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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Why philosophers should read *Paradise Lost*

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Abstract

This article reinterprets John Milton's *Paradise Lost* as a contribution to contemporary analytic philosophy of religion. Milton offers a novel free-will defence, similar to Alvin Plantinga's, grounded in original philosophical accounts of God, creation, freedom, and meta-ethics. Milton's monist God creates worlds and creatures *ex deo* out of God-self. God – and everything else – is animated matter: one substance both material and spiritual. Milton rejects materialism, dualism, and idealism. Only animist monism delivers the libertarian freedom that Milton's free-will defence demands. God has agent-causal libertarian freedom. God's reasons don't necessitate God's choices. God freely chooses which worlds to create, which commands to issue, which hierarchies to institute. God radically transcends creatures – especially in relation to God's meta-ethical power. Milton's implicit meta-ethic, rejecting both voluntarism and intellectualism, resembles Robert Adams's theist meta-ethic, where God's nature determines excellence and God's actual commands determine obligation. God also plays another meta-ethical role – instituting hierarchies where some creatures command others. Satan's fall is epistemic and meta-ethical. He refuses to recognise God's meta-ethical transcendence – to believe that God *is God*. Belief in God always requires a leap of faith beyond evidence and argument – because even perfect creatures cannot comprehend God's transcendence. Creaturely epistemic freedom means there is no explanation why some angels fall while others stand.

Keywords: Paradise Lost; S; free-will defence; monism; panpsychism

John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, first published in 1667, receives a lot of attention from scholars in English literature and political history, but little attention from philosophers. This is a pity. Milton offers original and philosophically interesting accounts of God, creation, freedom, morality, and authority.

Milton is not a philosopher. He didn't write philosophy; he had little or no impact on the philosophers of his day; and he is barely mentioned in modern histories of seventeenth-century British philosophy.[1] But Milton engages the philosophical debates of his time in his own way, and much of what he asks us to imagine is deeply philosophical.

Milton invites us to imagine how God's creation of a world like ours can be justified to creatures like us. His central challenge is to explain how perfect creatures in perfect worlds created by a perfect creator can fall into evil – and thus render their own worlds imperfect. *Paradise Lost* narrates the falls of Satan, Eve, and Adam. I focus here on Satan's fall. I hope to explore humanity's fall elsewhere.

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Milton asks us to imagine many things: that perfect angels fall in Heaven; that perfect humans fall in Paradise; that those humans were our own ancestors; and that their fall caused 'all our woe' [1: 3].[2] Milton's justification succeeds only if we imagine all these things. But some are easier to imagine than others – and all are worth imagining on their own. Milton may help us imagine how perfect creatures could fall even if we cannot connect *their* fall to *our* imperfect world.

This article develops a philosophical interpretation of *Paradise Lost*, blending Milton scholarship with contemporary analytic philosophy. I do not defend my interpretation as a reading of Milton's text. I seek only to demonstrate its *philosophical* interest – to show philosophers what they can learn from Milton and Milton scholarship, and to show how philosophers, in turn, can shed new light on Milton's epic.

Part one: Setting the scene

Satan's fall in Paradise Lost *and beyond*

Milton's Satan is one of the most contested characters in English literature (Forsyth 2003, 62–76). Is he a ridiculous cowardly fool vainly rebelling against perfect goodness (Lewis 1942), or a tragic Romantic hero bravely waging a doomed war against authoritarian tyranny (Bryson 2012; Empson 1961)? Readers have long disagreed whether Milton regarded Satan as the villain of *Paradise Lost* or its hero. I diagnose this disagreement as imaginative resistance (Tuna 2024). Atheist readers cannot (or will not) imagine that Milton's God is good – because they cannot see how any God could be good. Christian readers cannot (or will not) imagine that Milton's God is not good – because they elide Milton's God with *their own vision of God*, and they cannot imagine any other.

While Milton's retelling of humanity's fall follows Genesis, his narrative of Satan's fall, rebellion, and subsequent career is largely original. Chronologically, *Paradise Lost*'s first event is the 'Elevation of the Son' [5: 60 615]. God the Father summons the angels, presents God's 'only begotten Son' [5: 603–604], places that Son at the head of the angelic hierarchy, demands that all angels acknowledge the Son's authority, and threatens dire punishment for anyone who disobeys. Satan experiences this Elevation as a demotion, refuses to acknowledge the Son's authority, rebels against God, rallies his supporters, wages war in Heaven, is defeated by the Son, and is driven into Hell.

The relationship between Father and Son in *Paradise Lost* is very controversial, especially given Milton's own unorthodox Christology (Milton 2012, 127–229). Fortunately, we can side-step that controversy here. What matters most is not the content of God's command, but its normative force. Every fall involves an act of disobedience – a refusal to obey a binding command from a legitimate authority. But no perfect rational creature would willingly disobey what they *believed* to be a binding, legitimate command. Therefore, perfect creatures can only fall if they doubt God's authority to command. If perfect creatures are morally responsible for their falls, they must also be morally responsible *for this prior doubt*.

Forget God, Satan, angels, devils, snakes, gardens, or apples. *Paradise Lost* is really about meta-ethics. The hardest thing to imagine – for both readers outside the poem and characters within it – is the relationship between God and morality. Satan falls because he cannot believe that God *is God*. Satan doubts God's omnipotence and omniscience – and he even doubts that God created him [5: 859–863]. But his principal doubts concern God's moral sovereignty. Satan's primary sin is meta-ethical. He cannot believe that *anyone* could play the foundational meta-ethical roles that God must play.

Satan's sin involves *imaginative resistance* – a refusal to imagine a world where morality depends utterly on God. Many readers share Satan's resistance – refusing to even imagine that one person might be the source of moral norms that bind others. The philosophical literature on imaginative resistance features very brief 'stories' where readers refuse an

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author's arbitrary stipulation of an outrageous moral claim (Tuna 2024). These cases are artificial. Who actually believes that murder is an appropriate response to a minor traffic infringement? By contrast, imaginative resistance concerning God and morality is very real. Who believes that morality depends entirely on God? Many people. Who believes that God is irrelevant to morality? Many other people. As we'll see, Milton's implicit meta-ethic is complex and original. *Paradise Lost* thus challenges *all readers* – as well as its main characters – to imagine a world governed by an unfamiliar meta-ethic.

Independent of *Paradise Lost*, the broader question of Satan's fall – the origin of evil – has long puzzled philosophers. Satan's fall has been attributed to: his failure to properly coordinate his inclination for benefit and his inclination for justice (Anselm – Rogers 2015); his desire for happiness without God's assistance (Aquinas – Pini 2013, 68); his desire to (impossibly) be God's equal (Scotus – Pini 2013, 71); privileging his first-personal awareness of himself over his second-personal knowledge of God (Seeman 2025); and faulty application of the economics of consumer preference (Wood 2016). Milton's narrative offers a different *prior* explanation. Satan does fall in all these ways and more. But only because he first *refuses to believe that God is God*.

This suggestion – that Satan's fall is a refusal to believe – is familiar to Milton scholars (Fish 1997). I argue below that recent work in analytic philosophy can help us to understand *how* such meta-ethical resistance might arise even among perfect rational creatures.

Milton's free-will defence

In contemporary philosophical terms, Milton offers a free-will defence (FWD) similar to Alvin Plantinga's (Plantinga 1974; Danielson 1982; Fallon 1991; Fish 1997, lxviii). God creates free creatures whose free choices God cannot control without removing their freedom. God cannot select the possible world where free creatures always do the right thing. God creates a world where evil may arise – because the value of freedom outweighs the risk of evil.

Philosophers distinguish theodicy ('what God probably did') from defence ('what God might possibly do'). Milton straddles the two. He doesn't claim that every detail in his narrative actually happened; but nor does he present it as merely logically possible. Milton intends his tale to be plausible and imaginable.

Any FWD requires the following:

1. *Incompatibilism*: Creaturely freedom is not compatible with causal determinism. If creatures' behaviour were determined, then God could choose creatures' free choices by creating the right prior events and physical laws. Milton explicitly rejects the determinism of his own Hobbesian and Calvinist contemporaries (Danielson 1982, 132–165).
2. *Contra-divine freedom*: Creatures enjoy contra-divine freedom (Mulgan 2015, 235–243). Not even God can decide what this creature will freely do. God can only create the creature and *see* what it does.[3]
3. *Evil*: Creatures are (contra-divinely) free to choose evil.
4. *Value*: Creatures' (contra-divine) freedom (to choose evil) is sufficiently valuable that God might choose it – despite the risk of actual evil.

Milton's FWD is distinctive. He makes things harder for himself in several ways:

1. *Divine foreknowledge*: God announces that Adam and Eve will fall when tempted by Satan – long before Satan reaches Paradise, and before we (as readers) have even met Adam and Eve [3: 93–100]. God's foreknowledge of free creatures' future choices is particularly worrying because it is *public* – God announces humanity's future fall to all the loyal angels.

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2. *Anti-voluntarism*: Milton's God is no arbitrary tyrant. Milton rejects pure voluntarism, where all moral facts depend only on God's will (Danielson 1982, 6; Fallon 1991, 38). The Son's dialogues with the Father presume some standard against which God's will can be judged. If we could simply equate morality with God's will, then Milton's project of justifying God's ways would be trivial. Milton – an astonishingly self-confident and ambitious poet – would never build his magnum opus on something so trivial.
3. *Freedom's cost*: Milton's FWD has very wide scope. It explains 'all our woe' [1: 3], covering both natural and moral evils:
   a. Adam and Eve's fall introduces death, disease, decay, and suffering into a world that would otherwise have remained perfect forever.
   b. The cost of their fall is borne, not just by Adam and Eve, but by all their descendants. Future humans suffer because their 'first parents' fell.
   c. Adam and Eve's fall also introduces *non-human* suffering. Paradise's innocent non-rational inhabitants would otherwise enjoy blissful, immortal, peaceful lives [4: 340–352] rather than grim lives of predation, starvation, and death [11:182–190].[4]

Freedom's cost is very high. Therefore, its compensating value must also be very great.

4. *Perfect creatures*: Most FWDs ask why God made imperfect creatures (like us) who often choose evil. In *Paradise Lost, perfect* rational creatures freely choose evil. This absolves God of any blame for evil and imperfection [3: 99–102]. But we must now ask: How can perfection fall into imperfection?

Milton sets himself a very ambitious task. Fortunately, he also provides the philosophical resources to accomplish it. Milton's FWD is supported by novel accounts of creation, meta-ethics, divine freedom, divine transcendence, and creaturely freedom.

Part two: Milton's cosmos

Milton's metaphysics: Creator and creation(s)

Milton's God is perfect, omnipotent, omniscient, eternal, self-sufficient, perfectly free, perfectly rational, perfectly good, and the creator of everything that is not God. Everything that is not God depends on God for its existence, its nature, its value, and its purpose. God transcends all possible creations – and God's infinite power, knowledge, and goodness transcend the finite power, knowledge, and goodness of all possible creatures.

In the cosmos of *Paradise Lost, everything* revolves around God. We think that cosmos is easy to imagine because we think it is very familiar. It is neither. Milton's cosmos is very unfamiliar. Many characters within the poem cannot imagine it. Nor can many readers. Milton's worlds depend on God to a far greater extent *even than most theists expect*.

Paradise Lost is often read as a paradigm of Christian orthodoxy (Lewis 1942). It is not. Milton's own personal theology was very unorthodox (Kerr 2024). While it is controversial how much Milton's own heresies can be read into his poem, the God of *Paradise Lost* is clearly not the God of Christian orthodoxy. Milton reinterprets divine creation, freedom, and moral sovereignty.

Milton's first departure from orthodoxy is that God creates neither ex nihilo nor ex materia. God does not create worlds out of nothing, nor by moulding independently existing matter. God creates ex deo (Danielson 1982, 43–55; Fallon 1991, 79–110; Fish 1997, xvii–xxii; Poole 2005, 192). God creates worlds *out of God-self*. Every world – and every creature within it – is made by God from God's own substance. We are all, literally, moulded from God-stuff.

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Danielson develops a three-stage model of divine creation in *Paradise Lost* (Danielson 1982, 46–48):

1. God withdraws from some of God-self to produce *Chaos*. Chaos is God-stuff without form or order. This withdrawal does not diminish God, because God is infinite. Chaos is also infinite. No matter how many worlds God creates, an infinite Chaos remains – God's 'dark materials to create more worlds' [2: 916].
2. God marks out a 'region' of Chaos where a world will be created.
3. God imposes order on that region of Chaos to create a world.

Milton favours creation ex deo for several reasons:

1. Milton regards both creation ex nihilo and creation ex materia as unintelligible, impossible, and unimaginable (Milton 2012, 281–309). If God creates at all, God must create ex deo. Nothing else makes sense.
2. Even if alternative creations were possible, creation ex deo is much easier to imagine; and Milton seeks a justification of God's ways *that fallen humans can imagine*.
3. Even if alternative creations were possible, creation ex deo produces much better worlds. This is God's best option.
4. A theme of *Paradise Lost* is the intimate relationship between creator and creatures. Creatures are closest to God if they are created by God *out of God*. Even if God could create in other ways, God will still create ex deo – because this brings God's creatures closest to God.

Milton's model of creation is interestingly different from its principal philosophical competitors (both then and now):

- Contra orthodox (ex nihilo) theism: God is not completely ontologically separate from God's creations.
- Contra Plato's *Timaeus*: God does not mould a Chaos that exists independent of God (Broadie 2012).
- Contra Pantheism (Buckareff 2022): God transcends each created world, the set of all created worlds, the combination of worlds and Chaos, or anything else that is not God.
- Contra Panentheism (Meister 2017): Once God withdraws from Chaos, Chaos is no longer a part of God. Created worlds are not parts of God either. Only at the end do all worlds – and all of Chaos – return into God [3: 342; 6: 730–733]. Creatures are not aspects or parts of God. They are separate *agents* who get their substance from God.

Creation ex deo goes hand-in-hand with Milton's second unorthodox view:

'Monist animist materialism' (MAM) (Fallon 1991, 79): Milton's God is not pure disembodied spirit, inert matter, or any combination of matter and spirit. God is one substance that is both material and spiritual. God is animated matter. Because all worlds contain only God-stuff, everything in all worlds is also animated matter.

Milton's commitment to MAM is familiar to Milton scholars (Fallon 1991, 79–110; Fish 1997, xvii–xxii; Poole 2005, 192). MAM was distinctive in seventeenth-century philosophy and remains so today:[5]

- Contra Hobbesian materialism: Milton's worlds are not mechanical, inert, determined. They are animated – infused throughout with spirit or mind.
- Contra Cartesian dualism: Spirit is not substantially separate from matter. Rational creatures have no souls distinct from their bodies – and neither does God.

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- Contra idealism: Matter is not merely an idea in the mind of God – or in the minds of other spirits.

MAM interestingly prefigures the recent emergence of 'fourth way' alternatives to materialism, dualism, and idealism such as *panpsychism*. However, MAM also differs from leading twenty-first-century panpsychist views, in both origin and content:

- Regarding origin, MAM differs from both atheist and theist panpsychisms (Goff et al. 2022; Leidenharg 2021). Contra atheist panpsychism, MAM worlds are not self-creating or self-actualising. They are wholly dependent on God. Contra theist panpsychism, God does not create panpsychist worlds that (merely) resemble God. God creates out of God's own animated matter.
- Regarding content, Milton's MAM worlds are closer to pre-modern and/or non-Western *animist traditions* than to more modest analytic philosophical positions such as cosmo-psychism or micro-panpsychism. MAM worlds are ordered communities of spirited material *substances* – human and non-human agents who experience God's love and reciprocate it. There are no pan(en)theist world souls and no proto-experiencing micro-physical particles. Milton's MAM thus complements other analytic rehabilitations of pre-modern animism (Smith 2023).[6]

Milton's combination of creation ex deo and MAM supports his FWD in several ways (Fallon 1991, 19–49; Danielson 1982, 40):

1. Milton rejects Descartes's dualism and Hobbes's materialism because both yield a causally determined, mechanist world where there is no room for genuine agency, and we must reinterpret 'freedom' along compatibilist lines as Hobbes himself does (Fallon 1991, 19–49). By contrast, MAM worlds are natural homes for creatures who are genuinely free.
2. MAM worlds resemble God more closely than any lifeless, inert, compatibilist world. Therefore, MAM worlds are more likely to be good enough to outweigh the risk of evil.
3. If God can only create ex deo, if all worlds created ex deo are MAM worlds, and if all MAM worlds deliver contra-divine freedom, then God *cannot* create compatibilist, determinist worlds. If God creates any creatures, they must enjoy contra-divine freedom. The risk of evil is thus the price of *any* creation at all.

Milton's perfect worlds

If God creates MAM worlds ex deo, which ones will God create? The answer is that God creates *only* perfect worlds, and only *some* perfect worlds.

God creates two perfect worlds inhabited by perfect creatures: Heaven and Paradise.[7] Heaven is inhabited by perfect, free, rational creatures (angels). Milton's angels are neither disembodied spirits nor spirits embodied in some aethereal matter (Fallon 1991, 137–167; Lewis 1942, 135–144). They are made from the same kind of animated matter as God, on the one hand, and Adam and Eve, on the other. Milton's angels eat, fight, fly, parade, discourse, and (notoriously) engage in something that sounds a lot like sex [5: 407–490; 8: 618–629]. We are also told that Heaven itself is alive, possibly conscious, and arguably an agent – when the Son drives rebel angels into Hell, the very substance of Heaven responds to His call [6: 859–862] (Fallon 1991, 197–198). Heaven is a thoroughly animated world.

Paradise is inhabited by humans, non-human animals, and plants. Like God and angels, Milton's humans are spirited matter – neither Cartesian spirits embodied in matter, nor

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Hobbesian materialist mechanisms. Adam and Eve are conscious, alive, rational, free. And even Paradise's non-human inhabitants actively worship God [5: 197–204].

Although both are MAM worlds, Paradise is more material than Heaven. Both its inhabitants and its substance are heavier, more stuck in place, further from God. Within perfect MAM worlds, there is still a scale from more material to more spiritual (Danielson 1982, 65; Fallon 1991, 186).

While Heaven and Paradise differ from one another, both are perfect worlds. Perfection in *Paradise Lost* is both negative and positive. A perfect world has no defects. Death, disease, decay, suffering, and all other 'woes' are unknown in Heaven and Paradise. More positively, perfect creatures enjoy happy, harmonious, immortal lives. They are also much closer to God than we are. Angels live in God's presence, while humans regularly converse with God.

We are told that God creates Heaven and Paradise. We are also told that God *might* create other worlds out of Chaos [2: 916]. We are not told whether God does so. (We are given to understand that this is not our business [8: 167–178].) While God might create *some* other perfect MAM worlds, God does not create all possible worlds, (only) the best possible world, only the best set of worlds, all perfect worlds, or all good worlds. God freely chooses to create some perfect worlds *and not others*.

Another distinctive feature is that Heaven and Paradise are both *unequal worlds* where creatures differ in their capacities, their closeness to God, and their rationality. This is most obvious in Paradise, where non-humans come in many different kinds, humans are superior to non-humans [8: 381–397], and Adam is presented as superior to Eve [4: 296–311; 8:540–566]. But natural inequality also reigns in Heaven. Angels have different abilities, and some are clearly superior to others. God values variety within worlds – where each kind of creature is perfect in its own way.

Heaven and Paradise are also both *hierarchical communities* where some perfect creatures exercise authority over others. In Heaven, angels are arrayed in a feudal/military hierarchy where higher angels command lower ones [4:781–796]. In Paradise, humans have dominion over non-human creatures [7: 531–534] and Adam (notoriously) has authority over Eve.

To understand inequality and hierarchy in *Paradise Lost*, we must first understand the poem's broader meta-ethic.

Milton's meta-ethics: God's moral sovereignty

Milton's implicit meta-ethic is the key to understanding creation, divine freedom, relations between God and creatures, and how perfect creatures fall.

While my account of Milton's divine metaphysics (creation ex deo, MAM) largely follows Milton scholarship, my interpretation of his meta-ethics draws on, and extends, recent analytic philosophy.

While Milton rejects pure voluntarism, his ex deo monism means that all things are utterly dependent on God – more so than on other theist models. External moral constraints that are independent of God don't fit into this picture [3: 145–156].

We need a meta-ethic that is neither pure voluntarism nor pure intellectualism, but instead combines the following (Mulgan 2015, 33–62):

- *Moral realism*: There are normative facts.
- *Moral supernaturalism*: All normative facts depend on facts about God.
- *Anti-voluntarism*: Morality is not solely dependent on God's arbitrary will.
- *Hybrid moral supernaturalism*: Different normative facts depend on different facts about God.

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I borrow Robert Adams's theist ethical framework – where facts about excellence depend on God's *nature* (Adams 1999, 13–82), while facts about obligation depend on God's *actual commands* (Adams 1999, 231–276). Adams's particular account is controversial (Kazemi 2023). We need not endorse every detail. However, to cash-out *Paradise Lost*'s complex meta-ethic, we do need something like this.

God plays four key meta-ethical roles in *Paradise Lost*. I borrow the first two directly from Adams.

1. *Exemplar*: God replaces Plato's Form of the Good as the exemplar of excellence, goodness, and beauty. Finite creatures are excellent, good, beautiful insofar as (and because) they *resemble* God. Whenever creatures respond to values or reasons, they respond to something entirely dependent on God. Milton accentuates this resemblance – because his creatures are all (a) created from God-self; (b) made of God-stuff; and (c) perfect. Milton's creatures don't just share God's abstract properties – they also share God's substance.

Facts about excellence give God reasons to create. Insofar as it resembles God, any possible creation is good – and therefore worthy of God's love. God creates to enjoy good worlds. Furthermore, any MAM world is alive and capable of relating to God. God creates Heaven and Paradise so that God can enjoy interpersonal relationships with angels and humans.

Facts about excellence also provide God with reasons *to not create*. Even if it were possible to do so, God would not create imperfect worlds, non-MAM worlds, or worlds that were created ex nihilo or ex materia. Such worlds are *deficient*. They dis-resemble God in ways that render divine creation inappropriate.

2. *Direct Commander*: God gives creatures direct commands. God commands all angels to acknowledge the Son, and forbids Adam and Eve to eat one particular fruit.

I interpret divine command in *Paradise Lost* using Adams's 'modified divine command theory' (Adams 1999, 231–276). Only the commands of a perfectly good God will generate moral obligations. However, there are many different possible commands that a perfectly good God *might* issue. And creatures' actual obligations depend on what God has *actually* commanded – not on what God might have commanded.

I add two more meta-ethical roles that God plays in *Paradise Lost.*

3. *Creator of Kinds*: Creatures are perfect insofar as they possess and/or pursue the characteristic excellences of creatures *of their kind*. God decides which (possible) kinds are instantiated, thereby determining what is good for each creature.
4. *Indirect Commander*: God institutes hierarchies of authority – establishing obligations of obedience and dominion between the unequal creatures God has created.

We need these two roles to explain how hierarchical authority works. In Milton scholarship – and the poem itself – authority is often treated as either something arbitrarily imposed by God on natural equals (Bryson 2012), or flowing naturally from rational creatures' innate superiority and inferiority (Lewis 1942, 91–102). However, neither interpretation is plausible – either textually or philosophically. We need something new.

Denying natural inequality in *Paradise Lost* is textually implausible. In both Heaven and Paradise, it seems obvious that some perfect rational creatures just *are* naturally superior to others – especially in their decision-making capacity. Philosophically, this interpretation problematically reintroduces voluntarism's arbitrariness. God's imposed hierarchies now look like capricious tyranny.

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The obvious alternative reading is that natural superiority *implies* hierarchical authority. Before his fall, Satan commands his subordinates simply because they are *his inferiors*; Adam has authority over Eve simply because he is her natural superior; and humans naturally have dominion over inferior non-humans.

Unfortunately, this won't do either. Textually, hierarchical authority does *not* automatically track superiority. Consider two examples:

1. Before his fall, Satan exercises authority, not over all inferior angels, but only over *his* subordinates – those particular inferiors who are subject to *his* authority. Satan doesn't command Raphael's subordinates – or vice versa.
2. Angels are clearly superior to humans: lighter, more mobile, already at home in Heaven (where humans aspire to belong), more intelligent, more spiritual, and closer to God. But no angel has any hierarchical *authority* in Paradise; whereas all humans do.

Philosophically, this interpretation reduces God's moral sovereignty – rendering hierarchical authority something that not even *God* can alter.

It is telling that *Satan himself* defends both interpretations – variously treating hierarchical authority as either the arbitrary imposition of a tyrant [2: 199] or some fixed ancient order that God cannot change [2: 679–693].

My solution is that God creates natural superiors and inferiors, and then *sometimes adds* hierarchical authority.

Paradise and Heaven are not merely collections of isolated individuals. They are perfect *communities* where different kinds of perfect creature live harmoniously together. Like all finite things, a community's life together can resemble God in various ways. There are thus many different good ways for a perfect community to live. It is good for perfect communities to choose (together) how they will live (together). However, collective deliberation is chaotic and inefficient unless someone is ultimately in charge. Even among perfect creatures, some are better than others *at collective decision-marking*. To ensure that perfect communities flourish, God grants hierarchical authority to some of those superior decision-makers.

God adds hierarchical authority between A and B only when three conditions are met:

1. *Perfection*: A and B are both perfect creatures. A will not abuse their authority over B for their own ends, while B will reliably obey A's lawful commands. Hierarchical authority is not *licence* to exploit others. It is *authority* to govern so that all can flourish.
2. *Superiority*: A is naturally superior to B *with respect to collective decision-making*.
3. *Collective Action*: A and B belong to some community C such that:
   a. C can live well together in several different ways; and
   b. It is valuable for the members of C to choose together how to live together; but
   c. C will live together best if someone is 'in charge'. If God could have achieved the same results by either centrally coordinating creatures' behaviour (through instinct or direct command) or leaving individual creatures free to choose their own path, then hierarchical authority would be redundant.

Each condition is individually necessary. But they are *not* jointly sufficient. God could institute many different hierarchical arrangements. God could have established a different angelic hierarchy; or put an angel in charge of Paradise. The relationship between inequality and authority thus recapitulates *Paradise Lost*'s broader meta-ethic. Natural superiority

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depends on resemblance to God; while hierarchical authority is a specific command added by God.

Hierarchical authority in Heaven and Paradise is quite unlike anything *in our imperfect world*. Milton's endorsement of celestial hierarchy does not contradict his radical politics. Authority looks very different after a fall. Before his fall, Satan is superior to his subordinates *and* he enjoys God-gifted authority over them. Afterwards, Satan has no legitimate authority at all – and his superiority becomes increasingly questionable.

Satan falls, in large part, because he cannot accept that *his own* hierarchical authority rests entirely on God's free gift.

God's perfect freedom

Some of God's creative choices are explicable: God creates Heaven and Paradise because they resemble God; God creates no imperfect worlds because they dis-resemble God.

However, some *contrastive* facts about divine creation *have no explanation*. We cannot explain why God created only these perfect worlds (whichever they are) *and no others.* God's reasons to create do not necessitate God's creative choices. God freely chooses which reasons to respond to. Unlike Neoplatonist emanation or Leibnizian optimalism – where God necessarily produces the best world(s) – Milton's God is no consequentialist value maximiser (Fallon 1991, 12–13).

If God is free, then explanation must run out somewhere. God's decision to create only these perfect worlds is a brute fact. This is not an epistemic limitation. Even God does not know why – because there is nothing to be known.

Similarly, while we can explain why God issues some commands and institutes some hierarchies, we cannot say why God issued *this particular command* or instituted *this particular hierarchy*. These are more brute facts.

At each point, God's decisions involve both (a) God's nature, substance, being; and (b) God's free will. If God creates, then God will only create worlds from God's own self. But God freely chooses among a vast array of possible God-stuff-made worlds. God will only ever create perfect worlds – because only they resemble God in the right way. But God freely chooses which perfect worlds. God will only ever make perfect creatures whose characteristic excellences resemble God. But God freely chooses which creatures to create and freely combines them into worlds. God will only issue commands that a perfect creator could issue. But God freely chooses among many possible commands. If God creates communities of free creatures of different kinds, then God will institute hierarchies that enable all to flourish. But God freely choses to institute this particular hierarchy.

Only a perfect creator could wield such meta-ethical power – and perhaps only over creatures formed from their own being. If God were not perfect, if God did not create everything, or if we did not share God's very being, then perhaps Satan would have a point when he asks, in effect: 'Who made you the boss of me?'

In the jargon of contemporary analytic metaphysics, God's freedom is agent-causal libertarian freedom (Clarke et al. 2021). God is a substance – an agent who is the ultimate source of God's actions. God's free choices are not events caused by other events. They are things that God does. The buck stops, not with events, but with God. God's choices satisfy the much-discussed *principle of alternative possibilities* (PAP) (Frankfurt 1969). God always has real alternatives. God might create new worlds, and God might not. And there are infinitely many alternative new worlds that God might create.

God is perfectly free *and perfectly rational*. This raises a familiar dilemma (Kraay 2025; Rowe 2004). If rationality is responsiveness to reasons based on the value of options, then God can only choose the best option. The ability to do otherwise is merely the ability to be irrational. God cannot be irrational. Therefore, God is not really free.

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Milton's implicit meta-ethic supports two familiar responses to this apparent tension between perfect freedom and perfect rationality (Kraay 2025):

1. *No external constraints*: If God is perfectly rational, then God must respond perfectly to objective values. However, while objective values are external, mind-independent constraints *for creatures*, they are not external, independent constraints *on God* – because they depend entirely on God's own nature.
2. *Incommensurable values*: If objective value is resemblance to God, and if God infinitely transcends all finite things, then different finite things resemble God in very different ways. God thus faces a choice between *incommensurably good options* (Mulgan 2015, 246–247, 255–258). Different perfect worlds are valuable in quite different ways; they cannot be ranked on any common scale; and God freely chooses which valuable resemblances to actualise.

Milton's strong account of divine freedom supports his FWD in several ways:

1. Because God is the exemplar of excellence, the worlds that most resemble God *overall* may not be the ones that maximise other values such as knowledge, harmony, or happiness. They may instead be worlds containing the most God-resembling *creaturely freedom*.
2. If God can freely choose not to maximise value, then God can create free worlds even if these are not the best possible worlds.
3. God's perfect freedom and perfect rationality provide the *model* for creaturely freedom and rationality – explaining *how* creatures possess contra-divine freedom.
4. Throughout *Paradise Lost*, Milton emphasises both (a) the value of creatures' relationships with God; and (b) the value of freedom *within* those relationships. God freely choses God's relationships with creatures. Therefore, the most valuable relationships – those that most resemble God – are also freely chosen *by creatures themselves*.

Divine transcendence in *Paradise Lost*

We can summarise relations between God and creatures by setting out the many ways that *Paradise Lost* implicitly reimagines the traditional divine attributes of immanence and transcendence. God is immanent because God's very substance is the material foundation of all worlds – and because God is actively present in all perfect worlds. But God also radically transcends all possible created persons, in many ways:

1. *Substance*: While God and creatures are made from the same substance, that substance is God's own self. All things are made of God; all other persons are made out of someone else (God).
2. *Creation:* God is not created by anything; all other persons are created by God.
3. *Creator*: God is the creator of everything else; other persons do not create anything – they only mould, shape, rearrange what God creates.
4. *Infinite vs. finite*: God's power, knowledge, freedom, rationality are infinite; all creatures are finite.
5. *Divine foreknowledge:* God foreknows what free creatures will freely do – something no free creature could possibly know, even about their own future actions.
6. *Standard of value*: God is the standard of excellence, goodness, value; no other person sets any standard – either for others *or for themselves*. All other persons are measured against standards set by God. All projects – divine, angelic, human – are valuable only

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insofar as they resemble God. The value of God's projects depends entirely on God; other creatures pursue projects whose objective value is independent of themselves.
7. *Rationality*: God responds to reasons that depend only on God; all other creatures respond to external reasons independent of themselves.
8. *Authority*: God is the only source of direct commands or legitimate hierarchical authority; other persons only possess the authority that God has gifted to them – and only within whatever limits God freely chooses to set.

Satan falls because he cannot imagine God's meta-ethical transcendence. Satan treats God as just another person like himself. By having God speak within his poem, Milton tempts us to do the same. But God is radically different from us. God has meta-ethical powers that no creature could possibly have.

It is very difficult to imagine this God-saturated world. However, if you read *Paradise Lost without* imagining God's meta-ethical transcendence, you get *Frankenstein* (Shelley 1818).

Part three: Understanding Satan's fall

Satan is a perfect creature who freely falls. This raises two questions: how free *are* Milton's perfect creatures? And how could any perfect creature *fall*?

Creaturely freedom in Milton's perfect worlds

Rational creatures are made, not just in the image of God, but from God's substance. Creaturely freedom reflects divine freedom. Creatures thus enjoy agent-causal libertarian freedom. The ultimate origin of their actions is a substantial agent: namely, the creature themselves.

Agent-causal libertarianism is controversial for *our actual human freedom* (Clarke et al. 2021). But Milton's FWD is not about *our (fallen) human free will*. Perfect creatures may possess a freedom we lack. (Indeed, they do.[8]) Milton claims, not that we enjoy freedom, but that his perfect creatures do. This difference matters. While it fits uneasily into mechanist, naturalist, physicalist worldviews, agent-causation makes perfect sense in MAM worlds. We would expect creatures formed from God's own animated substance to also be free agents. Milton thus reinforces recent arguments that genuine freedom fits panpsychism better than materialism (Goff 2020).

Like God, creatures satisfy the principle of alternative possibilities. God guarantees that free creatures have alternatives – that nothing prevents their free choices. Frankfurt challenges PAP with imaginary cases where agents act freely even though they could not have done otherwise (Frankfurt 1969). Like Frankfurt's manipulators, God *could* intervene whenever someone intends evil. But God does not intervene – and God ensures that no one else intervenes either. Creaturely freedom is valuable precisely because both options are genuinely open to the agent at the time. There are no Frankfurt cases in God's perfect worlds.

God's foreknowledge does not contradict creaturely freedom, because it only operates *after* individual creation. God predicts humanity's fall only after Adam and Eve exist. God does not know *before creating them* what this particular angel or human will do. Milton's Plantinga-style FWD would collapse if God foreknew before creation.

God chooses between incommensurable objective values. Creatures most resemble God when they do likewise. Perfect rational creatures recognise and act on external reasons based on objective, independent values. They never knowingly choose a lesser good over a greater good or a weaker reason over a stronger. However, like God, creatures face incommensurable choices where they must choose *which values matter most to them*.

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Creatures' choices between incommensurable options could be (a) random; (b) determined by God; or (c) freely chosen by the agent. God selects (c) because the process of choosing is itself valuable; and because freely chosen projects are more valuable. In particular, God wants free creatures to freely chose *to love God*.

Satan's epistemic fall

Our explanation of Satan's fall remains incomplete. One crucial piece is missing. Even if perfect creatures are *free*, how can they *freely fall*? How can any perfect creature fail to love God? How can the freedom to choose between incommensurable *goods* lead to a choice of *evil over good*?

My answer is that each fall begins with a free *epistemic* choice – a refusal to believe that God is God. This answer, on its own, is not news to readers of *Paradise Lost*. I now illustrate how analytic philosophy might help us to unpack Satan's epistemic fall, using recent work on religious ambiguity and doxastic freedom.

Recall the occasion of Satan's fall. The Elevation of the Son forces angels to decide what they believe about God. If God plays all the meta-ethical roles outlined above, then God *does have* the moral sovereignty to elevate the Son, and all angels *should* acknowledge the Son's authority. But if God is an arbitrary tyrant, a less-than-perfect pretender, or a violator of independent moral norms, then self-respecting angels should *not* obey. All angels thus agree on the following biconditional: 'I should obey this person claiming to be God if and only if *He really is God*.'

Angels believe that God is God only if they believe the following:

1. God is omnipotent and omniscient – not just very powerful and very knowledgeable.
2. God created all other things out of God-self. And that includes *me*. I am God's creature.
3. All values and reasons depend entirely on God. And that includes all the reasons to which I respond, alongside the value of my self, my projects, and my freedom.
4. All obligations and all claims of hierarchical authority depend on God's actual commands. I possess my authority only as a gift from God.

Angels believe that God is God only if they recognise God's transcendent moral sovereignty. And this belief itself can – and must – be *freely chosen*.

Many philosophers agree that *our universe* is religiously ambiguous – open to many incompatible, reasonable religious, metaphysical, and philosophical interpretations (Mulgan 2015, 8–13). Reason alone cannot resolve our disputes. Some insist that religious ambiguity requires agnosticism – when reason runs out, we must withhold judgement. Others argue that, in certain circumstances, epistemically responsible agents can reasonably choose one alternative – making a leap of faith, a doxastic venture, a practical commitment. We thus enjoy some doxastic freedom (Bishop 2007, 122–150; Boespflug and Jackson 2024).

In William James's influential formulation, leaping beyond one's evidence is permissible only if two conditions are met (Bishop 2007, 124–125):

1. The agent faces a 'genuine option' – a choice that is 'living, momentous, and forced'. They must make a choice *and act on it*. Practical reason demands an answer.
2. The question at issue 'cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds'. Theoretical reason runs out.

Religious ambiguity and doxastic freedom are both very controversial *in our case* (Boespflug and Jackson 2024). Milton's FWD is not about *our* doxastic freedom, or the ambiguity of *our*

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universe. But aren't these things even harder to imagine in Satan's case? How can there be religious ambiguity in Heaven?

Milton's angels satisfy James's first condition. Theirs is no idle theoretical speculation. After the Son's Elevation, angels must decide *now* whether or not to obey. So they must decide what to believe about God. Nothing could be more live, momentous, or forced.

James's second condition is more troubling. Could theoretical reason run out in Heaven? Surely angels, of all people, know what to believe about God?

Angels' epistemic situation is very different from ours. Many familiar barriers to belief in God don't apply in Heaven.

1. In a world (as yet) without evil, arguments from evil lose their sting.
2. Angels who daily encounter God won't construct arguments from hidden-ness (Schellenberg 2015).
3. Heaven lacks religious diversity – removing this source of real-life doubt.
4. Angels – being perfectly rational, free, and good – have no doubts resulting from epistemic or moral imperfection.
5. Prior to Satan's fall, all angels are epistemically identically situated – they have the same evidence, the same experiences, the same nature. Heaven lacks any disagreement based on perspectival differences.

However, even in Heaven, there *is* room for doubt, because even perfect creatures in perfect worlds cannot fully comprehend God's divine transcendence.

Angels are epistemically perfect creatures. God is the exemplar of perfect knowledge. God infallibly knows everything. Angels' knowledge resembles God's *as much as any creatures' can.* However, God transcends all creaturely ways of knowing, perceiving, thinking, and speaking. No finite creature could possibly enjoy infallible knowledge – and especially *not about God*.

Angels thus face an epistemic dilemma. As they struggle to understand God, they must balance competing epistemic values – certainty vs. comprehensiveness, simplicity vs. explanatory power, parsimony vs. scope. Angels continually choose between describing God inaccurately and saying nothing about God; between fallible belief about God and withholding belief altogether. This is a classic choice between incommensurable values – between different ways that finite knowers can mirror God's perfect knowledge.

For all finite creatures, belief in God thus requires a leap of faith – a doxastic venture beyond argument, reason, and evidence. This is as true for angels in Heaven as it is for us. God's command that angels recognise the Son's authority demands a leap of faith that is theoretical, practical, and interpersonal – a leap to believe that God *is* a perfect creator and we are (merely) God's creatures; that *this person* (God) is radically unlike all other possible persons; that we can *trust* God's word about who God is.

Rational creatures enjoy a kind of freedom that God entirely lacks. God decides what *is* true. But God has no doxastic freedom. God infallibly believes all truths.

God wants angels to believe that God is God. But God cannot determine what angels *freely* believe. God creates Heaven to enjoy angels' *free* love based on their *free* beliefs – not puppets' pre-programmed 'affections' based on their predetermined 'beliefs'. If angels' love for God is to be valuable, their doxastic freedom must be contra-divine.

Angels do not face a simple, binary choice between belief and unbelief. The 'right' answer is to leap to the correct God-centred story outlined above. But there are many wrong answers: angels can refuse to leap at all – sceptically withholding judgement; or they can leap to any number of incorrect views; or they can flit inconsistently between them.

Satan does all three. He has no fixed position on any metaphysical, meta-ethical, normative, interpersonal, or epistemological question. Satan flits inconsistently between

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scepticism, empiricism, dualism, materialism, voluntarism, subjectivism, nihilism, existentialism, and pretty much any other philosophical error you can name (Fallon 1991, 194–222; Fish 1997, lxi).

And they are *errors*. Within the cosmos of *Paradise Lost*, Satan's many views are *falsehoods*, not just alternative perspectives. Satan's real tragedy is that the person he refuses to trust *really is God.* Milton asks us to imagine a world that is *only* religiously ambiguous *from a creaturely perspective*. There is no ambiguity from God's perspective. Loyal angels, leaping to true belief, are rewarded with deeper knowledge of God. Their leap is self-confirming. (After he leaps, Raphael cannot even comprehend Satan's doubts.) None of Satan's leaps is self-confirming in this way – which is why he cannot stay still. Unfortunately, Satan's refusal to trust that God is God *is* self-reinforcing in a different way. It becomes essential to his self-identity – part of who he is. Satan will try anything – *except* consider the possibility that the loyal angels got it right.

We can explain why God creates perfect creatures with the contra-divine doxastic freedom to fail to recognise God. We know why God creates angels free to stand or fall. We know *what* happens when this angel stands and that angel falls. (One freely leaps to belief that God is God; the other refuses that leap.) But we cannot explain why *Satan* fell while *Raphael* stood – why Raphael trusted God while Satan trusted only himself. This is where explanation runs out.

Every free-will defence leaves some things *unexplained*. Satan's fall is still not fully *explicable.* But I hope I have shown how philosophy can render it more intelligible, or at least less incredible.

Epilogue: Why should philosophers read an epic poem?

One anonymous reader notes that there is a difference between (a) claiming that there is much of philosophical interest in *Paradise Lost*; and (b) claiming that carefully and critically reading *Paradise Lost* is an especially valuable way to wrestle with those particular topics of philosophical interest. My title suggests the latter, but my text secures only the former.

In other words: Even if I have established that readers of *Paradise Lost* should become philosophers, I have not shown that philosophers should become readers of *Paradise Lost*.

When I presented this material as work-in-progress to my philosophy colleagues at the University of St Andrews, one asked: 'Why did Milton – who also wrote pamphlets, treatises, and much else – choose to present this material in a *poem*?'

Why do philosophers need to read Milton's poem itself, rather than resting content with philosophical commentaries like this? And why did Milton write an epic poem in the first place? This final section briefly addresses these questions.

Milton's world-building is not an end-in-itself. He clearly enjoys *describing* God, Heaven, Paradise, and Hell. But Milton also has more ambitious goals: to construct a narrative; to tell a story; to imagine his meticulously crafted worlds and their inhabitants *from the inside*; to illustrate the unbridgeable gulf between finite creatures and an infinite, transcendent God; and (most of all) to help us to imagine how perfect creatures might freely fall.

Paradise Lost is multi-vocal. We are not treated to a clear description presented by an impartial, omniscient, reliable narrator. Milton's narrator is opinionated, partisan, and self-consciously fallen. And Milton's God hardly ever speaks to us directly. Instead, much of the poem is told either from the point of view of unfallen creatures (whose perspectives are nonetheless fallible and partial), or in the duplicitous self-deceiving voices of fallen ones. We spend most of our time listening to what Milton's characters make of the worlds they inhabit. Our knowledge of Milton's worlds, and the events that unfold within them, is fallible, perspectival, incomplete. To read *Paradise Lost* is to immerse oneself in a world where even perfect creatures never really know where they stand, what they know, or who they are.

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This constant dislocation is infuriating for analytic philosophers. But it is necessary for Milton's wider purposes. Milton helps us to imagine that this is what it must always be like to be a fallible creature – however perfect, however spiritually superior, however favoured by God – trying to comprehend the transcendent, unknowable, infinite ways of God. It is one thing to describe this confusion. Milton's poem helps us to experience it. And unless we understand the gap between God and (even perfect) creatures, we cannot understand how such creatures might fall.

Everything in *Paradise Lost* comes back to Milton' free-will defence. He wants that defence to be philosophically, scripturally, and theologically sound. But he also wants it to be phenomenologically compelling. His goal is not just to argue *that* perfect creatures can fall – it is to help us to imagine what that would be like.

Philosophers should read *Paradise Lost* because the choices and dilemmas confronting Milton's characters are themselves philosophical. What would it be *like* to be Satan, or Adam, or Eve? What would it be like to possess libertarian freedom married with perfect rationality? How would it have felt to inhabit a perfect world, and enjoy perfect freedom, yet still feel tempted by disobedience and ruin? How would one react to the seemingly arbitrary commands of an obviously very powerful being who claims the authority to make moral claims true?

Milton's theological goals require a multi-vocal narrative. Why a poem? Milton wrote *Paradise Lost* because epic poetry was the prestige narrative genre of his day. If he were alive today, Milton might instead write a dense, psychological novel – or even a sprawling speculative fiction trilogy. I think we can best understand our own reasons to read *Paradise Lost* by comparing it to modern, more familiar, narrative genres.

Paradise Lost prefigures two contrasting subgenres of modern speculative fiction. Milton's Heaven is the archetype of the conservative, archaic, nostalgic, hierarchical, technophobic fantasy worlds of Tolkien et al. Innovation, debate, progress (not to mention modern warfare) are all explicitly Satanic. By contrast, Milton's Paradise is the prototype of optimistic science fiction – a young, progressive, open-ended universe inhabited by a new kind of perfect creature whose mission (if they had only chosen to accept it) was to forge a radically new kind of epistemic and practical community that grows, progresses, innovates, explores, and boldly goes where no one has gone before. Throughout the poem, we constantly see inhabitants of one of these two radically different worlds struggle to understand the other. (I believe that this radical difference between Heaven and Paradise is the key to understanding the fall of Adam and Eve. But that is a story for another day.)

Another modern narrative genre that *Paradise Lost* even more closely resembles is historical fiction. No one reads *Paradise Lost* to discover how the story ends. The poem opens 'Of Man's first disobedience…', not 'Of Man's first completely free decision that could go either way…read on to find out!' We already know what happens. We read to understand *how* it happens.

We read *historical* fiction – and not just *history* – because we want to imagine what it would be like to inhabit that historical world; to understand *from the inside* why those people might have done those things.

For most modern readers, of course, *Paradise Lost* is not actually historical fiction. We don't read Genesis literally – if we read it at all. For us, Satan, Adam, and Eve are more like characters in some richly imagined speculative fiction – aliens whose deliberations help us to imagine alternative metaphysical and ethical possibilities from the inside.

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Notes

1. Hutton (2015, 40), who indexes over 400 named individuals, has only one discussion of Milton – regarding history and moral education.
2. References to *Paradise Lost* in square brackets cite book and line numbers from the 1674 edition.
3. I introduce contra-divine freedom alongside incompatibilism (a) to cover possible cases where incompatibilist freedom is *not* contra-divine, and (b) to emphasise that *this* is what FWD really needs (Mulgan 2015, 235–43).
4. Milton's is no 'Rebel Angel Theodicy' (Forrest 2026), because it is Adam and Eve (not Satan) who bring natural evil into our world.
5. Among iconic early modern philosophers, Milton is arguably closest to Spinoza (minus his determinism) or Leibniz (minus his plenitude and optimalism). Fallon (1991, 117–136, 246) argues that, among his contemporaries, Milton is closest to Anne Conway (minus her cabbalism, transmigration of souls, and rejection of eternal damnation).
6. One intriguing possibility, which I hope to explore elsewhere, is that Milton's Paradise falls from animism into panpsychism, thereby becoming our universe. This would mirror Satan's greater fall from animated Heaven to materialist Hell.
7. In *Paradise Lost*, 'Paradise' designates a particular place. However, for simplicity, I use it here to name a whole created world.
8. In *Paradise Lost*, the freedom that is lost in humanity's fall is restorable only by divine grace [3: 175–183].

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