative principle of the universe which maintains and restores the harmony in the universe amongst man, beasts and the outward world. Reason in its rightness, is a rational and philosophical conscience which harmonizes man with man and with God. The implications of man's discursive reason points to the irony of obedience: for

man to be " sufficient to stand," he is dependent on divine wisdom through discourse. Man can choose for himself the upward path and become divine by accepting reason as the guiding force in life. Milton realizes the right reason in man is capable of controlling the passions completely. Mary Anne Radzinowicz, while interpreting Milton, puts the point: "...in a free mind reason harmonises the passions and the imagination; no external state of freedom can compensate for the internal chaos and imbalances which arise from passionately pursuing incompatible ends." Thus, man has to earn his freedom through reason's responsibility, as Milton writes in *Aeropagatica*:

God gave him Reason. He gave him freedom to choose, for freedom is but choosing.(741)

Conclusion

In order for the will to be free as God left it, man has to act voluntarily and so to perform the kinds of obedience and service that God requires, his will must in some way be answerable to reason. Man is the maker of his own destiny and is free from coercive forces external to it such as fate and God himself. He is the author of his own fall and is free by virtue of the capacity to judge and choose which essentially involves some kind of exercise of reason.

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