



2020

Adam and the Fall: One that Loved not Wisely, but too Well

John A. Murphy

DePaul University, j14amurphy@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://www.mackseyjournal.org/publications>

 Part of the [Continental Philosophy Commons](#), [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Murphy, John A. (2020) "Adam and the Fall: One that Loved not Wisely, but too Well," *The Macksey Journal*: Vol. 1 , Article 82.

Available at: <https://www.mackseyjournal.org/publications/vol1/iss1/82>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by The Johns Hopkins University Macksey Journal. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Macksey Journal by an authorized editor of The Johns Hopkins University Macksey Journal.

Adam and the Fall: One that Loved not Wisely, but too Well

John Murphy

DePaul University

Abstract

Paradise Lost transforms the Bible's story of Genesis—the creation and the Fall of humanity—into a fully developed epic poem. Traditional readings of both *Paradise Lost* and Genesis have often blamed Eve's consumption of the fruit for the loss of paradise; however, it seems that those traditional readings have restricted the interpretations of the Fall to focus merely on the consumption of the fruit. These readings seem to ignore the situational conditions Milton creates and the motivations of the first people. In order to break away from the traditional interpretations of the Fall, I will examine free will as articulated in Augustine's *On Free Choice of the Will* in close relation to the text-based conditions of the first humans in *Paradise Lost*. With this careful focus on free will and its constraints, I will prove that Eve is not at fault for the Fall in Milton's epic. I will further contend that the Fall occurred, not because of Adam's disobedient consumption of the fruit, but rather because Adam chooses to love and prioritize Eve over God.

Keywords: Free Will, *Paradise Lost*, Augustine, The Fall

Introduction

John Milton expands the forty verses of the origin myth about Adam and Eve by a factor of about four hundred in order to create *Paradise Lost*: an epic poem with exponentially more

detail. His expansion transforms the relatively flat characters of Adam and Eve in the biblical story of Genesis into complex people who play vital roles in the history of humanity and its eventual Fall from Paradise. As the first to eat of the Tree of Knowledge and the one to offer the fruit to Adam, Eve is almost dogmatically blamed with the fault of the Fall and the expulsion from Paradise; however, there lies a vastly different and potentially jarring alternative within the lines of *Paradise Lost*. Through an exploration of free will and evil, as articulated by Augustine in *On Free Choice of the Will*, I will examine the capabilities and actions of the first human beings in Paradise. I hope to show that although Eve has historically borne the responsibility for the Fall, the responsibility for the loss of Paradise lies with Adam and his free choice to love and prioritize Eve above God.

Milton's depiction of Adam and Eve in *Paradise Lost* follows the same hierarchical ordering characteristic of interpretations of Genesis insofar as "God set [Adam] above [Eve]" (Milton X 149). I must clarify that in this essay I am examining the origin myth of Adam and Eve strictly through the situational conditions of the text of *Paradise Lost*. This means that the analysis of free will in relation to the epic engages Milton's misogynistic recreation of the story of Genesis, such that Eve is explicitly declared to be subordinate to Adam. With the scope of this essay in mind, in Milton's universe Eve is subordinate to Adam, for his "perfection far excelled / [h]ers in all real dignity" (Milton X 150-1). Taking Milton at his word, Eve's inequality makes her role in the Fall more limited than is usually claimed.

Augustine's Free Will in *Paradise Lost*

Augustine understands free will within a hierarchy of faculties. The first and most basic level of this hierarchy consists of those things that merely exist: inanimate objects. Animate things—by this Augustine means only animals and humans rather than all living things—are

differentiated from inanimate things insofar as animate things “are superior... in virtue of having a soul” (Augustine 13). The second tier of this hierarchy of faculties, then, is that which has a soul. Augustine goes on to point out that the difference between humans and animals is the human ability to tame animals. Although animals may overpower humans, animals are incapable of taming human beings because animals lack reason or understanding. As Augustine points out, what “is usually called ‘reason’ or ‘understanding’” is that which allows humans to tame and subdue animals (Augustine 12). It is only because of this faculty of reason that humans rank the highest in the hierarchy, and it is that same faculty of reason that creates free will.

Milton affirms Augustine’s hierarchy through a conversation between Adam and God. Prior to the creation of Eve, Adam complains, despite the fact that the world was populated with all varieties of animals, that “[i]n solitude / [w]hat happiness, who can enjoy alone” (Milton VII 364-65). Adam finds the company of animals to be insufficient. Though they have souls, they lack understanding, and therefore, Adam cannot converse with them. God Himself confirms the fact that fellowship with beasts is not fit for one imparted with His own image and faculty of reason.

Milton and Augustine affirm the unique nature of the faculty of reason, and both argue that it changes the nature of the soul’s capacity to will freely. Here we must recall that both animals and humans have souls, and all souls are capable of willing. Willing is acting on the basis of desire, and both animals and humans have desire. A dog, for example wills to drink water when she is thirsty; she cannot contemplate drinking or decide to drink, she merely desires and wills to do so. It is only with and through reason and understanding, however, that a soul may decide to do something. Without this understanding, it is impossible for a soul to choose to do, or not do, a thing. Choice requires thinking, and unlike the dog, the human—possessing the

faculty of reason—has the ability to contemplate acting on their will. They can think about their actions and, moreover, can understand the difference between right and wrong. Reason, therefore, allows a soul to act or not act on its will based on its knowledge of what is right or what is wrong. Through the ability to choose to act or not act, reason creates free will. Augustine specifies that although reason creates free will and the ability to follow or turn away from what reason designates as proper, it is only when the will or the “impulses of the soul are ruled by reason, [that] a human being... said to be ordered” (Augustine 14).

In book IX of *Paradise Lost*, Milton summarizes Augustine’s notion that it is only through the faculty of reason that one may be free. Adam explains this to Eve:

The danger lies, yet lies within his power:

Against his will he can receive no harm.

But God left free the will, for what obeys

Reason, is free, and reason he made right. (Milton IX 349-52)

This summary emphasizes two specific ideas from *On Free Choice of the Will*. First, in saying “reason he made right,” Milton emphasizes the fact that reason is properly ordered towards that which is right and good (Milton IX 352). Second, in saying “[t]he danger lies... within his power... God left free the will,” Milton emphasizes that the ability to turn away from the good lies in the soul’s ability to reject reason (Milton IX 349-51). Milton’s summary supports the claim that it is only through the ability to do otherwise—to follow or reject proper reason—that free will exists. The ability to ignore reason, to knowingly will to do what is wrong, is fundamentally necessary to the existence of free will. God explains this idea: “[n]ot free, what proof could they have giv’n sincere / [o]f true allegiance” (Milton III 103-4).

God, then, gives the decree that Adam and Eve may not eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge in order to allow the first humans to prove their allegiance to Him. At this point, we must recall that in *Paradise Lost* Eve is by nature subordinate to Adam and “seen least wise” (Milton VII 578). Given that reason is the faculty of the soul that creates free will, a question arises: does Eve, with less understanding and reason, truly have the same ability to determine right and wrong—to choose between rejecting reason and following it? Simply put, given that Eve possesses a limited version of the faculty of reason, does she have free will?

God claims he created humans as “sufficient to have stood, though free to fall” (Milton III 99), but if Adam, with the full faculty of reason, is *merely* sufficient to stand, how is it possible for Eve, with a subordinated faculty of reason, to also be adequately sufficient? Eve questions this herself: “for inferior who is free?” (Milton IX 825). In other words, if Eve is sufficiently lacking in reason due to her inequality, how may both Adam and Eve be sufficient to stand and free to fall? I suggest that the only way for both humans to be adequately sufficient to stand while maintaining God’s honesty is for Adam and Eve to be sufficient to withstand the temptation of different transgressions.

The Consumption of the Fruit

The transgression that caused the Fall is often understood to be Eve’s eating of the fruit, and by means of her temptation, Adam’s subsequent consumption. The Fall, according to this interpretation, is fundamentally Eve’s responsibility, for “[t]he serpent... beguiled [her] and [she] did eat” (Milton X 162). Adam, in contrast, is portrayed as a suckered man that fell because of the fallen Eve’s malicious temptation; however, there are multiple flaws with this conception of Eve as the cause of the Fall and the temptress of Adam. The first pertains directly to free will as discussed above. Reason and the ability to do otherwise constitute the existence of free will.

Adam, when dealing with the fallen Eve, knew through reason that God's directive forbade the eating of the fruit, yet he still chose to turn away from reason and eat. Adam is, therefore, at least equally culpable for the Fall because both disobeyed God and ate the fruit. But, to recall once more, according to God the Son in *Paradise Lost*, Eve is by nature less perfect than Adam (Milton X 151). Given that fact, it would seem that Adam's act of consumption must be far worse than Eve's since he had more God-given sufficiency to do otherwise. Further, God, as the perfect being, cannot err, yet the insufficient reason He endowed upon Eve seems to prove the Fall inevitable. This inevitability removes free will's necessary condition of the ability to do otherwise, thereby, contradicting the notion that Eve had free will. The inequality between Adam and Eve seems to repeatedly cause problems, and yet it must be reconciled with the perfect nature of God. The only way to reconcile these two, seemingly contradictory facts, is to discern God's purpose for Eve's inequality that would simultaneously affirm the denial of a predestined fall and justify the inequality between Adam and Eve.

In order to see the purpose of the inequality, we must first grasp the action of consuming the fruit. Eve's consumption of the fruit is clearly an act of disobedience, yet it is incorrect to denote the action a sin because Sin and Death only move "from out [of] hell['s] gates" after the Fall (Milton X 282). Though God explains that Death and Sin are the consequences of eating the fruit of the Tree, His warning can be neither valid nor mean anything to Adam or Eve because they could not comprehend consequences that did not yet exist. The warning God delivers is comparable to the explanation of color to a congenitally blind person; the person may understand that there is something known as color, yet they are unable to genuinely comprehend color in any meaningful way. Therefore, like color to the congenitally blind, Sin and Death cannot genuinely exist in Adam and Eve's conception since they cannot yet have experienced either. Because they

cannot understand God's warning, they do not have the reasoned understanding that a soul must have in order to make a free decision; therefore, to eat the fruit is a naïve action that cannot justly be denoted as a sin.

If God's warning about consumption of the fruit holds no substantial value to Adam and Eve, then the request for obedience becomes far more fragile. When called upon to resist the bombardment of rhetorical attacks from Satan, the most cunning being in existence, God's fragile warning quickly fails. Given Eve's declared imperfection and the incomprehensible nature of the warning, Eve's consumption of the fruit is hardly surprising. The perfect God, as omniscient, would have understood the nature of the warning, and because He is fully just, He could not have ordained as the cause of the Fall that naïve transgression, especially when committed by less perfect Eve.

In other words, in Milton's epic, because God created Eve as the subordinate human, the fate of humanity could not have rested with her. It is with Adam that the fate of humanity must have lain, for as the more perfect of the two, Adam's ability or inability to stand with God would have revealed the highest capabilities of the allegiance of humankind. Eve's transgression, though disobedient, was comparably irrelevant to Adam's, for it would only serve to demonstrate the capability of a lesser human. This leads to a difficult problem: if Eve's transgression was irrelevant, then her entire existence in relation to the surrounding story must also be irrelevant because she, as Adam's tempter, could have been replaced by Satan. It leads to the conclusion that Milton's depiction of God created a lesser being, whereas He could have created an equal. Because God is just and cannot err, Eve's inequality and her consumption of the fruit must, therefore, have a different though necessary purpose from Adam's.

The Inordinate Desire of Adam

In order to gain a better understanding of the first human's transgressions and to grasp the effect of their respective consumptions, it seems necessary to examine sin more explicitly. To do this, I will explore specifically the transgression of eating the fruit in relation to Augustine's argument about free will. Though Augustine simply claims that it is through reason that souls can know and choose to do what is right, his understanding of right and wrong is complex. Augustine considers a simple question in searching for this understanding: 'what is evil?' One of the first plausible answers to this question seems to be that evil is that which the law forbids; however, it seems evident that "that law forbids [a thing]... because it is evil" (Augustine 4). If the law is based on a notion that precedes it, then the law cannot be what determines evil. Another plausible answer is that "[a]nyone who does to another what he does not want done to himself does evil" (Augustine 4). Yet this too, seems to be an insufficient solution, for, to use Augustine's example, "if someone's lust is so great that he offers his wife to another... and is eager to enjoy the same freedom" then, according to that explanation, this act of adultery would not be evil (Augustine 5). Augustine comes to the conclusion that "as long as you look for evil in the external, visible act, you are bound to encounter difficulties" (Augustine 5). Evil must therefore be a type of inordinate desire contrary to the good

The specification that evil desire is both inordinate and contrary to the good leads to two questions: 'what must be desired for desire to be evil?' and 'what must be desired for desire to be good or at least not evil?' In answering these questions, Augustine introduces and differentiates between the temporal and eternal law. The temporal law is the law that Augustine referred to earlier in considering the question of evil. It "can justly be changed in the course of time," whereas the eternal "law is unchangeable" (Augustine 11). The fact that the eternal law is unchangeable means that it informs the temporal law. This conclusion about the difference in

eternal and temporal law leads back to the questions about inordinate desire. Desire that is deemed to be inordinate must have as the object of its desire that which is not eternal or, more specifically, the desire for temporal things. What is called inordinate desire is that which aims at temporal things “subject to the ravages of time” (Augustine 24). When desire is good, it always aims at the eternal and only coincidentally at the temporal because the temporal has virtue only insofar as it shares in the eternal. Augustine concludes his examination of good and evil by explaining that reason aims at the eternal “by turning... away from temporal things toward what is eternal” (Augustine 25).

At first glance, Adam’s act would seem to be the same naïve act of consumption as Eve’s due to their shared inability to know Sin and Death. Thus, in eating the fruit, Adam cannot be tempted to do that which his reason could not comprehend. Instead, in eating the fruit, Adam turns his will away from that which is eternal, namely God, and “fixe[s] [his] lot” with Eve (Milton IX 952). Through his soul’s willing away from reason, Adam declares that he loves Eve more than he does God. He does this even though the God of *Paradise Lost* is the good; nothing is greater, more desirable, and most importantly, nothing is more eternal. Adam comprehends this. To desire and choose Eve, a temporal being, over God is the epitome of inordinate desire—the will choosing to turn away from reason and the eternal. It must then be Adam’s sole choice—to reject reason, to turn towards inordinate desire, and to love Eve more than God—that caused the Fall.

To go further, although Adam’s act of misdirected love occurred before the Fall and, therefore, could not have been a sin *qua* sin given that Sin and Death did not yet exist in Paradise, that fact does not reduce the perverse nature of his inordinate desire. Adam, through reason, fully comprehended the greatness of God and freely turned away from Him toward Eve

by eating the fruit rather than declaring his allegiance to God. The extent of the perversity of Adam's inordinate desire—turning directly away from the eternal—proves more than any possible postlapsarian sin that he is the cause of the Fall.

If Adam's inordinate desire for Eve was the perversity that caused the Fall, then Eve's consumption of the fruit must have been extremely possible, to the point of bordering on the inevitable. This is because, as previously discussed, free will can only exist if the option to do otherwise also exists. It is only after Eve consumed the fruit that Adam would have the ability to choose between the eternal and the temporal, i.e., between God and Eve. This suggests that Eve's transgression was a necessary condition to test Adam's love and allegiance to God. Therefore, God's just purpose for the subordination of Eve is to ensure that Eve would be merely sufficient to withstand the temptation of the fruit, thereby giving Adam's soul the ability to choose to will away from reason and the eternal, towards Eve, and prove himself to be Fallen.

The notion that Milton presents in *Paradise Lost*—that Eve's purpose was solely to function as Adam's test of free will—is furthered if we recall that before assenting to eat the fruit, Adam considers the fact that “God [could] create another Eve” (Milton IX 911). The option to replace Eve after she had consumed the fruit means that, had Adam turned away from the temporal and towards God, he would not have condemned humanity to consist of himself alone. Adam had the option to be fruitful and multiply regardless of Eve. It is also important to note here that, because the possibility of a replacement Eve exists, the earlier analysis of Eve as not responsible for the Fall proves itself true. Were Adam to have willed towards proper reason away from his inordinate desire of Eve in order to remain with God, God would have created a second Eve through which humanity could have developed. The simple fact that Eve, after she ate the

fruit, could have been replaced means that, prior to Adam's consumption of the fruit and decision to turn his will against reason, the human race as a whole, had not yet Fallen.

Conclusion

Paradise Lost is an epic about free will; it examines the necessary components of capability, and from those components of free will, it examines the origin myth of Genesis. Because neither Sin nor Death existed in Paradise prior to the Fall, God's test of Adam's sufficiency necessarily had to be a test of something other than whether Adam would sin. Without the test of whether Adam would sin, the only test of inordinate desire is whether Adam will choose between the temporal Eve and the eternal God. This test, however, could not exist were the first humans equally sufficient to withstand the temptation of the fruit. Were one to eat the fruit, the other would too, due to the same levels of sufficiency and temptation. If neither ate, the result would be the same as if both ate, there would be no test of the inordinate desire of the temporal. The necessary conditions of free will mandated that God needed to create one of the first people as subordinate so that the first humans would have different levels of sufficiency. Eve would be merely sufficient to withstand the temptation of the fruit; Adam would be merely sufficient to turn away from inordinate desire towards the eternal. In God's test of allegiance and free will, Adam failed, turning away from reason and succumbing to the inordinate desire of Eve, thereby damning humanity to a Fallen state.

While *Paradise Lost* centrally deals with the apparently tragic Fall of humanity, the poem ends with the silver lining that the Fall leads to something far greater: the *felix culpa* which translates to happy fall or lucky fault. Adam's act of misdirected love "makes guilty all his sons" (Milton III 290), yet it is only through this universal guilt that God the Son may sacrifice Himself and become "a second root" through which mankind may "be restored" (Milton III 288). In

replacing Adam as the root of man through His act of sacrifice, God the Son reverses Adam's act of inordinate desire. Whereas Adam loved Eve and so foreswore God, God the Son, in whom "[I]ove hath abounded more than glory abounds" (Milton III 312), through "dying to redeem" as a human (Milton III 299), loved God, the eternal, so properly that Adam's act could be forgiven.

My interpretation of the Fall of humanity as Milton depicts it in *Paradise Lost* is radical for a few reasons. It shifts the fault of the Fall from Eve to Adam, it reconceives the cause of the Fall as the result of inordinate desire rather than the consumption of the fruit, and while it doesn't propose predestination, it suggests that Eve's subordinate status was a deliberate choice by God to ensure the possibility of the test of Adam. Despite the different nature of this interpretation, Adam's inordinate desire and his failure to turn away from the temporal to love God above all else seems to be a far more plausible cause of the Fall than Eve's necessarily naïve act of disobedience. The act of turning away from reason and choosing Eve over God is a dismissal of God's unchanging perfection and goodness. It is Augustine's understanding of evil as inordinate desire which informs my conclusion. God is eternal and ought to be desired above all else, so it follows that the Fall of humanity would be Adam's failure to do this.

Works Cited

Augustine, *On Free choice of the Will*. Translated by Thomas Williams, Indianapolis, IN, Hackett Publishing Company, Inc, 1993.

Milton, John. *Paradise Lost*. "A Norton Critical Edition," Edited by Scott Elledge, Second Edition, New York, NY, Norton & Company, Inc., 1993.