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Milton's Moral History: Tracing Diachronic Continuity in *Paradise Lost*

By

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Abstract

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Milton's Moral History: Tracing Diachronic Continuity in *Paradise Lost*. Major
Professor: Catherine G. Martin

This thesis starts from the observation that the plot of *Paradise Lost* is driven by changes in the moral universe. First, I attempt to trace the progression of Christian moral history by identify distinct normative moral structures and acknowledging the gaps created by the structures' incompatibilities. Then, history organized by looking though Thomas Kuhn's paradigmatical model of history. Kuhn's historical model, however, fragments the timeline but reveals a theological anxiety about the continuity of moral law. I argue that continuity is restored in the poem by exhibiting the components of moral agency that Milton defines in *Areopagitica*. *Paradise Lost*, justifies the differences in the moral landscape and establishes a diachronic continuity by weaving Milton's theory of the moral agent into each of the successive moral paradigms.

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Introduction: The Problem of Continuity in Christian Moral History

Milton's portrayal of moral history in *Paradise Lost*¹ can best be understood through Kuhnian paradigm development, each moral era superseding the last by creating a new and distinct normative moral system. This historical perspective manifests itself in response to the theological anxiety about the structural incompatibility of the eras of moral history. Milton also seems to be interested in continuity, which manifests in his metaphysical coherence.² In addition, Milton's coherent cosmos offers a panoramic view of creation that represents a continuity of place between Heaven, Hell, and Earth. If Milton is interested in creating this material continuity as part of his project to "justify the ways of God to man," then one might expect he would also strive for continuity between the moral paradigms of heavenly and earthly existence and pre- and postlapsarian existence, as well as between the Old and New Testaments. The contention of this thesis is that Milton does attempt to reconcile these different moral paradigms, which I will examine of a particular development of moral agency found in *Areopagitica* and an exploration of the structure of his moral history using Thomas Kuhn's model of the history of science in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.³ The analysis that follows gives insight into Milton's passion for reason and the individual's freedom to act and interpret, further,

¹ John Milton, *The Complete Poetry and Essential Prose of John Milton* ed William Kerrigan, John Rumrich, and Stephen Fallon (New York: RH, 2007). Note: all citations of Milton come from this text.

² Stephen Fallon, *Milton Among the Philosophers* (Ithica, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991) which explores the metaphysical coherence of *Paradise Lost* in his book, and elaborates on Milton's assertion of animist monism that unites material and immaterial substance into a single metaphysical continuum.

³ Thomas Kuhn discusses his theory of the history of science in his book, *The Structures of Scientific Revolutions* 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996)

it reveals certain anxieties about its place in Christian history, an anxiety that he dramatizes and solves in *Paradise Lost*.

Milton, of course, is not the first to attempt to reconcile seemingly incompatible paradigms of moral history. Joachim of Fiore, a twelfth-century Italian theologian, wrote *Libre Concordie Novi ae Veteris Testamenti* or “The Harmony of the Old and New Testaments.” Joachim developed a theory of moral history that divided the timeline between the fall and the second coming of Christ into three periods, the first of which belongs to the father and is characterized by the law found in the Old Testament. The second age characterized by grace and begins with the first coming of Christ and belongs to the Son. Finally, the third age, marked by love, starts in Joachim’s near future and belongs to the Holy Spirit. Milton’s epic, however, encompasses pre-human Christian history and his cosmos is infused with moral value, which means he must alter Joachim’s structure of moral history. Milton does this for a number of reasons: first, the scope of *Paradise Lost* requires him to account for moral history prior to humanity, while preserving continuity in the cosmos. Second, his reconciliation of the disparate moral paradigms requires a foundation that persists throughout that history. That is, the force that reconciles the Old and the New Testaments must be intrinsically true of the nature of morality.

Milton’s moral agency is most clearly articulated in *Areopagitica*, in which he dismisses a paternalistic moral law in favor of an individual’s reason by saying “God uses not to captivate under perpetual childhood of prescription but trusts him with the

gift of reason to be his own chooser” (938). Thomas Fulton⁴ identifies the childhood to which Milton refers as Eden, the passage leads to commentary on the fall. First, however, Milton mentions Solomon’s assertion that “reading is weariness to the flesh,” yet maintains that it was never denounced as unlawful in scripture. That is, before he comments on Eden, Milton first references the height of Mosaic Law. Therefore, whether or not his aim was Eden, his rejection of paternalistic moral law catches Old Testament or Mosaic Law in the crossfire. Indeed, the fissure between Milton’s version of morality and Mosaic Law widens when he claims that reason, which he defines as choosing, is not only able to discern moral facts, but influences the moral world by deriving good from potentially libelous or harmful materials. In other words, Milton’s version of moral law and its relationship to agency seems to be incongruent with the spirit of the Old Testament Mosaic Law which is, at least in part, prescriptive in nature because it emphasizes which specific actions are right and wrong. *Areopagitica*, on the other hand, denounces prescription in favor of teaching the skill of discerning right and wrong, and even deriving positive outcomes from potentially harmful moral influences. This means that Milton must reconcile the Old Testament moral paradigm with his own to maintain coherence in the theodicy he is representing while still preserving scripture and the immutability of God.

Since Mosaic Law emphasizes specific actions that are right or wrong in a catalog of more than 600 laws, the Old Testament paradigm presents a normative deontological structure. That is a moral structure based on adherence to a set of rules or laws. Deontology implicitly asserts that moral value is located in the moral object

⁴ Thomas Fulton explores Milton’s sentiments regarding the new epistemology in the Seventeenth-century in his article, “*Areopagitica* and the Roots of Liberal Epistemology” *English Literary Renaissance* 34.1 (Blackwell Publishing Limited, 2004) 65.

or action, itself; however, Milton's agency in *Areopagitica* displaces moral value from the object to the subject—or more accurately to the interaction between the moral object and the moral subject. Milton's morality, then, presents a normative structure of virtue ethics which conflicts with the deontological structure of the Old Testament. Parsing the conflict in terms of normative structures clarifies the problems that theologians like Joachim of Fiore and Milton face in attempting to establish continuity between the Old and New Testaments. In other words, while Milton emphasizes will and reason in every paradigm of Christian moral history, he must account for the paternalism endemic to the deontological structure that preceded his own which he denounces in *Areopagitica*.

Michael's explanation of the purpose of Mosaic Law in Book XII of *Paradise Lost* claims that the "law was given to evince / their natural pravity" to the Jews and so that "when they see / Law can discover sin" (286-90). While Michael does not deny the paternalistic deontology of Mosaic Law he does place the moral agent at the center of its purpose. In a sense, Milton argues both in *Areopagitica* and *Paradise Lost* that humanity graduates from the deontological structure of the Old Testament to a New Testament where humanity completely wields the power of agency in a virtue ethics paradigm. Agency, on this account, thus has a flexible relationship to both law and to God throughout moral history. That makes the transition from the Old to the New Testament a "graduation" that may be less metaphorical than it originally seems. While agency has a different relationship to the law in these two paradigms, it seems that this difference is strongly affected by knowledge. In other words, Milton sees the

Old Testament as a learning experience designed to build agents' capacity for the active discernment outlined in *Areopagitica*.

It is necessary to gain a clear idea of Milton's conception of the moral agent in order to understand his moral history. A large part of establishing an agent's responsibilities and relationship to moral law comes from determining the source of authority. Fulton identifies Milton's moral system as a "self-authenticating method of ethical reasoning;" that is, the moral authority is located in the active agent itself (53). As "an uncompromising champion of individual *libertas*," Milton gives moral authority to the individual agent through what Christopher Kendrick calls a "self-validating ethos" (Myers, 385; 671).⁵ The authority of the agent, in Kendrick's view, is based in the abilities of the mind to "differentiate" between good and evil which he calls "ethical cognition." However, this means that Milton's morality has agents actively generating moral value or meaning since it is the action of interpreting the moral world that produces such value. In other words, without engagement with the moral world with moral reason there is no moral situation, thus, to a large extent, moral value issues from the moral agent. Nevertheless, when agents act morally they are—or should be—reacting to internal cognitive forces of interpretation rather than simply responding to the external stimuli of law and moral objects.

The idea that Milton's moral agent reacts to internal, rather than external forces opens up a related but slightly different debate: how does Milton consider the construction of truth? This is one of the chief critical concerns in *Areopagitica*. John

⁵ Christopher Kendrick investigates the ethical dimensions of Milton's mission in *Areopagitica* in his article, "Ethics and the Orator in *Areopagitica*" *ELH* 50.4 (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983).

Schaeffer in his article “Metonymies We Read By: Rhetoric, Truth, and the Eucharist in Milton’s *Areopagitica*”⁶ identifies two distinct constructions of truth that Milton presents: first, truth is an incrementally built body of knowledge, and second, truth is a static unified object that can be possessed. However, Kendrick, Fulton, and Benjamin Myers’ view that *Areopagitica* champions the practice of morality over the moral value itself emphasizes the incremental and consensual model of truth over the objectification of truth. Indeed, Fulton says that *Areopagitica* values the “process over the knowledge acquired,” which in turn means that moral truth is not a unified monolithic object, but rather a dynamic activity performed by individual agents. While their readings do not exclude the alternative model for truth it seems to privilege one over the other and makes room for the agent’s active role in the acquisition of truth.

Catherine Martin⁷ picks up this theme in her book *Ruins of Allegory* by saying “both physically and morally, Milton’s epic universe is thus correspondingly decentered in ways that radically undermine all previously ‘certain’ senses of place, personhood, and transcendent virtue” (82). This means that Milton’s moral philosophy diverges from classical conceptions of moral metaphysics. If moral truth is incremental and consensual and is actively generated by the practice of gaining moral knowledge, then moral truth cannot be manifest in some platonic, transcendent

⁶ John Schaeffer clearly articulates the concerns about truth in *Areopagitica* in his article, “Metonymies We Read By: Rhetoric, Truth, and the Eucharist in Milton’s *Areopagitica*” *Milton Quarterly* 34.3 (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000).

⁷ Catherine Martin’s thorough treatment of allegory in *Paradise Lost* becomes relevant here in an attempt to identify the individual’s engagement with truth in her book, *Ruins of Allegory: Paradise Lost and the Metamorphosis of the Epic Convention* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998) 82.

form⁸. In addition to a rejection of platonic metaphysics for the “good” it also is a rejection of any type of rigid body of laws, since moral truth could not be contained in such a way, nor would laws generate solid moral knowledge given the lack of active involvement on the part of the individual agent.

The active involvement of individual agents of course fits with Kendrick’s “ethical cognition” and the “active knowing” that he develops as a model for Milton’s version of engagement with the moral world. Since this active “differentiation” of good and evil is “self-validating” it constitutes a form of moral subjectivism, a well recognized feature of moral philosophy in the seventeenth century. Myers⁹ in his article “Milton and the Heretical Imperative” calls Milton’s morality “the subjective *practice* of radical religious individualism” (376, original emphasis). However, implicit in Milton’s brand of subjectivism is consequentialism,¹⁰ since, as he points out, two agents performing the exact same action—say, reading a pornographic book—may produce opposite values. In framing morality around the practice of discernment, he decenters moral value from the moral object and locates it in the consequence of the interaction between the agent and the object. In other words, the results that any given agent generates in the act of interpreting the moral world are what determine the value of the moral event.

⁸ Plato’s moral theory rests on the belief that moral events participate in an eternal truth; however, Milton removes moral value from the eternal truth and the object when he places such great emphasis on the moral agent and its personal education.

⁹ Benjamin Myers calls attention to the subjective aspects of Milton’s philosophy in *Areopagitica* in his article, “‘Following the Way Which is Called Heresy’: Milton and the Heretical Imperative” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 69.3 (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008) 376.

¹⁰ The difference between deontology and consequentialism is essentially the same as the difference between Plato and Milton. Deontology assumes that moral value is located in moral events themselves as in Emanuel Kant’s necessary prohibition on lying, while consequentialism maintains that moral values are instead found in the consequences that result from moral events; utilitarianism is a form of consequentialism.

Kendrick, among others, identifies the “warfarring Christian” as the model moral agent who actively seeks moral knowledge and produces positive moral consequences from potentially harmful materials. However, what distinguishes the “warfarring Christian” from the “fool” is the active pursuit of moral knowledge with the goal of sharpening one’s moral discernment. If this motivation to pursue moral knowledge and abilities is what makes a “good” moral agent in *Areopagitica*, then there is tremendous pressure to investigate the moral world, and even educate oneself through experience. Experience in this case becomes a tricky concept since *Areopagitica* is mainly about reading and perhaps not necessarily engaging in illicit acts. In other words, does Milton’s moral philosophy translate out of research and into practice? The answer to this question is yes and no. No, you cannot engage in illicit activities in the name of moral knowledge and remain sinless, nor is morality random in the sense that agents can invent their own moral law. However, you are still a “warfarring Christian” if you engage with such activities and internalize the knowledge that resulted from the encounter for future similar entanglements.

Milton talks most directly about the pursuit of moral knowledge through experience when he says:

Since therefore the knowledge and survey of vice is so necessary to the constituting of human virtue, and the scanning of error to the confirmation of truth, how can we more safely and with less danger scout into the regions of sin and falsity than by reading all manner of tractates and hearing all manner of reason? And this is the benefit which may be had of books promiscuously read. (839)

The model for attaining truth described in this passage confirms truth through negation, which means that moral agents have to determine the “good” through trial and error. In a sense, the “warfarring Christian” is asked to experiment with the moral world, scanning and surveying evil to confirm moral truth. In light of Kendrick’s “self-validating ethos,” Milton’s theory of morality becomes empirical, or rather, he is applying the new philosophy to morality. The “process” of morality in *Areopagitica*, then, becomes a science, an on-going effort to seek truth through experimentation and observation. However, the connection between morality and science does have to be qualified as analogous since truth in morality is interwoven with the agent’s subjectivity in a different way than, say, astronomy. Nevertheless, *Areopagitica* presents a well-defined moral philosophy that involves experimentation—redeploying empiricism in the moral world.

Daniel Fried¹¹ calls Milton an “implicit empiricist” because, while he has no explicit theory of empiricism, his prose emphasizes knowledge gained through experience (124). Martin goes further by describing Milton’s morality in *Paradise Lost* as follows: “moral choices have been reconciled as a kind of probabilistic, although not random, moral calculus replacing the pseudo-science” that preceded it (104). Moral choices, if the agent is acting with volition, involves reason; however, the activity of moral reason (which is itself choosing) is to “actively know” the moral world by discerning good and evil. The foundation of Milton’s morality presented in *Areopagitica* is the process of coming to know what is good and evil, which emphasizes the epistemological dimension of moral philosophy over other

¹¹ Daniel Fried qualifies Milton’s relationship to the concept of empiricism in his article, “Milton and Empiricist Semiotics” *Milton Quarterly* 37.3 (Blackwell Publishing Limited, 2003) 124.

metaethical concerns. However, Fulton counteracts what he recognizes as subsequent assumptions that stymied discussion of ethical-epistemology in Milton's works, saying: "it was this very application of epistemology to moral and political philosophy that characterized English philosophy of the early Enlightenment" (48).

Martin notices the reflection of Milton's emphasis on *a posteriori* knowledge in *Paradise Lost* when she says that "Milton's dialogue on astronomy reveals his deep regard for the role that both empirical and self-knowledge must play in a materially expanding cosmos" (102). The moral philosophy in *Areopagitica* is, as a result, dramatized in *Paradise Lost* and marks in imaginative space the trace of the perspective generated by the new philosophy.¹² *Paradise Lost*, to a large extent, applies this perspective to Christian moral history. Paul Cefalu in *Moral Identity in Early Modern English Literature*¹³ identifies Adam and Eve's moral agency as Irenean rather than Augustinian, meaning they advance through trial and error and were not created perfect. In short, they become proto-scientists in a new moral world. Thus, as Martin says, Adam and Eve, through their partially restored reason, begin recovering from the fall "through objective self-disciplined observation as well as faith" (102).

The moral agent as a proto-scientist pursues moral knowledge through an individual empirical project which means that the individual's place in history is simultaneously connected and disconnected from the tradition of which it is a part. A

¹² Marjorie Nicolson investigates the effect that new scientific instruments like the telescope has on imaginative spaces in her article, "Milton and the Telescope" *ELH* 2.1 (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1935). She explores the effect the telescope and other scientific emblems has on the literary imagination.

¹³ Paul Cefalu discusses the individual's capacity to exercise moral agency in Seventeenth-century England in his book, *Moral Identity in Early Modern English Literature* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004)

very basic formulation of the moral situation and a moral agent's participation therein is a process involving three major facets: first, the agent must identify an object as a moral object, second, they must determine the value of that object (good or evil) and finally, the agent must choose a course of action. Of course, Milton's formulation of this is centered on the agent and its process, rather than the object, making moral discernment a "probabilistic, though not random" calculation, as Martin says. Agents are therefore connected to one another in moral history in their pursuit of right moral action and the criteria that makes actions, moral actions; however, they are disconnected in the sense that their own subjectivity is at play in the moral process both in terms of immediate historical context and idiosyncrasy. This does not mean, however, that moral truth is random or relative but that the moral world is filtered through an agent's particular engagement with the moral world. That is, the Old Testament agent and the New Testament agent are disconnected because they each have very different rules of engagement in regards to the moral world and because they each possess separate, opaque human minds. Yet, they are connected because the criteria for moral agency, according to Milton, are consistent, and they are pursuing the same end: right moral action and truth.

The relationship between agents throughout Christian moral history is analogous to the relationship between scientists in Thomas Kuhn's model for the history of science. Scientists are united in their attempt to explain the natural world, yet when comparing them across the landscape of the history of science it becomes apparent that "those once current views are neither less scientific, nor more a product of idiosyncrasy than those current today" (2). Kuhn's construction discards the

traditional “development-by-accumulation” model of the history of science because it does not represent the true complexity of an event like the discovery of oxygen¹⁴. In other words, Kuhn explains that the traditional model of history does not include the subject and its interaction with the object. Indeed, he speaks of nascent sciences as a competition between rival explanations for the phenomena in question, yet are consistent with the “dictates of scientific observation and method” (4). This means that each rival explanation plays by the same rules both in an immediate and remote historical context, which is why the development of the scientific method was foundational to forging a community around the pursuit of scientific truth. However, Milton’s concentration on the process of moral engagement reveals that a foundation in process is just as important in the history of Christian morality as it is in the history of science. Milton is attempting to establish similar continuity in moral history as there is in the history of science.

However, as Kuhn explains “observation and experience can and must drastically restrict the range of scientific belief” in an effort to reduce the subjectivity at play in the pursuit of scientific knowledge. Therefore, a method that continually scrutinized both allows new discovery and individual liberty while accounting for the complexity of a system that involves a multitude of both competing and cooperating individuals. However, in the next breath, Kuhn recognizes the trade-off as follows:

But [observation and experience] cannot alone determine a body of such belief. An apparently arbitrary element, compounded of personal and

¹⁴ Kuhn’s famous example is the discovery of oxygen which, as he points out, could be reasonably credited to at least three different people over the course of 30 years. He uses this to prove his point that science does not fit the model of steady progress, sign-posted by discreet discoveries.

historical accident, is always a formative ingredient of the beliefs espoused by a given scientific community at a given time. (4)

In other words, Kuhn discards the diachronic continuity provided by the “development-by-accumulation” model because subjectivity fragments the history of science. Instead, Kuhn adopts a synchronic view of history when he says “rather than seeking the permanent contributions of an older science to our present vantage, the attempt is to display the historical integrity of that science in its own time” (3). He sacrifices the diachronic continuity in the history of science in favor of a synchronic account that incorporates the complexity of the scientific enterprise. Thus, he fragments the timeline of science into a series of paradigms punctuated by major shifts in scientific belief or methodology.

Kuhn’s paradigm model characterizes Milton’s representation of Christian moral history in *Paradise Lost* because his model for moral engagement is parallel to scientific engagement which is at the center of Kuhn’s model. The problems of subjectivity and historical context plague both histories and fragment diachronic continuity. However, while Kuhn abandons diachrony, Milton cannot sacrifice continuity in Christian moral history since the Old Testament would then cease to be relevant and God would prove to be mutable. In an effort to rescue continuity from complete subjectivity and incomparable normative structures, Milton constructs his history in *Paradise Lost* in a way that resembles Kuhn’s paradigm model, a move that seems to fragment the eras of moral history further. However, the text also provides a trace of agency, echoed from *Areopagitica*, and establishes a diachronic lynch-pin that maintains both synchrony and diachrony in Christian moral history. Kuhn’s

model provides a structure through which to understand how *Paradise Lost* attempts to connect the disparate moral structure represented throughout moral history and answer long-standing theological inconsistencies.

Before moving into a direct model of the paradigm structure in *Paradise Lost* it is important to briefly qualify the nature of the subjectivity in Milton's moral system. It seems that the individual's ability to generate moral meaning in the act of interpreting the moral world combined with the subjectivity that results from personal and historical context means that Milton's morality in *Areopagitica*, and by extension *Paradise Lost*, is relative. That is, the discernment that is encouraged in moral agents is a process that seems to invent the moral good and therefore moral law, according to personal and historical happenstance. However, a model like this would conflict with Milton's sense of order and his efforts to establish continuity, which manifests in his metaphysical monism and epic representation of moral history, not to mention the allegorization of chaos and order in the figures of Chaos and God. In short, it is clear that Milton would not advocate rampant moral relativism which the strong version of moral agency in *Areopagitica* seems to suggest; however, it does beg the question as to what brings this model of morality back from the brink of moral relativism. The counter-balance to the subjective element in this moral theory is the development of a necessary feature of the relationship between creator and created. This relationship brings with it an obligation on the part of the created to follow the decrees of their creator as a gesture of gratitude for their own being.

To sketch the problem in a slightly different manner, the "subjective practice of radical religious individualism" suggests that among the multitude of agents each

has a different path. They seek truth in their own way and generate moral value in a process of discernment that results from “ethical cognition.” All of this effort is deeply affected by the agent’s context. This paints a picture of a web of agents each moving in his or her own direction, but this is only a part of the picture. Even though each agent starts in a particular place resulting from personal and historical happenstance, all roads lead to God and his work. The reason that the “good” leads to God is derived from the ontological relationship between God and moral agents: he created them. Because every agent owes his or her being to God, He is by definition superior and by this they are obligated to abide by divine decrees. In other words, every moral agent in every moral paradigm is subject to the law of obligation. This presents a paradox between Milton’s moral discernment and the law of obligation because this obligation seems to conflate the Old and New Testament paradigms as based on the same principle. However, the law of obligation undermines the agent’s cognitive abilities only to limit the freedom of discernment and rescue morality from absolute subjectivity. That is, if the law of obligation did not limit the moral agent’s freedom moral law would be so involved with the agent’s discernment that it would become a function of their engagement with the moral world; moral law would become subjective, and therefore arbitrary.

This feature of the moral philosophy in *Paradise Lost* is most directly discussed in the debate between Abdiel and Satan. The disagreement in this scene stems from their varying interpretations or deductions about the origins of the angels’ being. Abdiel argues that through faith in God they know that he created them and that they owe him their existence. As a result, according to Abdiel, the appropriate

moral emotion toward God is gratitude and this gratitude manifests itself in abiding by the dictates of divine will. Satan, on the other hand, claims that they “know no time when they were not as now” and, given the evidence, they are as likely “self-made, self-begot” as they are created by God (V: 859-60). In effect, Satan attempts to release the angels from their obligation to God by presenting an alternative explanation for their being. This debate posits a necessary obligation that obtains in a relationship between creator and creature, and as a result, all roads for moral agents, while they may vary, lead to God.

Given Milton’s conception of the moral agent in *Areopagitica*, I will now turn back to the moral history chronicled in *Paradise Lost*. If the moral system devised in his prose is subject to empiricism and experimentation, and can therefore be called a science, then theories that deal with the history of science can be applied to Milton’s moral history to elucidate his view of morality as it exists in Christian history. Kuhn’s historical model presents a view of the history of science that hinges on revolutions as paradigm shifts, and not as mile markers on a constant crescendo of progress. These paradigm shifts are “the tradition-shattering complements to the tradition-bound activity of normal science” (6). *Paradise Lost* is a narrative that spans many analogous paradigms and paradigm shifts in moral history. Indeed, the central event in the epic is one of the biggest shifts in the moral paradigm in all of human history, the fall of Adam and Eve. However, these paradigm shifts are not limited to human involvement, but are represented in the narrative prior to Adam and Eve’s appearance, even prior to Raphael’s delineation of events in heaven.

I will now turn to a brief overview of Chapter I which discusses the paradigms of moral history as presented in *Paradise Lost*. The first paradigm represented in the chronology of Christian history is God's existence as the Augustinian "first cause." Using Augustinian logic, there must have been a time before humans and angels were created when God existed alone with the law. Because God has perfect reason and "judg'st always right," God, the only moral agent at this time, lives in perfect harmony with the law. This means that God and the law have a puzzling distinction: while the law is derived from God, God also adheres to the law. This is why God can, at least apparently, change his mind about humanity's sentence for their prophesized fall by citing the law of justice. This episode in Book III of *Paradise Lost* demonstrates that divine will and the law are not one and the same thing, since God can desire outright mercy, but sentence them to death. In addition, the poem shows God changing the law through divine decrees, which happens both explicitly and implicitly. The change effected by divine decrees is most clearly seen when Raphael chronicles the revelation of the Son and the commandment that "to him shall bow / all knees in Heav'n" (V, 607-8). While this event occurs outside of the paradigm in question, it explains the relationship between God and the law prior to the rest of creation by demonstrating how the law is separate from divine will, yet derived from it. In this case, as opposed to Adam and Eve, what he wills is right because he has innate knowledge of his word, and therefore, the law.

An example of a divine decree that is implicit in the text also marks the transition from the first to the second paradigm. The creation of the angels is an introduction of third-party moral agents. There seems to be perfect harmony between

angelic moral agency and the law until Lucifer falls. However, perfect harmony with the law requires perfect knowledge, and that is what perfect reason is derived from; the problem is that Milton's angels are necessarily free, but less perfectly rational than God. Like Uriel, they may also be deceived. Freedom thus comes with the trade-off of faith because perfect knowledge would mean that they "serve necessity / not [God]" (III, 155). This paradigm does have a sub-paradigm shift embedded in it—the fall of Lucifer. The introduction of evil into the universe in a sense constitutes a further paradigm shift, but it also merely reveals a danger that was always present since every angel was created free to fall. While the angels are more closely acquainted with God than humanity, their lack of perfect knowledge makes their relationship to God's moral law based on faith, and therefore contingent since moral choices are necessarily free for Milton. The angels, then, exist within a normative virtue ethical system that is motivated by duty, which Abdiel derives from the obligation entailed in their debt to God for their being.

The law of obligation that is a result of being created persists in the next paradigms, which involve the creation of humanity. However, humanity comes with a particular type of law that is structured differently from that known in heaven. While the angels receive a definitive law in *medias res*, the humans are created with a single prohibitive law: to not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Adam and Eve are, like the angels who must bow to the Son, not capable of penetrating the logic of this law with their reason; thus, following the law is the result of obedience to one's creator. This means that while the ethical law of obligation persists, it is superseded by this single deontological law since this structure rests more on

following a rule than on moral character or adherence to abstract truths. In other words, Adam and Eve are presented with a specific law that locates the sinful nature of that act in the act itself, not in the agent. Therefore, the paradigm represented in the Garden of Eden is distinct from the paradigm that came before it because it centers on a deontological normative structure rather than a virtue ethical structure.

The fourth paradigm begins with the human fall, and the disobedience of the single commandment. This marks a more major paradigm shift than the angels' fall since it warrants a new moral structure and a period of instability marked by a succession of minor paradigm shifts. The law that the remaining angels are subject to does not change, nor does it change for Satan and his cohort. On earth, by contrast, the moral law shifts in a radical fashion indicating a new paradigm. The paradigm following the fall of humanity is roughly equivalent to the Old Testament as modeled in books XI and XII of *Paradise Lost* exhibits a new moral age where minor paradigm shifts are frequent compared to previous moral eras. It centers on Old Testament Law, which means that humanity has transitioned from a deontological singularity (a deontological structure consisting of a single law) to an extreme form of deontology with more than six hundred laws. Michael explains the Old Testament law in Book XII saying that “the law was given them to evince / their natural pravity” and give humanity the capability to “see law” and can therefore “discover sin” (287-90). This means that the Old Testament, for the most part, is dominated by deontological laws because human reason—though partly restored in Adam and Eve—is clouded by sin. The fluctuations between greater emphasis on prescriptive law on the one hand and an individual agent's reason on the other make this a

dynamic paradigm. However, it is characterized at its center by a large body of prescriptive, deontological laws intended to foster moral reasoning.

The fifth paradigm begins with the incarnation of the Son. This would mark the beginning of the second age for Joachim of Fiore, but Milton's moral history reaches further back than Joachim's. When Christ introduces the law of love in the Christian aphorism: "love thy neighbor as thyself," he is bringing back a virtue ethical structure, restoring human reason and discernment as the impetus for moral action and knowledge. Ultimately, humanity was free not only to decide whether or not to do what was morally right, but also to investigate and devise what was right. In addition, in this paradigm the moral value is removed from the action itself to the moral character of the agent and the good or evil consequence that comes from that action. This is, of course, the age in which Milton is writing and will presumably persist until the second coming, when, as Michael explains, sin and death will finally be defeated, and after which harmony will be restored between moral agents and the law.

Paradise Lost encompasses many of the synchronic paradigms presented in Christian moral history, and others are either prophesied or logically implicit, but because they exhibit incompatible normative structures, moral continuity is difficult to establish. Through a Kuhnian reading of the moral history represented in the poem, and given the moral agency outlined in *Areopagitica*, a clear theory is revealed that establishes diachronic continuity through the seemingly incompatible synchronic moral paradigms. Through a conception of morality as a process rather than a rigidly established set of laws, coupled with an emphasis on agency, Milton is able to unite

the incompatible structures presented in Christian moral history. The emphasis on the development of an agent in *Areopagitica* makes morality into an educational enterprise which explains Milton's empiricism and experimentation in the current paradigm. But Michael justifies the Old Testament law by explaining that it is meant to instruct agents in how to discover sin, which will in turn allow them to graduate to the current virtue ethical paradigm. Therefore, Milton first establishing the paradigmatic structure of moral history, then develops a theory of moral agency that serves as a diachronic lynch-pin establishing continuity throughout moral history. Chapter I will discuss, in detail, the moral paradigms as they are represented or implicit in the text of *Paradise Lost*. Chapter II will then establish the presence of moral agency in the poem and offer a potential solution to the moral paradoxes presented over the course of Christian moral history.

Chapter I: The Paradigms of *Paradise Lost*

The first task in uncovering Milton's version of moral history is to lay bear the structures of that history. As a result, the task of this chapter is to present a critical exposition of the normative moral structures as they are revealed by the events of *Paradise Lost*. The Objective is to trace each paradigm as it is situated in the chronology of Christian history and draw out the distinctions between them that represent each paradigm shift. This chapter will attend to each paradigm in turn and develop its unique characteristics, revealing how it seems to fit Kuhn's fragmented, synchronic historical construction. Chapter II will then rehearse these structures while diachronically linking them through a formulation of moral agency which stems from *Areopagitica*. In other words, the exposition that follows will set up the theological problem of continuity over the course of Christian moral history, while the second chapter provides further analysis on the same features of the narrative which offers a solution that is built into the narrative moments that seem to pose a problem to continuity. The exposition of this problem and its subsequent solution is attempting to establish continuity, not only in Christian moral history, but also in the continuity between God and the Son as they relate to the moral paradigms with which they are associated. In essence, the poems efforts to establish diachronic continuity represents a specific issue under the poem's professed task to "justify the ways of God to man" (I: 26).

Paradigm I: God, the Son, and the Law

The first paradigm of Christian moral history precedes the creation of all agents; only God and the Son exist. The first verse of the Gospel of John reads, “In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God” (KJV, John 1:1). This verse alludes to a time when only the word—commonly identified as the Son—and God existed. If the word is roughly equivalent to the law, “unchangeable,” then only God and the law exist; yet God is a very particular moral agent because he “judgs’t always right,” that is, he has perfect reason (III: 127, 155). God’s perfect reason suggests that he is a moral agent in perfect harmony with the moral law and can perceive the “good” without impediment. This harmony does present a difficulty in relation to all other moral paradigms because God’s agency is not plagued by some form of uncertainty, and it begs the question about why this era should be classified as a moral paradigm at all. However, despite the differences, this first paradigm presents the ideal model upon which all subsequent paradigms are based. That is, all other agents aspire to God’s moral example. Indeed, Milton claims in *de Doctrina Christiana*¹ that it is God’s relationship to the law which allows morality to exist at all, without which it would be “mere arbitrary opinion” (1146). This means that while the first moral paradigm is unlike any other in terms of epistemology and agency, it is critical in understanding the relationship between moral agents, the moral law.

The relationship between God and the word, which in this case is useful to think about as the law, is complicated by the paradox in St. John’s Gospel. First, the

¹ In *de Doctrina Christiana* Milton explains that God is needed for the law to be necessarily binding and not arbitrary.

law is derived from God, which is to say that it is God's word that John speaks of. Second, the law and God are coeternal, and one and the same thing. These two propositions present a paradox because the first seems to suggest causation, or at least a temporal division between them. However, the second proposition denies any temporal distinction between these two objects. Indeed, it is difficult to maintain the independence of the law if they are coeternal since there does not seem to be any way of detecting difference. However, the law is a necessary condition for anything to exist independent of God—as opposed to the “artificial Adam” that Milton speaks of in *Areopagitica*. The law that operates independently of God is, as Merritt Hughes suggests in his article “Merit in *Paradise Lost*,”² the Son as the “creating word of St. John's Gospel;” for the word is what allows there to be an ontological division between something as banal as “up and down” and as pointed as “good and evil.” Therefore, the Son as the ‘word’ is a necessary condition for creation, making the law and God coeternal in relation to the created universe, regardless of temporal structures retroactively applied to the relationship between God and the law.

In establishing the independence of creation, the law also establishes its own independence from the will of God, at least in part. God can change the law insofar as he can add to it by divine decree, as he does in the revelation of the Son and naming him vicegerent. However, God cannot change the law once it is issued, for in reference to the relationship between his foreknowledge and free acts of will, God says that he cannot “revoke the high decree / unchangeable” in order to avoid Adam and Eve's deception and fall (III: 126-27). If he did change it, Adam and Eve would

² Merritt Hughes discusses the meritocracy in heaven according to individual moral achievement in his article, “Merit in *Paradise Lost*” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 31.1 (University of California Press, 1967) 3.

cease to be moral agents and would “serve necessity” not God. This means that even though the law is derived from God, once it is articulated it becomes independent of his will in the sense that it is unaffected by any subsequent whims or desires and coincides with his plan for the universe. The unchangeable nature of the law establishes its independence from God’s will and in turn makes God a free agent, albeit one with perfect reason and knowledge of the law, which means they are in perfect harmony. This problem is far from solved, but this basic idea allows Milton to cast God as a free moral agent while maintaining his essential, unchanging nature represented in scripture.

However, because God is in perfect harmony with the law his status as an agent free to choose his actions becomes questionable. In his article “To Act or Not,” Stephen Fallon elaborates on the paradox of “whether God’s actions are freely chosen or made necessary and inevitable as expressions of goodness” (429)³. Either, God has no freedom of choice, which we learn in *de Doctrina* Milton rejects; or, God’s acts are good because *he* does them, which makes them “mere arbitrary opinion” (*de Doctrina*, 1146). Fallon elaborates on a third option suggesting that Milton avoids both of these unpleasant conclusions. Basically, Fallon points out that the paradox assumes that there can be only one good action when an agent is faced with a moral event. If there are multiple good actions in a given event, like whether to create the universe or not, then God can choose between a number of actions all valued as good. The only limiting factor in this formulation would have to be that the action that he does take fits his ideal plan for creation which means that action is not made necessary by its

³ Stephen Fallon explores God’s capacity for freedom in the moral context of *Paradise Lost*, “‘To Act or Not’: Milton’s Conception of Divine Freedom” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 49.3 (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988) 429.

moral value, but is chosen based on how it serves God's pre-history "eternal purpose" (III: 172).

Fallon explicates God's freedom of choice by using as a case-study the creation of the earth in Book VII of *Paradise Lost*; however, God's reaction to the impending fall of humanity dramatizes his moral agency and demonstrates the particulars of the first moral paradigm. Whether it is meant to model moral reason to the reader or to the angels, the episode shows God identifying a moral situation, evaluating the alternatives and finally determining a course of action. His discussion of the agency of the "Ethereal Powers / and Spirits" (all created moral agents) culminates in a moral choice of his own: "man therefore shall find grace, / the other none" (III; 31-32). God's judgment here constitutes a moral action because he strives to maintain "mercy and justice" and, by extension, his "eternal purpose" (III:132, 172). It seems that "mercy and justice" are assigned to the first parents and Satan respectively. Indeed, the last line of his speech, "but mercy first and last shall brightest shine," suggests humanity will receive only mercy because they fall deceived (134).

After God finishes his first judgment, the Son presses him for what his mercy toward man entails, and asks whether he will "abolish thy creation, and unmake" humanity (III: 163). However, for the Son this option would mean defeat because God's "goodness and ... greatness both / be questioned and blasphemed without defense" (165-66). In other words, Satan would succeed in either perverting humanity or unmaking that which God has made for his own glory. In response, God qualifies the mercy he referred to before, yet now it seems to take on a slightly different tenor.

He explains that “man should not quite be lost, but saved who will” (173). God is now saying that humanity will receive conditional mercy rather than the unconditional mercy implied in God’s earlier proclamation. There is a subtle shift in God’s attitude toward man from his first statement claiming mercy first and last shall brightest shine” and “man shall not quite be lost” (III: 134, 173). This shift from the implication of unconditional mercy to mercy with the condition of a fitting sacrifice and the curse of death reveals the difference between God’s desires and his will to follow the law of the divine plan. That is, there is tension between mercy as the “brightest” divine virtue and the claim that man must die—“die he or justice must” (210).

The shift in God’s judgment shows that God is capable of having a desire that diverges from the law, though he decides instead to uphold justice “as God’s eternal purpose has decreed” (172). The separation of God’s desire and his action is a facet of the anthropomorphization of the divine in *Paradise Lost*, but the fact that God is able to desire a course of action and choose the “just” option demonstrates his status as a free moral agent and gestures at the structure of the first moral paradigm. The paradigm remains nebulous both because it is not directly represented in the text, and because, as Milton admits, it is beyond human comprehension. However, the dialogue between God and the Son dramatizes God’s engagement with the moral world and shows that it is similar to other types of agents in subsequent paradigms. God’s privileged epistemological status means that this paradigm cannot fit into available normative moral structures developed by moral agents whose existence is derived from God. Further, God’s perfect reason shows his ability to choose the “just” course

of action, cursing humanity with death despite the desire to grant unconditional mercy. His refusal to give in to his desire demonstrates not only his commitment to his plan, but also how to engage with the moral world.

Paradigm II: The Angelic Host

The second paradigm in Christian moral history presented in *Paradise Lost* comes with the creation of the angels, the first third party apart from God and the law. The angels have a unique relationship to God and the law because they have different epistemological access to the law, so the process by which they interpret the moral world is also different. Their different epistemological access to the moral law is best evidenced by Abdiel's interpretation of his origin, having been told of his own creation. In turn, this means that the freedom that the angels enjoy is different from that of God's. God's freedom exists in complete knowledge which gives him the ability to balance virtue through moral reasoning, as he does in Book III in the judgment of Adam and Eve. The angels' freedom, on the other hand, consists of interpreting the moral world and having the ability to choose otherwise, also through the use of reason. These two approaches are similar, but they have a key difference: God chooses to act in a way that coincides with his "eternal purpose," because to act otherwise would fundamentally change existence, while the angels choose whether or not to act in accordance with that purpose. In other words, the angels ought to choose to act according to God's purpose as it is revealed to them.

Moral action, for Milton, is based on reason: the agent interprets the moral situation, identifies the "moral" choice, and ideally takes action accordingly.

However, given that reason is the mechanism of moral activity there must be something that makes one action more just than another—that is, there must be some force of logical necessity that makes one action better than another. This is determined by logical necessity implicit throughout the poem, but articulated most clearly by Abdiel, who links it to causation and its laws. In other words, because God created the angels, he causes their existence. This particular type of physical causation brings with it an abstract moral relationship between the creator and the created. The creature is morally obligated to act in accordance with the creator's established final cause—or “eternal purpose.” This is the foundation of Abdiel's argument establishing sufficient reason that angels should obey God's decrees, new or old.

Satan seems to think that if God introduces new decrees regarding the moral law, then the law changes according to God's desires and is therefore arbitrary. Abdiel counters Satan's argument with an attempt to establish a logical argument from creation, which would direct angelic duty with moral force. In other words, Satan, in the beginning of this scene, argues against God's right to issue decrees, while Abdiel makes the argument that angels are bound by moral duty to follow those decrees because God created them and knows how to further perfect them. When Satan denies this, Abdiel echoes God, calling Satan an “ingrate;” also circumventing Satan's argument by pointing out that his assertion poses a non-question, given the fact that the angels owe their existence to God (V: 811). In other words, the angels are obligated to follow the law insofar as they freely fulfill the offices for which they were created or assigned, because God created them. For Abdiel, and seemingly for

Milton, the obligation that moral agents owe God is a matter of logical necessity that follows from the idea of beneficent creation and limits subjective interpretations of the good. It seems as though Abdiel casts God in an even more tyrannical light than Satan, saying that obedience is compulsory because he created them. Yet Abdiel draws back from this by reminding Satan of their experience with God, who has always worked for the improvement of his creations.

To a large extent, Abdiel derives the “right of merit” that Hughes discusses in his article, “Merit in *Paradise Lost*,” from the act of creation (3). The equality that Abdiel uses to denounce Satan’s proposal of angelic rule is based in the ontological status as fellow creatures rather than creators. When Abdiel says, “as by his Word the mighty father made / all things, ev’n thee, and all the Spirits of Heaven / by him created” he draws attention to what stratifies or hierarchizes the host of heaven dividing them between God and the Son, and the angelic host (V: 836-38). The Son’s right to rule is based on him being the creating word of God. This means that Satan’s first mistake is to misperceive the logical relationships contained within the concept of creation; then, he works hard to refute Abdiel in order to release himself from the obligation entailed in creation. Abdiel clarifies the moral relationship between angels and God when he says “his laws our laws, all honor to him done / returns our own,” which means that freely fulfilling the offices for which the angels were assigned or created is what it means for an angel to act morally (844-45). In other words, to fulfill God’s divine plan for creation whether it is understood or not, constitutes following both the moral law and the law of obligation entailed in the concept of creation.

Satan retaliates against the appeal to creation by demanding “proof” and asking “who saw / when this creation was? Rememberst thou / thy making while the Maker gave thee being?” (856). Effectively, Satan applies a logically sound epistemological skepticism to Abdiel’s appeal to creation, yet his mistake comes when he moves from skepticism to his assertion that angels are “self-begot, self-raised / by their own quickening power’ (860-61). Misguided though his conclusion is, Satan is attempting to undermine the idea of moral obligation to God by removing creation as the motivating force. Self-created beings would be justified in rebelling against God because it would affirm Satan’s tyrannical portrait of God. Satan’s logic here is that self-created beings have no obligation to any other beings, though he is not exactly correct in this assumption. It seems that God himself feels that he is obligated to remain consistent with his “eternal purpose” so as not to fundamentally change the angels and the rest of existence, though this obligation is of a very different quality than the one that binds Satan and the angels.

The obligation that is at the center of Satan and Abdiel’s debate speaks to the nature of this paradigm’s normative structure as a particular kind of virtue ethics. Satan is called an “ingrate” on a number of occasions, which suggests that the obligation manifests itself as gratitude; or rather, that the appropriate moral emotion for angels and all created agents is gratitude toward God. Gratitude in this case becomes like temperance or charity in that it is an ideal attitude to cultivate. Because Abdiel claims that the obligation that obtains on a relationship between creature and creator precludes other moral considerations like divine decrees, the second moral paradigm in *Paradise Lost* is a brand of virtue ethics. It is tempting to think of it as

deontology instead because the command to bow before the Son constitutes a specific moral law, and the angels cannot penetrate the entire logic of the revelation of the Son and naming him vicegerent; however, Abdiel locates the force of their morality in a virtue and in their moral character in fulfilling their moral duty. Abdiel's argument and understanding of the concept of creation and its moral implications shows that the paradigm is dominated by an emphasis on moral character and acting according to moral ideals, which means that it can best be categorized as virtue ethics.

Paradigm III: The Creation of Humanity

The creation of humanity marks the beginning of a new era of moral history defined by a new moral agent, humanity, and its relationship to both moral law and to God. God commanded the first parents, in Adam's words: "not to taste that only Tree / of knowledge ... God pronounced it death to taste that Tree" (423-27). In essence, humanity and the angels were both asked to obey God—as dictated by the law of obligation. However, while the angels received the commandment of fealty to the Son after their creation, Adam and Eve were given their single commandment almost at their creation. Because the respective laws given to humans and angels came at different times in relation to their own creation the normative structures of each paradigm is different. As a result, and in the context of the paradigmatical structures of *Paradise Lost*, the garden can best be categorized as deontological, whereas the angels' structure is virtue ethical. The capacity for this paradigm to fit into other normative moral structures diminishes with the realization that the moral agents to which this law pertains—Adam and Eve—do not understand the complex meanings

contained within the single law that subsequent biblical commentators will explore. However, Adam and Eve's understanding is not required for the law to be binding.

The law of obligation remains the basis for moral law in *Paradise Lost* as it shows up in both Raphael's account of the creation of the world in Book VII and in Adam's account of his own creation in Book VIII. The law of obligation, seemingly a remnant of the preceding structure of virtue ethics, persists because it remains the necessary force which morally compels Adam and Eve to follow the law, and, at least in part, is what makes disobedience wrong. Despite the consistent logical backdrop of the law of obligation, this paradigm changes the previous moral paradigm significantly. Raphael straddles the divide between them saying:

For which to the infinitely God we owe
Immortal thanks, and his admonishment
Receive with solemn purpose to observe
Immutably his sov'reign will, the end
Of what we are. (VII, 76-80)

The "immortal thanks" that is owed to the "infinitely God" is the motivating force that underwrites the law of obligation for moral agents created by God. Indeed, Raphael says that the expression of gratitude for being is the purpose for the moral agents' being, at least in part, since their job is to "observe" divine will. This is true both in the sense that angels and humans participate in moral agency which is at least structurally similar to God's, and that they obey his decrees. Therefore, as Raphael explains, the law of obligation entailed in creation persists for Adam and Eve in the garden. It seems that Milton is attempting to have it both ways by affirming virtue ethics and deontology. However, the law of obligation merely motivates the moral

system while the prohibition on the forbidden fruit dominates moral choice, which means that in regard to how moral agents engage with the moral world, the moral structure in the garden is deontological.

Adam picks up the theme of gratitude, the appropriate moral emotion toward God, and its entailment from creation in his first moments of consciousness.

Acknowledging his innate knowledge of language Adam echoes Satan's question about his own origin:

Tell, if ye saw, how came I thus, how here?
Not of myself; but some great maker then,
In goodness and in power pre-eminent;
Tell me, how may I know him, how adore him,
From whom I have that thus I move and live,
And feel that I am happier than I know. (277-82)

Adam, like Satan, briefly entertains the idea that he was self-made; however, he soon concludes that he must have been created. His next concern is the nature of his creator and how he may best worship him. It seems that, like language, gratitude is innate in Adam's state of being. This would mean that Adam worships out of necessity and not out of devotion to his creator, which contradicts God's assertion of free-will in Book III. This is part of the basis for William Empson's criticism of Milton's God, that he does not in fact allow for free-will, and rather uses humans and angels for the glorification of himself and the Son.⁴ However, it is Adam's brief echo of Satan and his subtle reasoning in this passage that solves this apparent problem. Adam chooses devotion to God rather than devotion to himself through the childlike reasoning he

⁴ William Empson makes the case that God in *Paradise Lost* is not a traditional Christian image in his book *Milton's God*.

employs. In fact, Adam is employing a simplified version of the teleological argument for the existence of God. The allusion to this sophisticated reasoning in this episode means that Adam's innate ability is reason and not gratitude⁵. In addition, if, as stated in the *Areopagitica*, "reason is but choosing," then Adam freely enters into a relationship of moral obligation to God since he favors the explanation from design over the explanation of self-creation that Satan chooses in Book V.

Given that Adam freely enters into this moral paradigm the birth of the moral agent on earth in Raphael's exposition of the creation of the world further elucidates the paradigm in the Garden of Eden. Raphael vaguely gestures at the bounty that God created for Adam, yet focuses on the creation of the forbidden tree. The implication is that the tree is the center-piece of God's bounty because it represents the gift of choice and therefore reason. God's role in the creation of the tree and the gift of reason makes him the ultimate source of both good and evil; however, the burden is on Adam to act according to God's plan; if he does so he will remain free from evil. God is exonerated from fault for evil's presence in the world because Adam was created in a context that allowed him to seek the knowledge of good and evil, even though it comes with the cost of death for him and his progeny. Adam and Eve's compliance with the single law represents obedience to God's eternal purpose which in turn means that their actions are, like God's, in harmony with the moral law.

The fall, however, represents the idea of freedom as it is tied to the concept of capability. If Adam and Eve begin "knowing good by evil," they are acquainted with evil and are no longer capable of existing in their paradise (*Areopagitica*, 939). When

⁵ Milton asserts the teleological argument, or argument from design, in the first chapter of *de Doctrina Christiana* as an axiom of the work that follows.

Adam recalls the commandment not to eat of the tree, God says that the consequence is death:

“The day thou eat’st thereof...inevitably thou shalt die;
From that day mortal, and this happy state
Shalt lose, expelled from hence into a world
Of woe and sorrow” (VIII, 329-33)

However, he goes on to define exactly what death is, since in a prelapsarian existence “death” is a signifier with no signified. This passage does two things: first, it attempts to acquaint Adam, *a priori*, with a concept he knows nothing of, and second, it points out a practical concern that is hidden within the single law. If Adam and Eve “know” evil after the fall, it is quite possible that they would no longer be able to coexist with paradise. Since they would then be imperfect beings, they are not only prevented from persisting in their “happy state,” but incapable of it in the same way they are incapable of truly understanding the consequence of disobedience.

Here again, Adam and Eve’s inability to penetrate the logic of the single prohibitory law, and their limited understanding of the law of obligation, affirm the deontological structure in this paradigm. If Adam and Eve are incapable of existing in the Garden after they know evil, and they are incapable of engaging *a priori* with postlapsarian concepts like death, then the epistemological gap between the two paradigms means human intellect is incapable of penetrating the moral structure in the Garden of Eden. The epistemological gap means that they abide by the single law that is given to them by God because it is given to them by God, their creator, who has shown himself to be beneficent through the bounty of creation. Adam freely

enters into this moral obligation through teleological reasoning; however, it also shows that over and above the law of obligation is a single prohibitive law that need not be understood aside from the fact that if the action is taken, it bears consequences. In other words, Raphael and Adam's exposition of creation, especially in Books VII and VIII, shows that Adam and Eve are placed within a deontological normative structure with a single law. While the angels do eventually receive a similar specific law in the revelation of the Son, humanity existed in a deontological paradigm from its creation, as opposed to the virtue ethical paradigm that preceded the creation of Earth.

Paradigm IV: East of the Garden

Paradise Lost makes specific mention of the earth's change that results from Eve's consumption of the forbidden fruit. "Earth felt the wound, and Nature from her seat / sighing through all her works gave signs of woe / that all was lost" (IX, 782-84). Since the Earth and Nature are irrevocably changed, Adam and Eve now exist in a different world governed by a different natural and moral law. While this new structure has not been articulated in Book IX, the fall marks the beginning of a new moral era that is pervaded by minor paradigm shifts. In fact, the Old Testament encompasses a number of moral fluctuations that makes this era of moral history difficult to characterize because, as Book XI shows, presents a tumultuous period of moral success and failure, yet according to Milton, it begins with a return to virtue ethics for Adam and Eve. However, the paradigm moves on to the law as articulated to Noah and changes again when it takes the form of Mosaic Law. These milestones

in the moral history in the Old Testament are merely a few of the more major shifts in normative moral structure, indeed this era can be characterized as a long period of moral fluctuation until it is stabilized with the Old Testament books of law.

Adam and Eve's normative moral structure seems to be suspended in the latter half of Book X. Not until after they both lament the fall and combine their skill in moral reasoning does it become clear what kind of moral paradigm exists once the deontological singularity is dissolved by the transgression of the single commandment. In a sense, Adam and Eve find themselves in a sort of moral vacuum. They have no conception of what the normative moral structure looks like, and they are surprised and confused that they have not died—what ever “death” means they do not seem to have experienced it yet. The dialogue between the first parents finally indicates that they have, in essence, defaulted to virtue ethics, because Adam and Eve engage in moral reasoning like that which is espoused in the *Areopagitica*. Adam first conceives of death as a return to dust, and therefore oblivion, which he sees as a release from both the immediate pain that he is now subject to, and the curses from his progeny. However, after he reconciles with Eve, she proposes that they seek death to prevent the suffering of the ensuing generations. Eve's proposal is a surprising embrace of utilitarianism; however, Adam rebuts Eve's utilitarian solution with a recognition of a greater good in allowing justice to come full circle when the Son returns to crush their enemy's head⁶. This episode shows Adam and Eve's evolving

⁶ Eve's turn to utilitarianism seems to be overshadowed by Adam's proposal of allowing the sacrifice of the Son to come to fruition as a utilitarian gesture itself. However, Adam's argument does not follow from the greatest good for the greatest number, but rather in its place in God's divine plan. Eve's proposal, on the other hand, values the least suffering for the greatest number and is therefore based in utilitarian sentiments.

moral reasoning, which in turn indicates what type of moral structure in which they now find themselves.

In Book III, God says he will “clear their senses dark” and restore their reason after the fall (188). However, Adam, with reason alone, is incapable of locating the “good” since he could do nothing but curse and wish for death. Eve, on the other hand, arrives at her utilitarian proposal which seeks to prevent the suffering of humankind. Eve’s logic is not unsound: the prevention of suffering is a moral good. However, Adam’s conclusion that allowing the suffering so that an even “greater good” can be attained is the superior moral judgment. In other words, the discernment that Adam and Eve exhibit together is very similar to the discernment outlined in *Areopagitica*, since they are capable of recognizing a greater good that results from a repulsive action—to allow all the generations of humanity to suffer. If Adam and Eve, with their moral discernment, are capable of the same actions as those articulated in *Areopagitica*, then Adam and Eve are in a similar moral paradigm; that is, they find themselves in a normative moral structure of virtue ethics, like Milton’s own moral era.

While Adam and Eve can apparently maintain virtue ethics during their lifetime, Books XI and XII show the degradation of this structure and the rise of a prescriptive law. Cain is banished after the first murder and he presumably functions in the same system in which Adam and Eve function. Eventually, Noah is found to be the only one able to maintain such discernment when he “preached / conversion and repentance as the souls / in prison under judgments immanent” (XI, 723-25). The flood, then, purges humanity and allows it to start anew in a “long time of peace,” a

peace that is broken by Nimrod. The paradigm that is roughly equivalent to the Old Testament is typified by the ebb and flow of success in virtue ethics until the paradigm is stabilized by the Mosaic Law. Michael explains that the law exists to “evince / their natural pravity,” which means it is meant to educate humanity both about evil, and about their potential for evil. In other words, the introduction of Mosaic Law dominates the period after the fall with the purpose to teach humanity to “discover sin” (XII, 291).

The ebb and flow between long periods of peace—or harmony with God’s eternal purpose—and discord is seen in a number of episodes revealed to Adam, including the lead up to the flood and the tyranny of Nimrod. This marks the period between the fall and the establishment of Mosaic Law as a period of varying success in virtue ethics. It seems that humanity’s “dark senses,” though “cleared” by God, are easily corrupted, and therefore, they have trouble discerning right from wrong. Milton states in the *Areopagitica* that, “good and evil we know in the field of this world grow up together almost inseparably,” so it is no wonder that the moral agents just after the fall have little success in maintaining the virtue ethical structure (938). Milton continues saying that “the knowledge of good is so involved and interwoven with the knowledge of evil;” however, Adam’s confusion about the concept of death demonstrates that moral agency is still in its nascent stages because of humanity’s limited knowledge and experience on which to base their moral discernment (938). In fact, they have little or no experience with good or evil that would constitute knowledge.

The solution to the chaotic ebb and flow of humanity's success with virtue ethics is Mosaic Law. The rigid deontological structure is meant to produce the knowledge necessary for independent moral discernment. Michael explains that the deontological Mosaic Law that dominates the Old Testament will "resign [humanity] in full time / up to a better covenant" (XII, 301-2). The covenant to which Michael refers here is the coming of the Son, or the New Testament, the period of moral history about which Milton wrote the *Areopagitica*. Therefore, Milton makes Old Testament law the forge in which moral agency is tempered, and thus capable of cutting through "shadowy types of truth" to "discover sin" (XII, 303; 290).

Michael describes the transition from the Old Testament to the New as:

...from flesh to spirit
From imposition of strict laws to free
Acceptance of large grace, from servile fear
To filial, works of law to works of faith" (XII, 303-06)

This begins to bridge the gap in continuity between the Old and New Testament in Milton's writing; but first it gives insight into the Old Testament paradigm. The vast majority of history in this paradigm happens after the "imposition of strict laws," and therefore is characterized as "servile fear" in relation to God, and "works of law" in relation to the law (XII, 304-6). Moral agents, as a result, are meant to freely choose whether or not to act morally according to the general guidelines of the law. Under Mosaic Law an agent's moral discernment is engaged in two ways, first, to reverse-engineer moral truth from what is stated in the law, and second, to determine how the law applies to a given moral situation. Milton's rejection of humanity's status as

“under a perpetual childhood of prescription,” seems to conflict with this structure if it is interpreted as a restriction on human reason; however, as Michael points out, this is precisely the purpose for Mosaic Law (*Areopagitica*, 938). However, it does show a paradigm that is typified by “works of law,” and the moral law is therefore in place to identify what the moral is so that moral agents can successfully maintain harmony with God’s eternal purpose while limiting the danger of moral reason going astray.

Michael’s explanation for the existence of the law, as something to educate moral agents that are inexpert at moral judgment, shows the deontological nature of the paradigm. While deontology does not necessarily mean that moral agents are ignorant of the truth behind moral law, the moral value is firmly located in moral action and taken out of the moral agent because the agent cannot penetrate moral truth. In the Garden, Adam and Eve do have a single prescriptive law, yet in the ensuing history in Books XI and XII, humanity has proven itself incapable of managing good and evil in a system governed by virtue ethics. As a result, humanity’s capacity to discern right from wrong is subordinated to the moral law given to them by God. This paradigm contrasts with the rest of moral history in that it guides moral reason, which can be seen as an infringement on the freedom of moral reasoning advocated in Milton’s other works, and which would represent an obstacle for continuity in Christian moral history.

The paradigm after the fall of humanity is a strong version of deontology because humanity has proven itself incapable of maintaining a virtue ethical moral system. Mosaic Law, which dominates this paradigm, was established in an effort to stabilize the chaotic fluctuations in this moral paradigm from Adam and Eve to the

establishment of God's law through Moses. This period of flux represents a microcosm for why Kuhn's theory about scientific revolution is relevant. If the law is in place to educate moral agents about good and evil, then morality, like the scientific method, is a process rather than a coherent object. The fluctuations then represent how morality is not merely a steady march of progress, but a fluid process more analogous to feedback loops. This more fluid understanding of moral history remains true in all the paradigms as they are portrayed in *Paradise Lost*, save the first because the relationship between God and the law is constant; however, the final paradigm, after the coming of the Son, marks the transition to what Michael calls, a "better covenant," in which moral agents are returned to a virtue ethical structure and are capable of reclaiming their moral discernment and reason, having graduated from the deontology that dominates the paradigm in the Old Testament.

Paradigm V: The New Covenant

Michael justifies the Mosaic Law by claiming it will "evince [humanity's] natural pravity...that when they see / law can discover sin" which means when, "in full time," humanity graduates from the deontological normative moral structure of the Old Testament, humans are now expected to "discover sin" as free agents (XII: 287-90). The incarnation of the Son marks this graduation, and for Joachim of Fiore begins the second age of moral history. However, in *Paradise Lost* the fifth paradigm begins with a return to virtue ethics. Because this is the paradigm in which Milton writes *Areopagitica* the structures should be fairly similar, his moral philosophy presented therein mirrors the anticipation of the fifth paradigm in Book XII of

Paradise Lost. Therefore, this age of moral history sees an increase in moral agency and a shift in the locus of moral value from the event and into the moral character and the consequence derived from moral action.

In Book XII, the fifth paradigm is anticipated in an explanation of the purpose for the Mosaic Law.

So law appears imperfect, and but giv'n
With purpose to resign them in full time
Up to a better cov'nant, disciplined
From shadowy types of truth, from flesh to spirit,
From imposition of strict laws to free
Acceptance of large grace, from servile fear
To filial, works of law to works of faith. (300-06)

Now that humanity is “disciplined,” capable of discerning moral truth, they can enter a period characterized by the “spirit” and “free / acceptance of large grace” (XII, 303-05). The emphasis on spirit echoes Joachim’s final age. However, Milton’s construction is congruent with Joachim’s history in that the Old Testament is characterized by law while human agency is still in its infancy. Only when this discipline is acquired can humanity transition from a paradigm based on “works of law” to a paradigm based on “works of faith.”

The difference between “works of law” and “works of faith” can be derived from Milton’s rejection of paternalistic moral law in the *Areopagitica*. The purpose of Mosaic Law, according to Michael, is to “remove sin by removing the matter of sin,” since it reveals sin to moral agents otherwise incapable of identifying it (944). However, Milton lambastes this justification for law. He argues that moral agents, in the fifth paradigm, do not follow the paternalistic law, but an internal law of

conscience. Performing “works of faith,” are the actions of the “warfarring Christian” and the “wise man” described in the *Areopagitica*, which means that the fifth paradigm also emphasizes moral empiricism and experimentation. Because Milton’s exemplary moral agents are not under “pittance, and prescription, and compulsion” of a rigid moral law they now have to investigate the moral world through a process similar to the scientific method. Moral agents are now not only capable of identifying evil and preferring good, but can test their moral senses and even derive good out of potentially harmful moral materials. As a result, agency sees a dramatic increase in the New Testament since, as I have argued, Milton is a virtue ethical consequentialist because he emphasizes moral character and good consequences from potentially harmful materials.

The emphasis on moral character is communicated with a clearer description of the “law of faith” that typifies the age of spirit that Joachim of Fiore presents and Milton echoes.

...and the law of faith
Working through love, upon their hearts shall write,
To guide them in all truth, and also arm
With spiritual armor, able to resist
Satan’s assaults” (XII: 487-92)

The central tenet of the “law of faith” and, by extension, the fifth paradigm, is love. Love is the mental state by which the good obtains in a moral action; however, the range of possibilities for an expression of love is vast. To satisfy this ambiguity, the moral value is displaced from the action, where it had been located in the last paradigm, and placed in the moral agent. The “law of faith” is then written on the

hearts of humanity placing the guide to the moral good within the moral agent itself. Therefore, the guiding force in the moral structure is more of a principle than a concrete legalistic statement. Thus to act morally is to act in the “spirit” of the moral good.

Since the “law of faith” is motivated by love the burden of identification of the moral good rests firmly on the agent. Indeed, the role of love seems to serve as a short-hand for the law of obligation, the logical duty or fealty that each moral agent should hold for his or her creator. While the Mosaic Law was meant to “evince” and “stir up,” the “law of faith” is meant to “guide,” which demonstrates the transition from the “perpetual prescription” of Old Testament deontology to a system of virtue ethics. Moreover, the law of faith gives moral agents “spiritual armor,” indicating that it defends against “Satan’s assaults,” but does not discern good moral action or combat evil in their stead. The present absence here is that the law of love does not give them a two-handed sword like Michael’s in the war in heaven, but protective armament. In addition, moral agents are now capable of acting in the “spirit of the law,” rather than according to the law, and can derive good out of evil, at least to some extent.

When in Book XII Adam recognizes the Son’s ability to create good out of evil in his sacrifice, he also recognizes the spirit of Milton’s consequentialism. Human moral agents, as they are represented in the *Areopagitica*, are capable of deriving moral truth from potentially harmful materials. While the Son can create good out of evil, humanity can merely derive moral truth from potential evil. Humanity’s capacity for moral consequences exists on a much smaller scale; yet the

law of faith is clearly no longer prescriptive. Moral agents are capable of manipulating their moral world by deriving good from evil through a kind of empiricism and experimentation outlined in the *Areopagitica*. Therefore, when Adam exclaims “o goodness infinite, goodness immense” in reference to the Son’s superlative good act of self-sacrifice, he echoes the infinite possibilities for expression of moral good through the love that the Son shows humanity (XII, 469). Indeed, it seems that in the spirit of the law of faith, humanity can, like the Son, “all this good of evil ... produce / and evil turn to good” (XII, 470-71). If good can come from evil, then the event itself cannot contain the moral value; rather the consequence of that action is the determining factor in the moral value of a given circumstance. As a result, the fifth paradigm, after the incarnation of the Son, becomes a virtue ethical moral system based heavily in consequentialism since it emphasizes moral character and the consequence that character can derive from a given moral situation. In short, the fifth paradigm exhibits a virtue ethics system that emphasizes a strong moral character that can manipulate the moral world. Because moral agents can manipulate moral circumstance, moral value is transferred from the action to the consequence from that action. The paradigms separated by the incarnation of the Son differ greatly in their normative moral structures. The consequentialism that the Son introduces to humanity is diametrically opposed to the deontological paradigm of the Old Testament. This paradigm also sees the relocation of moral value from the moral action to the moral agent, while in the preceding paradigm; the value of the action was paramount. This transition in moral value is shown in the transition from “works of law” to “works of faith.” Humanity is now given both the ability and burden to

discern between good and evil, derive good from evil materials, and act freely in the “spirit” of the moral good.

Chapter II: The Recurrence of Agency in *Paradise Lost*

The analysis of the moral history represented in *Paradise Lost* in the last chapter shows dramatic paradigm shifts in morality in Christian history. The oscillation in the relationship between the agent and the moral law means that Milton's historical construction is non-linear. As a result, Kuhn's theory of the history of scientific revolutions—that history is marked by paradigm shifts more closely resembling feedback loops than a crescendo of progress—offers a useful way to conceptualize Milton's history of morality and unite the apparently incompatible structural forms that morality takes during the course of Christian history. However, the lack of a linear progression causes a problem. It seems that continuity along the timeline of moral history suffers, which is a concern because, it is difficult to maintain the immutability of God if the history of his creation is inconsistent.

In other words, the problem lies in the tension between these paradigms. Each paradigm is consistent when analyzed synchronically. But, because moral history exhibits incompatible normative structures like deontology and consequentialism, a continuous diachronic view of this history seems to be unattainable. However, the same structure that throws this problem into sharp relief also offers a solution. If morality were a process, even when it consists of a body of laws centering on the agent, then the pursuit of moral truth is analogous to the pursuit of scientific truth. *Areopagitica* presents exactly this type of moral philosophy, emphasizing empiricism and experimentation in the spirit of the law, rather than a strict adherence to a conception of a remote, perfect ideal. In constructing morality as a dynamic process Milton departs from Platonic philosophy and makes a case for consequentialism—the

belief that moral values are located in the result of a moral situation—and the philosophy in *Areopagitica* that centers on the moral agent’s ability to progress through personal moral education.

The disparity between the Old and New Testament moral paradigms can be explained as a process of education. Adam demonstrates his lack of moral, and even physical, understanding when he confesses that he does not know what “death” means. He is cast into a world where death becomes a reality before he knows what this word signifies. Adam’s limited success in understanding his vision of the Old Testament mirrors Michael’s justification for the law when he states that the law is meant to “discover” evil and “discipline” him and his heirs against it, which begins to explain the relationship between the agent and the moral law (290; 302). Adam’s struggle to understand coupled with the didactic purpose of moral law means that human agency is simply not powerful enough to grapple with sin and evil on its own. The paternalistic law of the Old Testament, then, shows humans the difference between good and evil until, in the New Testament, they are able to engage with morality directly armed with *a posteriori* knowledge since they now have the entirety of human history at their disposal. Moral agency, therefore, is that which establishes continuity through each moral paradigm. This chapter will explore how *Paradise Lost* demonstrates the form of moral agency discussed in *Areopagitica* and establishes continuity in Christian moral history.

The analysis of the moral paradigms in the previous chapter highlights the discontinuity in moral history. However, Milton’s conception of moral agency in *Areopagitica* provides a central object around which to establish diachronic

continuity across the moral history presented in *Paradise Lost*. Kuhn's model for scientific revolutions using paradigm shifts is united around the scientific method and the search for truth. Milton's moral agent, then, is motivated in the same way as Kuhn's scientist. In *Areopagitica* Milton describes the "warfaring Christian" and the "wise man" who seek moral truth through experiencing both good and evil. Milton's moral empiricism and experimentation is part and parcel of his moral formulation when he asks "what were virtue but a name?" if that virtue were the result of "pittance, and prescription, and compulsion" serving necessity not God (944). The moral resolve of the agent, therefore, must be tested in order to have value. That is, the agent has to face both good and evil and prefer the good in order to obtain a positive value.

For Milton, reason is the most important element in determining moral value. In fact, reason is necessary to make an agent a moral agent. It follows from "reason is but choosing" and the preference of the good, that reason is necessary for an agent to engage in a moral event (944). The emphasis on reason is why agents who are under "pittance, and prescription, and compulsion" cannot be praised as moral agents for they are not engaging in true moral activity (944). This reveals a key difference between the Old and New Testaments. The emphasis on Mosaic Law in the analysis of this theological issue in Milton's works makes it seem that the Old Testament precludes choice by enforcing the type of compulsion that is denounced in *Areopagitica*, yet it would be absurd to say that the people of the Old Testament were not moral agents. The Old Testament is far more complicated, though the feature of Mosaic Law presents the biggest obstacle to continuity in moral history because its

emphasis seems to suggest a deemphasis of moral reason. While the complexities of The Old Testament moral paradigm require further exploration, this project is focused on the problem presented by the apparent paradox between strict laws and an the emphasis that Milton puts on moral reasoning. The inconsistency between the agency allowed by the Old and New Testaments can be solved by understanding that moral agency. Reason, then, is the faculty by which moral facts are assessed and chosen in both paradigms. Therefore, at any time during moral history agents demonstrate some manner of reason in order to be considered moral agents.

Milton's moral philosophy in *Areopagitica* goes further than the preference of one action over another, since the "warfarring Christian" and the "wise man" actively pursue moral truth (939).

Since therefore the knowledge and survey of vice is in this world so necessary to the constituting of human virtue, and the scanning of error to the conformation of truth, how can we more sagely and with less danger scout into the regions of sin and falsity than by reading all manner of tractates and hearing all manner of reason? And this is the benefit which may be had of books promiscuously read. (939)

This passage expresses the empiricism and experimental dimension of Milton's moral agency. Agents test themselves against the moral world in an effort to investigate moral truth and are therefore asked to engage in a moral empirical project. Milton's "warfarring Christian" and "wise man" become moral scientists since moral truth is the result of continual testing and observation.

The moral empiricism and experimentation in this case makes agency so powerful that it allows agents to manipulate the moral world by changing the value of

a given event. If, as Milton argues, the agent is able to derive positive moral results from potentially harmful materials the moral event has a positive moral value. That is, if an agent discovers moral truth in the reading of pornography or libelous materials, the reading is still morally good. The truth that the agent derives in this situation becomes the focal point of the moral situation and could include: what should be avoided in their deeds and thoughts, why certain actions are evil, or it could increase knowledge of human nature, deceitfulness, and even how sinners deceive themselves. If, on the other hand, the reading of pornography merely increases the agent's licentious tendencies, then the moral event receives a negative value.

Therefore, Milton's moral philosophy is consequentialist and highly dynamic. He readily admits that not everyone will produce a positive value from potentially harmful materials, which means that morality is highly individualistic in Milton's view. Individualism of this kind is incompatible with the deontological structure of the Old Testament. Agency, then, differs in structure between the two moral paradigms, which is problematic if agency is the concept around which to center the reconciliation of the paradigms of moral history. However, Michael's explanation of Mosaic Law again becomes relevant because he reveals that the investigative work that Milton encourages in *Areopagitica* is merely reversed for the Old Testament moral agent. However, the important thing to realize here is that the same intellectual work is occurring in both moral paradigms. Though the identification of evil is reversed by the law, the agent still has to reverse engineer moral truth, apply that truth, and act accordingly, while in the New Testament the burden is on the agent to identify good and evil, and act accordingly. Michael, of course, also makes it clear

that the moral history dominated by Mosaic Law, with all its complexity, demonstrates that no system of moral law could be perfect but serves them well until they are able to accept Christ's broader teaching of love.

If Milton wants to establish continuity over the course of Christian moral history, then he has to connect all of the disparate paradigms presented in that history and bridge the gaps created by the different manifestations of moral agency. Milton, therefore, has developed his idea of the moral situation which obtains through the application of reason—meaning there must be a choice and by extension freedom. In addition, the choices involved must be identified as either good or evil, and of course, the agent must be aware of these choices. The centerpiece of this moral equation is the identification of the value of any given moral action. That is, the most important part of Milton's moral formulation is the interpretation of the moral world which allows agents to discern good from evil and even manipulate the value of certain actions. Incidentally, the act of interpreting the moral world occupies much of the action in *Paradise Lost*. Using the same structure established in chapter I the current chapter will now rehearse these moments and draw out the presence of agency that links the fragmented moral timeline. The incidents of moral interpretation will be highlighted in an attempt to uncover the moral agency present in the text and establish the continuity between the different paradigms of Christian moral history.

In his interpretation of God's freedom, Stephen Fallon claims that God can discern one good from another and choose one of many equivalent good actions. The establishment of this equality is not explicitly stated in the text, yet God shows himself to desire one thing and choose another. Yet it would be inconsistent with the

identity of God to desire anything less than the superlative good, which means that the two actions must have equal value. The ability to choose allows God to have freedom without succumbing to arbitrariness and tyranny. The episode which shows this choice between two equivalent goods is not in the creation scene of Book VII but in the sentencing of humanity in Book III. God seems to say that humanity will be met with mercy, yet after the Son interjects, he changes his mind and seeks a sacrifice so that the demands of justice can be met.

However, God's identity also requires that he is omniscient, which means that he would have known all along what action had to be taken in regards to the first human transgression. It is puzzling why God would even have to debate the issue, let alone desire one action and choose another, since perfect knowledge would entail knowledge of what he would choose. What the episode does, however, is to dramatize the interpretation of the moral situation. God echoes the moral agency of *Areopagitica* as he prophesies humanity's fall. He emphasizes reason and freedom in calling Adam and Eve "authors to themselves in all / both in what they judge and what they choose" (122-23). In assessing the moral situation, which is the first step in God's judgment about humanity's impending fall, he calls attention to the act of judging a moral dilemma—or rather interpreting it. He eventually decides that, humanity "shall find grace" given the nature of man's lapse in judgment, since he "falls deceived" (130-31). God is accounting for the difference in the contexts of Satan's fall versus Adam and Eve's and therefore desires to grant them mercy.

However, it seems that the Son reminds God about justice when he says that he "judg'st always right" and God defers mercy pending a fitting sacrifice, so that

justice is appeased (155). In a sense, God changes his mind from unconditional mercy to conditional mercy, presumably to allow him to justify the entire history of human suffering in the face of God's perfect goodness. In effect, this means that God continues to interpret the moral situation throughout the scene and is aided by the dialogue with the Son. He has drawn attention to the interpretive error made by Adam and Eve, an interpretive process in which God is currently engaged with in this scene. His desire for unconditional mercy shows a dynamic, free moral agent as the scene becomes a drama staged to demonstrate God's perfect moral agency as it is defined in *Areopagitica*. God's agency, therefore, contrasts with both Satan and Adam and Eve's. These instances of flawed moral agency are revealed through an error of moral interpretation demonstrated in the debate between Satan and Abdiel in Book V, and in the dialogue between Eve and Satan in Book IX.

The second paradigm of moral history reflects God's accommodated moral agency found in the first. Satan and Abdiel's argument about their relationship to God and his law demonstrates the moral agency that persists throughout history. Again, agency requires the use of reason and interpretation in order to obtain in any given event. In the second paradigm, Abdiel and Satan articulate alternate interpretations of their existence and their relationship to God. Their disagreement about this relationship affects the legitimacy of God's status as sovereign and whether the angels are obligated to obey his law. Abdiel claims that because God created them, they owe him gratitude for their being, and are therefore obligated to remain loyal subjects. On the other hand, Satan claims that "[the angels] know no time when we were not as now" which means, given the evidence, that angels, like God, are self-

created is just as likely as the assumption that they were created by another. Satan and Abdiel's alternate interpretation not only determines their moral state of affairs but demonstrates their moral choices and establishes continuity between the first and second paradigms.

Abdiel articulates a traditional interpretation of Christian being, that his existence is the result of a conscious and free act of God. However, Satan points out that Abdiel's claim is a combination of faith and interpretation when he asks him to "remember thou / thy making, while the Maker gave thee being?" (857-58). Satan answers his own question when he says that they "know no time when they were not as now" (859). Satan is pointing out that no created being is conscious during their own creation, which means that they do not have first hand epistemological proof that their being is the result of a conscious and free act of God. This means that Abdiel's claim that God "made / thee what thou art . . . and circumscribed [all the angels'] being" is a mere interpretation—he has logically induced God's role in his being from God's status and his own finite existence (VII, 823-25).

Satan realizes that Abdiel's traditional explanation for angelic existence is inductive and therefore an interpretation of their existence with no first-hand epistemological justification. He then takes the opportunity to offer an alternative interpretation claiming that he wishes "by proof to try" Abdiel's traditional explanation of angelic existence. Satan's dismantling of the traditional interpretation is sound, Abdiel cannot prove that he was created by God; however, Satan proceeds in making a similar logical error—leaping from no justification to asserting an alternative for which he has no more or less proof than Abdiel. That is, his critique of

Abdiel's claim, that it is a subjective interpretation, can be leveled at his own claim that the angels are "self-begot, self-raised / by their own quickening power" (860-61). However, if Satan were to be right, it would fundamentally change the angels' moral relationship to God, effectively freeing them from the obligation to act in accordance with divine law.

The alternative existential explanations articulated in Satan and Abdiel's debate demonstrates the moral agency that connects the disparate moral paradigms. Indeed, the competing interpretations of their existence and whether it is contingent on God is precisely what makes the angels moral agents similar to humans. The conclusions that result from both Satan and Abdiel's inductions reveal their capacity for reason, the faculty with which moral facts are assessed and chosen. Since Satan chooses a different explanation from the traditional one, he shows the angels to be free, and further that Abdiel's continued faith in God as his Creator is a free action. Therefore, their debate demonstrates the agency that connects the disparate paradigms of Milton's Christian moral history. For Abdiel, choosing to show gratitude to God by recognizing that, as angels, they are secondary creations and therefore ought to accept God's superior merit as their creator is the highest virtue. On the other hand, Satan focuses on the latitude that they are given in heaven and decides that he is the sole arbiter of his own morality. Abdiel's position is a strong expression of virtue ethics: that the agent interprets the moral state of affairs and chooses actions based on their identification with over-arching virtues, yet his display of agency through interpretation of his moral state of affairs creates common ground between his own paradigm and other before and after his own.

In the third paradigm, Adam and Eve are given moral agency as well and while their context in Eden is distinct from previous paradigms, the qualities of a moral agent remain constant. Adam engages in the discourse started by Satan and Abdiel in their debate over the angels' existential beginnings when he first awakens into consciousness. Not only does this demonstrate a parallel in moral concerns, but a common method with which to engage them. The cause of his own creation seems to be an innate question since he immediately supplicates his surroundings for information about his creator. Given that a moral obligation follows from the creator-created relationship, Adam not only employs reason in the form of causal logic but does so in a moral situation. His interpretation of himself and his surroundings demonstrates a form of agency that is consistent with the agency represented in previous paradigms.

When Adam relates his first moments of consciousness to Raphael he attempts to determine a cause for the experiences relayed by his senses. He then internalizes this model for understanding the world by applying the same causal logic to himself, *a priori*. It seems that he takes a look at “ye hills and dales, ye rivers, woods, and plains” and deduces that they have existed before his awakening (VIII, 275). If their existence precedes his creation, then it is more likely that he was the result of some cause rather than springing into existence of his own volition. Determining that he has a definite cause is an implicit choice in itself but he dwells on the nature of the force that brought about his existence. After he implores his surroundings for the answer to his question he first says “not of myself,” which means that at least for an instant he considers the proposition of self-creation that

Satan posits in Book V (VIII, 278). Yet very unlike Satan, Adam rapidly moves from his consideration of self-genesis in the negative to a creating Other.

In essence, Adam leaps to the conclusion that he is the result of a designing Other and therefore articulates a simple version of the teleological argument.¹ He imagines that the scene before him as well as himself must be the result of a conscious act of design, and further, a benevolent design due to its beauty. He may be simplistic in applying his innate reason in this way, but Adam interprets his awakening and his surroundings in order to exemplify the reason that marks moral agents as such. He assesses his situation, including the landscape and creatures as well as himself, and chooses to posit an external cause for himself and the world. Indeed, he engages in a dialogue with the world in an effort to “know” his creator God, which happens to be the professed purpose of the new science according to Francis Bacon and others like him.² The new science seeks to understand God by reverse-engineering his image through investigation and interpretation of the world, a process that is Adam’s first act after being created.

Adam chooses one explanation over another; either he was self-created or he was created by a designing Other. In Milton’s terms, a choice like his one implies empirical reason and therefore fits the definition of a moral agency described in *Areopagitica*. Eden extends beyond the physical and represents a moral paradise in which Adam, as a created moral agent, freely enters into an obligatory relationship

¹ This reference to the teleological argument echoes the opening of *de Doctrina Christiana* when Milton mentions it as an axiom of his treatise.

² *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* says that it was Francis Bacon’s impression that “scientific explanation or appreciation ... is a form of Christian divine service,” which means that according to Bacon scientific exploration and discovery is designed to be applied to God and his “eternal purpose.”

with God. Since Adam chooses God as the explanation for his being, he also chooses to know, respect, and obey him on moral grounds. His decision is portrayed as a natural occurrence, yet it represents a new form of agency. There is no indication that the angels made the same choice upon creation, at least not until Abdiel are faced with Satan's alternative. Further, it seems that the angels are ill-equipped for such a decision since Abdiel was the only one to remain loyal out of a third of heaven's host.

Therefore, Adam interprets his own existential beginning in accordance with Abdiel's reasoning. Both Adam and Abdiel freely enter into an obligatory moral relationship with God since they choose him as the explanation for their being. The deployment of reason in both cases means that the moral agent is performing the same intellectual work. The equivalence of the intellectual work establishes continuity between the two paradigms despite the differences in the agents and their experience. The fall of humanity, however, marks a drastic change in the moral landscape and increases the distance between the moral agents and God. This distance means that the agents after this point engage with moral law differently, though in Michael's explanation of the Old Testament history it becomes clear that the same intellectual work entailed in being a moral agent remains constant even though that work is distributed differently.

It seems that Adam and Eve are gradually liberated after the fall because they transition from a deontological singularity to virtue ethics. That is, it seems as though by the end of Book XII they are capable of exercising more intellectual moral freedom. However, their moral agency proves more difficult to wield than expected, as shown in Book X. God has repaired "their senses dark" but has not shown them the

way to control their passions. Adam first attempts to make sense of the new world corrupted by their transgression by trying to determine what their punishment, “death,” means (III: 188). Adam’s “cleared senses” do not convey the understanding of the consequence of their first transgression, nor do they grant true understanding of the justice that the law seeks to achieve. However, the accurate interpretation of their moral situation starts to progress when he reconciles with Eve and they begin to reach conclusions. This seems to indicate that on their own Adam and Eve’s moral reason is doomed to failure, but together they can perceive their situation and its new requirements more clearly.

However, the fullest clarity that Adam and Eve achieve comes only at the end of a process, consideration and investigation of the actions that are open to them. Adam is afraid of the curses that his progeny will give him and Eve—more poignantly—is afraid of the suffering that will be endured by subsequent generations. Both of these prospects represent something that should be avoided, which is why they consider the conclusion that a utilitarian suicide is the best course of action. Adam and Eve’s new freedom begins to look more like a burden because now they have to decide whether suicide or the suffering endured by all the generations of humanity is the bigger evil. Suicide is of course over-ridden by another course of action: Adam finds that to allow justice to be served earning mercy for humanity is the best possible option. The process of determining the best course of action demonstrates the continued capacity of moral agency. Not only do Adam and Eve interpret their moral context by identifying good and evil—good being the prevention of suffering and suffering itself—but they also demonstrate the ability to discern

gradients of each. That is, some things are more evil than others, and some things are more good.

The senses that God intended to make clear seem to involve perception and reason, which together permit the identification and discernment of good and evil. They have changed the world and their collaborative reasoning scene in Book X is the point at which they begin to interpret their new moral context. They determine both what is good and evil and then which course of action they should take. The moral process takes place in the subject and therefore represents a virtue ethical paradigm akin to that of heaven and is in this case successfully performed. However, as Michael shows them in Books XI and XII, Adam and Eve's progeny are not so successful at interpreting the moral world, that is, recognizing evil, but preferring the good. From Cain, to Nimrod, to the masses that oppose Noah, humanity continually falls short of the moral good even though they did enjoy long periods of harmony. In other words, humanity had the tools to be good moral agents but prove largely incapable of wielding their agency to achieve good results. This is why, after a period of success and failure in a virtue ethical system, humanity was given a set of paternalistic laws which guides the interpretation of what is good and evil as agents determine right action in their own context.

Because human moral agents were given an extensive list of laws, this moral paradigm is dominated by a deontological normative structure. This becomes the biggest obstacle for Milton's moral continuity since deontology seems to defer the abilities that he claims defines moral agency in *Areopagitica*. Mosaic Law reverses the cognitive moral process found in *Areopagitica* because the agent has to determine

what the truth is from the guidelines presented by the law. Yet while this represents a deviation from the agency found in previous paradigms, the same intellectual work is occurring because Michael's explanation and justification for the Old Testament law make it a didactic enterprise meant to instruct humanity in how to interpret the moral world and discern good and evil. Since the same intellectual work is occurring in a moral situation in the strict deontology of the fourth paradigm, it ends up bearing a surprisingly strong connection to the previous paradigms and preserves the continuity of what makes moral agency according to *Areopagitica*. That is, all of the elements of a moral situation and a moral agent—including identification and interpretation of a situation through moral reason, as well as choosing a course of action—are present in the Mosaic formulation and therefore this paradigm is consistent with those that precede it.

The connection between the agency described by Michael in Book XII and the agency in *Areopagitica* is even stronger because it is the paradigm in which Milton lived and wrote. However, the representation of the fifth paradigm gets increasingly abstract because it continually gets more remote from Adam's experience. This means that the agency performed in the fifth paradigm is not dramatized as it was in previous paradigms. Since there is no action in the poem that demonstrates the moral agency that connects the final paradigm with the rest of Christian moral history, the only evidence of it is Michael's description of the transformation from the Old to the New Testament. That is, the transition from "works of law" in Old Testament deontology, to "works of faith" or the virtue ethics of the New Testament (XII, 306) is described, not demonstrated. The difference between these paradigms is the locus

of moral discernment, “works of law” implies “imposition of strict” laws which are meant to “discover sin” effectively interpreting the world for the agent (306; 290). However, *Areopagitica* rejects paternalistic laws and emphasizes “works of faith” along with a moral empiricism and experimentation that gives much more power and freedom to individual moral agents who have to “discover sin” for themselves.

The fifth paradigm is characterized by an increase in freedom. The burden of moral discernment and interpretation is again placed on moral agents which means they have the same moral freedom that Adam and Eve did just after the fall. However, this time they have been taught how to wield such freedom by Mosaic Law. Michael indicates humanity’s new capacity for engaging in moral situations by pointing out the paternalism that ends after the first coming of the Son. In other words, humanity has been “disciplined / from shadowy types of truth” by the Mosaic Law so that the “law of faith” can “guide them in all truth” (303; 490). Moral actions were previously based on a paternalistic body of laws, but after the incarnation of the Son they are based on the character of the moral agent and the consequence they are able to produce. The shift from the Old to the New Testament, therefore, is a change in the mechanism that “discovers sin” from a body of strict laws to the judgment of the individual moral agent.

In effect, the Old Testament paradigm reified into the Mosaic Law—a hardened body of laws meant to defend against sin—then the incarnation of the Son marks the point at which they are offered what Michael refers to as a “better cov’nant” (XII: 302). The law, then, becomes less rigid as the agent becomes the mechanism by which the moral world is interpreted and discerned with only the

guiding force or faith. Michael uses a war metaphor to illustrate the transition of the moral interpretive burden. He implies that the strict Mosaic Law has forged human agency so as to “arm / with spiritual armor, able to resist / Satan’s assaults” (XII, 490-92). In other words, humanity was given the ability to contend with evil through both their experience with the Mosaic Law and the grace of the Son. However, with this ability, which Michael calls “the law of faith,” comes greater independence to grapple with the moral world and interpret it individually though the empiricism and experimentation described in *Areopagitica*.

The interpretation of the moral world, which is now the responsibility of the moral agent, is thus closely connected throughout Milton’s poetry. He makes a classic articulation of virtue ethics at the end of Book XII which solidifies the final paradigm’s normative moral structure; however, when he says “virtue, which is reason” he connects the moral good, or the preference thereof, with reason: the ability to interpret the world (XII, 98). Further, it is the very thing that classifies a moral agent as such in *Areopagitica*. In other words, to be morally good is to be adept at interpreting the moral world, therefore, when “reason in man is obscured, or not obeyed” they require something to mediate between the agent and the world—Mosaic Law—yet through that experience humanity acquires the capacity to engage with the moral world directly (XII, 86). Therefore, Milton bridges the differences between the different eras in Christian moral history, principally the gap between the Old and the New Testaments, with moral agency by showing that in the former agency was being forged by reverse-engineering moral truth, so that in the latter it can be deployed, yet much the same intellectual work was occurring in either paradigm.

Since Milton claims in *Areopagitica* that the “knowledge and survey of vice is in this world so necessary to the constituting of human virtue, and the scanning of error to the confirmation of truth,” his morality is a process rather than a reified body of laws (939). Moreover, it requires agents with ability to “survey” and “scan” the moral world—that is, moral agents must be intellectually capable of engaging with moral concepts. If the agent were not capable of engaging on some level with morality intellectually they would not have moral agency and morality would be empty of meaning, because all creatures would serve necessity not their creator. By claiming that the “survey of vice” and the “scanning of error” is necessary for moral agents Milton is encouraging the investigation and individual interpretation of the moral world which takes the form of a process of empiricism and experimentation akin to the new science. Therefore, Kuhn’s paradigmatic view of the history of science yields insight into Milton’s representation of Christian moral history in *Paradise Lost*. The moral history represented in the poem can, therefore, be better illustrated by feedback loops rather than a steady crescendo of progress. The progress of moral history, both in terms of the success of the agents of that paradigm and in the latitude granted to those agents, accelerates and recedes over the course of the Christian history. Therefore, Kuhn’s historical model typifies Milton’s depiction of history better than traditional models of progress.

The careful survey and scanning of Milton’s moral history reveals a fragmented timeline of success and failure. Each paradigm is difficult to connect with those that surround it and that means that the epic is made up of a series of synchronic paradigms which are internally but not thoroughly consistent with one another. This

presents a problem for the immutability of God, for if his law changes over time, then he must change over time. However, in the interest of “justifying the ways of God to man” Milton solves this problem (I.26). His formulation of morality as a process, anchored in his view of moral agency in *Areopagitica*, provides a consistent element around which to base the moral equation. By emphasizing moral agency and the individual’s power of reason Milton constructs a holistic, diachronic view of Christian moral history marked by paradigm shifts. This paradigmatical view of moral history reconciles the apparent inconsistencies between the disparate paradigms, even the Old and New Testament, by demonstrating morality as an investigative struggle for truth.

Conclusion

The future of this project needs to explore the role of God and Christ in the process of moral change and in the individual's process of moral discernment. Milton's writings seem to oscillate between secular and religious thought as it grapples with Christian history; therefore, the way he negotiates his humanism in natural philosophy and in sacred sources is a central question as this project evolves. Not to mention, the context of Milton's thought, both poetic and philosophic, among his peers requires further investigation. However, first and foremost, the idea of moral history as it is expressed in the poetics of *Paradise Lost* needs more thorough treatment, which raises questions of moral language and its change across Christian history. The narrative evidence in this project's current form stands as a mere first step in investigating the idea of coherence in moral history as an aspect of the larger project to "justify the ways of God to man" and create a coherent picture of the Christian cosmos (I: 26).

However, this project presently shows how Milton's theodicy represents an attempt to establish continuity in the Christian cosmos and in doing so "justify the ways of God to man." This attempt is expressed most clearly in the cosmic setting of *Paradise Lost* as he presents a coherent picture of Heaven, Hell and Earth, which together with his metaphysical monism, unifies the human understanding of God as the immutable first cause, and an "eternal purpose" which shapes existence. However, the coherence of the settings of *Paradise Lost* is not the only obstacle to understanding the nature of God as immutable, but there is also God's consistency

over time in regard to the moral law. Either conclusion runs into problems of arbitrariness and is therefore avoided by traditional Christian thought.

The plot of *Paradise Lost* is driven by either change in the moral landscape or the breach of the laws that create that landscape, and the subsequent establishment of a new moral order, which means the premise of the poem is based in moral change, as the first line states. In other words, since the epic is driven by change in the moral state of affairs it becomes necessary to investigate the nature of that change as the poem develops a coherent image of the Christian cosmos. However, this means that God is mutable, and dangerously close to being arbitrary, because he can change his “eternal purpose” at will, but to safeguard against an understanding of God that makes his law arbitrary the gaps in moral history must be bridged. In other words, Milton’s attempt to “justify the ways of God to man” includes his attempt to establish continuity in the face of a Christian plot beset by change. Milton tries to bridge the gaps in the moral systems that pervade Christian moral history by appealing to human reason as something that actively interprets the moral world and uses a version of cognitive moral engagement to develop a logical continuity across Christian history.

Milton’s moral theory in *Areopagitica* emphasizes reason, choice, and personal freedom, and though *Paradise Lost* was written later, it remains true to the values expressed in Milton’s earlier works. The formulation of moral reason as the means by which moral agents interpret the moral world poses a problem for history because this formulation does not seem to remain constant in every era of Christian history. However, Milton’s version of agency provides a solution to the problem of continuity that it seems to present in relation to the form and expectations of agency

in the different periods of moral history. Therefore, Milton is developing a logical antinomy through narrative in an attempt to solve the apparent paradoxes presented by the history that his epic depicts. He does this by building common elements of the cognitive moral process into the moments that seem to conflict with the moral structures that came before and after. Because these common elements of agency are present, agency itself bridges the gaps of inconsistency that seems to plague Christian moral history. In this way, Milton provides an antinomy that reconciles the differences between the differing expectations of moral engagement in different moral periods. In other words, the claim of this thesis is that part of the aim of *Paradise Lost* is to present moral agents across time and though they have different moral contexts, they share central tenets of a cognitive moral process.

The gaps in moral history that drive the narrative of *Paradise Lost* becomes clear when normative moral structures are applied to the moral landscape presented in the poem. Normative moral structures are a way to characterize the expectations of moral agents in that structure. Virtue ethics, for example is a structure incompatible with deontology, and yet both of these structures are clearly found in the history represented in the poem. This incompatibility creates the gaps in moral history. Given the scope of the history in *Paradise Lost* it quickly becomes necessary to develop a historical construction in an effort to organize the succession of normative structures and further this analysis. Thomas Kuhn's theory of the history of science as a series of paradigm shifts becomes a useful way to frame the moral history of *Paradise Lost* for a number of reasons.

If the gaps in moral history are viewed as shifting from one paradigm to another—or one normative structure to another—then the moral timeline starts to come into focus. There are, of course, many paradigm shifts over the course of moral history, and this is the subject of future exploration in this project, however, the current issue is the nature of the moral paradigm shifts and the attempt to bridge them using moral agency. While Kuhn’s historical framework effectively organizes the moral timeline it also fragments it into a series of synchronic cross-sections that are only internally consistent. However, even though Kuhn’s theory exacerbates the problem at hand it also organizes the history in a way that supports Milton’s efforts to establish diachronic continuity, which he does by demonstrating that morality is a cognitive process manifest in every paradigm in the poem.

Milton appeals to reason as a cognitive process in order to establish a diachronic link between the fragmented synchronic moral paradigms. Putting such emphasis on moral activity as a process in which the individual investigates, interprets, and learns from experience in the moral world means that morality is not composed of eternal, monolithic truths that have to be manipulated in order to fit into each successive paradigm. Here again Kuhn becomes a logical framework for a rendering of morality as a process because his theory of paradigms was originally applied to the scientific enterprise which shares many characteristics with Milton’s moral agency. Milton asks the “warring Christian” to “scan” and “survey” the moral world which effectively makes the moral cognitive process into a science engaged with empiricism and, in certain circumstances, experimentation. Agency can

therefore adapt to each paradigm with its own divine decrees and social moral knowledge found in any given paradigm.

Therefore, while Milton's focus on the cognitive abilities of individual moral agents initially seems to pose problems for the continuity of moral history, because, as is made clear by Kuhn's theory of paradigm shifts, it does not seem to be consistent over time, it also creates a stronger bridge over the gaps in moral history caused by change in the existing moral landscape. The project of coherence in moral history is unlike Kuhn's since it does not stop at a fragmented timeline, but attempts to connect them after acknowledging that there is a problem. However, Kuhn's theory of paradigm shift remains relevant as it applies to the structure and organization of the problem, which in turn allows the project of coherence to ensue. Milton's bridges over these gaps is thrown into sharp relief in *Paradise Lost* when what Milton says in the *Areopagitica* is applied, his moral history organized with Kuhn's historical theory of paradigm shifts.

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