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HistTheo 959

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21 April 2017

### **Divine Sovereignty:**

#### **John Calvin's functional epistemological principle**

It is often asked in philosophy and theology whether something is good because God says it is good, or does God say it is good because it is good. In philosophy, this question is called Euthyphro's Dilemma. The Euthyphro's dilemma is often used in theodicy in order to address how a good God can allow evil in the world. The dilemma's seemingly diametrically opposed statements seek to weigh whether God's goodness or God's sovereignty takes theological priority. If one chooses the claims that something is good because God says its good, then God is most fundamentally sovereign, the sole arbitrator of good and evil, and human suffering is caused by a misperception of good as evil. The other claim asserts that God says its good because it is good, then God is fundamentally good and human suffering exists because God is not totally sovereign. The Christian theological tradition rejects a formulation that seeks to pit God's goodness and God's sovereignty against each other. Instead, Christian theologians have asserted that divine sovereignty and divine goodness is one and the same in God. In other words, God is sovereign because God is good; God is good because God is sovereign. Although theologically divine goodness and divine sovereignty can be one and the same, questions arise whether functionally or epistemologically goodness takes priority over sovereignty or vice versa.

John Calvin, the sixteenth-century French Reformer, is one of the most influential thinkers of the Christian mediation on divine sovereignty. Calvin's critics often accuse Calvin of

asserting that God is only sovereign. This conclusion seems unfair since as a Christian theologian, Calvin adheres to the traditions claim that theological divine sovereignty and divine goodness are one and the same in God. Misconception and reduction of Calvin's nuanced position arise from Calvin's complex dialectical thinking. Instead of asking whether Calvin adheres to the Christian claim that God is good, I assert that Calvin's theology functionally operates with a prioritization of divine sovereignty over divine goodness. This paper argues that although John Calvin adheres to the Christian theological claim that God is good, through his doctrine of divine providence and the doctrine of total depravity, Calvin's epistemology of God functions only through divine sovereignty. The first part of this paper will examine Calvin's doctrine of providence and its heavy dependence on divine sovereignty. The second part of this paper address Calvin's view of total depravity, and how it epistemologically impairs human beings from accessing divine goodness. Through the two critical claims that the fall is part of God's providence, and human beings are totally depraved, it is evident that for Calvin divine sovereignty is the only epistemological foundation for (unaided) human knowledge of God.

### **Dependency on Divine Sovereignty: Calvin's Doctrine of Providence**

Following the claim that God is all-powerful and sovereign, the Christian tradition asserts a doctrine of providence. The doctrine of providence attempts to defend the claim that God is "omnipotent" and "all-controlling" while explaining the issue of human suffering and the fall. The paper will examine Calvin's view of divine providence centering on the claims that God ordained the fall and uses evil to fulfill God's purposes. The section will conclude with a brief analysis of divine freedom in order to understand some of Calvin's concerns and the logic of his theological moves. On the issue of divine providence, Calvin makes the strong claim that God

ordains every single event. He writes, "...all events are governed by God's secret plan."<sup>1</sup> Calvin seems to support the common contemporary notion that "everything happens for a reason." It is important to note, however, two critical points. First, Calvin specifies that all "events" are governed by providence.<sup>2</sup> The notion of event seems to imply a distinction between subjective and objective reality. Events describe the ontological, historical instances that occur in objective (or shared) reality, while the occurrences of subjective reality (i.e. individual thought, intentions, etc.) are outside the "event" terminology. The nuance of the term, "event," distinguishes Calvin's claim from the contemporary notion of "everything happens for a reason." Second, Calvin uses the seemingly ambiguous verb, to govern. This verb does not specify the level of divine intention that would distinguish active intention or mere permission. What is evident from the statement is that God's plan is the operating principle of the events, and not simply "reason" as the contemporary phrase argues. Following the logic of his claim that "all events are governed by God's plan," Calvin argues that through divine providence God has ordained the fall of humanity from its original righteousness. He writes, "It offends the ear of some, when it is said God willed the fall; but what else, I pray, is the permission of Him, who has the power of preventing, and in whose hand the whole matter is placed, but his will?"<sup>3</sup> There are two main ways to interpret Calvin's statement: the weak sense and strong sense. The weak sense can read Calvin's claim that God willed the fall as God allowing the fall to happen or permitting the fall. The strong sense asserts that God intentionally willed the fall for God's glory, and cannot be reduced to a passive permission. Calvin, himself, conforms to the strong sense of the claim through his view of single providence and God's employment of evil.

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<sup>1</sup> Instit.I.XVI.2 (All Institute citations are from Calvin, John. *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Edited by John T. McNeil. 1559 translation ed. Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960.)

<sup>2</sup> Please note that although this paper seems to heavily depend upon the accuracy of the English translation of Calvin, the paper also draws upon Calvin's own logic and the progression of his theological moves in the *Institutes*.

<sup>3</sup> Calvin, John, *Genesis Commentary*, Genesis 3, 144 (obtained through instructor of HistTheo959)

Calvin is clear in his rejection of any view of providence that exerts more than a single degree of divine intention. He writes, “Not so crass is the error of those who attribute a governance to God, but of a confused and mixed sort, as I have said, namely one that by a general motion resolves and drives the system of the universe, with its several parts, but does not specifically direct the action of individual creatures...”<sup>4</sup> Calvin rejects splitting divine providence into two different degrees of intention: general and specific. The “general” providence would assert that God sets up universal laws or systems that move created history, while a “specific” providence would be God’s intentional will that determines particular events in history. Calvin claims that there is no “general” providence, but only a single “specific” providence. God intentionally wills and determines every event in history. Calvin writes, “[T]here is no erratic power, or action, or motion in creatures, but that they are governed by God’s secret plan in such a way that nothing happens except what is knowingly and willingly decreed by him.”<sup>5</sup> Creatures do not have an independent determinative power that is outside the knowledge and will of God. God both knows all events and actively wills all events. Calvin notes that this intentional will of God should be a source of comfort since, for Calvin, it reflects a caring God who is invested in creation. He states, “[F]or in times of adversity believers comfort themselves with the solace that they suffer nothing except by God’s ordinances and command, for they are under his hand.”<sup>6</sup> It is interesting that Calvin sees God’s intentional will for human suffering as a source of comfort. It would seem that suffering would increase after learning that God is the intentional cause; but for Calvin, sovereignty functionally dictates goodness. Calvin reasoning implies that the person suffering is comforted in their adversity because whatever God

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<sup>4</sup> Instit.I.XVI.4

<sup>5</sup> Instit.I.XVI.3

<sup>6</sup> Instit.I.XVI.3

will be good. As Nicholas Wolterstorff states, “Suffering is sent by God- for our good.”<sup>7</sup> Wolterstorff’s logic reflects that it is God who determines all events and goodness itself; therefore, divine sovereignty even in the mist of adversity is a source of comfort. It is also important to note that Calvin’s rejection of “general” providence does not mean that God’s favor is only specific. There is a general sense of divine favor in the fact that God spares humanity from divine wrath, but there is a special favor to the elect persons who are predestined for salvation. Thus, the person in the midst of adversity can be comforted by providence and God’s general favor of mercy while hoping that they are the elect recipients of God’s special favor.

In addition to his rejection of divine providence as general and specific, Calvin also rejects views of providence that rely only on foreknowledge. Calvin asserts that providence must be both foreknowledge and active intention. He writes, “providence means not that by which God idly observes from heaven what takes place on earth, but that by which, as keepers of the keys, he governs all events...it follows that providence is lodged in the act; for many babble too ignorantly of bare foreknowledge”<sup>8</sup> Calvin’s rejection of providence based on foreknowledge arises out of a fear that God is seen to be too passive. This is common pattern in Calvin as Calvin rejects a sense of “general” providence because of its passive implications of God. Although Calvin’s fear of a passive God is valid, Calvin theological moves may be further perpetuated by a desire to preserve divine freedom, which will be addressed later. For now, it is evident that Calvin needs to have an active God who determines all events in order to preserve his notion that God is all-caring. It would seem that Calvin is willing to preserve this notion of divine care via sovereignty over divine goodness. This is evident in Calvin’s formulation that God is able to employ evil instruments for God’s end, to which we turn to next.

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<sup>7</sup> Wolterstorff, Nicholas. "If God is good and sovereign, why lament?" *Calvin Theological Journal* 36, no. 1 (April 2001): 42-52. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost* (accessed April 20, 2017). 49

<sup>8</sup> Instit.I.XVI.4

Although it is implicit in the claim that God ordains the fall as an act of divine providence, Calvin explicitly states that God is able to employ evil and sinful instruments for God's purposes. Calvin writes, "...we serve his just ordinances by doing evil, for so great and boundless is his wisdom that he knows right well how to use evil instruments to do good."<sup>9</sup> It seems evident that for Calvin God is able to employ evil to do God's will. As Calvin notes, doing evil serves God's just ordinances, which must be specifically and actively willed by God. Perhaps it can be explained that since "we," human beings in so far as being the image of God can be used for good purposes even when human beings do evil. Calvin problematizes this explanation with the assertion that God even employs Satan to achieve God's purpose. In his warning against retaliation against transgressors, Calvin writes, "Yet a most useful admonition to still all impulses to wrath is that God arms both the devil and all the wicked for the conflict, and sits as a judge of the games to exercise our patience."<sup>10</sup> This statement seems to not only confirm that God can use any evil or sinful agents for God's will, it also asserts that God "arms" the devil and the wicked. The arming of the devil and wicked seems to imply that God may be the source of evil or at the very least, the potency<sup>11</sup> of evil. Calvin denies that God is the source of evil, but God as the source of evil's potency remains unclear.<sup>12</sup> Regardless, the claim of God employing evil itself seems to be a metaphysical contradiction. The Christian tradition, following Augustine, states that evil is the privation of good.<sup>13</sup> If God were goodness itself, then it would seem

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<sup>9</sup> Instit.I.XVII.5

<sup>10</sup> Instit.IXVII.8

<sup>11</sup> This questions hinges on whether "potency" has ontological value or not. If "potency" has ontological value then the claim that God is the source of evil's potency is the same as claiming that God is the source of evil's ontology, which is not only against the Christian claim that evil has no ontology, but also the claim that God is goodness itself. If "potency" has no ontological value then perhaps one can sustain an argument that God is the source of evil's potency. This issue is beyond what can be addressed in this short paper.

<sup>12</sup> It is not the objective of this paper to examine whether Calvin is able to sufficiently defend that his theology does not implicate God as the cause of evil. But the implication of this paper's thesis might inform that project.

<sup>13</sup> St. Augustine of Hippo. *The Enchiridion of Faith, Hope, and Charity*. Translated by Bruce Harbert. New City Press, 2008. 278

metaphysically impossible for Goodness to employ measures that are the privation of good or privation of itself. Ian McFarland, following this logic, states, “(evil is) that which is contrary to God’s will...as that which God does not will, is a lack (or privation) of being...”<sup>14</sup> This leaves Calvin’s claim that God is able to employ evil measures for God’s purpose with a metaphysical conundrum; either God is not goodness itself, or God cannot employ evil. Calvin does not want to give into either of these options. Calvin, being a Christian theologian, must hold onto the claim that God is goodness itself, and Calvin wants to assert God can employ evil. Although Calvin imagines an alternative to these options by troubling human epistemology of the good via total depravity, we will first address whether Calvin accepts a compromise of divine employment of evil through the notion of permission.

On the notion that Satan and all the impious are under God’s control, and God uses their evil deeds to whatever ends God wills, Calvin asserts that the control of divine will on evil beings cannot be pushed to mere permission. God does not simply permit Satan and the impious to commit evil, God commands it. Calvin writes, “they wrongly try to clear God’s justice of every sinister mark by upholding a falsehood...they escape by the shift that this is done only with God’s permission, not also by his will; but, he, openly declaring that he is the doer, repudiates that evasion...men can accomplish nothing except by God’s secret command...”<sup>15</sup> Calvin does not yield to permission; he maintains that it is God’s command (active will) that controls all (even evil) actions of men.<sup>16</sup> Calvin sees permission as a weak way to suggest that God is sovereign, which Calvin does not believe to be true sovereignty. It is also important to note that Calvin does not see a need to “clear God’s justice of sinister marks” because ultimately

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<sup>14</sup> McFarland, Ian A. *From nothing: a theology of creation*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014.114

<sup>15</sup> *Instit.*I.XVIII.1

<sup>16</sup> *III.XXIII.8*

it is divine sovereignty that justifies God's will as totally good. David Bentley Hart offers a critique on this view of divine permission.

But when any meaningful difference between will and permission has been excluded, and when the transcendent causality of the creator God has been confused with the immanent web of causation that constitutes the world of our experiences, it becomes impossible to image that what God's will might not be immediately convertible with what occurs in time; and thus both the authority of Scripture and justice of God must fall before the inexorable logic of absolute divine sovereignty.<sup>17</sup>

Hart rightly notes that Calvin's logic is the logic of absolute divine sovereignty. Hart points out that God's will cannot be confused with an immanent web of causation, which Calvin seems to want to maintain as evidenced in his insistence that providence is the action of God's active will. Calvin would fear that Hart's transcendent causality, an explanation of how God's will may not be what is immediately evident in time (or why if God is sovereign, evil exists in the world), threatens divine sovereignty. An explanation of Calvin's functional dependency on divine sovereignty might be further informed by Calvin's concern of divine freedom.

In the introduction to his book, Charles Raith II links Calvin with the tradition of later medieval thinkers such as Duns Scotus, William of Ockham, and Francisco Suárez. Raith II notes that through the later medieval thinkers, Aquinas's view of a transcendent God-human agency becomes flattened to a competitive-causal view. The shift in the relationship between divine-human agencies created a competitive view between divine and human wills, and therefore, made it necessary to give priority of God's will over human will. Raith II quotes Levering, "human freedom may submit to divine will, but thereafter on the grounds of God's obligating power rather than teleological grounds."<sup>18</sup> This concern of prioritizing divine will over

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<sup>17</sup> Hart, David Bentley. *The doors of the sea: where was God in the tsunami?* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2011) 90. It seems important to note that Hart explicitly states that Calvin's view that God ordained the fall is an instance of confusing divine will and permission.

<sup>18</sup> Raith II, Charles. *Aquinas and Calvin on Romans: God's justification and Our Participation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) 11. Raith II quoting Levering.

human will seems evident in Calvin's concern of divine freedom, in which God wills whatever God wills. In speaking about the how divine freedom chooses the sun to nourish and quicken all living things, Calvin writes, "(the sun is) merely the instrument that God uses because he so wills; for with no more difficulty he might abandon it, and act through himself."<sup>19</sup> It is the freedom of the divine will that chooses to ordain the sun to its function of nourishment. There is no notion that it is consistent with the sun's nature (which is created by God) for the sun to nourish. Instead of making this argument of what is proper to the sun's nature, Calvin explains the sun's action through the freedom of the divine will. God is free to choose whatever God wants to nourish and quicken all living things. The divine freedom is emphasized in the phrase that God might abandon the sun, and act directly through Godself to nourish living things. It is this notion of divine freedom that allows Calvin to claim, "God makes these evil instruments which he holds under his hand and can turn wherever he pleases, to serve his justice."<sup>20</sup> For Calvin, it is perfectly consistent with divine freedom that God is able to employ whatever God pleases to serve God's justice. Divine freedom is the operating principle that guides Calvin's theological moves and concerns.<sup>21</sup> Through Calvin's concern for divine freedom and its functional dependency on divine sovereignty, Calvin is able to assert the claim that the fall was an ordained act of divine providence. In order to persevere divine goodness in light of the difficulties of his claims about providence, Calvin employs total depravity to trouble human epistemology.

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<sup>19</sup> Instit.I.XVI.2

<sup>20</sup> Instit.II.IV.5

<sup>21</sup> Perhaps one can argue that Calvin's view of divine freedom seems unchecked by a conception of transcendent divine nature (God is goodness itself), which allows Calvin's functional prioritization of divine sovereignty over divine goodness. The importance of checking divine freedom with divine transcendent, as interesting as it is, is not within the scope of this paper. See Hart's book, *Doors of the Sea*, for additional information on the topic.

### **Total Depravity: the functional epistemological blindness of the good**

As stated above, when confronted with the metaphysical conundrum that either God cannot employ evil or God is not goodness itself, Calvin imagines an alternative option by troubling human epistemology of the good. Through his doctrine of total depravity, Calvin asserts that fallen human beings are so depraved of their original created righteousness and gifts that human beings possess a distorted understanding of good and evil. Functionally, total depravity allows Calvin to avoid the metaphysical conundrum, but at the risk of a Nietzschean epistemology. Calvin's doctrine of total depravity is perhaps one of Calvin's most dialectical doctrines. Throughout his *Institutes*, Calvin is unclear to whether through the fall the image of God within human beings is totally destroyed or minimally maintained. This paper's examination of Calvin's total depravity will focus on fallen human reason's ability to substantially recognize God's goodness via goodness, and the role of conscience.

Calvin states that the human soul, originally gifted with the image of God, is divided into two parts: understanding (or reason) and will. It is the human reason or understanding that is the faculty of discerning good and evil. Calvin writes, "Since reason, therefore, [is that] by which man distinguishes between good and evil, and by which he understands and judges..."<sup>22</sup> It is important to note that it is human reason or understanding that distinguishes human beings from other creatures. While reason occupies the function of discernment, the will is the operating faculty of action and choice. Calvin writes, "...while that of the will, to choose and follow what the understanding pronounces good, but to reject and flee what it disapproves."<sup>23</sup> The will follows the knowledge and the discernment of reason. Although post-fall, Calvin notes a

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<sup>22</sup> Instit.II.II.12

<sup>23</sup> Instit.I.XV.7

disconnect between human reason and will to the point that human will rebels against the judgment of human reason, the scope of this paper will focus on depravity of human reason. If reason is the capacity to discern good and evil, then a functioning reason is the necessary epistemological tool to recognize God's goodness via goodness. The functionality of fallen human reason is not immediately evident by Calvin's account of the depravity of the image of God and its gifts. He writes, "...even though we grant that God's image was not totally annihilated and destroyed in him, yet it was so corrupted that whatever remains is frightful deformity."<sup>24</sup> One could interpret this statement of depravity to assert that Calvin believes that reason, one of the divine gifts, maintains its epistemological functions. However, as quickly as Calvin denies the annihilation of the divine image, he states, "Therefore, after the heavenly image was obliterated in him, he was not the only one to suffer this punishment..."<sup>25</sup> In this statement, Calvin seems to assert that the divine image within the human soul was totally obliterated, and no trace of it remains. Calvin maintains this ambiguity of whether the image is present or absent in the human soul after the fall. Therefore, it is necessary not to question whether the image remains in the human being, but to qualify the damage of the fall.

Calvin qualifies the perversion of sin in three statements. First, when addressing the corruption of human nature in infants, Calvin writes, "their whole nature is a seed of sin; hence it can be **only** hateful and abhorrent to God. From this it follows that it is rightly considered sin in God's sight, for without guilt there would be no accusation."<sup>26</sup> In this passage, Calvin reduces the human nature to a seed of sin. He states that fallen human nature can only be hateful and abhorrent to God. This claim suggests that there is an utter corruption of human nature to the point that inherent goodness is obliterated, even to the point that God can no longer see

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<sup>24</sup> Instit.I.XV.4

<sup>25</sup> Instit.II.I.5

<sup>26</sup> Instit.II.I.8. Emboldened text for my emphasis.

something good about human nature. In his second qualifying claim, Calvin notes the potency of original sin. He writes, “For our nature is not only destitute and empty of good, but so fertile and fruitful of every evil that it cannot be idle.”<sup>27</sup> The first part of the statement confirms the previous analysis that fallen human nature is devoid or “empty” of good that it is only hateful in God’s sight. The second part of the statement asserts that fallen human nature does not suffer only from an emptiness of goodness, but also the active production of every kind of evil, one of which is self-deception or hubris. The third statement confirms what was claimed in the first and second statements. He writes, “...whatever is in man from the understanding (reason) to the will, from the soul even to the flesh, has been defiled and crammed with this concupiscence. Or to put it more briefly, the whole man is of himself nothing but concupiscence.”<sup>28</sup> Calvin specifies the parts of human nature that is affected by sin. Both aspects of the soul, reason and will, are infected with concupiscence as well as the flesh. Calvin also qualifies the total infection of concupiscence on the whole human being by his reduction that the “whole man is of himself nothing but concupiscence.” Calvin’s three statements challenge interpretations of Calvin’s depravity as merely a corruption that hinders the goodness of human nature. Calvin sees an utter loss of original human goodness, and a transformation of human nature as a site of evil’s production.

In addition to his bleak view of humanity’s loss of original righteousness, Calvin dialectically argues that fallen human reason is functionally bankrupt. Calvin writes, “Since reason, therefore, by which man distinguishes between good and evil, and by which he understands and judges, is a natural gift, it could not be completely wiped out; but it was partly

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<sup>27</sup> Instit.II.I.8

<sup>28</sup> Instit.II.I.8. Text in parentheses is my addition.

weakened and partly corrupted, so that its misshapen ruins appear.”<sup>29</sup> Although as a natural gift, human reason is not completely wiped out, it is functionally useless without divine aid. Calvin wants to maintain fallen reason so that one cannot collapse human beings and brute animals as one and the same. Human reason exists simply as a minimum point of distinction for human beings from animals. Reason’s capacity to discern good and evil is so “choked with dense ignorance, so that it cannot come forth effectively.”<sup>30</sup> The corruption of sin chokes human reason with ignorance and hubris that it cannot effectively discern good and evil. In addition to reason’s incapacity to discern good and evil, human reason is totally depraved when it comes to the matter of God, such as divine goodness. Calvin writes, “But we are drunk with the false opinion of our own insight and are thus extremely reluctant to admit that it is utterly blind and stupid in divine matters...Because man’s keenness of mind is mere blindness as far as the knowledge of God is concerned.”<sup>31</sup> As stated earlier, hubris and false confidence in fallen reason blinds human beings from the recognition that pertaining to knowledge or matter about God, the fallen mind is blind. Calvin, being so dialectical on the matter of depravity, can be interpreted in a strong sense (fallen reason is functionally useless), or a weak sense (fallen reason is totally distorted but not blind). The weak sense of the depravity does not seem to take Calvin’s use of “blindness” as a depiction of fallen reason seriously. Calvin also encourages a strong sense over a weak sense of depravity as he writes, “For there is no danger of man’s depriving himself of too much so long as he learns that in God must be recouped what he himself lacks.”<sup>32</sup> Practically, Calvin sees more of a temptation in allotting too much ability in human reason. He fears that a weak sense of depravity can foster reliance on human reasoning as a source to know the good, which Calvin

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<sup>29</sup> Instit.II.II.12

<sup>30</sup> Instit.II.II.12

<sup>31</sup> Instit.II.II.19

<sup>32</sup> Instit.II.II.10 sic

asserts totally depends on divine aid. Calvin would rather encourage a strong sense of depravity to avoid hubris, and a stronger reliance on the God's commandments and revelations.

In light of the functional bankruptcy of fallen human reason, some interpreters of Calvin turn to conscience as an epistemological alternative for the knowledge of God's goodness. Calvin refutes this false confidence in conscience with his limited view of the substance of conscience's knowledge. He writes, "conscience stands in place of law...The purpose of natural law, therefore, is to render man inexcusable...natural law is that apprehension of the conscience which distinguishes sufficiently between just and unjust, and which deprives men of the excuse of ignorance, while it proves them guilty by their own testimony."<sup>33</sup> Calvin does affirm that conscience can distinguish sufficiently between just and unjust, but only in so far as it deprives men of the excuse of ignorance. Calvin wants to avoid human beings claiming that God's punishment for evil deeds is unjust because human beings are not able to distinguish between good and evil. In order avoid the excuse of ignorance; Calvin allots a minimum knowledge of good and evil to human conscience. Calvin clarifies that this knowledge of good and evil via conscience is only good to refute ignorance and is not substantial beyond it. He writes, "For if men's heart have been imbued with the ability to distinguish just from unjust, **solely** that they should not pretend ignorance as an excuse, it is not at all a necessary consequence that truth should be discerned in individual instances. It is more than enough if their understanding extends so far that evasion becomes impossible for them, and they, convicted by the witness of their own conscience..."<sup>34</sup> Calvin is clear that conscience is simply enough to justly condemn human beings for evil deeds, but is not substantial enough to discern truth. In light of this limited

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<sup>33</sup> Instit.II.II.22

<sup>34</sup> Instit.II.II.23

function and knowledge of conscience, it seems that conscience cannot be a reliable epistemological knowledge for God's goodness via goodness.

In addition to conscience, one may argue that the elect<sup>35</sup> are divinely gifted with true discernment and so can properly discern God's goodness. The elevated capacities of the elect are theoretically a valid epistemological foundation to know that God is good via a substantive knowledge of goodness, but practically the identity of the elect is unknowable.<sup>36</sup> In addition to the unknown identity of the elect, the elect are not exempt from the depravity of human reason. The elect can err in their knowledge of God, and only through divine grace can they fathom a more truthful account of God's goodness. Lastly, the concept of divine election is based on the notion of divine freedom that God freely chooses who God will to be elected to salvation or elected to damnation. Being based in divine freedom, divine election already functions based on the epistemological foundation of divine sovereignty.

Calvin's effective epistemological troubling of human capacity via total depravity allows him to avoid the metaphysical conundrum laid by his doctrine of providence. In addition to avoiding the metaphysical dilemma, Calvin functionally elevates divine sovereignty as the only epistemological foundation to know God's goodness. There is no human capacity unaided by elected grace that can discern God as good via knowledge of the good. Calvin exemplifies this prioritization of divine sovereignty as he, himself, wrestles whether God can will evil without being evil. He writes, "nothing is done without God's will, not even that which is against his will. For it would not be done if he did not permit; yet he does not unwillingly permit it, but willingly; nor would he, being good, allow evil to be done, unless being also almighty he could make good

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<sup>35</sup> For the sake of scope and brevity, I briefly address the elevated capacities of the elect. The doctrine of election itself can suffice to be the topic of a whole paper; therefore, I briefly (and hopefully effectively) address any immediate concerns.

<sup>36</sup> Instit.III.XXI.7: "Although it is now sufficiently plain that God by his secret counsel chooses whom he will while he rejects others..."

even out of evil.”<sup>37</sup> In this passage there is a brief moment where Calvin seems to question whether God can will evil to be done. Calvin, however, defers to his own functional epistemological foundation of divine sovereignty to conclude that since God is almighty God can will evil in order to make good. Calvin concludes that it is functionally divine sovereignty that defines God’s goodness for human beings.

### **Conclusion**

The theology of John Calvin adds an interesting complexity in Euthyphro’s dilemma of whether something is good because God says it is good, or does God say it is good because it is good. Calvin raises the question of whether fallen human beings even have the capacity to properly judge God’s goodness through their fallen rational faculties. Calvin, being a Christian theologian, affirms the claim that divine sovereignty and divine goodness is one and the same in God. However, Calvin solely relies on divine sovereignty as the functional epistemological foundation to knowledge of God’s goodness. Through his reliance on divine sovereignty as his epistemological principle, Calvin is able to construct a vision of divine providence where God not only ordained the fall, but also utilizes evil for God’s purposes. Calvin supports his view of providence through the claim that a totally depraved human being can only rely on God’s sovereignty as the epistemological principle for knowledge of God. In the end, Calvin may affirm that divine sovereignty and divine goodness is one and the same in God, but fallen human beings can only know divine goodness through obedience to divine sovereignty.

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<sup>37</sup> Instit.I.XVIII.3