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John Calvin's Multiplicity Thesis

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Abstract: John Calvin holds that the fall radically changed humanity's moral and epistemic capacities. Recognizing that should lead Christian philosophers to see that philosophical questions require at least two sets of answers: one reflecting our nature and capacities before the fall, and the other reflecting our nature and capacities after the fall. Our prelapsarian knowledge of God, the right, and the good is direct and noninferential; our postlapsarian knowledge of them is mostly indirect, inferential, and filled with moral and epistemic risk. Only revelation can move us beyond fragmentary and indeterminate moral and theological knowledge.

Keywords: John Calvin; philosophy; moral knowledge; knowledge of God

1. Introduction

John Calvin is not usually viewed as a philosopher. There is no entry for Calvin in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Indeed, Calvin is famously hostile to philosophy:

"How lavishly in this respect have the whole body of philosophers betrayed their stupidity and want of sense? To say nothing of the others whose absurdities are of a still grosser description, how completely does Plato, the soberest and most religious of them all, lose himself in his round globe? What must be the case with the rest, when the leaders, who ought to have set them an example, commit such blunders, and labour under such hallucinations?" (Calvin [1559] 1989, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* I, 5, 11)¹

It is easy, however, to overstate the case. Philosophy's problem is that it tends to focus solely on worldly matters, neglecting spiritual dimensions relevant to attaining true wisdom:

"... whatever a man knows and understands, is mere vanity, if it is not grounded in true wisdom; and it is in no degree better fitted for the apprehension of spiritual doctrine than the eye of a blind man is for discriminating colors. We must carefully notice these two things—that a knowledge of all the sciences is mere smoke, where the heavenly science of Christ is wanting; and man, with all his acuteness, is as stupid for obtaining of himself a knowledge of the mysteries of God, as an ass is unqualified for understanding musical harmonies." (Calvin [1546] 1848, Commentary on I Corinthians 1:20)

Philosophy, in other words, is not intrinsically incapable of attaining truth, knowledge, and wisdom, any more than science is; its difficulty is that it tries to do so without the aid of religion, without "the heavenly science of Christ." We cannot understand by ourselves the mysteries of God; we require revelation. Secular philosophy and even natural theology, in themselves, can do little more than point beyond themselves to something greater:³

"Reason is intelligent enough to taste something of things above, although it is more careless about investigating these . . . there is one kind of understanding of earthly things; another of heavenly." (II, 2,13).⁴

In this essay I argue that, despite his disparaging remarks about the subject, Calvin is a philosopher with an innovative and intriguing metaphilosophical position.⁵ Calvin offers answers to philosophical questions. In fact, he offers at least two answers to each



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philosophical question pertaining to ethics, metaethics, epistemology, and the philosophy of mind. He thinks that any Christian philosophy requires multiple answers to central questions of philosophy. I call that Calvin's Multiplicity Thesis.

This opens space for a range of philosophical positions. If Calvin is right, Christian philosophers need not an answer, but at least a pair of answers to basic philosophical questions. We cannot give unified answers to questions such as:

Who am I? What am I? What can I know? How can I know? What should I do? How should I decide?

They each require n-tuples of answers, one for each stage of our relationship with God.

Recognizing that the fall has deep implications for Calvin's philosophy and theology is commonplace. What I hope to accomplish here is to explicate the nature of its implications and map the space of Christian philosophies that are possible as a consequence.

2. The Fall

Calvin understands the fall of mankind as an epistemological catastrophe as well as a moral catastrophe. It not only expels us from the Garden; it hobbles us. It damages our cognitive as well as our moral capacities.⁶ Prelapsarian epistemology differs from postlapsarian epistemology; prelapsarian ethics differs from postlapsarian ethics. There is such an important divide between these two realms that many philosophical questions require at least two answers—one for each side of the lapsarian divide:

Answer before the fall—when the world was as it was designed to be, and we were as we were designed to be.

Answer after the fall—now that we are less than we were designed to be.

Other answers may be required as well, for there may be other theological divisions that make a philosophical difference. We may need distinct answers before and after redemption, for example, or for the new heaven and new earth that arise when we encounter Christ, not through a glass darkly, but face-to-face. Here, however, I shall focus on the philosophical ramifications of the fall, for it is there that Calvin elaborates those ramifications most clearly.

In discussing philosophical questions, Calvin makes common use of counterfactual conditions such as "if Adam had stayed sinless" (I, 2, 1) and "if the depravity of man's mind did not lead it away from the right approach" (I, 2, 2). He often splits his response into two parts, as here:

"... it relates firstly, to the condition in which we were originally created and secondly, to our condition immediately after Adam's fall." (III, 15, 1)

The Multiplicity Thesis generates a problem, creating a gap between two kinds of entity, two kinds of norms, two sets of methodologies, two modes of description, two modes of knowledge, etc. How do things on the sides of the gap relate?

Calvin's answer depends on his analysis of the fall. He sees it as bringing about our corruption and degradation, and not only in a moral or practical sense. It corrupts and degrades our faculties of knowledge. It corrupts our intuitions and our reasoning ability. It corrupts our decision-making capacities. It distances us from God, epistemically as well as morally. As Karl Barth puts it, "Between what is possible in principle and what is possible in fact there inexorably lies the fall."

Calvin famously begins the Institutes by saying that our knowledge of God and our knowledge of ourselves are intertwined; we cannot know ourselves without a knowledge of God, and we cannot know God without a knowledge of ourselves.⁸ The fall, however, complicates our ability to know both. We not only have to seek such knowledge with

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impaired faculties; we must recognize our fallen condition and understand that it entails the need for two aspects of self-knowledge. We must know what we were intended to be, and were before the fall, as well as what we have become as a result of our own sin.

"... we cannot clearly and properly know God unless the knowledge of ourselves be added. This knowledge is twofold,—relating, first, to the condition in which we were at first created; and, secondly to our condition such as it began to be immediately after Adam's fall. For it would little avail us to know how we were created if we remained ignorant of the corruption and degradation of our nature in consequence of the fall." (I, 15, 1)

Doing this is difficult for us. "The corruption and degradation of our nature in consequence of the fall" is not just a marring, beclouding, or obscuring of it. The fall corrupts and degrades our epistemic faculties as well as our moral character. There is not only something else to know, something from which we are at a greater distance, though all that is true. We must carry out that more difficult task with weakened, damaged tools. That has implications for epistemology, for what we can know and how we can come to know it. It has implications for who we are, for what we can become, and for how we ought to make decisions. It affects theories of meaning and reference, for it has implications about how our words can relate to the world. It even has implications for political philosophy, for how we can relate to one another.

To say more about these implications, we need to understand the nature and extent of the corruption and degradation of our faculties. Something is retained; Adam is still Adam after the fall.

"On the other hand, soundness of mind and integrity of heart were, at the same time, withdrawn, and it is this which constitutes the corruption of natural gifts. For although there is still some residue of intelligence and judgement as well as will, we cannot call a mind sound and entire which is both weak and immersed in darkness. As to the will, its depravity is but too well known. Therefore, since reason, by which man discerns between good and evil, and by which he understands and judges, is a natural gift, it could not be entirely destroyed; but being partly weakened and partly corrupted, a shapeless ruin is all that remains." (II, 2, 12)

We might put Calvin's position this way. Intelligence is retained in a weakened and corrupted form; its soundness is destroyed. Judgment, both theoretical and practical, is retained, but weakened and corrupted; integrity is destroyed. We retain our will, but it too is weakened and corrupted. Our freedom is destroyed. We retain a love of truth, but our ability to attain it is limited within the sphere of the natural world, or gone altogether with regard to the supernatural.

It is worth pausing for a moment to consider Calvin's distinction between weakening and corrupting these faculties. Reason is weak in that it can no longer see what is written on the heart or in the book of the world very clearly. Though he sometimes speaks that way, it is not blind. But its vision is poor. The faculty remains, but in a diminished form, less able to recognize a priori truths, draw inferences, construct and evaluate hypotheses, recognize moral qualities, weigh moral considerations, and, in general, engage in other intellectual tasks. It is corrupted in the sense that it is specifically weak of will; it is tempted to let bias, self-interest, desire, and other inappropriate factors affect its operation.

3. Calvin's Application of the Multiplicity Thesis

As a result of the fall, Calvin contends, Christian philosophers need at least two answers for each philosophical question:

One describing how things were before the fall, and would have been now without it—with our original moral and epistemic abilities;

The other, how they are now, after the fall—with our weakened and corrupted moral and epistemic abilities.

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There is a moral and epistemic gap between our prelapsarian and postlapsarian conditions.

The closest analogue to Calvin's position in later Christian philosophy may be Aquinas's theory of analogical predication. But Calvin's position is far more radical. There is not merely an epistemic and semantic gap between the natural and the divine, between knowledge, power, wisdom, and other qualities as exemplified in this world and the knowledge, power, and wisdom of God. There is, for Calvin, a vast epistemic, semantic, and moral gap between us and everything—even ourselves—after the fall. All predication, for Calvin, ends up as analogical.

There is another crucial difference between Calvin's view and that of Aquinas: We did this ourselves. We sold ourselves into slavery, damaged our eyes, and went into exile. We cannot get back on our own. Only God has the needed causal power. We cannot redeem ourselves, any more than the slave can purchase his own freedom or the near-sighted can do surgery on their own eyes.

Calvin's own application of the Multiplicity Thesis is sweeping. He uses it to interpret the divide between Platonic and Aristotelian approaches to central questions of philosophy. To put it crudely, Plato, "the most religious of all the philosophers and the most sensible" (I, 5, 11), described how things were before the fall; Aristotle, how they are (or, more accurately, how we are) afterward.

Before the fall, we were capable of attaining a priori knowledge, knowledge written on the heart, including knowledge of God and God's commands. After the fall, we still have knowledge written on the heart, but our ability to discern it is much reduced. We must rely on revelation for our knowledge of God's nature and God's commands. Our knowledge is entirely, or almost entirely, a posteriori knowledge, derived from experience of the world and from revelation.

Calvin is, broadly, in the Platonic tradition, siding with Plato and Augustine against Aristotle and Aquinas. However, he deviates from it in an important way. A way that foreshadows Descartes's evil deceiver. He qualifies the Augustinian resolution of Platonism's epistemological problem. Augustine had put Plato's forms into the mind of God as God's ideas, and maintained that God illumined some of the forms to us, enabling us to anchor our ideas and our language to ideas in the mind of God. That solved the problem of skepticism that had plagued Plato's doctrine of forms, for Plato had left it unclear how it was possible for us to gain knowledge of the forms. Within a generation, the Academy had become a center of skepticism, and 'Academic' had become synonymous with 'skeptic.' Augustine's position is stable, however, for God, who is omnipotent and supplies the causal power linking our minds to the forms.

Calvin takes himself to be explicating Augustine, not disagreeing with him. Calvin's Multiplicity Thesis generates a problem for this view, however, for the Augustinian resolution, in his opinion, is prelapsarian. It works before the fall—but only before the fall. After the fall, our nature has been corrupted and degraded. We do not need something external, such as Descartes's demon, to make us question our access to the truth; we have done it ourselves.

Our minds are so blinded that they cannot perceive the truth, and all our senses are so corrupt that we wickedly rob God of his glory. (II, 6, 1)

Our minds are no longer illuminated in the same way. God's action is the same, but we are no longer able to receive as clearly. The Augustinian resolution of Platonism's epistemological problem thus breaks down.¹²

Accordingly, Augustine, in speaking of this inability of human reason to understand the things of God, says, that he deems the grace of illumination not less necessary to the mind than the light of the sun to the eye (August. de Peccat. Merit. et Remiss. lib. 2 cap. 5). Moreover, not content with this, he modifies his expression, adding, that we open our eyes to behold the light, whereas the mental eye remains shut, until it is opened by the Lord. (II, 2, 25)

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Calvin represents an important milestone on the path to Descartes. Descartes, from this perspective, tries to reinforce the Augustinian doctrine of illumination; Calvin seeks to limit it. Descartes tries to combat the skeptic, finding a foundation on which he can rebuild the full structure of human knowledge, including a priori knowledge that Plato would have seen as knowledge of the forms. Calvin would have little hope that it could be done. We can regain that knowledge only with the help and grace of God.

Before the fall, Calvin embraces a strong form of rationalism. We have immediate knowledge of a priori truths, including truths about the forms, about God, about God's commands, and about ethical truths. After the fall, in contrast, we are left with at best a moderate rationalism. Some writing remains on the heart—we still have some capacity for a priori knowledge—but that capacity is limited. Our path to that innate knowledge generally goes through experience or revelation. We can access what is written on the heart only with the help of something a posteriori. Knowledge of the forms is still possible, but it is mediated and inferential rather than direct and immediate.

Augustine's doctrine of illumination, in short, offers us a plausible account of our knowledge of the forms before the fall. After the fall, our minds are not illumined in the same way.

Calvin talks about the diminution of illumination in two ways. Sometimes he suggests that, after the fall, the light of illumination itself no longer shines:

"I feel pleased with the well-known saying which has been borrowed from the writings of Augustine, that man's natural gifts were corrupted by sin, and his supernatural gifts withdrawn; meaning by supernatural gifts the light of faith and righteousness, which would have been sufficient for the attainment of heavenly life and everlasting felicity. Man, when he withdrew his allegiance to God, was deprived of the spiritual gifts by which he had been raised to the hope of eternal salvation. Hence it follows, that he is now an exile from the kingdom of God, so that all things which pertain to the blessed life of the soul are extinguished in him until he recover them by the grace of regeneration." (II, 2, 12)

Sometimes, however, Calvin speaks as if our minds are still illumined, but we are no longer able to perceive God's light in the same way. The light shines as it did before, but we have drawn the shades.

"... we open our eyes to behold the light, whereas the mental eye remains shut, until it is opened by the Lord." (II, 2, 25)

This points to the possibility that God reopens our mental eyes, that Paul's "new man" can once again see, at least partially, through a glass darkly, perhaps, what God has illumined. 14

The metaphors of exile and closing of our mental eyes both imply that our capacities, after the fall, are much diminished. There is, however, an important difference. The exile metaphor suggests that God has turned out the light; any effort on our part to open our eyes is fruitless without action from God. The closed-eyes metaphor suggests that the light is still on, but that we have closed our eyes to it. This in turn seems to imply that we could act to restore our ability to see what we had seen before the fall without any further action from God. But these are not as far apart as that makes them sound, for Calvin makes it clear that we cannot open our eyes on our own; we require God's grace.

There is much more to be said about the contrast between our pre- and postlapsarian conditions. We have not yet begun to say anything about the nature of philosophy after our redemption in Christ, much less in the kingdom of God or in the new Jerusalem. Before considering those questions, however, it is important to isolate the core of the Multiplicity Thesis, which is independent of any particular construal of an appropriate pre- or postlapsarian philosophy. Calvin's key contribution is that a Christian philosophy should not rest content with a single philosophical theory or attitude. We cannot simply be realists, or anti-realists, or foundationalists, or fallibilists, or moral realists, or constructivists, and so on. We have to recognize that the fall marked a sharp divide. Philosophical theories

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adequate to our circumstance now, after the fall, do not capture the circumstance in which and for which we were created.

We are, in short, more than we have become. We were meant for more. That must be at the heart of any Christian philosophy.

4. Knowledge of God

There is not space here to explore all the philosophical implications of Calvin's view thoroughly. I do want to examine one of central interest to Calvin: the possibility of knowledge of $\rm God.^{15}$

Calvin believes that we have some a priori knowledge of God: "some idea of God always exists in every human mind" (I, 3, 3). Indeed, "a sense of Deity is indelibly engraven on the human heart." (I, 3, 3). This is Calvin's sensus divinitatis, the sense of the divine, that remains in us even after the fall. 16

"That there exists in the human minds and indeed by natural instinct, some sense of Deity, we hold to be beyond dispute, since God himself, to prevent any man from pretending ignorance, has endued all men with some idea of his Godhead, the memory of which he constantly renews and occasionally enlarges, that all to a man being aware that there is a God, and that he is their Maker" (I, 3, 1)

Before the fall, our knowledge of God was immediate, direct, and noninferential, though still fragmentary; a finite being cannot fully comprehend an infinite God. We had some knowledge of God as creator, as author of our being, as savior, as "the origin and fountain of all goodness." We understood God's commands and felt a natural love for God.

After the fall, however, our knowledge of God is fleeting and indistinct. It is indeterminate, easily resisted, hard to cultivate, and inferential. The sense of the divine gives us glimpses, but we must, through careful attention, diligent study, and judicious reasoning, build an admittedly incomplete portrait of God from them.¹⁷

To return to Augustine's metaphor of illumination, our innate sense of the divine gives us flashes of lightning, giving us glimpses of God and the things that God has written on our hearts. But this is nothing like the light that bathed our minds before the fall.

Their discernment was not such as to direct them to the truth, far less to enable them to attain it, but resembled that of the bewildered traveler, who sees the flash of lightning glance far and wide for a moment, and then vanish into the darkness of the night, before he can advance a single step. (II, 2, 18)

We are able to patch together the glimpses that the sense of the divine provides to a limited extent, not merely through what has been traditionally known as natural theology, but also, and even primarily, through the contrast between God and the self and its depravity. We come to know God by coming to know ourselves, and come to know ourselves through knowing God. "Our wisdom, in so far as it ought to be deemed true and solid Wisdom, consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves" (I, 1, 1). The power of the sensus divinitatis is real:¹⁸

"For, in the first place, no man can survey himself without forthwith turning his thoughts towards the God in whom he lives and moves; because it is perfectly obvious, that the endowments which we possess cannot possibly be from ourselves; nay, that our very being is nothing else than subsistence in God alone." (I, 1, 1)

What is true of our faculties, "the endowments which we possess," is also true of the world, "the theater of God's glory" (179, I xiv 20), and its many gifts to us:

"In the second place, those blessings which unceasingly distil to us from heaven, are like streams conducting us to the fountain." (I, 1, 1)

So far, these sound like undeveloped cosmological/teleological/criteriological arguments for the existence of God. The excellence we find in ourselves and the world, the argument seems to go, entails the existence of its even more excellent cause. However, the more compelling argument, in Calvin's view, rests not on excellence but on deficiency. The fall obscures God from us, but also impels us to seek knowledge of God.

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"Here, again, the infinitude of good which resides in God becomes more apparent from our poverty. In particular, the miserable ruin into which the revolt of the first man has plunged us, compels us to turn our eyes upwards; not only that while hungry and famishing we may thence ask what we want, but being aroused by fear may learn humility." (I, 1, 1)

In short, wonder and appreciation provide reasons to look for and believe in God, but feelings of inadequacy and shame provide more powerful reasons.

"For as there exists in man something like a world of misery, and ever since we were stript of the divine attire our naked shame discloses an immense series of disgraceful properties every man, being stung by the consciousness of his own unhappiness, in this way necessarily obtains at least some knowledge of God." (I, 1, 1)

Calvin's natural theology, then, takes an unusual form. Our negative qualities provide more evidence for God's existence than our positive qualities do. We infer God's existence and excellence not so much from the good qualities of ourselves and the world as from our own negative qualities.

"Thus, our feeling of ignorance, vanity, want, weakness, in short, depravity and corruption, reminds us that in the Lord, and none but He, dwell the true light of wisdom, solid virtue, exuberant goodness. We are accordingly urged by our own evil things to consider the good things of God; and, indeed, we cannot aspire to Him in earnest until we have begun to be displeased with ourselves Every person, therefore, on coming to the knowledge of himself, is not only urged to seek God, but is also led as by the hand to find him." (I, 1, 1)

"Of course, we do not recognize the full extent of our own deficiencies until we form the idea of a perfect God. The gap between our own intelligence, wisdom, virtue, and power and the corresponding qualities in God is not merely vast; it is infinite. Only when we conclude that God exists, therefore, do we truly attain self-knowledge. That greater sense of our own inadequacy impels us toward God even more strongly." $(I, 1, 2)^{19}$

The fall thus creates distance between man and God, but also provides the force that impels us toward God. It damages our faculties, impairing our ability to know God. It takes the light with which God had illumined the mind and leaves only occasional flashes of insight. It creates an intervening fog, making it difficult for us to discern God's nature, commands, and call.

Nevertheless, it leaves little room for doubt that there is a God: "we cannot open our eyes without being compelled to behold Him" (I, 5, 1). We cannot comprehend the essence of God, which remains "incomprehensible, utterly transcending all human thought". When we consider ourselves and the world around us, however, we find that "his glory is engraven in characters so bright, so distinct, and so illustrious, that none, however dull and illiterate, can plead ignorance as their excuse" (I, 5, 1).

5. Calvin's Paradox

The thought that we can know that God is, but not what God is, is hardly original with Calvin. But Calvin develops from this position a paradox that seems to me unique, and to bring us back to the core of the Multiplicity Thesis. The world serves as a mirror of the divine.²⁰

"Hence, the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews elegantly describes the visible worlds as images of the invisible (Heb. 11: 3), the elegant structure of the world serving us as a kind of mirror, in which we may behold God, though otherwise invisible. Hence it is obvious, that in seeking God, the most direct path and the fittest method is, not to attempt with presumptuous curiosity to pry into his essence, which is rather to be adored than minutely discussed, but to contemplate

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him in his works, by which he draws near, becomes familiar, and in a manner communicates himself to us." (I, 5, 9)

What is true of the world is also true of us. We are ourselves models of God:

"Hence certain of the philosophers have not improperly called man a microcosm (miniature world), as being a rare specimen of divine power, wisdom, and goodness, and containing within himself wonders sufficient to occupy our minds, if we are willing so to employ them." (I, 5, 3)

The view that nature is a mirror of God, and that we ourselves are microcosms of God, would seem to give us hope that we can know far more of God than His mere existence. After all, nature and humanity both have a structure that we can understand, at least in part. If we can attain knowledge of some laws of nature, and nature is a mirror of the divine, can we not therefore attain some knowledge of the laws of God?

With sufficient humility, we might indeed be able to attain such knowledge. Our pride, however, will not let us. We suppress this knowledge because it would presuppose recognition of the depth of our own inadequacy. We prefer to see the mind as a mirror of nature, or even, as in various forms of idealism, antirealism, constructivism, and so on, as the architect, builder, or projector of nature. We feel drawn toward a vision of ourselves as creators. We want to see ourselves as capable, on our own, of understanding the world without reference to something higher.

Calvin calls minds who seek to understand the world and themselves without appealing to God "monster minds." Such minds "are not afraid to employ the seed of Deity deposited in human nature as a means of suppressing the name of God" (I, 5, 4). Calvin has little respect for a person with such a mind; "substituting nature as the architect of the universe, he suppresses the name of God" (I, 5, 4).

Even though the world is a mirror of God, and we ourselves, in a different way, are something like mirrors of God, we fail to recognize the face of God in ourselves and the world around us. We put ourselves or nature in God's place, thinking of one or both as self-sufficient. As soon as we do so, we take our own conceptions, our own mistaken self-images, our own illusions, desires, and confusions, and project them onto the world and onto whatever concept of the divine we manage to form.

"Hence that immense flood of error with which the whole world is overflowed. Every individual mind being a kind of labyrinth, it is not wonderful, not only that each nation has adopted a variety of fictions, but that almost every man has had his own god." (I, 5, 12)

Calvin gives us here a classic argument for skepticism, the argument from variability (Striker 1983).

- 1. Variability—people indulge in varied superstitions, forming various conflicting concepts of God.
- 2. Undecidability—there is no way to tell who if anyone is right.
- 3. Skepticism—"the human mind, which thus errs in inquiring after God, is dull and blind in heavenly mysteries" (I, 5, 12).

On our own, therefore, we would be left with little more than skepticism.

"Some praise the answer of Simonides, who being asked by King Herod what God was, asked a day to consider. When the king next day repeated the question, he asked two days; and after repeatedly doubling the number of days, at length replied, 'The longer I consider, the darker the subject appears.' He, no doubt, wisely suspended his opinion, when he did not see clearly: still his answer shows, that if men are only naturally taught, instead of having any distinct, solid, or certain knowledge, they fasten only on contradictory principles, and, in consequence, worship an unknown God" (I, 5, 12)

The reasons that the wonders of the world and the excellences as well as deficiencies of our own nature supply for concluding that God exists, therefore, do not become, for us,

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reasons to conclude anything in particular about the nature of God. That is not because they do not constitute such reasons; indeed, they should lead us to conclude that both nature and the mind point us toward God and give us knowledge of God just as mirrors point us toward and give us knowledge of the objects reflected in them. But, after the fall, we are constitutionally incapable of responding in the way we should and in principle could. The fall has kept us from understanding God's nature.

"In vain for us, therefore, does Creation exhibit so many bright lamps lighted up to show forth the glory of its Author. Though they beam upon us from every quarter, they are altogether insufficient of themselves to lead us into the right path. Some sparks, undoubtedly, they do throw out; but these are quenched before they can give forth a brighter effulgence." (I, 5, 14)

Before the Fall, then, we see God's glory in the world around us, and can attain a posteriori knowledge of God's nature from the world and from ourselves. After the Fall, the world hints toward God, but we can no longer attain determinate knowledge of God from experience of the world or ourselves. The evidence is still there, but we can no longer see it as evidence; we will not allow ourselves to see it. That, in short, is why we need revelation.

6. Revelation

After the fall, our a priori knowledge of God is fleeting, inferential, and depends on self-knowledge, which is itself entangled with knowledge of God. A posteriori knowledge is indeterminate or impossible for us, even though the evidence is there, if only we could permit ourselves to see it as evidence of God's nature. Without revelation, we would be left with skepticism or at best a vague spirituality, a conjecture that there is a higher being of an unknown and unknowable character, a "something, I know not what," whose relation to the world would remain a mystery.

Revelation changes that picture entirely. We need revelation to know God as redeemer. We need it even to recognize God as creator. We need it for determinacy and for de re knowledge. Otherwise, we would be left with an unclear and indistinct concept of God that could yield only de dicto knowledge, and very little of that.

"I am only showing that it is necessary to apply to Scripture, in order to learn the sure marks which distinguish God, as the Creator of the world, from the whole herd of fictitious gods." (I, 6, 1)

Calvin sees revelation as testimony, giving us knowledge as any kind of testimony does. He moreover gives a recursive theory of revelation. We need an account of the acquisition of revealed knowledge as well as an account of the transfer of revealed knowledge in the Word.

Understanding both acquisition and transfer requires us to understand the epistemic role of Christ. To grasp that, it may help to think about the process by which someone might recognize something as a mirror. Imagine a person sitting in a room—a restaurant, say—seeing people in the next room talking, eating, and laughing. The room appears to be large, extending far beyond the edge of the room the diner inhabits. Suddenly, the diner has a gestalt shift, perhaps catching, out the corner of one eye, a movement on the right side of that room matching a movement clearly observed on the left. The diner realizes that the next room is the same size as this room, and that the people who appear to be on the left are those on the right reflected in a mirror, cleverly placed to make the restaurant appear to be twice its current size. The diner did not naturally recognize the mirror as a mirror. Nor did anything in the mirror itself indicate its nature as a reflection. The diner had to see something on both sides to realize that the mirror was a mirror.

Just so, to see the world and ourselves as mirrors of God, we have to see something on both sides. Viewing one side alone cannot support such a conclusion. Christ supplies that view. Man and God at once, Christ offers us the opportunity for the gestalt shift, the switch to seeing the world and ourselves as mirrors of the divine.

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Of course, that shift also offers much more. We learn not only what we can learn from seeing ourselves and the world as microcosms of divinity but also an aspect of God as redeemer that we could not have derived from those sources, no matter how clearly we might be able to see them.

"I speak only of that simple and primitive knowledge, to which the mere course of nature would have conducted us, had Adam stood upright. For although no man will now, in the present ruin of the human race, perceive God to be either a father, or the author of salvation, or propitious in any respect, until Christ interpose to make our peace; still it is one thing to perceive that God our Maker supports us by his power, rules us by his providence, fosters us by his goodness, and visits us with all kinds of blessings, and another thing to embrace the grace of reconciliation offered to us in Christ. Since, then, the Lord first appears, as well in the creation of the world as in the general doctrine of Scripture, simply as a Creator, and afterwards as a Redeemer in Christ,—a twofold knowledge of him hence arises" (I, 2, 1)

Calvin's theory of revelation acquisition concerns the rationale for thinking that a first-person experience is actually a case of acquisition of revealed knowledge of God. What justifies Moses in thinking that the burning bush is a sign from God rather than a delusion? What justifies a prophet in thinking that the inspiration he feels comes from God, that the vision of the future he experiences is veridical? Sometimes, as in the case of the resurrection of Jesus, there are multiple witnesses.²¹ But in many cases no such confirmation is available. Moses was alone when he saw the burning bush and heard the voice of God. Prophecy is by its very nature private. Calvin sees that an adequate theory of acquisition therefore cannot rely on interpersonal considerations. Nor can it rely on anything about the content of the experience itself. There is no mark distinguishing veridical from illusory experiences in the content of the experience.

Calvin concludes that acquisitions of revelation cannot be distinguished from pretenders by their content or their relations to the experiences of other people. The only option remaining is that we distinguish them by their relations to our other mental states, specifically, by an accompanying feeling of certainty.

"Whether God revealed himself to the fathers by oracles and visions, or, by the instrumentality and ministry of men, suggested what they were to hand down to posterity, there cannot be a doubt that the certainty of what he taught them was firmly engraven on their hearts, so that they felt assured and knew that the things which they learnt came forth from God, who invariably accompanied his word with a sure testimony, infinitely superior to mere opinion." (I, 6, 2)

This would seem a dangerous criterion, for false prophets, too, can feel certain that their experiences come from God. But Calvin, I think, means something more than that. The certainty true prophets feel is "firmly engraven on their hearts." Calvin uses this phrase in speaking of the sense of the divine and of the moral law written on the heart. In short, he uses this locution for a priori knowledge, for something innate. An experience of the divine, in the form of a perceptual experience or an inspiration to prophecy, accompanies a certainty that is innate, that reflects something deep in our very natures. We might call it a profound certainty, a certainty that has deep a priori roots. The experience of the divine overpowers the person experiencing it; they cannot but feel certain of its divine origins.

Calvin has little to add to standard accounts of the transmission of knowledge through testimony. He does, however, make two further points. First, the public transmission of scripture plays an important role. The promulgation of the law and the interpretations of the prophets spread revealed knowledge more widely than would have been possible without them (I, 6, 2–3).²² They create a community that is in important ways self-regulating, preventing divergent private experiences and divergent transfers from corrupting the transmission of revealed knowledge. Second, scripture is self-authenticating, by way of the Holy Spirit:

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"Let it therefore be held as fixed, that those who are inwardly taught by the Holy Spirit acquiesce implicitly in Scripture; that Scripture carrying its own evidence along with it, deigns not to submit to proofs and arguments, but owes the full conviction with which we ought to receive it to the testimony of the Spirit." (I, 7, 5)

The same profound certainty that accompanies an acquisition of revealed knowledge thus also accompanies its transfer through scripture. We accept scripture as revealed because it reaches something deep in us, something powerful, something innate—something "engraven on the heart." But it is not just that its content appeals to something we are by our very natures equipped to receive, accept, and understand. The Holy Spirit supplies its own testimony, acting to impress the Word on us, serving as evidence that the Word is indeed the Word of God. Our revealed knowledge is thus doubly revealed—revealed to the person receiving the direct revelation through experience or inspiration, and again in transfer by way of scripture through the power of the Holy Spirit.

What could we know of God apart from revelation? The answer, for Calvin, is very little.

"We should consider that the brightness of the Divine countenance, which even an apostle declares to be inaccessible, (1 Tim. 6:16,) is a kind of labyrinth,—a labyrinth to us inextricable, if the Word does not serve us as a thread to guide our path; and that it is better to limp in the way, than run with the greatest swiftness out of it" (I, 6, 3)

Apart from the revelation of Scripture, and, especially, of the revelation of the incarnation, we would have no way of escaping a skepticism that would leave the nature of God almost completely indeterminate. We could not recognize the world or ourselves as mirrors or microcosms of God. Even if we did, we would find ourselves unable to understand the world or ourselves well enough to grasp what they could tell us about God's nature. We would be stuck inside the labyrinth—the labyrinth of the world, and, just as intricate, the labyrinth of the self.

7. Moral Knowledge

I have explored Calvin's position on our knowledge of God because it provides a key to his understanding of the nature and possibility of moral knowledge.

Calvin believes that we have some a priori knowledge of the good. The moral law is written on the heart (Romans 2: 14–15). Before the fall, our moral knowledge was immediate, direct, and noninferential, just like our knowledge of God, though it too was fragmentary. We had some direct access to the commands of God, and thus some direct knowledge of God as "the origin and fountain of all goodness." We understood God's commands, which were the source of moral truth; we had a natural tendency to follow those commands, ²³ but we also had the freedom to break them.

Once we did break them, our moral knowledge became indistinct. The law was still written on the heart, but it became entirely general, indeterminate, and easily resisted. Our innate sense of right and wrong gives us some insight: "That homicide, putting the case in the abstract, is an evil, no man will deny" (II, 2, 23). But we often falter in attempting to apply that knowledge in particular cases. Calvin's analysis here foreshadows Kant's idea that the essence of immorality is making an exception for oneself: "... one who is conspiring the death of his enemy deliberates on it as if the thing was good. The adulterer will condemn adultery in the abstract, and yet flatter himself while privately committing it. The ignorance lies here: that man, when he comes to the particular, forgets the rule which he had laid down in the general case" (II, 2, 23).

But Calvin holds that we sometimes fall prey to weakness of will in a different way. Desire overcomes reason; our passions suppress our knowledge of right and wrong in particular cases: "the turpitude of the crime sometimes presses so on the conscience, that the sinner does not impose upon himself by a false semblance of good, but rushes into sin knowingly and willingly. Hence the expression,—I see the better course, and approve

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it: I follow the worse (Ovid)" (II, 2, 23). We may distinguish weakness of will, akrasia, from corruption, akolasia, by the fact that only the former leads to regret. The weak-willed person regrets giving in to temptation, and has a disposition to repent. The corrupt person, however, feels no regret, for the desire on which such a person acts is itself corrupted in a way that person cannot recognize. Weakness of will, then, makes us aware of our own failings in a way that can lead us back to God. Corruption does not.

The indistinctness of our moral knowledge, the difficulty of applying it to particular cases, and our tendency to weakness of will and corruption all fill our lives with moral risk. Being good and doing right were easy for us in the garden. They are not easy now. The fall damaged our moral sense, impairing our ability to know what we ought to do and what we ought to be.

The fact that we are models of God—that we are in a sense mirrors of the divine—gives us some ability to attain moral knowledge. Just as in other respects, however, we want to see ourselves as creators. Our "monster minds" lead us to think of ethics as springing from ourselves rather than springing from God. So, although the divine command theory is ultimately correct, and something we understood before the fall, we now resist it, seeing morality as consisting of conventions we devise for the improvement of our lives together. We are not entirely wrong in this; that is mostly what morality, as we now practice it, has become. But just as we were meant to be more than we have become, so morality was meant to be, and is, more than we have let it become. We fail to recognize God as its source and put ourselves in God's place, sometimes directly, as in existentialism or constructivism, and sometimes more subtly.

So long as we retain a purely secular approach to ethics, we are bound to stumble into skeptical traps, at least once we go beyond the few, vague perceptions we retain of the law written on the heart. We see that beyond a few generally accepted moral principles, people form different, conflicting conceptions of the right and the good. Using secular tools, we cannot tell which of these, if any, are correct. The only rational response would be to suspend judgment.

We can move beyond a few vague moral generalities, then, only through revelation. Without revelation, we would be left with little moral knowledge and even less understanding of how to apply it to the situations we face. But revelation allows us to have more than indistinct concepts of the right and the good. This is true in two respects. Scripture develops the law in much greater detail than we are able to discern from our limited grasp of what God has written on our hearts. It provides access to revealed a posteriori knowledge and allows Christians to form a self-regulating community that counteracts the force of skeptical arguments. Scripture's self-authenticating nature, in theory, but sadly not always in practice, prevents an analogous skepticism from afflicting those communities. The picture, then, is this: we have some general and rather indeterminate a priori moral knowledge, arising from our being made in the image of God. We have the ability to attain more precise and more particular a posteriori moral knowledge through the study of scripture.

By itself, however, scripture is not enough. Christ, here too, enables a gestalt shift, allowing us to see the world and ourselves as mirrors of God, made in the image of God, and thus as mirrors of the moral truth. Apart from Christ, we could not recognize the world or ourselves as revealing something of God's nature and the moral truth that arises from it. Even if we somehow did come to that recognition, we still could not understand the world or ourselves well enough to grasp securely what they could reveal about the right and the good and their application to the particular, concrete circumstances of our lives. We would be stuck inside a labyrinth largely of our own creation, with only the vaguest sense of how to navigate it. The labyrinth of the social world, the world that sees moral codes as conventional constructions and in which distinct, competing, conflicting moral codes interact, is even more intricate than the labyrinth of the self.

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8. Conclusions

I have been arguing that Calvin has a distinctive metaphilosophical position. There are distinct stages of our relationship with God, each of which demands its own answers to basic philosophical questions. There are such sharp epistemological and ethical divides between the stages that each demands its own unique answers. Christian philosophers need at least one position reflecting our nature and capacities before the fall, and the other reflecting our nature and capacities after the fall. Calvin thus outlines a criterion—the Multiplicity Thesis—that an adequate Christian philosophy must fulfill.

I would not go so far as Bavinck (1894, 5), who holds that Calvinism yields "a specific view of life and the world; so to speak a philosophy of its own." As Calvin sees it, our prelapsarian knowledge of God, the right, and the good is direct and noninferential; our postlapsarian knowledge of them is mostly indirect, inferential, and filled with moral and epistemic risk. Christian philosophers, however, might paint different portraits of those two stages.

Nevertheless, Calvin's thought gives us more than "marginal notes on philosophy" (Partee 1977, p. 21); it implies a metaphilosophy that constrains the philosophical positions available to Christian philosophers. We are more than we have become; morality was meant to be, and is, more than we have let it become. That must be at the heart of any Christian philosophy.

What Calvin sees as essential is this. Apart from the revelation of scripture and the incarnation—in short, apart from Christ—we would have no way of escaping skepticism. We could not recognize the world or ourselves as mirrors of God, as models of God's nature. The glories of nature and the deficiencies we sense in ourselves could point us toward God, but would tell us little about the being to which they were pointing. We could not understand the world or ourselves well enough to conclude anything about God's nature or the nature of the right and the good. We would be stuck inside the labyrinth of the natural world, the social world, and the self without any way to trace a path out. Only God's revelation in Scripture and in Christ can allow us to go beyond the most fragmentary and indeterminate moral, philosophical, and theological knowledge.

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Notes

All references to Calvin hereafter will be to the Institutes unless otherwise noted.

- See Kolfhaus (1939, p. 12): "Hence all thinking about God outside Christ is a vast abyss which immediately swallows up all our thoughts." But it is important to note that Calvin's opinion of theology is little better; as Helm (2010, p. 5) observes, he generally uses it "as a term of contempt." Our relation to God is not primarily an intellectual relation; philosophy and theology thus tend to lead away from a proper relationship with God. Still, it is important not to exaggerate, for Calvin refers to his work as "Christian philosophy"; see Niesel (1957) and Partee (1977), contra Schulze (1902) and Mann (1934). Calvin sees philosophy as appropriately confined to "earthly things" (II, 2, 13), so in the phrase 'Christian philosophy,' 'philosophy' must take on a somewhat different meaning (Partee 1977, pp. 14–16), based not only on reason but on scripture and the guidance of the Holy Spirit.
- As William J. Bouwsma (1989, p. 71) puts Calvin's view, "classical philosophy . . . conjured up for him fears of entrapment in a labyrinth." (See Bouwsma 1988, pp. 45–48.) Of course, Calvin's interpretation, too, "can become a labyrinth in which the unprepared reader quickly becomes lost" (Holder 2006, p. 2)!
- Calvin, consequently, eschews what he sees as excessive theorizing even in theology. As John de Gruchy (2013, p. 118) observes, "The Institutes were not written as academic systematic theology to impress scholars of the day and engage them in debate, but as a guide for understanding the Scriptures in order to educate people in the Christian faith and help them live the Christian life." As Breen (1968) observes, "Calvin's first purpose was to teach"
- Partee (1977) is the most extensive treatment of Calvin as a philosopher, and explores Calvin's relation to a variety of philosophical figures, themes, and movements. As Partee observes (p. 10), following Bohatec (1950, pp. 30–31), Calvin's opening statement in

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- the Institutes tracks Budé's definition of philosophy—the knowledge of God and man—which in turns tracks the Stoic definition as reported by Cicero and Seneca.
- Most commentators on Calvin stress the moral significance of the Fall and at most hint at its epistemic significance. Consider Barth ([1922] 1995, p. 33): "Human innocence before the fall consists of a sure combination, free of all friction, between sensuality, understanding, and reason with its vision. Original sin is the absence of righteousness; we have been dealt a wound that is in need of healing." Understanding and reason earn a mention, but Barth's focus throughout is on ethics. An important exception is Warfield (1909).
- ⁷ Barth (1934), quoted in Steinmetz (2010, p. 23).
- For an argument that this is the central organizing claim of the Institutes, see Helm (2004, 2010).
- Partee (1977, p. 15) puts it this way: "Although something of the understanding and judgment remains in man after the fall, the mind is not whole and sound but weak and dark." Haas (2004, p. 94) reconciles the conflicting language this way: "Because of his mercy and grace, God grants to fallen humanity some apprehension of right and wrong, justice and injustice. Appealing to Romans 2: 14–5 Calvin notes that God imprints upon human hearts some understanding of his moral law, and God sustains the conscience as the faculty that judges between good and evil, justice and injustice. This knowledge and judgment is always defective and imperfect." In short, we blind ourselves, but God restores and sustains a limited vision so that we have at least some glimmering of the truth we used to see clearly. For a more detailed treatment of this theme, see Haas (1997).
- That theory, as well as its interpretation, are controversial; see Bonevac (2012).
- For studies of Calvin in relation to the Platonic tradition, see Battenhouse (1948), Boisset (1959, 1964), McLelland (1965), Babelotzky (1977), Partee (1977), and Gerrish (1993). The dominance of Aristotle in Scholastic philosophy after Aquinas, despite the efforts of Renaissance humanists to revive Platonism, might account for some of Calvin's hostility to philosophy in general and to Scholasticism in particular. Calvin's relation to Scholasticism is controversial in its own way; see, for example, Muller (1995, 1996, 2000), Van Asselt and Dekker (2001), and Partee (2008).
- The interpretation I advocate is thus intermediate between the view of Torrance (1964) that Calvin "rejected the basic tenets of the Augustinian philosophy" (402) and the view of, e.g., Smits (1957), Lange van Ravenswaay (1990), Lane (1999), and Holder (2006), who see him as essentially Augustinian in his approach to philosophical questions. For other treatments of the complicated relation between Calvin and Augustine, see Warfield (1956) and McGrath (1990).
- Links between Calvin's thought and philosophical developments in the early modern period have been receiving increasing attention. See, for example, Bouwsma (1988), Zachman (2012), and Helm (2020).
- Grace and faith mark an important transformation of our relationship with God. There are thus at least three stages that require distinct answers to philosophical questions. I explore only the ramifications of the fall here. There are, I think, important parallels between our condition before the fall and our condition after faith has restored some of our capacities. To quote Haas (2004, 94): "The radical transformation of the human heart that enables sinners to understand and embrace God's moral order for their lives is the result of union with Christ. This doctrine lies at the heart of Calvin's teaching on salvation and the Christian life. It is accomplished by faith and the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit."
- As de Gruchy (2013, p. 120) stresses, "Calvin's fundamental question is not Luther's—'how to find a gracious God'—but rather how do we know God at all, and how do we discern God's will."
- The importance of the sensus divinitatis for Reformed Epistemology has engendered substantial controversy. Alvin Plantinga argues for its centrality in a number of works, including Plantinga (1993a, 1993b, 2000). Key reactions include Sudduth (1995), Jeffreys (1997), Helm (1998), Clanton (2017), and McAllister and Dougherty (2019).
- For a subtle analysis of Calvin's epistemology and philosophy of language in relation to Duns Scotus, Ockham, and Richard of St. Victor, see Torrance (1964, pp. 410–16).
- ¹⁸ "Experience teaches that the seed of religion has been divinely planted in all men" (I, 4, 1).
- For an argument that Descartes pursues a similar strategy in the third Meditation, see Schechtman (2014).
- See Schreiner (1991) for an extended treatment of the role of nature in Calvin's theology. Kayayan (1996) explores the mirror metaphor in depth.
- On the importance of multiple witnesses, as well as miracles occurring in series, see Bonevac (2011).
- The role of law, and the relation between conscience and natural law, in Calvin's thought is a complex topic that I cannot address here. For helpful discussions, see Bohatec (1934) and Backus (2003).
- Calvin endorses a divine command theory. We should not conclude from this, however, that God's commands are arbitrary. We are in no position to understand justice as God understands it. To quote Bohatec (1934, pp. 90–1, my translation): "we have to presuppose and believe in a justice unknown to us in all God's expressions of will and actions that seem incomprehensible to us."

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