What does John Milton’s poetry actually do with Scripture? Insofar as the major poems of his maturity all present adaptations of biblical narrative, the theological aspects of Milton’s poetry might seem unavoidable. Theologically oriented studies of Milton tend not to focus, however, on the biblical intertextuality whose weave makes up his poetic matter and form. This recurring biblical intertextuality is central to what I call Milton’s “scriptural reasoning.” *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained*, and *Samson Agonistes* are each unique in how they respectively engage biblical intertexts; yet they all seem intended to provoke re-readings of various biblical passages, opening up interpretive possibilities, even aporias, that might otherwise remain unnoticed. In this respect, each poem offers an implicit instance of biblical interpretation. By means of such poetic elaboration, these works offer not merely eisegetic speculation but an active interweaving of widely varying biblical texts, the interpretive effects arising from the fact that the poems are not themselves Scripture. The very mode of poetic-imaginative discourse, as such, thus serves to foreground the interpretive action involved in any reading of biblical texts. At the same time, Milton’s mode of engagement with Scripture in his major poems also seems to parallel one of the hermeneutic ambitions of the Miltonic *De Doctrina Christiana*: that his own words would be glossed by the biblical text, rather than vice versa.¹ In this respect, Milton’s poetry often seems intended to do both less and more than interpret a given biblical passage, by driving seventeenth-century English readers back to those biblical writings, but with the ability to hear and read them anew. In unfolding how Milton’s mature poetry embodies such biblicism, I argue that he also draws upon a specific account of “reason” which is distinct from the modern (and postmodern) view that reason is intrinsically coercive. By “coercive” I do not mean that modernity views reason as destructive, but that its presumed function is predictive calculation for the purpose of controlling objects in the world.
This study considers Milton's biblical “reasoning” under three different aspects which stand in contrast to the modern view of reason. The term indicates, first, the discursive relationships within a network of specific claims that Milton engages in various ways: claims regarding what is real (ontology), claims about human nature (anthropology), and claims concerning human virtue (ethics) and civil society (politics). The present chapter outlines briefly a few of these main claims and their relationships, as they embody this “discursive” sense of “reasoning.” In a second sense, which might be called “Christo-poetic,” “reasoning” also indicates the indirect ways that Milton deploys Scripture to intimate how the above network of claims is intrinsic to the whole form and content of divine self-revelation. This divine self-revelation is most apparent for Milton in the Son of God, the embodiment simultaneously of Divine Reason and Rhetoric. Chapter 4 addresses Milton's Christology in detail, but we should understand from the outset that Milton interprets the incarnate Logos (both Ratio and Oratio) of John 1 as the gift of peaceful difference. Milton locates “reason,” in this Christo-poetic sense, at the center of his intertextual engagement of biblical narrative. Milton uses the term “reason” in a third sense, which might be called “ethico-cognitive,” to indicate action taken by the human faculty of “right reason,” or conscience. Milton recognizes that such a faculty may be corrupted, but its regeneration, in his view, is the basis for the very possibility of human participation in the divine life. Milton's explicit appeal to this latter sense of reason is a central element in the network of claims noted above. Part I of this study (Chapters 2 and 3) focuses upon the ways that these different senses of “reason” – discursive, Christo-poetic, and ethico-cognitive – inform Milton's prose writing.

In Parts II and III (Chapters 4 through 10) I argue that these different senses of “reasoning” are woven together in Milton's major poems to embody “scriptural reasoning” in its fullest sense: in the modes of intertextuality by which he juxtaposes different biblical narratives, images, and themes, but also in the polysemic appeals to divine, angelic, and human ratio figured through his biblicism. In effect, his mature poetry models a kind of biblical intertextuality that unites literary means and ends in a fruitful tension, in order to show the extent to which divine love can be intelligible to finite human beings as a gift that is neither merely coerced order nor chaotic. By deploying such intertextuality to present a Christocentric reading of the overarching biblical narrative, Milton's major poems offer an open-ended meditation on the relation between the divine Word as written text and the divine Word as living person. Amid the theological and
political consequences of nominalism, Milton’s poetic biblicism attempts to circumvent the tendency of modern reason to render divine love as either sheer necessity or merely arbitrary will. The larger argument of this book is that the very modes of biblical intertextuality in Milton's mature poetry embody his belief that “reason,” divine and human, is the poetic gift of peaceful difference. In other words, Miltonic “reason,” in this fullest sense, is a capacity for faithful otherness, or “troth” (peaceful difference), that is simultaneously creative (poetic) and freely self-donative (gift). As such, reason enables human participation in a goodness and beauty that precedes and shall outlast the effects of the Fall.

The aim of this first chapter is to identify and connect in an introductory way some of the key points in the network of claims that makes up the “discursive” sense of reasoning described above – the connections between ontology, anthropology, ethics, and politics. Taking initial points of departure from a comparison between Thomas Hobbes’s *Leviathan* and some of Milton's claims in *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, I contend that Milton's writing inhabits an account of reason that contrasts sharply not only with Hobbesian philosophy but also with some aspects of Reformed theology. Before considering that network of arguments, however, we must first address some recent critical trends that could disable readers from even apprehending my argument. The final section of this chapter provides a detailed overview of the book which, in order to be understood clearly, necessarily follows the engagement of these critical trends and the unfolding of Milton's discursive arguments.

**MODERN REASON AND MILTON STUDIES**

The unique character of the argument here risks misunderstandings that could arise from two main sources: from general assumptions regarding “reason” that are common in critical discourse today, and from the effects that those assumptions have had on the practice of Milton criticism in particular. The general risk of misunderstanding arises from the fact that much critical practice today inhabits a specific (though seldom acknowledged) story regarding the history of “reason.” That story is partially suggested by the common critical use of the epithet “logocentric.” By using that term to designate, in effect, a continuous tradition which deploys reason as a necessarily coercive suppression of Dionysian chaos, or “freedom,” such common usage reveals the presumption of a simple two-fold historical narrative. The first aspect of that narrative is a tendency to treat Christian accounts of reason as a species of popular Platonism. The second aspect is
to subsume both the Christian and Platonist senses of reason within the modern account of reason, understood as a calculative function the purpose of which is to enable mastery over “nature” or fortune. To tell the larger story of exactly how the claims of Christianity became subsumed within the imperatives of Enlightenment rationalism is not our present concern. My point here is simply that Milton did not participate in modern assumptions regarding the function and purpose of human reason. He was obviously alert to the challenges posed by the account of reason embodied by, for example, the writings of Machiavelli, Descartes, or Hobbes, but Milton’s prose and poetry indicate a consistent rejection of such a view. Thus, when I refer in the following chapters to Milton’s account of “reason,” I do not impute to him a Cartesian certainty. At the same time, to argue that Milton is not a modern rationalist does not imply that he advocates merely the chaotic opposite to such control. This study presents, in effect, a rhetorical account of the biblical polysemy used to depict reasoning in Milton’s prose and poetry. As such, the intelligibility of my argument requires that readers at least hold in question the modern account of reason that we might otherwise presume, according to which difference is necessarily violent. Only then can Milton’s view of reason as peaceful difference even begin to appear as a possibility. Let there be no misunderstanding on this point, however: my claim is simply that in order to understand Milton’s writing we need to avoid imputing to him a modern view of reason. Such a claim does not require that we agree with Milton in order to understand him; while challenging readers, for the sake of historical understanding, to hold in question some specific assumptions that we might normally fail to notice, the argument makes no claim regarding the truth or falsity of those assumptions.

In addition to precluding the very appearance of divine ratio as the gift of peaceful difference, the assumed binary opposition between coercive reason and chaotic freedom leads critics to characterize Milton as either an authoritarian or an advocate of radical indeterminacy (or as negotiating between the two poles). There are few topics in Milton studies upon which there is less critical consensus than the attempt to characterize Milton’s view of “reason.” Milton has been described as an epistemological rationalist who is skeptical of all sensory knowledge, an advocate for the “instrumentalization of thought” that entails the “removal of the transcendental imperative,” a logician participating fully in the reductive tendencies of Ramist method, a nominalist practitioner of a paradoxical baroque rationalism that celebrates irreducible indeterminacy, and an adherent to the metaphysical realism of earlier Christian humanism which opposed the predominant
nominalism of the period. Although each of these characterizations gets at some aspect of Milton’s writing, they all tend to be shaped by the alternation between describing Milton’s view of reason as either authoritarian or indeterminate.

According to John Rumrich, the most influential authoritarian version of Milton, which he calls the “Invented Milton,” is a variation of the “neo-Christian” Milton criticized by William Empson. The “Invented Milton” usually involves three elements: (a) a tendency to downplay the heretical elements in Milton’s writing that were part of his attempt to make the Christian God less apparently obnoxious (or at least less manifestly evil); (b) a resulting tendency to miss the extent to which Milton’s Paradise Lost is a “sincere” theodicy the outcome of which is not merely presumed; (c) the characterization of the Miltonic narrative voice as an overbearing pedant whose didactic aim is repeatedly to “surprise” readers with the discovery of their own fallenness. Against such an “Invented Milton” has arisen what Peter C. Herman calls the “New Milton Criticism,” which emphasizes the role of “indeterminacy,” “chaos,” or “incertitude” in Milton’s poetry and prose. After pointing out, correctly in my view, that Milton does not insist upon modern certainty, or clear and distinct ideas, these critics go on to argue for the reverse mirror-image of Milton as a champion of indeterminacy. From their assumption that reason – under the rubric of “coherence” or “consistency” – is necessarily coercive, the New Milton Critics deduce that Milton rejects such constraints and favors instead an indeterminate “freedom.” Any suggestion that Miltonic “freedom” is not a synonym for “randomness” may then be immediately interpreted as a tacit return to the authoritarian Milton, thereby inscribing the binary as a totalizing account. In this way, the recent critical attempt to privilege a Dionysian Milton over an Apollonian modernity simply assumes (rather than proving) and reinforces the very binary opposition that I shall argue Milton rejects.

If we do not presume that Milton’s biblicist rhetoric inhabits such a binary opposition between chaos and coercion (considered ontically), or radical doubt and certainty (considered epistemically), each of the three elements listed above by Rumrich which he uses to characterize the “Invented Milton” appears much differently. Thus, for example, one might agree with Empson that Paradise Lost grapples with divine justice in such a way that leads Milton to ideas often deemed heretical, but Empson’s influence upon “New Milton Critics” has tended to obscure the important rhetorical difference between heresy and apostasy. Although the former may, in a biographical sense, result in the latter, heresy and apostasy, considered as
rhetorical modes, face in opposite directions. The rhetorical orientation of writers who are labelled “heretics” by others, because they self-consciously introduce doctrinal novelty, typically aims to alter what constitutes the faith, often by affirming other elements of the faith that they continue to share with implied readers. By contrast, the rhetoric of an apostate may be just as biblicist, but it aims to persuade readers to abandon faith altogether. Heretical rhetoric appeals to shared premises of any given faith in order to change how those shared premises are interpreted; by contrast, apostate rhetoric attempts to show the untenability of even those most basic elements of the faith. The very question of which contrasting rhetorical end is being served on a given occasion will not even appear, however, if we fail to notice that these two modes of biblical intertextuality are different. Indeed, so-called “heretics” typically understand themselves to be more devoted to God than their opponents. The larger point here is that the tendency to miss the difference between heresy and apostasy results from the dominant critical habit of subsuming both terms within the motions of “freedom” (Dionysius), which is presumed to be constitutionally opposed to the coercive restrictions of “orthodoxy” (Apollo). By questioning this binary, we open the possibility of imagining how Milton could understand his own theological reflections as rooted in good faith, despite being deemed “heretical” by others; that is, as heresy but not necessarily apostasy.

In a comparable way, we may agree with Rumrich that Paradise Lost is a “sincere” theodicy, but we need not presume that radical doubt (if possible) is the only alternative to a rigid orthodoxy. We may, instead, ask whether Milton’s questioning of divine justice is rooted primarily in ontic or epistemic concerns. Is Milton’s theodicy sincere because he believes that God really is (or could be) unjust, or because humans are finite? By eliding the distinction between claims about a given reality (in this case, divine justice) and claims regarding what humans can know about that reality, such an approach tends to reduce any epistemic uncertainty into an ontic claim about the doubtfulness of the reality discussed. Milton may indeed be raising questions about either issue in Paradise Lost – the reality or the intelligibility of divine justice – but a continual conflation of the two will render any suggestion of creaturely limitation as a necessary flaw in Milton’s “God.” Finally, while the New Milton Critics rightly reject Stanley Fish’s image of the Miltonic narrator in Paradise Lost as an overbearing pedant, to emphasize mere indeterminacy or uncertainty per se as the center of Milton’s poetics is to presume that the categories of coercion and chaos exhaust Milton’s account of reality. If we react to the authoritarian Milton
of modern certainty with an emphatic but vague “uncertainty,” we risk missing the difference between a skepticism that is the rejection of faith and a questioning uncertainty that is actually the occasion for any genuine faith.

In this way, my larger argument here is not a refutation of the New Milton Criticism; rather, it extends what is best in such criticism, even as it describes the limitations that such criticism shares with much of so-called “neo-Christian” criticism. My argument corroborates the recent emphasis upon interpretive openness in Milton’s writings, but my analysis goes beyond the New Milton Criticism by setting Milton’s poetic strategies in the context of his biblicism. In that context, we can begin to understand how Milton’s “poetics of incertitude” can arise from his attempt to imitate biblical form, but also how such incertitude could be part of Milton’s attempt to let Scripture gloss his own writing. The fact that Milton’s poetic refusal to bind Scripture could itself be interpreted as a kind of “radical doubt” that rejects faith altogether is one of the ironies of Anglo-American culture today, in which people espousing religious faith so often deploy terms and attitudes closer to Cartesian certainty than to faith seeking understanding. To open authentically the questions arising from Milton’s view of reason thus requires, not the impossible modern pretense to view reality from nowhere, but that we hold in question the account of reason presumed by many analyses of Milton’s writing.12

Distinct from but related to these competing accounts of reason are contrasting accounts of what is real. Throughout this study, I use the term “ontology” in this general sense, to indicate “an account of what is real,” and not specifically to indicate only a traditional branch of metaphysics. I should also clarify here that I distinguish between “ontology” and “ontic” in a non-Heideggerian sense, to indicate merely the difference between “the study of being” and “being” respectively. In evaluating the view of reason that various critics impute to Milton, I show how their arguments presume what John Milbank calls an “ontology of violence.”13 I should emphasize that such a demonstration of argumentative presuppositions regarding what these critics take to be Milton’s view of reality (ontology) implies nothing about the personal beliefs of any given critic regarding ontology. Likewise, the fact that none of these critics advances any explicit claims about ontology is not relevant to my argument. Our concern here is with the ontology (account of reality) that these critical arguments impute to Milton, typically by means of their assumptions about the character of reason. An explicit disavowal of, or disregard for, metaphysical doctrine does not keep critics from imputing to Milton assumptions about what is
Milton’s Scriptural Reasoning

real. Thus, for example, in arguing against those critics, like John Dryden, who attempt to “cancel Miltonic ambiguity,” Joseph Wittreich makes no explicit claims regarding ontology, but simply presumes that the only alternative to the determinacy of Enlightenment rationalism is to “reclaim *Paradise Lost* as a poem of proliferating contradictions.” Although I agree strongly with Wittreich’s larger claim that Milton’s epic should be taught as a perspectival “battleground of intellectual paradigms,” Wittreich’s mode of argument assumes that the alternation between determinacy and indeterminacy exhausts the possible options regarding how to interpret reality in the poem. As a result, his characterization of *Paradise Lost* tends not to permit questions such as: (a) whether the poem might imply any degree of resolution to some of the intellectual battles that it presents; or (b) whether some contradictions in the poem might be more important than others; or (c) whether presumptuous Enlightenment certainty is the only alternative to accepting contradictory strife itself as the authoritative meaning of the poem. As any reader of *Areopagitica* could appreciate, Milton understood strife to be an unavoidable part of life in a fallen world, but he did not mistake that condition as the necessary reality for which humans are made, originally or finally. Ultimately, I contend that the most noble and generous aspirations of Wittreich’s New Milton Criticism, which aims to “dislodg[e] commonplaces” and to open “seemingly closed systems,” will be fulfilled only by going beyond the binaries of coercion versus chaos, or constrained versus unconstrained thinking. Such binaries inhabit an ontology of violence: that is, they presume that reality consists merely of either compulsion or its absence.

What I mean by an “ontology of violence” is, in some respects, comparable to the way that Michel Foucault describes “power”:

By power, I do not mean ‘Power’ as a group of institutions and mechanisms to ensure the subservience of the citizens to the state. By power, I do not mean, either, a mode of subjugation which, in contrast to violence, has the form of the rule. Finally, I do not have in mind a general system of domination exerted by one group over another. Although “power” is distinct from all these things, it is also the reality that gives rise to them. Instead, Foucault posits that power is a “multiplicity” of immanent “force relations” and “processes” which form into both “systems” and the contradictory “violence” that opposes such systems, as well as “strategies” which end up “embodied in the state apparatus.” In effect, he describes a pre-political reality: that is, an ontology, and specifically an ontology of force relations that gives rise to the compelled order of the
social systems and to the random forces of disorder and contradiction. The key point here is that my argument deploys the phrase, “ontology of violence,” in a manner similar to Foucault’s notion of “power”: to indicate not political oppression or its opposing “violence,” in Foucault’s sense, but the assumption that reality, in whatever form, is reducible to compulsion, or “force relations.” Against such a view, Milton posits that reality, both divine and created, is a gift of charity relations. Of course, the very possibility of a true gift, of genuine self-donation for the good of an other, is what an ontology of violence emphatically denies by reducing all giving to a function of compulsion. Nevertheless, such is Milton’s position, I contend, and our limited aim here is to disclose it as his view, despite the critical tendencies that would preclude its appearance. Political implications do, of course, arise from Milton’s ontology, just as they do indirectly from an ontology of violence, as with Foucault’s notion of “power”; such political implications, however, are not always linear or immediately transparent.

Beyond such general difficulties, readers who inhabit a modern binary view of reason and of Milton studies risk misconstruing some of the details of my analysis. Such risk is well illustrated by Peter Herman’s recent summary of the differences between the “Old” and the “New” Milton studies. According to Herman, the paradigm of the Old Milton studies involves three key claims: (1) “Milton is a poet of absolute, unqualified certainty”; (2) “Paradise Lost coheres”; and (3) “the critic’s task is to make the poem cohere.” Against such an emphasis upon “coherence” Herman argues, as we have noted, for the central place of “indeterminacy,” an ontic category which he seems to treat as a synonym for epistemic “incertitude.” We should notice, however, that Herman’s ensuing argument actually goes on to discuss three distinct, if potentially related, kinds of “coherence”: (1) the coherence of Paradise Lost specifically; (2) the intertextual relationships between various works in Milton’s corpus; (3) the relationship between Milton’s biography and the claims advanced in his published writing. Although these different aspects of “coherence” may be connected in critical arguments, as they are in Herman’s case negatively, these topics are not necessarily dependent upon one another. One could, for example, argue for the coherence of Paradise Lost, but insist on pivotal discontinuities in Milton’s corpus and/or biography. More importantly, to point out that there is a “consistency” between the claims advanced in any two different Miltonic texts does not entail or presume a “static” Milton whose politics or beliefs never changed. One may even go so far as to argue, on the basis of such textual similarity, that Milton continued to hold a specific
position on a given issue without ever implying that such a consistency applies even to other passages in the same texts, not to mention the rest of the Miltonic corpus.

Against the binaries that tend to shape Milton criticism, I must therefore point out that my argument here does not entail that Milton's texts always and everywhere advocate the same view of reason that he unfolds in his mature poetry. Likewise, the network of claims that I delineate below connects some of the rhetorical, logical, and exegetical threads that appear in Milton's writing, but this specific set of claims and their relations does not pretend to exhaust the meanings of Milton's poetry or prose. Most importantly, we may point out the logical relationships among these claims without implying that either Milton's biography or his corpus (intertextually or intratextually) is free from logical contradiction or from the fissures of fallen language. Thus, we may argue, along with John Rumrich, that Milton's "ethics and social agenda" and his "artistic and aesthetic expressions imply each other," without positing a belief in the "Invented Milton," or in the comparable "Whig Milton," whose life and writing are presumed to be free of contradiction. Rather, amid Milton's widely ranging audiences, occasions, and rhetorical cross-purposes, there are also some variously and partially repeated arguments and animating principles whose implications he draws out across texts. Our focus here is upon those connections rather than upon the numerous disconnections that are obviously worth critical attention.

Thus, to argue, as I shall, that on a given topic Milton makes the same claim in two different texts does not presume or imply a static Milton. Indeed, if Milton were to present the very same argument to the House of Commons in the 1650s and in the 1670s, such a "static" repetition of claims could, in fact, indicate a complete reversal in his thinking, if not a desire for martyrdom. What we actually find, however, is that the shifts in Milton's prose styles and modes of argument reveal an increasingly subtle sensitivity to the assumptions and expectations of those he aimed to persuade. Moreover, I contend that the author of Artis Logicae Plenior Institutio was capable of employing either logical consistency or contradiction when it suited his rhetorical aims. Thus, in the same way that, for example, Herman's argument for Milton's "poetics of incertitude" asserts that there is a continuity between Milton's mode of critique in Areopagitica and a radicalization of that mode in Paradise Lost, my argument here delineates some selected continuities in Milton's writing, amid both intratextual and intertextual ambivalences and unresolved tensions. The interesting critical questions arise, of course, from debates