Milton: A Christian Defence of Free Will

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> But I ne kan nat bulte it to the bren,
> As kan the hooly doctour Augustyn,
> Or Boece, or the Bishop Bradwardyn:
> Wheither that Goddes worthy forwityng
> Streyneth me nedely for to doon a thing
> ...
> Or elles if free choys be graunted me.
>
> Chaucer, *The Nun's Priest's Tale*, ll. 474-78, 480.

Milton ends his invocation to the Muse in *Paradise Lost*, Book I, by praying for divine assistance that he may 'assert Eternal Providence/ And justify the ways of God to men.' (*PL* I: 25-6) One would think the justness of 'the ways of God' to be axiomatic, or so at least Milton seems to have thought[i]; but the fact that he had set himself the noble task has very often led readers to suspect otherwise. There is in fact a philosophical question involved here, and a very problematic one at that. For if God is omnipotent, omniscient, and supremely good (*C.P.W.*, VI: 145,149,150-51), as almost all religions agree he *is*, how came sin and suffering and evil in the world? Is God himself then the creator of evil?[ii] It is this paradox that led the Gnostics, or at least some of them, to hold that the sensible world had been created by an inferior deity named Ialdabaoth, and this again is behind the Manichaean view that evil is a positive principle. It was perhaps as an answer to Manichaeanism that the early church propounded its doctrine of evil as *privatio boni*: that is, privation or absence of good.

The problem of course becomes even more difficult to negotiate when it comes to determining the relationship between God and man, for it is not easy to reduce man to a philosophical abstraction. God made Adam and Eve, 'our grand parents', in his perfect wisdom and love. Adam moreover was created in God's own image (Gen. i.26), which for Milton is proof that the soul too was made by God at that time (*C.P.W.*, VI: 316).[iii] It is man's soul that bears the closest resemblance to God. But in spite of his divine likeness man did transgress; he did fall, introducing death and pain

and misery into the world. It is in the Biblical narrative of man's transgression and his subsequent expulsion from Eden (Gen. iii) that divine foreknowledge seems to clash most irreconcilably with human free will. Since God's prescience is infallible he must have foreknown with certainty that human beings would transgress, leaving, it seems, little for man to choose from. In other words, did man fall because of his own decision to disobey God's command, or because God would anyway have him fall? Are human beings free to choose for themselves, or are they forced to choose what must necessarily be? This essay will try to see how Milton attempted to solve this riddle by an examination of some of the key passages of his *Christian Doctrine* and *Paradise Lost*.

In the fifth book of *The Consolation*, Philosophy, replying to Boethius' question whether there can be room for freedom of the will in the intricate chain of causation planned by God, says:

> There is freedom.... For it would be impossible for any rational nature to exist without it. Whatever by nature has the use of reason has the power of judgement to decide each matter.
>
> (Boethius 1969: 149)

This might also be taken as Milton's starting point on the subject. Even as we grant God's omniscience there must place for free will, since it is hard to imagine how human beings could exist otherwise:

> ..., then liberty would be an empty word, and will have to be banished utterly not only from religion but also from morality and even from indifferent matters. Nothing will happen except by necessity, since there is nothing God does not foresee.
>
> (*C.P.W.*, VI: 164)

He rejects outright all theories that 'jettison entirely all man's freedom of action and all attempt or desire on his part to do right' (*C.P.W.*, VI: 157). There is, moreover, no scriptural authority for such theories, proceeding, as they do, from human speculation: '... but scripture nowhere says it and that is in itself a good enough reason for rejecting their suggestion' (*C.P.W.*, VI: 157). Like all honest Protestants Milton trusted no other authority save the revealed Word of God in matters of faith. Theological debates are all human inventions, what matters is the text of the Bible as it appears to one's own conscience.

The problem, however, manifests in its full complexity in *Paradise Lost* where the contradiction has to be resolved within the limits of artistic representation. Here, our first encounter with Milton's God occurs when the latter is surveying his creation and sees Satan flying towards 'the new created world' (*PL* III: 89). As per narrative time this is *before* Satan's arrival on earth, or his tempting of Eve, or the Fall of man. But,

awkwardly, he speaks to his '[o]nly begotten Son' (*PL* III: 80), telling him what *will* come to pass.

> And now
> Through all restraint broke loose he wings his way
> Not far off heaven, in the precincts of light,
> Directly towards the new created world,
> And man there placed, with purpose to assay
> If him by force he can destroy, or worse,
> By some false guile pervert; and shall pervert
> For man will hearken to his glozing lies,
> And easily transgress the sole command,
> Sole pledge of his obedience: so will fall,
> He and his faithless progeny: whose fault?
> Whose but his own? Ingrate, he had of me
> All he could have; I made him just and right,
> Sufficient to have stood, though free to fall.
>
> (*PL* III: 86-99)

This is, as we see, a tricky passage. Unlike the *Christian Doctrine* where Milton can engage with the issue of human free will at the level of discursive analysis, here the question has to be settled at the level of representation, which is a different matter altogether. The question then is: does the passage in *Paradise Lost* annul and belie the spirited defence of free will in the *Christian Doctrine*?

Dennis Danielson takes up the issue in an essay (Danielson 1989). Commenting on this crucial passage Danielson writes: 'God's knowledge is analogous to our knowledge of things present --- it is properly *scientia* rather than *praescientia*, since God dwells in an eternal present that transcends our categories of time and tense.' (Danielson 1989: 120) This is exactly what Boethius had argued in *The Consolation of Philosophy*. God lives in an eternal present where the human distinctions of past, present and future do not apply:

> His knowledge transcends all movement of time
> and abides in the simplicity of its immediate pre-
> sent. It encompasses the infinite sweep of past
> and future, and regards all things in its simple
> comprehension as if they were now taking place.
> Thus, if you will think about the foreknowledge
> by which God distinguishes all things, you will
> rightly consider it to be not a foreknowledge of
> future events, but knowledge of a never changing
> present. For this reason, divine foreknowledge
> is called providence, rather than prevision, because

> it resides above all inferior things and looks out on
> all things from their summit.
>
> (Boethius 1969: 106)

But Danielson is also quick to point out the oddity in the passage. God begins speaking as though the Fall of man is still something in the *future* ('so will fall') and ends up speaking of it as something *accomplished* ('he had of me'). Danielson says:

> Accordingly, the notion of free will upon which
> Milton's theodicy is based takes on an ambiguity
> that it would not have possessed had God uttered
> his judgement only after the Fall, epic time. Because
> narrative is a time-bound medium, a God this
> narratively presented cannot help but sound prejudiced
> when he speaks of the supposedly "unnecessary"
> future Fall as if it were a *fait accompli*. Although the
> difficulty may be literary and not ultimately doctrinal,
> one cannot readily justify Milton for placing God in
> what appears such a doctrinally awkward situation.
>
> (Danielson 1989: 120-21)

Although there is no doubt that the passage in *Paradise Lost* does pose certain 'awkward' questions, yet, as Danielson himself concedes, the difficulty may actually be literary rather than doctrinal. For if God had delivered his judgement after the Fall, although the linguistic ambiguity would have been resolved, yet the effect of the passage would have been substantially diminished. Let us then give Milton the benefit of the doubt and try to see how he doctrinally tackled the issue in his *Christian Doctrine*.

Milton's argument for the defence of free will is conceptualised in two ways: one, by showing that it is contrary to the nature of God to deny his subjects the freedom to exercise their individual wills; and two, by engaging in a refutation of those points of orthodox Christian dogma that limit the freedom of the human subject by imposing various kinds of necessities upon it. The first is what may be called a defence from First Principle, while the second is more properly a doctrinal defence. To the first point then.

God is omnipotent and is not driven by any impulse of necessity (*nulla necessitate impulsus*). There is, however, one internal necessity to which even God is subject: that he is necessarily God (*C.P.W.*, VI: 159). This, however, does not in any way limit his freedom since it involves only a logical entailment of his own exercise of power. It is only in God that an immutable internal necessity to do good is perfectly compatible with absolute freedom of action (Das Gupta 1995: 257). Milton makes this point rather cautiously, though Arminius had already said much the same thing in his *Analysis of the Ninth Chapter of Romans*: 'We ought by no means to admit the thought that there is injustice in God, who is just in himself, and, indeed, is essential justice, and does nothing, and can do nothing, unless it most perfectly agrees with his nature' (*C.P.W.*,

VI, n.20: 159). God cannot act in an un-Godly manner. It would not agree with his nature to contradict himself, since he is by nature unchangeable. It is therefore unbecoming of God to deny human beings freedom of action after having himself given it to them. Thus in the *Christian Doctrine* (I.iii) Milton is able to defend man's free will from this First Principle of God's immutability:

> ... God becomes mutable so long as you make those things which by his command are matters of free will, appear inevitabilities.... He would be mutable, and his intention would not be stable, if, by a second decree, he thwarted the freedom he had once decided upon, or cast the least shadow of necessity over it.
>
> (*C.P.W.*, VI: 161)

Again, in the *Paradise Lost* God says:

> I formed them free, and free they must remain,
> Till they enthral themselves: I else must change
> Their nature, and revoke the high decree
> Unchangeable, eternal, which ordained
> Their freedom....
>
> (*PL* III: 124-8)

Before we proceed to see the doctrinal points of Milton's defence we may briefly consider the views of those orthodox Christian thinkers whose systems Milton abandoned in his *Christian Doctrine*. As Kelley points out, the deterministic theology of Luther and Calvin, which denied any freedom whatsoever to the human subject, was in effect an extension and a consolidation of Augustinian premises ('Introduction', *C.P.W.*, VI: 75-8). It was Augustine who first propounded the doctrine of 'Original Sin', as what was possibly an answer to the high optimism of Pelagius. Augustine magisterially declares in the *City of God*:

> [T]he first men were indeed so created, that if they had not sinned, they would not have experienced any kind of death; but that, having become sinners, they were so punished with death, that whatsoever sprang from their stock should also be punished with the same death. For nothing else could be born of them than that which they themselves had been. Their nature was deteriorated in proportion to the greatness of the condemnation of their sin, so that what existed as punishment in those who first sinned became a natural consequence in their children.
>
> (*D.C.D.*, XIII. iii)

Man does have the freedom to exert his own will, but given the corruption it is infected with, it is unlikely to lead to anything positive or good. Augustine's theory of election was likewise taken up by Luther and Calvin as a starting point for their doctrines of predestination and supralapsarianism. The supralapsarian dogmatists held that the decision to elect or reprobate was taken by God even before creation. God here not only foreknows everything, but has decreed them absolutely. Thus Calvin would not only have God decree man's Fall, but also create him to Fall: 'The decree is dreadful, I confess. Yet no one can deny that God foreknew what end man was to have before he created him, and consequently foreknew because he so ordained by his decree' (*Institutes* 3.23.7)

In the *Christian Doctrine* (I.iii) Milton defines the nature of the divine decree in non-absolute terms. God makes absolute decrees only regarding those things which he has proposed to carry out himself. 'For example he decreed by himself to create the world, and he decreed by himself that he would not curse the earth any longer, Gen viii. 21' (*C.P.W.*, VI: 154). There are however actions which 'others perform, or God performs in cooperation with others' (*C.P.W.*, VI: 153), and regarding such actions God's decrees are not absolute but conditional. This is, however, not a contradiction of God's immutability, since as revealed throughout the scriptures, God, for reasons consistent with his wisdom and justice, has deliberately left his decrees subject to human response. In fact, it is by interpreting God's decrees in an absolute sense do we make him contradict himself. For if God has absolutely decreed justification for some they shall be justified whatever happens. No amount of villainy and wrongdoing can prevent the salvation of those that are absolutely elected by God. This is clearly contradictory to God's decree that one must do good to be saved, and as such cannot be the case. This denial of orthodox Christian determinism is a crucial component of Milton's free will defence.

But can there be a place for human freewill in the face of an all-encompassing divine foreknowledge? How can God know with certainty the outcome of human actions which, if shaped by the exercise of free will, must be uncertain in nature? And if God knows them certainly, as he would surely do because of his wisdom, does it not make them inevitable? These and similarly disturbing questions are answered by Milton by distinguishing certainty from necessity. God knows the outcome of all events certainly, but that does not necessarily make them happen. To illustrate his point Milton now introduces what is sometimes called the 'prophetic analogy.' If a human being having prophetic powers were to foreknow future events with certainty can those events, when they do occur as foreseen by him, be said to have happened because of any kind of necessity arising out of his foreknowledge? As a proof text Milton cites 2 Kings viii.12. Knowledge is an internal aspect existing only in one's mind. It cannot affect external things. Divine foreknowledge exists in God's mind without influencing human courses of action.

The question as to why Milton thought it necessary to defend human free will so staunchly from the various orthodox challenges to it will lead us to his human philosophy. In the *Christian Doctrine* Milton lays down the basis of what must have appeared to him an issue of utmost importance: to define a position where human beings could have the freedom to assume the responsibility for their own actions. If a strict necessity were to determine human actions all possibilities of ethical judgement would be vitiated. It would, as Milton remarks, 'make demons and wicked men blameless' (*C.P.W.*, VI: 165), and neither would goodness have any value. We should take God seriously when he says:

> Not free, what proof could they have giv'n sincere
> Of true allegiance, constant faith or love,
> Where only what they needs must do, appeared,
> Not what they would? What praise could they receive?
> What pleasure I from such obedience paid....
>
> (*PL* III: 103-7)

The freedom of the will is actually a test of human sincerity and makes it possible to situate human actions within an ethical framework.

But God has not left man defenceless in this battle between good and bad. He has gifted man with reason. It is through an exercise of his reason that man would be able to negotiate the right path through the labyrinth of life, and the same was true for prelapsarian man. In fact, in *Paradise Lost* Milton equates reason with choice: 'reason also is choice' (*PL* III: 108). It is, however, in *Areopagitica* that Milton gives expression to his unreserved faith on reason: 'Many there be that complain of Divine Providence for suffering Adam to transgress; foolish tongues! When God gave him reason, He gave him freedom to choose, for reason is but choosing; he had been else a mere artificial Adam, such an Adam as he is in the motions.' (*Areopagitica*: 163) It is the best gift God could have given to man, for it makes him 'just and right, / Sufficient to have stood, though free to fall.' (*PL* III: 98-9)

In his vigorous defence of human free will, in his unstinting belief in reason, and in his strong assertion of human responsibility Milton is moving very close to such humanist positions as found in the works of Pico della Mirandola, Marsilio Ficino, or Juan Luis Vives. In fact, Pico and Vives' conception of man as a rational being deliberately placed by God in the middle of the universe so that he is free to move up or slide down as he wills agrees very well with the mature philosophy of Milton (Cassirer 1948: 223-54, 387-93). Yet Milton was a believing Christian, and it is as a Christian that he defends both God and man.

NOTES:

[i] In *Christian Doctrine*, Bk.I, ch. ii, Milton cites 'justness' as the fourth attribute of God 'grouped under the concepts of Life, Intellect, and Will.' One of the reasons why he does not discuss it in detail here is because 'it is self-evident.' (*C.P.W.*, VI: 151)

[ii] Regarding those who hold God the author of sin, Milton remarks: 'If I did not believe that they said such a thing from error rather than wickedness, I should consider them of all blasphemers the most utterly damned.' (*C.P.W.*, VI: 166)

[iii] See ibid. note 58, pp. 316-7, for Milton's views on the creation of the soul.

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