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JOHN F. OWENS, SM

Creation, *Paradise Lost*, and Modernity

I.

THE NOTION OF AN ORDER OF THINGS from which we are never free, to which we owe obedience and respect—the idea of a created order—divides people more and more into different communities, depending on whether or not they can make sense of the idea. For believers, the idea of creation probably seems obvious; there is a sense of fundamental dependence, that we are brought into existence and held in existence by something beyond ourselves. This doctrine delivers hope and confidence in the worst of times, assuring us that there is an original identity of goodness in things that persists to the end because it expresses the way things finally are. Believers can miss, however, the strangeness of the doctrine, a strangeness that reveals itself in different ways. It is more or less impossible to *imagine* the event of creation. We think we can do it, of course, picturing a great darkness with God hovering over the abyss and then the action by which God brings creation out of nothing. But this act of envisioning hides the problem that before creation there was no space and therefore no vantage point from which to observe an event in any way. This imaginative attempt shows the difficulty of trying to

describe something that upholds everything, including our attempts to express what it is.

The epistemological problems of the notion become acute with the advent of modernity and the adoption of new approaches to ontology and evidence. Locke proposes the principle that the strength of beliefs should never be stronger than the strength of the evidence that supports them.¹ Religious belief fails the test, in that it invariably has the strength of one hundred percent, exceeding any “evidence” it can provide. Therefore, according to Locke, we cannot consider it intellectually respectable. A British judge said in a famous 2010 case, “In the eye of everyone save the believer, religious faith is necessarily subjective, being incommunicable by any kind of proof or evidence.”² Believers might feel that the discussion has missed the point and insist that religious belief is not like belief in an additional planet or cosmological process, as if God and the act of creation were simply placed alongside other entities or happenings. Aquinas quotes Dionysius to the effect that God is not “this and not that;” he is not an item that fits into a longer list.³ The unbeliever will make no sense of this, however, and might well retort that the difference *must* come down to one side’s believing in “one more thing” than the other. How else could it be?

These difficulties can lead to a redefinition of what religious belief ultimately means, perhaps in a pragmatist direction, as with the proposal of William James that religion comes down to “the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.”⁴ Charles Taylor defines a secular society along these lines, as one where religious belief has become one choice among many: “The shift to secularity in this sense consists, among other things, of a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others.”⁵ Such a development meets a cautious welcome among believers who likely feel that it is good to move from operating out of an unreflective background to

a conscious choice. It does not occur to them that this move, which largely sums up the thrust of the Western Enlightenment, might in fact be the source of the problem.

For the enlightened Westerner, the doctrine of creation also presents a striking moral problem. Something seems to have been imposed on us, for without our consent someone decreed that we are to be in a certain way and that we are not to stray from the identity with which we were first provided. We are tied forever to the intentions of the one who brought us into existence, appearing as if we are denied any fundamental creativity. Obviously, the religious believer sees it differently, holding that our created status is no more imposed on us than breathing or barking is imposed on a dog. It is not easy to articulate this insight, however, and it is too easy for opponents to reply that the difficulty reflects the fact that there is nothing to be articulated.

I want to examine these impasses more closely by looking at a literary example, Milton's *Paradise Lost*. I will look at ways in which the poem and its reception express the modern predicament regarding religious belief.

II.

Milton wrote *Paradise Lost* in the 1660s, just as the "modern" era was consolidating itself, two decades after the death of Galileo, and a little over a decade after the death of Descartes. Fundamental Christian belief was still in place. As C. S. Lewis remarks, the "unbiased" reader understands the poem as assuming basic Christian doctrines and attitudes, for example that the human is fundamentally dependent on a larger order, and that any attempt at rebellion against this order, or against the Creator, is always futile.⁶ Readers have long noticed that the figure of Satan in *Paradise Lost* is a good deal more vivid than that of his antagonist, God the Father—a point that the author of the poem might have acknowledged. However, Milton would likely be taken aback by the widely held contemporary view of Satan as the

real hero of the poem, the one who is ultimately in the right. Milton would feel that by definition, no one can be in the right against God, and that God, being God, cannot be called into question. By contrast, William Empson says in his commentary on *Paradise Lost* that “all the characters are on trial in any civilized narrative.”⁷ Similarly, the contemporary critic Michael Bryson, commenting on Empson’s position, puts it bluntly: “God is on trial in *Paradise Lost*, and according to Empson he didn’t get a favourable verdict.”⁸ Something fundamental has changed between the Augustinian theological view that Lewis detects as underlying Milton’s poem and the further reaches of contemporary critical commentary.

In a way strikingly characteristic of the dawning intellectual age, in the first book of *Paradise Lost*, while taking possession of his new realm, Satan talks about himself:

Thou profoundest Hell
 Receive thy new Possessor: One who brings
 A mind not to be chang’d by Place or Time.
 The mind is its own place, and in it self
 Can make a Heav’n of Hell, a Hell of Heav’n,
 What matter where, if I be still the same.⁹

The phrases describing a mind that is “not to be changed by place or time” and that “is its own place” bear a striking resemblance to the notion of the philosophical subject that Descartes proposes. After describing the soul as a “thinking substance” in *The Discourse on Method*, Descartes explains, it “does not require any place, or depend on any material thing.”¹⁰ We are all familiar with this Cartesian mind, even if we have never heard of it: the private place that is a kind of inner theater that only we can access, an integrated unit where objects are present to an observing subject, and that is in principle removed from the external world and the laws of causality. As Descartes notices, this mind has an absoluteness that nothing can touch, a validity that it obtains regardless of the state of the world. However the universe configures itself beyond me, I have no doubt that the objects of my

mind at least *appear* to me in just the way that they do. These appearances comprise a set of immediate possessions, which are originally mine. There is even a sense in which not even God can really influence the certainties of my mind and their appearances. Descartes mounts an argument that even if God—or an evil genius—attempted to interfere with my mind, there would remain an area he could not reach, my own possession, a realm of things “as they are for me.” In the end, not even the gods can rob me of this original possession.¹¹

This suggests a program—to work on the rest of my beliefs so that they become truly mine, relating perspicuously to the original untouchable place where they are first unshakably present to the Cartesian mind. Descartes famously institutes a project of clearing his mind of beliefs that others have planted, and then building up his beliefs again out of appearances that are indubitably before the mind. The mind starts to function as a kind of tribunal that processes beliefs until we can count them intellectually respectable. Even a belief in God, if we are to consider it rational, must be built up from within the original area of seeming, perhaps from close examination of one of the ideas before the mind, which displays a set of connections that we cannot doubt. Only after it has survived this process can we consider it “reasonable.”

The Cartesian program takes various forms as modernity starts to grip the Western mind. Locke says that when God wants to reveal something to us, he makes the divine origin of the message clear “by some Marks which Reason cannot be mistaken in.”¹² Kant famously appeals to an original intuition of the mind to bring intellectual respectability even to belief in Christ: “Even the Holy One of the Gospel must first be compared with our ideal of moral perfection before he is cognized as such.”¹³ Empson broadens the point: “Our own consciences must decide whether what other people tell us about God is really good. Our own consciences are therefore the final judges even of truths vouchsafed to us by Revelation.”¹⁴ A reasonable mind refuses to rest in the grip of anything that has been imposed from outside. This does not mean that it cannot accept obligations, pro-

vided that they have been examined by reason and freely accepted, so that in a sense the obligations come out of the mind itself. Kant says just this, that for the autonomous person, the only binding law is the law that reason gives to itself, so that “all maxims are repudiated that are inconsistent with the will’s own giving of universal law.”¹⁵ The reasonable mind builds itself up on foundations that already belong to it. As has been noticed, the ideal starts to resemble a sort of self-creation, an existence that proceeds out of itself. It is naturally set up for confrontation with the traditional idea of creation, which insists on the very opposite, that with the exception of the existence of the Almighty, all entities depend radically on something that is outside them, from which they receive their very being.

III.

The plot of *Paradise Lost* begins, as Empson nicely expresses it, when Satan “doubts the credentials of God.”¹⁶ He raises the question of whether God is really God, or whether he is rather just the most powerful individual around, so that he is making claims to worship he has no real right to make, even if he has the force to back them up. In this situation, where an earthly person whose authority is challenged would submit a curriculum vitae, a Creator should provide at least something in the way of credentials. Satan makes just this request when talking to the loyal angel Abdiel. He points out that evidence seems at best neutral on the question of a creator. Any evidence we can access assumes that we already exist, so that it comes long after the supposed creation. We function in the way familiar to us, where our life seems to go on of its own accord, without outside help. The world-order—known to twentieth-century thinkers as the “evolutionary” order—takes care of itself, so that things grow up spontaneously, following their own laws, “self-rai’s’d,” as Satan puts it.¹⁷ If there is something beyond the natural order, it does not show itself directly. There are stories of gods and of their claims regarding their status and function in regard to the creation, but the gods

themselves do precious little to back up such claims. If anything, the evidence suggests the opposite. Again, Satan puts it well:

The Gods are first, and that advantage use
On our belief, that all from them proceeds;
I question it, for this fair Earth I see,
Warm'd by the Sun, producing every kind,
Them nothing.¹⁸

Even those who dislike what Satan is saying cannot help but wonder if he has a kind of right on his side. God requires the rational creature to accept certain claims, but makes a poor show of providing reasons or proofs that would enable confidence in the claims. So while it is clear that he is the most powerful thing around and can impose his will on others if he wants, it is not at all clear that he is God and therefore has the right to demand worship. For the reasonable observer, the demand for worship could just be an act of bullying, to which rational creatures—for moral reasons—should not submit. They may of course decide to submit for tactical reasons, but this is not what God is after. In fact, to submit for tactical reasons already shows the beginning of a kind of rebellion, so it looks as if rational dignity itself requires that the human creature stand up to God as a kind of equal, perhaps not equal in power, but basically equal in dignity until proven otherwise. And if there are no proofs offered, it is the responsibility of the rational creature to decide its next move. All options are open, including rebellion, depending on how the reasons work out. Satan draws just this conclusion.¹⁹

Here we see the implications of habits of mind that come into existence with Western modernity. For those caught in these habits, the human first becomes truly “human” by emancipating itself from the demand for original obedience. The Fall—wherein people trust in themselves and their own identities and refuse to be bound by a command that seems devoid of a reasonable explanation—is the beginning of true humanity. The lines of this development through

recent Western history are well known: the gradual loss of belief in a provident God, then in a creator God, then in God; and finally, in our own time, a loss of belief in any original reality or truth at all, to which we might owe primitive loyalty. The end of the story, or somewhere near it, is nicely captured by the contemporary Milton critic Catherine Belsey, who explains that as Milton's texts demonstrate, "truth . . . is ultimately no less authoritarian than the original arbitrary imposition of the one restraint. . . . Truth is a despotism. It enlists subjects in obedience to an authority which needs no other justification." Belsey looks forward to a new order that will be achieved "by substituting for the politics of truth, anchored in metaphysics, a politics of interest, which is also necessarily, since interests are always plural, a politics of difference."²⁰

At the endpoint of this development, where God and the doctrine of creation are held in doubt, there is no original identity that can be taken for granted, to which humans can count on returning, through the twists and turns taken by history. To one caught up in the sweep of these reflections, the liberation that beckons seems the only interesting life, part of a drama lived resolutely within time and history, reliant on nothing unchanging that exists beyond it, that would bring a duty to correspond or conform, and to which humans could appeal in time of need. Nietzsche sketched such a life, one that has the tragic greatness of those who give themselves over to a kind of love for the temporal, affirming human life in time, even though they know they are going to die and that the whole will not be reconstituted in any beyond.²¹ They have the tragic greatness of the members of the string quartet on the *Titanic*, who go on playing even though they know they will be dead in an hour or two.

Milton gives no sign that he endorses the kinds of possibilities that become fashionable with the coming of European romanticism, but one can argue that at times his poem does. One can interpret the last lines of *Paradise Lost* as hinting at what is to come. These lines present a picture of the first parents after the Fall, with all their history before them, as they take each other's hands and leave the garden. Mil-

ton refers to “Providence” here, looking to the redemption that lies ahead in God’s plan. But if we remove this one reference, the scene is surprisingly close to something that Nietzsche could endorse:

Som natural tears they drop’d, but wip’d them soon;
 The World was all before them, where to choose
 Thir place of rest, and Providence thir guide:
 They hand in hand with wandring steps and slow,
 Through *Eden* took thir solitarie way.²²

The fallen world may be full of suffering, but it is also beautiful, tragic, endearing, and above all, interesting. Traditional conceptions of heaven, by contrast, seem boring in the way that stasis always is, having no openness to history and repeating the same thing over and over. After the battle between the opposing sides in the middle of *Paradise Lost*, Milton’s Satan addresses the loyal angel Abdiel about the other angels who remained loyal to God the Father and whom the Father used to combat the new possibilities of freedom. Satan describes them as the “Minstrelsie of Heav’n,” characterizing them above all by their submission to the Father, so that their final commitment is to “Servilitie.”²³

IV.

In spite of modernity’s dominance in the last few centuries of Western history, there remains a stubborn continuing tradition of belief that no amount of argument seems able to shift, held by people who feel themselves caught up in an original created order of things. Living within an enlightened Western society, believers adhere to a tradition far removed from the intuitions that dominate their contemporary world. C. S. Lewis offers two quotations out of the older Christian tradition that show the degree to which the Christian past has become a foreign country. The excerpts concern the question of which is the greatest of the virtues. Augustine, in the *City of God*, nominates the virtue of obedience, seeing it as a kind of corner-

stone that holds all other virtues in place, “as it were, the mother and guardian of *all* virtues.”²⁴ The second statement, from the early eighteenth-century essayist Joseph Addison, makes the same point: “The great moral which reigns in Milton . . . is the most universal and most useful that can be imagined, that Obedience to the will of God makes men happy and that Disobedience makes them miserable.”²⁵

Strikingly, among attitudes fostered by Western modernity, it is impossible to imagine obedience as the first of the virtues. For a rational creature, the only permissible obedience is contractual, based on a consideration of reasons that lead to a free decision. If not in this form, obedience is degraded to mere “Servilitie.” And yet, strikingly, the quotations from Augustine and Addison seem to express accurately what the orthodox characters in *Paradise Lost* hold—a primitive obedience that precedes consideration of reasons. When challenged by Satan on the question of evidence, the faithful angel Abdiel does not reply that he has such evidence, but rather that the demand for evidence should not be made on God in the first place, or at least not in such a way. God should not be turned into a conditional object of enquiry. In a manner that recalls passages in the Book of Job and looks forward to motifs in Kierkegaard, Abdiel implies that there is something misguided about the request for evidence of the one who brought questioners into existence and sustains them. The request itself betrays a kind of impiety:

Shalt thou give Law to God, shalt thou dispute
With him the points of libertie, who made
Thee what thou art, & formd the Pow’rs of Heav’n
Such as he pleasd, and circumscrib’d thir being?²⁶

Adam makes a similar statement, responding to a promise from Raphael, who observes that in the universe, all things tend upward into a higher life, and that this can happen for the human race as well: “If ye be found obedient, and retain/ Unalterably firm his love entire/ Whose progenie you are.”²⁷ Puzzled that obedience could ever

be subject to a conditional “if” clause like this, as though there were a possibility of a life outside obedience, Adam replies to Raphael:

What meant that caution joind, *if ye be found*
Obedient? can we want obedience then
 To him, or possibly his love desert
 Who formd us from the dust, and plac'd us here
 Full to the utmost measure of what bliss
 Human desires can seek or apprehend?²⁸

What has Adam seen that is obvious to a person existing in an un-fallen state and also to Augustine and Addison, but certainly not obvious to the contemporary reader? Strikingly, Milton’s text does not seem to offer a direct answer. Milton illustrates Adam’s coming into the world with his relationship to God the creator intact. God speaks to him, and Adam does not doubt the status of the one with whom he speaks. This may seem to confirm the worst secular suspicions that religious doctrines simply evade rationality and go back to blind choices or feelings, or to something else that is “incommunicable by any kind of proof or evidence,” as the British judge puts it. But I think in fact that this sort of relation to a person outside of us, whom we address as a person, contains an important clue as to what is at stake in the discussion and hints at an order of things that was in place in the old metaphysical worldview before Cartesian ontology replaced it. A brief example demonstrates the point.

Imagine a small child who is in a bad mood with his or her parents and is rather enjoying the mood and seeing the parents simply in relation to the mood—as hateful objects that appear in light of the mood. The child says things like “I hate you,” “you don’t love me,” and so on. We notice that for the child at this moment, the real parents do not appear in the observed world because the child does not allow them to appear. Any evidence the parents might offer to the contrary of the child’s view is of no use because the child simply integrates such evidence into the world-picture created by his mood. If the par-

ents say, "But we do love you," the child replies, "That's just what you would say." Interestingly, not only are the real parents excluded from the exchange; the real child does not appear in the exchange either. The child's eye controls everything, and as Wittgenstein noticed, this kind of eye does not itself appear within the drama, even though it oversees the whole thing.²⁹ It seems to me no great exaggeration to see this sort of attitude as exemplifying the kind of knowledge recommended by modernity, in which the known is restricted to the status of an object for a subject. What the child sees bears a close relation to the sort of world seen through the grid of Newtonian physics where everything is perceived in terms of masses and energies, and even human beings can be interpreted in this way. We realize that in principle, those who believe that this "objectifying" stance reveals the whole of the world can never be challenged from within the stance. Like Plato's prisoners in the cave, so long as they maintain the stance, they are impervious to influence from beyond, as Descartes noticed.

What other possibility is there? The child can come out into the world again and accept a reality that is beyond his control, in that the significance of the parents is no longer limited to the significance they have for the child. It is striking that this moment, when a child agrees to enter the world and to become a functioning human person, he achieves only with the help of other persons, in relation to whom he can make the key move. It is also clear that the child does not *have* to come out into the world in this way. It is possible for him to remain immersed in the mood and the shadow world it creates. In real life, fortunately for the human race, time and altered circumstances usually bring the child out of it. Interestingly, the parents often try to make the child laugh, and with this, the child knows the game is over. Most of us can remember moments when we were caught between the one state and the other, and we sensed the power of will required to uphold our lonely attempt to shut out a world status of which extends beyond that of an object for us. To realize at the deepest level that there are other possibilities and yet to remain determinedly in the objectifying and controlling stance of the solipsist, seems to cor-

respond to the state of sin in *Paradise Lost*. The controlling human subject attempts to usurp the position of the Almighty, enjoying the feeling of power and independence it brings, achieving what Augustine calls “a dim resemblance to omnipotence.”³⁰ The older, orthodox interpretation of Milton’s poem suggests that our greatest blessing is to leave this behind, to consent to enter a world that we have not made, a world not upheld by our will but gloriously independent of us. The world as reduced to an object of our subjective will can seem interesting and precious so long as we are caught up in that particular sort of view, perhaps because its lines of significance come back to us. But for the person who has consented to enter the real created world, this other world appears as a pale illusion, something that does not *exist* in the deepest sense, however much it attracts those who are caught in it while they remain in its grasp.

Modernity has instilled the habitual opinion that we need to retreat to the position of the observing subject if we are to uncover “real” reality. Alternative views of the world, for example the one implied by our personal relation to our friends, seem vague and approximate by comparison, mere “anecdotal” versions of what the other sort of knowledge aims at in itself, such that the second sort of knowledge has to be translated back into the first, if it is to achieve respectability. In other words, my talking to someone needs to be turned into a “verbal transaction” if we are to see it for what it is. Certain thinkers have long criticized the dominance of this “modern” worldview, and sometimes insist that it is at best a partial way of looking at the world. But it is a devil of a job to say what the other part is, or how it is to be described. Whatever roads we want to travel, modernity owns them already, or has taken a very long-term lease on them. “Believers” in the modern world are those who retain a secret memory of another way of relating and knowing that a brash newcomer has pushed aside and suppressed. They cling to the sense that reality ultimately begins not with a collection of objects for a subject, but with a person, or better, since a person never exists alone, with “persons.”

Notes

1. Locke says that the mark of a person who is “earnest” about the truth is “the not entertaining of any Proposition with greater assurance than the Proofs it is built on will warrant.” John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), bk. 4, ch. 19, n. 1, 697.
2. Lord Justice Laws, quoted in *The Telegraph*, April 30, 2010.
3. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, II, q. 1a, a. 4, 2, trans. Timothy McDermott OP (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1964), 53.
4. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1903), 31.
5. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 3.
6. C. S. Lewis, *A Preface To Paradise Lost* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), 66–72.
7. William Empson, *Milton’s God* (New York: New Directions, 1961), 94.
8. Michael Bryson, *The Tyranny of Heaven: Milton’s Rejection of God as King* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2004), 21.
9. John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, bk. 1, lines 251–56.
10. Rene Descartes, “Discourse on the Method, Part 4,” *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes: Vol. 1*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 111–51, 127.
11. Descartes, “Meditations on First Philosophy,” *Philosophical Writings*, 2: 3–62, 18–19.
12. Locke, *Essay*, bk. 4, chap. 19, n. 14, 704.
13. Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, ed. and trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 21.
14. Empson, *Milton’s*, 261.
15. Kant, *Groundwork*, 39.
16. Empson, *Milton’s*, 95.
17. That we were formd then saist thou? & the work
Of secondarie hands, by task transferd
From Father to his Son? Strange point and new!
Doctrin which we would know whence learnt: who saw
When this creation was? rememberst thou
Thy making, while the Maker gave thee being?
We know no time when we were not as now;
Know none before us, self-begot, self-rai’s’d
By our own quick’ning power.
Milton, *Paradise Lost*, bk. 5, lines 853–61.
18. *Ibid.*, bk. 9, lines 718–22.

19. Our puissance is our own, our own right hand
 Shall teach us highest deeds, by proof to try
 Who is our equal: then thou shalt behold
 Whether by supplication we intend
 Address, and to begirt th'Almighty Throne
 Beseeching or besieging.
 Milton, *Paradise Lost*, bk. 5, lines 864–69.
20. Catherine Belsey, *John Milton: Language, Gender, Power* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), 83–84.
21. "I teach mankind a new will: to desire this path that men have followed blindly, and to call it good and no more to creep aside from it, like the sick and dying!" Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), 60.
22. Milton, *Paradise Lost*, bk. 12, lines 646–49.
23. Ministring Spirits, traird up in Feast and Song;
 Such hast thou arm'd, the Minstrelsie of Heav'n,
 Servilitie with freedom to contend.
 Milton, *Paradise Lost*, bk. 6, lines 167–69.
24. Lewis, *Preface*, 68–69. Cf. Augustine, *De Civ. Dei*, bk. 14, 12.
25. *Ibid.*, 71. Cf. Joseph Addison, *The Spectator*, no. 369.
26. Milton, *Paradise Lost*, bk. 5, lines 822–25.
27. *Ibid.*, bk. 5, lines 501–03.
28. *Ibid.*, bk. 5, lines 513–18.
29. "The I in solipsism shrinks to an extensionless point and there remains the reality co-ordinated with it," Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C. K. Ogden (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1922), 5.64:75.
30. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick, Book II (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 2.6.14:32.