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RELIGION AND THE SOUL

How my soul, which I look upon to be an immortal Being in me, that is the Principle of thinking, should extinguish with my Body I cannot in any reasonable way of thinking conceive.

THOMAS SYDENHAM

Thy body, when the soule is gone, will be a horreur to all that behold it, a most loothsome and abhorred spectacle.

ROBERT BOLTON

Western thinking about the human condition long hinged on the union of two contrasting elements, body and soul. At least from the time of Plato (c.428–c.348 BC), models of their relationship – complementary but conflictual – promoted a dualism which, once given the blessing of Christianity, proved durable, persuasive and dominant. A grasp of the emergence of those ideas is essential for understanding later developments.

The earliest Greek-speaking philosophers, before 500 BC, hoped to explain the world in terms of a *single* causal entity – water, air and so on. Their successors and rivals conceptualized it in terms of *multiple* principles. But with Pythagoras (sixth century BC) and his followers, and in particular with Plato in fourth-century Athens, these options ('monism', 'pluralism') were challenged by a *dualism*, applied to the cosmos and man alike, which was to prove astonishingly influential – indeed, arguably it still rules, or skews, Western outlooks. The notion that man is a compound of two distinct entities, body and

soul, carried with it massive implications, philosophical, moral, scientific and theological. Philosophically, the soul–body pairing presupposed two independent sorts of reality. In natural philosophy, it came to mean the split between an animating principle (First Mover) and a thing moved (matter), while within Christian theology, it would become the hierarchy of Creator and created, Holy Spirit and terrestrial clay.

If the earliest Greek thinkers were primarily interested in 'science' – how the world came to be and how it worked – it was Pythagoras who turned attention to a 'moral' universe, governed by a principle of Truth. For the Pythagoreans, humans were composed of a good (divine) soul and a mutinous body requiring to be mastered. This good–bad split pervaded other domains: in the cosmos, for instance, form, order and light were good; chaos, disorder and darkness, evil. Such macrocosmic–microcosmic correspondences exerted a tenacious hold over later philosophers. The Neoplatonist Plotinus, for instance, described a continuum which extended down from Divine Intellect to brute matter, via angels, man, lower animals, the vegetable kingdom and inanimate matter. As we shall see later, this model of the superiority of the soul in man and the universe alike was still being proclaimed by the Cambridge Platonists as late as the mid-seventeenth century.

The Greeks of the age of Homer (eighth century BC) had thought of *psyche* (breath, or soul; later, *anima* in Latin) not as a moral agent but simply as the breath necessary for life. Filled with *psyche*, the Homeric warrior was all action, defined by deeds more than deliberations, worlds apart from the sophisticated orators and contemplative intellectuals recorded in Plato's dialogues a few hundred years later.

Indeed, the *Iliad* even lacks an abstraction which we could translate as 'person' or 'oneself'. Rather, Homer portrays life and conduct as driven by external, supernatural forces, and his protagonists are puppet-like, often in the grip of terrible powers beyond their control – gods, demons and Furies – which decree their fates and punish, avenge and destroy. The inner life, with its agonizing dilemmas of will, conscience and choice, has not yet become decisive.

A new mental landscape had emerged, however, by Athens's golden age (fifth and fourth centuries BC). The thinking on the psyche that then developed set the mould for mainstream Western reasoning about the mind, as was in effect acknowledged by Freud when he named infantile psycho-sexual conflicts the 'Oedipus Complex', paying tribute to the play by Sophocles. What makes Greek drama so powerful is its combination of elements both of traditional and of newer casts of mind.

The plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides dramatize titanic conflicts – the hero or heroine as a plaything of the gods or crushed under destiny, the rival demands of love and honour, of duty and desire, of individual, kin and state. The ineluctable outcome of such conflict is madness and death. Unlike Homer's heroes, the tragedians' protagonists are the *conscious* subjects of reflection, responsibility and guilt, racked by inner conflict, and the agonies of minds divided against themselves are echoed in the contrapuntal utterances of the Chorus. The destructive powers in the tragedies are no longer solely those of external fate, imperious gods and malevolent furies. For ruin is also self-inflicted – their heroes are consumed by *hubris*, by ambition or pride, followed by shame, grief and guilt; they tear themselves apart and heap retribution upon themselves (*nemesis*). The psychic civil war staged by Greek tragedy was then rationalized in the philosophy of Socrates and Plato.

Systematically reasoning about nature, society and mind, the philosophers of Periclean Athens cast the rational individual – that is to say, the well-born and educated male citizen, like themselves – as their ethical and political standard. In thus championing reason, they did not deny the irrational. On the contrary, the credit they granted to the mind affirms the dangerous power they saw in the passions and in the blind destructive force of fate: only the calm pursuit of reason could save humans from catastrophe.

Plato, in particular, condemned appetite as the arch-enemy of freedom and dignity; and the Platonic polarization of the rational and the irrational, enshrining as it did the superiority of mind over matter, became definitive of such later and complementary philo-

sophies as Stoicism, with its celebration of transcendent Order and universal Mind. Through self-knowledge – 'know thyself' – reason could fathom human nature and thereby master the appetites that enslaved man. Terrified by the primordial forces assailing the mind, Platonism, Stoicism and kindred philosophies exposed unreason as a danger and disgrace which mind or soul must combat.

In particular, the soul cast as an immortal intellectual and moral principle was central to Socrates, who memorably deemed the unexamined life not worth living. While indebted to Pythagoras, he did not precisely echo his simple body-soul dualism. For experience showed that wrong was not simply a beast in the body but rather the pursuit of a supposed but mistaken good, due not to evil but to *ignorance*.

In their struggles to represent the human condition and the good life, Socrates and his pupil Plato tried out various formulations. In Plato's *Phaedo*, for instance, the soul was presented as an elementary entity; but it was not unitary in the *Republic*, the *Phaedrus* or the *Timaeus*. This last work, widely endorsed in medieval and Renaissance psychologies, posited a threefold partition of the soul, each part being mapped onto a specific bodily zone: the rational element in the head, the spirit in the breast and the appetites in the belly. Dividing the rational faculty from the rest, the neck was an isthmus insulating the intellect from contamination.

The same three faculties reappear in a different guise in the *Phaedrus*, in the myth (also popular later) of the charioteer and his pair of horses. This gives a different account of the soul's fate as yoked to the body. The charioteer stands for the rational faculty of the soul, a white horse its spirited element or will (reason's natural ally), and a dark horse its appetites. When the dark horse stumbles, it brings down with it the white horse and the charioteer. In this Platonic allegory of the 'fall', it is thus a principle *within* the soul itself which is responsible for its fate, harnessed as it is to the body.

Socrates and Plato were clearly torn between rival conceptualizations of the driving forces (or ruling classes) within. In the *Timaeus* – and the *Phaedrus*, for example, the appetites are envisaged as integral

to the soul, and hence it is from the soul that desires emerge. In the *Phaedo*, by contrast, appetites are grossly corporeal and at odds with the soul. When Plato's complex speculations were selectively Christianized, however, what was absorbed was a simplified dualism which pitted fallible flesh against a god-like soul.

Whereas Plato devoted himself to elucidating moral truth, his pupil Aristotle principally sought to explain man and the universe in a naturalistic or scientific way. Furthermore, while Plato maintained that the senses could never deliver certain knowledge of anything – intellect alone could grasp truth – Aristotle looked to them as man's chief source of knowledge, being highly critical of Plato's fanciful postulation of independent, transcendental Forms. Form could not exist apart from matter, pronounced Aristotle, the consummate biological observer – though matter for its part, without form, was simply 'potential'; it was form which provided the immutable principle.

This 'form and content' doctrine underpinned Aristotle's view of soul and body. He proposed a far snugger alliance of the two than Plato: where his mentor saw strife, he emphasized the necessity for their union. The body, for Aristotle, was not the enemy of the soul. Rather, the soul needed to be wedded to the flesh, since only through the body could it function. The two were thus not estranged and competing sovereign entities, but were related as means to ends, potentiality to actualization.

This intimate rapport between body and soul challenged Plato's clear-cut value-judgement distinctions. The Aristotelian soul was neither immured within the body nor the casualty of its cravings, but originated with and within the body, being sexually transmitted through the semen. Moreover, the tripartite soul of the *Timaeus* (reason, spirit, appetite) was simplified to become twofold in Aristotle, rational and irrational – the latter itself being further subdivided into the vegetative and sensitive faculties. These 'lower' souls were also present in plants and animals: nutrition, growth and sense were all attributed to the actions of the respective vegetative and sensitive souls. The Aristotelian viewpoint, which thus stressed continuities rather than polarities between plants and animals on the one hand

and humans on the other, proved lastingly influential in science and medicine, as we shall see in the next chapter.

Beyond this subrational soul lay *nous*, the intellect or rational soul.* The lower part of *nous*, the 'passive intellect', was tied to the body and perished with it – it was, so to speak, the materialization of thought. The active *nous* was, however, divine, immortal, detached from the body and thought of less as a substance than as an activity. This rather elastic account of reason or *nous* eased the assimilation of Aristotelian metaphysics into Christian theology.

Stoicism, too, had a considerable input into Christian formulas. St Paul drew for his notion of the spiritual soul upon the Stoic concept of soul (*pneuma*), viewed by the Apostle as the creative in-breathing of God ('inspiration' in the literal sense). And the Stoic belief that man's end was to live in conformity with the Ruling Principle or Universal Reason, which involved not merely quelling but actually eradicating desires in a positive state of 'apathy' (literally: being without feeling), commended itself to Christian asceticism.

Christianity was an outgrowth from Judaism, and it took the inspiration for its new dispensation for man's salvation from the Old Testament master-narrative which began with Creation as related in Genesis and would end in the New Jerusalem. Christ's prophetic message, as recorded in the Gospels (written up long after His

* The fascinating but complex philological issues raised by soul-language cannot here be discussed. But it should be remembered that the soul underpins a whole series of symbols. The chief of these symbols is *breath*, and all its derivatives. The etymology of the Latin word *animus* is in itself related to 'breath' and 'air' as principles of life. *Animus* is the intellectual principle and the seat of desire and the passions, and corresponds to the Greek *anemos* and the Sanskrit *aniti*, meaning 'breath'. Its properties are intellectual and emotional and its range male, while the *anima* is the principle of inhaling and exhaling air and its range is female. Without claiming to teach a complete and coherent system of anthropology, St Paul distinguishes within the individual spirit (*pneuma*), soul (*psyche*) and body (*soma*). If Thessalonians 5: 23 is compared with 1 Corinthians 15: 44, it will be seen that it is the soul-*psyche* which vitalizes the human body while the spirit-*pneuma* is that part of the individual which is exposed to a higher level of life and to the direct influence of the Holy Spirit. It is the latter which is to benefit from salvation and from immortality and the latter which grace makes holy. However, its influence should be radiated by the *psyche* throughout the body and consequently throughout the individual as a whole, that is, the body which lives and moves in this world and will be resurrected in the life to come.

death), incorporated and enlarged upon Ezekiel, Isaiah and the other prophets; the New Testament is plotted by their apocalyptic expectations, which were further elaborated and reinterpreted down the ages by the Church.

Incorporating earlier biblical texts (especially Genesis, Exodus, the books of the prophets and the apocalyptic visions of Daniel), the book of Revelation, which concludes the New Testament, unveils a succession of events destined to terminate the present wicked world-order, which, through Christ's Second Coming, is to be replaced by the regeneration of mankind. In this sacred chronology, Revelation taught a model of time foreign to the classical world. Unlike Graeco-Roman cyclicalism (Plato's 'great year', the theory of eternal recurrence), the Bible grants earthly history a single storyline, with an opening ('In the beginning': the *fiat* of Creation), a catastrophe (the Fall), a crisis (the Incarnation and Resurrection of Christ), and an imminent end (the Second Coming of Christ as King, followed by 'a new heaven and a new earth'), which will bring the 'tragedy' of man to a happy ending (hence Dante's 'divine *comedy*'). This historical drama, furthermore, had a heavenly Author: 'I am the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last.'

Mankind is but a pawn in the blood-curdling chiliastic narrative whose protagonists are the titanic opposing forces of good and evil, light and darkness. Satan, the Beast and the Great Whore – collectively, 'Antichrist' – are ranged against God, Christ and the company of saints. History's consummation will occur only after the annihilation of the forces of evil in this 'war in heaven'.

Early Christians expected 'apocalypse now' to bring about the 'kingdom of God'. This failed to happen. But the Apocalypse, as Milton observed, rises 'to a Prophetick pitch in types, and Allegories', and so it proved easy to adjust apocalyptic symbols to changed circumstances. Over time, the evil empire of the Beast was variously re-identified (and still is) with the Jews, Islam, the Vatican, Communism and so forth. Moreover, a tendency to internalize eschatology via a spiritual reading had begun as early as St Paul's 'behold, the kingdom of God is within you'. Rejecting literal readings of the

millennial promise, St Augustine also directed apocalyptic prophecy to the individual soul. His *Confessions* were to form the template for later spiritual autobiographies and allegories like Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, which depicted the believer wending his spiritual way through the temptations of Satan towards the 'new Jerusalem . . . prepared as a bride adorned for her husband'.

Christianity thus adopted (and universalized) Judaism's providential vision of the destiny of Zion's children unfolding in linear ('real') time. But the soul-body dualism which became equally fundamental to Christian theology was derived not from the Hebrew heritage but from admixtures of Levantine theosophy and Greek philosophy. The Old Testament viewed man primarily as a divinely animated body, not, as in Plato, an immaterial soul, temporarily enfleshed. Admittedly, in Jewish circles around the time of Christ the Pharisees were promoting doctrines of the immortal soul, but this innovation was opposed by powerful Sadducees who upheld the traditional doctrine that the soul perishes with the body.

The Hellenization of Christianity, with its metaphysics of the separate soul, began, perhaps ironically, with Philo the Jew, a first-century Alexandrian deeply sympathetic to Greek thinking. Drawing on the Stoic idea of *pneuma* as the divine substance or soul breathed into man, Philo proposed a radical body-soul dualism that was foreign to Old Testament faith. He also drew on Plato's *Phaedrus* myth of the 'fall' of the soul; dwelling in the body as in a tomb, the soul was condemned to be a 'pilgrim and sojourner' while on earth. In the thinking of the second- and third-century Church Fathers, this model of the polarization of soul and body crystallized, as did the image of the soul trapped in the world – experience of savage persecution evidently made the Neoplatonic body-soul conflict particularly pertinent to early Christians.

For Christians, however, unlike Platonists, certain doctrines integral and singular to Christianity, specifically the Incarnation and Resurrection, precluded wholly negative views of the flesh. Within the Christian eschatology, the immortal life of the soul required the reanimation of the body: had not Christ taught (and St Paul

expounded) how His Resurrection after the Crucifixion was the guarantee of a general resurrection? Without that, would not the Saviour have died in vain?

In any case, the need to combat Gnostics, Manichees and members of other ascetic sects and heresies, who execrated the flesh as the Devil's work (tainted by profane earthly powers), also weighed heavily with the Fathers. Countering Gnosticism, Irenaeus (late second century) insisted that it was soul and body melded together which made up a complete person – man was the union of soul, which had received the divine spirit, with flesh, made in God's image. Irenaeus' contemporary, the brow-beating, heretic-hunting Tertullian, demanded respect for God-created flesh.

But other winds were blowing. The third-century theologian Origen gave pride of place to the immateriality of the soul and, in allegorical readings of Scripture, deemed its entry into the material world a 'descent'. The soul of man was pre-existent, he stressed in Neoplatonic manner, and so its embodiment must be punishment for some prior sin. Whereas Tertullian had cast the soul (in a rather Jewish manner) as part and parcel with the flesh, Origen constantly avowed its self-sufficient immateriality. His reputed self-castration squares with such flesh-despising views.

Augustine (354–430) gave Christian thinking yet another twist – one which proved lastingly influential. In his youth he was a Manichee who held, like the Gnostics, that matter was evil and a threat to the soul. Repudiating such views upon becoming a Christian – and putting aside his concubine – he later taught that man's corruptibility and mortality derived not from the flesh *per se* but from the sin of Adam. Without Original Sin, man as a unity – body and soul – would have been immortal: only after the Fall did flesh and spirit descend to civil war. Through the Resurrection, however, the glorified but still physical body, reunited to the soul, would return man to his pristine perfection. Although the corrupt concupiscence of the body in this life – upon which Augustine never failed to dwell – was symptomatic of man's lapsed condition (the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak), the flesh was not in itself base or even (despite the

Christian Platonists) the cause of the Fall, for the first sin came from the soul. When Adam ate of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, it was first and foremost a disobedience of the will.*

While softening the detestation of the flesh characteristic of his Manichee phase (and of Christian Platonists), Augustine thus presented body and soul as the two components of a torn and divided self. The immateriality of the soul was upheld without naïvely elevating it above the body in a way which would have betrayed the specificity of the Christian gospel. Over a thousand years later, in a rather similar manner, that great Augustinian Martin Luther was likewise to insist, against the Platonizers, that the body in itself was not a punishment for Original Sin. Man would have had a bodily presence, flesh and bones, had he never fallen. In a tradition from Augustine to Luther, Christian doctrine thus tried to steer a middle way between the Jewish lack of a separate soul and the Neoplatonic contempt for the flesh.

Throughout medieval and, in due course, Reformation and Counter-Reformation thinking, the human animal continued to be defined as *homo duplex*, the union, incurably discordant, of earthly body and immortal soul – a notion enshrined in the Anglican Prayer Book's reference to 'ourselves, our souls and bodies'. Rival readings of this alliance vied for supremacy. The Aristotelian scholasticism pioneered by Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century (and long the staple fare of the universities) portrayed the flesh as the *instrument* of the soul; Christian Platonists by contrast viewed it as the soul's *dungeon*. For some Christian teachers, the body, identified by St Paul with flesh embattled against the spirit (Galatians 5: 17: 'For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are

* Such issues (especially the implication of sex in sin) inevitably posed the question of the propagation and transmission of the soul: when and how did man get his soul? Augustine's insistence on its spiritual nature made it hard for him to uphold, along with Tertullian, the doctrine of physical traducianism. Nevertheless, he did link Original Sin with procreation, which was suggestive of the idea that the infant's soul came in some way from the parents' copulation. His solution to this ever-delicate problem was what he might call spiritual traducianism: the soul of the child came from the soul of the parent. Thus, the transmission of Original Sin was explained, and the spirituality of the soul safeguarded.

contrary the one to the other'), was the inexorable enemy. On the other hand, the divinely created human frame could be depicted as 'the temple of the Holy Ghost' (St Paul again: 1 Corinthians 6: 19), a view sanctified by the Incarnation.

The Church's teachings were further complicated, moreover, because from the earliest Fathers body and soul were not thought of merely as literal objects but metaphorical – in other words, flesh and spirit, denoting degenerate and pure impulses respectively. St Paul's Epistle to the Galatians, just quoted, served as a standard source for this rhetoric of two warring protagonists at large, with its identification of the 'works of the flesh' as 'adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like'. The terms of this rhetorical war provided pulpit orators with limitless ammunition. In his *Of the Combat of the Flesh and Spirit* (1593), the Cambridge Puritan William Perkins explains that 'flesh' and 'spirit' signify contrary impulses within man, the spirit being a 'created quality of holiness' and flesh 'the natural corruption or inclination of the mind, will, and affections'. Both – here Perkins is clearly speaking with a Platonic tongue – are qualities within the soul.

As heathen Europe underwent conversion from the Dark Ages, all such high-theological teachings became intertwined in myriad ways with popular and pagan lore about the supernatural, ghosts and the afterlife. The emergent mission of the Church and the needs of the faithful led to the formulation of much that was barely biblical: the Trinity (with its evident echoes of Plato's tripartite soul), the Eucharist, the Devil (and the Faustian idea of selling one's soul to Satan) and, from the thirteenth century, the doctrines of purgatory and limbo. Superstitions and saints' lives embroidered awesome tales of miraculous bodies and wonder-working souls.

All such teachings were popularized, through the liturgy and sermons, through offices of piety and the frescoes which emblazoned the interiors of churches. A tradition of earthy and sometimes droll body-soul dialogues emerged, dramatizing typically bitter recri-

nations between a deceased person's body and soul, contesting responsibility for his failings. The Soul blamed sin on the flesh, which it charged with every imaginable carnal enormity. Not so, rejoined the Body: it could not be censured for sin, because it was only passive and subordinate matter acting under orders: evil, as Augustine had argued, began in the mind or will. In any case, should the Soul not have been vigilant in the first place?

Parallel literary genres, like the Dance of Death that was popular after the Black Death, juxtaposed body and soul; and the clichés of the 'body and soul' dialogues – were they not partners in crime? – formed the daily bread of sermons, homilies and devotional tracts. Certain motifs constantly recur in texts and images: *contemptus mundi*, the deathbed with its ever-present devils or the soul escaping from the mouth or nostrils, and gothic visions of souls burning in hell.

Characteristic of these pious and didactic dialogues was the Puritan William Prynne's 'The Soules Complaint against the Bodies Encroachments on Her' (a poem written during his imprisonment in the 1630s and published in 1642), a supplication made by the Soul in which the Body remains duly silent. In its absence, asserts the Soul, the flesh can achieve nothing:

What is the body, but a loathsome Masse
Of dust and ashes, brittle as a glasse.

Along similar lines is an image in Francis Quarles's *Emblems* (1635). Armed with a lengthy spyglass, Spirit can see much farther than Flesh. While the latter heeds objects close at hand which seduce the senses, Spirit describes a vision of the Last Judgement and urges Flesh to renounce its 'present toyes' for 'future joyes'.

Written in the 1650s, Andrew Marvell's 'Dialogue between the Soul and the Body' marks a watershed by departing significantly from traditional religious didacticism. In content it is far removed from the medieval templates, for all references to sin have disappeared, and its tone is philosophical rather than pious. Marvell dramatizes the ceaseless warfare being waged within Everyman. In conventional Christian-Platonic terms, Soul implores:

O who shall from this Dungeon, raise
A Soul enslav'd so many wayes?
With bolts of Bones, that fetter'd stands
In feet; and manacled in hands.

But the twist is that Soul does not have all the best lines. Body protests at how Soul visits upon the flesh all manner of spiritual ailments which prove terrible torments:

But Physick yet could never reach
The Maladies Thou me dost teach;
Whom first the Cramp of Hope does Tear:
And then the Palsie Shakes of Fear.
The Pestilence of Love does heat:
Or Hatred's hidden Ulcer eat.

Body is indignant at having to take the rap: if the flesh is indeed a tub of troubles, who inflicted them in the first place?

What but a Soul could have the wit
To build me up for Sin so fit?

Turning the tables on conventional tropes, and surely echoing the struggles of people against monarch in a Civil War in which Marvell's own sympathies were divided, it is Body no less than Soul which craves release:

O who shall me deliver whole,
From bonds of this Tyrannic Soul?
Which, stretcht upright, impales me so,
That mine own Precipice I go
A Body that could never rest,
Since this ill Spirit it possest.

After several sharp rallies, the contest proves an honourable if bad-tempered draw, or stalemate. Marvell, an MP as well as a poet, was a political trimmer – and his irenic moral is the interdependence, if insurmountable quarrelsomeness, of both elements in man's divided nature, rather as in a stormy marriage. His poem marks a new era

which reworked, as much as it reiterated, the old Christian truths.

As a devotional genre, the body-soul *querela* had petered out by the eighteenth century. But, poetically at least, the 'body and soul' pairing remained as pervasive as ever, and its archetypes constituted a powerful way of representing gendered and sexual relations. Love poets had, of course, long distinguished antithetical kinds of love – the one earthbound, the other heavenly, *eros* and *agape*, or *cupiditas* and *caritas*. Other possibilities, too, were explored – indeed, done to death. Of all the metaphorical analogues for the soul-body duo, the most popular and explosive was that of husband and wife. Typically, the body was identified with sensual Eve and the soul, or reason, with Adam. However deployed, body-soul thinking told of the union of opposites, habitually discordant but mutually indispensable.

The finest expressions of the Christian vision in the English-speaking world were *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*. These works formed the consummation of a tradition while also marking its dissolution.

Milton's God is omnipotent, His moral law inexorable and eternal. But the Lord makes man free (as Milton elsewhere wrote, 'For what obeys reason is free/And reason He made right'), since without freedom of choice there can be no moral order. Lucifer has the liberty to break God's decrees, though the price is expulsion from Heaven. It was God's will to create an earthly Paradise; all He required was that man should live in it according to His law. In Book V, Adam is warned:

God made thee perfect, not immutable;
And good he made thee, but to persevere
He left it in thy power; ordain'd thy will
By nature free, not over-rul'd by fate
Inextricable, or strict necessity.

The two epics spell out the consequences of man's disobedience. The original nature of man, glorious in body, lay in Adam and Eve as depicted in the Garden in Book IV:

Godlike erect, with native honour clad
 In naked majesty seem'd lords of all:
 And worthy seem'd: for in their looks divine
 The image of their glorious Maker shone.

In this divine order, Adam was the superior: 'He for God only, she for God in him'. Yet Eve (body) proved more persuasive, as we see in Book IX:

She gave him of that fair enticing fruit
 With liberal hand: he scrupl'd not to eat
 Against his better knowledge, not deceiv'd,
 But fondly overcome with Female charm.

Nature was the physical manifestation of God's design for the universe, associated with light and growth. Man was not simply a part of material nature: he was not like the animals, indeed, for he had been given dominion over them. He had a soul, and hence a moral consciousness, and a freedom of choice which set him closer to Heaven than to Earth.

The path of wisdom and goodness was to recognize and obey the will of God. In Book VIII Milton shows the Ptolemaic Adam in conversation with Raphael, questioning the meaning of the universe: could it have been created simply so as to orbit the tiny Earth once in twenty-four hours? The Archangel's answer was also, by implication, Milton's. It was natural that men should speculate ('for Heav'n/Is as the Book of God before thee set'), and from astronomy men could calculate the times and seasons. But further than this man need not go – here lay the lures of forbidden knowledge. Raphael warned against idle speculation:

Heav'n is for thee too high
 To know what passes there; be lowly wise:
 Think onely what concerns thee and thy being;
 Dream not of other Worlds.

Though himself a humanist and for many a heretic, what Milton feared was the misuse of reason. In Book IV of *Paradise Regained* the Devil tempts Christ, painting a seductive picture of Greek philosophy and art. From Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, insinuates Satan, Christ can learn the political wisdom he will need to be a real ruler in Heaven. Christ replies:

But these are false, or little else but dreams,
 Conjectures, fancies, built on nothing firm.

All one needed was divine truth. Philosophers had perplexed themselves and others:

Ignorant of themselves, of God much more,
 And how the world began, and how men fell
 Degraded by himself, on grace depending.
 Much of the soul they talk, but all awry . . .

Thus Milton put the new science, rationalist philosophy and profane curiosity in their place. Human wickedness took the form of a headstrong conceit and an aversion to submit to God's moral law. The wisdom of salvation was contained in the Scriptures.

Paradise Lost ends with Adam and Eve walking sadly out of Eden:

The World was all before them, where to choose
 Their place of rest, and Providence their guide:
 They hand in hand with wandering steps and slow,
 Through *Eden* took their solitarie way.

The world was also all before Milton's contemporaries, as they took their hesitant steps away from that closed Christian world of revealed truth and forbidden knowledge towards – they knew not what.