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## *Areopagitica and the Roots of Liberal Epistemology*

Criticism of *Areopagitica* has often sought either to extol the work as a cornerstone in the foundation of the liberal tradition or to diminish and even renounce such claims as misreadings of Milton's more totalitarian intentions. Following the Whig and Romantic lionization of Milton during the nineteenth century, readers have traditionally seen the tract as "one of the founding and canonical texts of modern liberalism,"<sup>1</sup> and have even gone so far as to call it "unique in its period, and perhaps unequalled in the range of freedom it demands until the *Liberty* of John Stuart Mill."<sup>2</sup> This liberal humanist account of *Areopagitica*'s position in intellectual history has been challenged from a postmodern perspective by readers who cast suspicion even on the discourse of philosophy itself as an unconscious instrument of power.<sup>3</sup> Such cynicism seems almost justified by the fact that five years after writing *Areopagitica*, with his party now in power, Milton took the very role as licenser that he had railed against. Some critics have accordingly suggested that "as Petrograd in 1919 and Havana in 1965, so was Milton's Protestant London in 1644,"<sup>4</sup> while others see in *Areopagitica* a "complicity with the

I have accrued many debts in writing this essay, particularly to Jessica Brantley, Paul Fry, Blair Hoxby, Annabel Patterson, John Rogers, and Nigel Smith.

1. Catherine Belsey, *John Milton: Language, Gender, Power* (New York, 1988), p. 78; quoted in William Kolbrener, *Milton's Warring Angels: A Study of Critical Engagements* (Cambridge, Eng., 1997), p. 15. Kolbrener provides a detailed survey of these critical traditions.

2. Harold J. Laski, "The *Areopagitica* after Three Hundred Years," in *Freedom of Expression: A Symposium*, ed. Hermon Ould (London, 1944), p. 175.

3. See Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (Brighton, 1980), pp. 109–33. See also, Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, tr. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, 1984), pp. xxiv, 8–9, 27–37, 46.

4. John Illo, "The Misreading of Milton," in *Radical Perspectives in the Arts*, ed. Lee Baxandall (Baltimore, 1972), p. 183.

most repellent aspects of fascism.”<sup>5</sup> This postmodernist view is shared by Stanley Fish, whose more literal deconstruction of *Areopagitica* brings him to argue that the tract “has almost no interest at all in the ‘freedom of the press’ . . . and does not unambiguously value freedom at all,”<sup>6</sup> and therefore cannot fit into the history of liberalism.

As the interests of literary scholarship, history, and political science have become increasingly interdisciplinary, the postmodern revisionism of the seventies and eighties has largely given way to more precise attempts to situate Milton in the history of political thought.<sup>7</sup> Much of this recent work has provided the most accurate, if not the most interesting, challenge to Whig historiography. Quentin Skinner’s *Liberty before Liberalism* (1998), for example, cautions against teleological conceptions of liberalism, and describes seventeenth-century English radicalism as embracing a neo-Roman conception of civil liberty that is not precisely “liberal,” at least in a later Millsian sense. This account may undervalue the centrality of toleration, but recent work on toleration has also tempered the Whiggish habit, as Blair Worden phrases it, of congratulating “the past on becoming more like the present.”<sup>8</sup> Worden’s work has shed light on Cromwell’s intolerance; Cromwell’s professed interest in liberty of conscience applied to only a few select sects, but not Quakers, Socinians, or antitrinitarians—a “heresy” that Milton harbored. Other revisionist approaches have argued that the idea of “liberty” itself has been taken out of context, and that Puritan proponents of toleration did not

5. Herman Rapaport, *Milton and the Postmodern* (Lincoln, 1983), p. 172. This view is also more generally supported, as David Norbrook points out, by such revisionist approaches to Enlightenment philosophy as Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York, 2000). See Norbrook, “*Areopagitica*, Censorship, and the Early Modern Public Sphere,” in *The Administration of Aesthetics: Censorship, Political Criticism, and the Public Sphere*, ed. Richard Burt (Minneapolis, 1994), p. 5.

6. Stanley Fish, “Driving from the Letter: Truth and Indeterminacy in *Areopagitica*,” in *Re-membering Milton: Essays on the Texts and Traditions*, ed. Mary Nyquist and Margaret W. Ferguson (New York, 1988), p. 235.

7. Victoria Kahn, for example, argues that Milton’s politics in *Areopagitica* are shaped by Machiavellian views of civic virtue and rhetoric. Kahn shows how Milton’s developing defense of Christian liberty fostered his republican politics. See *Machiavellian Rhetoric* (Princeton, 1994), pp. 173–84, 209ff. Blair Worden adds to this in “Milton’s Republicanism and the Tyranny of Heaven,” in *Machiavelli and Republicanism*, ed. Gisela Bock, Quentin Skinner and Maurizio Viroli (Cambridge, Eng., 1990), pp. 225–47. For a discussion of the differences between Machiavellian republicanism and early modern liberalism, see Steven Smith, *Spinoza, Liberalism, and the Question of Jewish Identity* (New Haven, 1997), pp. 34ff, 163–64.

8. Blair Worden, “Toleration and the Cromwellian Protectorate,” in *Persecution and Toleration*, ed. W. J. Sheils (Oxford, 1984), p. 199.

seek liberty in a modern sense.<sup>9</sup> “The claim of liberty of conscience,” argues J. C. Davis, “had virtually nothing to do with a claim to direct or manage ourselves”; rather it is a claim to “be free to submit to the governance of God [over] any other authority.”<sup>10</sup> John Coffey’s extensive “post-revisionist” response offers a more balanced account, although he still tempers “Whiggish optimism with a dose of revisionist realism.”<sup>11</sup>

What has been overlooked are the purely philosophical implications of the new trends in political thought: not just what kind of liberty or republicanism Milton advocates, but what more basic ethical systems and theories of knowledge were required to make these new arguments. The philosophical restructuring of the 1640s played a formative role in cultural and intellectual history, particularly in Hobbes, whose *Leviathan* responds to the sectarian politics and rational models of this decade. Hobbes’s extraordinary list of innovations—his “state of nature” model, his description of “the faculties of both body and mind,”<sup>12</sup> and his epistemological standards—have often removed him from the earthly realm of cultural history, as if his claim to be the first political scientist were to be taken at face value. “Civil philosophy,” he wrote famously, is “no older . . . than my own book *De Cive*.”<sup>13</sup> As Johann Sommerville has shown, Hobbes is not really as “modern” or as original as he claims, nor is the desire for modernity represented in his almost justifiable hubris.<sup>14</sup> The theories of human nature often associated with the Enlightenment

9. See for example, J. C. Davis, “Religion and the Struggle for Freedom in the English Revolution,” *Historical Journal*, 35.3 (1992), 507–30; W. Lamont, “Pamphleteering, the Protestant Consensus and the English Revolution,” in *Freedom and the English Revolution*, ed. R. C. Richardson and G. M. Ridden (Manchester, 1986), pp. 72–92; and Conal Condren, “Liberty of Office and its Defense in Seventeenth-century Political Argument,” *History of Political Thought*, 18.3 (1997), 460–82.

10. Davis, p. 515.

11. John Coffey, *Persecution and Toleration in Protestant England, 1558–1689* (London, 2000), p. 5; see also Coffey, “Puritanism and Liberty Revisited: The Case for Toleration in the English Revolution,” *Historical Journal*, 41.4 (1998), 961–85.

12. Translated from the 1642 edition of *De Cive*, where Hobbes is referring to a philosophical system circulated in manuscripts, in *De Corpore* and *De Homine*. An English manuscript summary of *De Cive* and *De Homine*, *The Elements of Law, Natural and Politic*, was intended to be used against the Parliamentarians in 1640. See *On the Citizen*, ed. Richard Tuck and Michael Silverthorne (Cambridge, Eng., 1998), p. 21, and Tuck’s introduction, pp. xii–xiv.

13. *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes*, ed. Sir William Molesworth, 11 vols. (London, 1839–1845), I, ix. The edition of 1642 had an extremely limited print run, but the 1647 edition was, as Tuck points out, “an immediate best-seller.” Tuck and Silverthorne, p. viii.

14. Johann Sommerville, *Thomas Hobbes: Political Ideas in Historical Context* (London, 1992), see esp. pp. 44, 46.

emerge in significantly brazen forms during the debates of the civil war. The epistemological dimensions of these debates are also of value in understanding the relationship between narrative and truth in literary representation. Scholars such as David Norbrook have drawn connections between forms of expression and the political belief systems from which they arose.<sup>15</sup> As part of the aesthetic consequences of seventeenth-century republicanism, Norbrook postulates a “poetics of the sublime, of what lies just beyond the available means of understanding,”<sup>16</sup> which he contrasts with the outward beauty of Royalist aesthetics. This important model suggests that much remains unanswered about the mechanics of the connection between politics and poetics. To what extent, for example, are the associations that we find between political parties and aesthetic values merely associations? In the note on the verse in *Paradise Lost* Milton suggests a political motivation for his prosody when he states that the blank verse represents an “ancient liberty” recovered from the “modern bondage of Riming”—terms that pervaded the political debates of prior decades.<sup>17</sup> Does this aesthetic “liberty” have more than

15. See Norbrook, *Writing the English Republic* (Cambridge, Eng., 1999); see also Michael McKeon, “Politics of Discourses and the Rise of the Aesthetic in Seventeenth-Century England,” in *Politics of Discourse: The Literature and History of Seventeenth-Century England*, ed. Kevin Sharpe and Steven N. Zwicker (Berkeley, 1987), pp. 35–51; Timothy Reiss, “Power, Poetry, and the Resemblance of Nature,” in *Mimesis, From Mirror to Method, Augustine to Descartes*, ed. John D. Lyons and Stephen G. Nichols, Jr. (London, 1982), pp. 215–47; Robert Weimann, *Authority and Representation in Early Modern Discourse* (Baltimore, 1996); and Andrew Barnaby, “The Politics of Garden Spaces: Andrew Marvell and the Anxieties of Public Speech,” *Studies in Philology*, 47:3 (2000), 331–61.

16. Norbrook, *Writing the English Republic*, pp. 18–19.

17. For political use of “ancient liberty” see Don M. Wolfe et al., *The Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, 8 vols. (New Haven, 1953–1982), III, 399. (Unless otherwise noted, subsequent citations from Milton’s prose are drawn from this edition, hereafter labeled *CPW*.) To some extent, Milton’s innovation continues Davenant’s project of stripping epic verse of unnecessary strictures. As Hobbes writes, praising Davenant’s simple “alternate” rhyme: “to chuse a needlesse and difficult correspondence of Rime, is but a difficult toy, and forces a man some times for the stopping of a chinke to say some what he did never thinke.” *Sir William Davenant’s Gondibert*, ed. David F. Gladish (Oxford, 1971), p. 47. Hobbes prefigures Milton’s idea that rhymed lines limit and distort meaning, and, almost too coincidentally, Milton also asserts his point with a comic internal rhyme. Poets so constrained, Milton argues, are “carried away by Custom” to say things other than “they would have exprest them.” See Claude E. Wells, “Milton’s ‘Vulgar Readers’ and the Verse,” in *Milton Quarterly*, 9 (1975), 67–70. Barbara Lewalski suggests Milton’s familiarity with Davenant’s epic experiments, and that the “Davenant-Hobbes manifesto and the example of *Gondibert* set Milton a challenge to produce a more worthy modern heroic poem on quite different principles.” Barbara K. Lewalski, *The Life of John Milton* (Oxford, 2000), p. 445. Critics have traditionally argued that Milton’s versification reacts against the heroic couplets of the Royalist Neo-classicism that was ushered in with the Restoration, although Milton’s style was surely

a stylistic affinity for the politics with which it associates itself? Or do the abstract ideas about the nature of thought that lie at the center of the political debates shape literary representation on a more systemic level? Norbrook's idea of an unclosed and even shifty relation between language and meaning deserves to be explored in the light of the skepticism and epistemology on which the new forms of political argument were premised.

Milton's "ancient liberty" suggests a qualification of my anachronistic use of the term "liberal." The backward-looking "ancient liberty" of republicanism is often quite different from the forward-looking inventions of Enlightenment liberalism, as Skinner and others have argued. Yet this corrective may overlook crucial changes in seventeenth-century politics. Political thought of the English Civil War grew to a large extent out of the historicizing tendencies of Renaissance civic humanism, but it also coincides with the nascent development of Enlightenment models. Hobbes's famous conviction that the war might never have happened had the revolutionaries not been captivated by classical republicanism has been elaborately affirmed in recent scholarship.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, historicist criticism has provided perhaps the strongest challenge to revisionists and more traditional historians who have held the position, as Christopher Hill disparagingly described it, that "the English Revolution had no intellectual origins."<sup>19</sup> But the view of English revolutionary ideology as classically republican not only separates the toleration issue too much from the full picture of motivating arguments; it also does not account for new ways of thinking that, in the tradition of Bacon and Descartes, sought precisely to work against previously established "ancient"

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determined before this. See Leonard Goldstein, "The Good Old Cause and Milton's Blank Verse," in *Zeitschrift Für Anglistik und Amerikanistik*, 23 (1975), 133-42, and Paul S. Wood, "Native Elements in English Neo-classicism" and "The Opposition to Neo-classicism in England between 1660 and 1700" in *Essential Articles: for the study of English Augustan Backgrounds*, ed. Bernard N. Shilling (Hamden, 1961), pp. 392-418. Sharon Achinstein sheds light on the politics of Milton's poetics in "Marvell, Dryden, and Literary Enthusiasm," *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 59:1 (1997), 1-29.

18. Hobbes writes in one instance that "There were an exceeding great number of men of the better sort, that had been so educated, as that in their youth having read the books written by famous men of the ancient Grecian and Roman commonwealths concerning their polity and great actions; in which books the popular government was extolled by that glorious name of liberty, and monarchy disgraced by the name of tyranny; they became there by in love with their forms of government." *Behemoth: A History of the Causes of the Civil Wars of England*, in *Works*, VI, 168.

19. Christopher Hill, *Intellectual Origins of the English Revolution* (Oxford, 1965), p. 1.

authorities. Nor does this view fully account for the forms of political argument that evolved as a criticism of other methods of constructing ideologies in England, such as patriarchal absolutism, divine-right monarchy, or Presbyterian intolerance. The conditions of debate fostered a rich dynamism in the way in which not just the substance of argument, but also the nature of understanding—the foundation on which this substance rested—came into play.

The epistemological foundations of these debates merit more attention. Scholars who draw connections between stylistic changes and the political revolution often make reference to the “massive shift in signifying systems”<sup>20</sup> that philosophers such as Michel Foucault and Richard Rorty—pointing to Descartes—have located in the seventeenth century. Yet efforts to show the mechanics of this relationship have remained confusing, both because the period remains somewhat unclassifiable, and because the revolution in epistemology has for so long been oversimplified as merely Cartesian in nature. In one attempt to understand Milton in this context Catherine Gimelli Martin argues that Milton’s “calculated indeterminacies” are “typical of baroque artists in that he responds to the restrictions imposed by the new scientific order by cultivating a form of allegorical equivocity.” “Milton’s poetic account of the Fall,” she writes, “forsees the downfall of the Cartesian certitude then triumphant.”<sup>21</sup>

This essay draws a different picture from other models of seventeenth-century epistemology, one that offers a new way of understanding the relationship between literary production and broader changes in European intellectual culture. Being more philosophical than historical, such retrospective analyses as Rorty’s and Foucault’s see the seventeenth-century revolution through a lens tinted by twentieth-century biases and agendas.<sup>22</sup> Their different interests in the epistemology of a new scientific order are reinforced by the legacy of scientific positivism, which dismissed the applicability of epistemology to ethics. But it was this very application of epistemology to moral and political philosophy that characterized

20. Norbrook, *Writing the English Republic*, p. 6.

21. Martin, *The Ruins of Allegory: Paradise Lost and the Metamorphosis of Epic Convention* (Durham, 1998), pp. 22, 4, 3.

22. For a concise formulation of Foucault’s position, see Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York, 1970), p. 51. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, 1979) provides perhaps the clearest statement of this epistemological shift.

English philosophy of the early Enlightenment. During the civil war and Commonwealth period, England experienced a “legitimation crisis”<sup>23</sup>—to use Habermas’ term—in which warring factions sought better ways of giving their convictions legitimacy. New methods for making rational claims developed as a consequence. Skinner observes in *Liberty before Liberalism* that the vocabulary of the state of nature and Milton’s use of it was “wholly foreign to the Roman and Renaissance texts.”<sup>24</sup> This exception points to an important change in the formulation of political arguments in the 1640’s and afterwards as writers such as Milton and Hobbes describe human nature—the “faculties of both body and mind”—in ways that begin to separate them significantly from the methodology of political thought of the early Stuart period. As Richard Tuck writes, “the great achievement of political philosophy in the first half of the seventeenth century was . . . the construction of a new theory of natural law.”<sup>25</sup> The new methodology focused on finding irreducible laws of human nature, often in “state of nature” models, instead of using previously established authorities. These self-consciously innovative writers use something close to Cartesian standards to gauge the accuracy of moral and political claims, but they are also interested in something quite different. Their theories of human understanding focus not on the accuracy of truth claims, but on the process by which humans obtain knowledge. These process-based models of reason are a crucial part of the descriptions of human nature that constitute the basis of political theory. Philosophers on what would become the “liberal” side of the political spectrum use such models to describe the political conditions through which people acquire moral knowledge. This non-Cartesian component in the foundations of political philosophy more formatively shaped literary representation.

With a few exceptions, notably the work of Ernest Sirluck, evaluations of *Areopagitica*’s place in intellectual history have rarely looked precisely at the immediate discursive context from which the tract arises, as one among many contemporary pamphlets on liberty of conscience and

23. See Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis*, tr. Thomas McCarthy (Boston, 1975). I borrow from Lyotard’s use of “legitimation” in *The Postmodern Condition*.

24. Quentin Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism* (Cambridge, Eng., 1998), p. 19.

25. Tuck, “Scepticism and Toleration in the Seventeenth Century,” in *Justifying Toleration*, ed. Susan Mendus (Cambridge, Eng., 1988), p. 29. See Martin Dzelzainis’ comments on Milton’s rationalist political methodology in *John Milton, Political Writings*, ed. Martin Dzelzainis (Cambridge, Eng., 1991), p. xv.

freedom of the press.<sup>26</sup> In 1644, Milton was part of a coalition of Independents and Separatists who sought to defend freedom of belief against the hegemony of Presbyterians and Erastians, who believed in state control of the church. *Areopagitica* poses as a speech to Parliament, and part of the task in evaluating Milton's generalizing yet seemingly self-contradicting positions lies in understanding how they coexist with more context-bound rhetorical maneuvers that seek to appeal to the Erastians (such as John Selden) in order to counter the Presbyterian hegemony in Parliament.<sup>27</sup> The parliamentary stronghold is represented in part by the Licensing Order of 1643, one of whose principal purposes is to "prevent sects and schisms" (*CPW*, II, 529) and suppress other elements of the Puritan movement. Milton's approach allows him to raise the toleration question without immediately alienating his Erastian audience, although his defense of freedom of the press is hardly in itself rhetorical; as several of his peers point out, control over the press is one of the chief means of preventing religious and intellectual freedom. Sirluck's pioneering work has done much to illuminate the particular political pressures within which the tract operates, yet his careful contextualization does not address the problems that have occupied evaluative criticism—criticism bent on understanding just where *Areopagitica* fits (or does not fit) in the liberal tradition.

Part of the problem in situating this tract is that it moves with deliberate shiftiness over a web of interconnected topics, as if to exemplify formally the author's view that civic and religious liberties are "inseparably knit together."<sup>28</sup> The tract's complexity mirrors the complexity of the crisis to which it responds; even while various forces within the Puritan movement vie for ascendancy or sufferance through Parliament, their political battle is itself under siege by Royalist armies who, at the time of composition, surround the gates of London. The undetermined question of parliamentary authority over the individual mind is thus

26. *CPW*, II, 158–83. But see also Nigel Smith, "Areopagitica: Voicing Contexts, 1643–5," in *Politics, Poetics, and Hermeneutics in Milton's Prose*, ed. David Loewenstein and James Grantham Turner (Cambridge, Eng., 1990), pp. 103–22.

27. Sirluck, *CPW*, II, 170–78. These two positions, Presbyterianism and anti-sectarianism, Milton had himself only recently denounced; indeed, in his anti-Episcopal tracts, as Sirluck points out, "Milton was a Presbyterian demanding the immediate institution of the 'one right discipline'"; *Of Reformation* (1641), *CPW*, I, 605; Sirluck, in *CPW*, II, 2. Annabel Patterson explores the tract's rhetorical function in relation to Parliament in *Censorship and Interpretation: The Conditions of Writing and Reading in Early Modern England* (Madison, 1984), pp. 111–19.

28. In *An Apology Against a Pamphlet*, in *CPW*, I, 923.

ensconced within a larger undetermined question about who should rule England, and what the nature of that rule might be.

As shifty as it may seem, *Areopagitica* does, however, participate in a distinct crisis in political thought as part of an immense polemical effort from a coalition of dissidents who wrote against the reigning Presbyterians. What is remarkable about this crisis in terms of intellectual history is that almost at once, in the years 1643–1644, the arguments for toleration indelibly entered English political discourse.<sup>29</sup> The sudden appearance of the debate in England stems not only from the bloodless squabbles of various Puritan sects, but from more impartial considerations that followed in the wake of the first episode of the Civil War. These writers, whom Sirluck has termed secularist, look more at the religious causes of the War, and slightly pre-date the Independent tracts on the subject, as in such anonymous pamphlets as *A Short Discourse, Touching the Cause of the Present Unhappy Distractions*, acquired by Thomason in February 1643.<sup>30</sup> The secularists employ the same sequence of argument as Hobbes's *Leviathan*: they begin with the problem of civil war, and then, taking the opposite view to Hobbes, present toleration as the solution. Henry Robinson also uses a secular line of reasoning in *Liberty of Conscience: of the Sole Means to Obtaine Peace and Truth* (March 1644). He sees intolerance to religious difference as the principal cause of war, and also sees liberty of the press as crucial to the maintenance of liberties and to the discovery of truth.<sup>31</sup> The texts advocating toleration that followed within the next several months came from a largely Independent standpoint, and included

29. For a full account, see Wilbur K. Jordan, *The Development of Religious Toleration in England* (Cambridge, Eng., 1932–40). The ideological movement was preceded by the Dutch, whose toleration policy had an exemplary influence. See for example, [Roger Williams], *Queries of Highest Consideration* (1644), p. 12; [William Walwyn], *The Compassionate Samaritane* (1644), pp. 44–45. Some of the Dutch influence comes from exiled Baptists, and of particular importance is Thomas Helwys, who established the first Baptist Church in England, and wrote a tract in 1612 that advocates toleration of all religions. See Coffey, “Puritanism and Liberty Revisited,” p. 964.

30. Sirluck claims this to be the earliest toleration tract from the Revolution, although [William Walwyn], *Some Considerations Tending to the Undeceiving Those Whose Judgements Are Misinformed* (November 10, 1642) may have the rightful claim, *CPW*, II, 79–80. Walwyn's pamphlet does not articulate a clearly tolerationist policy; however, it tries to make peace between the Protestants and the Puritans in arguing that a common enemy seeks to divide them. Sirluck also includes *A Discovery, What God, the Supreame Judge, Through his Servant Hath Caused to Bee Manifested* (November 1643) as one of these, but this document, partially a translation of a “high German” text about the Thirty Years War, simply rails against sectarianism as a cause of discord.

31. [Henry Robinson], *Liberty of Conscience in Tracts on Liberty in the Puritan Revolution 1638–1647*, ed. William Haller (New York, 1933), III, 133, 165–66.

Roger Williams' tracts, shaped by his experience of persecution in Massachusetts, although he feared with some foresight that the Independents would come to practice the same intolerance if they did come to power. Early in 1644, Williams anonymously published the *Queries of Highest Consideration* (February) and *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution* (July), which ignited intense opposition. As if to illustrate Milton's phrase "as good almost kill a Man as kill a good Book" (*CPW*, II, 492), Parliament ordered the book burned by the hangman.<sup>32</sup> Those tracts that follow, up to the publication of *Areopagitica* in November, are of a more sectarian bent: *M.S. To A.S. With A Plea for Libertie of Conscience* (May 1644), attributed to John Goodwin; Goodwin's sermons in *Theomachia, or, The Grand Imprudence of Men Running the Hazard of Fighting Against God, in Suppressing any Way, Doctrine, or Practice, Concerning Which They Know not Certainly Whether It Be from God or No* (October 1644); William Walwyn's *The Compassionate Samaritane* (June-July 1644), which also attacks the Licensing Order and suggests an influence on Milton<sup>33</sup>; *A Paraeneticke or Humble Adresse to the Parliament and Assembly For (Not Loose, But) Christian Libertie*, by an Assembly Congregationalist; Henry Robinson's work, which may also have influenced Milton, *John the Baptist, Forerunner of Christ Jesus* (September 1644) and *An Answer to Mr. William Prynne's Twelve Questions* (November 1, 1644). Copious production continued for some time, especially as negotiations for an Accommodation Order, which would have allowed non-separating "Assembly" Congregationalists to practice equally with Presbyterians, began to fail. Toleration became a fervent topic again in 1659, when the republicans had overthrown the Protectorate and hoped to establish a new and more effectively tolerant state.

32. Coffey, "Puritanism and Liberty Revisited," p. 965.

33. Sirluck, in *CPW*, II, 86; Sirluck argues for the influence of this tract on *Areopagitica*; see p. 87, n. 75 for a list of such instances, but see especially *The Compassionate Samaritane*, pp. 47 and 55. Walwyn argues that for those who wish to control opinion, "their next interest is to be masters of the Presse, of which they are lately become by an Ordinance for licensing of Bookes, which being intended by the Parliament for a good and necessary end (namely) the prohibition of all bookes dangerous or scandalous to the State, is become by meanes of the Licencers (who are Divines and intend their interest) most serviceable to themselves (scandalous bookes being still disperst) in the stopping of honest mens writings, that nothing may come to the Worlds view but what they please, unlesse men will runne the hazard of imprisonment (as I now doe) so that in publike they may speake what they will, write what they will, they may abuse whom they will, and nothing can bee said against them" (p. 39). The second edition of *The Compassionate Samaritane* (1645) seems in turn to have been influenced by *Areopagitica*, p. 551, n. 228.

Following Quentin Skinner's contextualist approach to political theory,<sup>34</sup> the present essay makes a comparative analysis of these toleration tracts. *Areopagitica* came out of an intensely collaborative moment in English political culture, in which various participants sought to find a way of legitimating their convictions about Christian liberty. Milton's tract, while arguably the most literary, is far from being "unequaled in the range of freedom it demands,"<sup>35</sup> as earlier encomiasts felt. As Coffey points out, it is a bit surprising that Milton remained intolerant to Catholics throughout his career, when many of his peers and friends (Williams and Vane, for example) were very widely tolerant.<sup>36</sup> But what makes Milton's work foundational is that he brings to its next logical step an argument implicit but not fully expressed in these tracts. The earlier tracts sought in various ways to show how an individual conscience cannot (or must not) be dictated by an external authority. Although widely disparate in approach, most of them begin by showing that such dictation was in fact the reality of an intolerant state: that intolerance meant a prescribed, even forced, system of beliefs. They then formulate arguments characterizing the wrongfulness of this relation, focusing on the idea that force is no way to instill religious understanding, or that it is akin to a kind of mental tyranny, as well as the very real tyranny against which they had revolted. These arguments were often interlarded with extensive scriptural citations and corroborations. The earlier writers used a method of political argument that was normative in the sixteenth and mid-seventeenth centuries, when conceptions of social order were largely based on a conglomeration of biblical phrases or examples, and on the patterns of social polity suggested by God's earliest relationships. "Human innovation," as Selden suggested, went against cultural norms, but "if we must admit nothing, but what we read in the Bible, what will become of parliament?"<sup>37</sup> Yet Stuart ideologues predominantly sought biblical "proofs" to show that Monarchy is a good form of government, for example, because God gave it to Adam, and it was the devil, after all, who revolted against the monarchy of heaven.<sup>38</sup> Absolute monarchy is a

34. See *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and his Critics*, ed. James Tully (Princeton, 1988).

35. Laski, p. 175.

36. Coffey, "Puritanism and Liberty Revisited," p. 969.

37. John Selden, *Table-talk: being the discourses of John Selden, Esq.* (1689), p. 25.

38. For a classic example, see *An Homily against Disobedience and Willful Rebellion* (1571) in *The Two Books of Homilies Appointed to be Read in Churches* (Oxford, 1859), p. 550.

bad form of government, the opposing position held, because the foreign Normans imposed it artificially on the original English<sup>39</sup>; and licensing is bad, as Milton argues earlier in the tract, because its history can be associated with Catholicism.

Besides resorting to the traditional modes of persuasion through association, Milton experimented with new forms of reasoning. This self-authenticating method of ethical reasoning followed the influential work of the Arminian philosopher Hugo Grotius, whom Milton had met in Paris.<sup>40</sup> Writers such as Selden and Hobbes appealed to the models of Grotius in formulating the new language of ethics and politics, which, like Descartes and Bacon, favored a method of argument which did not use fallible and pre-established authorities. Participating in this new methodology, Milton approached the problem of toleration more convincingly than his cohorts did by stripping the terms of the discussion down to what he considered to be their bare essentials. In using an irreducible law of human nature, Milton strives toward a method akin to the “mathematically demonstrative” (*CPW*, II, 513) arguments that he praises in Selden. If, by the unchangeable nature of reason itself—the way in which people obtain knowledge of right and wrong, or good and evil—he could prove that toleration was a necessary good, he would present an irrefutable argument. For if the political system violated human nature, and prevented individuals from being able to know the good, it would then be proven false. This thought process follows Plato’s in the *Republic*, where a model of knowledge of the good—the most irreducible form of justice—becomes the cornerstone for the political structure. Milton refutes Plato’s censorship-controlled utopia, which he associates flatteringly with the policy of the new parliamentary

39. “The evil of that Government . . . rose in and with the Norman conquest.” Henry Vane, *A Healing Question* (1656), p. 4. The myth of the “Norman yoke” appears earlier in the century, as in 1628 by John Pym in *The proceedings of the Lords and Commons in the year 1628 against Roger Manwaring* (1709), p. 11. While Hobbes would argue that “history can provide examples of fact but no arguments of right” (*Works*, VI, 259), the myth of the Norman yoke would not be fully exploded until the end of the eighteenth century. For Milton’s use, see Christopher Hill, *Milton and the English Revolution* (London, 1977), pp. 100–01.

40. For a discussion of toleration, Grotius, and the Tew Circle, see Hugh Trevor-Roper, *Edward Hyde, Earl of Clarendon* (Oxford, 1975), pp. 5–6. For discussions of Grotius, natural law, and new methodologies in general, see Richard Tuck, “The ‘Modern’ Theory of Natural Law,” in *The Languages of Political Theory in Early-Modern Europe*, ed. Anthony Pagden (Cambridge, Eng., 1987), pp. 99–119; and Tuck, *Philosophy and Government, 1572–1651* (Cambridge, Eng., 1993). For Grotius’ influence on Milton, see Hill, *Milton and the English Revolution*, pp. 54, 117, 276, 288, and Lewalski, pp. 87, 89, 167.

hegemony,<sup>41</sup> by offering a radical interpretation of Paradise—another utopia—and a theory of knowledge of good and evil that demonstrates the epistemological limitations of Plato’s polity.

## II

## THE EARLY ARGUMENTS FOR TOLERATION

English toleration tracts approach the problem from several angles and with different methodologies, which might nonetheless be simplified into three overlapping categories: (1) sermonizing which sought to justify toleration using scriptural corroboration, and thus combated the scriptural arguments used for persecution (particularly Deuteronomy 13 and 17); (2) the secular argument that, as Roger Williams says, “inforced uniformity . . . is the greatest occasion of civill Warre”<sup>42</sup>; and (3) the characterization of enforced religion as an affront to the believer. The first of these, scriptural exegesis, was one of the most popular modes of reasoning, but it was significantly not Milton’s method in *Areopagitica*. Although Milton took a rather bellicose stance, the argument from the state of war is nonetheless central to the debate, and central to Hobbes, whose own argument from the state of war brought him to very different conclusions. Various sides of the argument generally positioned themselves in terms of whether it was “enforced uniformity” that caused civil war, or whether it was, as Hobbes argued, the fragmentation of uniformity that caused it. Just before being caught up in the cause of the Independents against the Presbyterians, for example, Henry Robinson, attempted to offer liberty of conscience as a means to bring peace to the two sides of the Civil War. As he writes, “The King saies he took up defenseive Arms; and both Houses of Parliament averre that they did so: The Parliament party fear that if the King prevail, though his Majesty himselfe be not Popishly affected, the Bishops would be established, and by their jurisdiction, supresse all such as did not conforme both to their discipline and doctrine: on the other side, the Kings party is in as great a fear, that if the Parliaments side should get the upper hand, though they do not establish Brownisme or Anabaptisme, yet they would settle a Presbytery, which may as much abridge them the Liberty

41. “Nor is it Plato’s licensing of books will do this,” *CPW*, II, 526.

42. Roger Williams, *The Bloudy Tenent of Persecution, for the Cause of Conscience*, in *The Complete Writings of Roger Williams*, ed. Samuel L. Caldwell (New York, 1963), p. 4.

of Conscience, as they themselves have been abridged under Episcopacie heretofore . . . In such a case as this, is there no remedy?"<sup>43</sup> The way to achieve a peaceful state is to legislate toleration, so that no party may fear the oppression of another. Robinson echoes a slightly earlier tract, which views the present state of England as the result of sectarian discord that would not exist if people were allowed to embrace what beliefs they choose. *A Short Discourse Touching the Cause of the Present Unhappy Distractions . . . and Ready Means to Compose, and Quiet Them* (1643) argues that the present state of war stems from "spirituall" rather "than from temporall interests" (p. 1). The "remedy of the present inconveniences" is "to provide that they may not destroy one another; but every party being at ease, and contented with themselves, in those affaires that regard . . . their own consciences" (p. 3). To support this position, the author argues primarily that toleration would bring peace and that persecution is wrong. He also provides an additional argument that later writers, particularly Milton, would struggle to elaborate. It concerns the problems incurred by human reason itself, for it recognizes that "mans reason cannot be forced by outward violence" (p. 3). But the question of why a person's reason cannot be forced had yet to be determined.

The problem was first approached, not through an exploration of "reason" itself, but by characterizing the relationship between a person's reason and those beliefs legislated by the state. Such arguments began in earlier—although, as Robinson points out, "seldom thought on"<sup>44</sup>—discussions of toleration. The General Baptist Leonard Busher's book *Religions Peace: or a Plea for Liberty of Conscience* is among the earliest English treatises on the subject.<sup>45</sup> Printed in Amsterdam in 1614, and republished again in London in 1646 with a preface "To the Presbyterian Reader,"<sup>46</sup> it was co-opted into the cause of the Independents, who, like Milton, sought to erode the Presbyterians' compulsory policy of religious conformity. As the prefatory address contends, "hatred, contention, disaffection, and the bitter fruits thereof, have reigned amongst us; and, in all probability, will reign, till God shall put it into the heart of the

43. [Robinson], *Liberty of Conscience*, in Haller, III, 109.

44. [Robinson], *Liberty of Conscience*, in Haller, III, 116.

45. Another pamphlet may be from 1612, "The Confession of Fayth," in Walter H. Burgess, *John Smith the Se-Baptist, Thomas Helwys, and the First Baptist Church in England* (London, 1911).

46. *Tracts on Liberty of Conscience and Persecution 1614–1661*, ed. Edward Underhill (New York, 1966), p. 10.

parliament to make trial for the prevention thereof” (p. 12). Busher’s fundamental arguments against enforced religion are that persecution is unjust and tyrannical, and that persuasion is a more viable means of bringing people to see the truth than fear. Ministers should be allowed to persuade people of the word of God, “and not, as tyrants, to force and constrain them by persecution” (p. 27). With forceful means, “we cannot say we have the liberty of the gospel in our land; seeing where that is, there is no persecution for any difference in religion, nor [any] forcing of the conscience to believe the gospel, except by the word and Spirit of God only, the which do wound and kill the errors of men, and not their persons” (p. 28).

The strongest argument prior to Milton characterized the nature of an enforced belief system by analogy. The enforcement of belief, writes Busher, was a kind of rape: “Because persecution for religion is to force the conscience; and to force and constrain men and women’s consciences to a religion against their wills, is to tyrannize over the soul, as well as over the body. And herein the bishops commit a greater sin, than if they force the bodies of women and maids against their wills” (p. 34). This potent way of casting the mental tyranny that enforced uniformity produces would be repeated in many later treatises, such as Roger Williams’ *Queries of Highest Consideration*: “since the Common-weale cannot without a spirituall rape force the consciences of all to one Worship, oh that it may never commit that rape, in forcing the consciences of all men to one Worship, which a stronger arme and Sword may soon (as formerly) arise to alter.”<sup>47</sup> Wolseley later claims similarly that to force the conscience was “a spiritual rape.”<sup>48</sup> This associative argument, yoking intolerance with violent tyranny, would become a mainstay in tolerationist rhetoric; as late as *De Doctrina Christiana*, Milton would argue that a society without the “liberty” of “winnowing and sifting every doctrine” is a “barbarous tyranny.”<sup>49</sup>

Like the later tolerationists, Busher constantly repeats the argument that to force a conscience is to violate it, “because,” he explains, “persecutions do cause men and women to make shipwreck of faith and good consciences, by forcing a religion upon them even against their minds

47. [Williams], *Queries of Highest Consideration*, p. 3. He repeats this in *Bloudy Tenent of Persecution*, Caldwell, III, 182.

48. Wolseley, *Liberty of Conscience . . . Asserted and Vindicated*, p. 27. Quoted from Worden, “Toleration and the Cromwellian Protectorate,” p. 231.

49. *Columbia Works*, XIV, 13; *CPW*, VI, 123.

and consciences” (p. 36). Later he extends this to suggest that such violation produces dissembling. “Because many of your majesty’s subjects,” he writes, “both men and women now are forced to dissemble their religion, for fear of our persecution.” If they are allowed freedom of conscience, they “will be released and set free from their spiritual bondage and slavery, wherein we now do hold them, against their consciences.” Busher pushes this hypothetical condition of freedom even further: such freedom would make citizens more capable of being good: “they will become more faithful Christians to God, and more loyal subjects to your majesty, than ever they were before, to the salvation of their souls and the safety of the crown and state” (p. 63).

While such treatises did much to show that forcing belief is wrong-headed, they did not generally go on to demonstrate the consequences of state-controlled religion, the mechanisms of injustice, or the precise ways in which this policy compromises the integrity of belief. Rather, they argued by characterizing injustice in a sometimes almost sensationalist manner, and by associating persecution with preconceived negatives: it is barbarous mental tyranny or spiritual rape. Against the argument that enforced religion was tyranny, opponents of toleration might justifiably argue that force was (after all) used to control other moral codes of a society, that false religion was simply wrong, that Deuteronomy 13 demanded false prophets were to be executed, and that, without an enforced state religion, society would become schismatic. Schism bred discord, a far more odious social condition than orderly, harmonious conformity. “To divide the church,” wrote Archbishop Whitgift, “is as great a fault as to fall into heresy.”<sup>50</sup> And the Presbyterians accordingly argued that the people who would be rightfully “forced to cover their heresies” might instead be encouraged to “rent” the “Mythical Body of Christ” to pieces, unless set under the “Presbeterian discipline.”<sup>51</sup> Presbyterianism, writes Whitgift, offers “a medium way between Hierarchy, and a Democraticall Government” (extremes represented respectively by the Prelacy of Charles and the anarchy of the Independents). This “medium way . . . is able to suppress all Schismes and Divisions” (p. 17). In addition to fragmentation, toleration might allow any number of heretical, dangerous, and self-harming beliefs to circulate. Tolerationists,

50. *The Works of John Whitgift*, ed. J. Ayre, 3 vols. (Cambridge, Eng., 1992), III, 595, quoted in Coffey, *Persecution and Toleration*, p. 29.

51. D. P. P., *An Antidote against the Contagious Air of Independency* (Feb. 18, 1644), pp. 12, 9, 16.

as one opponent called them, therefore, needed a still “more plausible reason,”<sup>52</sup> than mere outrage at the cruelty of righteous punishment. A slightly more philosophical solution than the sensationalist arraignments of “Mr. Persecution”<sup>53</sup> was advanced by a couple of writers prior to Milton, William Walwyn and Henry Robinson. Robinson in particular sought to differentiate between the moral codes necessary to the integrity of the state, and those from which it was necessary to allow individuals to choose.

William Prynne, the Puritan famous for having lost his ears to the cause against the Episcopacy, now wrote in favor of enforced uniformity under the Presbyterians. In his *Twelve Considerable Serious Questions*, published in September 1644, he argues that, while Christ did not prescribe any form of Church government, it was nonetheless the right of the state to enforce a given system for the sake of order and conformity. Robinson responded with *An Answer to Mr. William Prynne’s Twelve Questions*. Although he agrees that there is no divinely established church government, he argues that the state has no right to impose one, and that the choice should devolve on the people: “every particular Christian ought to have under the Gospel a liberty and latitude, to choose such a form of Church government, as he himselfe, for his particular use, in his owne reason and understanding apprehendeth to be according to Gods Word.”<sup>54</sup> Here the connection between choice and reason, which Milton would exploit more fully, is introduced into the debate. Possibly influencing Milton’s own constructions, Robinson suggests that a person’s understanding and apprehension are better disposed when given the freedom to choose. He is one of the few at this stage who employs the terms of the refurbished discourse of natural law, which he uses to differentiate between externally dictated moral codes and those beliefs that require voluntary apprehension: “The selfe same Law of Nature, God, and rectified reason which instructed and warranted all Nations to subject themselves unto some publique forme of Civill government, obliging all persons and societies of men alike, which they conceived most advantagious, doth not warrant us to doe the like in Church affairs;

52. The Presbyterian heresiographer Thomas Edwards registered horror at the “many plausible reasons” given to support “total liberty of all Religions,” *Gangreana* (1646), I, 124, quoted in John Coffey, “Puritanism and Liberty Revisited,” p. 971.

53. From Overton’s funny fictional narrative, [Overton], *The Arraignment of Mr. Persecution* (1645).

54. Robinson, *An Answer to Mr. Prynne’s Twelve Questions* (1644), p. 2.

because whatsoever civill action the civill Magistrate requires, may be performed by the outward man, or else be expiated by penalty without taint of conscience: But the Church government as it aimes at, and regards the Spirituall service and performance, . . . cannot be undergone, or worke upon a mans spirit unlesse he will himself, neither may he be willing thereunto, unlesse he apprehend them to be according to Christs Government and Institution” (p. 9). Robinson’s awkwardly posed insight is that the kind of moral understanding at stake in this debate, which “regards the Spirituall service and performance,” cannot “worke upon a mans spirit” unless “he will himself.” Truth cannot be forced on a person unless that person wills it, and that volition is essential to the process of apprehension. In his earlier *Liberty of Conscience*, Robinson makes a slightly different connection between cognitive volition and human understanding. “Though a man would use all the means which can be prescribed him, and should even himselfe be contented, and desire that such a Religion were the true one, yet it is not in his power to thinke so, and consequently to be of the same in heart, untill his reason and understanding be convinced thereof.”<sup>55</sup> While following a prescribed set of beliefs may even be conducive to contentment, he argues, people cannot have the “power to thinke” or to understand these beliefs unless their reason has properly apprehended them. The extraordinary insight of *Areopagitica* was to take these arguments further and show why a prescribed set of beliefs cannot produce knowledge. Milton shows that the natural conditions of reason require freedom in order for people to know what they profess.

Walwyn also approaches the contours of Milton’s paradigmatic theory of knowledge. He makes a pioneering argument (albeit, again, roughly) from the nature of reason itself: “Whatsoever a mans reason doth conclude to be true or false, to be agreeable or disagreeable to Gods Word, that same to that man is his opinion or judgement, and so man is by *his owne reason necessitated to be of that mind he is.*”<sup>56</sup> Walwyn suggests that the way in which a person comes to a particular belief through his or her own reason determines the accuracy of judgment or the level of knowledge. A belief that enters a person’s judgment by some means other than free reason (coercion or conformity) is epistemologically inferior. This emphasis on the nature of acquiring knowledge devalues

55. [Robinson], *Liberty of Conscience*, in Haller, III, 141–42.

56. [Walwyn], *The Compassionate Samaritane*, p. 12. My italics.

the fragmented and sometimes erroneous nature of “truth,” as Robinson avers: “even amongst all those that professe Christianity, I conceive it may easily be observed, that such as study the variety of opinions, and trie the spirits out of a zeale to truth, choosing their Religion by their owne judgements, though erroneous, are yet more jealous of Gods worship, and conscionable towards men.”<sup>57</sup> The strange disclaimer “though erroneous” may seem to disarm the argument, yet apart from valuing the nature of zealous conviction, Robinson also needs to account for the possibility that some forms of tolerated Christianity may not be true. But there is something rhetorical about Robinson’s allowance for error, for it stresses just how important the process of free choice is: the process of obtaining the truth matters so much that we may embrace the occasional error, if that happens. Even error is better than professing a belief we do not actually know to be true. As Jeremy Taylor would later write, “an honest error is better than a hypocritical profession of truth.”<sup>58</sup>

Acknowledging the possibility of error is an inevitable feature of the philosophy of toleration. “The uncertainty of knowledge in this life,” Walwyn writes, “no man, nor no sort of men can presume of an unerring spirit,” and thus, “one sort of men are not to compell another, since this hazard is run thereby, that he who is in an error, may be the con-strainer of him who is in the truth.”<sup>59</sup> At the core of this political crisis—which was to many “the greatest occasion of civill Warre”<sup>60</sup>—was a problem of hermeneutics. The misinterpretation of scripture was for Hobbes the foundation of civil unrest. Civil war, he argues, has been fought by Christians since the time of the Apostles by people who cannot interpret the language of the truth. In the fourth part of the *Leviathan*, aptly subheaded, “Of spirituall Darkness from MISINTERPRETATION of Scripture,” he begins with the question, “Whence comes it that in Christendome there has been, almost from the time of the Apostles, such justling of one another out of their places, both by forraign, and Civill war?” The first answer lies in wrongful interpretation: “by abusing, and putting out the light of the Scriptures.”<sup>61</sup> The problem was

57. [Robinson], *Liberty of Conscience*, in Haller, III, 115.

58. Jeremy Taylor, *The Liberty of Prophesying* (1647), p. 163; quoted from Worden, “Toleration and the Cromwellian Protectorate,” p. 207.

59. [Walwyn], *The Compassionate Samaritane*, pp. 15–16.

60. Williams, *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution, for the Cause of Conscience*, p. 4.

61. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. W. G. Pogson Smith (Oxford, 1952), p. 473.

solved by devising a more effective hermeneutic method; by taking the Hobbesian stance of enforced uniformity but under a wide doctrinal umbrella; and by allowing the possibility of error in interpretation. As Milton would later argue in *A Treatise of Civil Power* (1659), “no man can know” the true interpretation of scripture to be “at all times to be in himself, much less to be at any time for certain in any other” (*CPW*, VII, 246). This way of understanding the mind’s relationship to external representations is then written into the authorial intentions of the Bible: God created an uncertain narrative *in order* to produce an internal authority, thus enhancing the process by which knowledge is obtained. “God’s providence,” he writes in *De Doctrina Christiana*, “committed the contents of the New Testament to such wayward and uncertain guardians . . . so that this very fact might convince us that the Spirit which is given to us is a more certain guide than scripture, and that we ought to follow it” (*CPW*, VI, 589). The textual uncertainty of the New Testament brings readers to seek for certainty in their own conception rather than the outward authority of the text. The affirmation of uncertainty central to the political and theoretical positions of Milton and his cohorts had shaping consequences on the way in which inquiry was represented as text.

### III

#### RATIONALISM AND EPISTEMOLOGY

To Robinson’s and Walwyn’s rather rough arguments about the nature of reason, Milton would give explicit and sustained analysis. Milton’s treatise, longer than all but two of those published in the previous year, addresses the topic using more artful and more philosophically rigorous prose. Two concepts in particular distinguish his discourse from the others: “liberty” and “reason.” His appreciation for the new discourses of political philosophy appears in his commendation of John Selden’s methodology.<sup>62</sup> In praise of what are now thought of as the Cartesian

62. The praise of Selden also serves the purpose of extolling a non-Presbyterian Erastian Parliamentarian. See Sirluck, *CPW*, II, 177, and Nigel Smith, “*Areopagitica*: Voicing Contexts,” p. 106. Smith comments insightfully on Selden and Milton, pp. 106–18. As Sirluck points out, Milton strategically cites Selden and Lord Brooke, an Independent who believed in toleration, but he cites no Presbyterians (p. 177). Sirluck comments on how these lines refer to Selden’s prefatory lines. See also Parker, *Milton, A Biography*, second edition, ed. Gordon Campbell (Oxford, 1996), p. 269; *CPW*, II, 521. Selden also influenced Milton’s use of natural law in the 1644 edition of the *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* (*CPW*, II, 350).

standards of methodology—that there may be knowable or demonstrable representations of the external—Milton speaks of how Selden’s volume “proves by exquisite reasons and theorems almost mathematically demonstrative, that all opinions, yea errors, known, read, and collated, are of main service and assistance toward the speedy attainment of what is truest” (*CPW*, II, 513). Just where Milton derives this new, Hobbesian idea of a “mathematically demonstrative” political argument is an important question.<sup>63</sup> Milton is drawn to the idea of a higher standard of argumentation, that a moral problem such as the one he grapples with now—and claims Selden, too, undertakes—can be grounded in “exquisite reasons” and provable laws. Selden endorses Milton’s idea that unprejudicial reading aids the attainment of knowledge, but Milton loosely connects this small point from Selden’s preface with the broader methodology of his work, a methodology that is really used to justify other claims. Milton’s distortion of Selden seems to integrate two philosophical issues central to the seventeenth century: the possibility that moral laws might be mathematically demonstrable, and the question of how humans come to the “attainment of what is truest.” This latter question occupies the bulk of *Areopagitica*, which becomes as much a treatise on how “to discover onward things more remote from our knowledge” (*CPW*, II, 550) as on toleration and licensing, although Milton’s interest in knowledge applies to these other issues. He projects on Selden what he himself employs in *Areopagitica*, a way of looking at a political problem which goes beyond mere characterization, but relies instead on a principle of nature to make the argument necessary. While less sophisticated pamphleteers spoke against “imposing upon civil liberty” and against their opponent’s mistaken idea that “liberty for all Sects” meant “to destroy religion,”<sup>64</sup> they were seldom able to explain why their opponents had misconceived, or to bring to their convictions a foundation approaching the status of a “law of nature.” Milton sought more convincing arguments that justified his position on toleration with a model of human rationality.

Milton’s interest in the emerging discourse on method is evinced not only in his initial praise of Selden’s laws of nature and in his use of

63. Tuck shows how Grotius drew an analogy between mathematics and moral science, and in doing so “made the most decisive break possible with humanism.” Tuck, *Philosophy and Government*, p. 171. The text of Grotius used, however, was not published until the nineteenth century.

64. John Rogers, *Diapoliteia, or a Christian Concertation with Mr. Prin, Mr. Baxter, Mr. Harrington, for the True Cause of the Commonwealth* (1659), p. 31.

“reason,” but also when he suggests a “method” to his own discourse. The tract’s argument unwittingly demonstrates the “ingenuity of Truth” when Milton finds himself having turned from an unfinished thought and self-consciously comments on his own narrative. This sudden shift reveals how Truth, “when she gets a free and willing hand, opens herself faster than the pace of method and discours” (*CPW*, II, 521). The idea that truth outstretches “the pace of method and discours,” with its seeming allusion to Descartes’ *Discours de la Methode*, suggests a conscious relation to such recent attempts to establish a method for determining the truth, which is, after all, the subject of Milton’s own treatise.<sup>65</sup> This sudden revelation of the “ingenuity of Truth” beyond method, and beyond the pace of rational discourse, indicates a mild defiance of philosophic discourse evoked again in privileging Spenser over Aquinas as a “better teacher” (*CPW*, II, 516). Milton’s theory of knowledge has a wholly different orientation from the Cartesian criteria for knowledge that structures Descartes’ method and discourse, and Milton’s narrative seems conscious of this irony. The disclosure of truth’s ingenuity in this unusual moment of discursive self-awareness suggests an intention both to embrace and transcend that discourse’s normative strictures. This stylistic defiance and Milton’s awareness of his narrative’s own powers of discovery illustrate the tract’s general tenets concerning the imposition of external controls on the truth, that discovery depends on a liberation from preconceived notions and directives. In this and in Milton’s treatment of Spenser’s narrative of choice as superior to philosophy, Milton is eager to show that this philosophical advancement may be achieved within the representational arts. Poetry is not the same as mere rhetoric, as Plato had argued, or the shadow of a shadow, but an art in which truth is allowed to shift for itself, and thus outstretch the pace of method and discourse, even while achieving the same epistemological standards.<sup>66</sup> Milton’s interest is also to show that the process of thought—or the

65. For another discussion of the Cartesian elements of this passage, see Francis Barker, “In the Wars of Truth,” *Southern Review*, 20:2 (1987), 117.

66. A preoccupation with epistemology and narrative was already present in Milton’s work by the time he began to formulate this problem in *Areopagitica*. Like many other early modern writers, Milton was perplexed by Plato’s challenge that poets could not know the good because their very manner of representation precluded such knowledge. At a time when Platonic metaphysics pervaded Stuart poetry, Milton attempted in his early works to achieve a poetics that did, like Plato’s philosophy, approach the forms. In the early exercise “On the Platonic Idea as Understood by Aristotle,” for example, Milton parodies Aristotle’s critique of Platonic metaphysics. “But you,” the unreliable narrator ironically addresses Plato, “if you were the first who brought

process of coming to the truth—is fundamental to the politics he promotes. As in Hobbes's method of building a political system on the state of human nature, he sought a correlation between his model of rationality and a political structure that would fully enable it.

Accordingly, Milton starts out in *Areopagitica* aptly mirroring what he praises in Selden, with “great authorities brought together”—historical examples linking, among other things, licensing with Catholicism. A discernible shift then occurs in the tract itself, as if Milton awoke after several dense pages of rhetoric associating licensing with the inquisition and the lack of licensing with good societies. He then turns to a more philosophical or “mathematical” line of reasoning and to the discourse of “reason” itself. Perhaps unconsciously following the progress of thought in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Milton proceeds from the idea of maintaining “temperance”—which also arises in the discussion of Spenser—to the idea that true knowledge derives only from rational choice: God gave humanity “the gift of reason to be his own chooser” (*CPW*, II, 513–14). Milton's refutation of Plato's epistemology and politics thus comes in appropriately Aristotelian terms. Milton's idea that “reason is but choosing” alludes to Aristotle's cerebral sense of metaphysical (rather than behavioral) choice, which builds on the Platonic distinction between opinion and knowledge, the lower and higher forms of human understanding. “Choice is not common to irrational creatures,” writes Aristotle, “but appetite and anger are [;] . . . appetite relates to the pleasant and the painful, choice neither to the painful nor to the pleasant. . . . For this reason too, [choice] cannot be opinion. . . . We choose what we best know to be good, but we opine what we do not quite know.”<sup>67</sup> Distinguished from the faculties that govern opinion, cognitive choice is the process by which people obtain knowledge. (It is worth mentioning that Milton and Hobbes diverge on this crucial point. In Hobbes's anti-Aristotelian thought there is ultimately no such choice, and human

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these absurdities [i.e., the forms] into the schools [you] must surely now call home again those exiles from your city, the poets, for you are the supreme fabler [fabulator, poet] yourself. Either that, or even though you are the founder, you shall go into exile yourself.” *Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merritt Hughes (New York, 1957), pp. 57–58. This response to Plato's banishment remains among the most interesting of the many defenses of poetry in Milton's corpus. The defense ironically mirrors Aristotle's *Poetics* arguing that poetry can also approach the metaphysical ideal of the forms. Milton's early poetry, such as “At a Solemn Music,” attempts to effect this ideal by approximating Plato's reality.

67. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (1112a), in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York, 1941), p. 968.

mental activity is precisely dictated by the “pleasant and painful”; therefore, it may “truly” be said that the “world is governed by opinion,”<sup>68</sup> and not impartially obtained ethical knowledge.)

In basing the argument for choice on the nature of reason and asserting that humanity was left with the “Gift of reason to be his own chooser,” Milton demonstrates more precisely how intolerance is not just a violation of a set of nebulous values, but a violation of conditions that are essential to the possession of knowledge. Because reason is constructed by nature and must be left free in order to obtain knowledge, it would compromise the nature of human understanding to control or prohibit systems of belief.

## IV

## THEORIES OF KNOWLEDGE

The explanations of the nature of reason that arose in the 1640’s would shape the way various schools (the Hobbesian and the Miltonic) described how we know, and what knowledge is. Following his explanation of the metaphysics of reason, Milton turns to a theory of knowledge. The natural condition of humanity, Milton argues, is one of rational choice, and under such conditions humanity cannot develop “under a perpetuall childhood of prescription” (*CPW*, II, 514). To be in a state of prescription in a modern civilized world is unnatural. The childhood of prescription suggests Eden, to which Milton turns directly: “It was from out the rinde of one apple tasted, that the knowledge of good and evill as two twins cleaving together leapt forth into the World. And perhaps this is that doom which Adam fell into of knowing good and evill, that is to say of knowing good by evill” (*CPW*, II, 514).<sup>69</sup> Milton suggests that perhaps Adam comes to the knowledge of good through evil. He turns abruptly from this thought, toward the question of what good and evil are in a state of prescription. This sequence interweaves a few elements that shape Milton’s thinking, especially the relationship between “prescription” and the free “reason” given humanity. “If every action which is good, or evill in man at ripe years, were to be under pittance, and prescription, and compulsion”—the position Hobbes

68. *The Elements of Law Natural and Politic*, ed. J. C. A. Gaskin (Oxford, 1994), p. 72.

69. A surprising parallel for this exists in Hobbes, written four years earlier: “There are few things in this world, but either have a mixture of good and evil, or there is a chain of them so necessarily linked together, that one cannot be taken without the other.” *The Elements of Law*, p. 45.

openly endorses—"what were vertue but a name, what praise could be then due to well-doing, what grammercy to be sober, just or continent?" (*CPW*, II, 527). The passage turns from this theory of knowledge with an almost unstructured fluidity—again demonstrating the ingenuity of truth—to the argument that no action could be called good unless it comes from a free agent; otherwise, virtue would be "but a name."

The picture of humanity in Paradise, first suggested by a "childhood of prescription," continues to develop in language that more forcefully suggests the Fall as a *felix culpa*: "many there be that complain of divin Providence for suffering Adam to transgresse, foolish tongues! when God gave him reason, he gave him freedom to choose, for reason is but choosing; he had bin else a meer artificiall Adam . . . God therefore left him free" (*CPW*, II, 527). With the faculty of reason, Adam was (and had to have been) given the freedom of choice, since the two are interdependent. The description of Adam's metaphysical freedom, his "freedom to choose, for reason is but choosing," again evokes the Aristotelian notion of rational choice. The use of the gerund—"reason is but *choosing*"—stresses the process itself rather than the knowledge acquired. This rational process of acquiring knowledge Milton later describes as "knowledge in the making" (*CPW*, II, 554). Norbrook points out that the use of present participles in the text—"building," "cutting," "squaring," "hewing"—which predominate over past participles would have "possible overtones of premature completion"<sup>70</sup> and thus embody part of the rhetorical features of the sublime for Longinus and Milton. Milton's idea is that reason is but *choosing*, where the process of making knowledge is far more important than its static or "close[d]"<sup>71</sup> representation, to use Longinus' term. The nature of conception of the truth remains more important than its external representation, just as the posture of the believer in conceiving the truth is more important than the belief professed: what matters is how well the believer knows what he or she professes. The argument for rational choice is instantiated in the style itself, which resists closed expressions of truth. Milton is attracted to Longinus not only because of his republican politics, but because his theory of representation suits the nature of the mind behind Milton's argument for liberty.

70. Norbrook, *Writing the English Republic*, p. 135.

71. J[ohn] H[all], *Peri Hypsous, or Dionysius Longinus of the Height of Eloquence* (1652), p. 74, quoted in Norbrook, *Writing the English Republic*, p. 137.

In Milton's ideal picture of the life of the mind, the search for truth is something necessarily fragmented since epistemological fragmentation causes constant trial and assists in the process of discovery. The picture of a mere "artificial Adam," or an original form of humanity not really given choices but controlled by the unseen hand of God, suggests by analogy the artificiality of the belief systems in a state that controls publication or religion. The simple allusion to Adam is politically suggestive, since the standard absolutist political analogy used the prelapsarian state of obedience, rather than the state of reason, as a foundation for the monarchy. For many, the condition of humanity in Paradise acted as a philosophical precursor to more scientific attempts to draw models of human nature as it exists in the state of nature, and Milton's too is an argument from the state of nature. His picture of Adam and Eve describes human nature even as it exists now: this is the "doom which *Adam* fell into of knowing good and evill, that is to say of knowing good by evill," he writes, "as therefore the state of man *now* is" (*CPW*, II, 514, my italics). The Royalists generally had not used a state of nature argument per se (although Hobbes would); their pictures of the condition of Adam rely more on received theology and the broader analogy of the sin of Adam's disobedience. Robert Filmer, for example, reminds us that "the desire for liberty was the cause of the fall of Adam."<sup>72</sup> William Davenant similarly gestures toward the story of the fall in his suggestion that political "obedience like the Marriage Yoke, is a restraint more needful and advantagious then liberty; and hath the same reward of pleasant quietnesse, which it anciently had, when *Adam*, till his disobedience, enjoy'd Paradise."<sup>73</sup> The state of humanity in Paradise was also used with more scientific descriptions. In claiming that moral knowledge as well as judicature is the province of the sovereign, for example, Hobbes too reverts to a biblical argument: "Cognisance or Judicature of Good and Evill" is "forbidden by the name of the fruit of the tree of Knowledge" (*Leviathan*, p. 159). For Milton, individuals must be left free to come to moral knowledge themselves. The metaphysical description of human reason—that choice brings us to true knowledge—thus becomes the cornerstone

72. Sir Robert Filmer, *Patriarcha and Other Writings*, ed. Johann P. Sommerville (Cambridge, Eng., 1991), p. 2. For further examples of Filmer's political argument, see his contradictions of Hobbes in *Observations concerning the Originall of Government Upon Mr Hobs Leviathan, Mr Milton against Salmasius, H. Grotius De Jure Belli* (1652), p. 187ff, and *The Anarchy of a Limited or Mixed Monarchy* (1648), p. 138.

73. *Sir William Davenant's Gondibert*, ed. David F. Gladish (Oxford, 1971), p. 30.

for his argument. It generates further applications that then buttress his political claims, the principal being that truth that is not chosen (but dictated by external authority) cannot be considered knowledge. This negative or reversed application—the nature of truth without freedom—is for Locke the argument that “absolutely determines this controversy.”<sup>74</sup>

This negative application of Milton’s paradigm, that externally dictated “truth” can never instill knowledge, is perhaps the most formative concept for literary representation, if not also the most powerful argument for toleration. It is captured in his memorable words that “A man may be a heretick in the truth; and if he beleeve things only because his pastor says so, or the Assembly so determins, without knowing other reason, though his belief be true, yet the very truth he holds, becomes his heresie.” Milton’s formulation expresses the inverse of Robinson’s idea that error is preferable to professing ideas that we do not actually know. This argument follows hard on another line of reasoning, that knowledge is actually in a state of flux, which suggests that representation of the truth (if not also the truth itself) must always be changing: “Well knows he who uses to consider, that our faith and knowledge is compar’d in Scripture to a streaming fountain; if her waters flow not in a perpetuall progression, they sick’n into a muddy pool of conformity and tradition” (*CPW*, II, 543).<sup>75</sup>

Milton’s arguments not only suggest the uncertainty and transmutability of external representations, but also enforce the necessity of an ever-changing way of describing these truths—if not an ever-changing truth itself. What “absolutely determines this controversy” for Locke “is this: although the magistrate’s opinion in religion be sound, . . . yet if I be not thoroughly persuaded thereof in my own mind, there will be no safety for me in following it.”<sup>76</sup> Locke’s assertion characterizes the shift in method in the seventeenth century: the search for a demonstrative, determined “proof” to settle a political question. Ironically, the effort to find such an “absolute” argument only confirms the necessity of not trusting another’s authority, because an individual must be persuaded

74. Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, p. 32.

75. Sirluck points out a similar argument in Walwyn’s *Compassionate Samaritane*, pp. 41–42. See Sirluck’s introduction, *CPW*, II, 84–87.

76. Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, p. 32. Of the tolerationists prior to Milton, only William Walwyn makes a similar argument: “for though the thing may be in it selfe good, yet if it doe not appeare to be so to my conscience, the practice therefore in me is sinfull, which therefore I ought not to be compelled unto.” *The Compassionate Samaritane*, p. 42.

in his or her “own mind.” The “absolute,” authoritative demonstration actually undermines the authority of any external representation or coercion of the truth, which is why Milton’s tract remains shifty. The danger of becoming a heretic in the truth formatively implicates his own constructions of meaning. Milton frequently gestures toward the danger of trusting even his own representations. In *De Doctrina Christiana* he is “far from recommending or imposing anything on [his] own authority.”<sup>77</sup> Locke too would insist that his own writing not be trusted: if the reader takes “on trust” what he reads in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, he warns, “‘tis no great Matter what [the reader’s thoughts] are, they not following the Truth, but some meaner consideration.”<sup>78</sup>

Milton’s ideas about heresy seem quite radical even in their revolutionary context. In spite of its seemingly tolerationist purposes, the *Apologetical Narration* of the Independents in 1644 rejected, as John Coffey writes, the “ruinous toleration of error and heresy.”<sup>79</sup> While overturned by later Cromwellian policies, the “Ordinance for the Punishing of Blastphemies and Heresies” in 1648 prescribes the death penalty for anti-trinitarianism and imprisonment for Arminianism.<sup>80</sup> Hobbes and Milton were fascinated by the implications of “heresy,” that is, of holding a belief, or a linguistic system signifying this belief, that others held to be false. Milton stripped “heresy” of its inherent value as an institutional indictment of a false believer. Since we are to believe only what we possess through free reason, no man should consider another a heretic who interprets scripture according to “his conscience and utmost understanding,” as he would write fifteen years later in *A Treatise of Civil Power*. “He the only heretic, who counts all heretics but himself” (*CPW*, VII, 251–52). By this point in the late 1650’s, although probably earlier, evidence shows that he had adopted both the “Pelagian Heresie,”<sup>81</sup> as Richard Baxter would call it, of Arminianism, and the Arian heresy of antitrinitarianism which Cromwell and his policy-shaping chaplain John Owen had sought to extirpate.<sup>82</sup> For Hobbes, the presence of

77. *CPW*, VI, 121.

78. Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, p. 7.

79. Coffey, “Puritanism and Liberty Revisited,” p. 963.

80. See Coffey, *Persecution and Toleration*, p. 146.

81. Richard Baxter, *Catholick Theologie* (1675), I, 1, quoted from Lamont, p. 75.

82. Maurice Kelley notes how Milton had shifted at some point in his career toward antitrinitarianism, although his convictions are not strongly expressed until the Picard draft of the *De Doctrina Christiana* (c. 1658). *CPW*, VI, 68. For Owen’s treatment of heretics under Cromwell, see Worden, “Toleration and the Cromwellian Protectorate,” p. 203.

“heresy” in a state is merely symptomatic of the human propensity for strife: “men give different names, to one and the same thing, from the difference of their own passions; As they that approve a private opinion, call it Opinion; but they that mislike it, Heresie: and yet heresie signifies no more than private opinion; but has onely a greater tincture of choler” (*Leviathan*, p. 79). As he writes later in the *Leviathan*, the tolerationist idea that every man be “Judge of Good and Evill actions” is one of the “Diseases of a Commonwealth, that proceed from the poyson of seditious doctrines” (p. 249).

In both Milton and Hobbes a possessed truth is epistemologically privileged over its external representation, although for Hobbes this has negative consequences: since the material spirit of humanity is in continual strife, the differing ways of describing truths are largely a pretext for war, and open war is the least allowable human condition. In Milton the differing ways of describing truths are signs of health rather than unrest; they signify a restless search for knowledge that must itself find ever-changing descriptions. This picture of the human condition informs Milton’s literary representations, in which he works against nominalism. Hobbes’s theory of literary representation fittingly contradicts Milton’s ideals. In his preface to Davenant’s epic experiment *Gondibert*, for example, published just before the *Leviathan*, Hobbes asserts colorfully that we must not commit the “palpable darkness” or the “ambitious obscurity” of “expressing more than is perfectly conceived.”<sup>83</sup> This nominalistic inclination brought one critic, in drawing politics and (Cartesian) epistemology together, to argue that “the fluid and ambiguous concept of meaning characteristic of the Renaissance gives way” in the mid-seventeenth century “to a fixed concept and practice of signification—that representation, however complex, becomes fundamentally monolithic.”<sup>84</sup> Yet it seems rather that this moment in seventeenth-century thought reaffirmed a dialectic in representation and in accompanying theories of the mind. For Milton, it is not speech that needs to be correctly used to convey knowledge but rather the correct mental posture in conceiving meaning. This meant that the locus of meaning in Milton’s text would lie beyond external representation.

83. Hobbes’ Preface to *Gondibert*, in Sir William D’Avenant, *Gondibert: an Heroick Poem* (1651), p. 83.

84. Timothy Reiss, “Power, Poetry, and the Resemblance of Nature,” in *Mimesis, From Mirror to Method*, p. 218.

Milton's notion of heresy raises a question of interpretation crucial to our conception of the effect of these paradigms on hermeneutics. The idea that no man should consider another a heretic who interprets scripture according to "his conscience and utmost understanding" ultimately means that no one can act as an authority in the interpretation of scripture. Hobbes would argue against this doctrine that "whatsoever a man does against his Conscience, is Sinne," saying it was "repugnant to Civill Society." "For a mans Conscience, and his Judgement is the same thing; and as the Judgement, so also the Conscience may be erroneous." For Hobbes, there is no profit gained in letting individuals struggle to obtain moral knowledge. When a man has "no other rule to follow but his own reason," he might very easily deviate from the rules of the commonwealth (*Leviathan*, p. 249). Milton and Locke affirm precisely the opposite: "if I be not persuaded in my own mind," Locke writes of any particular doctrine, "there will be no safety for me in following it." These different views have crucial implications for how Scripture should be read. When knowledge depends on the right posture of the mind in conceiving the truth, more even than its external representation, then the power a given external representation has to convey moral knowledge is placed in question.

For Milton, creating the sort of "knowledge" that is fixed in an external representation would fill the same dangerous function as authoritative prescription. The idea of keeping a free rational process in motion arises in the image of the waters of knowledge, where, if they do not "flow in perpetuall progression," they "sicken into a muddy pool of conformity and tradition." "Tradition" fills the function of authoritative prescription, since it too cannot induce knowledge. The concept of "process" suggests the importance not merely of knowledge itself, but of "knowledge in the making," which is finally brought to support the fragmentation and, to his opponents, the apparent epistemological insecurity of a multiplicity of sects: "Where there is much desire to learn, there of necessity will be much arguing, much writing, many opinions; for opinion in good men is but knowledge in the making. Under these fantastic terrors of sect and schism, we wrong the earnest and zealous thirst after knowledge and understanding which God hath stirr'd up in this City" (*CPW*, II, 554). The fragmentation of "truth" produces the possibility for more knowledge, and thus the negative casting of "sect" and "schism" represent merely chimerical terrors concocted by those who do not adequately examine the foundations of their own beliefs.

Toward the end of the tract, Milton broadly connects epistemology with politics in asserting his own work as an instance of what is possible in a land of true “Philosophic freedom” (p. 537). In the beginning he had promised that “this whole Discourse propos’d will be a certaine testimony” “to all who wish and promote their Countries liberty.” “The utmost bound of civill liberty attain’d” would be “now manifest by the very sound of this which I shall utter, that wee are already in good part arriv’d, and yet from such a steepe disadvantage of tyranny and superstition grounded into our principles” (p. 487). His closing address to the “Lords and Commons” draws a correlation between the free pursuit of knowledge and the “mild, and free, and human government” that the Parliament’s “valorous and happy counsels have purchast.” Because of this political freedom, English society is able to be “enfranchis’d, enlarg’d and lifted up our apprehensions degrees above themselves.” “Ye cannot make us now lesse capable,” he continues, “lesse knowing, lesse eagerly pursuing of the truth, unless ye first make your selves, that made us so, less the lovers, lesse the founders of true liberty” (p. 559). In his assertion that the loss of political freedom would make society not just “less knowing” but less “eagerly pursuing the truth,” Milton draws a concrete connection between the rational models he has depicted and the politics that would enable them.<sup>85</sup>

## V

THE BROADER PHILOSOPHICAL IMPLICATIONS OF *AREOPAGITICA*

It has been observed that Locke’s massive project in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* was “originally motivated by tolerationist concerns.”<sup>86</sup> This may be so, although Locke’s slow acceptance of toleration is itself premised by an inquiry into the nature of human understanding whose arguments inform his work on toleration. Similarly, Milton’s view of the nature of reason in *Areopagitica* not only had wider ramifications for his own work, but was part of a much larger field of inquiry in seventeenth-century thought. The metaphysics of moral knowledge in

85. Norbrook makes a very insightful analysis of the republican resonance in the tract, particularly with regard to this passage, in “*Areopagitica*, Censorship, and the Early Modern Public Sphere,” pp. 14–15. See also *Writing the English Republic*, pp. 118–39, and Janel Mueller, “Contextualizing Milton’s Nascent Republicanism,” in *Of Poetry and Politics: New Essays on Milton and his World*, ed. P. G. Stanwood (Binghamton, 1995), pp. 281–82.

86. Annabel Patterson, *Early Modern Liberalism* (Cambridge, Eng., 1997), p. 253.

Milton warrants a brief comparison with a truly Copernican moment in English political philosophy, Hobbes's *Elements of Law* (1640). Milton's praise of "mathematically demonstrative" arguments reflects the epistemological aspirations of the new philosophy in a way that is represented more in Hobbes than in any other writer of the period. "Geometry therefore is demonstrable," Hobbes wrote famously, "for the lines and figures from which we reason are drawn and described by ourselves; and civil philosophy is demonstrable, because we make the commonwealth ourselves."<sup>87</sup> This methodology is announced with extraordinary force in Hobbes's early treatise, which Hobbes claims is "the true, and only foundation of such science" because, in the style of mathematics, it "proceedeth evidently from humble principles" rather than the "authority of men, or of custom."<sup>88</sup> (Later in *Behemoth*, Hobbes comments disparagingly on two opposite political tracts, Milton's *Pro Populo Anglicano Defensio* [1651] and Salmasius' *Defensio Regia* [1649], for the nature of argument; they are examples of "very ill-reasoning" and mere exercises in "rhetoric."<sup>89</sup>)

Hobbes's methodology was offered more tangibly than Milton's to a deliberating Parliament at the eve of the Civil War. In an effort to prevent England from descending into war, Hobbes circulated a manuscript of *The Elements of Law*, "wherein he did set forth and demonstrate," as he writes, "that the said Power and Rights were inseparably annexed to the Sovereignty."<sup>90</sup> In the dedicatory letter to William Cavendish, Earl of Newcastle and member of the Privy Council, Hobbes writes that "it would be an incomparable benefit to commonwealth, that every man held the opinions concerning law and policy, here delivered" (p. 20). Although it is hard to imagine how they treated the rather long manuscript (in some cases almost 400 pages long) that begins with a scientific disquisition on the human organism vastly unlike Stuart political theory, it had apparently been in the hands of "many gentlemen," and "occasioned

87. Hobbes, *Six Lessons to the Professors* (1656), in *Works*, VII, 184. See also, *The Philosophical Rudiments Concerning Government and Society* (the English version of *De Cive*) in *Works*, II, iv, and *The Elements of Law*, p. 19; Locke writes in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* that "he is bold to think that morality is capable of demonstration, as well as mathematics," Nidditch, p. 516.

88. *The Elements of Law*, pp. 19, 75.

89. Martin Dzelzainis points this out in "Milton's Classical Republicanism," in *Milton and Republicanism*, p. 6; he quotes Hobbes from *Behemoth or the Long Parliament*, ed. Ferdinand Tönnies (Chicago, 1990), p. 40.

90. *The Elements of Law*, p. xii.

much Talk of the Author” (p. xii), who, for fear of his life, soon fled to France. Hobbes may have overestimated the danger to himself, yet it is true that Manwaring had been sent to the Tower for arguing for absolutism (and even, according to Aubrey, for preaching Hobbes’s “doctrine”).<sup>91</sup> However different it was, there was clearly a strong interest in Hobbes’s doctrines; *De Cive* was sold out soon after publication in 1647, and it went into ten editions in three languages by 1669.<sup>92</sup> A remarkable number of manuscripts of *The Elements of Law* are still extant (at least nine from the early 1640’s), which indicates that considerable industry accompanied this polemical effort.<sup>93</sup> The significance of this work has been somewhat undervalued because its publication date is often equated with its printing in 1650. The book follows the structure and arguments of the first two books of the *Leviathan*, though these books are shaped, like the last two books, by the specter of religious and civil war that had overtaken England in the intervening years.

It is unclear whether Milton knew Hobbes’s treatise, although it is not unlikely that some of its ideas would have circulated into Milton’s realm without direct contact. Many of its basic structures come so close to Milton’s method and arguments that the relationship of the two theories deserves closer attention. The two function as if in a cultural dialogue as to how the “mathematically demonstrative” principles of human nature should work. As in Milton’s unusual arguments in *Areopagitica*, central to Hobbes’s polity are his description of the “faculties of the mind” (p. 22) and the nature of the knowledge of good and evil. Although topically similar, both of these foundation blocks in Hobbes’s “state of man” model are different in essence from Milton’s, and as a result, so too are his politics. Hobbes begins by explaining how his methodology overcomes “dogmatical” passion—the nature of previous political

91. Aubrey’s *Brief Life of Hobbes* is excerpted in *Elements of Law*, p. 235.

92. Arnold A. Rogow, *Thomas Hobbes: Radical in the Service of Reaction* (New York, 1986), p. 135.

93. It is not unlikely that the unusually large number of extant manuscripts were produced in the urgency of the moment (and this might explain not printing), although the composition is hardly rushed. The five manuscripts that I have seen are all different, on different paper and by different hands, all in different lengths (between approximately 170 and 400 pages). Those described by Peter Beal also seem different, in *Index of English Literary Manuscripts* (London, 1987), II, pt. I, 578–80. Two are signed by Hobbes with his corrections (on May 9, 1640); the others bearing that date and his name are clearly not signed by him. Hobbes was fond of producing books in an old-fashioned or limited manner (such as the vellum edition of the *Leviathan*), but this is the only book with multiple copies remaining.

discourse—with “mathematical” “Reason,” and then sets out to draw a picture of human reason and the process by which humans obtain knowledge. For philosophical and not religious reasons, Hobbes argues that “the will is not voluntary.” Consequently, in contrast to Aristotle, “our wills follow our opinions, as our actions follow our wills. In which sense they say truly and properly that say the world is governed by opinion” (p. 72). “One conception followeth *not* another, according to our election” (p. 34, my italics); rather, one conception follows another according to a determinist system of forces that dictate our mental behavior. But not only is the process of reason and the process of gaining “truth” different from the Aristotelian account, so also is the nature of that which we call good and evil. Truth does not impose itself on the mind in relation to the mind’s free capacity to conceive, and thus “truth” does not need to shift for itself, as in Milton and Locke. What we call good is merely that which brings pleasure, and that which we call evil is pain.

Another philosopher that might be seen in a cultural dialogue with Hobbes, also influenced by Grotius and Selden, is Nathanael Culverwel, whose *Discourse on the Light of Nature*, published after his death in 1652 but probably written in the mid-1640’s, provides an early example of the new innovations in English philosophy. A Cambridge Platonist siding with the parliamentarians, but seemingly not confined by Calvinist theology of the will, Culverwel also stresses the idea of rational liberty. His book influenced Locke’s politics and epistemology,<sup>94</sup> and begins significantly as a scriptural explication that proves the freedom God gave humanity to develop an independent moral system. His version of Proverbs 20.27, the “understanding of man is the candle of the Lord,”<sup>95</sup> implies for him that God has given humanity the light of reason to determine its own moral questions. The “God of Nature has not chained nor fettered, nor enslav’d such a creature, but given it competent liberty, and

94. Culverwel was very closely analyzed by Locke in his unpublished work of the 1650’s, *Essays on the Law of Nature*, which, as von Leyden shows, forms an early draft of the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, in *Essays on the Law of Nature*, ed. W. von Leyden (Oxford, 1958), pp. 62–63.

95. Nathanael Culverwel, *An Elegant and Learned Discourse on the Light of Nature* (1652), p. 1. Culverwel’s idea of the “candle of the lord” and the light of nature are repeated in the famous manifesto of the Cambridge Platonists, *A Brief Account of the new Sect of Latitude-Men Together with Some Reflections on the New Philosophy*, by S. P. of Cambridge, ed. T. A. Birrel (Los Angeles, 1963), p. 10; see G. A. J. Rogers, “Locke and the Latitude-men: Ignorance as a Ground of Toleration,” in *Philosophy, Science and Religion in England, 1640–1700*, ed. R. Kroll and P. Zagorin (Cambridge, Eng., 1992), p. 232.

enlargement, the free diffusion, and amplification of its own essence, he looks withall, that it should willingly consent to its own happiness, and to all such means, as are necessary of the choisest end . . . which if it do, 'twill presently embrace the Law of Nature' (pp. 48–49). Culverwel's picture of an ideal for human rationality, in which God left humanity free to determine not just its own ends, but its own understanding, also reveals the outlines of a political structure, especially in its anticipation of Locke: that a creature "should willing consent to its own happiness," and that it has a "competent liberty." Following these ideas of the 1640's, Locke made such claims in his politics that "we are born Free, as we are born Rational."<sup>96</sup> Milton's Adam and Eve, who were given a "rational liberty" (XII.82), embrace this formulation of human reason. "God left free the will," says Adam, "for what obeys / Reason, is free, and reason he made right" (IX.351–52).<sup>97</sup> Milton's metaphysical explanation of the process of gaining moral knowledge in *Areopagitica* is the first sustained treatment of a subject that would distinguish the fields of ethics and epistemology in the Enlightenment, finding perhaps a full expression in Kant's *Metaphysics of Morals*.<sup>98</sup>

When Hobbes published the *Leviathan* in 1651, his philosophy had become informed in several ways by the tensions and debates of the crisis over toleration. As Johann Sommerville points out, "a major purpose of *Leviathan* was to refute Presbyterian ideas—and all theories which gave clergy power over the state,"<sup>99</sup> and therefore Hobbes had an interest similar to the tolerationists. Unlike the tolerationists, however, and like his Erastian friend Selden and others of the Tew circle, his solution was to give the state absolute power over the clergy. But the toleration crisis shaped Hobbes's political philosophy in yet more substantial ways. Evidenced in the first words of the extended title, "the Matter"—*Leviathan, or The Matter, Form and Power of a Commonwealth Ecclesiastical and Civil*—Hobbes's materialist metaphysics had come to play a much more pronounced role in the construction of his political system. His theory of the conditions of knowledge seems to engage the epistemological foundations

96. Locke, *Two Treatises on Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge, Eng., 1992), p. 308.

97. Milton, John, *Paradise Lost*. ed. Alastair Fowler (New York, 1998).

98. Kant writes that the "freedom of the will of an intelligence, its autonomy as the formal condition under which alone it can be determined is a necessary consequence." Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* (Indianapolis, 1959), p. 81. In his essay "What is Enlightenment," Kant draws a necessary connection between this condition of human reason and civil freedom. See p. 92.

99. Johann Sommerville, *Thomas Hobbes: Political Ideas in Historical Context*, p. 23.

of his opponents. For Hobbes, Reason is not “but choosing,” as in Milton; rather, “Reason . . . is *nothing* but Reconing” (*Leviathan*, p. 32, my italics), by which Hobbes means a mechanistic calculation performed in the service of desire and preservation. What makes this profoundly different from the Miltonic paradigm is that Hobbes does not believe that human societies can be enlightened by the toleration of different beliefs. His much more pessimistic view of the results of liberty lies in the very different metaphysics that shape his conception of the mind. Hobbes’s materialism was first presented to European audiences in an eloquent rebuttal of Descartes’ second meditation, on the “nature of the human mind.” In this response, included in the first edition of the *Metaphysical Meditations* (1641), Hobbes argues that Descartes should not have gone further with “I think, therefore I am,” to define this thinking being as “a mind, a Soul, an Understanding, [or] Reason.”<sup>100</sup> Instead Descartes’ meditation should indicate “that a thinking thing is material” (p. 120), not (as Descartes thought) immaterial. Descartes’ separation of the observing self and the material objects observed also allowed for metaphysical freedom.<sup>101</sup> For Hobbes, thought is a mechanical function of the body, and since there is no free will, “reason” is merely the weighing of competing possibilities in order to maximize pleasure and minimize pain. Since this desire of pleasure over pain leads us toward the will to dominate and exploit others toward our better end, we are left with the condition of war of “every man, against every man” (*Leviathan*, p. 96), in which society must submit itself to a contracted authority, and thus its members must “conferre all their power and strength upon one Man . . . that may reduce all their Wills, by plurality of voices, unto one Will . . . and therein to submit their Wills, every one to his Will, and their Judgements, to his Judgement” (p. 131). Hobbes has no motivation to structure a political system to promote free reason, since rational liberty does not exist.

Locke’s politics and epistemology respond to Hobbes, but they are also fabricated largely out of philosophical developments—like those reflected in Culverwel and Milton—that stem from the early part of the revolution. Locke owned a copy of *Areopagitica* (and Milton’s complete

100. Descartes, *Six Metaphysical Meditations, wherein it is proved that there is a God. And that Man’s Mind is really distinct from his body* (1680), p. 117.

101. For more on the relationship between these two figures, as well as valuable evidence concerning the chronology of Hobbes’s work, see Richard Tuck, “Hobbes and Descartes,” in *Perspectives on Thomas Hobbes*, ed. G. A. J. Rogers and Alan Ryan (Oxford, 1988), pp. 11–42.

prose),<sup>102</sup> from which Locke may have borrowed ideas or images such as Milton's personified, female Truth. "Truth is strong [and] needs no policies" seems echoed, for example, in Locke's statement that "truth certainly would do well enough, if she were once left to shift for herself."<sup>103</sup> Yet as Tuck shows, well before Locke supported toleration, he was preoccupied by problems in skepticism that would later inform his arguments. In 1659, for example, before accepting the principles of toleration, Locke wrote about how truth must "shift for herself" in an entirely epistemological context: "When did ever any truth settle it self in any ones minde by the strength and authority of its owne evidence? Truths gain admittance to our thoughts as the philosopher did to the Tyrant by their hansome dresse and pleasing aspect. . . . Men live upon trust and their knowledg is noething but opinion moulded up between custome and Interest, the two great Luminaries of the world, the only lights they walke by."<sup>104</sup> Locke's *Letter Concerning Toleration* often focuses on the problem that a state-legislated religion violates the nature of understanding. "The care of souls cannot belong to the civil magistrate, because his power consists only in outward force: but true and saving religion consists in the inward persuasion of the mind, without which nothing can be acceptable to God. And such is the nature of the understanding, that it cannot be compelled to the belief of anything by outward force."<sup>105</sup> When people have "no other rule to follow but the religion of the court," he argues, they are "put under a necessity to quit the light of their own reason, to oppose the dictates of their own consciences" (p. 19). Liberty is necessary both to please God but also to allow for the individual to comprehend the truth. "To impose such things, therefore, upon any people, contrary to their own judgement, is, in effect, to command them to offend God; which, considering that the end of all religion is to please him, and that liberty is essentially necessary to that end, appears absurd beyond expression" (p. 33).

102. Locke also recommended it to Shaftesbury. See Nicholas von Maltzahn, "The Whig Milton, 1667–1700," in *Milton and Republicanism*, ed. D. Armitage, A. Hymy and Q. Skinner (Cambridge, Eng., 1995), p. 237, n. 21, and Patterson, *Early Modern Liberalism*, pp. 241–44.

103. John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, ed. John Horton and Susan Mendus (London, 1991), p. 42.

104. Locke, *Correspondence*, ed. E. S. De Beer (Oxford, 1976), p. 1. Quoted from Richard Tuck, p. 33.

105. Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (New York, 1991), p. 18.

One of the canonical works of Enlightenment liberalism, Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologicopoliticus* (1670), bases its political system less on self-preservation than on the preservation of intellectual freedom.<sup>106</sup> It is worth viewing the larger dialogue created by the tolerationists and Hobbes. Liberalism might be seen as a response to Hobbes, and Spinoza responds largely to Hobbes's conception of the mind. Like Milton, Spinoza endorses Aristotle's ideals, in which (under optimal conditions) free reason controls the passions toward temperance, moral, virtue, and true happiness. Like the "pursuit of happiness" of Locke and Culverwel, Spinoza felt that "a man's true happiness consists only in wisdom, and the knowledge of the truth, not at all in the fact that he is wiser than others, or that others lack such knowledge."<sup>107</sup> For Hobbes, the "utmost end, in which the ancient philosophers have placed felicity, . . . there is no such thing in this world, nor way to it, more than to Utopia: for while we live, we have desires, and desire presupposeth a farther end" (*Elements*, p. 44). Since Hobbes subordinates reason to the passions, and since the free arbitration of individual reason is useless, individuals must resign control of their passions and their rights. In Spinoza's philosophy, by contrast, reason controls the passions.

In keeping with this essential freedom, Spinoza articulated as an object of government "not to change men from rational beings into beasts or puppets"—a "meer artificial Adam"—"but to enable them to develop their minds and bodies in security, and to employ their reason unshackled." And thus, in terms that have recently been the battle cry of the powerful rather than the voice of the disenfranchised, "the true aim of government is liberty" (p. 259). Rational freedom makes individual citizens more capable of knowing right and wrong, of living in harmony, and even of being more obedient subjects.<sup>108</sup> Sedition and religious wars occur when states attempt to control belief: "such seditions only spring up, when law enters the domain of speculative thought, and opinions are put on trial and condemned on the same footing as crimes" (p. 5). A necessary aspect of this freedom is the ability to interpret religion on

106. Steven Smith suggests that Spinoza's *Tractatus* is the first work in western political theory that defends the proposition that the exercise of free speech is the goal of social policy (Smith, p. 160). *Areopagitica* at times seems to make a similar claim.

107. Spinoza, *The Chief Works of Benedict De Spinoza: A Theologico-political Treatise and A Political Treatise*, tr. R. H. M. Elwes (New York, 1951), p. 43.

108. "It is imperative that freedom of judgment should be granted, so that men may live together in harmony, however diverse, or even openly contradictory their opinions may be," p. 263.

one's own: "Therefore, as the supreme right of free thinking, even on religion, is in every man's power, and as it is inconceivable that such power could be alienated, it is also in every man's power to wield the supreme right and authority of free judgement in this behalf, and to explain and interpret religion for himself" (p. 118).

The supreme right to interpret religion for oneself occupied a culture never more fervently than during the Civil War and Commonwealth period. It became a central cause of policy in the crisis of 1659, when the republicans had overthrown the Protectorate and looked back nostalgically on the original aims of the revolution. The ideals and experiments in toleration from 1644 had somewhat failed, leaving many republicans feeling that the only solution was to abolish any connection between church and state and leave the establishment of churches in the hands of the people. Optimistically unwary of the impending restoration of Charles II, the largely Puritan radicals sought to build a new English republic in which freedom of belief was the central issue. One of the most astonishing indications of their idealism was the extent to which they debated the issue of whether the ministry should be supported by the people rather than by the state, simply on the grounds of the potential truthfulness of what might be preached. Even when it would clearly disadvantage their own cause, since the people would in most cases choose an Anglican ministry, they argued that the choice of local ministers must devolve on the people because a state-supported ministry would preach only what the state wanted. The guiding principle behind this futile idealism was that power and money compromised the people's ability to know what they professed, as it compromised the ability to comprehend the truth. Although only a relatively small group of writers were able to demonstrate the reasons behind this idealism, these revolutionaries argued for individual freedom on the basis of the conditions of knowledge that it afforded. As Milton wrote in 1659, "Two things there be which have bin ever found working much mischief to . . . the advancement of truth; force on the one side restraining, and hire on the other side corrupting the teachers thereof" (*CPW*, VII, 245). The freedom of thought, and freedom to interpret scripture on one's own, remained central: "no man, no synod, no session of men, though called the church, can judge definitively the sense of scripture to another man's conscience," and therefore, "he who holds in religion that beleef or those opinions which to his conscience and utmost understanding appear with most evidence or probability in the scripture, though to others he seem

erroneous, can no more be justly censur'd for a heretic than his censurers" (pp. 250–51). The connection between politics and hermeneutics—the right to interpret texts freely and individually, or in Hobbes's case, the absence of such a right—vitaly shaped the way in which these variant systems viewed the authority of the text. The philosophical paradigms Milton created in *Areopagitica* thus remained a deep cultural as well as personal concern as he turned from political prose to epic verse, although it is likely that Milton had already begun composing *Paradise Lost* when he came out of retirement in 1659.

## VI

## PHILOSOPHY AND AESTHETICS

*Areopagitica*'s narrative indeterminacies have been insightfully explored by many readers. The heightened use of contrary meanings in this text derives from Milton's experimentation in the very narrative of choice that he endorses. Fish's work on Milton's indeterminacy makes this suggestion: "If the *Areopagitica* is to be faithful to the lesson it teaches, it cannot teach that lesson directly; rather it must offer itself as the occasion for the trial and exercise that are necessary to the constituting of human virtue; it must become an instrument in what Milton will later call 'knowledge in the making.'"<sup>109</sup> *Areopagitica* does constitute an instrument in its own shifting sense of meaning, and by so doing endorses such shiftiness as part of the process of disclosure. The narrative is in itself an example of knowledge in the making, where the search for knowledge requires ever-changing representations, and forbids a closed, nominalistic relation between linguistic systems and the truth they represent. Milton's distrust of external literary forms is related to the external forms that he rails against: "We doe not see that while we still affect by all means a rigid externall formality, we may soon fall again into a grosse conforming stupidity" (*CPW*, II, 564). Milton's conception of the role of narrative makes external representations secondary to truth itself, and thus while representations may seem uncertain and perhaps relativistic, truth itself is not. In Milton's conception, external forms remain relatively peripheral because of the more internal nature of truth. The

109. Stanley Fish, "Driving from the Letter: Truth and Indeterminacy in *Areopagitica*," p. 242. Blair Hoxby argues similarly that "Milton's text is persuasive because it seems to enact the model of discourse it propounds," in "The Trade of Truth Advanced," *Milton Studies*, 36 (1998), 188.

result is a narrative rather than a nominalistic conception of truth, one in which truth exists not in an easily reducible linguistic entity or what is “perfectly conceived,” as in Hobbes, but in the correct interaction between the reader and an often inconstant course of thought. The distrust of external forms is connected to the models of moral and political philosophy that held cognitive freedom as necessary to the construction of truth.

That a particular conception of epistemology might influence a writer’s presentation of the truth is broached in Milton’s reflection on the contours of his own discourse, which he uses to demonstrate the “ingenuity of truth.” His dictum that “Truth is strong [and] needs no polities” is demonstrated even in the course of inquiry; truth has gotten “a free and willing hand,” or in Locke’s words has been “left to shift for herself.” Milton’s brazen claim that *Areopagitica* is the product of the liberated search for knowledge that it advocates bears with it the distinct sense that he has discovered something new, and that this discovery is integral to the “very sound” of that which is uttered. Liberated even from the strictures of method and discourse, but also from the strictures of received custom and tradition, the truth has been allowed to shift on its own. The restless search for knowledge that must find ever-changing descriptions is instantiated by the narrative itself. At the same time Milton’s conception of reason and of the internal construction of truth places in question the role of external representation. His pervasive distrust of external authority in the construction of truth extends even to external representations, and implicates his sense of authority as an author, as suggested in his de-authorizing moves in *De Doctrina Christiana* (CPW, VI, 121). But the de-authorizing of representations also puts pressure on the reader, whose own quest for authority nonetheless brings him or her to a state of mild, although seemingly perpetual, uncertainty. This affirmation of uncertainty would shape the nature and certainty of representation. The principle of uncertainty that is so much a rhetorical feature in Milton’s work—*Paradise Lost* being the most famous example—is here rooted in a politically inflected cultural debate about toleration.

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