

## Critical Analysis

Lauren Carson

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**Alvis, John. "Philosophy as Noblest Idolatry in *Paradise Lost*." *Interpretation* 16 (1989): 263-284.**

The wisdom of pursuing philosophy, or the study of the nature of knowledge, has been widely disputed since its foundation as a science. One side of the issue debates that since God created minds with a thirst for knowledge, then He must have intended for those minds to be broadly used in the search for wisdom and truth. The opposite viewpoint is that God created thirsty minds in order for them to be filled by Him: wisdom comes through seeking God and His truth alone. John Alvis' article "Philosophy as Noblest Idolatry in *Paradise Lost*" presents arguments to support the opinion that Milton accepts the theory that God created man to be thirsty for Him. The acceptance of the theory that requires man's intelligence to be put to use in search of God's truths in order to grow closer to Him demands the avoidance of the use of reason in pursuit of knowledge only for the sake of that knowledge. Alvis interprets Milton as critical of any philosophy without boundaries and uses several good interpretations of portions of *Paradise Lost* to support his thesis.

According to Alvis, Adam's misunderstanding of God's purpose in placing the Tree of Knowledge in the center of the Garden and forbidding him to taste the fruit was the beginning of his downfall. Adam did not understand the "distinction between a law grounded in God's will alone and a law decreed by nature" (265). He decided, based on his reason, that there was no real basis for the law in what was around him and so was able to rationalize the breaking of that law. The existence of the law made by God's will did have a purpose--that purpose was to "set

bounds to nature and reason” (266). Alvis’ point that “faith in philosophy becomes . . . a delusion” is based on the evidence in *Paradise Lost* of “God’s goodness and of Adam’s awareness of the goodness” (267). Alvis maintains, this evidence is enough to prove that God had a reason for establishing a boundary on human reason beyond which it is not wise to go; Adam’s respect for that boundary would have prevented his fall by eliminating his aspiration to be like God.

Alvis’ interpretation of Adam’s conversation with Raphael implies Milton’s belief that knowledge, without the practical wisdom to understand it, can be dangerous. Raphael elaborated on his own imperfect interpretation of God’s design for man: that of spiritual growth. Raphael did not have a clear understanding of the differences between man and the angels; the archangel equated mankind with his own kind instead of seeing them as a separate creation. This insufficiency, added to his lack of knowledge of what Satan had already introduced to Adam’s mind through Eve, led to his mistake in explaining how Adam and Eve could become more like God. Had he chosen a different way of explaining the changes to occur, Adam and Eve would have had a harder time rationalizing their disobedience to God’s will. Raphael’s depiction of a plant changing as it grows away from the earth “stands literally as an instance of coarse matter rising by degrees to spirit,” which is exactly what Adam and Eve want for themselves once Satan has planted the thought in their minds (270). However, according to Alvis, Milton “means to suggest the difficulty of understanding God’s purpose through any intermediary other than God’s own Son” (272). Clarifying this suggestion would lead to the idea that man is not capable of raising himself to meet God through his own reason. Unfortunately, neither Adam nor Raphael realized the need for this clarification; instead of depending on God’s plan for mankind, they thought that man was capable of raising himself to heaven through his own ability. Raphael’s

faulty imaginings added strength to Adam's natural proclivity towards curiosity without giving sufficient warning of the dangers of going outside the boundary that God has set.

Alvis also sees Adam and Eve, in their imperfection, as not realizing the shortcomings of their minds and their inability to reason out God's will using the minds He gave them. God created the agile, logical mind of man to search for His truths and to desire to draw closer to Him. Satan perverted that desire and gave it another focus. Adam, during his conversation with Raphael, comes to the conclusion that he "knows how to rise" by thought and observation (275). Raphael, belatedly realizing Adam's mistake, "seeks simultaneously to moderate Adam's preoccupation with reason as speculation and to raise his estimate of reason as the arbiter of action" (275). Alvis' interpretation of Milton's belief in reason and the pursuit of knowledge as good only when used to make wise choices is upheld by his critique of Raphael's "treating knowledge itself as a pleasure subject to regulation" (276). Alvis uses this to support his belief that Milton intended to show that the search for knowledge is necessary, but that the subjugation of that impulse toward knowledge for its own sake would have prevented Adam from seeing himself as becoming equal with God.

The fact the Eve was created with a questioning mind and unquestioned intelligence is the basis for the success of Satan's temptation. Satan was perceptive enough to detect the ability to reason as well as the desire for knowledge present in God's creation. Alvis shows how Satan works on that present desire to increase it and to make the pursuit of knowledge in itself more attractive. God created Eve with the desire to know God as well as the desire to be attractive to Adam. Eve adds to her God-given desire the wish to "prove [that] she deserves Adam's respect by showing that she loves that which . . . he loves" (279). Because of Satan's deceit, Eve believes that she has found the way to move past simple feminine charm and become a true

companion to Adam in his search for knowledge. Alvis does an excellent job of proving his thesis with this argument. His twofold message is that Milton believed that man fell partly as a result of Eve's reaching the conclusion that philosophy is "a power to be employed towards securing Adam's affection", and that Eve fell prey to the same temptation as Adam: that of "desiring knowledge . . . in excess of temperate bounds" (280).

The inventiveness of Adam's mind is shown very clearly by Alvis as he interprets Milton's depiction of Adam's rationalization of his disobedience. In *Paradise Lost*, Milton clearly shows Adam knows that he is disobeying God, and that he is making a free choice to do so. Instead of using his reasoning ability as God intended it to be used, as a way to make good, obedient choices, Adam uses his God-given aptitude to "reason away death by equating dying with translation to a higher order of existence" (281). Adam realizes quickly that his sophistry is not valid, and he becomes repentant when it is too late and the first humans are expelled from their earthy paradise. Alvis shows how Milton presents Adam's response to his expulsion: Adam understands fully how much more important the pursuit of knowledge is when obedience to God is the main objective than that of only gaining knowledge. Alvis ends with the observation that "From his fall Adam thus gains wisdom by learning to disparage all but practical forms of knowledge" (282).

Alvis concludes that sin is not necessary for man to reach God. Milton's omniscient God had provided for an atonement, foreseeing man's disobedience; man was, however, created in perfection and by choosing disobedience made the sacrifice necessary. Adam, here, at last understands God's plan for man to enjoy "a profusion of created good which must be embraced only to the extent that savoring the good intimates the goodness of the Maker" (284). God intended for man to enjoy his creation, including the pleasures of an agile and searching mind,

but to enjoy it in moderation. Adam's great mistake was "overvaluing . . . contemplation" while "undervaluing the governing power of rationality"; had he withstood "the temptation to divinize human nature through philosophizing", he would have been following God's perfect and original plan (284).

John Alvis has done an excellent job of supporting his conclusions with original material. He proves his main point, that Milton believed that God intended for man to seek knowledge in moderation, many times and in many ways. Knowledge in itself, therefore, is not dangerous according to Milton, neither is the pursuit of knowledge. It is only when the seeking of knowledge becomes the ultimate goal that the danger of disobedience enters the picture. God's plan is for man to learn and grow through that learning, but not to lose sight of the paramount purpose of learning--which is to seek God and His will. Had Adam learned that purpose through wisely listening to Raphael, and not needed to learn through experience and death, he would have avoided the need for the struggle back to a perfect communion with God. Instead, Adam used his God-given aptitude for philosophy to excuse his disobedience and bring death into the world. After the fall the new goal becomes the same as the original goal: to place God's divine will above man's desire for knowledge, and to subjugate that desire to God's desire for us to draw closer to Him.

*Lauren Carson is a Computer Science and Mathematics major. Dr. James Walter was her professor.*

**Dr. Walter's Comments:** *Appropriately for a review of a tightly reasoned and difficult scholarly essay, Lauren displays what philosopher Hans Gadamer calls the "art" of dialectical conversation, which "consists not in trying to discover the weakness of what is said, but in bringing out its real strength.*