

THE PROGENITOR OF DECEPTION

Artimus Cunningham '21

In Milton's *Paradise Lost*, God is an absolute monarch who seldom interacts with other beings. His laissez-faire approach is strongest when it comes to dealing with humanity. While he often refuses to interfere, he promises that he bestows free will upon every being he created. The severity of his interactions and interference are directly tied to the Great Chain of Being. The Great Chain of Being is a hierarchical structure that ranks everything (celestials, mortals, plants, animals, rocks) by their closeness to God. There are other implications and rules stemming from this structure as well. The Great Chain of Being dictates how much knowledge one is allowed to know, the weight of what is expected of him, and with whom he is allowed to communicate. By creating a hierarchical structure, free will appears impossible since some beings must be placed above others. If a being is ranked below another, then the lowest being is in essence subservient. For instance, while Adam serves God and acknowledges the angels as his betters, Eve is made by God to be subservient to Adam as if he were her God. The Great Chain of Being is founded upon inequality and servitude, yet one may argue that the Great Chain of Being does not destroy the credibility of the God in *Paradise Lost* because the other beings possess free will. While all beings are capable of acting autonomously, God can still punish them. This creates a paradox.

Although God allows free will in beings' actions, his subsequent punishment cancels out free will. If God avoids interfering in other beings' affairs to protect their free will, then God punishing those who resist the Great Chain of Being is in effect eliminating free will. The Great Chain of Being creates a fundamental structure that eliminates the credibility of Milton's God, who claims to have granted all beings free will. The Great Chain of Being creates a hierarchical structure based on assumed mental, physical, and spiritual superiority. Michael D. Terranova posits a simplified answer as to why the hierarchy is ordered in this way. He explains that

Minerals have (or, more precisely, participate in) existence. Plants have existence and life. Animals add sentience to these two perfections. Humans are the crown of the hierarchical chain by having existence, life, sentience, and intelligence. At each

stage there is a higher complexity, but also a higher nobility, for the increasing complexity is an even greater participation in the plenitude of being. (Terranova 207)

The concept of perfections combining in order to form the Great Chain of Being solves issues such as fallen angels ranking above humans and women ranking below men. In an extremely patriarchal society like the one in which the Great Chain of Being originated, women were considered to be both physically and mentally weaker than men. Since women were believed to lack the perfections of knowledge and intelligence according to patriarchal societies, they were placed lower in the hierarchy. On the contrary, fallen angels are considered to be the ultimate evil yet they rank above humanity in the hierarchy. This not only proves that the Great Chain of Being does not take into account good and evil, but it also places fallen angels above mankind because the fallen angels possess greater physical strength, intelligence (knowledge of the cosmos), and life force (they are immortal). Therefore, the Great Chain of Being must not be studied as a hierarchy constructed by an omni-benevolent deity but instead created by a neutral God.

God's neutrality shapes the Great Chain of Being by valuing obedience over moral alignment. Although theologians traditionally describe him as omnibenevolent, God repeatedly shows little care towards a being's alignment (good or evil). The greatest example is the fallen angels' placement and the humans' placement. While both disobey God, only the fallen angels descend (because they refuse to repent). Obedience also proves to be more important than alignment when Milton discusses the creation of Sin. Plotting "In bold conspiracy against Heav'ns King," Satan proves that despite evil thoughts and intentions, God would not alter his rank until he disobeys (2.751). A counter argument is that Satan was not truly evil until he actively sought rebellion. Thus, moral alignment as betrayed by action still plays a role when determining one's rank. Unfortunately, this point does not hold well when considering who is able to sin. Milton states that infants and people with mental disabilities are incapable of sin. This is because, according to Milton, they do not possess the mental capacity necessary for understanding right and wrong. Therefore, if someone belonging to either group were to sin, then that person could not be considered evil despite the act itself being classified as such.

Milton's God promises that he grants both angels and humans free will. Dismissing all responsibility for the actions of others, God claims that they "so were created, nor can justly accuse / Thir maker, or thir making, or thir Fate; / As if Predestination over-rul'd / Thir will, dispos'd by absolute Decree" (3.112-115). God explains how neither man, angel, nor fallen (all sentient entities in the Great Chain of Being) have the right to blame him for their actions because he grants them free will. Predestination, according to him, does not overrule free will. In other words, while all sentient beings are subject to destiny, their ability to decide which choices to make and how to make them are ever present. This is important in punishing mankind because it eliminates Adam and Eve's excuses. Eve questions on multiple occasions whether she has free will because the Great Chain of Being does not allow Eve autonomy. Autonomy is a necessary component of absolute free will. When discussing the relationship between Adam and Eve, the speaker tells the reader that "though both / Not equal, as thir sex not equal seemd; . . . Hee for God only, shee for God in him" (4.295-299). Upon her creation, she is immediately deemed to be not only inferior to Adam but to be subservient to him as well. While Adam follows God, Eve must follow Adam. She is to prepare his food, obey him, follow him, and serve his every desire. As long as she submits to the Great Chain of Being, then she lives a peaceful life. The attempt to alter her position leads to catastrophe and divine punishment. God's interference and the construction of her punishment for attempting to alter the Great Chain of Being eliminates her free will. Under the set hierarchy, Eve's movements and actions are limited by God. Eve's greatest limitation is the worldly knowledge she does not receive. Coupled with an overwhelming force which seeks to punish her, her free will is an illusion.

Raphael warns Adam that to become subservient or even equal to Eve is a mistake that would upset the Great Chain of Being. The Son later reprimands Adam and tells him that "By attributing overmuch to things / Less excellent, as thou thy self perceav'st . . . Thy cherishing, thy honouring, and thy love, / Not thy subjection" (10. 1202-1207). This is the first time a being is warned against descending along the Great Chain as opposed to Satan and Eve who both seek to ascend. The inability to neither rise nor fall illustrates that there is zero room for mobility along the Great Chain of Being. Without a chance of mobility, Adam, Eve, Satan, and every other being is limited in the free will God promises. Eve is never allowed to reign over Adam, Adam is never allowed to be equal to or subservient to Eve, and Satan is never allowed

to rise above his rank and rule over God or the Son. God punishes every being who attempts to alter the hierarchy. Philosopher and theologian Ghazali posit that “Neither animals nor angels can change their appointed rank and place. But man may sink to the animal or soar to the angel, and this is the meaning of his undertaking that “burden” of which the Koran speaks” (qtd. In Truglia 153). Despite his brilliance, Ghazali’s theory does not hold true for the world of *Paradise Lost*.

Satan, who was once an angel, falls into the category “fallen angel” which is a clear change from his previous rank. Despite Death and Sin overtaking Adam and Eve after the fall, they never alter their ranking. Men still preside below fallen angels and above women with women directly below men. Adam is unable to alter his position which negates Ghazali’s theory and proves neither ascension nor descension is allowed in the Great Chain of Being in *Paradise Lost*.

The Great Chain of Being controls knowledge which also leads to injustice. God sends Raphael to warn Adam and Eve about the dangers of knowledge. The conversation occurs between Raphael and Adam. The exclusion of Eve may not have been executed with malicious intent, but the result occurs due to her position within the hierarchy. Holding Eve accountable, despite the warning not reaching her, is an injustice. If God is a being who is the embodiment of justice, then if he is “Not just, [then he is] not God” (8.701). Satan says this to Eve when convincing her to eat fruit from the forbidden tree, but this statement transcends beyond that moment. God, who places himself at the top of the hierarchy, appoints Raphael (who he foresees failing) to speak to Adam and Eve. God knows Adam and Eve are ignorant. Limited knowledge proves to be their downfall when Satan (a being with a higher position) comes to Eve and persuades her. Each instance could have been easily remedied if knowledge had flowed freely throughout the Great Chain of Being. Humanity’s original sin led to divine punishment despite the humans’ disadvantage in a conflict with a supernatural being, Satan. Their descendants are to be punished with death, sin, painful childbirth, subservience to husbands, and countless tragedies. God’s decision lacks justice because he refuses to acknowledge the hierarchical design’s inherent flaw stemming from limiting knowledge.

Obedience and fealty have a surprisingly important role in the Great Chain of Being. Despite both the fallen angels and mortals disobeying God, the fallen angels are still placed above mortals in the hierarchy. Thus, obedience and fealty do not play a role in

deciding one's appointed position. On the contrary, the fallen angels were once at least two major places removed from mortals, but once they fall, they are only one position higher. The reason the fallen angels fall in the hierarchy and the humans do not is because Adam and Eve maintain their faith and repent. Scholar Kristin Pruitt McColgan notes, "The interplay between reason and faith thus involves, paradoxically, both hierarchy and reciprocity" (84). Obedience may appear to have a limited role in hierarchical appointment, but it is obedience and repentance that greatly influences whether one falls or remains in place. This means that the fallen angels theoretically may remain in their assigned positions and receive grace if they kneel before God and repent.

The problem of free will that persists throughout *Paradise Lost* emerges once again. Milton was a Protestant and likely an Arminian. Debora Shuger who studies the theology of *Paradise Lost* dictates that

Were Milton's God an Arminian, this apparently universal offer of grace should be followed by something to the effect that those whom God foresees will accept His grace are His elect, eternally predestined for salvation. However, the Father does not say this, but rather starts off in what would appear to be the opposite direction: "Some I have chosen of peculiar grace / Elect above the rest; so is my will" (3.183–84; Shuger 401).

God's words suggest that it is not the individual's choice to accept his grace but rather it is God's will that determines their choice. If grace may only be achieved through God, and if only God may decide if someone accepts it, then the free will of the individual is nonexistent. This means that it is God's will for Satan and his followers to never repent or accept grace; he takes away Adam and Eve's decision by "[removing] the stone from their hearts" (104) which forces them to repent and accept grace. God's decisions betray the promises he makes throughout *Paradise Lost*. God's power forces characters into situations that remove their agency and thus, his own credibility.

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