

Lecture 26: Sufficient to Have Stood?

The problem of theodicy: Christian orthodoxy generally affirms that God is all-powerful (omnipotent), all-knowing (omniscient), and supremely good. But the existence of evil in the world God made would seem to suggest, either that God is not all powerful or that God is not good. How can one justify the existence of evil? The crucial answer is offered by God himself, in Book III; noting the progress of Satan toward Eden, the Father remarks to the Son:

[M]an will hearken to his glozing lies,
And easily transgress the sole command,
Sole pledge of his obedience: so will fall 95
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. . . .
Not free, what proof could they have given sincere [1
Of true allegiance, constant faith, or love,
Where only what they needs must do appear'd, 105
Not what they would? What praise could they receive?
What pleasure I, from such obedience paid,
When Will and Reason (Reason also is Choice)
Useless and vain, of freedom both despoil'd,
Made passive both, had serv'd Necessity, 110
Not me?

Human beings **choose** to do evil, so God cannot eliminate evil without also eliminating choice. So, the whole mess is our fault; God is off the hook:

They therefore as to right belonged,
So were created, nor can justly accuse
Their Maker, or their making, or their fate,
As if predestination overruled
Their will, disposed by absolute decree 115
Or high foreknowledge; they themselves decreed
Their own revolt, not I: if I foreknew,
Foreknowledge had no influence on their fault,
Which had no less proved certain unforeknown.

IF God foreknew? Is certainty really the issue? [2
Still, the crucial point is driven home. God leaves our wills free to accept or reject God's image in us, our capacity to choose; we are "authors to [our]selves in all":

They trespass, authors to themselves in all
Both what they judge and what they choose; for so
I formed them free, and free they must remain,
Till they enthrall themselves: I else must change 125
Their nature, and revoke the high decree
Unchangeable, eternal, which ordained
Their freedom, they themselves ordained their fall.

Having justified himself, God relents somewhat,
offering a loophole of sorts:

The first sort by their own suggestion fell,
Self-tempted, self-deprav'd: Man falls deceiv'd 130
By the other first: Man therefore shall find grace,
The other none: In Mercy and Justice both,
Through Heav'n and Earth, so shall my glory excel,
But Mercy, first and last, shall brightest shine.

The Son quickly seizes this opportunity:
O Father, gracious was that word which clos'd
Thy sovran sentence, that Man should find grace; . . . 145
For should Man finally be lost, should Man, 150
Thy creature late so lov'd, thy youngest son,
Fall circumvented thus by fraud, though join'd
With his own folly? that be from thee far,
That far be from thee, Father, who art judge [3
Of all things made, and judgest only right. 155
Or shall the Adversary thus obtain
His end, and frustrate thine? shall he fulfill
His malice, and thy goodness bring to nought, . . .

or wilt thou thyself
Abolish thy creation, and unmake
For him, what for thy glory thou hast made?
So should thy goodness and thy greatness both 165
Be question'd and blasphem'd without defence.

God seems to acknowledge the force of this argument:

All hast thou spoken as my thoughts are, all 171
As my eternal purpose hath decreed.

There is a small problem, however:
But yet all is not done; Man disobeying,
Disloyal, breaks his fealty, and sins
Against the high supremacy of Heaven, 205
Affecting God-head, and, so losing all,
To expiate his treason hath nought left,
But to destruction sacred and devote,
He, with his whole posterity, must die,
Die he or justice must; unless for him 210
Some other able, and as willing, pay
The rigid satisfaction, death for death.
Say, heavenly Powers, where shall we find such love?

Of course we know how God's Son will respond:

Father, thy word is past, Man shall find grace; 227

And shall grace not find means, that finds her way,

The speediest of thy winged messengers, . . .

Behold me then: me for him, life for life 236

I offer: on me let thine anger fall;

Account me Man; I for his sake will leave

Thy bosom, and this glory next to thee

Freely put off, and for him lastly die. 240

This is the central moment of the poem. If we accept the premise that justice must be satisfied by blood sacrifice, then the Son's choosing to become that sacrifice makes all other choices possible. But the Son's voluntary self-sacrifice raises a number of awkward new questions.

Such as: If the Father foreknows (as we do!), does the Son freely *choose*? How much does the Son foreknow? If the Son is, and knows that he is, immortal, does he believe that he really can die? Does he even know what death is?

NOTES

1] Milton makes the same argument in the *Areopagitica* (B 1818):
“When God gave [Adam] 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 [i.e., puppet shows]. We ourselves esteem not of that obedience, or love, or gift, which is of force. God therefore left him free, set before him a provoking object, ever almost in his eyes; herein consisted his merit, herein the right of his reward, the praise of his abstinence.”

2] Milton makes the same argument in his treatise *Of Christian Doctrine* (*de doctrina Christiana*) I.iv: “Of Predestination”: “God’s prescience seems to have nothing to do with the principle or essence of predestination. . . .” *Complete Prose Works*, ed. Don M. Wolfe, 8 vols. Vol.VI trans. John Carey, ed. Maurice Kelley (New Haven: Yale UP, 1973), 183ff. Perhaps.

3] Compare Abraham’s argument with God about Sodom and Gomorrah: “That be far from thee to do after this manner, to slay the righteous with the wicked: and that the righteous should be as the wicked, that be far from thee: shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?” (Genesis 18:25) See also Moses resisting God’s intention to wipe out the children of Israel (Exodus 32:11-14 & Numbers 14:10ff.)