
Stoic and Epicurean? Calvin's Dialectical Account of Providence in the *Institute*

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Abstract: Calvin's account of providence demonstrates an awareness of the widely differing views of classical philosophers, particularly Stoics and Epicureans, on the subject. His own presentation stresses divine transcendence even more than Epicurean teaching had, whilst simultaneously asserting a more intimate involvement of God in the created order than any Stoic managed. The unity of Divine and human in Christ offers Calvin a way of holding together the two sides of this dialectical teaching.

'The entire sum of our wisdom, of that which deserves to be called true and certain wisdom, may be said to consist of two parts: namely the knowledge of God, and of ourselves.'¹ In this the opening affirmation of his great work of systematic theology, the *Institute of the Christian Religion*, John Calvin signals the *leitmotiv* of the Protestant Reformation, namely the radical distinction of things divine from things human, and, at the same time, their joint summation in a single Wisdom. The God who creates heaven and earth out of nothing is for Calvin an absolutely transcendent God, wholly 'other' in relation to his creation in general and in relation to man in particular. For Calvin, 'no theology is Christian and in conformity with the Scriptures except in the degree to which it respects the infinite distance separating God from his creature'.² To know God in his essence is to high for us: 'His essence is so incomprehensible that his majesty is hidden, remote from all our senses' (*Inst.* 1.5.1). Thus for Calvin 'true and certain wisdom' consists of *two* distinctive parts, and nothing may be permitted in orthodox theology which would contribute to the confusion, or 'mixing together' as Calvin says, of this foundational distinction between Creator and creature, between the divine and the human.

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- 1 John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 1.1.1 (citing book, chapter, section throughout.)
- 2 François Wendel, *Calvin: The Origins and Development of his Religious Thought*, trans. Philip Mairet (London: Collins, 1963), p. 151.

Yet – this provisional conjunction is altogether characteristic of Calvin's own distinctive rhetorical style – *and yet*, at the same time that he seeks to uphold the radical otherness and, consequently the radical 'hiddenness' of the divine from the human, of the Creator from the creature, Calvin understands the person and redemptive work of the God-man, Jesus Christ, of God 'revealed' in the flesh, to stand at the very centre of his theological task. Christo-centrism is judged by François Wendel to be the very hallmark of Calvin's theology.³ Thus, paradoxically, the sum of this bipartite Wisdom which Calvin addresses both here in his introduction and systematically throughout his *Institute*, affirms both radical transcendence *and* radical immanence in the relation of the divine to the human. In Christ, the Wisdom of God who came to dwell among us, the two distinct parts of theology, God in his divinity and ourselves in our humanity, are indissolubly bound together. Consequently, it comes as no great surprise when we read later on in the *Institute* that Calvin embraces unreservedly the traditional Christological formulations of the four great general councils of the ancient Christian church.⁴ Following the famous formulation of the Council of Chalcedon held in AD 451, Calvin maintains the hypostatic unity in Christ of the divine and human natures: Calvin observes in the second edition of the *Institute*,

He who was the Son of God was made the Son of Man, not by confusion of substance but by unity of person: that is, he so joined and united his divinity with the humanity that he had taken, that each of the two natures retained its properties; and nevertheless Jesus Christ has not two distinct persons, but only one⁵

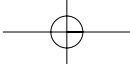
When we view Calvin's opening statement that the 'entire sum of our Wisdom' is the knowledge of God and of ourselves through the lens of Chalcedonian orthodoxy, it becomes clear that for Calvin Christ himself is that Wisdom. It is in Christ that the two distinct parts, the knowledge of God and of ourselves, are bound together in a single Wisdom.

What, then, has this broad claim concerning the task of theology have to do with the doctrine of providence as received and interpreted by the sixteenth-century Reformers? Well, the short answer is 'everything', but to demonstrate this will require an exploration of Calvin's approach to this doctrine within the context of the system of the *Institute*. Providence is addressed in the first of four major parts of the treatise. This first part, titled 'The Knowledge of God the Creator', begins with a treatment of the manner of our knowing God, followed by discussion of the doctrines of the Trinity, the creation, and providence in this order. In his theological

3 Wendel, *Calvin*, pp. 215–25.

4 *Inst.* 4.9.8. On this point see Wendel, *Calvin*, pp. 125, 126. Wendel remarks that there is nothing whatever 'original' about Calvin's Christology, so close is his reliance upon the Chalcedonian formulation of dogmatic orthodoxy.

5 *Inst.* 2.14.1; see also Calvin's Commentary on Matthew 24, *Opera Omnia quae supersunt* (Brunswick, 1863–1900), vol. 45, p. 672.



epistemology Calvin distinguishes a twofold knowledge of God which provides an important structural principle for his treatise as a whole and which has a most significant bearing on his treatment of providence in particular.⁶ In the 1559 edition of the *Institute*, Calvin formulates his summary of the *duplex cognitio dei*:

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 Creator, and afterwards as a Redeemer in Christ, a twofold knowledge of him arises.⁷

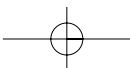
Thus, while 'no one can have even the least taste of sound doctrine and know that it is of God, unless he has been to this *school*, [namely] to be taught by the Holy Scripture' (*Inst.* 1.6.2; emphasis added), it is important to observe here that at least some knowledge of God is not altogether restricted to the divinely revealed word of scripture and furthermore, this divine knowledge includes specifically a appreciation of the divine providence itself. According to Calvin's argument, there is a two-fold knowledge of God because God is discerned as Creator and governor of the world *both* in the general revelation of creation itself *as well as* in the special revelation of scripture. Thus the first mode of the knowledge of God constitutes what we would call a 'natural theology'. The creation is referred to by Calvin as a 'theatre of the divine glory'⁸ – a most interesting figure when compared with its parallel metaphor, namely the 'school' of holy scripture. Within this theatre providence stands as it were the 'proscenium arch' which frames the stage.⁹ For Calvin it is not necessary for the ordinary theatre-goer to have submitted to the rigours of the *schola* of the scriptures in order to obtain at least some knowledge of God the Creator and ruler of the cosmos. As spectators in the 'theatre of glory' we are able to contemplate the divine providence as do indeed Plato, Aristotle and many others among the pagan philosophers who lacked schooling in the second mode of divine *cognitio*. At least at a rudimentary level the content of theatre knowledge and school learning are coextensive. Indeed scripture itself testifies to this alternate source of 'theatre'

6 See Edward A. Dowey, *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952). For an interesting discussion of the history of this motif in Reformed theology, see Richard A. Muller, "'Duplex cognitio dei" in the Theology of Early Reformed Orthodoxy', *Sixteenth Century Journal* 10, 2 (1979), pp. 51–61.

7 *Inst.* 1.2.1. See David C. Steinmetz, 'Calvin and the Natural Knowledge of God', in *Calvin in Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995). William Klempa, 'Calvin and Natural Law', *Calvin Studies IV*, ed. John H. Leith and W. Stacy Johnson (Davidson, NC: Davidson College, 1988), pp. 1–23.

8 For Calvin's repeated use of this image of creation see *Inst.* 1.5.1–2; 1.6.2–4; 1.8.10; 1.14.20.

9 Susan E. Schreiner, *Theatre of His Glory: Nature and the Natural Order in the Thought of John Calvin*, *Studies in Historical Theology* 3 (Durham, NC: Labyrinth, 1991), p. 7.



wisdom. As the Psalmist famously proclaims: 'The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handy-work (Ps 19).' In his comment on this passage Calvin observes that 'even wicked men are forced, by the mere view of the earth and sky, to rise to the Creator' (*Inst.* 1.16.1). By observing the narratives played out on the divine stage, pagan philosophers, although unschooled by scripture, have nonetheless attained to a sophisticated spectator's knowledge of God and of the divine providence.

In this connection Calvin refers to two passages in Cicero's treatise of natural theology, *De natura deorum*, where the philosopher argues that this knowledge of things divine is 'engraved' on the minds of men.¹⁰ It is notable that in this first book of the *Institute* he should refer first to Cicero rather than to Paul's discussion of the natural knowledge of God in the introductory chapter of the Epistle to the Romans. Speaking of the Gentiles, Paul remarks here that 'what can be known about God is plain to them, [i.e. the Gentiles] because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made.'¹¹ In his commentary on this passage, Calvin refers to another scriptural passage where, in a sermon preached to the Greeks on the Areopagus at Athens, Paul observes that the God 'in whom we live, and move, and have our being'¹² has made himself manifest 'everywhere, in all places and in all things', and in so clear and evident a manner that no one can plead ignorance. Thus scripture plainly affirms the natural or 'common' revelation of the divine providence. In this context of the 'two-fold knowledge of God' (*duplex cognitio dei*) Calvin maintains that creation is a mirror (*speculum*) of the invisible deity, and that human reason, unaided by the spectacles of scripture (another interesting metaphor), is naturally able to discern the eternal ruling power of the divine through a contemplation of the splendour of the natural order with the rational creature itself as the principal glory of this order.¹³ For Calvin,

10 *Inst.* 1.3.1. The two passages cited from Cicero's *De natura deorum* are as follows: 'Intelligi necesse est deos, quoniam insitas eorum vel potius innatas cognitiones habemus. Quae hobbis natura informationem deorum ipsorum dedit, eadem *insculpsit in mentibus* ut eos aeternos et beatos haberemus' (I.17). The second reference is from Bk II.4: 'Itaque inter omnes omnium gentium summa constat; omnibus enim innatum est, et in animo quasi *insculptum* esse deos.'

11 Rom. 1:19, 20.

12 Acts 17:28.

13 See Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle to the Romans*, trans. and ed. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), pp. 67ff. See especially the comment on Rom. 1:20: 'God is in himself invisible; but as his majesty shines forth in his works and in his creatures everywhere, men ought in these to acknowledge him, for they clearly set forth their Maker: and for this reason the Apostle in his Epistle to the Hebrews says, that this world is a mirror, or representation of invisible things. He [Paul] does not mention all the particulars which may be thought to belong to God; but he states, that we can arrive at the knowledge of his eternal power and divinity; for he who is the framer of all things, must necessarily be without beginning and from himself . . .'

the character of Wisdom being what it is, human self-knowledge can never be far removed from the knowledge of things divine.

When Calvin turns from the question of theological epistemology to his more detailed and systematic interpretation of the doctrine of providence in the later chapters of Book One of the *Institute*, it does not come altogether as a surprise that he chooses to set out his position by means of an extended discussion and critique of two very famous pagan theologies of providence, namely the Stoic and the Epicurean.¹⁴ The spectators in the theatre of glory have it in their power to offer valuable instruction. It becomes very clear from the early stages of this discussion, however, that even the most critically discerning of these spectators in the theatre offer no satisfactory substitute for the wisdom imparted at school, that is the school of the holy scriptures.

A word here concerning Calvin's own schooling career might serve to shed some further light on his initial approach to the question of divine providence in a treatise of Christian theology through an analysis of the inherited wisdom of pagan philosophy as represented by these two Hellenistic schools. Calvin was trained at the Collège de Montaigu in Paris and later studied at the new royal trilingual college founded by Francis I, the forerunner of the Collège de France, where he was immersed in a highly sophisticated Renaissance-humanist tradition of classical learning and where he would very quickly have learned that theological reflection on the concept of providence is by no means the exclusive preserve of Christian doctrine.¹⁵ Homer, the pre-Socratics, Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, and Epicurus as well as the sapiential tradition of the hebrew scriptures have a great deal to say on this subject. Through his study of the fathers and of later scholastic theology Calvin would also soon have discovered the continuing relevance of pagan philosophy to the unfolding of the Christian conversation about providence from the New Testament onwards. As their arguments reveal, sixteenth-century theologians in general were thoroughly acquainted with this tradition of discourse on providence inherited from the fountain heads of both natural and revealed theology, although they make quite distinctive uses of this inheritance. As a student of the Platonic dialogues, Calvin would certainly have been aware that in the *Timaeus* and the *Laws* (10. 901d–904a) Plato presents a sophisticated view of Providence as a principle of benevolent cosmic Justice. According to *Timaeus*, the creator

who made this world of generation . . . was good and the good can never have any jealousy of anything. And being free from jealousy, he desired that all things should be as like himself as they could be. This is in the truest sense the origin of creation and of the world, as we shall do well in believing the testimony of wise men. God desired that all things should be good and nothing bad, so far as this was attainable. (*Timaeus* 30b)

14 Charles Partee, *Calvin and Classical Philosophy* (Leiden and New York: Brill, 1977), p. 99.

15 Wendel, Calvin, p. 26.

In the Myth of Er in the final book of *Republic*, the divine Justice is presented not as a creative power which shapes and determines human willing and action, but rather as an eschatological principle whereby rewards and punishments are meted out according to eternal law after death (*Politeia X*). With the advent of the Stoics, divine providence acquires a more terrible aspect as the predetermining power of Destiny or *Fatum* – literally that which is spoken or decreed (from the Latin deponent verb *fari* – to speak, utter) – a power which rules inexorably over all the secondary processes of nature and human history, ‘a god who deems that everything is his concern’, as Cicero puts it in his treatise *De natura deorum*.¹⁶ According to this Stoic teaching, divine causality comes to be viewed as so intimately involved with these processes of nature and history as to dissolve any real distinction between God and the finite world. In a most palpable sense the Stoics come to substitute nature for God. As a consequence of this pantheistic metaphysic, contingency in human willing and action are virtually dissolved in the face of an austere and unyielding determinism.¹⁷ Secondary causality, and with it any truth to human individuality, is relentlessly crushed in the Stoic endeavour to affirm the divine governance.¹⁸ Human freedom is a necessary sacrifice to the maintenance of the order.

In sharp contrast to the Stoic account, the gods of Epicurus are far removed from the theatre of human activity, and exhibit supreme indifference to any and all human striving and suffering. According to the very beautiful presentation of the Epicurean philosophy in the poem of Lucretius *On the Nature of Things*, ‘the very nature of divinity must necessarily enjoy immortal life in deepest peace, far removed and separated from our affairs; for without any pain, without danger, itself mighty by its own resources needing us not at all, it is neither propitiated with services nor touched with wrath.’¹⁹

Nec bene promeritis capitur neque tangitur ira. Such a negative account of providence is proposed by Epicurus as the vital key to dispelling the gloom (*tenebras*) of superstition inculcated by the theological determinism epitomized in Stoic teaching. In order to protect human freedom and the contingency of willed action, Epicurus insists that the divine must be separated altogether from the world. In the serene sanctuaries of philosophy, in imitation of the gods who dwell far off in the interstices between the worlds, the wise man may gaze with imperturbable equanimity on the tribulations suffered by others ‘not because any man’s troubles

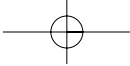
16 Cicero, *De natura deorum*, I.20.

17 See, e.g., Cicero, *De natura deorum*, 2; Epictetus, *Encheiridion*.

18 Seneca, *Epistularum Moralium Ad Lucilium* 107: *Fata volentem ducunt et nolentem trahunt.* (The Fates lead the willing, but drag the unwilling.)

19 Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, I.44–49:

Omnis enim per sedivom natura necessesit
immortali aevo summa cum pace fruatur
semota ab nostris rebus seiunctaque longe;
nam privata dolore omni, privata periclis,
ipsa suis pollens opibus, nil indiga nostri,



are a delectable joy, but because to perceive what ill you are free from yourself is pleasant (*suave*).²⁰ It is difficult to imagine a sentiment more completely alien from the Christian religion than this. Above all, Epicurus's repeatedly stated aim is to dispel the 'terrors of the mind' experienced as a result of what he regards as a superstitious adherence to such religious precepts as the immortality of the soul and the inevitability of eternal rewards and punishments according to divine law. In order to preserve human freedom he proposes a materialistic account of causality grounded in a principle of fortune or chance which plainly repudiates a divine providential power and which later earned him a reputation for atheism. It is perhaps worth noting in this connection that Dante portrays Epicurus seated among the heretics within the gates of the City of Dis, much further down in the nether depths of Avernus than the pagan philosophers and poets, defenders of divine governance, with whom the Florentine dallies in the Elysian regions of his *Inferno*.²¹

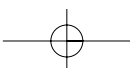
In response to these pagan philosophical accounts Calvin sets out his own position on Providence by taking issue with what he calls the 'carnal mind':

when once it has perceived the power of God in the creation, [the carnal mind] stops there, and, at the farthest, thinks and ponders on nothing else than the wisdom, power, and goodness displayed by the Author of such a work, (matters which rise spontaneously, and force themselves on the notice even of the unwilling,) or on some general agency on which the power of motion depends, exercised in preserving and governing it. In short, [the carnal mind] imagines that all things are sufficiently sustained by the energy divinely *infused* into them at first. But faith must penetrate deeper. After learning that there is a Creator, it must forthwith infer that he is also a Governor and Preserver, and that, not by producing a kind of general motion in the machine of the globe as well as in each of its parts, but by a *special* providence sustaining, cherishing, superintending, all the things which he has made, to the very minutest, even to a sparrow. (*Inst.* 1.16.1; emphasis added)

Perhaps most telling here is Calvin's appeal to the language of 'infusion'. Quite famously in Reformed soteriology, the traditional doctrine of an ontologically 'infused' righteousness is rejected in favour of forensic 'imputation'. Rather than being viewed as a quality or *habitus* which, infused into the soul, increases incrementally and dynamically through sanctifying activity towards ultimate perfection, the grace which *alone* justifies is perfect, total, and alien; the justifying grace is imputed externally to the soul by Christ alone and is participated by faith alone. For the Reformer the concept of divinely 'infused' energy as the power which

20 Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, II.1–4:
 Suave, mari magno turbantibus aequora ventis,
 e terra magnum alterius spectare laborem;
 Non quia vexare quemquamst iucunda voluptas,
 sed quibus ipse malis careas quia cernere suave est.

21 *Inferno*, canto X, 14–15; IV, 88–102.



governs creaturely motion invokes the image of an infinite, divine power insufficiently distinguished from the finite, creaturely recipient. In short, the divine transcendence must be guarded. This soteriological allusion is made over against the Stoic error which is a failure to give due recognition to the transcendence of the divine sovereignty over creation. For Calvin a Stoical 'infusion' of divine energy thus represents a collapse of the right distinction between God and nature; it is, for him, tantamount to a pantheistic deification of nature. On this point, at least, it would appear that in the name of preserving the divine transcendence Calvin leans somewhat toward Epicurus – better that the gods be removed to the interstices of the cosmos, than that divine power be thought to be 'infused' into mere creatures.

Yet, on the other side, and virtually in the same breath, Calvin insists upon the penetration of the eye of faith to the knowledge that the Creator is nonetheless engaged in superintending the most minute detail of the creation and is not merely 'producing a kind of general motion in the machine of the globe'. In his assertion of a 'special providence' Calvin upholds an intimate involvement of divine governance with the infinitesimal detail of secondary causality, an involvement which must finally be regarded as more radical even than proposed by the Stoics. 'Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted.'²² At the very moment that we are reminded of the necessity of protecting the divine transcendence, of avoiding any infusion of divine energy into the creation, Calvin extends the divine involvement with the individuality of creatures well beyond anything ever imagined by the Stoics. Here it would seem that what is offered with one hand is swiftly taken away with the other. How can there be such an affirmation of God's special providence combined with the cautious preservation of due distinction between Creator and creature? In an almost intolerable paradox, it would appear that Calvin seeks to affirm radical expressions of *both* the Stoic and Epicurean views! A close examination of the text reveals that this is precisely his intent. In their doctrines of Fate and Natural Law, the Stoics may conceive that 'all parts of the world are invigorated by the secret inspiration of God' but, according to Calvin, the Stoics do not go far enough! Had they enjoyed the advantage of the *schola* of scripture, they might have attained to the Psalmist's deeper understanding of the extent of God's special, fatherly care for his creation.²³ It is precisely on this matter of the fatherhood of God that pagan spiritual discernment is so limited, where 'men otherwise most ingenious are blinder than moles' (*Inst.* 2.2.19). To know God as Father requires schooling in the sacred scriptures whereas knowledge of God's eternity and general power to rule are accessible to the unaided power of human

22 Matthew 10.29.

23 As the College Grace begins, 'The eyes of all wait upon Thee, O Lord, that thou mayest give them their meat in due season. Thou openest thine hand, and fillest all things living with plenteousness' and as the Psalm (104) continues, 'Thou hidest thy face, they are troubled: thou takest away their breath, they die, and return to their dust. Thou sendest forth thy Spirit, they are created, and thou renewest the face of the earth.'

reason. For mere spectators in the theatre of glory there is a natural knowledge of God as Maker and Ruler of all things but *not* as the Redeemer who cares for every last one of his lost sheep.²⁴

We have already shown that, in opposition to the Stoics, the Epicureans sought to preserve human individuality, agency, and identity. To do so, however, demanded a denial of the reality of divine governance altogether. In his *Commentary on Seneca's 'De Clementia'*, his earliest writing on the question concerning the divine providence, Calvin addresses directly the virtual atheism of the Epicurean attempt to guard human integrity and divine transcendence: 'Although they do not deny the existence of the gods, they do the closest thing to it; they imagine the gods to be pleasure-loving, idle, nor caring for morals, lest anything detract from their pleasures; they deride Stoic providence as a prophesying old woman. They think that everything happens by mere chance.'²⁵ Calvin flatly denies the possible existence of fortune and chance as causes. To affirm Epicurus's swerve is to deny that *all* events are governed by the secret counsel of God, and is thus tantamount to atheism. This doubtless accounts for Calvin's vituperative dismissal of Lucretius as 'that filthy dog' (*Inst.* 1.5.5).

In an argument which must owe something to Aristotle's *Physics*, Calvin dismisses chance or *fortuna* as a mere figment of carnal sense.²⁶ What is required in order to see divine providence is nothing less than a conversion (*metanoia*), a turning away from the insubstantial pageant of the theatre, with all of its false appearances of causality, towards a true knowledge of causes as inculcated in the school of Holy Scripture. Quoting Augustine's *Retractions*, Calvin observes that what the carnal sense falsely attributes to *fortuna* is in actuality regulated by a hidden order, 'what we call chance is nothing else than that the reason and cause of which is secret' (1.15.8). 'No pious man, therefore, will make the sun either the necessary or the principal cause of those things which existed before the creation of the sun, but only the instrument which God employs, because he so pleases; though he can lay it aside, and act equally well be himself' (1.16.2). What appears to us externally as mere contingency or accidentality, faith recognizes as nothing less than the *hidden* impulse of divine providence. It is, then, our carnal nature which 'inclines us to speak as if God were amusing himself by tossing men up and down like tennis balls'. God may act at any moment in accordance with the secondary causes that embody the system of the world, or he may act apart from them, or even against them when he so desires (see 1.17.1). The attribution of true causality to what Aristotle called the 'accidental cause' (*to symbebekos*)²⁷ stems from the error of seeking to distance God from the world, as it were through an excess of divine transcendence. With his understanding

24 *Inst.* 2.2.18. See also 2.2.22: 'If the Gentiles have the righteousness of the law naturally engraven on their minds, we certainly cannot say that they are altogether blind as to the rule of life.'

25 *Commentary on Seneca's De Clementia*, ed. F.L. Battles and A.M. Hugo (Leiden and New York: Brill, 1969), 1.6.10, p. 31.

26 *Inst.* 1.15.8. See Aristotle, *Physica*, II. 4–6 (195b30–198a14).

27 Aristotle, *Physica*, II.5 (197a5).

of the instrumentality of secondary causes, Calvin's providence maintains transcendence while, at the same time, it is ever deeply involved in the particulars of history and the operations of the natural order. 'Truly God claims omnipotence to himself, and would have us to acknowledge it – not the vain, indolent, slumbering omnipotence which sophists (read Epicureans) feign, but vigilant, efficacious, energetic, and ever active' (1.15.3). Yet, in some sense, the divine causality is even more hidden to the Christian than are the gods to the unschooled Epicurean spectator in the theatre of glory. Just as Calvin out-Stoicizes the Stoics in his assertion of the radically immanent involvement of special providence, so also he exceeds Epicurus in guarding both divine transcendence and human freedom.

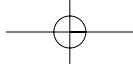
It is important to note that there is a definitely contemporary polemical edge to Calvin's attacks on the Epicureans. Scholars have shown how considerable a force philosophical Epicureanism had become in sixteenth-century thought. The works of Diogenes Laertius, Cicero, and the masterwork of Epicurean theology, the poem by Lucretius *On the Nature of Things*, had all been published either in the late fifteenth or early sixteenth centuries.²⁸ Both Lorenzo Valla and Erasmus sought to reconcile Christianity with philosophical Epicureanism. Rabelais, among others, had appealed to Lucretius in his alleged denial of the immortality of the soul.²⁹ It is doubtless owing to these strongly worded refutations of the 'do-nothing' gods of Epicurus that Calvin earned for himself the reputation of being a friend of the Stoics and what modern commentators term a theological determinist. It cannot be denied that many of Calvin's positive claims concerning providence do indeed appear to lean in the Stoic direction. 'Let the reader remember,' he states in his chapter on the nature of Providence in the *Institute*, 'that the providence we mean is not one by which the Deity, sitting idly in heaven, looks on at what is taking place in the world, but one by which he, as it were, holds the helms and overrules all events. Hence his providence extends not less to the hand than to the eye . . . Providence consists in action' (*Inst.* 1.15.4). In defence of this principle of an immanent, 'special' providence, Calvin goes on to make an argument which anticipates the central soteriological concern of the Reformation, namely, salvation by grace alone (*sola gratia*). Calvin's objection to the governance of a merely general providence is that it renders man 'a partner with God' in the working out of the divine purpose. This is to be viewed as the placing of a limitation on the sphere of exercise of the divine 'paternal favour' (1.15.5).

The Reformer insists that a scriptural account of providence cannot possibly be reduced to the Stoic conception of fate!

We do not with the Stoics imagine a necessity consisting of a perpetual chain of causes, and a kind of involved series contained in nature, but we hold that God is the disposer and ruler of all things, – that from the remotest eternity, according to his own wisdom, he decreed what he was to do, and now by his

28 Partee, *Calvin and Classical Philosophy*, pp. 97–104.

29 See Schreiner, *Theatre of His Glory*, p. 20.



power executes what he decreed. Hence we maintain, that by his providence, not heaven and earth and inanimate creatures only, but also the counsels and wills of men are so governed as to move exactly in the course which he has destined. (*Inst.* 1.15.8)

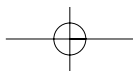
Providence is an immutable law which is nonetheless hidden. Through this twofold claim of immutability and hiddenness of the divine governing purpose Calvin draws both pagan theologies into the construction of his own. Affirmation of the immutability of providence, moreover, is not to be interpreted as relieving mortals from responsibility for their acts, *nor* does it excuse them from the due exercise of prudence nor exculpate their wickedness. Returning to Calvin's conspicuous endorsement of Chalcedonian Christological orthodoxy with which we began this exploration of his doctrine of providence, it is, by analogy, necessary to affirm *both* the truth of the divine nature (*alethos theos*) and the perfection of the human nature (*teleos anthropos*). We must know both God and ourselves, in their distinction and in their unity, in order to gain a full understanding of the divine providence in our lives. Although all things come to pass by the divine dispensation as their principal cause, and indeed nothing can *properly* be said to happen fortuitously, God nonetheless has a due regard for secondary causes. A Christian cannot say with Agamemnon 'Blame not me, but Zeus or Moira.'³⁰ According to Calvin's dialectical principle, such murmuring against God is tantamount to collapsing due distinction between the two natures: 'The profane make such a bluster with their foolish puerilities, that they almost, according to the expression, confound heaven and earth' (1.16.3). This confounding of heaven and earth, this confusion of the divine and human natures, stems from the failure to allow room for a difference between primary and secondary causality.

For Calvin, it would seem that the predicament of pagan philosophy is to be caught between the two without the means *either* properly to distinguish the two *or* to reconcile them. The wisdom of the theatre is finally ineffectual. Without such a difference of heaven and earth clearly understood, without the Wisdom revealed in the scriptural school-house, the prayers of the faithful must inevitably be reduced to perversity and superfluity. What need is there to request provision for things which God has, in his hidden counsel, decreed from all eternity? Here Calvin's argument takes on some close resemblance to the position argued by Boethius in the *Consolation of Philosophy*.³¹ The principal implication is that God's knowledge of events is not so much a *foreknowledge* of futurity as it is a knowledge from the standpoint of eternity. God knows and orders the world according to his eternal will; the human will is under no external pressure but rather is, one might say, phenomenologically free.³² Calvin quotes Proverbs in setting out the reconciliation

30 Quoted by Calvin at *Inst.* 17.1.3. See *Iliad*, XIX.87: *Ego d' ouk haitios eimi, alla Zeus kai moira.*

31 Boethius, *Consolatio*, 5.6. This position is also argued by Anselm and Aquinas.

32 See Niels Gregersen, 'Providence', in Adrian Hastings, ed., *Oxford Companion to Christian Thought*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 574–5.

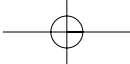


of human deliberation with providence: 'A man's heart deviseth his ways but the Lord directeth his steps' (16.9). The eternal counsel embodied in the divine decrees does not stand in the way of the exercise of human prudence in the arrangement of human affairs. 'The reason for this is clear. For he who has fixed the boundaries of our life, has at the same time entrusted us with the care of it, provided us with the means of preserving it, forewarned us of the dangers to which we are exposed, and supplied cautions and remedies, that we may not be overwhelmed unawares' (*Inst.* 1.16.4). Both prudence and folly are employed by the divine providence as instruments: 'the Providence of God does not interpose simply; but, by employing means, assumes, as it were, a *visible form*' (*Inst.* 1.16.4). One can perhaps see in this language of 'visible form' a foreshadowing of Calvin's theology of sacramental presence which, like his theology of providence, depends completely upon the Chalcedonian Christological dialectic.³³ In the notion of 'instrumentality' there is an association, even a co-operation, but never any confusion of divine and human forms of counsel. They need not be separated as exemplified by the Nestorianising Epicurean theology, nor need they be conflated as the monophysite tendency of the Stoic teaching requires. Calvin assiduously avoids both of these unorthodox alternatives. Is it not the Wisdom of Christ as revealed in the scriptures that renders this predicament of pagan wisdom soluble?

Calvin asks, 'What then of human wickedness? Can the divine Providence be judged the origin of evil? Even when rebellious humanity works against God his justice is nonetheless served since in his boundless wisdom he well knows how to use bad instruments for good purposes' (*Inst.* 1.16.5). By adherence to a due distinction between 'instrument and end', as it were between the two orders of primary and secondary causality, Calvin is able to see human sinfulness itself as an instrument of divine providence while denying, on the ground of the self-same distinction, that this instrumentality provides any excuse whatsoever for human misdeeds. Calvin's contemporary the Renaissance Stoic Pietro Pomponazzi insisted that he preferred to be a 'slave of Fate' rather than a servile denier of divine providence, even if it meant attributing to providence itself the authorship of sins.³⁴ In this Renaissance philosopher's essentially pagan humanist solution to Epicurean atheism Calvin sees a confusion of the orders of causality, and thus a confusion what is properly divine and what is human. To Pompanazzi Calvin replies, 'Will they implicate God in the same iniquity with themselves, or will they cloak their depravity by his righteousness? They cannot exculpate themselves, for their own conscience condemns them: they cannot charge God, since they perceive the whole wickedness

33 For Calvin, although it is necessary to distinguish the visible signs from the spiritual truth in the sacraments, he maintains nonetheless that 'in taking the sign of the body we are likewise taking the body' *Inst.* 4.17.10. For an excellent discussion of Calvin's sacramental theology see B.A. Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude: the Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1993).

34 Pietro Pomponazzi, *Libri quinque de fato, de libero arbitrio et de praedestinatione* (1520), ed. R. Lemay (Lugano, 1957), vol. II.7.1.34: 'It is necessary that there should be sin; providence intends there to be sins and is itself author of sins.'



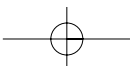
in themselves, and nothing in Him save the legitimate use of their wickedness' (*Inst.* 1.16.5). Here again, there is a foreshadowing the Reformed soteriology of justification by faith only. 'Have done, then,' Calvin says, 'with that dog-like petulance which may, indeed, bay from a distance at the justice of God, but cannot reach it!' Absolute dependence upon the eternal decrees is nothing less than a solace to believers, and here we see an adumbration of the 'comfortable doctrine of predestination':

The Christian, then, being most fully persuaded, that all things come to pass by the dispensation of God, and that nothing happens fortuitously, will always direct his eye to him as the principal cause of events, at the same time paying due regard to inferior causes in their own place. Next, he will have no doubt that a special providence is awake for his preservation, and will not suffer anything to happen that will not turn to his good and safety. But as its business is first with men and then with the other creatures, he will feel assured that the providence of God reigns over both. In regard to men, good as well as bad, he will acknowledge that their counsels, wishes, aims and faculties are so under his hand, that he has full power to turn them in whatever direction, and constrain them as often as he pleases. (*Inst.* 1.16.6)

In his argument for the rule of special providence it might be argued that Calvin is, in some sense, a hyper-Stoic: the divine sovereign becomes more deeply involved than ever in the minutiae of nature and history. Equally in his claims concerning the radical hiddenness of the eternal counsels and decrees he might just as easily be viewed as a hyper-Epicurean. The followers of Epicurus at least had sufficient confidence in their recognition of the character of the life of the gods that they thought themselves able to model their community of philosophical tranquillity in imitation. Calvin allows no such access of recognition, and therefore the *Deus absconditus* of the *Institute* is, if anything, even more remote than the do-nothing gods of Epicurus. The chief point to observe, therefore, is that Calvin's account of providence presents us with a God who is simultaneously *more* remote in his transcendence than the gods of Epicurus, and *more* intimately involved in cosmic governance through his special providence than the Stoics ever dreamed possible. Calvin's dialectical account of providence resolves the predicament of the opposition of human freedom and divine sovereignty by embracing within a single view, in their totality, the two radical extremes of pagan theology. Whereas the pagan theologians were driven to reject the governing providence in order to secure human freedom or, alternatively, to reject the freedom in order to affirm the providence, Calvin reaches out in both directions and encompasses the two earth-bound theologies within his own higher, mutually comprehensive standpoint. With John Donne³⁵ Calvin seeks to

behold those hands, which span the poles
And tune all spheres at once, pierced with those holes . . .

35 Reference is to the poem 'Good Friday 1613, Riding Westward'.



For Calvin, it is manifestly the case that schooling in the higher Wisdom which sustains within itself the knowledge of both God and of ourselves, the Wisdom which *is* Christ, revealed in the holy scriptures, leads to a profound response to the interaction of divine governance and human agency, a response which demands looking beyond the spectacle of the theatre of glory. Calvin is hardly the dark 'fideistic fatalist' he is often accused of being.³⁶ This is to see only the Stoical side of Calvin's dialectic, and no doubt owes its provenance to the subsequent history of Calvinist theology which, most unfortunately and much too frequently, is confused with Calvin's own position.³⁷ By embracing the Stoic and Epicurean positions within his own response to their pagan predicament Calvin's doctrine of providence out-humanizes the humanists.

36 For an instance of this common interpretation, see Antonino Poppi, 'Fate, fortune, providence, and human freedom', in Charles Schmitt and Quentin Skinner, eds., *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 661–7.

37 See R.T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).