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# THE PROBLEM OF SELF-DESTROYING SIN IN JOHN MILTON'S *SAMSON AGONISTES*

Ian T. E. Boyd

In this paper, I argue that John Milton, in his tragedy *Samson Agonistes*, raises and offers a solution to a version of the problem of evil raised by Marilyn McCord Adams. Sections I and II are devoted to the presentation of Adams's version of the problem and its place in the current discussion of the problem of evil. In section III, I present Milton's version of the problem as it is raised in *Samson Agonistes*. The solution Milton offers to this problem is taken up in section IV and examined in section V. Last, in section VI, I explore briefly the existential aspect of Milton's solution.

## I

The problem of evil has often been raised by the unwilling suffering of innocents. The horror of this kind of suffering finds its most vivid expression in the speeches of Ivan in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamozov*.<sup>1</sup> Ivan, like many contemporary philosophers, argues that the suffering of children gives us evidence enough to reject the existence of a good God. What makes the problem of evil so clear in these cases is the innocence of the sufferer together with the apparent lack of any benefit for which the suffering is necessary.

In recent work, Marilyn McCord Adams focuses attention on what she calls 'horrendous evils.' Horrendous evils are "evils the participation in (the doing or suffering of) which gives one reason *prima facie* to doubt whether one's life could (given their inclusion in it) be a great good to one on the whole."<sup>2</sup> Such doubts stem from the view that horrendous evils, all things considered, appear to outweigh or engulf any good part of one's life. It seems as if there is no way the life of the sufferer of horrendous evil could be a great good to her. It is difficult to see how a horrendous evil could be balanced-off, much less defeated. Its defeat would have to provide the sufferer with a reason to believe that her life is still a great good for her and, moreover, that this goodness is in some sense organically related to the horrendous evil she has experienced. In other words, there would have to be a connection between the evil experienced and the overall goodness of the sufferer's life, and she would have to have no regrets about the evil part of her life because of the benefit connected with it.<sup>3</sup> The problem of evil is raised, in the form



Adams proposes, when it seems reasonable to believe that there could be no defeat of the horrendous evil some sufferer has experienced.

The connection between the sufferer's estimation of the value of her life and what is objectively the case is important to notice. Evil is deemed horrendous just in case the sufferer's life is objectively determined not to be a great good to her, on the whole. Adams is careful to note that individuals can be mistaken about what evils would make their lives meaningless, as in the case of persons who habitually make the worst of a good situation.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, according to Adams, "a major consideration in determining whether an individual's life is/has been a great good to him/her on the whole, is invariably and appropriately how it has seemed to him/her."<sup>5</sup> Thus, the individual's own assessment is relevant in deciding whether a particular case is a case of horrendous evil, but it isn't itself sufficient to make this determination.

The horrors mentioned by Adams include "the betrayal of one's deepest loyalties, cannibalizing one's own offspring . . . parental incest . . . participation in the Nazi death camps, the explosion of nuclear bombs over populated areas, [and] having to choose which of one's children shall live and which be executed by terrorists."<sup>6</sup> These are horrendous evils, according to Adams, because "most people would find in the *doing* or suffering of them *prima facie* reason to doubt the positive meaning of their lives."<sup>7</sup> In the list of horrors she gives, she identifies a variety of evil, the *doing* of horrendous evil, which, though quite interesting in its own right, doesn't figure much in her subsequent discussion. Nonetheless, an important version of the problem of evil arises in connection with the lives of the *doers* of horrendous evils. Suppose that Hitler had become a Christian in the last week of his life and, during that same time, had come to repent of the evils he did as leader of the Nazis. At that point, it might also be true of Hitler that his whole life would seem meaningless to him or horrible. But the horror of his life, as Adams points out, would stem from the evils he did, not the evils he suffered.<sup>8</sup>

Here someone might raise an objection. It is easy to see how the *victim* of horrendous evil has a legitimate complaint. Someone who has been brutally tortured, for example, may not be able to conceive of any way in which her suffering could be defeated; it has become a permanent fixture in her story and is dark enough to engulf the meaning of her life. We sympathize with this victim of horrendous evil because she is an unwilling innocent in the undefeated evil which happens to her. It is, however, not so easy to see that the victim's torturer has any basis for complaint about the quality of his life, if he were afterwards to repent of what he had done, for he has perpetrated this horrible act of his own free will. Our intuitions regarding such a case tell us that perpetrators of such horror deserve whatever suffering comes to them when they repent and look back on their former evil deeds with pain. Their suffering doesn't usually strike us as raising the problem of evil. In fact, the suffering and remorse of such a perpetrator might itself be seen as a good thing. While it is easy to imagine repenting with wretchedness at one's perpetration of horrendous evil, it is hard to believe that the perpetrator in

such cases really has a legitimate complaint about the quality of his life. Thus, it is initially not at all clear that the perpetration of horrendous evil itself raises the problem of evil.

But a torturer may later regret his actions with a self-loathing so great that he might wish he'd never been born or, at least, never had the opportunity to perform such an atrocity. In such a case, the torturer might regard his life as void of any positive meaning. The *doer* of horrendous evil might complain because he supposes that a loving and good God shouldn't have allowed him to act in such a way as to make his whole life hateful to him. For, according to Adams, "God cannot be said to be good or loving to any created persons the positive meaning of whose lives He allows to be engulfed in and /or defeated by evils—that is, individuals within whose lives horrendous evils remain undefeated."<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, on Christian views, God offers redemption from sin to sinful creatures, so that part of the promise of Christianity is that even those who do evil can find a way to see their lives as good and meaningful for them. Thus, what makes Adams's suggestion so interesting is that it reveals a different problem of evil, one not much yet considered in the literature—a specifically Christian problem of evil.<sup>10</sup>

## II

The Christian problem of evil which Adams's work helps us to see is what I will call the problem of self-destroying sin. Self-destroying sin is evil, the doing of which gives a Christian *prima facie* reason to doubt whether her life could be counted a great good to her on the whole. That is, most people would agree that her doing this sort of evil constitutes a *prima facie* reason to doubt whether, given the inclusion of such evil action, her life can be a great good to her on the whole.<sup>11</sup> As in the case of horrendous evil, this criterion is meant to be objective, but also relative to the assessment of the individual perpetrator. The problem is raised, therefore, when it appears to most onlookers or to the perpetrator that the individual's sin has made her life loathsome.

The problem of self-destroying sin can lead a Christian to doubt God's power or God's goodness toward the one who sins self-destructively. God appears to have betrayed the trust of the perpetrator by allowing her life to be ravaged beyond repair by sin. He appears unable or unwilling to fulfill his promise to save and redeem her from her own evil. This problem is not just a matter of the despair of an individual sufferer. If self-destroying sin exists for a single Christian, that is, if a person can sin in such a way that her whole life is rendered loathsome, then Christianity itself is called into question, for the central promise of Christianity is redemption from sin.<sup>12</sup> Cases of self-destroying sin, therefore, raise the fearful doubt that God either might not be able or might not be willing to redeem some of those who put their trust in him.<sup>13</sup> Insofar as redemption is the heart of the Christian gospel, this is a pressing problem.

And yet, on the other hand, what reason could there possibly be to impugn God's power or goodness for suffering which results from a

human being's own sin? Is it even possible for God to intervene in the case of self-destroying sin without violating free will? To see how a Christian perpetrator of horrendous evil might suppose her life calls into question God's goodness or power, it is helpful to observe that the problem is raised because of two levels of willing in the individual sinner.<sup>14</sup> A Christian who sins self-destructively has a will for God to redeem her—to fulfill the promise of the gospel: salvation from sin; that is, she has a second-order desire for a will that wills justly. On the other hand, as a sinner, she also has a will to do acts that are not just. In the case of the perpetrator of horrendous evil, this will is one that wills very serious evils.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, she can claim with Paul: "I do not do the good I want, but the evil which I do not want, this I do."<sup>16</sup> The second-order desire for a will that wills justly raises the problem of evil because this will is for God's promised redemption—salvation from sin. When she commits sin that appears to render her life hopelessly awful, God seems unable or unwilling to fulfill his promise to save.<sup>17</sup>

What is needed as a response to this problem is the defeat of the evil of sinning within the context of the life of the sinner. Defeat for our purposes consists only in the sinner's life being rendered a great good to her on the whole. On Adams's view, such a defeat wouldn't constitute a theodicy, but it would nonetheless be a satisfactory solution to the problem of self-destroying sin. For, she contends,

to exhibit the logical compossibility of divine goodness with horrendous suffering, it is not necessary to find logically possible reasons *why* God might permit them. It is enough to show *how* God can be good enough to created persons despite their participation in horrors—by defeating them within the context of the individual's life and by giving that individual a life that is a great good to him/her on the whole.<sup>18</sup>

The sufferer, accordingly, must receive some benefit that restores positive meaning to her life even with the inclusion of the horrendous evil. If the suffering of horrendous evil is unrelated to the benefit that renders the sufferer's life a great good for her, the horrendous evil might be over-balanced or outweighed by the benefit, but it wouldn't be defeated.<sup>19</sup> For defeat to occur, the evil and the benefit must be related in a particular sort of way. A necessary connection, however, is too strong for the sort of solution Adams is interested in. What needs to be established for defeat in this sense is just that the suffering in question is a sufficient condition for the benefit. The benefit, then, could be obtained in any number of ways other than the suffering, but, given the individual's decision to sin, the benefit is received through the suffering attendant on having sinned. The suffering involved in self-destroying sin, therefore, must be organically connected to the benefit that renders the sufferer's life a great good on the whole. In what way, then, can God defeat (in this sense of "defeat") self-destroying sin?

Adams sketches three ways in which God might defeat horrendous evil by integrating the suffering of it into a person's relationship with

God: (i) identifying with Christ's participation in horrendous evil sympathetically ("in which each person suffers his/her own pains, but their similarity enables each to know what it is like for the other"<sup>20</sup>) or mystically (a literal experience of Christ's pain); (ii) divine gratitude towards the sinner for her suffering; and (iii) a vision of God's inner life.<sup>21</sup> The nature of self-destroying sin would seem to exclude (i) and (iii) at the outset, because there can be no analogue of this kind of suffering in a God who is perfectly good.<sup>22</sup> It also appears unlikely that God could be grateful for horrendous sin, for gratitude would suggest that God needs, wants, or appreciates what is given by the perpetrator, and it is hard to imagine that a good God would have such attitudes towards self-destructive sin. Adams's account, therefore, does not adequately address the problem of self-destroying sin and does not offer a satisfactory candidate for a good that constitutes a defeat of it.<sup>23</sup>

The direction in which a viable solution might be sought, however, is revealed, when the problem of self-destroying sin is construed as questioning whether God can really "work all things together for the good of those who love him" as the biblical text claims.<sup>24</sup> Can God bring good to the sinner even through her self-destroying sin? Many interpreters of this biblical text suppose that innocent suffering can be used by God for the good of his creatures, but they are less clear when it comes to evils of our own making. Thomas Aquinas, on the other hand, takes a very strong line in his interpretation of this verse. He writes:

Some people say that sins are not included under "all things" [in the biblical passage] . . . . But against this is the passage in the gloss . . . if some among the saints go astray and turn aside, even this God makes efficacious for good for them.<sup>25</sup>

With regard to self-destroying sin, then, this line of thought suggests that defeat is possible, that is, that even the life of a perpetrator of self-destroying sin will be a great good for her and that she will see the self-destroying sin as in some way organically connected to this goodness.

The problem raised for Christianity by self-destroying sin is the very problem that Milton seeks to address in *Samson Agonistes*.<sup>26</sup> Milton's version of this problem helps to refine the rough and somewhat sketchy description of it above. Furthermore, Milton offers a compelling solution to this apparently intractable problem, one which addresses itself to the problem in both its philosophical and existential forms.<sup>27</sup>

### III

In *Samson Agonistes*, Milton takes up the experience of Samson, the judge of Israel (Judges 13-17). Samson's experience as portrayed by Milton is a case of self-destroying sin. The angel of the Lord had foretold Samson's birth and declared that he should live as a Nazarite to God<sup>28</sup> and would begin the deliverance of Israel from the Philistines. God's promise to make Samson the deliverer of Israel can be viewed as analogous to God's promise to save his people from sin. For ordinary

Christians, self-destructing sin is sin that seems to make it impossible for God to fulfill his promise to redeem them and to give their lives positive meaning. Thus, for Samson self-destructing sin is sin which makes it impossible for him to fulfill this divine prediction, rendering God's promise to him unfulfilled and untrue.<sup>29</sup>

When first we encounter Samson, he has had his eyes gouged out and is being held captive by the Philistines in Gaza. Samson gives us insight into the misery imposed upon him by these conditions in his opening lament:

O loss of sight, of thee I most complain!  
Blind among enemies, O worse than chains,  
Dungeon, or beggary, or decrepit age!  
Light the prime work of God to me is extinct,  
And all her various objects of delight  
Annul'd, which might in part my grief have eased,  
Inferior to the vilest now become  
Of man or worm. (lines 68-74)<sup>30</sup>

While the conditions of his imprisonment are loathsome enough, he is even more plagued by inner turmoil. His mind is aswarm with restless thoughts "present[ing] / Times past, what once I was, and what I am now" (22). His opening speech reveals that his deepest concern is whether God's promise to make him Israel's deliverer can be made consistent with what has happened to him. He questions why his birth should have been twice foretold by an angel and why he should have lived as a Nazarite to God, if, as he says, "I must die / Betrayed, Captived, and both my Eyes put out, / Made of my Enemies the scorn and gaze; / To grind in Brazen Fetters under task / With this Heav'n-gifted strength" (32-36).

Samson hasn't simply lost his chance to deliver Israel; he has also become a public spectacle. He has so shamed his father Manoa that Manoa cries out to God at one point:

O wherefore did God grant me my request,  
And as a blessing with such pomp adorn'd?  
Why are his gifts desirable, to tempt  
Our earnest Prayers, then giv'n with solemn hand  
As graces, draw a Scorpion's tail behind? (356-60)<sup>31</sup>

Samson's people think him a fool upon whom such suffering is justly visited. The chorus, although generally sympathetic to his complaint, nonetheless points out the painful fact: "Israel still serves with all her sons" (240). In some ways, Samson has even become a horror to his people: his foolish venture cost them their deliverance; they remain under the oppressive hand of the Philistines.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, in the broader perspective Samson has brought shame to God, both before his people and the Philistines. "A worse thing yet remains," according to Manoa: "This day the *Philistines* a popular Feast / Here celebrate in Gaza; and pro-

claim / Great Pomp, Sacrifice and Praises loud / To Dagon their God who hath delivered . . . *Samson*" (433-38). Samson's defeat has become an occasion for the worship and praise of Dagon, the god of the Philistines.

For all these reasons, Samson is characterized by both himself and the chorus as one whose life is ruined.<sup>33</sup> Samson's grief, however, isn't just over such sufferings coming upon him, for, if they had come upon him through no fault of his own, his sufferings would raise a problem, but one more like that experienced by Job, i.e., the suffering of unwilling innocents. Samson's problem is captured in his attempt to call himself to order in the midst of his complaint: "Yet stay, let me not rashly call in doubt / Divine Prediction; what if all foretold / Had been fulfill'd but through mine own default? / Who have I to complain of but myself?" (43-46).<sup>34</sup> He suffers because of his own sin. His sin doesn't result in the physical torture of his imprisonment alone, but also in the spiritual torment of being justly forsaken by God. Samson sees that all his suffering has come upon him by his own hand, and that through his own fault he has managed to thwart providence and derail God's ends for him. In sum, Samson freely, though weakly, betrayed the trust given him by God.

Yet, while Samson accepts this responsibility, he nevertheless complains to God. He complains because he believes that the God who called him and predicted great exploits for him must in some way bear responsibility for his plight. Relating his affliction to the band of Dannites who have come to comfort him (and who serve as the chorus), he asks: "Am I not sung and proverb'd for a Fool / In every Street, do they not say how well / Are come upon him his deserts?" (203-5). This verdict is the same one he has come to himself: he has fallen because of his own foolish decision. In this speech, though, he goes on to ask: "yet why? / Immeasurable strength they might behold / In me, of wisdom nothing more than mean; / This with the other should, at least, have pair'd / These two proportion'd ill drove me to traverse" (205-9). That this "should" is an implicit accusation of God is made clear by the chorus' response: "Tax not divine disposal" (210). This complaint indicates that Samson thinks God should have given him the means to avoid the self-destroying sin which led to his fall.

To see how Samson has some acceptable grounds for taxing God, it is helpful to notice that Samson has two wills. Samson has a second-order desire for a will that enables God to fulfill his promise to make Samson Israel's deliverer, and a first-order desire to sin in ways that in effect frustrate this second-order desire. While Samson acknowledges that his sin is done freely, he still supposes that a loving God should have honored his second-order desire by helping him to avoid acting on his first-order desire. God should have helped to bring about what he had promised, for in trusting God to make him Israel's deliverer, Samson also trusted God to keep him from acts that would render the fulfillment of that promise impossible. Thus, Samson's second-order desire amounts to a will for a will to avoid sinning in a way that would preclude the possibility of God's promise being realized. Consequently, Samson taxes God because his second-order desire appears to have been violated by the execution of his first-order desire to sin. He finds

grounds to blame God because he focuses upon his second-order desire and upon God's promise.<sup>35</sup> In Samson's view, God appears to have failed to make good on his promise—a promise which Samson both trusted and wanted God to fulfill.<sup>36</sup>

Let us recall, at this point, that self-destroying sin is not just any sin. Self-destroying sin is sin the participation in which gives one a *prima facie* reason to doubt whether one's life can be counted as a great good to oneself on the whole. Self-destroying sin raises doubts about the power or goodness of God both for the sufferer and those familiar with the sufferer's plight. Samson's complaints suggest that he is suffering because of his own sin, but they also indicate that he and those acquainted with his suffering are beginning to question why God did not help him to avoid this sin. So far, however, we have just been assuming with Samson that Samson's life has in fact been rendered loathsome by his sin. If we are to confirm that Samson's is a case of self-destroying sin, we must consider more carefully whether Samson's life really is void of any positive meaning.<sup>37</sup>

It might appear that forgiveness would serve sufficiently to comfort Samson and to defeat the suffering caused by his sin. But when Samson realizes the possibility of forgiveness, his response only serves to reveal the depth of his despair: "His pardon I implore: but as for life, / To what end should I seek it?" (521-22).<sup>38</sup> He is convinced that his life as foretold by the angel is beyond repair: "Now blind, dishearten'd, shamed, dishonour'd, quell'd, / To what Can I be useful, wherein serve / My nation, and the work from Heav'n imposed . . ." (563-65). Rather than be free to grow old and have his shameful life extended, he would rather work the Philistine mill waiting for "oft invocated death" to hasten "the welcome end of all [his] pains" (576-77). When his hope is at its lowest ebb, he declares: "My hopes all flat, nature within me seems / In all her functions weary of herself; / My race of glory run, and race of shame, / And I shall shortly be with them that rest" (595-98). It's not hard to see why Samson feels this way. When he had all the gifts of God before, when he had everything going his way, he still fell prey to the self-destroying sin from which he now suffers. If providence couldn't save him the first time, there is no reason to suppose it could do so the second. Samson distrusts God as well as himself. Whatever good forgiveness does Samson, it won't alter what Samson's life is or is likely to become, in his view. Even if he is forgiven, his life is lost; he can never fulfill his divine vocation.

Doubting that his life could ever be a great good seriously affects Samson's view of God. That his life has become what it is leads him to question God's goodness, and this doubt, in turn, plunges him even deeper into despair because God's goodness toward him is the only thing that can sustain him in such dire circumstances. At one point he says:

I was his nursling once and choice delight,  
His destined from the womb . . .  
But now [God] hath cast me off as never known,

and to those cruel enemies.  
 Whom I by his appointment had provoked,  
 Left me all helpless with th' irreparable loss  
 Of sight, reserved alive to be repeated  
 The subject of their cruelty and scorn. (633-46)

God appears to Samson as one who was with him as long as he did well, but who, as soon as he fell through frailty, forsook him and left him helpless among his enemies. Samson wonders why God didn't keep him from sin, in any of the number of ways God could have done so without violating his free will, for God is indeed willing and able to keep his promises despite human weakness.

As the play progresses, Samson works through this complex problem in dialogue with the chorus, his father, Dalila and a Philistine giant, Harapha of Gath. In his encounter with Dalila, Samson doesn't seem to progress much with respect to this problem. After her departure, he concludes: "God sent her to debase me, / And aggravate my folly who committed / To such a viper his most sacred trust / Of secrecy, my safety, and my life" (999-1002).<sup>39</sup> He still sees God as his adversary, and his sin still plagues him. In fact, Raymond Waddington supposes that Samson's response to Dalila's complaints is parallel to what Samson takes God's response to his own complaints to be: stern, harsh, and judgmental.<sup>40</sup>

The parallel between Samson's case and that of ordinary Christians should be clear. Just as Samson trusted God to make him Israel's deliverer, Christians trust God to save them from sin, i.e., from becoming something that would strip their lives of positive meaning. Thus, we see that Samson's case can be generally applied to all Christians who recognize their own evil—for whom the remembrance of their sin is a grievous and intolerable burden.<sup>41</sup> As John T. Shawcross implies, Samson isn't simply a tragic hero, "he is all of us."<sup>42</sup>

#### IV

The turning point in Samson's outlook comes in his encounter with Harapha of Gath. Harapha, the Giant of Gath, comes to see Samson because he has heard of his mighty acts. Harapha declares his regret that he never fought with Samson. Samson's remarkable response is that nothing at present stands in Harapha's way. He counters Harapha's arrogant remarks saying: "Boast not what thou wouldst have done, but do / What thou wouldst; thou seest it in thy hand" (1104-5). That Samson is beginning to see it is possible for him again to take up his divine vocation is apparent even in these lines. Furthermore, when Harapha says, "Presume not on thy God, whate'er he be, / Thee he regards not, owns not, hath cut off / Quite from his people, and deliver'd up / Into thy enemies' hand" (1155-59), Samson responds,

All these indignities, for such they are  
 From Thine, these evils I deserve and more,  
 Acknowledge them from God inflicted on me

Justly, yet despair not of his final pardon  
 Whose ear is ever open, and his eye  
 Gracious to re-admit the suppliant;  
 In confidence whereof I once again  
 Defy thee to the trial of mortal fight,  
 By combat to decide whose god is God,  
 Thine or whom I with Israel's Sons adore. (1168-77)

Samson, we must bear in mind, is blind, weak, and bound. To engage in mortal fight with Harapha, the giant of Gath and a warrior of great renown, appears the height of folly for one in Samson's situation. Moreover, it seems ridiculous to Harapha. What could he possibly gain by beating to death such an opponent?

These lines, then, suggest several important points regarding Samson's state of mind. They mark a heightened sense of self-esteem in Samson. His faith in his divine vocation is beginning to be restored. While he never failed to desire God's promise, Samson had lost faith that God would fulfill it. It appeared that his sin had made it impossible for God to bring his promise to fruition. In the quotation above, however, Samson embraces the possibility that he may yet be the deliverer of Israel; he realizes that God's promise hasn't necessarily been made void by his sin. Formerly Samson found no comfort in forgiveness because it didn't appear to restore his life; he still thought his life could never be what it was supposed to be—what God promised it would be. But God's promise, as he now recognizes, hasn't been destroyed by his sin, for his sin has not precluded the possibility of its fulfillment. Samson begins to think that perhaps his sin isn't self-destroying, and his hope and faith begin to be restored.

But, of course, the return of some hope in Samson isn't sufficient for the defeat of Samson's sin. For the present, God's original promise remains unfulfilled. For Samson's sin to be defeated, Samson's life must become what it was supposed to be. It is the fulfillment of God's promise that would leave the repentant Samson considering his life not loathsome.<sup>43</sup>

Before we turn to the issue of whether this sin-defeating actuality is realized, it is helpful to consider some other goods that are organically related to Samson's self-destroying sin and which contribute to its defeat. Samson's call involved his being set apart as an example and representative of God to his people—he was to be a Nazarite to God. Hence, if Samson delivered Israel without also reflecting the character and will of God in himself and his life, his actions wouldn't constitute a fulfillment of God's original promise. In the course of the play, Milton portrays a qualitative change in Samson that is organically related to his suffering. Accordingly, we perceive not only an improvement in Samson with respect to his attitudes at the nadir of his despair, but also a much humbled servant of God in comparison to the Samson who before his fall walked about "like a petty God . . . swoll'n with pride" (530, 532).<sup>44</sup> Samson's earlier thought—that he, through his sin, might have frustrated providence—is in fact itself an example of his sinful pride. Now,

however, having seen the horror of his sin, Samson is able to recognize his need for God to sustain him. He is also enabled to adore God more deeply than before because he understands more clearly God's love for him. Thus, as the New Testament teaches, the one who is forgiven much loves much.<sup>45</sup> While forgiveness alone is insufficient to defeat the self-destroying sin Samson has committed, when it is coupled with the possibility that Samson may yet deliver Israel, it gives Samson reason to love God even more than before his ruinous sin. Before he fell, Samson thought he was worthy to be God's chosen servant, worthy to be Israel's deliverer. Now he knows what he is; he knows that he isn't worthy to be God's servant or the deliverer of Israel. Above all, he realizes that even in his ruin God can use him to deliver Israel. The restoration of this possibility, then, fills him with gratitude toward God. His passing through these experiences makes him a deeper, more complex, and perhaps even a more glorious character.<sup>46</sup> These effects represent defeating goods (in Adams's sense of defeat) in so far as they are of great benefit to Samson.

The final defeat of Samson's sin is contingent upon his actually fulfilling divine prediction by becoming the deliverer of Israel. Even in light of the benefits to Samson mentioned above, the defeat of self-destroying sin is *incomplete* until Samson has fulfilled the divine prediction for his life. Until then, his original complaint remains, namely, that through his own sin he managed to lose his chance to fulfill the divine promise. The defeat of his sin is completed only when Samson destroys the temple of Dagon, killing the "choice nobility and flower" of the Philistine nation (and himself in addition). The tragedy is that he died in this act. The act itself, however, is what finally defeats the self-destroying sin of Samson, for in it he decisively begins the deliverance of Israel, and God's promise to Samson is fulfilled. What this final act demonstrates is that Samson, though free to sin self-destructively, still cannot make untrue God's promise to him, and so cannot destroy the positive meaning of his life; God's word cannot fail to have its effect in his willing servants.<sup>47</sup> Shakespeare eloquently expresses this thought in a different play, through Hamlet's remark: "there's a divinity that shapes our ends, / rough-hew them how we will."<sup>48</sup>

The responses of Manoa and the chorus to Samson's final act serve to confirm that with Samson's destruction of the temple his self-destroying sin is defeated and his life is made a great good for him. Although Samson's concrete well-being (sight, health, life) is not restored, the positive meaning of his life is. Thus, even though Samson dies, his father Manoa finds no reason for lamentation in his death, for Samson has been vindicated before his nation and his enemies. He has brought honor and the potential for freedom to Israel. Manoa further proclaims:

To himself and Father's house eternal fame;  
 And which is best and happiest yet, all this  
 With God not parted from him, as was fear'd,  
 But favouring and assisting to the end.  
 Nothing is here for tears, nothing to wail  
 Or knock the breast, no weakness, no contempt,

Dispraise, or blame, nothing but well and fair,  
And what may quiet us in a death so noble. (1717-24)

Several things indicate that this final event serves to defeat the evil Samson brought on himself by his sin. In fulfilling God's prediction so gloriously, he gains eternal fame, as Manoa says. That God was the one sustaining Samson in this act is also clear. Thus, Samson is vindicated before all those who had derided him as one forsaken by God. The most notable aspect in Manoa's speech is the lack of any tinge of regret or resentment. This absence of regret—or even the presence of joy—is an indication that what has happened here isn't simply balancing-off, but defeat, in Adams's sense. Furthermore, Samson's sin no longer raises doubts either about whether Samson's life could be a great good to him or whether God was faithful to his promise to Samson.<sup>49</sup>

The chorus reiterates Manoa's response and seeks to extend it to all those who have now learned about Samson: "All is best, though we oft doubt, / What th' unsearchable dispose / Of highest wisdom brings about, / And ever best found in the close" (1745-48).<sup>50</sup> The claim that "all is best" is the claim that the evil has been defeated within the context of Samson's life—that he has fulfilled his vocation; there is no regret regarding the presence of the sin and the suffering that followed upon it. It would, of course, have been better if Samson could have attained all of the goods he did and fulfilled God's promise without sinning. But, given the choices Samson made, his suffering at his sin (and God's response to it) is sufficient for the attainment of the goods that defeat his evil.<sup>51</sup> These goods, then, come to Samson in and through the circumstances in which he sins. They are seamlessly woven into the fabric of his life such that his sin becomes part of the sufficient condition for their realization; God brings about his promises through Samson's sin, not despite it.<sup>52</sup>

## V

Is Milton's solution to the problem of self-destroying sin a viable one? A solution to this problem must show how God could allow someone such as Samson to undergo the sufferings involved in committing self-destroying sin, and yet be good and loving toward that person. For such suffering to be defeated, the sufferer's life must be a great good to her, and the evil experience must be organically connected to this goodness. An indication that this has been accomplished is that the sufferer doesn't regret the presence of the suffering in her life. The self-destroying sin doesn't need to be the only means by which this goodness might be obtained; it need only be a sufficient means given the free decisions of the sufferer. Thus, the sin itself is free, but the fulfillment of God's promise and the goods involved with it are organically related to the sin once it has become part of the sufferer's story. The sin and the intense suffering that follows self-destroying sin, then, are the sufficient means by which a loving and good God can restore positive meaning to the sinner's life.

In view of these constraints, Milton's story of Samson appears to con-

tain a viable solution to the problem of self-destroying sin. Samson didn't have to suffer as he did, but, given his free decision to sin, God made his sin and sufferings the means by which his life became a great good to him. Furthermore, from the point of view of those acquainted with his suffering, the unanimous conclusion is that, in the end, Samson's life is glorious and good; there is no regret or remorse. This conclusion is strengthened when it is observed that those proclaiming it, Manoa and the chorus, had at different times seriously questioned God's goodness toward Samson.<sup>53</sup> While the responses of observers are important, the experience of Samson himself is also a major consideration, for he must see the defeat; the evil must not be regrettable in his view.<sup>54</sup> Since we have no words from Samson after the act has been done, it might seem that we can never know whether in his own view his self-destroying sin was truly defeated. But we have already seen that for Samson the fulfillment of God's promise to make him Israel's deliverer would be more than sufficient to defeat all the evils he suffered because of his sin, and that the destruction of the temple accomplishes this promise, thus rendering Samson's life a great good even to him. The chorus's response to Samson's final act also indicates that even they can see that the divine prediction for Samson's life has in fact been fulfilled: "Living or dying thou hast fulfill'd / The work for which thou wast foretold" (1661-2). In view of these considerations, Milton's solution appears to be viable; it demonstrates how God could be both loving and good toward Samson and yet allow him to suffer self-destroying sin.

## VI

The solution Milton offers is not by accident cast in the form of tragedy. To grasp the significance of Milton's choice of genre, it is necessary to consider how tragedy is intended to function. In the introduction to *Samson Agonistes*, Milton characterizes tragedy as the "gravest, moralest, and most profitable of all other Poems," because of its power to raise "pity and fear, or terror, to purge the mind of those and such like passions, that is, to temper and reduce them to just measure with a kind of delight, stirr'd up by reading or seeing those passions well imitated."<sup>55</sup> Tragedy's intended effect, then, is cathartic and therapeutic; it is meant to help those experiencing it to come to terms with the problem or problems raised by it.

In a recent article, Martha Nussbaum gives an incisive analysis of the Aristotelian notion of pity which helps us to understand how tragedy is supposed to accomplish its end of raising and purging pity and fear. According to Nussbaum, pity "requires and rests upon three beliefs: (1) the belief that the suffering is serious rather than trivial; (2) the belief that the suffering was not caused primarily by the person's own culpable actions; and (3) the belief that the pitier's own possibilities are similar to those of the sufferer."<sup>56</sup> Both Samson and those acquainted with his circumstances believe his suffering to be serious. He has lost the possibility of fulfilling God's ends for him. Condition (1) for pity is thus met in Samson's case.

At first glance, it appears that condition (2) couldn't be met in Samson's case, since his suffering is the result of his free decision to sin. But we learn from Nussbaum that, on Aristotle's scheme, it is only necessary that the suffering be deemed undeserving (*anaxios*).<sup>57</sup> Thus, "though there is some fault, we believe that the suffering is out of proportion to the fault."<sup>58</sup> Furthermore, Nussbaum suggests that the agent's unwillingness with regard to the action leading to the suffering also contributes to the estimation that the suffering is undeserved. So then, in one sense, Samson's case doesn't fit this condition because his suffering might be viewed as in perfect proportion to his fault—the betrayal of divine vocation. In another sense, however, Samson's case does meet Nussbaum's second condition, for, as I have argued, Samson is unwilling with regard to his sin at the level of his second-order desire for the fulfillment of God's promise. Samson, then, isn't a fully willing participant in the sin which leads to his demise. This unwillingness with regard to his sin leads us to wonder, with Samson, whether God has dealt unlovingly with him. It is this unwillingness which makes the suffering appear undeserved and out of proportion. Moreover, it might be argued that what *prima facie* ruins a life is tragic whether or not it is deserved. That Samson's life is apparently ruined, then, is tragic, despite the fact that his own fault brings it upon him. We pity Samson because he is unwilling and because his life looks ruined. In this way, condition (2) also is fulfilled.

Nussbaum's third requirement for pity, the belief that one's own possibilities are similar to those of the sufferer, is the one that is most helpful for understanding how pity and fear are raised and purged by tragedy. The idea here is that the audience or reader of tragedy, when she is confronted with the experience of the tragic figure, realizes that this figure's experience is a real possibility for her. Nussbaum explains how this experience is tied to fear:

the pitier makes sense of the suffering by recognizing that she might herself encounter such a reversal; she estimates its meaning in part by thinking about what it would mean to encounter that herself, and she sees herself, in the process, as one to whom such things might in fact happen. That is why pity is so closely linked to fear.<sup>59</sup>

Thus, in the case of Samson, we are led to pity because it seems that somehow providence has dealt unlovingly with him. This realization simultaneously raises fear within us, for if Samson can be so dealt with by providence, then why should we fare any better? Milton's goal in this work, then, is to purge these passions by showing how providence can be good and loving even in Samson's case. This portrayal, then, is Milton's solution to the problem of self-destroying sin.

By raising and purging pity and fear in us, Milton is able to go beyond a merely theoretical solution to a pastoral or existentially effective one. Thus, from the perspective of tragedy, Samson himself becomes the solution; we gain peace and consolation by experiencing him.<sup>60</sup> He stands as a paradigm of comfort for all those aware of their own moral inadequacy.

Søren Kierkegaard portrays Job in a similar way. According to Kierkegaard, Job “left himself as a pattern to succeeding generations, his life as a principle of guidance to every man, his name as an assurance to the man, his own deeds as an encouragement to the striving.”<sup>61</sup> When one either suffers unforeseen evils, or lives in fear knowing that such suffering could at any time come, Job stands as a pattern, as an assurance that one can be preserved in such suffering. In the same way, Samson stands as a pattern for all, and as an eternal witness that God shapes our ends, rough-hew them how we will. Samson’s experience, then, suggests how self-destroying sin might be defeated and Samson himself stands as an answer to the existential aspect of this problem of evil.

Plantinga characterizes the existential problem of evil in the following account:

[F]aced with the shocking concreteness of a particularly appalling example of evil in his own life or the life of someone close to him, a believer may find himself tempted to take toward God an attitude he himself deplores; such evils incline him to mistrust God, to be angry with him, to adopt toward him an attitude of suspicion and distrust or bitterness or rebellion.<sup>62</sup>

The existential problem is the problem concretely raised for the particular sufferer. It is this aspect of the problem of evil that leads Plantinga to conclude that all theodicies seem “shallow, tepid, and ultimately frivolous.”<sup>63</sup> Adams suggests that this failure of standard theodicies stems from their global or generic focus.<sup>64</sup> The idea here is that most theodicies offer little or no comfort or hope to the individual actually suffering from such evil. Milton’s solution, however, is therapeutic; it offers both comfort and hope to those suffering from self-destroying sin. Hence, it is able to offer both a theoretical and a practical solution to the problem of self-destroying sin. The practical remedy is exemplified in Samson himself. We see that Samson repents of his sin and believes that God is not only able to forgive his sin, but also able to use even his sin-ravaged life to fulfill his original promise to Samson. The true existential and practical aspect of Milton’s solution, however, is not captured in these simple practical measures. Milton’s hope and intention rather is that in the very experience of Samson’s life, the one suffering from self-destroying sin would find her fear that God has forsaken her purged. Milton, therefore, extends the current discussion of the problem of evil by raising a previously neglected aspect of it, and by offering a solution which manages to avoid the existential shallowness of many contemporary theodicies.<sup>65</sup>

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#### NOTES

1. Book v, Chapter iv.
2. Marilyn McCord Adams, “Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of

God" in *The Problem of Evil*, ed. M. M. Adams and R. M. Adams (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 211.

3. Cf. Roderick Chisholm, "The Defeat of Good and Evil," first published in *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Association*, 42 (1968-9), pp. 21-38, revised and reprinted in *The Problem of Evil*, eds. M. M. Adams and R. M. Adams (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 53-68. Defeat, on Chisholm's view, is to be distinguished from 'balancing-off.' Balancing-off involves two unrelated states of affairs, one of which is good and the other bad to the same degree as the first part is good. The badness of the bad state of affairs is said to be balanced-off by the good state of affairs when the conjunction of these states of affairs is considered. The problem with balancing-off is that "when evil is balanced off, we may yet regret or resent its presence in the larger whole" (p. 58). Since the good part isn't organically connected to the bad part, the good could have been attained without the bad, and thus the bad part is regrettable because it was avoidable. The bad part is defeated when the good part is organically related to the bad part and outweighs it. In such a case, Chisholm claims there would be no reason to regret the evil part.

4. Adams, p. 211.

5. Adams, p. 211.

6. Adams, p. 212.

7. Adams, p. 212 (my emphasis).

8. It should be noticed that there is a distinction between culpable and non-culpable doing of horrendous evil. When, for example, a father accidentally backs his car over his daughter or when a mother unwittingly cannibalizes her child, the evil is horrendous but the perpetrator isn't culpable. In the discussion that follows, I will not focus upon this sort of doing of horrendous evil, but will instead confine my attention to the culpable doing of horrendous evil.

9. Adams, p. 214.

10. On the face of it, this problem needn't be confined to Christianity. It might be raised for Judaism and Islam as well. I will however limit my discussion to the problem as it is raised for Christianity.

11. I've modified Adams's own formal definition (Cf. p. 212, n8).

12. The persons in question are Christians—they have trusted God to redeem them from their sin. Thus, the simple solution that such persons just aren't among the elect or are among those who go to hell isn't a viable or relevant one.

13. The atheist, on the other hand, would respond to such cases as evidence against the existence of God. The distinction between this response and that of the Christian is important. The Christian doesn't reject the existence of God, but she does wonder how God can be good and loving. This doubt leads her to wonder whether she might be deceived about her own life. Perhaps, it doesn't have positive meaning. And even if it does have positive meaning at present, she sees no reason why it isn't possible that she could, in the future, sin in such a way that her life too would become a horror. In this way, the problem of evil is raised for believers and non-believers alike.

14. Cf. Harry Frankfurt's, "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person," *Journal of Philosophy*, LXVIII, 1 (1971), 5-20, which initiated the long literature on the hierarchical analysis of the will.

15. See footnote 8.

16. Romans 7.19.

17. An example having to do with a small evil might help to clarify this

point. John, who has recently been pulled over for speeding a third time and is dangerously close to losing his license, asks his wife and his friends to help him to quit speeding. He gives them permission to go to any length to keep him from speeding. If one of the people John has appealed to for help were to sit quietly by as he cruised down the highway at 85 mph, John would have grounds to complain and even blame this person for his action. He would contend that he had clearly asked his friend to help him avoid such an action, and thus she bears at least some responsibility for his action. In an analogous way, when a Christian is entangled in self-destroying sin, some question arises about God's power or goodness if he allows a Christian to render her whole life loathsome.

18. Adams, p. 217.

19. Cf. Chisholm on defeat note 3.

20. Adams, p. 218.

21. Adams, p. 218f.

22. Cf. Hebrews 4.15.

23. Adams, in some other articles which are forthcoming (e.g., "Chalcedonian Christology: a Christian Solution to the Problem of Evil") seeks to remedy the deficiencies of the defeaters cited above by suggesting that God in Christ casts His lot with the doers of horrendous evil by dying a ritually cursed death (cf. Dt. 21.23, Gal 3.13 "cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree"). By taking on this curse Christ makes void the curse upon God's people. While it is true that Christ takes on the curse and even is said to become sin (cf. 2 Cor. 5.21), he nevertheless isn't himself a perpetrator of evil. Thus, it isn't clear exactly how Christ's being ritually cursed would serve as a defeater for self-destroying sin.

24. Romans 8.28.

25. Aquinas, *Super ad Romanos*, chap. 8, lec. 6, quoted in E. Stump, "Aquinas on the Sufferings of Job" in *Reasoned Faith*, ed. E. Stump (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 336f.

26. All quotations are cited from John Milton, *Samson Agonistes* (hereafter SA) ed. F. T. Prince (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957).

27. The problem of evil in question is only the problem raised by self-destroying sin. The existential aspect of this problem then should not be confused with the existential problem of evil raised by the suffering of unwilling innocents such as is raised by Dostoevsky. The existential problem here will be exemplified by the life of Samson, and I will argue that from his life, as it is portrayed by Milton, Christians suffering from self-destroying sin may derive existential comfort.

28. A Nazarite is one dedicated or consecrated (Hebrew *nezîr*) to God (cf. Num. 6.2ff). The Nazarite vow indicates that one is called to separate himself "as holy to the Lord" (Num. 6.9).

29. A discussion of the precise nature of Samson's self-destroying sin would itself require a paper. The simple characterization of it takes it as Samson's revealing to Dalila the secret of his strength. While many interesting and difficult questions can be raised regarding this action, there simply isn't space enough to deal with them adequately in this paper.

30. The vividness with which Milton writes about blindness here and elsewhere in the play derive from his own experience. Milton went completely blind around 1652, almost twenty years before *Samson Agonistes* was published. This and other parallels have led many to see this work as reflecting Milton's own experience. Thus, F. T. Prince writes: "[Milton] chose the Hebrew champion, whose mighty strength was given by God for the liberation of His people, as a fitting parallel to himself, his intellectual prowess

dedicated to the achievement of truth and faith by his country. The seeming failure of Samson's mission . . . his overthrow, his blindness: all these features of the story could draw upon deep springs of personal emotion" (SA pp. 12-13). See also, A.N. Wilson, *The Life of John Milton* (Oxford: Oxford, 1983) 224-239.

31. Cf. SA 42-48. Samson's plight not only raises a problem for him, but also for others, in this case, Manoa. It serves as fuel for those opposed to the God of Israel as well:

I this pomp have brought  
Among the Heathen round; to God have brought  
Dishonour, obloquy, and oped the mouths  
Of Idolists, and Atheists. (449-53)

32. Note that Samson will not brook this complaint from his people: "That fault I take not on me, but transfer/ On Israel's Governors, and Heads of Tribes" (241-42). Despite this refusal to take responsibility, Samson can't deny that his failure destroyed the hopes of his people and left them in their suffering. In this sense, he has inflicted suffering upon his people; he is a perpetrator of evil upon them.

33. Cf. SA 120-121; 595; 678-651.

34. Cf. SA 378-80.

35. There are a number of closely related problems here which I'm not going to take up in this paper. For instance, it is possible that a variety of horrendous evil would arise even where an agent's second-order desires are not right as in Samson's case. In Samson's case (as Milton portrays it), however, his second-order desire is what makes his life meaningless in his view. In the context of Milton's play, this second-order willingness for God's promise is what makes Samson's case a tragic one. I will elaborate this point in Section VI.

36. An obvious objection to this line of reasoning is that human free will does, in fact, make it impossible for God to help. If this objection is valid at all, it requires qualification. Human free will, on the account sketched out here, makes it impossible for God to help only if there is no desire at any level for God's will. In Samson's case, he would have to have no desire for God to fulfill his promise to him. When a desire for God's will is removed, division in the will no longer remains. The agent uniformly wills to act against God's will, i.e., to sin. For this objection to apply to Samson's case, Samson's first-order desire to sin would have to be in accordance with whatever second-order desires he has.

37. As I have already noted, the criterion for self-destroying sin is meant to be objective. Thus, we consider Samson's estimation of his situation as an important indicator of his actual situation, though not necessarily an incorrigible one.

38. A. S. P. Woodhouse, ("Tragic Effect in Samson Agonistes," *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 28 [1958-59], pp. 205-22), writes of Samson's initial state: "Blinded, now, enslaved, the mockery of his enemies, Samson knows that all these evils have come upon him through his own weakness. He experiences bitterest remorse; but this is not repentance: it is too entirely self-centered for that, and it has issued in a degree of despair (itself a sin in the Christian view) which can entertain no thought of forgiveness, no ray of hope" (p. 207). In Woodhouse's view, then, the possibility of forgiveness would be sufficient to move Samson from remorse to repentance; it would be grounds for hope. But, it seems from this text that forgiveness alone offers no hope for Samson, because it cannot undo what he has done; it can't make him Israel's deliverer. In this sense, then, even forgiveness is insufficient to give

Samson's life positive meaning for him.

39. Milton's view of women is an area of great controversy. He is currently infamous for his sexism. While it is true that his portrayal of women is often reflective of the sexist attitudes of his time, a number of scholars argue that Milton also subtly undermines such views in the very texts that present them. Susanne Woods's comments on Dalila's statement, "In argument with men a woman ever / Goes by the worse, whatever be her cause" (903-4) deserve full quotation:

Radzinowicz dismisses this complaint as being "the pettish terms of an inadequate feminist." There is more to it, however. Dalila is using it, as she uses so much of her argument to try and gain Samson's sympathy. It is on the one hand merely the device of the strong and intelligent woman who has learned that a simpering presentation of "poor little me" often works better than an assertion of her own strength. Yet the statement is also true. Its proof is the Chorus's misogyny (ll 1010-60), which both Radzinowicz and Camille Wells Slight's have shown is not Milton's own. Women's wiles are so dangerous, with her "capacity not rais'd to apprehend / Or value what is best / In choice, / but ofttest to affect the wrong" (ll 1028-30). That the only solution is for man to exercise what the Chorus believes is his God-given "despotic power" over woman. The very outrageousness of this solution, from the perspective of Milton's lifelong devotion to human freedom, casts a glow of validation on Dalila's petulant complaint. ("How Free are Milton's Women?" in *Milton and the Idea of Woman*, ed. Julia Walker [Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988], pp. 29-30)

For other treatments of Dalila, cf. John Ulreich, "Incident to All Our Sex: The tragedy of Dalila" and Jackie DiSalvo, "Intestine Thorne: Samson's Struggle with the Woman Within" in the same volume.

40. Thus, Waddington writes: "Samson refuses [Dalila's] appeal in the same fashion that he imagines God refusing his, by invoking a standard of legalistic absolutism (750-53)" ("Melancholy Against Melancholy" *Calm of Mind*, ed. J. A. Wittreich, Jr. [Cleveland: Press of Case Western Reserve, 1971], p. 275).

41. Samson's case then isn't parallel only to those whose lives have been ruined in a way as dramatic as his, it is also parallel to all Christians who are acutely aware of the heinousness of their own sin.

42. John T. Shawcross, "Irony as Tragic Effect: *Samson Agonistes* and the *Tragedy of Hope*" in *Calm of Mind*, ed. J.A. Wittreich Jr. (Cleveland, OH: Press of Case Western Reserve, 1971), p. 293.

43. As his words to Harapha indicate, he would not only not regret his sin, but he would see all of the sufferings following from the sin to be the just deliverances of a gracious God. By saying that Samson doesn't regret his sin I seek to indicate only that he no longer considers the sin to have ruined his life beyond repair. Samson is repentant of his sin.

44. Suggesting that this rebellious pride is Samson's tragic fault, James Holly Hanford writes: "intoxicated by success Samson forgets to refer his victories to their source, and so becomes, in Milton's interpretation, an instance of classical hybris" ("*Samson Agonistes* and Milton in Old Age," in *John Milton, Poet and Humanist*, [Cleveland: Case Western Reserve University Press, 1966], p. 280).

45. Cf. Luke 7.47.

46. While it is true that it would have been better if Samson hadn't

sinned and therefore didn't have to experience the intense suffering he did, his character is nevertheless made glorious by his passing through this experience. God is glorified by using Samson in his ruin; there is no doubt for Samson or Israel that God is the true deliverer of Israel. Samson is glorious because God is glorified. To examine further just how and why Samson is made glorious by his sin and suffering, however, is beyond the scope of this paper.

47. Samson can only make God's promises untrue if he loses all desire for God's promise. Thus, only by relinquishing his second-order desire for God to fulfill his promise can Samson make God's word untrue.

48. *Hamlet* V.ii.10-11.

49. Insofar as the destruction of the temple marks the fulfillment of God's promise to Samson, it is a good specifically for Samson. It is, however, also a global good in that it is a good to all of Israel.

50. The audience or the reader of this play is now being addressed.

51. Fredson Bowers makes a similar point: "[Samson's] fall from grace did not alter God's purpose to crush the Philistines, but conditional upon his fall the means must necessarily change by which that purpose will in the end be unerringly fulfilled" ("Milton's *Samson Agonistes*," in *Hamlet as Minister and Scourge*, [Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia, 1989], p. 237).

52. If God had brought about the fulfillment of his promise despite Samson's sin, then Samson's sin wouldn't be related in any way to the defeating good and we would have balancing-off, not defeat.

53. Manoa at one point says: "Alas methinks whom God hath chosen once / To worthiest deeds, if he through frailty err, / He should not so o'erwhelm, and as a thrall / Subject him to so foul indignities, / Be it but for honour's sake of former deeds" (368-72). Samson's response indicates that this statement questions God's actions, "Appoint not heav'nly disposition, Father" (373). The Chorus also wonders how God's action can be just and they plead for God not to continue to deal unjustly as he seems to be (652-724). Cf. Woodhouse, p. 209. Furthermore, the judgments of the chorus and Manoa are used by Milton to relate authoritatively what, in fact, the significance of this final act is.

54. Seeing the defeat isn't an *ante-mortum* requirement. While the materials for the defeat are given in the midst of the suffering, the defeat itself may be seen only *post-mortum*. Thus, Samson need only see the defeat; it isn't necessary that he see and recognize it as such *ante-mortum*.

55. SA, "Of that sort of Dramatic Poem which is call'd Tragedy," lines 4-7. This conception of tragedy is drawn from Aristotle's *Poetics*. Milton's use of tragedy, though thoroughly Aristotelian, is also colored by Christian doctrine. Thus, according to James Holly Hanford, "by representing a clearly marked triumph of the human will over its own weakness, and by substitution of Providence for blind fate as the power that overrules the action, the play provides material for a different understanding of catharsis from that contemplated by Aristotle" ("*Samson Agonistes* and Milton in Old Age," in *John Milton, Poet and Humanist*, [Cleveland: Case Western Reserve University Press, 1966], p. 278).

56. Martha Nussbaum, "Compassion: The Basic Social Emotion," *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 13.1 (1996), p. 31.

57. Nussbaum, p. 33. Nussbaum notes that this concept can be found in the following places in Aristotle: *Rhetoric*, 1385b14, 1385b34-1386b7, b10, b12, b13; *Poetics*, 1453a4,5.

58. Nussbaum, p. 31.

59. Nussbaum, p. 35.

60. This is indicated in his comments on tragedy and in the closing chorus (1745-58).

61. Søren Kierkegaard, *Edifying Discourses*, trans. L. M. Swenson (New York: Harper, 1958), p. 67.

62. Alvin Plantinga, "Epistemic Probability and Evil," in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), p. 69.

63. Plantinga, p. 70.

64. Adams, pp. 212-215.

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