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From David Hawkes' s Introduction to Paradise Lost

Milton believed that the kind of knowledge that can be attained by the human mind was necessarily contingent, or limited. It was limited by cultural and historical context: The ancient Greeks, for example, had been culturally unable to arrive at monotheism. But it was also inherently limited by

its internal properties. The human mind is designed, or has developed, in such a way as to live in time and space. To exist outside time and space, the human mind would have to become something different than what it currently is. The same goes for such ideas as causality or extension; without the capacity to think according to these categories it would be simply impossible to have any kind of recognizably human experience. We do not, therefore, experience the world as it really is, we experience the world as it appears to human beings. And we know that this experience is contingent upon—limited by—the inherent nature of the human mind.

It follows that the concepts we form of things, the way they appear to us, do not correspond to the things in themselves. There are thus two kinds of truth: the truth “for us,” in what modern philosophers call the world of “phenomena,” and the truth “in itself,” in what is known as the world of “noumena.” In John Keats’ “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” for example, the poet laments that he can never experience the urn in its noumenal state, as it is in itself. Keats comes to this realization by considering the difference between the significance it possesses for him, as a modern Englishman, and the meanings it conveyed to its creator, an ancient Greek. The “phenomenal” appearance of the urn has changed, although the urn “in itself” has not. In a sense the noumenal is more true, because it is more absolute, than the phenomenal, but the truth “in itself” is by definition beyond the grasp of human thought. We are stuck with a consciousness that we know to be incomplete. This is philosophical terminology, but Milton expresses the same ideas in quasi-mythological, religious terms. *Paradise Lost* hinges upon the fundamental, unbridgeable, qualitative distinction between the world of earthly phenomena as experienced by Adam and Eve (and also by the poem’s all-too-human narrator), and the world of spiritual noumena as it is represented to them (and us) through the intricate system of characters, figures, and images that make up the Western mythological and religious traditions.

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