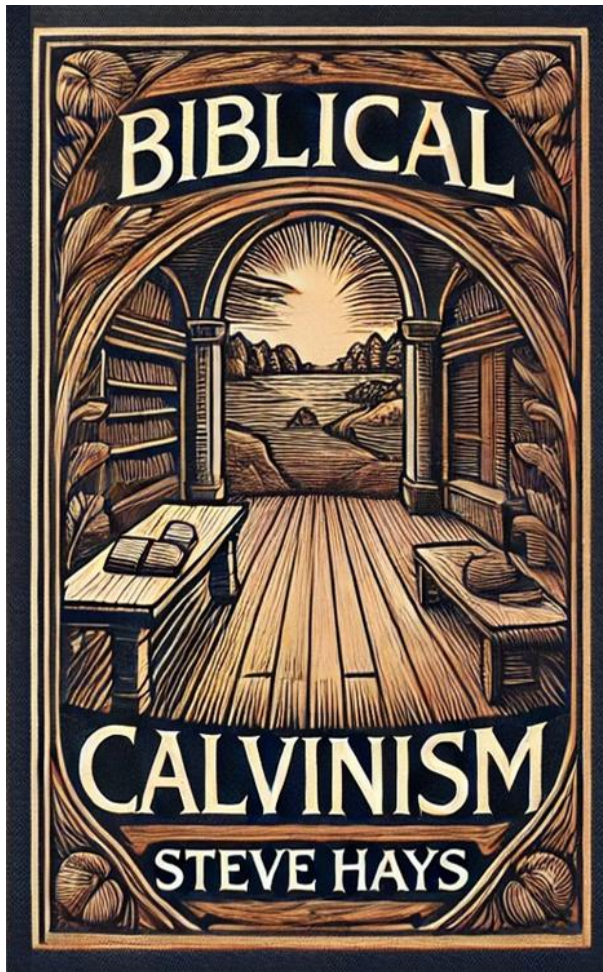


BIBLICAL



CALVINISM

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Biblical Calvinism

Preface

This anthology represents a large sample of my occasional writings on Calvinism. In terms of my selection criteria, I've tried to focus on high-level critics of Calvinism and/or covering all the stock objections to Calvinism. If anything, it suffers from overkill.

Some of the discussions are unpleasantly polemical. That's unavoidable due to the nature of the criticisms. Defending Calvinism can be unedifying in the same way defending inerrancy can be unedifying. Every new critic expects you to field the same list of repetitious objections, as if you have a duty to start from scratch every time you encounter a critic. You're bombarded by the same uninformed, uncomprehending objections.

I'm a nondenominational Calvinist. I'm a supra. My center of gravity is exegetical theology, followed by philosophical theology, with historical theology a distant third.

I use "Arminian" as shorthand for freewill theism generally, inclusive of Molinism and open theism. There are intramural debates about whether those are authentic variations on Arminianism. Arminian theology has evolved over time.

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I. The Concept of Calvinism

What is Calvinism?

I. PRELIMINARIES

I've discussed this before, but now I'd like to offer a more comprehensive statement. This will reflect my own understanding.

Calvinism is often defined by the "five points of Calvinism". But while that's an integral element of Calvinism, it's a reductionistic definition.

There's a distinction between Reformed distinctives and Reformed essentials. Calvinism shares many essentials in common with other theological traditions. Usually the question "what is Calvinism" has reference to things that distinguish Calvinism from freewill theism or (traditionally) Catholicism. But it's misleading to define a theological tradition primarily by what makes it different from other theological traditions.

Even in that respect, Reformed distinctives aren't necessarily unique to Calvinism. Calvinism is not the only predestinarian theological tradition. There's Augustinianism, classical Thomism, and Jansenism.

This post is not a defense of Calvinism, but an exposition of some key tenets.

II. SNAPSHOT DEFINITIONS

i) Philosophical definition

Calvinism is the view that everything happens for a reason.

ii) Theological definition

Calvinism is the view that salvation is by grace alone. Sinners make no independent contribution to their salvation.

III. ABSOLUTE UNIVERSAL PREDESTINATION

God has predestined every event. Physical events and mental events. "Blueprint" predestination. A master plan or plot.

Predestination is absolute in the sense that nothing outside of God conditioned his plan. Predestination isn't based on what will happen; rather, what will happen is based on predestination.

Calvinism allows for alternate possibilities. However, what might have been isn't independent of God. Rather, possible worlds reflect God's imagination.

Events are conditionally necessary by virtue of predestination. Given predestination, everything must happen according to plan.

That doesn't mean predestination is antecedently necessary. Leibniz thought there was a best possible world, and the principle of sufficient reason required God to choose the best possible world.

However, I don't believe there's a best possible world. There are better possible worlds and worse possible worlds. No one world history contains all possible goods.

In principle, God could create more than one possible world. In principle, God could create a less good world.

Predestination means human agents lack freedom in the sense that human agents can never think or act contrary to what has been predestined. That doesn't preclude other concepts of freedom. The definition of freewill didn't fall from the sky. Rather, that's a philosophical issue subject to various constructions.

IV. UNCONDITIONAL ELECTION

Election is unconditional in the sense that God's choice isn't based on human merit or foreseen receptivity to the Gospel.

That doesn't mean election is a roll of the dice. God can still have reasons for electing some individuals and reprobating others. Humans are agents. A world in which you have a different distribution of elect and reprobate will have a different world history. If God reprobated Abraham, that would change the course of world history. Election can take into consideration the plot that God prefers.

V. REPROBATION

There's an asymmetry between election and reprobation. Unlike election, reprobation has an element of conditionality—although it's not contingent on anything independent of God. God doesn't damn anyone who's innocent. Guilt is a necessary but insufficient condition of reprobation. If guilt was a sufficient condition, all sinners would be damned.

VI. METICULOUS PROVIDENCE

Providence is the mirror-image of predestination. Providence is predestination in its execution while predestination is providence in its intention (Warfield). The scope of providence is commensurate with the scope of predestination. God's plan unfolds by means of primary causation and secondary causation, creation and miracle.

VII. ORIGINAL SIN

i) All humans are held guilty in Adam

That doesn't preclude actual sin.

ii) All humans are morally corrupted.

Original sin includes spiritual inability. Absent monergistic regeneration, humans are unreceptive to the Gospel.

That's another sense in which humans lack freedom. That's narrower than lack of freedom due to predestination, and unlike predestination, where inability to do otherwise is absolute, spiritual inability is not absolute. Spiritual renewal enables a sinner to be receptive to the Gospel.

Spiritual inability doesn't preclude other kinds of freedom. It's not an intellectual impediment to understanding the Gospel. People can hate an unwelcome truth.

VIII. REDEMPTION

i) Limited atonement

Christ died to redeem elect sinners.

ii) Vicarious atonement

Christ died on behalf of and in place of the elect.

iii) Penal substitution

The sacrificial death of Christ satisfies the justice of God.

IX. REGENERATION

Regeneration is causally prior to faith. Regeneration is a source of faith. The Gospel is the object of faith while regeneration restores an irrepressible predisposition to believe the Gospel.

X. JUSTIFICATION

i) Although sanctifying grace is a necessary condition of salvation, justification is contingent on faith alone.

ii) When God justifies sinners, he imputes the merit of Christ's atonement to believers (an ascribed status).

XI. PERSEVERANCE

Those whom God elects, redeems, and regenerates cannot fail to be saved. While it's possible for a professing Christian to commit apostasy, it's not possible for a born-again Christian to lose his salvation.

The root of Calvinism

Calvinism is often defended or derided. For freewill theists, Calvinism is the standard foil. But usually there's not much by way of definition beyond TULIP. Here's a definition by a great Reformed theologian. It's a useful point of reference whether or not we completely agree with his interpretation.

It begins, it centers, it ends with the vision of God in His glory...

Whoever believes in God; whoever recognizes in the recesses of his soul his utter dependence on God...

Perhaps the simplest statement of it is the best: that it lies in a profound apprehension of God in His majesty, with the inevitably accompanying poignant realization of the exact nature of the relation sustained to Him by the creature as such, and particularly by the sinful creature...Theism comes to its rights only in a teleological conception of the universe, which perceives in the entire course of events the orderly outworking of the plan of God, who is the author, preserver, and governor of all things, whose will is consequently the ultimate cause of all. The religious relation attains its purity

only when an attitude of absolute dependence on God is not merely temporarily assumed in the act, say, of prayer, but is sustained through all the activities of life...

The doctrine of predestination is not the formative principle of Calvinism, the root from which it springs. It is one of its logical consequences, one of the branches which it has inevitably thrown out. It has been firmly embraced and consistently proclaimed by Calvinists because it is an implicate of theism, is directly given in the religious consciousness, and is an absolutely essential element in evangelical religion, without which its central truth of complete dependence upon the free mercy of a saving God can not be maintained.

This is the root of Calvinistic soteriology; and it is because this deep sense of human helplessness and this profound consciousness of indebtedness for all that enters into salvation to the free grace of God is the root of its soteriology that to it the doctrine of election becomes the cor cordis of the Gospel. He who knows that it is God who has chosen him and not he who has chosen God, and that he owes his entire salvation in all its processes and in every one

of its stages to this choice of God, would be an ingrate indeed if he gave not the glory of his salvation solely to the inexplicable elective love of God. B. B. Warfield, "Calvinism," The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge.

In the mind's eye

Calvinism as well as some varieties of freewill theism (e.g. Molinism, classic Arminianism) affirm God's future knowledge and/or counterfactual knowledge. However, even in that respect they share less in common than meets the eye.

Let's take a comparison. I've read that Alfred Hitchcock filmed his movies in his mind before he filmed in reality. We might say he had a mental representation of the future film. Likewise, if I watch Psycho, my memory of the film is a mental representation of what I saw.

Yet there's clearly an asymmetry here. On the one hand, my mental representation of Psycho is a copy of the original whereas there's a sense in which Psycho is a copy of Hitchcock's original idea. He filmed what he saw in his mind's eye, whereas I visualize the end-product. What's in my mind's eye is caused by the film while what's in his mind's eye is the cause of the film.

That's analogous to the difference between Calvinism and freewill theism respecting omniscience. In freewill theism, God's knowledge of a creature's future or hypothetical actions is a copy of what they will do or might have done. For their agency is in some respect independent of God. In Calvinism, by contrast, a creature's future or hypothetical actions is a copy of God's exemplary idea.

In Calvinism, God's concept of what will happen or might have happened is metaphysically prior to the outcome. That's the source of origin. The mental event (in God's mind) is primary while the extramental event (outside God's mind) is secondary.

In Molinism or Arminianism, by contrast, what will happen or might have happened is metaphysically prior to God's concept. His concept is derivative. The extramental event is primary while the mental event is secondary.

In Calvinism, what will or might have been is ultimately subjective to God. Originating in God's mind and will.

In Molinism or Arminianism, what will be or might have been is objective to God, originating outside God's mind. His mind mirrors that semiautonomous reality. Imprinted on God's mind.

Perspectives on Calvinism

There are different perspectives on Calvinism. Different ways of approaching Calvinism. Differences of emphasis or orientation:

1. SOTERIOLOGICAL

This orientation stresses doctrines like unconditional election, reprobation, special redemption, spiritual inability, sola gratia, monergistic regeneration, perseverance.

It has special reference to the human situation. This is typically the focus of Reformed pastors, preachers, and evangelists.

2. THEOLOGICAL

This orientation stresses doctrines like absolute predestination and meticulous providence. It operates at a more cosmic level. It lays more emphasis on God's relation to the world in general rather than God's relation to mankind in particular.

There are people who incline to (1), but distance themselves from (2).

3. PHILOSOPHICAL

This orientation piggybacks on (2). If (2) is true, then everything happens for a reason. There are no random, aimless events. No brute facts. No fortuitous accidents. Everything serves a purpose in a part/whole, means/ends

relation. God leaves nothing to chance. Everything unfolds according to his master plan for world history.

This dovetails with the principle of sufficient reason. There are no inherently inexplicable truths. And that's a condition of intelligibility. In principle, there's a rational explanation for everything, although many things may be inscrutable to humans, given our epistemic limitations.

Is Calvinism synonymous with fatalism?

I've posted most of the definitions at one time or another, but it's useful to collate them in one place.

Is Calvinism fatalistic? Is determinism synonymous with fatalism?

Critics of Calvinism use "fatalism" as an inaccurate term of abuse, because it has invidious connotations that a neutral term does not. Here are some standard definitions and explanations of fatalism. Calvinism is not fatalistic:

Fatalism, in its most usual sense, should not be confused with predestination. Fatalism asserts an abstract necessity without regard to causal antecedents and thus is diametrically opposed to predestination, in which causes and effects, ends and means, are determined in relation to one another. The use of means is rendered futile by fatalism, but not by predestination. The Encyclopedia of Christianity, 4:180.

Another misconception of the determinist position is that, according to

determinism, "our choices don't make any difference." This suggests an image of a determinist as one who drives widely on dangerous mountain roads, because "whatever will be will be". Now it may be that there are a few determinists who think and behave like this, but this approach to life is certainly not implied by determinism. A determinist, to be sure, believes in a sense that whatever happens is inevitable. But it does not follow from this, that whatever happens is inevitable, regardless of what I do. For this to be true my own choices and actions would have to be entirely disconnected from the rest of what goes on, so that they make no difference to anything else that happens. But this, far from being implied by determinism, is actually inconsistent with it. So a determinist, if he understands his own position, will be as concerned as anyone to avoid known dangers and to work hard for desired

outcomes... W. Hasker, *Metaphysics* (IVP 1983), 37-38.

According to this view, then, determinism is the thesis that everything that occurs, including our deliberations and decisions, are causally necessitated by antecedent conditions. Fatalism, by contrast, is the doctrine that our deliberations and decisions are causally ineffective and make no difference to the course of events. In circumstances of fatalism what happens does not depend on how the agent deliberates. The relevant outcome will occur no matter what the agent decides.

*Clearly, however, determinism does not imply fatalism. While there are some circumstances in which deliberation is futile (i.e. 'local fatalism'), deliberation is nevertheless generally effective in a deterministic world. Paul Russell, "Compatibilist Fatalism: Finitude, Pessimism and the Limits of Free Will," Ton van den Beld, ed., *Moral Responsibility and Ontology* (Kluwer: Dordrecht, 2000), 199-218.*

This is one of the most common confusions in free will debates. Fatalism is the view that whatever is going to happen, is going to happen, no matter what we do. Determinism alone does not imply such a consequence. What we decide and what we do would make a difference in how things turn out—often an enormous difference—even if determinism should be true. Robert Kane, A Contemporary Introduction to Free Will (Oxford 2005), 19.

An event is naturalistically fated just in case it occurs in every physically possible world. If there are such fated events, then in one clear sense somethings are going to happen no matter what—vary the initial conditions as much as you like (within the bounds of physical possibility) and the fated event will nonetheless eventuate. Naturalistic fatalism in this sense neither entails nor is entailed by

determinism. John Earman, *A Primer on Determinism* (D. Reidel, 1986), 18.

Others hold to fatalism, the ancient (but still popular) idea that future events happen regardless of what we do. Fiction is full of eerie, fatalistic tales, usually about people who try hard to prevent a dire prophecy about them from coming true—but end up right where the prophecy says they will. Oedipus was fated to kill his father and marry his mother—which he did, even though he went to great lengths to try to prevent such a tragedy.

Are you fated to read this entire book? If so, then you will read it no matter what you do to avoid reading it, such as throwing the book in the trash. It is the view that all future events will happen no matter what anyone does. The future is fixed and will be a certain way regardless of our deliberations and actions. In modern times, fatalism seems to be an enormously popular idea. Soldiers have been known to say something like “If there’s a bullet with my name on it, I’ll get it. If there’s no bullet with my name on it, I won’t get it. Either way, I can’t change it, so worrying is a waste of time.” Some people

express fatalistic sentiments with the old cliché, “Que sera, sera—whatever will be will be.”

*Fatalism, however, is not the same thing as causal determinism. Causal determinism says that future events happen as a result of preceding events. That preceding events include things that we do, so many future events happen because of what we do. Fatalism says that future events happen regardless of what we do. Causal determinists reject fatalism because they believe that people’s actions play a role in events that are determined. Lewis Vaughn & Austin Dacey, *The Case for Humanism: An Introduction* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003), 68, 78-79. [Foreword by Evan Fales.]*

It is sometimes supposed that the doctrine of Determinism—in the form of a belief in the causal interconnectedness of all events, from past to present and thence to the future—also has fatalistic implications. But this has got to be wrong. A determinist can well believe that just as our present actions are the effects of past events, so our present actions have their own effects and so can play a role in determining future events. That is to say, a

causal determinist can consistently say that our wills are causally efficacious, at least some of the time. Since fatalism denies that our choices can have any effect on what the future is to be, a fatalist cannot consistently say this. Hence determinism does not imply fatalism.

<http://www.sfu.ca/content/dam/sfu/philosophy/docs/bradley/fatalism.pdf>

Oedipus was fated to kill his father and marry his mother. What do we mean when we say that? Certainly it must have been true that Oedipus would kill his father and marry his mother. But at least on one understanding, the claim seems to involve more than that: it involves the thought that nothing that Oedipus could have done would have stopped him from killing his father and marrying his mother. Somehow, no matter what he chose to do, no matter what actions he performed, circumstances would conspire to guarantee those outcomes. Fatalism, understood this way, thus amounts to powerlessness to avoid a given outcome.

We can put the point in terms of a counterfactual: There are some outcomes such that whatever action Oedipus were to perform, they would come about.

This is a very specific fatalism: two specific outcomes are fated. There is no implication that Oedipus could not effectively choose to do other things: he was free to choose where he went, what he said, what immediate bodily actions he performed.

<http://web.mit.edu/holton/www/pubs/determinism&fatalism.pdf>

Fatalism is the thesis that all events (or in some versions, at least some events) are destined to occur no matter what we do. The source of the guarantee that those events will happen is located in the will of the gods, or their divine foreknowledge, or some intrinsic teleological aspect of the universe, rather than in the unfolding of events under the sway of natural laws or cause-

effect relations. Fatalism is therefore clearly separable from determinism...

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/determinism-causal/#Int>

Artificial reality

Some theologians use the authorial metaphor to model God's relationship to the world. God is like a novelist, the world is like a novel. Humans are like storybook characters. The physical environment is like the setting. History is like the plot.

It's a useful metaphor—but a bit quaint. It could easily be updated to make it more flexible and realistic. I'm alluding to science fiction involving virtual reality and artificial intelligence.

I don't mean that's realistic in the sense that it's possible. I just mean that for illustrative purposes, it is more lifelike.

So let's play along with that scenario. God is like a video game designer who creates self-aware virtual characters. Unlike storybook characters, these characters are endowed with consciousness. They have an actual mental life. They can feel simulated physical pain or pleasure. They can experience the gamut of human emotions. They can reason. Deliberate. Suffer psychological pain.

They are aware of their surroundings. Aware of fellow characters, with whom they interact. They make plans. Experience disappointment, and so on.

Unlike a novelistic plot, which is static, events unfold in the video game in real time. A real past, present, and future. Stream of consciousness.

This can illustrate different aspects of God's economic relationship:

i) The designer exists apart from the game. The designer planned the game. Created the characters. At that level, he caused everything to happen.

ii) Yet the AI virtual characters aren't merely projections of the designer. They have actual, individual mental states that are ontologically distinct from the designer. They experience their world from the inside out.

Each AI virtual character has its own first-person viewpoint, that's not equivalent to God's first-person viewpoint, or God's third-person viewpoint of the characters. These are irreducible perspectives. Each character knows what it's like to be himself (or herself).

iii) They might cause things to happen the way we cause things to happen in dreams, by willing them to happen. Psychokinetic agents. And from their vantage-point, that might be indistinguishable from physical causation.

iv) They could become aware of their designer's existence. Be cognizant of a larger reality, outside the world in which they exist.

v) We can explore both determinist and indeterminist models.

On an indeterminist model, the designer creates the initial conditions, but after that the game may take on a life of its own. Within certain parameters, the outcome is wide-open.

On a determinist (or predeterminist model), the designer plans everything that happens. Every thought, word, feeling, and action. Everything unfolds according to plan.

In principle, characters might become aware of the fact that their actions are predetermined. That wouldn't have much impact on their action, because they don't know in advance what they are predetermined to do. They just do whatever they were going to do. Do whatever they were motivated to do, which turns out to be what they were predetermined to do. To the extent that knowledge of predeterminism affects their action by making them self-conscious about their next move, that is, itself, a predetermined reaction. So it doesn't change the outcome.

This, of course, raises familiar theodical issues. Are they still responsible for their actions?

A stock objection is that they can't be responsible unless they were able to do otherwise. Suppose we grant that contention for the sake of argument.

There are stories with alternate endings. There are stories in which the character did both. In that event, is he blameworthy if, in one case, he does something immoral?

What about the libertarian version? Unlike storybook characters, the virtual characters can suffer actual harm. One character can make another character feel simulated physical pain. Or induce anguish.

Or "murder" the character. Erase him from the game. All his memories and aspirations are extinguished by another, malevolent character.

But that raises questions about the designer's benevolence. Is it proper for him to permit one character to wield that kind of power over another? Is it proper for him to permit one character to harm another? Much less to cause him irreparable harm?

The value of an analogy depends on sufficient similarity to the thing it illustrates to be truly comparable, but sufficient dissimilarity to enable us to see the issue from a fresh perspective. If it's too much like the thing it illustrates, it lacks a point of contrast to contribute any distinctive insight into the original issue.

The divine video game

I'd like to elaborate a previous post:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2015/09/artificial-reality.html>

Some pop freewill theists act as though, if humans are predestined, then we aren't real agents. Then we are merely projections of God's mind. What we think is reducible to God thinking about himself.

Let's take a stock distinction in philosophy of mind. The hard problem of consciousness includes the unique, first-person experience of every self-aware human. Suppose I was born blind. In that event, I can't know what it's like to be sighted. I can try to imagine what it's like. I can try to extrapolate from a sighted person's description of vision. But even in that case, my own experience remains the frame of reference.

To recur to my previous analogy, suppose God is like a video game designer who programs artificially intelligent virtual characters. Everything they think, feel, and do was programmed.

Suppose the plot includes a teenage boy (Nate) who has a crush on a teenage girl (Angie). The fact that Nate has a crush on Angie doesn't mean the programmer has a crush on Angie. Angie is simply a character that he created. He doesn't have the same feelings for her as Nate. He may like her as a character. A novelist may have a favorite character. But the programmer is not a teenage boy to fall in love with Angie. Rather, she's just a character in his story. The programmer doesn't experience the story from the inside

out, from the viewpoint of a virtual character within the story. Nate has a unique, first-person perspective about Angie which the programmer does not and cannot share.

Dropping the analogy, creation has its own objective existence. It has a different and distinct mode of subsistence. God is timeless and spaceless. The world is temporal and spatial. Finite.

Humans have minds. That's not reducible to God's mind. Each normal adult has a particular, intransmissible perspective. That's not equivalent to divine self-reflection.

In addition, our mental states, unlike God's, are mutable and temporally successive. We change. We learn. God doesn't.

Humans can form intentions and act on their intentions. That's because God has made a world with cause/effect connections. I will my hand to turn a key. My mind caused the hand to move, which caused the key to turn.

"God alone" didn't make that happen. God created the initial conditions to make that possible. But the transaction is not reducible to divine agency. God doesn't have hands—I do.

That's all consistent with absolute predestination and meticulous providence. There are other objections you can attempt to raise against Calvinism, but this isn't one of them.

II. Exegetical Considerations

Annotated prooftexts

Many Arminians labor under the misapprehension that the case for Calvinism begins and ends with Rom 9. In my observation, that's common due to their self-reinforcing ignorance of the exegetical literature.

In this post I'm going to quote a number of Reformed prooftexts, in canonical order, then quote interpretive comments by various scholars. So the post has a simple structure: I quote a text of Scripture, then I quote one or more scholars expounding the passage. Taken by themselves, Reformed prooftexts might seem to beg the question by presupposing a Reformed interpretation thereof. (Arminian prooftexting is open to the same objection.) I've gone beyond bare prooftexting to provide exegetical arguments for the Reformed interpretation.

I'm doing this in part for the benefit of laymen who don't have easy access to the best modern commentaries. But it's also useful to have some of this material collated, at one's fingertips.

Although both Calvinists and Arminians have their one-verse prooftexts, Reformed theological method is based less on snappy one-liners than tracing out the flow of argument or narrative arc in larger blocks of Scripture (e.g. Gen 37-50; Exod 4-14; Isa 40-48; Jn 6, 10-12, 17; Rom 9-11; Eph 1-2, 4).

I'll quote Calvinists, Arminians, an open theist, and some scholars I don't know how to classify. All the quotes will support or be consistent with Reformed theology. You might wonder why a non-Calvinist scholar would offer an interpretation consistent with, or supportive of, Calvinism. One reason is that some commentators compartmentalize exegetical and systematic theology. They think you should

interpret each book on its own terms, without shoehorning passages into a harmonious system of doctrine. Likewise, some scholars think some verses are more Calvinistic while others are more Arminian. They don't interpret one in relation to the other. In addition, some liberal scholars don't think Scripture has a consistent theological message.

This post is not exhaustive, either in terms of Reformed prooftexts or supporting arguments. It's a sampler. It understates the exegetical case for Calvinism.

(Because everything below the break consists of direct quotes, I won't bother with quotation marks or indented paragraphs.)

Gen 45:5-8; 50:20

5 And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life. 6 For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are yet five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. 7 And God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. 8 So it was not you who sent me here, but God. He has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt.

20 As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many

people[a] should be kept alive, as they are today.

God used their crime for his purposes, purposes they could not have anticipated. Here Joseph sounds forth the overarching theological conviction of the Joseph Novel: God's purposes are not thwarted by human sin, but rather advanced by it through his good graces. The hand of God is seen, not only in clearly miraculous interventions and revelations, but also in the working out of divine purpose through human agency, frail and broken as it is. Joseph knows it to be true: "You sold me..." but "God sent me..."

Joseph does not deny their evil intent. But the word play, using the same verb with different idioms, highlights the way God has turned the evil intent of humans into an opportunity to accomplish his good purposes. They planned harm, but God reconfigured their evil and produced good from it...The brothers sold Joseph to Egypt with evil intent, but it was really God who brought him to Egypt in order to preserve life. **B. Arnold, Genesis (Cambridge 2009), 361, 388.**

God's providence has directed everything, even the misdeeds of the brothers. It underscores the true purpose of the entire account of Joseph: God is the subject of the story, and he is moving all things to the end and goal that he has decreed (cf. 50:20). That goal is the preservation of a "remnant," or seed on the earth.

Joseph again highlights the fact of the sovereignty and providence of God. He states emphatically that the true source of his coming to Egypt is not the brothers' evil activity...Rather, it was the will of God that brought about the present circumstances: this opening statement clearly proclaims the doctrine of providence. It was God who placed Joseph in these various official positions.

Joseph simply believes that God even uses the sinfulness of humans to bring about his good purposes for the world. This theological concept is no stranger to the rest of Scripture (see [Prov 16:1](#); [20:24](#); [Ps 37:23](#); [Jer 10:23](#)). As [Proverbs 16:9](#) says, "The heart of man plans his way, but Yahweh directs his steps." There is no stronger statement regarding the true meaning of the sovereignty of God in Scripture than what Joseph says here to his brothers. **J. Currid, Genesis (EP 2003), 2:324-325; 397.**

"But God sent me ahead of you" (v7a) reiterates Joseph's interpretation of his travail in Egypt...Joseph viewed the families of Jacob as the surviving "remnant" of the world's populations (cp. the Noah imagery, v5). If the Jacobites fail to survive, the whole of the human family will die without salvation hope. Joseph's role as savior of the world from starvation typifies the salvation of the nations that the promises call for (e.g. 12:3). **K. Mathews, Genesis 11:27-50:26 (B&H 2005), 2:813.**

Exod 4:11

Then the Lord said to him, "Who has made man's mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the Lord?" ([Exod 4:11](#)).

Some Christians, hoping apparently to limit God's liability, effectively absolve God of responsibility for what goes on in the world. If a child is born blind, it is a result of a prenatal infection or genetic defect; God had nothing to do with it. If religious zealots bring down buildings and kill thousands, God was not involved. The problem with this is that it effectively limits God's power and sovereignty. What if an infection was the proximate cause of a baby's being born

blind? Couldn't God have saved the child if he had wanted to? Couldn't God have stopped the mass-murderers? God cannot be almighty and all-knowing and also be absolved of responsibility for what happens in the world.

God's response in [Exod 4:11](#) is striking: he takes full responsibility for the suffering that people experience. He makes some blind, some deaf, and some mute. The text does not deny that there are proximate causes to such things (injuries, infections, etc.; the ancients knew nothing about viruses and bacteria, but they certainly knew that accidents and injuries could make a person blind or lame). Furthermore, the issue of human sin is never raised in God's response. This passage is not at all concerned with proximate causes-human sin, like disease or injury, is really just another proximate cause. This text is focused on the ultimate cause, God, and does not shrink from affirming that God is in control of all that happens. Of course, the question of theodicy is very large, and merely asserting that God takes responsibility for all that happens in the world does not resolve all the issues. This topic is explored much more fully in Job. **D. Garrett, A Commentary on Exodus (Kregel 2014), 215-16.**

[Exod 4:21](#); [7:3-5](#)

21 And the Lord said to Moses, "When you go back to Egypt, see that you do before Pharaoh all the miracles that I have put in your power. But I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go.

3 But I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and though I multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt, 4 Pharaoh will

not listen to you. Then I will lay my hand on Egypt and bring my hosts, my people the children of Israel, out of the land of Egypt by great acts of judgment. 5 The Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord, when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring out the people of Israel from among them."

Pharaoh's heart was particularly important because the Egyptians believed it was the all-controlling factor in both history and society. It was further held that the hearts of the gods Ra and Horus were sovereign over everything. Because Pharaoh is the incarnation of those two gods, his heart was thought to be sovereign over creation.

Yahweh hardens Pharaoh's heart to demonstrate that only the God of the Hebrews is the Sovereign of the universe. **J. Currid, Exodus: Chapters 1-18 (EP 2000), 113-14.**

By indicating that he would control Pharaoh's resistance to the exodus, God assured Moses that he was totally in control of Pharaoh in every way, able to make him resist as long as necessary even during a buildup of increasingly painful plagues and then make him give up and let the Israelites go at the moment of God's choosing (which was already the essential message of 3:19-20).

His purpose in preventing Pharaoh from giving in too easily and too early was, as will be seen in subsequent parts of the narrative, to allow himself fully to demonstrate his sovereignty over Pharaoh, the Egyptians, the land of Egypt itself, and the gods in which Pharaoh and the Egyptians trusted. **D. Stuart, Exodus (B&H 2006), 146-47.**

The significance of this pattern lies in the observation that even when Pharaoh is subject of the hardening, or when the subject is unmentioned, these statements describe a

resulting condition traceable to a previous hardening action caused by God (cf 7:13, 14, 22; 8:15[19]; 9:7, 35). Therefore these statements cannot refer to Pharaoh independently hardening his heart, as many commentators argue. This is not to say that the reality of Pharaoh's volitional decisions and accountability should be overlooked or ignored; the concern of this study is about the ultimate cause of the hardening.

It is never stated in Exod 4-14 that Yahweh hardens Pharaoh in judgment because of any prior reason or condition residing in him. Rather, as stated in the exegetical conclusion, the only purpose or reason given for the hardening is that it would glorify Yahweh. Therefore, the divine hardening of Pharaoh was unconditional. ([Source](#))

Judges 9:23

23 And God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the leaders of Shechem, and the leaders of Shechem dealt treacherously with Abimelech

In v23 we see God directly intervening by sending a spirit to stir up hostility between Abimelech and Shechem...This incident is just one of several in which God employs the services of an evil spirit to expedite judgment upon sinners ([1 Sam 16:14](#); [18:10](#); [19:10](#); [1 Chron 21:1](#) [cf. [2 Sam 24:1](#)]). The expression "evil spirit" need not mean that the spirit was itself demonic or evil. The Hebrew term can refer to moral evil, but it can also refer to disaster, harm, or calamity in a non-moral sense. If the word is given the latter sense here, the expression may simply mean that the spirit was sent to bring harm and calamity upon the objects of God's anger.

Even if the spirit is viewed as demonic in nature, this need not impugn the goodness of God himself, for the OT makes it clear that he will on occasion resort to deceit when judging sinners. In this case, the demonic spirit would be an instrument or agent of divine retribution. **R. Chisholm, A Commentary on Judges and Ruth (Kregel 2013), 316-17.**

Judges 9:53

53 And a certain woman threw an upper millstone on Abimelech's head and crushed his skull.

The Lord remains sovereign even during the worst of times. He preserved Jotham and brought his justified curse to pass. In the process he intervened supernaturally (by sending a spirit to stir up strife) and manipulated people and circumstances in order to accomplish his just purposes. through a series of reports he drew Abimelech to Shechem and brought about the destruction of that sinful city. By giving Abimelech temporary success, the Lord placed him in a vulnerable position where his daring became his downfall. By using a woman armed with a millstone to kill Abimelech, the Lord once more showed he can accomplish his purposes through unlikely instruments. **R. Chisholm, A Commentary on Judges and Ruth (Kregel 2013), 326.**

1 Sam 2:25

25 If someone sins against a man, God will mediate for him, but if someone sins against the Lord, who can intercede for him?" But they would not listen to the voice of

their father, for it was the will of the Lord to put them to death.

A sobering statement is contained in 2:25b. The wording should be carefully noticed (see note on 2:25). It does not say that Eli's sons had become so hardened in their sinful ways that the Lord decided to put them to death, but rather than Eli's sons did not listen to him *because* the Lord was *already planning to put them to death*. In other words, the resistance of Hophni and Phinehas to Eli's call to repentance was not the *reason* for God's judgment but was the *result* of his prior judgment. **J. Vannoy, 1-2**

Samuel (Tyndale 2009), 59.

2 Sam 17:14

And Absalom and all the men of Israel said, "The counsel of Hushai the Archite is better than the counsel of Ahithophel." For the Lord had ordained to defeat the good counsel of Ahithophel, so that the Lord might bring harm upon Absalom.

The Lord answered David's prayer (cf. [2 Sam 15:31](#)). The narrator's description of Ahithophel's advice as "good," in contradistinction to Hushai's characterization of it as "not good" (17:7), reminds the reader that Absalom is a victim of divine deception (see the comment above on 16:18).

There is more to the story than meets the eye. Indeed, as we read the advice of the two counselors, it is quite apparent that Ahithophel's plan is superior; even the narrator admits this (17:14). But in the end the Lord is manipulating the minds of Absalom and his men, causing them to prefer the desperate, inferior plan offered by

Hushai, because he has already determined to bring disaster upon Absalom (17:14). This is reminiscent of the account of Eli's sons, who rejected their father's warning because the Lord had by that time decided to kill them ([1 Sam 2:25](#); see as well [1 Kings 12:15](#)). **R. Chisholm, 1 & 2 Samuel (Baker 2013), 268,270.**

2 Chron 18:19-22

19 And the Lord said, 'Who will entice Ahab the king of Israel, that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-gilead?' And one said one thing, and another said another. 20 Then a spirit came forward and stood before the Lord, saying, 'I will entice him.' And the Lord said to him, 'By what means?' 21 And he said, 'I will go out, and will be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.' And he said, 'You are to entice him, and you shall succeed; go out and do so.' 22 Now therefore behold, the Lord has put a lying spirit in the mouth of these your prophets. The Lord has declared disaster concerning you."

In effect, Micaiah explained his actions on the basis of divine intentions behind these events. The Chronicler frequently appealed to divine intentions to explain earlier events. This passage reveals heavenly purposes in great detail. Micaiah has seen the Lord ask for a volunteer from the host of heaven (v18) to lure Ahab to his death (v19). An unnamed spirit had agreed to do so by becoming a lying

spirit in the mouths of all [of Ahab's] prophets (vv20-21). God had agreed to the plan and guaranteed success (v21).

Micaiah's two oracles were designed to seal Ahab's fate. While prophets usually warned to encourage repentance, occasionally their role was to insure destruction (see [Isa 6:9-1](#)). Jesus spoke in parables for a similar reason ([Lk 8:9-10](#)). **R. Pratt, 1 and 2 Chronicles (Mentor 1998), 326.**

The ethical and theological implications of trickery have not been the focus of this paper. Yet obviously such matters naturally attend the archetype of the trickster and the art of trickery. Particularly troublesome are those passages where God himself is said to be involved in the situation. Most instances fit the category of *ruse de guerre*. Thus God caused the Aramaean soldiers to hear what seemed to them the clamor of a great host coming upon them and fled in panic ([2 Kgs 7:6-7](#)). At the Lord's direction Absalom and his advisors were deceived into following advice that would ultimately lead to their defeat ([2 Sam 17:14](#)) and Ahab is deceived into following the counsel of his false prophets to his own destruction ([1 Kgs 22:19-23](#)). ([Source](#))

[Ps 33:10-11, 15](#)

10 The Lord brings the counsel of the nations to nothing;

he frustrates the plans of the peoples.

**11 The counsel of the Lord stands forever,
the plans of his heart to all generations.**

**15 he who fashions the hearts of them all
and observes all their deeds.**

This section focuses on the Lord's sovereign plan in history as the development of the theme that all his work is dependable (v4b). Verses 10 and 11 go together as the plan and intentions of the nations (v10) are contrasted with the plan and intentions of the Lord (v11).

Now, as for the plan and intentions of the nations, the psalmist says that the Lord "annuls" and "thwarts" them. This second term has the idea of stopping an action (as in forbidding someone from carrying out a vow; see [Num 30:8](#)).

On the other hand, the counsel and the purposes of the Lord endure forever. Here we find the verb "stand firm, endure" repeated. As the Lord's creation stood firm at his decree (v9), so his counsel stands firm forever (v11). It cannot be shaken or interrupted by the antagonistic plans of the world. As the sage says, "There is no counsel, no wisdom, no plan against the counsel of the Lord" ([Prov 21:30](#)). And to make his plan stand, as the psalmist says, "He brings to nothing the plans of the nations." The certainty of the plan of the Lord is not temporary-it is eternal. This is stressed by "forever, to the farthest time," and reiterated in the parallel colon that affirms that the purposes of God's heart are "until endless generations." The plan of the Lord can be trusted completely because it is carried out in faithfulness.

The one who forms the heart, i.e. fashions it according to his plan, evaluates its activities...Because he created mankind, his evaluation can penetrate even to the motivations behind actions. He understands completely what we are, what we do, and why we do it, and the standard by which he evaluates us is his righteousness. **A**

Ross, A Commentary on the Psalms: 1-41 (Kregel 2011), 734-735, 737-738.

The point of the line is thus to add that the watcher is the original shaper, their creator. Specifically, YHWH shapes people's mind; the implies the ability to look into it. **J.**

Goldingay, Psalms 1-41 (Baker 2006), 470.

Ps 139:16

Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them.

What is meant, we may well ask, when the Psalmist asserts that all the days are written upon God's book?...The thought here is that the entirety of the Psalmist's being, even including the days of his life, are inscribed in a book that belongs to God. By the days of his life the Psalmist has in mind all the vicissitudes that he must experience. All of his life, each individual day with all that that day will bring, is written down by God in His own book.

Furthermore, it is stated that these days of the Psalmist's life have been formed before there were any of them...If we understand his language aright, he is saying that the days of his life were actually formed before even one of them had come into existence. All his life, the details of each day, had been written down in the book of God, before any of these days had actually occurred.

The Psalmist has here reached a peak in his exaltation of the all-knowing and all-powerful God. Not only does God know all things, but God has also foreordained all things. In

other words, the Psalmist has brought us head on with the doctrine of predestination. His life he regards not as a chance happening, but as a life already planned by God even before he himself was born. All the days that David would live and all the events of each day had been written down in God's book before David himself had come into existence.

David's life is not determined by David; he is not the master of his fate nor the captain of his soul, nor, for that matter, is any man. Before David appeared upon the earth, the days of his life had been determined by God Himself. Indeed, all that occurs had been foreordained of God. God has a plan and hence there are no surprises for Him. He knows what the future will bring forth, for He Himself has determined the future. David was to live a life that had been predetermined for him.

David does not rebel at this thought and neither should we. The contemplation of this profound doctrine leads him to an utterance of the preciousness of God's thoughts. He is willing that it should be as set forth here. He is content that God has determined in advance his life, predestined the course of events for him. As a devout believer in the Lord he knows that whatever God does is right. **E. J.**

Young, The Way Everlasting (Banner of Truth 1997), 80-82.

Prov 19:21

**21 Many are the plans in the mind of a man,
but it is the purpose of the Lord that will stand.**

The Lord's purpose informing their instruction will prevail over human schemes to subvert the teaching (see 16:1-

9)...The pair is also linked by the concept that God's counsel will stand forever (v21b)...*As for the counsel* [see 19:20] *of the Lord*, refers to God's immutable will (see 1:25). The juxtaposition *are many* (see 7:26) with *it* [i.e., "counsel"] *will take place* contrasts the many human plans that may or may not occur in historical reality with God's single plan that will happen (cf. 6:1). The manifold images developed in the human thinking organ are one thing, but what finally transpires as a reality is another. God can make them successful or cancel them ([2 Sam 15:30-17:14](#)) or bring about the reverse of what people intended (cf. [Gen 45:4-8](#); [50:20](#); [Exod 1:8-12,20](#); [Job 23:13](#); [Ps 2:1-6](#); [Prov 20:24](#); [27:1](#); [Is 45:9](#); [Acts 2:23](#); [4:27-28](#); [23:11-15](#)). Even the best human plans and efforts cannot stand before him if he does not will it ([Prov 21:30-31](#); cf. [Ps 33:11](#); [Is 7:7](#); [14:24](#); [46:10](#)). **B. Waltke, The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 15-31 (Eerdmans 2005), 114-15.**

Prov 20:24

24 A man's steps are from the Lord; how then can man understand his way?

If even a strong and powerful man cannot determine his steps, how can any human being discern the way his steps take? The similarity between *from the Lord* and "to the Lord" (see vv22-23) identifies the just God as the ultimate author of *the steps* (see 16:9), a metaphor for every decision and activity *of a man* (*geber*; referring to the male in his strength; see 6:34).

The parallel to "step," *his way* (see 1:15), moves from his individual decision to his entire direction and the destiny

with which he acts. People do not understand their ways because God makes the actual direction and destiny of their free actions subservient to his plan. **B. Waltke, The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 15-31 (Eerdmans 2005), 154.**

Prov 21:1

21 The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will.

God's inscrutable mastery extends to kings, the most powerful of human beings, and to the heart, their most free member. The Lord rules even the most free and powerful human beings (see 16:14-15; 19:12; 20:2).

As the heart of the individual determines and directs his every move, *the king's heart* (see I:90) determines the nation's direction and well-being (see vv10-15)...God's inscrutable mastery directs the king, who has in his hands the life and death of his subjects (16:10-15). Here the anthropomorphism teaches that God steers the king's heart according to the Lord's good pleasure. The metaphor is *a channel of water*...Farmers in Mesopotamia and Egypt divert the water by putting up dams and other obstructions in the stream's flow to direct the water to their fields and gardens. Palestinian farmers depended on rain (cf. [Deut 11:10-12](#)), but must have captured and directed the water to where it was most needed. Natural streams are not meant, because their direction is fixed. The Lord is the Farmer; the king's heart is the flexible channel... **B. Waltke, The Book of**

Proverbs: Chapters 15-31 (Eerdmans 2005), 167-168.

Prov 21:30

30 No wisdom, no understanding, no counsel can avail against the Lord.

Verse 30 protects against misinterpreting v29b to mean that a human being, even the upright, has the power to consummate his journey independently from the Lord. The Lord has the final word in realizing the goal. Everything in this proverb stops at the divine name.

By the triple anaphoric hammer blows "there is no," the proverb drives home the vast and unbridgeable guilt between the best of human wisdom and the Lord's sovereignty. "Wisdom" and "counsel" are used in battle imagery in [2 Kgs 18:20](#) and [Isa 10:13](#), and probably all three words refer explicitly to human military strategy as suggested by 21:31 (cf. 24:5). **B. Waltke, The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 15-31 (Eerdmans 2005), 191.**

Isa 14:24-27

24 The Lord of hosts has sworn:

"As I have planned,

so shall it be,

and as I have purposed,

so shall it stand,

25 that I will break the Assyrian in my land,

and on my mountains trample him underfoot;

**and his yoke shall depart from them,
and his burden from their shoulder."**

**26 This is the purpose that is purposed
concerning the whole earth,
and this is the hand that is stretched out
over all the nations.**

**27 For the Lord of hosts has purposed,
and who will annul it?**

**His hand is stretched out,
and who will turn it back?**

When God swears to do something, the listener can be fully assured that it will happen. God's holiness guarantees the execution of his plans, for he stakes his holy reputation on his promises (cf. similar holy oaths in [Amos 4:2](#); [6:8](#); [8:7](#)).

The claim is made that there is a direct connection between God's plans and purposes and what actually will happen...This contrasts with man's inability to carry out his plans (8:10; cf. 46:10; [Ps 33:9-11](#); [Prov 19:21](#)).

The final two verses extrapolate the principles in 14:24-25 and apply them to God's plans for the whole world...the comparison suggests that God makes sovereign plans not only for specific events related to the future of Assyria, but also for every nation on earth...There is no other way for things to happen in this world, no second choices, no alternative plans but God's plans. No one can resist the hand of God, and no one can turn God's hand away from doing his will. **G. Smith, Isaiah 1-39 (B&H 2007), 320-22.**

Sometimes in Isaiah a divine statement is underlined in some particularly emphatic way (cf. 5:9; 9:7; 37:32), and so it is here. The name of God is used here (cf. comment on 1:9) combines with the statement of his settled purpose (cf. 5:19) to assure us that the Assyrians cannot survive. If such a mighty God has designed to crush them, they are doomed indeed. As though to reinforce this certainty still more, God speaks of "my land" and "my mountains."

The prophetic word here enunciates an important general principle that has been demonstrated so strikingly in the downfall of Assyria: God is sovereign over human history (v26). All nations will have to submit to his judgment. This important theological principle will be seen in relation to other nations-both small and great-in the oracles that follow. God is not like a man who makes plans and finds he has no power to put them into effect. Perfect wisdom and absolute power find their unity in god. **REBC 6:568-69.**

Isa 46:10-11

**10 declaring the end from the beginning
and from ancient times things not yet done,
saying, 'My counsel shall stand,
and I will accomplish all my purpose,'
11 calling a bird of prey from the east,
the man of my counsel from a far country.
I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass;
I have purposed, and I will do it.**

Here the three participles make a direct link between predictive prophecy (declaring the outcome at the start) and divine intervention in history (calling from the east a

bird of prey)...As several commentators (e.g. Young) have noted, the three participles move from general to particular to specific. In the first instance, God tells in general what will happen in the future. He can do so because the future is fully shaped by his own plans and wishes. This is the same point that was made in chap. 14 concerning Assyria (vv24-27). Assyria's plans for Judah were really of little import. It is the Lord's plans for Assyria to which that great nation should have paid attention (see also 22:11; 37:26).

This thought is summed in the ringing affirmations of the final bicolon of v11...The repetition serves to emphasize the unshakable connection between promise and the performance, between divine talk and divine action...This parallelism underlines again that the reason God can tell what is going to happen is that what happens is only an outworking of his eternal purposes. **John Oswalt, The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40-66 (Eerdmans 1998), 236-37.**

Jn 3:6-8

6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.7 Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' 8 The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

From the start, the Gospel [of John] speaks of those who "receive" Jesus as the Light and "believe in his name," those who are given "authority to become children of God"

by virtue of having been born...of God" (1:12-13). Two chapters later Jesus tells Nicodemus, "unless someone is born from above [or "of water and Spirit"], he cannot see [or "enter"] the kingdom of God" (3:3,5). But what exactly is the relationship between being "born of God," or "born from above," and "receiving" or "believing in" Jesus? Which comes first? Is a person reborn because he or she believes, or does a person believe as a *result* of being reborn? Conventional wisdom assumes the former as a matter of course, and the word order of 1:12-13 seems on the face of it to support this. Yet those verses make no explicit causal connection either way between faith and rebirth, and as Jesus' dialogue with Nicodemus runs its course, evidence for the opposite view begins to surface. "Receiving" Jesus' testimony is mentioned in 3:11, and "believing" is repeatedly urged in verses 12, 15, and 16. Finally, the stark alternative of "believing" or "not believing" in him is clearly set forth (v18), and then restated (in language reminiscent of 1:9-13) as either loving or hating the Light, either "coming to the Light" or refusing to come (vv19-21). The person who "hates the Light" does so because he "practices wicked things," and refuses to come "for fear his works will be exposed" (v20). By contrast, the person who "does the truth comes to the Light, so that his works will be revealed as works wrought in God" (v21).

On this note the interview with Nicodemus-if Nicodemus is still anywhere in the picture-comes to an end. In sharp distinction from the other three Gospels, in which Jesus says, "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners" ([Mk 2:27](#)//[Mt 9:13](#); also [Lk 5:32](#)), he does come to call, if not explicitly "the righteous," at least those who "do the truth"-as against those who "practice wicked things." Those who come to him in faith (that is, "come to the Light") demonstrate by so doing that they are *already* "doers of the truth," not by their own merits to be sure, but because their

works have been "in God" (*en theo*, 3:21). They do not prove their faith by their works—at least not yet—but on the contrary prove their works by their faith. To this extent, John's Gospel turns some versions of Reformation theology on their heads! It is not as radical as it sounds, however, for the point is simply that God is at work in a person's life *before* the person "receives" Jesus, or "believes," or "comes to the Light." This is evident in the account of the man born blind—the Gospel's classic case study on what it means to be "born of God"—where the point made is not that the man was a sinner who "believed" and was consequently reborn. On the contrary, Jesus insists, "Neither this man sinned nor his parents"—that is, his predicament was not the result of sin. Rather, the purpose of the healing was "that the works of God might be revealed in him" (9:3)—that is, God was *already* at work in his life, and his eventual confession of faith (9:38) would reveal that to be the case. He did not believe *in order* to be "born of God." He believed *because* he was "born of God." This interpretation is confirmed by Jesus' repeated insistence that "All that the Father gives me will come to me" (6:37), "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draw him" (6:44), and "no one can come to me unless it is given him from the Father" (6:65). The initiative in human salvation is God the Father's and his alone.

While it is true that John's Gospel centers on a call to decision, the hearer's decision cannot change but only reveal what has gone on before—the working of God the Father in those who will eventually become his children. Jesus can speak of "other sheep" whom, he says, "I have," even though they have not yet believed (10:16), and the Gospel writer can envision scattered "children of God"—born of God," therefore—who have yet to be gathered into one" (11:52). Perhaps the words of old Simeon in another Gospel put it best: Jesus in the Gospel of John comes "so that the

thoughts of many hearts might be revealed" ([Lk 2:35](#)). The accent is not on "conversion" (the words for "repent" and "repentance" never occur), or even the forgiveness of sins, but on revelation. The coming of Jesus into the world simply reveals who belongs-and who does not belong-to his Father, the God of Israel. **J. R. Michaels, The Gospel of John (Eerdmans 2010), 40-42.**

Jn 6:37, 39

37 All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. 38 For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. 39 And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day.

Both here and elsewhere in the Gospel tradition, Jesus responds to unbelief with an appeal to divine sovereignty and divine election. It is in this framework of sovereignty and election that Jesus holds out the universal-sounding declaration that "the person who comes to me I will never drive out." The words "never drive out" are just as emphatic and final as "never go hungry" or "never ever thirst" (v35). Yet they do not add up to universalism. There is no indiscriminate "Whosoever Will," as in the old Gospel song. Those who "come to Jesus" are those whom the Father gave him, and no one else. In promising never to "drive out" those who come, Jesus is simply obeying the Father by accepting the Father's gift. He confirms a principle first laid down by John, that "A person cannot receive anything unless it is given him from heaven" (3:27). The corollary is

that a person *must* receive that which is given from heaven, and this Jesus promises, emphatically, and without qualification, to do.

If he were now to reject those who came to him in genuine faith, he would not only be denying them salvation, but he would "lose" that which his Father wanted him to have.

Their loss would be his as well. **J. R. Michaels, *The Gospel of John*** (Eerdmans 2010), 377-79.

Formally it is a "litotes", a figure of speech in which something is affirmed by negating its contrary..."whoever comes to me I will certainly keep in, preserve..."I will never drive away" therefore means "I will certainly keep in". **D.**

A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Eerdmans 1991), 290.

Jn 6:44

44 No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day.

The words are a negative corollary to verses 37 ("All that the Father gives me will come to me") and 39 ("that of all he has given me I might not lose anything"), and an echo of John's caution to his disciples three chapters earlier, "A person cannot receive anything unless it is given him from heaven" (3:27)...Those who "come to me," Jesus says, do so because his Father "draws" them, and for no other reason. They are God's gift to Jesus, and Jesus is God's gift to them. Jesus is not so much inviting these Galilean "Jews" to "come to him" as providing the *reader of the Gospel* with an explanation why they would not and could not

come. They do not come to Jesus because they are not "drawn" or "dragged" to him. The verb is used literally of drawing a sword (18:10), or dragging a net full of fish into a boat (21:6) or onto shore (21:11). **J. R. Michaels, The Gospel of John (Eerdmans 2010), 385-86.**

Jn 9:3

3 Jesus answered, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him.

It touches upon God's manipulation of history to glorify his name. A good example would be [Exod 9:16](#), cited in [Rom 9:17](#), where God tells Pharaoh: "This is why I have spared you: to show you my power so that my name may be declared throughout all the earth." **R. Brown, The Gospel According to John I-XII (Doubleday 1977), 371-72.**

In John's theology, people might not understand God's eternal purposes until they actually came to pass (cf. 2:22; 12:16; 13:7); in this case, the fulfillment that revealed the purpose arrived many years after the situation began. This principle would have made sense to John's contemporaries; for example, many sages believed that God had allowed Israel to endure troubles in the past so that God might redeem them for his glory.

Sipre Deut. 306.30.2, 5, 6. God's mighty acts could be said to be predestined before the creation (*Gen. Rab.* 5:5). **C. Keener, The Gospel of John (Hendrickson 2003), 1:779.**

Jn 10:26-28

26 but you do not believe because you are not among my sheep.

For emphasis, Jesus repeats himself: "But as for you, you do not believe," adding the reason for their unbelief, "because you do not belong to my sheep" (v26).

Reintroducing the sheep metaphor, he revisits the parable of vv1-5 and the discourse of vv7-18. One might have expected rather, "You do not belong to my sheep because you do not believe," but the wording here is in keeping with the theology of the Gospel...Those who do not "believe" prove thereby that they are not Jesus' sheep. Behind it all is a strong accent on election: those who "believe" do so because they are *already* Jesus' sheep (see v16, "other sheep I have"), his gift from the Father. J. R. Michaels, *The Gospel of John* (Eerdmans 2010), 598.

"Lost" sheep are not "found" in John's Gospel (as, for example, in [Lk 15:6](#)). Rather, Jesus' mission is to make sure his sheep "will never be lost, and no one will seize them out of my hand" ([Jn 10:29](#)). He does not come "to seek and to save that which is lost" ([Lk 19:10](#)), but to keep people from ever being "lost". In this Gospel a person is not *first* lost and then saved (as in [Lk 15:24](#)), but either lost or saved.

Both are final, not temporary conditions. **Ibid. 380.**

Jn 11:4

4 But when Jesus heard it he said, "This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it."

The purpose of Lazarus's sickness was not "for death"...Instead, the purpose of the sickness is to provide an opportunity for God to manifest his glory (11:4; cf. 11:40), as in 9:3. **C. Keener, The Gospel of John (Hendrickson 2003), 2:839.**

Jn 12:39-40

**39 Therefore they could not believe. For again
Isaiah said,
40 "He has blinded their eyes
and hardened their heart,
lest they see with their eyes,
and understand with their heart, and turn,
and I would heal them."**

The writer goes a step beyond "they would not believe," adding, "Therefore they were unable to believe" (v39) on the basis of another text in Isaiah...This is clearly sufficient to explain why "they were unable to believe" (v39; compare 5:44; 8:43). Jesus had said elsewhere that "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draw him" (6:44), or "unless it is given him from the Father" (6:65), and Isaiah's ancient words now put the judgment in even starker terms. Not only has God not "drawn" these people or "given" them faith, but he has "blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts" to make sure they would *not* repent and be healed! **J. R. Michaels, The Gospel of John (Eerdmans 2010), 710.**

Jn 17:2, 9

2 since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him...9 I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours.

In [John 17:6-19](#), our Lord effectively prays for his disciples, those whom the Father has given him, but not for the world (vv9-10). In verses 20-26, Jesus then prays for all future believers, once again given to him by the Father (v24; cf. 6:37-44). This intercession is consistent with Jesus' teaching previously: he is the good shepherd who dies for the sheep (10:11,15); his sheep are given to him by his Father (10:29); his sheep receive eternal life due to his death; but not all people are his sheep (10:26-27). All of this is consistent with his office as a priest who offers himself for a particular people and intercedes for those same people. **P. Gentry & S. Wellum, Kingdom Through Covenant (Crossway 2012), 674-75.**

[Jn 17:12](#) 12 While I was with them, I kept them in your name, which you have given me. I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost except the son of destruction, that the Scripture might be fulfilled.

But Judas is not an exception. Jesus didn't choose Judas for the same reason he chose the Eleven. Even before he chose him, Jesus knew that Judas would betray him. That's why Jesus chose him. Judas had an instrumental role to play in the atonement ([Jn 6:64,70-71](#); [13:10-11,18,21-22](#)). Judas

was excluded from rather than included in the sphere of soteriological election and protection. Christ's ability to keep everyone the Father entrusted to him didn't break down in the case of Judas; rather, Judas always had a different function and destiny. Cf. **D. A. Carson, The Gospel According to John (Eerdmans 1991), 291-2; 563-4.**

Acts 2:23

23 this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.

God's "foreknowledge" (*prognosis*) means more than his ability to anticipate the future. It is another way of talking about his determination of events in advance, according to his own plan (cf. [Rom 8:29](#); [1 Pet 1:2,20](#)). Jesus came into the world to fulfill certain God-given roles, and those associated with him had their own roles to play in the drama of redemption.

[Quoting from the *NIDNTT*] Perhaps no NT author is more concerned than Luke to testify to the accomplishment of the will of God in history or caught upon the language of the divine plan and predetermined intention, purpose and necessity. **D. Peterson, The Acts of the Apostles (Eerdmans 2009), 146.**

Acts 4:28

28 to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.

The word *boule* ("purpose, plan, will") appears again (cf. 2:23 note), together with the verb *proorisen* ("decided

beforehand," a compound of the verb used in 2:23; 10:42; 11:29; 17:26,31), now with the expression "your power" (*cheir*, "hand"; cf. 4:30; 11:21; 13:11) added to stress God's sovereignty in all these events. Once in each chapter of Acts so far, Peter has expressed the confidence that God is able to carry out his purpose even through rebellious human beings who do not accept his revealed will (1:16-20; 2:23-36; 3:13-15).

[Quoting Tannehill] In a time of threat, prayer can be a rediscovery of the sovereign God who wins by letting our opponents win and then transforming the expected result. This rediscovery can keep God's witnesses faithful in spite of threats. **D. Peterson, The Acts of the Apostles (Eerdmans 2009), 201.**

Acts 13:48

48 And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed.

The present verse is as unqualified a statement of absolute predestination-"the eternal purpose of God" (Calvin]-as is found anywhere in the NT. Those believed who were appointed (the passive implies, by God) to do so. The rest, one infers, did not believe, did not receive eternal life, and were thus appointed to death. The positive statement implies the negative. **C. K. Barrett, Acts I-XIV (T&T Clark 1994), 658.**

It is God who "assigns" people to the group of people who inherit eternal life. The idea of being "assigned to a certain classification" may echo the OT concept of being recorded in

the 'book of life,' in which God's people are listed. **E. Schnabel, Acts (Zondervan 2012), 589.**

Acts 17:26

26 And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place

God "determined" not only the existence of human beings but also the conditions of their existence. **E.**

Schnabel, Acts (Zondervan 2012), 734.

Rom 8:28-30; 11:2

28 And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. 29 For those whom he chose beforehand he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. 30 And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

2 God has not rejected his people whom he chose beforehand. Do you not know what the Scripture

says of Elijah, how he appeals to God against Israel?

[[Rom 8:29](#)] Since, however, it would be a needless truism to say that God "knows" (about) Christians ahead of time, the verb would have to suggest that God "foresees" something peculiar to believers-perhaps their moral fitness (so many patristic theologians), their destiny, or (which is far more likely, if this is what the verb means) their faith...But I consider it unlikely that this is the correct interpretation..."enter into relationship with before" or "choose, or determine, before" ([Rom 11:2](#); [Acts 2:23](#); [1 Pet 1:2,20](#))...Paul does not say that God knew anything *about us* but that he knew *us*, and this is reminiscent of the OT sense of "know". (Moreover, it is only some individuals-those who, having been "foreknown," were also "predestined," "called," "justified," and "glorified"-who are the objects of this activity; and this shows that an action applicable only to Christians must be denoted by the verb...It must be a knowledge or love that is unique to believers and that leads to their being predestined. This being the case, the difference between "know or love beforehand" and "choose beforehand" virtually ceases to exist...[1 Pet 1:20](#) and Eoh 1:4 suggest rather than Paul would place this choosing of us "before the foundation of the world", **D. Moo, The Letter to the Romans (Eerdmans, 2nd ed., 2018), 553-55.**

[[Rom 8:28](#)] In saying that God works in all things for good, *panta* (all things) focuses especially on sufferings and tribulations, but the all-encompassing character of the term should not be ignored. What is remarkable, though, is that even suffering and tribulation turn out for the good of the Christian...Paul doesn't teach that all things are intrinsically

good or pleasant, but instead that the most agonizing sufferings and evils inflicted on believers will be turned to their good by God. It is correct, then, to say that *agathon* (good) is eschatological, since the "good" will be evident and fully realized only at the end time. Yet by virtue of this promise, believers know "now" that everything conspires to their good, and this knowledge fortifies them with courage in facing any situation.

Thus Paul adds the phrase "for those called according to his purpose" to further describe those who love God. This last phrase is not a correction of the previous one but a clarification so that the reader can accurately locate the roots of our love for God. The believers' love for God is ultimately due to God's purpose in calling them to salvation.

The text does not say that "some" of those called were justified. It fuses the called and justified together so that all those who are called receive the blessing of justification. If all those who are called are also justified, then calling must be effectual and must create faith, for "all" those who are called are justified, and justification cannot occur without faith (3:21-22,28; 5:1)...The foundational reason why all things work for believers good begins to emerge: God's unstoppable purpose in calling believers to salvation cannot be frustrated, and thus he employs all things to bring about the plan he had from the beginning in the lives of believers.

[[Rom 8:29](#)] The good realized is not due to fate, luck, or even the moral superiority of believers; it is to be ascribed to God's good and sovereign will, which has from eternity past to eternity future secured and guaranteed the good of those whom he has chosen. This is the significance of "the golden chain"...In each case God is the subject of the verbs...The good he has begun he will finish ([Phil 1:6](#); cf. [1 Cor 1:9](#); [1 Thes 5:24](#))

The background of the term [*proginosko*] should be located in the OT, where for God "to know" (*yada*) refers to his covenant love, in which he sets his affection on those whom he has chosen (cf. [Gen 18:19](#); [Exod 33:17](#); [1 Sam 2:12](#); [Ps 18:43](#); [Prov 9:10](#); [Jer 1:5](#); [Hos 13:5](#); [Amos 3:2](#)). The parallel terms "consecrate" and "appoint" in [Jer 1:5](#) are noteworthy...The intention of the text [[Amos 3:3](#)] is to say that Yahweh had set his covenant love on only Israel. [Rom 11:2](#) yields the same conclusion...the verb *proegno* here functions as the antonym to *apostoto*. In other words, the verse is saying that God has not rejected his people on whom he set his covenant love (cf. also [Acts 2:23](#); [1 Pet 1:2,20](#)). Similarly, in [Rom 8:29](#) the point is that God has predestined those on whom he has set his covenant affection. The object of the verb *proegno* is personal, "those whom" God set his affection on...not just facts about the world but specific persons.

The words *proegno* and *proorisen* are almost synonyms. Many scholars observe that the only difference is that Paul specifies the goal of God's preordained work in reference to predestination, that is, that we be conformed to the image of his Son. But this overlooks the distinction between the terms *proginoskein* and *proorizein*. The latter term stressed the preordained plan of God that will certainly come to pass ([Acts 4:28](#); [1 Cor 2:7](#); [Eph 1:5,11](#)) in accordance with his will. The former has a different nuance in that it highlights God's covenant love and affection for those whom he has chosen.

[[Rom 11:2a](#)] As in 8:29 (see the exegesis and exposition of 8:28-30), the work *proginoskein* doesn't merely connote foreknowledge but also implies foreordination with the emphasis being on God's covenant love for his people (cf. [Amos 3:1](#); [1 Cor 8:3](#); [Gal 4:9](#); [2 Tim 2:19](#)). Such an understanding of *proginoskein* is confirmed by the

immediate context, for *proegno* clearly functions as the antonym of "has forsaken". The latter verb means "rejected," and thus the former means "selected". **T.**

Schreiner, Romans (Baker, 2nd ed. 2018), 441-45; 566.

"Foreknew" focuses attention upon the distinguishing love of God whereby the sons of God were elected. But it does not inform us of the destination to which those thus chosen are appointed. It is precisely that information that "he also foreordained" supplies, and it is by no means superfluous.

J. Murray, The Epistle to the Romans (Eerdmans 1982), 318.

Confidence in the sovereignty of God in dire circumstances is one of the fundamentals of the faith. It is one thing-and very necessary-to assent to the great historical facts of the gospel as touching the birth of Christ, his miracles, atoning death, resurrection from the dead and return to glory. But, I submit, confidence in God's sovereign goodness in the midst of a baffling and painful providence is equally important, if not more so. **P. Barnett, Romans (CF 2003), 200.**

Rom 8:35-39

35 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? 36 As it is written,

"For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered."

37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 38 For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Those who defend the view that believers may possibly forsake their salvation note that nothing is said here about the impossibility of believers separating themselves from Christ's love...[however], the objective of the text is to rule out that very eventuality. Affliction, persecution, famine, death, and so on are mentioned because these are the sorts of things that would cause a believer to renounce faith in Christ. **T. Schreiner, Romans (Baker, 2nd. ed., 2018), 457-58.**

Rom 9:9-22

9 For this is what the promise said: "About this time next year I will return, and Sarah shall have a son." 10 And not only so, but also when Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, 11 though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad-in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls- 12 she was told, "The older will serve the younger." 13 As it is written, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated."

14 What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! **15** For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." **16** So then it depends not on human will or exertion,[a] but on God, who has mercy. **17** For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." **18** So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.

19 You will say to me then, "Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?" **20** But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, "Why have you made me like this?" **21** Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use? **22** What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, **23** in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory-

[[Rom 9:13](#)]...I think that a corporate and salvation-historical interpretation of vv10-13 does not ultimately satisfy the data of the text...In addition to the general points I made in the introduction to this section, the following portions are especially relevant to vv10-13.

First, Paul suggests that he is thinking of Jacob and Esau as individuals in vv10b-11a when he mentions their conception, birth, and "works"-language that is not easily applied to nations. Second, several of Paul's key words and phrases in this passage are words he generally uses elsewhere with reference to the attaining of salvation; and, significantly, they occur with this sense in texts closely related to this one: "election" (see esp. 11:5,7); "call" (see esp. 8:28), and "[not] of works" (see esp. [Rom 4:2-8](#) and [11:6](#)). These words are therefore difficult to apply to nations or peoples, for Paul clearly does not believe that peoples or nations-not even Israel-are called and chosen by God for salvation in the sense Paul is using the word. Third, as we noted earlier (see the introduction to 9:6b-13), a description here of how God calls nations to participate in the historical manifestation of his salvific acts runs counter to Paul's purpose in this paragraph. In order to justify his assertion in v6b that not all those who belong to physical Israel belong also to spiritual Israel, and thus to vindicate God's faithfulness (v6a), he must show that the OT justifies a discrimination *within* physical Israel in terms of the enjoyment of salvation. An assertion in these verses to the effect that God has chosen Israel rather than Edom for a positive role in the unfolding of the plan of salvation would not contribute to this argument at all...The nations denoted by these names, we must remember, have come into existence in and through the individuals who first bore

those names, **D. Moo, The Letter to the Romans (Eerdmans, 2nd ed., 2018), 605-606.**

[[Rom 9:18](#)] First, structural and linguistic considerations show that v18 is closely related to vv22-23, where the "vessels of mercy, destined to glory" are contrasted with "vessels of wrath, prepared for destruction." As God's mercy leads to the enjoyment of glory, God's hardening brings wrath and destruction. Second, the word group "harden" is consistently used in Scripture to depict a spiritual condition that renders one unreceptive and disobedient to God and his word. Third, while the Greek word is a different one, most scholars recognize that Paul's references to Israel's "hardening" in [Rom 11:7](#) and [25](#) are parallel to the hardening here. Yet the hardening in Rom 11 is a condition that excludes people from salvation. Fourth, it is even possible that the references to Pharaoh's hardening in Exodus carry implications for his own spiritual state and destiny. **D. Moo, The Letter to the Romans (Eerdmans, 2nd ed., 2018), 616-17.**

[[Rom 9:9](#)] The present issue relates to the salvation of ethnic Israel, not merely to its historical destiny. I have already observed that it was Israel's lack of salvation that grieved Paul (vv1-5), and thus one would expect him to answer that question. The specific terms and phrases used in vv6-9 demonstrate that salvation is at issue. The phrase "children of God" (v8) is invariably soteriological in Paul ([Rom 8:16,21](#); [Phil 2:15](#)), designating those who are in Christ. Similarly, "the children of the promise" refers to those who are the recipients of God's saving promises; it cannot be restricted to the temporal destiny of God's people. Finally, the word "call" in Paul has a soteriological

cast, confirming that the subject relates to inclusion in the people of God **(485)**.

Even if Genesis refers only to historical destiny (which is disputable), Paul applies the stories soteriologically. In other words, he reads the story typologically. The purpose in Romans is to explain why some ethnic Israelites are not part of the saved people of God. Thus he asserts that "all those from Israel are not Israel" (v6). As in [Gal 4:21-31](#), so too here Ishmael stands as a type for unbelievers and Isaac as a type for believers. Indeed, Ishmael here (like Esau and Pharaoh later in the argument) probably represents Jewish unbelievers of Paul's day **(485-86)**

Another controversy exists over whether the salvation promised here relates to individuals or groups. Many opt for the latter and exclude the former, because Paul focuses on the salvation promised to corporate Israel. I have argued at some length elsewhere that such a dichotomy is logically and exegetically flawed, since groups are always composed of individuals, and one cannot have the former without including the latter. At this juncture I should note that the selection of a remnant out of Israel implies the selection of some individuals out of a larger group. Moreover, the unity of Rom 9-11 indicates that individual election cannot be eliminated. In chapter 10 believing in Jesus is an individual decision, even though Paul addresses Jews and gentiles as corporate entities. The individual and corporate dimensions cannot be sundered from each other in chapter 10 and the same principle applies to chapter 9. Those who insist that corporate election alone is intended in chapters 9 and 11 are inconsistent when they revert to individual decisions of faith in chapter 10. The three chapters must be interpreted

together, yielding the conclusion that both corporate and individual election are involved **(986-87)**.

[[Rom 9:10](#)] A winnowing process has been in effect from the inception of Israel's history, and thus the exclusion of some ethnic Israelites from the promise does not constitute an annulment of God's promise **(987)**.

[[Rom 9:11-12a](#)] The wording underscores that God's promise to bless Jacob was both prior to and not based on any good works he did, and the exclusion of Esau should be estimated similarly: his evil works were not contemplated in advance as reason for exclusion...[Paul] counters the notion found in some texts that the free will of human beings is ultimate (cf. Pss Sol 9:4-5; [Sir 15:11-20](#); [2 Bar 54:15,19](#); [85:7](#); m. Avot 3:16). The desire to rationalize the choice of Jacob over Esau is reflected in Jub 35:13, where it says, "Now I loved Jacob more than Eau because he [Esau] has increasingly made his deeds evil. And he has no righteousness because all of his ways are injustice and violence". Any attempt to explain the promise of Jacob on the basis of God's foresight of Jacob's good works turns the text upside down.

Nor is it convincing to say that the text isn't about predestination. Paul specifically says that human works are excluded "in order that God's electing purpose might prevail (v11) and contrasts "call" with "works" (v12), showing that God's election is the ground of Jacob's exclusion...It is telling that "faith" and "works"" are not contrasted here, but "works" and God's "calling". We have already seen (see esp. the exegesis and exposition of 8:28-30) that "calling" in Paul is effective: God's call creates what is desired **(488-89)**.

Here the reason why his promises are inviolate is propounded: his electing purpose must prevail. It cannot be thwarted, not even by human beings, because it is based not on their actions or works or choices but on God's will and intention. It is important to observe as well that Paul contrasts not "faith and works" but "God's call and works". It would transgress the boundaries of the text to claim that faith is a "work" here, but if Paul desired to say that election and calling depend on human faith, he could have easily clarified this in the course of his argument. His failure to insert human faith as the decisive and ultimate basis for God's election indicates that God's call and election are prior to and the ground of human faith. Abasciano strays from the text and the Pauline intention by inserting the notion of faith (which Paul deliberately left out of the discussion), and thus ends up subverting the argument of the text by making election conditional upon faith **(489-90)**.

[[Rom 4:12b-13](#)] The choice of Jacob instead of Esau contradicts the notion that we have corporate over against individual election here, though there are certainly corporate implications as well. The corporate should not be played off against the individual here (see the important studies of Dunson 2011; 2012). In addition, there is no basis in Malachi for saying that the election of Jacob over Esau is conditional...Even if the words don't relate to salvation in Malachi, Paul applies the text to salvific matters **(490)**.

We must also beware of a rationalizing expedient that domesticates the text by exalting human freedom so that it fit neatly into our preconceptions...Once again many scholars insist that this passage relates not to individual salvation but only to the temporal destiny of nations, since Jacob and Esau represent two peoples ([Gen 25:23](#)) and

their historical destiny. But again this view ignores that the issue in the context of Rom 9 relates to the salvation of the Jews, and a discussion of historical destiny apart from salvation is irrelevant to the issue that called for the the discussion...Paul uses their histories as type, model, or pattern that relates to salvation.

That Paul has not restricted himself to issues of temporal destiny is evident from the terms he uses...It is difficult to believe that these terms carry a different meaning in [Rom 9:12](#). Similarly, in Paul, God's purpose ([Rom 9:28](#); [Eph 1:1](#); [2 Tim 1:9](#)) and election ([Rom 11:5,7,28](#); [1 Thes 1:4](#); cf. Pet 1:10) usually relate to salvation, and the same is likely here, since Paul is concerned that the saving promises given to the Jews has not be realized ([Rom 9:1-5](#)). At least four parallels exist with [1 Tim 1:9](#). What is astonishing about Paul's argument here is that most of ethnic Israel (i.e., those who have not believed the gospel) are identified with Esau and Ishmael **(491-92)**.

We have already seen that [Mal 1:2-5](#) confirms the idea that Edomites were outside the people of God...Indeed, even in the OT, Edom virtually functions as a type of a nation that will experience God's wrath (see Isa 34; 63:1-6; [Jer 49:7-22](#); [Ezk 25:12-14](#); [Amos 1:11-12](#); Obadiah). Most Jews in Paul's time would have understood the Edomites to be unsaved as well. This is not to suggest that every individual Edomite was cursed. The text relates to what is generally true regarding the Edomites as a nation **(492)**.

[[Rom 9:15](#)] There is no basis for saying that what Paul says here [9:14] applies only to Israel. Paul has already proclaimed God's sovereignty in saving gentiles (8:28-30), and he turns to the same idea in 9:24-26) **[495]**.

...Yahweh will not withdraw his presence from his people. The words in [Exod 33:19](#) signify God's sovereign freedom in dispensing mercy...The notion that his mercy is conditioned upon the faith of human beings reads into the text what isn't there. God's mercy is granted without any conditions, as the flow of thought in this chapter clearly demonstrates...The stunning thing for Paul was not that God rejected Ishmael and Esau but that he chose Isaac and Jacob, since they did not deserve to be included in his merciful and gracious purposes **(495-96)**.

Barclay (2010a; 2010b) contrasts Paul's reading of the story of Israel here with Josephus, Philo, and the Wisdom of Solomon. These writers attributed God's mercy to the worthiness of Israel, in stark contest to Paul. Paul is closer to Pseudo-Philo, but he differs here as well, since the latter sees God's mercy as restoring Israel, while Paul teaches that Israel's very existence is grounded in and generated by mercy **(496)**.

[[Rom 9:16](#)] Human works were excluded previously as the basis of which God elects and calls (vv11-12). Verse 16 restates and clarifies this theme by indicating that human choice and effort are not the basis on which God's merciful promises is received **(497)**.

[[Rom 9:17-18](#)] The power is two-edged even in the Exodus narrative, effecting salvation for Israel and bringing judgment on Pharaoh and Egypt...The very point of verse 19 is that mercy and hardening are antithetical, and no indication is given that those who are hardened receive God's mercy...It is a mistake to understand 11:26-32 as a promise that those hardened throughout history will have their hardening removed. Those Israelites who were

hardened and died in their hardening will face judgment **(998-500)**.

[[Rom 9:19](#)] If God shows mercy and hardens whomever he wills regardless of human effort or choice, then how can he possibly assign blame to human beings for their choices and actions? God's will determines whatever occurs, and thus he rather than human beings must be held responsible. The formulation of the question suggests that the interpretation of vv14-18 is on target, for the question would scarcely be raised this way if the previous verses taught that the ultimate factor in human destiny were human choices. The question emerges precisely because the destiny of human beings is attributed to the will of God. Nor does Paul in vv19-23 disagree with the idea that God's will is the ultimate cause of one's destiny. He does not solve the problem by retrenching from his previous argument. It has often been pointed out that Paul could have easily clarified the situation if he wanted to assert that human beings could actually resist God's will. Is it not the case that Paul's answer to v20 is shocking? We expect a very different answer to that question. If human beings cannot ultimately resist God's will, then how should we interpret Paul's response to the complaint in v20? I have already shown that he does not deny the premise: no one can ultimately resist God's will. What he denies is the conclusion **(502-03)**.

[[Rom 9:20-21](#)] The significance of the [potter] metaphor must be gleaned from the flow of the argument in Romans since the Jewish use of the metaphor is variegated...The proviso in Jeremiah 18, however, can't be imposed on Rom 9. The context is entirely different **(504-505)**.

[[Rom 9:22](#)] In Paul's writings, both "wrath" and "destruction" frequently refer to eschatological judgment. Any notion of historical destiny alone certainly seems forced. Moreover, the corollary "vessels of mercy" that are destined "for glory" describes eternal life, for we have seen in [Rom 9:14-18](#) that the "mercy" word group often refers to eschatological life, and "glory" does the same. Since "vessels of wrath" refers to eschatological judgment and "vessels of mercy" to eschatological glory, and since no evident adversative sense can be found between verses 21 and 22-23, it follows that the vessels for honor and dishonor most naturally denote the saved and the perishing, respectively. The word "honor" designates eternal life in 2:7,10, where it parallels the term "glory" **(506)**.

The most important objection is that God would not make vessels in order to destroy them...Those who inclined toward the former think that the idea of cause sits awkwardly with the notion that God is patient with vessels he intends to destroy...[however] the implication is that it would have been just and righteous for him to destroy them immediately (cf. [Rom 3:25-26](#))...Many scholars conclude from this parallel [[Rom 2:4](#)] that 9:22 means that God is patient because he is waiting for people to repent. That is hard to square with the evidence contained in v22. Those with whom he is patient are "vessels of wrath" heading for eschatological judgment in contrast to the "vessels of mercy" in v23, who will experience eschatological salvation. Nor is there any intimation that the vessels of wrath will later become vessels of mercy, since the text says that they are "prepared for destruction."

Finally, the participial phrase in v22 explains why God bears patiently with those who will experience his wrath. He wants "to show forth his anger and make known his power"...In

Pharaoh's case God demonstrates his patience by not destroying Pharaoh immediately, even though he resisted God's command. By delaying his judgment on Pharaoh, however, God magnified his name and exhibited more forcefully the greatness of his salvation and the terror of his judgment. The correspondence calls for a similar interpretation of v22. God defers his immediate judgment of vessels of wrath so that he can unveil the full extent of his power and wrath on those who continually resist his offer of repentance.

The idea that God suspends an immediate retribution to impose a severer judgment later is attested elsewhere in Jewish literature (2 Esd [4 Ezra] 7:70-74; [2 Macc 6:12-14](#)). This also answers the objection noted earlier: that God would not make vessels to destroy them since no potter does that. This objection demands that the illustration of the potter and the clay correspond to God's relation to creation in every respect, but we must let the text guide us as to how to understand the analogy **(507-09)**.

How should one interpret the word *katertismena*?...The middle voice is quite rare in the NT, while the passive is common. The word, then, denotes a preparation by God (divine passive) for their destruction rather than a self-preparation...there is no philological basis for translating the word as "ripe" or "ready"...In any case, one cannot by exegetical means rescue God from willing the fate of the vessels of wrath. This too was part of his plan, and thus double predestination cannot be averted (509-10). **T. Schreiner, Romans (Baker, 2nd. ed., 2018)**.

[Rom 11:2-6](#)

2 God has not rejected his people whom he chose beforehand. Do you not know what the Scripture says of Elijah, how he appeals to God against Israel? 3 "Lord, they have killed your prophets, they have demolished your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life." 4 But what is God's reply to him? "I have kept for myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal." 5 So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace. 6 But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace.

[[Rom 11:2](#)] For the "know" in the verb "foreknow" refers to God's election: as [Amos 3:2](#) puts it...The temporal prefix, "fore-" indices further that God's choosing of Israel took place before any actions or status on the part of Israel that might have qualified her for God's choice. How could God reject a people whom he in a gracious act of choice had made his own? **D. Moo, The Letter to the Romans (Eerdmans, 2nd ed., 2018),692.**

For the distinction between a general election of Israel as a nation and a specific election to salvation of individual Israelites...Paul falls in line with other Jews of his day...There developed during this period a new focus on a "special election" *within* Israel (see esp. M. Elliot, *Survivors of Israel*). This combination of a special election of individuals within, and alongside, a larger corporate election of Israel does better justice to the exegetical data than the

view that Paul knows only a corporate election. D. Moo, *The Letter to the Romans* (Eerdmans, 2nd ed., 2018), **693**.

[[Rom 11:6](#)] The polemical force of "based on the election of grace" becomes clearer in this verse, as Paul explains just what such a *gracious* election entails. The principle of grace is antithetical to that of "works"; if God has elected the individuals who make up the remnant "by grace," it follows that he could not have elected them on the basis of works. The word "works" refers to anything that human beings do. Since Paul's focus is on the basis for the election of Israel, it is quite likely that he would think of these human actions as done specifically in obedience to the Mosaic law. But, as I have insisted before, it is not the fact that these works are *torah*-works that prevents them from being a basis for election. As Paul's references to the works of Abraham (4:2-8) and Jacob and Esau (9:11-13) suggest, his problem with works lies not in the fact that they are *torah*-works but in fact that they are *human* works. Paul's polemic, while focused on Israel because of his particular situation, is applicable to all human beings and finds its ultimate basis in the human condition. Because of their sin but also simply because of their creaturely status, people can make no claim on God.

"For if it were otherwise," if human beings could by their works secure the blessing of God (as Paul points out in the second part of the verse), grace would "no longer" be grace. For grace demands that God be perfectly free to bestow his favor on whomever he chooses. But if God's election were based on what human beings do, his freedom would be violated and he could no longer be acting in grace. For Paul, however, the gracious character of God's activity is a theological axiom, automatically ruling out any idea that would conflict with it.

To be sure, Paul distinguishes "works" from faith throughout Romans, and so his denial that election is based on works need not mean that it cannot be based on faith. But Paul's conception of God's grace (see particularly 4:3-5) would seem to rule out anything outside of God's own freewill as a basis for his actions. To make election ultimately dependent on the human decision to believe violates Paul's notion of the grace of God...God's grace is the efficient cause of salvation, human faith being not its basis but its result. **D. Moo, The Letter to the Romans (Eerdmans, 2nd ed., 2018), 696-97.**

[[Rom 11:2b-4](#)] What receives prominence here is the verbal phrase "I have left for myself", in which God's action is the decisive reason that a remnant is preserved...This interpretation is also ratified by v5, where the remnant is due to "the election of grace"...The idea of the verse, then, is that God has not rejected those on whom he has set his covenant love. Such an idea is unthinkable and indeed impossible (**566**).

[[Rom 11:5](#)] The existence of a remnant of believing Jews is not ultimately ascribed to their greater wisdom or nobility, or to their free will or to their spiritual perception. The inclusion of the remnant in God's people is due to his electing grace. This point confirms the interpretation of "I have left for myself" in v4, for the phrase is explained in terms of "gracious election" (v5). The only reason some Jews believe is that God has graciously and mercifully chosen them to be part of his people (cf. 9:27-29). The linkage of grace and election also must be observed. Many worry that the choosing of some and not all would be unjust, but this idea overlooks the fact that election is gracious. No one deserves to be elected, and thus the

election of any is a merciful gift of God that cannot be claimed as a democratic right (568).

[[Rom 11:6](#)] Verse 6 proceeds to forge a connection between election by grace and the exclusion of works. By definition if one is elected by grace, then works are excluded...Paul concludes this paragraph by explaining why works are excluded. If they are introduced as a factor in election, then "grace is no longer grace"...Once works play a role in gaining salvation, then grace by definition is excluded. Dunn's claim that "works of the law" are intended here is off the mark, since Paul speaks of "works" in general without introducing the word "law". Thus he shows that no works of any kind play a role in the reception of God's electing grace. One should also observe that Paul's teaching on election is indissolubly bound up with his gospel of justification. Those who deny unconditional election introduce, albeit subtly, the notion that human works play a role in obtaining justification and open the door for human boasting. For Paul, the purity of grace is bound up with the conviction that God elects apart from any work on the part of human beings...[Luther] defended the doctrines of the bondage the will and unconditional election so vigorously because the denial of either compromised the Pauline gospel that justification is by grace one through faith alone (658-69).

T. Schreiner, Romans (Baker, 2nd. ed. 2018).

1 Cor 1:26-31

26 For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. 27 But God chose what is foolish in the

world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; 28 God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, 29 so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. 30 And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, 31 so that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

The concept of calling obviously implies the need to respond in obedience. However, Paul does not use the language of response in contexts where he refers to God's converting call, leaving the impression that this calling of individuals to salvation is a decisive act of God. Indeed, the action of calling is synonymous in vv27-28 with God choosing the weak, the despised, and the lowly. In other words, in Paul's parlance, calling is a synonym for divine election, even if the latter is logically prior.

The two verses [27-28] together leave the unmistakable impression of the deliberate, sovereign action of God in assembling, or "calling," his people in Corinthian contrary to all expectations. God's choice of the humble nation Israel was likewise surprising and unanticipated [[Deut 7:7](#)]. This is a stable pattern in salvation history. From Genesis onward, where he consistently bypasses the firstborn, God chooses the most unlikely figures, a model he followed in Corinth. In short, the Corinthians are God's people not because of themselves but "because of him" ([1 Cor 1:30](#)).

God's ultimate aim in his activity of choosing, shaming, and nullifying is to preclude all human boasting. The critical purpose of God's action of exalting the foolish and lowering the proud is that no one can sing his or her own praises in the presence of God...Paul insists that all praise is to be reserved for God, for "it is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus." Sometimes a brief remark carries more weight than a longer and more elaborate explanation. This is the case in point, with the first two words of the verse, literally "of him," offering a pithy summary of the conclusion of the argument in 1:31 to boast only in the Lord. The point is that if it is "of him" that the Corinthians have their standing with God, it is presumably not "of yourselves." It is hard to conceive of a more emphatic way of underscoring God's grace in such a short space. **R. Ciampa & B.**

**Rosner, The First Letter to the
Corinthians (Eerdmans 2010), 104,106-108.**

Eph 1:3-14

**3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord
Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with
every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, 4
even as he chose us in him before the foundation
of the world, that we should be holy and blameless
before him. In love 5 he predestined us for
adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according
to the purpose of his will, 6 to the praise of his
glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the
Beloved. 7 In him we have redemption through his**

blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, 8 which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight 9 making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ 10 as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

11 In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, 12 so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory. 13 In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, 14 who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.

Throughout the remainder of this passage (1:4-14), Paul gives a series of reasons why God is so worthy to be praised. The first refers to God's choosing of his people in eternity past.

[vv11-12] Paul ever so strongly emphasizes that God is not responding to events as they unfold with various countermeasures, but that he has a carefully designed plan that he is revealing and fulfilling, especially as it relates to the choosing and redeeming of his people. Here he uses three different words to express the fact that he has a plan

(*prothesis, boule, and thelema*). It is difficult to find shades of differences between the three words, especially as they appear in this context. It is better to recognize a rhetorical stress on God's sovereignty.

It is also important for the readers to know that God has the power (*energeo*) to put his plan into effect. The power of God is a major theme in this letter, and Paul here introduces it by emphatically asserting that God will powerfully unfold his plan as he has willed it and against any conceivable opposition. To ward off any doubt, Paul explains that God works out "everything" (*ta panta*) according to his purpose. **C.**

Arnold, Ephesians (Zondervan 2010), 79. 90.

[1:4: "In him"] One view is that it could be regarded as a dative of sphere, which connotes the idea that we are chosen in Christ as the head and representative of the spiritual community just as Adam is the head and representative of the natural community. The other view is that it could be relational or instrumental in the sense that God chose believers in connection with or through Christ's work of redemption. The latter interpretation is preferable because it expresses that God chose the believer for his glory and that it had to be done in connection with the redemption accomplished in Christ.

[1:11] The present tense refers to God's continual activity toward the purpose that he resolved eternity past. The "all things" (*ta panta*) refers to all of God's providence and must not be restricted to God's redemptive plan. This coincides with v10 where "all things" are described as "those things in heaven and those things on earth." **H.**

Hoehner, Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary (Baker 2002), 177, 229.

The great theme of divine election is the first to be introduced as Paul's mind reaches back before creation, before time began, into eternity in which only God himself existed. Election is one of the variety of motifs found in this magnificent paragraph that describe different facets of God's gracious, saving purposes: note the language of predestination (vv5,11), good pleasure (vv5,9), will (vv5,9,11), mystery (v9), purpose (v9; cf. v11), appointment (v11), and plan (v11).

There is clearly a corporate dimension to God's election. It was God's intention to create for himself a people perfectly conformed to the likeness of his Son ([Rom 8:29-30](#)). It is inappropriate, however, to suggest that election in Christ is primarily corporate rather than personal and individual...Some of the divine gifts, for example, redemption and forgiveness of sins in Christ (v7), together with the sealing of the Holy Spirit following belief in the gospel of salvation (vv13,14), must be understood as coming to believers personally and individually.

Further, to suggest that election in Christ is "not related primarily to individual salvation but to God's purpose" introduces an unnecessary "either-or." Predestination is to a relationship with God the Father through his Son, described in v5 under the imagery of adoption.

That choice in Christ was made in eternity, before time and creation, as the phrase "before the creation of the world" makes plain. The language of election before the foundation of the world occurs a number of times in the Pauline letters, not least in the context of thanksgiving ([1 Thes 1:4](#); [2:13](#); cf. [Rom 8:29](#); [2 Tim 1:9](#)), as part of an expression of

gratitude for God's amazing grace. To say that election took place before creation indicates that God's choice was due to his own free decision and love, which were not dependent on temporal circumstances or man's merit. The reasons for his election were rooted in the depths of his gracious, sovereign nature.

The verb "foreordain, predestine," which appears six times in the NT, is used exclusively of God ([Rom 8:29,30](#); [1 Cor 2:7](#); [Eph 1:5](#), in relation to sonship; cf. 1:11; [Acts 4:28](#)) and serves to emphasize his sole initiative and authority in our salvation. Predestination is for a God-designed purpose, in this instance, "adoption."

The basis or standard of God's action in foreordaining us to be his children is spelled out in the compound phrase, "in accordance with his pleasure and will." "Pleasure"...signifies not simply the purpose of God but also the delight that he takes in his plans..."Will" signifies that which is purposed, or intended.

By giving Gentile believers the Spirit, God "seals" or stamps them as his own now, and he will protect them through the trials and testings of this life (cf. 6:10-18) until he takes final possession of them (cf. v14) on "the day of redemption" (4:30).

The Holy Spirit by whom the Gentiles were sealed...is now called the "deposit guaranteeing our inheritance." Beyond this translation lies the word that signifies a "downpayment" or "pledge."...In giving him [the Spirit] to us God is not simply promising us our final inheritance but actually providing us with a foretaste of it...

He has made them his own: they are his treasured possession..."They will be mine," says the Lord Almighty, "in the day when I make up my treasured possession" ([Mal](#)

[3:17](#)). P. T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* (Eerdmans 1999), 98-100,102-103,120-122.

[Eph 2:8](#) 8 For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God

In Greek, events as a whole are treated as neuter singular things with neuter articles, (e.g., *topisteuein*, "believing"), neuter relative pronouns (e.g., [Eph 5:5](#)), or neuter demonstrative pronouns, as in v8b (also, for example, 6:1; [1 Cor 6:6,8](#); [Phil 1:22,28](#); [Col 3:20](#); [1 Thes 5:18](#); [1 Tim 2:1-3](#)). Hence, the antecedent of *touto* is the whole event: "being saved by grace through faith". One implication of this proper understanding of *touto* is that all the components of the event are also referenced as originating not from human capacity or exertion but as God's gift. This means that even the believer's act of believing comes from God, as is said more explicitly by Paul elsewhere: "For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him..." ([Phil 1:29](#)). This is part of the evidence of Protestantism's historic position that salvation is *sola gratia* and *sola fide*). Humans contribute nothing of their own to this salvation, since even believing (which the elect are indeed enabled to do) is a divine gift (cf. [Rom 3:24-25](#)). In the context of [Eph 2:8](#), the key to this is what Paul had been driving home so forcefully up until now: Before God's gracious intervention, believers were hopelessly dead, with their wills imprisoned by nature in acts that led only to transgression and sin (2:1-5a,12).

S. M. Baugh, Ephesians (Lexham Press, 2016), 160-61.

Eph 2:1-10

2 And you were dead in the trespasses and sins 2 in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience- 3 among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. 4 But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, 5 even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ-by grace you have been saved- 6 and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, 7 so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. 8 For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, 9 not a result of works, so that no one may boast. 10 For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God

prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

"Dead" [in sins] is here understood not as literal physical death, but in the metaphorical sense of alienation from the one who gives life [cf. 2:12; 4:18].

The readers formerly came under the controlling influence of "the age of this world."...This could be interpreted to refer to the various non-Christian religions, ideologies, philosophies, values, and economic systems as well as to the more mundane but equally powerful influence of peer pressure, fashion, and the media.

The second powerful influence that formerly held the readers in bondage to sin is the devil [2:2].

Paul now [2:3] indicates the third form of evil influence that holds unbelieving humanity in bondage to sin and from which they need deliverance...a conflict between the flesh and the Spirit.

Paul's thought here [v10] corresponds to his statement on the purpose of election in 1:4, where he says that God "chose us...so that we would be holy and blameless." **C.**

Arnold, Ephesians (Zondervan 2010), 129,131-133,142.

[2:8] In Paul's thinking, faith is not something that people offer to God and with which God's grace then cooperates to save them. Rather, faith is aligned with grace, and both faith and grace stand over against anything that human beings can offer God.

The second statement (v9) denies that salvation comes "from" any "works" they might accomplish. Prior to their

conversion, "the Ruler of the realm of the air" [Satan] was powerfully at work (*energountos*) in them, and they followed the cravings of their fallen flesh and mind (vv2-3).

F. Thielman, Ephesians (Baker 2010), 143.

The past condition is mentioned by terms relating either to sin ([Rom 5:8-11](#); [7:5](#); [Eph 2:1](#)), ethical practices, alienation from God and his people ([Col 1:21](#); [Eph 2:3](#)), or bondage to evil, supernatural forces ([Eph 2:2](#)).

Those outside of Christ are not only subject to the pervasive bondage of the present evil age; they are also inspired and empowered by personal evil forces. Paul depicts the second hostile influence as a powerful supernatural being who rules over this host of evil spirits.

"By nature" [v3] can only mean "by birth" at [Gal 2:15](#), and this is its significance here. The expression "children of wrath" is a Hebraism, like "sons of disobedience" (v2), and means worthy to receive divine judgment.

[v8] However, the context demands that "this" be understood of salvation by grace as a whole, including the faith (or faithfulness) through which it is received.

[v9] "Works" now stand for human effort in general, a nuance found elsewhere in Paul.

The concluding statement of this stunning paragraph about God's gracious salvation underscores the importance and divine origin of these good works: "which God prepared in advance so that we might live in them."...The only other use of this verb at [Rom 9:23](#) presents a strongly predestinarian thrust, and it is likely that the prefix "before" suggests that God's preparation precedes the foundation of the world...as already prepared in his mind and counsel from before eternity. **P. T. O'Brien, The Letter to the**

Ephesians (Eerdmans 1999), 158-159, 162, 175-177, 180-181.

5. Efficacy. Turning to the effect of the gift, a perfect gift may also be figured as that which fully achieves what it was designed to do. Seneca portrays how a beneficiary can feel totally beholden to his benefactor, owing everything to him (Ben. 2.11), and certain kinds of benefit (giving birth to children, or rescuing a person from death) amount to the gift of life itself, and thus often the very capacity to give in return (Ben. 3:29,3). Once again, this perfection is common in relation to God, since divine agency can be taken to ground, encompass, and even cause the activity of the human recipient of grace. **J. Barclay, Paul and Gift (Eerdmans 2015), 73.**

Eph 4:17-19

17 Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. 18 They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. 19 They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity.

Paul's Gentile Christian readers should have left behind an existence whose "thinking," that is, mindset, was so distorted that it was marked by "futility" and had fallen prey to folly. In the *LXX* this word denoted the futility of idol-worship as well as the emptiness of human endeavors which

sought to bring lasting satisfaction. Cf. [Isa 28:29](#); [30:15](#); [33:11](#). Note especially the many references to "futility") in Ecclesiastes (1:2,14; 2:1,11,15,17, etc), which have probably influenced Paul.

Because it lacks a true relationship with God, Gentile thinking suffers from the consequences of having lost touch with reality and is left fumbling with inane trivialities and worthless side issues.

It is noteworthy that the apostle goes out of his way to emphasize the perceptive and mental dimension in the human estrangement from God. The Gentiles' mindset has been drastically affected (v17b), their thinking has become darkened so that they are blind to the truth...the light of their understanding has gone out so that they were now in a state of being incapable of grasping the truth of God and his gospel.

Not only are the Gentiles darkened in their understanding; they are also "separated from the life of God," that life which God possesses in himself and bestows on his children. Gentiles who do not belong to Christ are "dead" through their trespasses and sins (2:1,5), and have no relationship at all with the living God (2:12). "God-forsaken" **(p190)**.

Such ignorance is culpable. It is not an excuse for sin...As if to underscore this point, Paul adds that their delusion is "due to hardness of heart." **P. T. O'Brien, The Letter to the Ephesians (Eerdmans 1999), 320-22.**

They are "separated from the life that comes from God." This is in part an expansion of Paul's declaration in 2;12 that Gentiles are "not having hope and godless in the world." Paul sets this parallel to being enemies of God in [Col](#)

1:21. The genitive of separation, "from the life," describes the nature of the alienation and helps us understand how Paul could earlier say that before coming to Christ, they were "dead" (2:1). The next noun, "from God," should be interpreted as a genitive of source and as such characterizes God as the fountainhead of life. **C.**

Arnold, Ephesians (Zondervan 2010), 282.

2 Tim 1:9

9 who saved us and called us to[a] a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began,

Calling can be used in a comprehensive sense to describe salvation as the result of God's sovereign control in summoning people to himself (Rom 8:28,30)...Next, the gospel summary describes the basis of this salvation. The next two lines consist of a negative/positive contrast that explains the basis of God's saving and calling. First, on the negative side, is the thoroughly Pauline statement rendered literally "not according to our works." Its effect is to rule human effort completely out of the process.

The text also describes the way in which the decision was executed-God's grace. In isolation "grace" refers to God's unmerited favor (1:2; see on 1 Tim 1:2,12; Tit 3:7), and the contrast between human merit and God's purpose and grace celebrates the divine initiative in the salvation of people.

Third, the closing phrase-"before the beginning of time"-commences a Pauline "transition of time" scheme, whereby the passage receives a salvation-historical character that

allows the unique nature of the present age to be seen. The time phrase itself, literally "before eternal times," drawn from Hebrew thought, distinguishes between the timelessness of God's existence and the temporality of his creation...the point that v10 will make is that what was conceived prior to creation-the plan to save people-was executed at a point in history in which the grace of God became manifest in history in Christ. But at this point in the text, the theological poem tells us that the plan to save through the work of Christ was made, and in God's mind worked out, prior to creation. In this way, the piece underlies God's sovereignty both in electing his people and in bringing this to pass through Christ's redemptive work.

P. Towner, The Letters to Timothy and Titus (Eerdmans 2006), 468-70.

1 Pet 1:2

2 according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood:

The NT understanding of God's foreknowledge of his people indicates that God did not simply observe them or have information about them at some prior time in history. Instead, God chose them according to, or consistent with, his plan and purpose long before God formed a people to be his own. [First Peter 1:20](#) states that the redemptive role of Christ was also foreknown (*proginosko*) to God before the creation of the world. Therefore, verses 2 and 20 express correlating thoughts that even before creation God had chosen both the people who would be redeemed and the

agent who would redeem them. **K. Jobes, 1 Peter (Baker 2005), 68.**

1 Pet 2:8-9

8 They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.

9 But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

God has not only appointed that those who disobey the word would stumble and fall. He has also determined that they would disbelieve and stumble.

The "but" (*de*) beginning v9 is most naturally understood as a contrast to what immediately precedes...God has appointed the disobedient to destruction, but on the contrary believers are a "chosen people" (*eklekton genos*). They belong to God's people because they have been elected, chosen by him. We saw in the first verse of the letter that Peter introduced the theme of election to strengthen God's pilgrim people, and he returned to it here.

T. Schreiner, 1, 2 Peter, Jude (B&H 203), 113-14.

Michaels (1988: 107) understands the appointment of Christ as stone and the appointment of unbelievers to stumbling not as two distinct appointing but as one divine appointment with a twofold result. This thought is supported by the use of the same verb (*tithemi*, place, appoint) to refer both to the stone God has placed in Zion

(2:6) and to the appointment of those who disbelieve and stumble (2:8). When God appointed Jesus Christ as the atoning sacrifice, to be the stone placed in Zion, by that act God also necessarily appointed two consequential outcomes with respect to acceptance or rejection of Christ.

It is impossible to escape the force of Peter's teaching that God has sovereignly determined both the destiny of those who come to Christ and of those who disobey his word and reject his gospel. **K. Jobes, 1 Peter (Baker 2005), 155-56.**

Rev 4:11

**11 "Worthy are you, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they existed and were created."**

"They were and they were created" has been interpreted to mean that creation existed in the mind of God before he actually began to create, or the two verbs could be synonymous (a hendiadys), stressing the fact that God created "all things." It may be best to view the first verb as referring to the ongoing preservation of the created order and the second to the inception of creation: "they continually exist and have come into being." **G. K. Beale, The Book of Revelation (Eerdmans 1999), 335.**

Rev 13:8; 17:8

8 and all who dwell on earth will worship it, everyone whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who was slain.

And the dwellers on earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world will marvel to see the beast, because it was and is not and is to come.

The phrase "the book of life" appears five other times in the Apocalypse (3:5; 17:8; 20:12,15; 21:27). In each case, as here, it is a metaphor for saints whose salvation has been determined: their names have been entered into the census book of the eternal new Jerusalem before history began, which is explicitly affirmed in 21:27, though the pretemporal phrase is omitted there, unlike 13:8 and 17:8, which express the notion of predetermination "from the foundation of the world." That saints were written in the book *before history began* is implied by the fact that the beast worshipers are said not to have been so written...The dual notion of a "book of life" for the righteous and "books" of judgment for the wicked is based on [Dan 12:1-2](#) and [7:10](#).

This safety is the precreation identification of God's people with the Lamb's death, which means that they also identify with his resurrection life, which protects them from spiritual death and ultimate deception (cf. 5:5-13). No one can take this life from them. This conclusion stands regardless of how the syntactical problem is solved.

The "earth-dwellers" will not be able to withstand deception by the beast because their "names has not been written

from the foundation of the world in the book of life." The same reason for worship of and deception by the beast is given in 13:8. Being "written in the book of life" is a metaphor referring elsewhere to believers, whose salvific life has been secured, or, with the negative, to unbelievers, who do not benefit from having such security...In 13:8, as here, this security or lack thereof was determined before historical time began, "from the foundation of the world."

G. K. Beale, The Book of Revelation (Eerdmans 1999), 701-703; 866.

Rev 17:17

17 for God has put it into their hearts to carry out his purpose by being of one mind and handing over their royal power to the beast, until the words of God are fulfilled.

[God] will cause the political forces of evil to attack and destroy Babylon. God executes his will through the "hearts" of both the righteous and the unrighteous. This must be construed not as mere divine "permission" but as divine causation.

For the notion of God executing his will through the "hearts" of both saints and the ungodly see with respect to the former especially [2 Chron 30:12](#), as well as [1 Kgs 10:24](#); [Ezra 7:27](#); [Neh 2:12](#); [7:5](#); [Jer 32:40](#); for the latter see also [Exod 4:21](#); [7:3](#); [9:12](#); [10:1](#); [14:4,8](#); [2 Chron 36:22-23](#); [Ezra 1:1](#); [Acts 2:23](#); [4:27-28](#). **G. K.**

Beale, The Book of Revelation (Eerdmans 1999), 887-88.

Blueprint predestination

Arminians have become increasingly brazen in attacking predestination and providence. They say Calvinism makes God a "moral monster." "Worse than Hitler." "Worse than Satan." They've taken the infidel position that if Scripture actually taught Calvinism, then Arminians ought to deny the faith. Turn their back on Christ.

Although that's extreme, that's a logical extreme. If you really think Calvinism makes God a "moral monster" who's worse than Satan, and if you became convinced that Scripture teaches Calvinism, then you haven't left yourself an out. Apostasy would be the logical fallback position, given the premise.

Now I hope that Arminians who say this (e.g. David Baggett, Jerry Walls, Randal Rauser, Roger Olson) are simply indulging in rhetorical bravado. They are so caught up in the momentum of the debate that they issue intemperate threats which, after a cooling off period, they'd realize are foolhardy. That's the most charitable interpretation, although it may be charitable to a fault.

Why do Calvinists keep bringing the issue back to Scripture? Because Christianity is a revealed religion. Because only God knows his own mind. We lack direct access to the mind of God. Intentions are hidden. We don't know God's intentions unless he tells us. That's not something we can intuit or infer from the natural order.

Some Arminians seem to think the case for predestination comes down to a handful of prooftexts like Rom 9. In this post I'm going to quote a range of passages that bear on predestination and providence. Of course, just quoting the

Bible doesn't necessarily settle the issue, since the Bible is subject to interpretation. But I get the impression that some Arminians have never read the Bible from cover-to-cover. They don't know what all is there.

It's useful to present some of the prima facie evidence for predestination and providence in Scripture, so that Arminians have a better idea of why Calvinists believe what they do. We can debate the best interpretation of any given passage, but let's begin by getting some of the raw evidence on the table. Keep in mind that this is just a sampling of the available evidence.

Arminians typically recast the issue in philosophical categories like "causation," "determinism," or "causal determinism," then proceed to attack these categories. Although there's a place for framing the issue philosophically, that's not where we should begin. It makes the debate too abstract, as if this is just a debate over competing ideas or philosophical models. It's important to start with revealed truths.

Likewise, they say Calvinism "makes God the author of sin" (whenever that means). But even if we accept that framework for the sake of argument, the deeper question is whether the Bible makes God the "author of sin." Suppose the word of God makes God the "author of sin"? Then what? Where does that leave the Arminian?

One final point concerns the defining interrelationship between predestination and providence. As Warfield put it:

Providence and predestination are ideas which run into one another. Providence is but predestination in its execution; predestination is but providence in its intention. When we say the one, we say the other, and the common idea which gives its content to both is control.

It is purely this idea of control which people object to when they say they object to predestination; not the idea of previousness, but purely the idea of control. They would object just as much if the control was supposed to be exercised without any previous intention at all.

"Some Thoughts on Predestination," Shorter Writings 1:106.

UNIVERSAL PREDESTINATION

10 as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. 11 In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will ([Eph 1:10-11](#)).

Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created ([Rev 4:11](#)).

And he said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name 'The Lord.' And I will

be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy ([Exod 33:19](#)).

METICULOUS PROVIDENCE

The Lord has made everything for its purpose, even the wicked for the day of trouble ([Prov 16:4](#)).

The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps ([Prov 16:9](#)).

The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will ([Prov 21:1](#)).

I know, O Lord, that the way of man is not in himself, that it is not in man who walks to direct his steps ([Jer 10:23](#)).

Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father ([Mt 10:29](#)).

And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place ([Acts 17:26](#)).

INEXORABLE PLAN

24 The Lord of hosts has sworn:
"As I have planned,
so shall it be,
and as I have purposed,
so shall it stand,

25 that I will break the Assyrian in my land,
and on my mountains trample him underfoot;
and his yoke shall depart from them,
and his burden from their shoulder.”

26 This is the purpose that is purposed
concerning the whole earth,
and this is the hand that is stretched out
over all the nations.

27 For the Lord of hosts has purposed,
and who will annul it?
His hand is stretched out,
and who will turn it back?

([Isa 14:24-27](#))

Also henceforth I am he; there is none who can deliver from
my hand; I work, and who can turn it back? ([Isa 43:13](#)).

Declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient
times things not yet done, saying, “My counsel shall stand,
and I will accomplish all my purpose” ([Isa 46:10](#)).

So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall
not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I
purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it
([Isa 55:11](#)).

10 The Lord brings the counsel of the nations to nothing;
he frustrates the plans of the peoples.

11 The counsel of the Lord stands forever,
the plans of his heart to all generations.

([Ps 33:10-11](#))

Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases ([Ps 115:3](#)).

Whatever the Lord pleases, he does, in heaven and on earth, in the seas and all deeps ([Ps 135:6](#)).

Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will stand ([Prov 19:21](#)).

No wisdom, no understanding, no counsel can avail against the Lord ([Prov 21:30](#)).

So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath ([Heb 6:17](#)).

ETERNAL PLAN

For those whom he chose beforehand he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. 30 And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified ([Rom 8:29-30](#)).

But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory ([1 Cor 2:7](#)).

Even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him ([Eph 1:4](#)).

Who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began ([2 Tim 1:9](#)).

2 in hope of eternal life, which God, who never lies, promised before the ages began 3 and at the proper time manifested in his word through the preaching with which I have been entrusted by the command of God our Savior ([Tit 1:2-3](#)).

POTTER/CLAY

You turn things upside down!
Shall the potter be regarded as the clay,
that the thing made should say of its maker,
 “He did not make me”;
or the thing formed say of him who formed it,
 “He has no understanding”?
([Isa 29:16](#)).

Woe to him who strives with him who formed him, a pot among earthen pots! Does the clay say to him who forms it, “What are you making?” or “Your work has no handles”? ([Isa 45:9](#)).

But now, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand ([Isa 64:8](#)).

“RANDOM” EVENTS

But if he did not lie in wait for him, but God let him fall into his hand, then I will appoint for you a place to which he may flee ([Exod 21:13](#)).

And a certain woman threw an upper millstone on Abimelech's head and crushed his skull ([Judges 9:53](#)).

The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord ([Prov 16:33](#)).

But a certain man drew his bow at random and struck the king of Israel between the scale armor and the breastplate. Therefore he said to the driver of his chariot, "Turn around and carry me out of the battle, for I am wounded" ([1 Kgs 22:34](#)).

8 Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, 9 according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. 10 And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. 11 And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense ([Lk 1:8-11](#)).

EVIL EVENTS

5 And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life. 6 For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are yet five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. 7 And God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. 8 So it was not you who sent me here, but God. He has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt ([Gen 45:5-8](#)).

As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today ([Gen 50:20](#)).

For the Son of Man goes as it has been determined, but woe to that man by whom he is betrayed! ([Lk 22:22](#)).

This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and prior choice of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men ([Acts 2:23](#)).

To do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place ([Acts 4:28](#)).

EVIL ATTITUDES

He who fashions the hearts of them all and observes all their deeds ([Ps 33:15](#)).

And the Lord said to Moses, "When you go back to Egypt, see that you do before Pharaoh all the miracles that I have put in your power. But I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go ([Exod 4:21](#)).

But I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and though I multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt ([Exod 7:3](#)).

For it was the Lord's doing to harden their hearts that they should come against Israel in battle, in order that they should be devoted to destruction and should receive no mercy but be destroyed, just as the Lord commanded Moses ([Josh 11:20](#)).

If someone sins against a man, God will mediate for him, but if someone sins against the Lord, who can intercede for him?" But they would not listen to the voice of their father, for it was the will of the Lord to put them to death ([1 Sam 2:25](#)).

But Amaziah would not listen, for it was of God, in order that he might give them into the hand of their enemies, because they had sought the gods of Edom ([2 Chron 25:20](#)).

He turned their hearts to hate his people, to deal craftily with his servants ([Ps 105:25](#)).

10 Make the heart of this people dull,
and their ears heavy,
and blind their eyes;
lest they see with their eyes,
and hear with their ears,
and understand with their hearts,
and turn and be healed."
([Isa 6:10](#))

He has blinded their eyes
and hardened their heart,
lest they see with their eyes,
and understand with their heart, and turn,
and I would heal them."
([Jn 12:40](#))

For the Lord has poured out upon you
a spirit of deep sleep,
and has closed your eyes (the prophets),
and covered your heads (the seers).
([Isa 29:10](#))

7 What then? Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened, 8 as it is written,

“God gave them a spirit of stupor,
eyes that would not see
and ears that would not hear,
down to this very day.”
([Rom 11:7-8](#))

O Lord, why do you make us wander from your ways
and harden our heart, so that we fear you not?
Return for the sake of your servants,
the tribes of your heritage.
([Isa 63:17](#)).

Thus says the Lord God: On that day, thoughts will come into your mind, and you will devise an evil scheme ([Ezk 38:10](#)).

And God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the leaders of Shechem, and the leaders of Shechem dealt treacherously with Abimelech ([Judges 9:23](#)).

His father and mother did not know that it was from the Lord, for he was seeking an opportunity against the Philistines. At that time the Philistines ruled over Israel ([Judges 14:4](#)).

Now the Spirit of the Lord departed from Saul, and a harmful spirit from the Lord tormented him ([1 Sam 16:14](#)).

And Absalom and all the men of Israel said, “The counsel of Hushai the Archite is better than the counsel of Ahithophel.” For the Lord had ordained to defeat the good counsel of

Ahithophel, so that the Lord might bring harm upon Absalom ([2 Sam 17:14](#)).

So the king did not listen to the people, for it was a turn of affairs brought about by the Lord that he might fulfill his word, which the Lord spoke by Ahijah the Shilonite to Jeroboam the son of Nebat ([1 Kgs 12:15](#)).

20 and the Lord said, 'Who will entice Ahab, that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-gilead?' And one said one thing, and another said another. 21 Then a spirit came forward and stood before the Lord, saying, 'I will entice him.' 22 And the Lord said to him, 'By what means?' And he said, 'I will go out, and will be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.' And he said, 'You are to entice him, and you shall succeed; go out and do so.' 23 Now therefore behold, the Lord has put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these your prophets; the Lord has declared disaster for you" ([1 Kgs 22:20-23](#)).

5 When the servants of King Hezekiah came to Isaiah, 6 Isaiah said to them, "Say to your master, 'Thus says the Lord: Do not be afraid because of the words that you have heard, with which the servants of the king of Assyria have reviled me. 7 Behold, I will put a spirit in him, so that he shall hear a rumor and return to his own land, and I will make him fall by the sword in his own land'" ([2 Kings 19:5-7](#)).

Now therefore behold, the Lord has put a lying spirit in the mouth of these your prophets. The Lord has declared disaster concerning you ([2 Chron 18:22](#)).

And if the prophet is deceived and speaks a word, I, the Lord, have deceived that prophet, and I will stretch out my

hand against him and will destroy him from the midst of my people Israel ([Ezk 14:9](#)).

11 Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, 12 in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness ([2 Thes 2:11-12](#)).

For God has put it into their hearts to carry out his purpose by being of one mind and handing over their royal power to the beast, until the words of God are fulfilled ([Rev 17:17](#)).

SUBLIMINAL CONTROL

A man's steps are from the Lord; how then can man understand his way? ([Prov 20:24](#)).

6 Against a godless nation I send him,
and against the people of my wrath I command him,
to take spoil and seize plunder,
and to tread them down like the mire of the streets.

7 But he does not so intend,
and his heart does not so think;
but it is in his heart to destroy,
and to cut off nations not a few
([Isa 10:6-7](#))

Will few be saved?

13 Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. 14 For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few (Mt 7:13-14).

22 He went on his way through towns and villages, teaching and journeying toward Jerusalem. 23 And someone said to him, "Lord, will those who are saved be few?" And he said to them, 24 "Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able. 25 When once the master of the house has risen and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, 'Lord, open to us,' then he will answer you, 'I do not know where you come from.' 26 Then you will begin to say, 'We ate and drank in your presence, and you taught in our streets.' 27 But he will say, 'I tell you, I do not know where you come from. Depart from me, all you workers of evil!' 28 In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God but you yourselves cast out. 29 And people will come from east and west, and from north and south, and recline at table in the kingdom of God. 30 And behold, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last" (Lk 13:23-30).

1. Will the majority of the human race be saved or damned?

i) The two passages I quoted are standard prooftexts for belief that the majority of the human race is doomed to hell. That's what I'll be discussing in this post.

ii) There is another argument for the same position. If you combine exclusivism (i.e. one must believe in Jesus before death to be saved) with church history up until the present, then that's another argument for the proposition that the majority of the race will be damned.

There are, however, some potential complications. There's the question of whether those who die before the age of reason are heavenbound or hellbound. There's the question of how much longer the churn age will last, and the success or failure of evangelism worldwide.

You also have progressives who subscribe to inclusivism and/or postmortem evangelism. That's becoming more popular.

Even if we conclude that (i) fails to establish the claim, the claim may still be true, given (ii). But this post is about the first line of argument.

2. In addition, the traditional interpretation is a fixture of the anti-Calvinist polemic. Freewill theists routinely allege that according to Calvinism, the elect are a "chosen few". However, that's not based on Calvinism, per se. Rather, that's based in part on a freewill theist's interpretation of [Mt 7:13-14](#)—which he combines with the Reformed doctrine of election and reprobation. And to that extent it reflects a failure to distinguish between his own position and the opposing position. The critic is imputing one of his own assumptions to Calvinism.

3. We might begin by filling in the implicit imagery in Christ's two sayings. Try to visualize the whole picturesque metaphor.

i) Jesus seems to be using mixed metaphors, although these are closely related metaphors. The basic picture appears to be a fortified city. The city has a defensive wall with one (or more) gates. The main gate is wide. Wide enough so that several people can leave or enter simultaneously. It can accommodate several people (some mounted on horses or mules) abreast.

ii) Matching the main gate is the broad road. The basic idea is that the broad road is the default thoroughfare. The path of least resistance. Most folks unthinkingly go with the flow. To vary the metaphor, Christians must swim against the tide.

iii) In contrast to the main gate is the side gate. Because it's narrow, people only enter single file rather than side-by-side.

The imagery of gates and roads trades on spatial metaphors. Two divergent paths. One leads to heaven while the other leads to hell.

However, the narrow gate may also trade on a temporal metaphor. The main gate closes at sunset. To enjoy the protection of the fortified city, you generally had to get there before sundown. If you got there after dark, you were out of luck. Had to sleep outside. Exposed to the dangers of bandits and nocturnal predators.

But a function of the side gate was to admit some parties who arrived after dark. Yet that wouldn't be just anyone.

That would be reserved for dignitaries or friends of the sentinel.

So an additional lesson might be not to procrastinate. If you try the main gate, but it's locked, and there's a line at the side gate, it may close before your turn comes. A lost opportunity. This is similar to the parable of the wise and foolish virgins. It was too late for the foolish virgins to make up for lost time.

If the spatial dimension of the metaphor illustrates the need to resist conformity, the temporal dimension illustrates the need for urgency.

Furthermore, the narrow gate may be inconspicuous compared to the main gate, so you have to be observant or well-informed to find it, compared to the indifferent, inattentive masses.

It's possible that I'm pressing the imagery beyond what Jesus intended. However, the reason imagery is sketchy is probably because the scene was so familiar to his audience that he didn't need to draw a detailed word-picture. His thumbnail sketch would conjure a fuller picture in the minds of the listener. So I think it's safe to pencil in the implied details.

4. This also raises the question of whether his admonition is predictive or hortatory. Is he saying for a fact that when the roll call is recited, most humans will be damned? Or is he using contrastive imagery to shake people out of their complacency? Put another way, is it like some prophetic oracles of doom which are implicitly conditional or counterfactual? The purpose of the dire warning isn't to say their fate is sealed, but to give them an opportunity to avert disaster by changing course before the clock runs out.

5. The version in Luke might suggest that the comparison is more specific. The point of contrast is not about the ratio lost and saved humanity in general, but the difference between the few Jews who respond to Jesus compared to many gentiles who respond to Jesus. On that view, perhaps the majority of the human race will be saved, but mostly drawn from gentile people-groups.

Will just a few be saved?

13 “Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. 14 For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few (Mt 7:13-14).

23 And someone said to him, “Lord, will those who are saved be few?” And he said to them, 24 “Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able...29 And people will come from east and west, and from north and south, and recline at table in the kingdom of God (Lk 13:23-24,29).

A popular trope that critics of Calvinism mechanically resort to is the allegation that according to Calvinism, God reprobates most human beings. Problem with that allegation is that Calvinism has no official statement on the percentages.

In my experience, critics who say this usually refuse to offer any justification for their allegation. They seem to think that's an implication of Calvinism, but they rarely construct an argument to that effect. On the rare occasion that they attempt to justify their allegation, they appeal to their interpretation of [Mt 7:13-14/Lk 13:23-24](#). So let's discuss this:

i) To begin with, that's not an implication of Calvinism. Rather, that's a hybrid position in which the critic of Calvinism takes his own interpretation of Scripture as a frame of reference, combines that with the Reformed doctrine of reprobation, then alleges that "according to Calvinism," God reprobates most human beings. But he didn't get that from Calvinism. Rather, he's imputing his interpretation of Scripture to Calvinism, then deriving a conclusion. He lacks the critical detachment to distinguish his own assumptions from the opposing position.

ii) The imagery of these two prooftexts is somewhat ambiguous. The imaginary probably envisions city gates, with roads leading into the city or away from the city. But the relationship between the gate and the roadway is unstated. Is the gate at the end of the road? That envisions a journey to the city, where the gate is the entry-point. Or is the gate an exit from the city onto the road?

If the gate is an exit, then this suggests that getting through the gate is just the starting-point in what may be a long, treacherous journey. Leaving is when the hard part begins. The challenges lie ahead.

If the gate is an entrance, then this suggests that if you get to that point, you have it made. You arrived at your destination. Now you're safe. You put the treacherous journey behind you.

iii) What's the distinction between the narrow gate and the wide gate? The wide gate envisions the main gate into a city. That's used by visitors, traders, and the hoi polloi. By contrast, the narrow gate is a side-gate used by people with special entree. They know the porter.

iv) The imagery of the narrow gate has ironic implications for critics of Calvinism. If we press the imagery, then most folks cannot enter by the narrow gate even if they want to, even if they try to, because it would generate a bottleneck. Indeed, [Lk 13:24](#) makes that very point.

So by that logic, God has not made universal provision for the salvation of everyone. It's not simply that only a few will avail themselves of the opportunity. Rather, the narrow gate screens out most seekers. They can't go through all at once. They must line up single file. People in the front of the line have an advantage. For folks waiting in back, it's too late. If you don't make it inside before the gates close for the night, you'll be turned away. "Outer darkness". That's the gist of the imagery.

v) Notice, though, that Jesus doesn't answer the question of whether few be saved. He probably leaves it up in the air as a stimulus to the reader. Each reader needs to answer that question for himself by heeding the warning and taking appropriate action.

vi) Does the passage imply that only a few will be saved? We need to compare that with the messianic banquet in [Lk 13:28-29](#). That evokes a motif in Isaiah (e.g. [Isa 25:6-9](#); [26:5](#); [43:5](#); [49:12](#); [55:1-2](#)), including the image of Gentiles flooding into God's kingdom ([Isa 59:19](#)). That envisions a multitude.

Why does Scripture use disparate imagery? Why does some imagery picture a few while other imagery pictures a multitude? Probably to encourage initiative and

perseverance, on the one hand, while discouraging presumption, on the other hand.

vii) In addition, it may be that Christ's statement is not a prophecy about church history in general, but focused on the hostile reaction to his message and mission in 1C Palestine. The short-term situation that his immediate followers will confront. No doubt that has analogues in church history, but it's not a statement about every place and every time.

Arminian prooftexts

The argument for Arminianism used to be a whole lot simpler for Arminians. It was a two-sided debate between Calvinists and Arminians. Now, however, Arminians have far more competition.

They must vie with universalists for the "all/world" passages.

Likewise, they must vie with open theists for the anthropopathic passages (e.g. [Ezk 18:23,33](#); [Mt 23:37](#); [Lk 19:41](#)).

To further complicate matters, many or most contemporary Arminians espouse eternal security. When "4-point Arminians" debate Wesleyan Arminians, they default to Reformed exegesis.

Finally, even though Arminians champion unlimited atonement, that masks a fatal equivocation inasmuch as Arminians can't agree what the atonement is or does. Many contemporary Arminians espouse penal substitution, but many traditional Arminians reject penal substitution. Moreover, you have prominent contemporary Arminians who reject penal substitution (e.g. Joel Green, Randal Rauser). Even if you think Christ died for everyone, what does that mean?

In this post I'm going to quote the major Arminian prooftexts. A partial exception is that I won't quote their prooftexts against the perseverance of the saints, both because I've discussed that at length elsewhere, and because Arminians are divided on the subject.

After quoting their prooftexts, I will quote from a variety of scholars. These include Calvinists, Arminians, universalists, open theists, and non-Calvinists. By non-Calvinists I mean scholars who, to my knowledge, aren't Calvinists, but beyond that I don't know how to classify them. They don't self-identify their overall position, if they have one.

Obviously, I won't agree with everyone I quote. My point is to illustrate the complexity of the Arminian burden of proof. Nowadays, Arminians are having to fight on several fronts at once, both in terms of intramural debates as well as non-Arminian opponents. It's not a straightforward appeal to their prooftexts.

In some cases, after quoting a scholar or scholars, I'll include an editorial aside.

1) Isa 5:1-7

What more was there to do for my vineyard, that I have not done in it? When I looked for it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? (v4).

God is sometimes surprised by the way things unfold. For example, he expected Israel to be fruitful, but they were not ([Isa 5:1-5](#)).

<http://rachelheldevans.com/blog/ask-open-theist-greg-boyd-response>

At other times he tells us that he is surprised at how things turned out because he expected a different outcome ([Isa. 5:3-7](#); [Jer. 3:67; 19-20](#)).

<http://reknew.org/2007/12/response-to-critics/>

Both traditional Arminians and open theists claim this passage. But as Boyd points out, this isn't just an Arminian/Calvinist dispute, but a classical theist/open theist dispute.

2) Ezk 18:23

Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, declares the Lord God, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live?

An even more problematic question that burdens those who view the future as eternally settled and thus known by God as such is why God would give certain agents the free will to damn themselves, especially when he tells us he desires all to be saved and is grieved by very person who is lost (e.g. [Ezk 18:23](#); [33:11](#); [1 Tim 2:4](#); [4:10](#); [2 Pet 3:9](#); [1 Jn 2:2](#)).

G. Boyd, "God Limits His Control," *Four Views on Divine Providence*, 202.

3) Mt 23:37

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!

The heart of God, clearly, is a heart which grants freedom, and which sometimes suffers profoundly because of it. In the case of [Matthew 23:37](#), what the Son of God longed for the Son of God didn't get! The fact that most theologians in the classical tradition found it necessary to attribute this lament not to the heart of the eternal God but only to the humanity of Christ simply testifies to the strength with which a non-biblical philosophical concept of God (viz. God's impassability) has held biblical exegesis hostage.

<http://reknew.org/2008/01/what-is-the-biblical-basis-of-free-will/>

Boyd has a more consistent hermeneutical approach than traditional Arminians. He rejects the Reformed appeal to anthropomorphic or anthropopathic depictions. Traditional Arminians must straddle the fence without falling over on the Calvinist side or the open theist side. It's quite a balancing act. In addition:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2014/07/o-jerusalem-jerusalem.html>

<https://triablogue.blogspot.com/2019/09/gathering-children-of-jerusalem.html>

4) JN 1:12-13

12 But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, 13 who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

Some interpreters forcefully reject any idea that the relative clause with which v13 begins ("who were born...") is a comment on the preceding clause ("who believed in his name") since then faith would proceed from regeneration whereas, according to their view, a person must opt for rebirth as a possibility opened up for him or her in the call that comes from the Revealer. In the choice that faith makes a person can be "born again" and so change and come to his or her real being. However, against this it has to be asserted that the concluding statement in v13 traces the entire gift of being a child of God, including the manner in which it is effected, to its deepest ground: "procreation" by God. The idea that faith as a human choice should precede that birth and therefore that in some sense a person should have this rebirth of God at his or her disposal not only seems absurd but is also at variance with statements like this in [1 Jn 5:1](#)," **H. RIDDERBOS, THE GOSPEL OF JOHN, 47.**

No evangelical would say that before we are born again we must practice righteousness, for such a view would teach works-righteousness. Nor would we say that first we avoid sinning, and then are born of God, for such a view would suggest that human works cause us to be born of God. Nor would we say that first we show great love for God, and then he causes us to be born again. No, it is clear that practicing righteousness, avoiding sin, and loving are all the consequences or results of the new birth. But if this is the case, then we must interpret [1 John 5:1](#) in the same way, for the structure of the verse is the same as we find in the texts about practicing righteousness ([1 John 2:29](#)), avoiding sin ([1 John 3:9](#)), and loving God ([1 John 4:7](#)). It follows, then, that [1 John 5:1](#) teaches that first God grants us new life and then we believe Jesus is the Christ.

<http://www.9marks.org/journal/does-regeneration-necessarily-precede-conversion>

5) JN 3:16

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

Some argue that the term "world" here simply has negative connotations—the created human world. But the characteristic use of "the world" (ho cosmos) elsewhere in the narrative is with negative overtones—the world in its alienation from and hostility to its Creator's purposes. It makes better sense in the soteriological context to see the latter notion as in view. God loves that which has become hostile to God. The force is not, then, that the world is so vast that it takes a great deal of love to embrace it, but rather that the world has become so alienated from God that it takes an exceedingly great love to love it at all. A. Lincoln, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 154.

6) ACTS 7:51

You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you.

More puzzling still is why God sincerely tries to get individuals and groups to turn from their wicked ways and

surrender to him if he is eternally certain his efforts will fail (e.g. [Acts 7:51](#)...).

G. BOYD, "GOD LIMITS HIS CONTROL," FOUR VIEWS ON DIVINE PROVIDENCE, 202.

7) ROM 5:18; 11:32

Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men.

For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all.

So when he uses "all men" here [5:18], he does not mean every human being but rather is saying "that Christ effects those who are his just as certainly as Adam does those who are his." While all are in Adam, it is clear in Romans that only those who are believers are in Christ.

While some have taken this [11:32] to mean universal salvation, this is impossible in light of the constant emphasis on final punishment at the eschaton (1:18; 2:5-11; 6:21,23; 9:22,29). Therefore, it is likely that the "all" here is corporate, meaning that God's mercy will be shown to Jew and Gentile alike. **G. OSBORNE, ROMANS, 144, 312.**

Notice how Arminian Grant Osborne defaults to Calvinist exegesis to deflect universalism.

Observe first the parallel structure of [Rom] 5:18...The whole point of such a parallel structure, so typical of Paul, is to identify a single group of individuals and to make two

parallel statements about that single group of individuals, and the effect therefore is to eliminate any possibility of ambiguity. The very ones who came under condemnation, as a result of the first Adam's act of disobedience, will eventually be brought to justification and life, as a result of the second Adam's act of obedience...Again, I do not know how Paul could have expressed himself any more clearly than that.

Paul's teaching here is so explicit, and so clear, that even the opponents of absolute universalism have sometimes conceded, as Neil Punt does, that '[Romans 5:18](#) and its immediate context place no limitations on the universalistic thrust of the second "all men".'

...Paul's explicit teaching that God, being merciful to all ([Rom 11:32](#)), shows no partiality to anyone. So how, then, do the Arminians explain the supposedly final division within the human race? Presumably by an appeal to human freedom: We ultimately determine our own destiny in heaven or hell. But if that is true, then the redeemed are also in a position to boast, it seems, along the following lines: 'At the very least, some of my own free choices—my decision to accept Christ, for example—were a lot better than those of the lost, and these choices also explain, at least partially, why my character ended up to be a lot more virtuous than theirs.' **THOMAS TALBOT, UNIVERSAL SALVATION: THE CURRENT DEBATE, 19-20, 260.**

Notice how a universalist easily co-opts Arminian prooftexts, hermeneutics, and applies them more consistently.

[8\) Rom 8:29](#)

For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.

proginosko (2) "choose beforehand" tina [someone] [Ro 8:29](#). ton laon autou 11:2. BDAG 866b.

While agreeing that God knows the future, including who will believe, the corporate election perspective would tend to understand the references to foreknowledge in [Rom 8:29](#) and [1 Pet 1:1-2](#) as referring to a relational prior knowing that amounts to previously acknowledging or recognizing or embracing or choosing people as belonging to God (i.e., in covenant relationship/partnership). The Bible sometimes mentions this type of knowledge, such as when Jesus speaks of those who never truly submit to his lordship: "And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness'" ([Matt 7:23](#); cf. [Gen 18:19](#); [Jer 1:5](#); [Hos 13:4-5](#); [Amos 3:2](#); [1 Cor 8:3](#)). On this view, to be chosen according to foreknowledge would mean to be chosen because of the prior election of Christ and the corporate people of God in him.

<http://evangelicalarminians.org/the-facts-of-salvation-a-summary-of-arminian-theologythe-biblical-doctrines-of-grace/>

Notice Arminian Abasciano's oblique concession that the traditional Reformed understanding of proginosko was right all along.

[9\) Rom 14:15](#)

For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died.

Paul uses the powerful verb *apollumi* ("annihilate, destroy, ruin") in the present imperative, which implies an ongoing process rather than once and for all "being lost before God."...Horst Baltz is therefore closer to the nuance required by this context in suggesting the translation of *lupeo* in this verse as "injured/deeply troubled," which implies an ongoing state.

References in the commentaries to "eschatological ruin" or "spiritual ruin" not only overlook the tense of the verb but also provide scant explanation of the effects of conscience violation. **R. JEWETT, ROMANS, 861-861.**

10) 2 COR 5:14-15,19

14 For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; 15 and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.

19 That is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.

This probably means that one has died as the representative of all his people, and therefore all of them are deemed to have died in the person of their representative. **F. F. BRUCE, I & II CORINTHIANS, 207.**

Most commentators admit that the most sensible reading is to take *pantes* in all three occurrences as being coextensive...In many ways the meaning of the verse turns on this one word [*ara*]: Christ died for all, therefore all died. The point that Paul wishes to make, *inter alia*, is that Christ's death effects the spiritual death of others, such that (*kai*) he died for all so that (*hina*) those who live (having died in Christ) should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and rose again (v55). In other words, Christ's death is both effective and purposive and reveals there is an implicit union between Christ and those for whom he died, something that Paul makes more explicit in [Rom 6:1-11](#). **J. GIBSON, "FOR WHOM DID CHRIST DIE?," FROM HEAVEN HE CAME AND SOUGHT HER, 303.**

11) 1 TIM 2:4-6; 4:10; TIT 2:11

4 who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. 5 For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, 6 who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time.

For to this end we toil and strive, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe.

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people.

The purpose of the reference to "all people," which continues the theme of universality in this passage, is sometimes misconstrued. The reference is made mainly with the Pauline mission to the Gentiles in mind (v7). But the reason behind Paul's justification of this universal mission is almost certainly the false teaching, with its Torah-centered approach to life that included either an exclusivist bent or a downplaying of the Gentile mission... Paul's focus is on building a people of God who incorporate all people regardless of ethnic, social, or economic backgrounds... **P. TOWNER, THE LETTERS TO TIMOTHY AND TITUS, 177-178.**

It may be that they [false teachers] were consumed with genealogies because they restricted salvation along certain ethnic lines (1 Tim 1:4)...When Paul says that God desires all to be saved (1 Tim 2:4) and that Christ was the ransom for all (1 Tim 2:6), he may be responding to some who excluded Gentiles from salvation for genealogical reasons... Paul counters Jewish teachers (Tit 10:10,14-15; 3:9) who construct genealogies to exclude some from salvation. T. Schreiner, Paul: Apostle of God's Glory in Christ, 184-85. These problems disappear if we accept the other possible translation, "to be precise, namely, I mean." "All" is thus

limited here to believers," **I. H. MARSHALL, PASTORAL EPISTLES, 556.**

12) HEB 2:9

But we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

When we place this description of Abraham's offspring with the emphasis on the children God gave to Jesus and the use of the word "brothers," we have significant evidence that Jesus's death "for everyone" (v9) is particular rather than general. All of this fits with v17, which speaks of Jesus's High Priestly ministry "to make propitiation for the sins of the people"... Given the focus on God's elect and Jesus's family in the context, it seems fair to conclude that here the emphasis is on the actual satisfaction accomplished in Jesus's death for those who would be part of his family. **T.**

SCHREINER, "PROBLEMATIC TEXTS" FOR DEFINITE ATONEMENT IN THE PASTORAL AND GENERAL EPISTLES," FROM HEAVEN HE CAME AND SOUGHT HER, 396. Cf. P. T. O'BRIEN, THE LETTER TO THE HEBREWS, 101-124.

13) HEB 10:29

How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of

God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace?

The apostate treats as profane that which is in fact not only holy in itself, but the source of cleansing holiness for the believer. The language is cultic, not ethical. **P.**

ELLINGWORTH, THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS, 540.

In other words, "sanctification," in the usage of Hebrews, refers not to inner renewal by the Holy Spirit, but a kind of ceremonial consecration, like ritual purity or cultic holiness.

14) 2 PET 2:1

But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction.

The most immediate [image] is borrowed from the Roman slave trade, where a ransom might serve as the price of emancipation, after which the one freed belong to the one who paid the price.

[First Peter 1:18-19](#) affirms that believers were "ransomed" from the futile ways of their ancestors "with the precious blood of Christ" (cf. [Eph 1:7](#); [2 Pet 2:1](#)). In these and related passages, NT writers are drawing on a wealth of what would have been shared experience in the larger Greco-Roman world. Those familiar with the history of Israel, of course, would have heard reverberations of the

story of the exodus in the background of such references (e.g., [Ex 6:6](#); cf. [Is 51:11](#)). Others, however, might have been led to conjure up images of the "redemption" of slaves or of prisoners of war.

This raises the question, If Jesus' death "purchased" believers, to whom was the purchase price paid? The devil? The demonic world? It is here, at this juncture, that we encounter the limits of the metaphor of redemption. **J.**

GREEN & M. BAKER, RECOVERING THE SCANDAL OF THE CROSS (IVP 2000), 41-42, 102.

A spillover from Calvinism into Arminianism has occurred in recent decades. Thus many Arminians whose theology is not very precise say that Christ paid the penalty for our sins. Yet such a view is foreign to Arminianism...Arminians teach that what Christ did he did for every person; therefore what he did could not have been to pay the penalty, since no one would then ever go into eternal perdition...[Arminians] also feel that God the Father would not be forgiving us at all if his justice was satisfied by the real thing that justice needs: punishment. **J. GRIDER, "ARMINIANISM," EVANGELICAL DICTIONARY OF THEOLOGY, 80.**

Joel Green is a premier Arminian NT scholar. The monograph he coauthored with Baker is a frontal assault on penal substitution. But that obscures the Arminian appeal to [2 Pet 2:1](#) as a proof-text for unlimited atonement. If it's not redemptive in the penal substitutionary sense, then in what sense, if at all, did Christ atone for the sins of the false teachers? Grider's clarification raises the same issue.

I'd add that even if you think the Bible teaches penal substitution (which it undoubtedly does), you can't superimpose that on every generically redemptive passage. [2 Pet 2:1](#) lacks vicarious or sacrificial language. It doesn't say the false teachers were redeemed by the blood of Christ. It doesn't say Christ died in their stead.

15) 2 PET 3:9

The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.

God's patience with his own people, delaying the final judgment to give them the opportunity of repentance, provides at least a partial answer to the problem of eschatological delay.

The author remains close to his Jewish source, for in Jewish thought it was usually for the sake of the repentance of his own people that God delayed judgment. **R.**

BAUCKHAM, JUDE, 2 PETER, 312-13.

In other words, it's not referring to humans in general, but God's people (Jews, Christians) in particular.

Why would God strive to the point of frustration to get people to do what he was certain they would never do before they were even born; namely, believe in him? Doesn't God's sincere effort to get all people to believe in

him imply that it is not a foregone conclusion to God that certain people would not believe in him when he created them? Indeed, doesn't the fact that the Lord delays his return imply that neither the date of his return nor the identities of who will and will not believe are settled in God's mind ahead of time?...If this isn't what [2 Pet 3:9](#) explicitly teaches, what does it teach?

If it is difficult for the classical view to explain why God strives with people he is certain will not be saved, it is even more difficult to explain why God would create these people in the first place...why a God who loves all people and who wants no one to perish would give freedom to people he is certain are going to use it to damn themselves to hell. **G. BOYD, "THE OPEN-THEIST VIEW," DIVINE FOREKNOWLEDGE: FOUR VIEWS, 29.**

[16\) 1 JN 2:2; 4:14](#)

He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world.

If here it is a reference to the whole planet, consideration of the historical context in which John wrote makes a more likely interpretation to be the universal scope of Christ's sacrifice in the sense that no one's race, nationality, or any other trait will keep that person from receiving the full benefit of Christ's sacrifice if and when they come to faith.

In the ancient world, the gods were parochial and had geographically limited jurisdictions. In the mountains, one sought the favor of the mountain gods; on the sea, of the sea gods. Ancient warfare was waged in the belief that the gods of the opposing nations were fighting as well, and the outcome would be determined by whose god was strongest. Against that kind of pagan mentality, John asserts the efficacy of Jesus Christ's sacrifice is valid everywhere, for people everywhere, that is "the whole world."

But "world" in John's writings is often used to refer not to the planet or all its inhabitants, but to the system of fallen human culture, with its values, morals, and ethics as a whole. Lieu explains it as that which is totally opposed to God and all that belongs to him. It is almost always associated with the side of darkness in the Johannine duality, and people are characterized in John's writings as being either "of God" or "of the world" (Jn 8:23; 15:19; 17:14,16; 18:36; 1 Jn 2:16; 4:5). Those who have been born of God are taken out of that spiritual sphere, though not out of the geographical place or physical population that is concurrent with it (Jn 13:1; 17:15: see "In Depth: The "world" in John's Letters" at 2:16).

Rather than teaching universalism, John here instead announces the exclusivity of the Christian gospel. Since Christ's atonement is efficacious for the "whole world," there is no other form of atonement available to other peoples, cultures, and religions apart from Jesus Christ. **K. JOBES, 1, 2, & 3 JOHN (ZONDERVAN 2014), 80.**

1 John is written to a Christian community...Its concern, as we have seen, is with the sins of Christian believers after their conversion, emphasizing that "the blood of Jesus...

purifies us from all sin" (1 Jn 1:7), that "if anybody sins we have an Advocate with the Father" and that he is a propitiation "for our sins" (1 Jn 2:1-2, my italics). But having introduced an explicit theology of atonement to deal with the specific problem of "our" sins now, after conversion and baptism, the author adds, almost as an afterthought, that of course this is God's way of dealing with sin always and everywhere: "and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world". There is not one "propitiation" for us and another for the rest of the world, but Jesus (kai autos) is the only sacrifice, and the only way of salvation for all. The point is not that Jesus died for everyone indiscriminately so that everyone in the world is in principle forgiven, but that all those forgiven are forgiven on the basis of Christ's sacrifice and in no other way. J. R. Michaels, "Atonement in John's Gospel and Epistles," **C. HILL & F. JAMES, EDS. THE GLORY OF THE ATONEMENT (IVP 2004), 116-17.**

The FACTS of salvation

Recently, Brian Abasciano laid out his basic case for Armininism:

<http://evangelicalarminians.org/the-facts-of-salvation-a-summary-of-arminian-theology-the-biblical-doctrines-of-grace/>

Abasciano is a well-trained NT scholar. I'm going to do a running commentary on his case, because it represents a systematic, up-to-date defense of Arminianism by a capable scholar. I'll ignore the final section on "Security in Christ," since I did an MAR thesis on that topic (see sidebar).

God has provided for the forgiveness of sins and salvation of every person by the death of Jesus Christ on behalf of sinful humanity. Indeed, by the grace of God Jesus tasted death for everyone (Heb 2:9). As 1 John 2:2 says, "He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world" (NIV). After the statement of 1 Tim 2:4 quoted above that "God desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth," the following verses from 1 Timothy

continue, “For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time (1 Tim 2:5-6). Indeed, “the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 11:10), “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners” (1 Tim 1:9), “the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world” (1 John 4:14; cf. John 4:42), God is “the Savior of all people” (1 Tim 4:10), Jesus is “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29), who “died for the ungodly” (Rom 5:6), and “died for all” (2 Cor 5:14-15) when “in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them” (2 Cor 5:19). Jesus even died for those who reject him and his word, deny him, and perish (Luke 22:17-21; John 12:46-48; Rom 14:15; 1 Cor 8:11; 2 Pet 2:1; Heb 10:29). The provision of atonement has been made for as many as sin, which is all people (Rom

3:22-25; 5:18). But even though Jesus died for all and has provided atonement for all, the intent of the atonement provided was that its actual application (which grants the forgiveness of sins, righteous status with God, and salvation) be conditional on faith in Jesus Christ. This is stated rather clearly in John 3:16-18 quoted above. Out of love, God sacrificed his only Son for the world so that those from the world who trust in Jesus and his atoning sacrifice will benefit from that atoning sacrifice and be saved while those from the world who reject that atoning sacrifice in unbelief will not benefit from it but remain condemned and perish (cf. various other passages that make it clear that faith is the condition upon which and the means by which forgiveness, eternal life, and salvation are received, for example: Luke 8:12; John 1:12; 3:36; 5:24; 6:40, 47; 20:31; Acts 16:31; Rom 1:16; chs. 3-4; 10:9-10; 1 Cor 1:21; Gal 2:16; ch. 3; Eph 2:8-9; 1 Tim

1:16). Since the atonement was provided for all, making salvation available to all, Scripture sometimes portrays justification as potential for all people (Rom 3:22-25; 5:18) even though not all will ultimately be saved. Although God desires that all believe and be saved through Christ's blood, many will perish, not for lack of the availability of salvation, but because they reject the saving provision made for them in Christ's death and have "not believed in the name of the only Son of God" (John 3:18). Similarly, Scripture's references to God or Christ as the Savior of the world/all (John 4:42; 1 Tim 4:10; 1 John 4:14) do not mean that all will actually be saved, but that the Father and the Son have provided salvation for all that is effective only for those who believe.

Two problems:

i) His prooftexts prove too much. They don't merely speak of universal *provision*, but universal *salvation*. They don't say God merely makes salvation "available" to everyone, or

that everyone is "potentially" justified. On the face of it, his Arminian prooftexts disprove Arminianism.

Abasciano must import qualifications into his prooftexts. Cut them down to size. Take, for instance, his appeal to [2 Cor 5:19](#): "in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them."

But if, in fact, God is not counting everyone's trespasses against them, then that's a prooftext for universalism rather than Arminianism.

Now, there's nothing necessarily wrong with thinking a given passage contains an implicit qualification. But Calvinists can help themselves to the same principle. So Arminians have no advantage over Calvinists when it comes to these passages. Contextually, it makes more sense to view [2 Cor 5:14-15,19](#) as referring to all believers rather than all humans—believers and unbelievers alike.

ii) Abasciano says universal provision is qualified by the faith-condition. But he fails to explain how salvation is available to those who are in no position to believe the gospel, because they live and die at a time or place that has no access to the gospel.

Of course, Abasciano can postulate another qualification. He might speculate that God will save them had they believed the Gospel, if given the opportunity. Problem is, he's not deriving that from his prooftexts. That's a caveat he must superimpose on his prooftexts, despite what they say.

So, once again, his Arminian prooftexts disprove Arminianism.

Jesus also promised, “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself” (John 12:32). Thus, the Father and the Son draw all people to Jesus, enabling them to come to Jesus in faith.

The text doesn't say God merely "enables" all people to come to Jesus.

When our wills are freed, we can either accept God's saving grace in faith or reject it to our own ruin. In other words, God's saving grace is resistible, which is to say that he dispenses his calling, drawing, and convicting grace (which would bring us to salvation if responded to with faith) in such a way that we may reject it. We become free to believe in Jesus and free to reject him. The resistibility of God's saving grace is clearly shown in Scripture, as some of the passages already mentioned testify. Indeed, the Bible is sadly filled with examples of people spurning the grace of

God offered to them. In Isaiah 5:1-7, God actually indicates that he could not have done anything more to get Israel to produce good fruit.

i) Of course, this is an anthropomorphic parable in which God is depicted as a disappointed farmer. He expected the ground to produce a good harvest, but his hopes were dashed.

If we're going to take the depiction at face value, this would be a proof-text, not for classical Arminianism, but open theism.

ii) In addition, this has to be counterbalanced with what Isaiah says about divine hardening in the next chapter (6:9-13).

iii) There's a failure on the part of Arminians to appreciate the difference between two kinds of discourse. Some discourse is primarily informative, while other discourse is primarily performative. Much prophetic discourse is intended, not so much to supply information, but to provoke a reaction, one way or the other.

Moreover, in addressing a mass audience, it may be intended to provoke more than one reaction. It can have a polarizing effect, separating the chaff from the wheat. The faithful heed the warning while the faithless spurn the warning.

But if irresistible grace is something that God dispenses, then he could have easily

provided that and infallibly brought Israel to bear good fruit. Many passages in the Old Testament talk about how God extended his grace to Israel over and over again but they repeatedly resisted and rejected him (e.g., 2 Kgs 17:7-23; Jer 25:3-11; 26:1-9; 35:1-19). 2 Chronicles 36:15-16 mentions that God's persistent reaching out to his people, which was rejected, was motivated by compassion for them. But this could only be if the grace he extended them enabled them to repent and avoid his judgment yet was resistible since they did indeed resist it and suffered God's judgment. This shows God allowing his purpose to not come to pass because of allowing human beings a choice of whether to yield to his grace or not.

i) According to Calvinism, no one can resist *predestination*. But they *can* resist the Gospel. They *can* resist verbal warnings. Indeed, their very resistance is predestined.

ii) Once again, Abasciano fails to appreciate the fact that prophetic discourse can have more than one aim or

audience. It can be for the benefit of the remnant, and the detriment of the reprobate.

iii) How does God allow his purpose to not come to pass? Did he purposefully not allow his purpose to come to pass? Does God first form a purpose to bring about something, then form a contrary purpose to disallow his former purpose?

Stephen also furnished a good example of the resistibility of grace when he said to his fellow Jews, “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did not your fathers persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it” (Acts 7:51-53).

In what sense do they resist God's grace? Stephen's appeal has a tertiary referent. To begin with, he's alluding to [Isa 63:10-11](#). But that, in turn, is alluding to some event in Pentateuchal history. There are two options: the Shekinah in the tabernacle or the prophetic enduement of Moses. If the former, it refers to resisting the visible evidence of

God's holy presence. If the latter, it refers to resisting God's prophets. [Acts 7:52](#) suggests a prophetic referent.

But either interpretation is thoroughly consistent with Calvinism. The reprobate can resist miraculous external evidence. They can also resist the prophetic word.

When Calvinism talks about "irresistible grace," it's referring to monergistic regeneration. Inner grace. Not signs or words. So Abasciano's appeal is confused.

Luke 7:30 tells us that “the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected the purpose of God for themselves.”

i) Coming on the heels of the previous verse, "rejecting God's purpose" is equivalent to rejecting John's baptism. The ministry of John the Baptist was a part of God's redemptive plan. The Pharisees and lawyers indirectly rejected God's purpose by directly rejecting the ministry of John the Baptist. They refused to acknowledge their need to repent.

But, once again, that's thoroughly consistent with Calvinism. The reprobate can resist the prophetic words. That's not only something they are able to do, but something they were bound to do. They were predestined to reject God's prophets. So Abasciano's appeal continues to be confused.

ii) In addition, if God planned to save them, but they thwarted his plan, then God was mistaken. If I plan to do

something, but my plan falls through, then I was mistaken in imagining that I could do it. I didn't plan to fail.

And Jesus, who spoke to people for the purpose of saving them ([John 5:34](#)), yet found that they refused to come to him to have life ([John 5:40](#)),

Jesus is addressing a general audience. His words have a winnowing effect. He intends to save some, but expose and inculcate others ([Jn 3:19-21](#); [9:39](#); [15:22](#)).

and who came to turn every Jew from their sin ([Acts 3:26](#); see the treatment of this text under “Atonement for All” above), yet clearly found that not every Jew believed in him,

- i)** If Jesus came with the intention of turning every Jew from their sin, then his mission is a failure.
- ii)** The syntax is ambiguous. Fitzmyer renders it "blessing you as each one of you turns from your evils ways." The point is not that everyone repents, but everyone who repents is blessed.

lamented over his people's unwillingness to receive his grace, saying, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are

sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!” (Luke 13:34; see further Ezek 24:13; Matt 23:37; Rom 2:4-5; Zech 7:11-14; Heb 10:29; 12:15; Jude 4; 2 Cor 6:1-2; Ps 78:40-42).

That fails to distinguish between illocutionary and perlocutionary discourse. Prophetic discourse is often perlocutionary. Designed, not to inform (although that's a part of what prophets do), but to trigger a response—which may be a varied response.

Arminians differ among themselves about some of the details of how God’s prevenient grace works, probably because Scripture itself does not give a detailed description. Some Arminians believe that God continually enables all people to believe at all times as a benefit of the atonement. Others believe that God only bestows the ability to believe in Christ to people at select times according to his good pleasure and wisdom. Still others believe that prevenient grace

generally accompanies any of God's specific movements toward people, rendering them able to respond positively to such movements as God would have them.

In other words, the details of Arminian theology lack Scriptural support.

The concept of "freed will" raises a broader question of whether human beings have free will generally, apart from the realm of pleasing the Lord and doing spiritual good (again, people are not free in this area unless God empowers them). The Arminian answer is yes. People have free will in all sorts of things. By this we mean that when people are free with respect to an action, then they can at least either do the action or refrain from doing it. People often have genuine choices and are therefore correspondingly able to make choices. When free, the specific choice someone makes has not been efficiently

predetermined or necessitated by anyone or anything other than the person himself. In fact, if the person's action has been rendered necessary by someone else, and the person cannot avoid doing the action, then he has no choice in the matter and he is not free in it. And if he does not have a choice, then neither can it properly be said that he chooses. But Scripture very clearly indicates that people have choices and make choices about many things (e.g., Deut 23:16; 30:19; Josh 24:15; 2 Sam 24:12; 1 Kings 18:23, 25; 1 Chron 21:10; Acts 15:22, 25; Phil 1:22).

Abasciano is operating with a seat-of-the-pants definition of choice rather than a philosophically precise definition. Compare his sloppy usage with how some libertarian philosophers define or delineate the issues:

A choice is the formation of an intention or purpose to do something. It resolves uncertainty and indecision in the mind

about what to do. Robert Kane, Four Views on Freewill (Blackwell 2007), 33.

Before going into the arguments for determinism, it is necessary to remove some misconceptions about the determinist position. To begin with, it must be emphasized most strongly that determinists do not deny that people make choices...The experience of choosing-of seeing alternatives, weighing their desirability and finally making up one's mind-is not any different whether one is a libertarian or a determinist. For while determinists believe that there are sufficient conditions which will govern their choices, they do not know at the time when they're making a decision what those determinants are or how they will deduce as a result of them. So, like everyone else, they still have to make up their own minds! William Hasker, Metaphysics (IVP 1983), 37.

So what does it mean to have free will? Some thinkers have said that it is the ability in causally identical situations to choose either A or not-A. It seems to me, however, that this so-called Principle of Alternative Possibilities is not a necessary condition of willing freely. I'm persuaded by illustrations like that given by Harry Frankfurt to show that freedom does not require the ability to choose other than as one does. Imagine a man whose brain has been secretly implanted with electrodes by a mad scientist. The scientist, being an Obama supporter, decides that he will activate the electrodes to make the man vote for Obama if the man goes into the polling booth to vote for Romney. On the other hand, if the man chooses to vote for Obama, then the scientist will not activate the electrodes. Suppose, then, the man goes into the polling booth and presses the button to vote for Obama. In such a case it seems that the man freely

votes for Obama. Yet it was not within his power to do anything different!

<http://www.reasonablefaith.org/free-will>

Back to Abasciano:

Moreover, it explicitly speaks of human free will (Exod 35:29; 36:3; Lev 7:16; 22:18, 21, 23; 23:38; Num 15:3; 29:39; Deut 12:6, 17; 16:10; 2 Chron 31:14; 35:8; Ezra 1:4, 6; 3:5; 7:16; 8:28; Ps 119:108; Ezek 46:12; Amos 4:5; 2 Cor 8:3; Philemon 1:14; cf. 1 Cor 7:37) and attests to human beings violating God's will, showing that he does not predetermine their will or actions in sin. Furthermore, the fact that God holds people accountable for their choices and actions implies that those choices and actions were free.

Does the Bible "explicitly speak of human free will?"

i) His OT prooftexts all refer to "freewill offerings. To begin with, this is just a convention of traditional English translations. For instance, the Complete Jewish Bible renders it "voluntary offering." Needless to say, a determined or predetermined action can still be voluntary. It's not as if the human agent is acting against his will. There's no sense of compulsion.

ii) More to the point, these are called "freewill" offerings because they are optional. That stands in contrast to most OT sacrifices and offerings, which were mandatory under specified conditions. It's not referring to a faculty of the will, but distinguishing what's obligatory from what's optional. Most OT sacrifices or offerings were religious duties. By contrast, the worshipper isn't required to present a "freewill" offering.

iii) Furthermore, his argument proves too much. Freewill offerings were a tiny subset of OT sacrifices and offerings. They could either be burnt offerings or one of three kinds of peace offerings. If freewill offerings imply the libertarian freedom of the worshiper in those cases, then that denies the worshiper's libertarian freedom in all other cases.

Regarding his NT prooftexts:

2 Cor 8:3: That refers to their financial means, not a psychological faculty or ability. Indeed, their financial resources were quite limited.

Phlm 14: Abascino ignores the rhetorical pose. Paul is being tactful. Calling in a favor. He's imposing on Philemon without seeming to be heavy-handed about it. Exerting moral authority. And, legally, Philemon is in a position to refuse, which is one reason Paul must be diplomatic. He must respect Philemon's social prerogatives.

If this proves libertarian freewill, then it proves too much, for it would mean the slave master has a psychological faculty of libertarian freedom, but a slave does not.

1 Cor 7:37: Paul's point is that in choosing between marriage or bachelorhood, the Christian isn't bound by social obligations or customary expectations.

Finally, the concept of freed will also implies that God has ultimate and absolute free will. For it is God who supernaturally frees the will of sinners by his grace to believe in Christ, which is a matter of God's own free will and sovereignty. God is omnipotent and sovereign, having the power and authority to do anything he wants and being unconstrained in his own actions and will by anything outside of himself and his own judgment (Gen 18:14; Exod 3:14; Job 41:11; Ps 50:10-12; Isaiah 40:13-14; Jer 32:17, 27; Matt 19:26; Luke 1:37; Acts 17:24-25; Rom 11:34-36; Eph 3:20; 2 Cor 6:18; Rev 1:8; 4:11). Nothing can happen unless he either does it or allows it.

Except that freewill theists do think God's actions and desires are constrained by something outside himself: namely, the ability of humans to counteract his plans and desires. So Abasciano doesn't really think God is sovereign. Although he doesn't wish to cede that attribute (divine

sovereignty) to Calvinists, his claim to that attribute is self-contradictory.

There are two main views of what the Bible teaches concerning the concept of election unto salvation: that it is either conditional or unconditional. For election to be unconditional means that God's choice of those he will save has nothing to do with them, that there was nothing about them that contributed to God's decision to choose them, which seems to make God's choice of any particular individual as opposed to another arbitrary.

i) "Arbitrary" in the sense that if a sinner has no right to God's mercy, then God can justly discriminate. Since God's not obligated to show mercy to *any*, he's not obligated to show mercy to *all*. Does Abasciano imagine God is duty-bound to show everyone mercy?

Not only does that fail to distinguish between guilt and innocence, justice and mercy, but it would mean Abasciano denies to God the freedom to do otherwise. is Abasciano a necessitarian about the plan of salvation?

ii) However, who God elects or reprobate will makes a difference in how history unfolds. To take one example, if Abraham was reprobate rather than elect, that would entail

an alternate timeline in which events play out very differently.

It also implies unconditional and arbitrary reprobation, God's choice of certain individuals to not save but to damn for their sin for no reason having to do with them...

Abasciano's statement is self-refuting. If God damns them "for their sin," then God is not damning "for no reason having to do with them."

Sin is a necessary, but insufficient condition of reprobation.

Desiring the salvation of all, providing atonement for all people, and taking the initiative to bring all people to salvation by issuing forth the gospel and enabling those who hear the gospel to respond to it positively in faith (see "Atonement for All" and "Freed to Believe" above), God chooses to save those who believe in the gospel/Jesus Christ (John 3:15-16, 36; 4:14; 5:24, 40; 6:47, 50-58; 20:31; Rom 3:21-30; 4:3-

5, 9, 11, 13, 16, 20-24; 5:1-2; 9:30-33; 10:4, 9-13; 1 Cor 1:21; 15:1-2; Gal 2:15-16; 3:2-9, 11, 14, 22, 24, 26-28; Eph 1:13; 2:8; Phil 3:9; Heb 3:6, 14, 18-19; 4:2-3; 6:12; 1 John 2:23-25; 5:10-13, 20). *This clear and basic biblical truth is tantamount to saying that election unto salvation is conditional on faith.*

No, that's not "tantamount to saying that election unto salvation is conditional on faith." Although *salvation* is contingent on faith, but doesn't make *election* contingent on faith. Indeed, it could be the other way around. Faith is contingent on election, which is why God grants faith to the elect.

Just as salvation is by faith (e.g., Eph 2:8 – “For by grace you have been saved through faith”), so election for salvation is by faith, a point brought out explicitly in 2 Thes 2:13 – “God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth” (NASB; note: “God has chosen you . . . through . . . faith in the truth”; on the grammar of this verse, see here).

Far from being explicit, commentators like Beale, Bruce, Fee, Green, Marshall, and Wanamaker (as well as Bill Mounce) all regard "salvation" rather than "faith" as the object of divine choice in this verse. There's no presumption that Abasciano has a better grasp of Greek syntax than all these other NT scholars.

The fact that the Holy Spirit is given to believers on the condition of faith in Christ is also profoundly supportive of conditional election. For in Scripture the presence of God/the Holy Spirit is the bestower and marker of election. As Moses prays in Exodus 33:15-16: "If your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people? Is it not in your going with us, so that we are distinct, I and your people, from every other people on the face of the earth?" Or as Paul states in Rom 8:9-10, "However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him. If

Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, yet the spirit is alive because of righteousness. But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you” (emphasis added). The giving of the Spirit conveys election, and having the Spirit makes a person elect. Thus, having the Spirit also marks a person out as elect. But the Spirit is given to believers by faith, making election to be also by faith.

To say the Spirit is given on condition of faith begs the question. What if faith is given by the Spirit?

From a non-traditional Arminian view (see below on differing Arminian views of election), this accords with the facts that the Holy Spirit sanctifies believers and sanctification is sometimes identified as the means by which election is accomplished (2 Thes 2:13; 1 Pet 1:2). To

sanctify means “to make holy, set apart for God.” The initial sanctifying work of the Spirit is roughly equivalent to election—believers are chosen or set apart as belonging to God and for service and obedience to him. The Apostle Paul told the church of the Thessalonians, “God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth” (2 Thes 2:13; NASB). Election is here presented as taking place through or by sanctification that the Holy Spirit performs. But as we have seen, the Holy Spirit is received by faith, making the sanctification he brings also conditional on faith and shedding light on the mention of “faith in the truth” immediately following in 2 Thes 2:13.

He's very dependent on that particular verse, and his particular rendering, to make his case. But most scholars disagree.

Similarly, 1 Pet 1:1-2 speaks of “elect exiles . . . according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood . . .” Election takes place in or by or through the sanctification effected by the Spirit. That is, a person becomes elect when the Holy Spirit sets him apart as belonging to God, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood (i.e., the forgiveness of sins), an act consequent on the giving of the Spirit, which again is itself consequent on faith in Christ.

No, election takes place through God's prior choice. Not only were they chosen ("elect exiles"), but they were chosen *by God*, and they were chosen *beforehand* (even Abasciano concedes that's what *proginosko* means).

The final state of grace of those mentioned above for us to consider is union with Christ, which is the most fundamental of them all, serving as the ground of each. As Eph 1:3 states

concerning the Church, God “has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing.” The phrase “in Christ” indicates union with Christ, a state entered into by faith, as mentioned above.

He's building on a false premise (see above).

More directly, Eph 1:4 then explicitly indicates the condition of election specifically with the phrase “in him [Christ]”: “he [God] chose us in him before the foundation of the world.” Just as God blessing us in Christ with every spiritual blessing indicates that God has blessed us because we are in Christ (Eph 1:3), so God choosing us in Christ indicates that God chose us because of our union with Christ (Eph 1:4). Ephesians 1:4, therefore, articulates conditional election, an election that is conditional on union with Christ. But the fact that union with Christ is conditional on faith in him makes election also conditional on faith in Christ.

No, it doesn't indicate that God chose us "because of our union with Christ." Rather, it either means God chose us in Christ as our federal head, or that God chose us to be saved through the work of Christ.

The next phrase in Eph 1:4—“before the foundation of the world” —brings us to a difference of opinion among Arminians on the nature of conditional election. The traditional view conceives of conditional election as individualistic, with God choosing separately before the foundation of the world each individual he foreknew would freely be in Christ by faith and persevere in that faith-union. The view seems to find striking support in two prominent passages that relate to election. Romans 8:29 says, “For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.” Now without question, God’s foreknowledge of human beings is total and would include prior knowledge of each person and whether

they would believe or not. And in Rom 8:29, divine foreknowledge is presented as the condition for predestination. Given all that we have said so far, many would find God's foreknowledge of the faith of believers to be the most natural element of his foreknowledge of them to be determinative for his decision to save them and predestine them to be conformed to the image of Christ. The other prominent passage providing support for election being conditioned on divine foreknowledge of human faith is 1 Pet 1:1-2, which speaks of elect status as being "according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood . . ." Here elect status is explicitly said to be based on God's foreknowledge. And again, the type of evidence we have been reviewing leads many to believe that it is especially foreknowledge of the faith of believers that is in view as that to which the divine election conforms.

Since this text does not specify the foreknowledge in view to be of people, another option compatible with both main Arminian views of election would take divine foreknowledge in 1 Pet 1:2 to be of God's own plan of salvation, meaning election is based on God's plan to save those who believe.

Even if we grant for the sake of argument that *proginosko* means prescience, there's nothing in these verses about foreseen *faith*. *What is foreseen?*

The non-traditional Arminian view of election is known as corporate election. It observes that the election of God's people in the Old Testament was a consequence of the choice of an individual who represented the group, the corporate head and representative. In other words, the group was elected in the corporate head, that is, as a consequence of its association with this corporate representative (Gen 15:18; 17:7-

10, 19; 21:12; 24:7; 25:23; 26:3-5; 28:13-15; Deut 4:37; 7:6-8; 10:15; Mal 1:2-3).

Of course, that's consistent with covenant theology in Calvinism.

Some have mistakenly taken Paul's appeal in Romans 9 to the discretionary election of the former covenant heads to be an indication that the election of God's people for salvation is unconditional. But the election of the covenant head is unique, entailing the election of all who are identified with him rather than that each individual member of the elect people was chosen as an individual to become part of the elect people in the same manner as the corporate head was chosen. In harmony with his great stress in Romans on salvation/justification being by faith in Christ, Paul appeals to God's discretionary election of Isaac and Jacob in order to defend God's right to make

election to be by faith in Christ rather than works or ancestry.

Here he seems to idiosyncratically classify Isaac and Jacob as "corporate heads." But God didn't make his covenant with Isaac and Jacob. God made his covenant with Abraham. Abraham was the federal head or covenant mediator. Isaac and Jacob beneficiaries. They are party to the covenant by virtue of Abraham. So they are individuals.

Mind you, I think Paul is using them as representatives to illustrate a principle: individual election.

Paul's olive tree metaphor in Rom 11:17-24 gives an excellent picture of the corporate election perspective. The olive tree represents the chosen people of God. But individuals get grafted into the elect people and participate in election and its blessings by faith or get cut off from God's chosen people and their blessings because of unbelief. The focus of election is the corporate people of God with individuals participating in election by means of their participation (through faith) in the elect group, which spans salvation history.

i) Calvinism is not opposed to corporate election. Rather, it's opposed to pitting corporate election against individual election.

ii) Keep in mind that [Rom 11:17-24](#) doesn't use elective language.

iii) Also keep in mind that we need to distinguish between elective words and the concept of election. The same word can be used to denote more than one concept. Although the Jews were the "Chosen People," that doesn't mean God chose to save every Jew. God's choice of Israel isn't "election" as that's defined in Reformed theology.

iv) In the history of Israel, you have a contrast between a faithful remnant and many nominal Jews.

v) There's the question of what the olive tree represents in Paul's metaphor. Who is Paul warning? For instance, Paul is addressing the church of Rome. A local church may be (usually is) a mixed multitude of true believers and nominal believers. Over time, the nominal believers can outnumber the true believers. Over time, a local church can lose its Christian identity. In church history, you also have apostate denominations. Some began well, but ended badly.

But this is consistent with the perseverance of the saints. God preserves elect individuals—not necessarily institutions.

While agreeing that God knows the future, including who will believe,

Yet Abasciano says humans have the freedom to do otherwise. But in that event, human choices are inherently unpredictable. How can God foresee an intrinsically unpredictable event? If the outcome could go either way, then it's unpredictable. If it's unpredictable, then it's unforeseeable.

the corporate election perspective would tend to understand the references to foreknowledge in Rom 8:29 and 1 Pet 1:1-2 as referring to a relational prior knowing that amounts to previously acknowledging or recognizing or embracing or choosing people as belonging to God (i.e., in covenant relationship/partnership). The Bible sometimes mentions this type of knowledge, such as when Jesus speaks of those who never truly submit to his lordship: "And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness'" (Matt 7:23; cf. Gen 18:19; Jer 1:5; Hos 13:4-5; Amos 3:2; 1 Cor 8:3). On this view, to be chosen according to foreknowledge would mean to be chosen because of the

prior election of Christ and the corporate people of God in him. “Those [plural] whom he foreknew” in Rom 8:29 would refer to the Church as a corporate body and their election in Christ as well as their identity as the legitimate continuation of the historic chosen covenant people of God, which individual believers share in by faith-union with Christ and membership in his people. Such a reference is akin to statements in Scripture spoken to Israel about God choosing them in the past (i.e., foreknowing them), an election that the contemporary generation being addressed shared in (e.g., Deut 4:37; 7:6-7; 10:15; 14:2; Isaiah 41:8-9; 44:1-2; Amos 3:2). In every generation, Israel could be said to have been chosen. The Church now shares in that election through Christ, the covenant head and mediator (Rom 11:17-24; Eph 2:11-22).

Here he's tacitly admitting that the traditional Calvinist understanding of *proginosko* is correct: it doesn't mean

prescience; rather, it means prior choice.

Abasciano has created a dilemma for himself. On the one hand, he wants to disprove individual election by substituting corporate election. On the other hand, he can only do that by forfeiting another traditional Arminian maneuver. Arminians typically evade the predestinarian force of passages like [Rom 8:29](#) by contending that *proginosko* means prescience, whereas Calvinists say it means prior choice. Abasciano is now conceding the Calvinist interpretation of *proginosko*. Even if (ex hypothesi) he's right about corporate election, he wins one point by losing another point. One step forward, one step back.

Similarly, to be chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world would refer to sharing in Christ's election that took place before the foundation of the world ([1 Pet 1:20](#)).

Scripture doesn't teach *Christ's* election.

Because Christ embodies and represents his people, it can be said that his people were chosen when he was just as it could be said that the nation of Israel was in the womb of Rebekah before its existence because Jacob was (Gen. 25:23) and that God loved/chose Israel by loving/choosing Jacob before the nation of Israel ever existed (Mal. 1:2-3) and

that Levi paid tithes to Melchizedek in Abraham before Levi existed (Heb. 7:9-10) and that the church died, rose, and was seated with Christ before the Church ever existed (Eph 2:5-6; cf. Col. 2:11-14; Rom 6:1-14) and that we (the Church) are seated in the heavenlies in Christ when we are not literally yet in Heaven but Christ is. Christ's election entails the election of those who are united to him, and so our election can be said to have taken place when his did, even before we were actually united to him. This is somewhat similar to how I, as an American, can say that we (America) won the Revolutionary War before I or any American alive today was ever born.

How can Christians be chosen "when" Christ was? Even if you accept the dubious claim that Christ himself is elect, he was chosen before the foundation of the world. Yet Abasciano thinks election is contingent on faith (e.g. "individuals become elect when they believe and remain elect only as long as they believe"). Therefore, the election of humans must be subsequent to their faith. Moreover, since believers live at different times, how can they all be

chosen when Christ is chosen? Abasciano's position is incoherent on its own terms.

The corporate view explains why only those who are actually God's people are called elect or similar appellations in Scripture and not those who do not belong to God but one day will. In the New Testament, only believers are identified as elect. As [Rom 8:9](#) states, "if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him." Similarly, [Rom 11:7-24](#) supports the corporate understanding of the elect as referring only to those who are actually in Christ by faith rather than also including certain unbelievers who have been chosen to believe from eternity. For in [Rom 11.7](#), "the rest" are not elect. But Paul believed that those from 'the rest' could yet believe, revealing that the elect is a dynamic term that allows for departure from and entry into the elect as portrayed in the passage's olive tree metaphor.

It's not *election* that's dynamic, but *hardening*. And that's up to *God*.

Since the election of the individual derives from the election of Christ and the corporate people of God, individuals

become elect when they believe and remain elect only as long as they believe. Hence, 2 Pet 1:10 urges believers to “be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure” (NIV) and the New Testament is filled with warnings to persevere in the faith to avoid forfeiting election/salvation (see “Security in Christ” below; for an introduction to corporate election with links to further resources, see here).

This assumes that "chosen" language in Scripture is always a technical term for election. But election is a specialized theological category. And you can't simply quote one author's usage to define another author's usage. For instance, God's choice of Israel doesn't mean every individual Jew is thereby secured.

Is God a tempter?

This is a sequel to a more detailed post:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2017/08/god-tempts-no-one.html>

1. [Jas 1:13](#) is an Arminian prooftext (I'm using "Arminian" as a synecdoche for freewill theism in general). One problem is that Scripture contains many examples of God "tempting" or "testing" individuals, so there's the question of how to harmonize [Jas 1:13](#) with other passages of Scripture that say the opposite. In this respect, the Arminian appeal to [Jas 1:13](#) is like the Catholic appeal to [Jas 2:24](#) to negate sola fide, as if [Jas 2:24](#) simply overrides the Pauline doctrine of justification, and there's no obligation to harmonize the two.

2. In commentaries, the discussion often centers on the best way to render the Greek or Hebrew word. Is it "test" or "tempt"? However, that's very superficial. The fundamental issue isn't semantic but psychological. It's not about the meaning of the word but the kind of situation God sometimes puts people in. Likewise, how God is said to mess with some people's minds. For instance:

2 He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you" ([Gen 22:2](#)).

you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams. For the Lord your God is

testing you, to know whether you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul ([Deut 13:3](#)).

21 I will no longer drive out before them any of the nations that Joshua left when he died, 22 in order to test Israel by them, whether they will take care to walk in the way of the Lord as their fathers did, or not.” 23 So the Lord left those nations, not driving them out quickly, and he did not give them into the hand of Joshua ([Judges 2:21-23](#)).

Therefore thus says the Lord: ‘Behold, I will lay before this people stumbling blocks against which they shall stumble; fathers and sons together, neighbor and friend shall perish’ ([Jer 6:21](#)).

30 But Sihon the king of Heshbon would not let us pass by him, for the Lord your God hardened his spirit and made his heart obstinate, that he might give him into your hand, as he is this day ([Deut 2:30](#)).

9 And if the prophet is deceived and speaks a word, I, the Lord, have deceived that prophet, and I will

stretch out my hand against him and will destroy him from the midst of my people Israel (Ezk 14:9).

3. Certainly these passages are prima facie consistent with Calvinism. Why think James has a different, or indeed, contrary understanding? I sometimes wonder how many Arminians have read the OT.

4. Then there's the question of how freewill theism is consistent with passages like these. An Arminian might say that while there's a sense in which God tempts/tests people, he doesn't do so in the unacceptable Calvinistic sense. He never tempts/tests them in a "causal" or "deterministic" sense. When he tempts/tests them, he leaves their libertarian freedom intact. They retain their ability to resist temptation. There are, however, some basic problems with that explanation:

i) The texts I cited (and that's just a sample) don't have those qualifications. So that's not an exegetical explanation. Rather, that's superimposed on the text.

ii) Not only do they lack those qualifications, but what some of them say is diametrically opposed to that. Take [Deut 2:20](#). In that passage, God does something to the agent to ensure a particular outcome. Sihon is not at liberty to act contrary to how God acted on him. That would defeat the aim of God's action. Same with Pharaoh ([Exod 4:21](#); [7:3](#)).

iii) Likewise, take the hapless false prophet ([Ezk 14:9](#)). If God has deceived him, what power can overrule God? Or [1 Kgs 22:19-23](#). Ahab is doomed.

God tempts no one

13 Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God," for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. 14 But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. 15 Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death (Jas 1:13-15).

Jas 1:13 is an Arminian prooftext. (I'm using "Arminian" as a loose synonym for freewill theism.) I've discussed this before. Now I'd like to approach it from a different angle.

1. Before exegeting the text, I wish to make some methodological observations. There are many scriptures which state or imply that in some sense, God tempts/tests people. And you don't have to be a Calvinist to see that. For instance, in his magisterial commentary on James, Dale Allison cites a long list of scriptures which state or imply the very thing that James seems to deny, viz. **Gen 22:1; Exod 7:3; 11:10; 16:4; 20:20; Deut 2:30; 13:4; 2 Sam 24:1; 1 Kgs 22:19-23; 2 Chron 34:24; Job 2:10; 5:18; 9:17; 10:8; 12:14-16; 42:11; Isa 45:7; 63:17; Jer 6:21; Lam 3:38; Ezk 3:20; 14:9; 20:25-26; Amos 3:6** (237; 237-38n148; n246n192). And this list could easily be extended.

Allison takes the position that "here one part of the canon is a odds with other parts" (246n192). I think that's the wrong solution, but it does illustrate the problem when freewill theists cherrypick prooftexts.

If we affirm the inerrancy of Scripture, we can't use [Jas 1:13](#) as a high card to trump other scriptures. Moreover, we can't simply use that as the filter to interpret other scriptures. Why not use the other scriptures as the filter to interpret [Jas 1:13](#)? It's not as if one particular scripture ipso facto functions as the hermeneutical standard of comparison, controlling our interpretation of other scriptures. If we affirm the inerrancy of Scripture, then we need an interpretation that's consistent with all related scriptures.

2. It's understandable that freewill theists deem [Jas 1:13](#) to be incompatible with Calvinism. But it's not as if James says predestination makes God a tempter. It's not as if James says meticulous providence makes God a tempter. That's something which freewill theists infer from [Jas 1:13](#).

[Jas 1:13](#) isn't like the Five Articles of Remonstance, which specifically target Calvinism. James isn't opposing his position to predestination or meticulous providence or divine hardening. At least that's not the stated point of contrast. It's understandable from their viewpoint why freewill theists deem [Jas 1:13](#) to be incompatible with Calvinism, but it's illicit to automatically impute their viewpoint to James.

3. Moreover, even if we grant, for argument's sake, that the Calvinist God is a tempter, this doesn't imply that the Arminian God or Molinist God or open theist God is not a tempter. To say "God tempts no one" is ambiguous. Does putting someone in a tempting situation make you a tempter? For instance, Joseph found himself in a tempting situation with Potiphar's wife. Combine that with a classic Arminian model of providence:

God's concurrence is his consent to and cooperation with creaturely decisions and actions. No creature could decide or act without God's concurring power. For someone to lift his or her hand requires God's concurrence; God loans, as it were the power sufficient to lift a hand, and without God's cooperation even such a trivial act would be impossible. R. Olson, Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities (IVP 2009), 117.

[Arminius] even went so far as to say that every human act, including sin, is impossible without God's cooperation. This is simply part of divine concurrence, and Arminius was not willing to regard God as a spectator (121).

For [Arminius] God is the first cause of whatever happens; even a sinful act cannot occur without God as its first cause, because creatures have no

ability to act without their Creator, who is their supreme cause for existence (122).

4. So what does [Jas 1:13](#) mean? What does James deny when he denies that God tempts anyone? In theory, it could mean James rejects predestinarian theology because he thinks that makes God complicit in evil. However, James doesn't actually say that. And even if a freewill theist takes that to be a logical implication of [Jas 1:13](#), it doesn't follow that James himself thought predestination, meticulous providence, or divine hardening had those entailments. Since he doesn't use those examples as his stated point of contrast, a freewill theist can't justifiably substitute those examples as the presumptive or implicit point of contrast.

5. Some commentators try to relieve the difficulty by driving a wedge between "testing", which is more objective, and "tempting", which is more subjective. God is said to "test", but not to "tempt". Yet that won't work:

i) For one thing, it's a false dichotomy. On the one hand, a temptation is a test of faith. On the other hand, to be tested is to be tempted to do the wrong thing.

ii) In addition, v14 clearly has a psychological thrust.

6. Some commentators qualify the character of the ordeal by saying God won't tempt someone to commit evil. But while it's possible that James has that unstated distinction in mind, that's not what he says, and it's hard to deduce that from what he actually says.

Moreover, that claim is overly broad, for there are prima facie examples in Scripture to the contrary.

7. There may, however, be an element of truth to (6) if the principle is more narrowly drawn. The general teaching of Scripture is that God tests his children, not to bring about their destruction, but to refine them.

8. The immediate and explicit point of contrast is supplied by the next verse. In theory, that could mean James thinks the temptation originates in the human agent. The psychology of the human agent is the ultimate source of what makes a situation tempting.

However, nothing in the statement requires that interpretation. And that interpretation is difficult to harmonize with so many other scriptures to the contrary.

9. Or it may simply mean that when a person gives in to temptation, he succumbs willingly rather than against his will. The experience wasn't coercive. He wasn't acting at gunpoint. Rather, he did it because he found it so appealing.

Indeed, James employs the extended metaphor of sexual temptation and resultant consequences because that's such a natural and accessible illustration. If someone commits sexual immorality, that's because the desire to resist—assuming there even was a desire to resist—is overpowered the heat of the moment, viz. **"All at once he follows her, as an ox goes to the slaughter, or as a stag is caught fast till an arrow pierces its liver; as a bird rushes into a snare; he does not know that it will cost him his life"** ([Prov 7:22-23](#)).

That's entirely consonant with the wording of the passage.
And that's entirely consonant with predestinarian theology.

A freewill theist might find that morally objectionable, but the exegetical question at issue is what the sentence means, and not extraneous assumptions a reader may bring to the passage. Exegesis isn't contingent on the ethical or philosophical bias of the reader.

The best interpretation is probably a combination of (7) and (9).

Divine temptation

The high Calvinist doctrine of God's sovereignty including evil as part of God's plan, purpose, and determining power blatantly contradicts Scripture passages that reveal "God is love" (1 Jn 4:9), takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked (Ezk 18:32), wants everyone to be saved (Ezk 18:32; 1 Tim 2:4; 2 Pet 3:9), and never tempts anyone (Jas 1:13). To be sure, Calvinists have clever but unconvincing explanations of these and numerous other passages of Scripture. R. Olson, Against Calvinism (Zondervan 2011), 99.

I myself have discussed all of his perfunctory prooftexts, so let's do something different. Take the following passage:

If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, 2 and the sign or wonder that he tells you comes to pass, and if he says, 'Let us go after other gods,' which you have not known, 'and let us serve them,' 3 you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams. For the Lord your God is testing you, to know whether you love the Lord your God with all

your heart and with all your soul. 4 You shall walk after the Lord your God and fear him and keep his commandments and obey his voice, and you shall serve him and hold fast to him. 5 But that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has taught rebellion against the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt and redeemed you out of the house of slavery, to make you leave the way in which the Lord your God commanded you to walk. So you shall purge the evil from your midst (Deut 13:1-5).

i) Isn't this a clearcut example of divine solicitation to sin? God, through the instrumentality of the false prophet, is "testing" the covenant community. Because, in this case, the false prophet is able to perform miracles or truly foretell the future, that tempts people to follow him. For his message is attested by the classic authenticating signs of a true prophet.

ii) And this isn't just any old sin. This is the sin of apostasy. One of the gravest sins. There is no sin worse than apostasy.

iii) The function of this test is to sift the covenant community. Some members will succumb to the temptation while others will remain faithful.

iv) What's the relationship between vv1-2 and v3? Well, one possible explanation is divine empowerment. The fact that a false prophet can work miracles or truly foretell the

future goes beyond normal human ability. So this naturally raises the question, how did he acquire this superhuman ability? V3 may be attributing his ability to divine empowerment.

Of course, this attribution doesn't exclude the possibility that he is possessed. God could dispatch an "evil spirit" to possess him (e.g. [1 Kgs 22:19-23](#)).

v) In any event, the text tells us that God lies behind the false prophet. The false prophet is a tool. God is using the false prophet to test the allegiance of his people. Some will pass the test while others will fail the test.

Through the false prophet, God is tempting his people to commit apostasy. To abandon the true God for false gods. Due to its miraculous attestation, this is very seductive. A powerful and, for some, persuasive inducement to deny the faith.

To be sure, God isn't tempting them to sin for the sake of sin. Rather, this is a refining process. It will purify Israel by burning off the dross.

Still, in the passage before us, it's unmistakably the case that false prophets are able to perform prodigies so that God may test the covenant community. That's the divine purpose which underlies this ordeal. Through the medium of the false prophet, God is inciting people to defect from the true faith. That's tempting them to commit evil. There's no way around it. That's right there in the text.

vi) Now at this point an Arminian like Olson might scream [Jas 1:13](#) in my ear. Haven't you read [Jas 1:13](#)? That's what's wrong with Calvinism. You blatantly contradict Scripture!

However, this is not in the first place a debate over the Calvinism. Rather, this is just a matter of what Scripture says. [Deut 13:1-5](#) means whatever it means. You don't have to be a Calvinist to interpret that passage the way I did. You only have to accept it on its own terms. Calvinism is not a necessary presupposition of my interpretation. Although I think this passage (and others like it) is broadly supportive of Calvinism, it doesn't require a Calvinistic grid to understand the passage the way I do. Indeed, the passage doesn't really require much exegesis. It pretty much speaks for itself. I'm just making a bit more explicit what is logically implicit in the passage.

vii) Moreover, there's no reason we should have to filter this passage through [Jas 1:13](#). We might just as well filter [Jas 1:13](#) through [Deut 13:1-5](#). It's not as if Scripture tells us that [Jas 1:13](#) supplies the interpretive grid through which other passages like [Deut 13:1-5](#) must pass. [Deut 13:1-5](#) is no less inspired than [Jas 1:13](#).

viii) And it's not as if [Deut 13:1-5](#) is a merely incidental passage of Scripture. To the contrary, along with [Deut 18:15-22](#), this is the paradigmatic passage concerning false prophecy. This is foundational for subsequent discussions of false prophecy in both the OT (e.g. [Jer 14:14](#); [23:9ff.](#); [29:8](#); [Ezk 13:6-9](#)) and the NT (e.g. [2 Thes 2:9-11](#); [1 Jn 4:1-4](#); [Rev 13:13-14](#); [16:14](#); [19:20](#)).

The Olivet Discourse contains a perfect illustration of the principle given in [Deut 13:1-5](#):

22 And if those days had not been cut short, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of

the elect those days will be cut short. 23 Then if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or 'There he is!' do not believe it. 24 For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. 25 See, I have told you beforehand. 26 So, if they say to you, 'Look, he is in the wilderness,' do not go out. If they say, 'Look, he is in the inner rooms,' do not believe it. 27 For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. 28 Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather.

29 "Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. 30 Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. 31 And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four

winds, from one end of heaven to the other ([Mt 24:22-31](#)).

Indeed, the very wording is probably modeled on Deut 13:

These false messiahs and false prophets will offer “signs and wonders,” a phrase that echoes OT tradition, especially Deut 13:1(2), which expressly warns of the false prophet who hopes to gain acceptance through signs. C. Evans, Mark 8:27-16:20 (Nelson 2001), 323.

Here we have false prophets and messianic pretenders who, through miraculous portents and prodigies, will lead astray a portion of the covenant community. In this case, the new covenant community. Yet God will preserve the elect.

Once again, God is winnowing the wheat from the chaff. An elect remnant will survive the ordeal.

Resisting God

A better translation of Neh 9:30 would be, “Many years you drew them and warned them by your Spirit through your prophets. Yet they would not give ear.” The text speaks of a resistible divine drawing that seeks to bring people to the Lord in repentance. Stephen also furnished a good example of the resistibility of grace when he said to his fellow Jews, “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did not your fathers persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it” (Acts 7:51-53). Luke 7:30 tells us that “the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected the purpose of God for themselves.” And Jesus, who spoke to people for the purpose of saving them (John 5:34), yet found that they refused to come to him to have life (John 5:40).

<http://evangelicalarminians.org/the-facts-of-salvation-a-summary-of-arminian-theology-the-biblical-doctrines-of-grace/>

I've already discussed Abasciano's misinterpretation of [Lk 7:30](#) and [Acts 7:51](#) here:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2014/03/the-facts-of-salvation.html>

Now I'd like to make a broader point. Abasciano overlooks a basic tenet of Calvinism. It might seem discordant with Calvinism to admit that men can ever resist God, but that's ambiguous. For there's a sense in which God can (and does) cause a person to resist him.

That's one function of divine hardening:

21 And the Lord said to Moses, “When you go back to Egypt, see that you do before Pharaoh all the miracles that I have put in your power. But I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go ([Exod 4:41](#)).

12 But the Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh, and he did not listen to them, as the Lord had spoken to Moses ([Exod 9:12](#)).

20 But the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he did not let the people of Israel go...27 But the Lord

hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he would not let them go ([Exod 10:20,27](#)).

10 Moses and Aaron did all these wonders before Pharaoh, and the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he did not let the people of Israel go out of his land ([Exod 11:10](#)).

37 Though he had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him, 38 so that the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

“Lord, who has believed what he heard from us, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?” 39 Therefore they could not believe. For again Isaiah said, 40 “He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart, lest they see with their eyes, and understand with their heart, and turn, and I would heal them.” ([Jn 12:37-40](#)).

Resisting God isn't antithetical to divine determinism, for God can determine or predestine a man to resist him. His very resistance to God is, itself, the effect of God's prior action.

"Resisting God" is ambiguous. It's shorthand. Resist God in what respect? Can a human resist God's will? God's plan? Calvinism says no.

Can a human resist God's word? God's command or prohibition? Calvinism says yes.

Not only is it possible for humans to resist God's word, but when they do so, their very resistance is part of God's plan. Their predestined resistance facilitates God's plan. Their resistance is instrumental in the realization of God's design.

Predestination is irresistible, but resistance (of a certain kind) can be, and sometimes is, the end-result of predestination.

In the TULIP acronym, "irresistible" has specific reference to monergistic regeneration. The unregenerate are passive in regeneration. Unable to cooperate in their regeneration.

Can a Christian lose salvation?

I was watching a debate between Catholic apologist Trent Horn and Reformed Baptist apologist James White on whether a Christian can lose salvation:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NsSwRjXRR9k&t=7552s>

It was a pretty high level debate by two smart, well-prepared opponents. Horn has a chapter the same issue in his **THE CASE FOR CATHOLICISM** (Ignatius 2017), chap 12.

Although I wrote a partial review of his book, I ignored the chapter on eternal security because it's such well-trodden ground. However, after watching the debate, I've decided to comment on his case. My remarks will be based on his book, supplemented by the debate.

I don't know why Trent singles out one of the "five points of Calvinism" to critique? Why not all? If not all, why just one? But perhaps this is a special interest of his.

Before discussing some specific prooftexts, I'll comment on some general methodological problems with Horn's presentation:

- 1.** Trent accuses Calvinists of beginning with their theology and discounting certain interpretations in advance because they conflict with Reformed theology. They are reading their theology into the text. A problem with that allegation is duplicity. Every theological system has some problem passages. Passages that apparently conflict with the theological system. Every theological system tries to harmonize the problem passages with the the theological

system. The question is whether that's just a prima facie point of tension, for which there's a reasonable explanation, or whether the passages are intractable. Assuming the inerrancy of Scripture, the goal is to have a theological system with the greatest explanatory power. A theological system that integrates the most data.

Catholicism is no exception. At one point in the debate he appealed to the Catechism of the Catholic Church to prooftext predestination. Likewise, he rejects what [Heb 6:4-6](#) says about how an apostate can't be restored because that runs counter to Catholic theology. By the same token, Tridentine theology commits him to the gift of perseverance in some cases.

2. Trent quotes Protestant scholars who agree with him as if there's something significant about the fact that there are Protestant Bible scholars who reject the perseverance of the saints. But it goes without saying that there are Bible scholars who subscribe to freewill theism. The existence of that viewpoint within Protestant tradition is hardly inconsistent with Calvinism.

3. From what I can tell, his basic objection is that Calvinism is either internally inconsistent or inconsistent with his prooftexts. Problem is, he seems to lack a clear understanding of what the Reformed position represents.

In Calvinism there's a distinction between what I'll call nominal believers and regenerate believers. Incidentally, this has analogies in other theological traditions.

It doesn't take saving grace for someone to believe the Bible. They can believe the Bible for the same reason they believe a story on the news, or believe what their parents or

peer group tells them. Belief in Scripture, like belief generally, can be a result of social conditioning. So this isn't unique to Calvinism. It doesn't take saving grace to believe most of the things we believe. There are natural belief-forming mechanisms and psychological predispositions that religious as well as secular claims trigger.

From a Reformed standpoint, the fact that a professing Christian loses his faith doesn't mean he lost his salvation inasmuch as his faith was never the product of saving grace, but a naturally produced belief like other naturally produced beliefs. So many of Trent's prooftexts miss the point. His prooftexts are entirely consistent with the Reformed position. Trent points to examples of "Christians" who lose their faith or commit apostasy, but Calvinism doesn't deny that.

Trent fails to distinguish between nominal and regenerate believers or two different kinds of professing Christians. Trent says if faith is a gift from God, how did apostates ever believe unless they were true believers in the first place. But in Calvinism, bare belief isn't the same thing as saving faith. Saving faith is a gift from God—not bare belief.

Now Trent may reject that distinction. He might think that's ad hoc. But if his objection is that certain verses are inconsistent with Calvinism, then he needs to show that they are inconsistent with Calvinism on its own grounds.

He can try to show that the distinction between nominal/generate believers is false, but that's a different argument. That's not an argument about consistency but truth.

I'd add that in Calvinism, a regenerate Christian can undergo a crisis of faith. In Calvinism, it's not faith that

saves us but grace that saves us. Faith is a result of grace.

4. Trent commits some fallacies in semantics, hermeneutics, and theological method. For instance, when you interpret a Bible writer, you should use his own writings as the primary frame of reference. You should interpret each writer on his own terms. His own usage. The flow of argument. Trent, however, has a bad habit of using one Bible writer to interpret or explain away another Bible writer. That's bad hermeneutics and bad theological method.

5. Trent appeals to passages where final salvation is contingent on perseverance in faith and fidelity. Once again, this fails to grasp the nature of the opposing position. Calvinism doesn't deny that salvation has a conditional or cooperative aspect. The question, rather, is whether that hinges on the independent contribution of the Christian. Or is his faith and fidelity the inevitable effect of God's saving grace?

6. In the debate, Trent bifurcated God's will by stating that God can will or desire things which don't happen. For instance, he indicated that God can't simultaneously will sin and forbid sin.

But that's confused. Is he expressing his own position or is he alleging that Calvinism is inconsistent? If the latter, his understanding is simplistic. In Calvinism, God does will what he forbids. God doesn't will sin for the sake of sin, but he wills sin as a necessary condition for second-order goods. Trent may disagree with that, but if so, his disagreement is irrelevant if the question at issue is not whether Calvinism is right but whether it's consistent.

BTW, that's not distinctive to Calvinism. There are other predestinarian traditions like Augustinianism and classical Thomism, both of which were at one time honored traditions in Roman Catholicism.

7. Because he's a Catholic apologist, unlike the average freewill theist, his outlook commits himself to the Tridentine position that God grants the gift of perseverance to those who are destined to spend eternity with God (as he puts it). That, however, generates tensions in his position:

i) That means there are two classes of Christians: those who've been granted the gift of perseverance and those who haven't. But isn't that analogous to the Reformed distinction that Trent opposes?

ii) In addition, what does the gift of perseverance confer? Presumably, it ensures that the recipient will die in a state of grace. The reason some Catholics persevere while others don't is because some were granted the gift of perseverance while others were not. It causes them to persevere. If it didn't have that causal or determinate effect, it wouldn't explain the divergent outcomes.

But that means those with the gift of perseverance cannot fail to persevere. It is impossible for them to commit final apostasy. But that means Trent can't infer from warning passages and apostasy passages that salvation is amissable. He must interpret the same passages the same way Calvinists do. He himself must fall back on "impossible hypotheticals".

8. Trent says predestination means God knows what will happen and sovereignly incorporates that into his plan of salvation. He knows those who will initially accept his grace

and then later reject to to their own peril, and his plan takes that into consideration.

But if predestination is based on foreknowledge, what does predestination do? What does it add to the foreseen outcome? If what God foresees is independent of predestination, what's the difference between an outcome that was or wasn't predestined? On Trent's view, doesn't predestination at most rubber-stamp what God foresaw apart from predestination? It doesn't seem to cause or ensure a particular outcome.

9. For freewill theists, when Calvinists say an apostate was never a true believer in the first place, that may sound like the No True Scotsman fallacy. However, that's not an ad hoc explanation. Rather, it's based on the principle that salvation is by grace alone. Now, you can reject sola gratia, but if you accept sola gratia, then to say an apostate was never a true believer in the first place is an implication of that principle.

10. There's a larger context to the debate. According to Catholics like Trent, why did God save the prospective apostate in the first place if he knew they were going to forfeit salvation? Why does God revoke salvation or justification? Does God change his mind?

11. Trent compares apostasy to losing or giving away a Christmas present. But that's a flawed analogy. A Christmas present is external to the recipient. By contrast, saving grace has a psychologically transformative dimension. The mind doesn't accept or reject the grace of faith, as if the mind is one thing while the grace of faith is exterior. These aren't separable. Rather, the grace of faith (or regeneration) operates on the mind. It creates a new predisposition. Trent may repudiate that conception, but if he's arguing against

Calvinism, his comparison fails to engage the Reformed position.

He says parents can disown (grown) children. Children can abandon parents. True, but that reflects the limitations of the human analogy. Humans are permanently dependent on God in a way that's not the case for kids of human parents.

12. Trent says if salvation can't be lost, these warnings are nonsensical. They can't keep the reprobate out of hell and they aren't necessary to get someone to heaven because you don't need warnings.

i) That's a classic blunder by failing to distinguish between predestination and fatalism. Predestination isn't *que sera sera* fatalism. In predestination, the end is secured by particular means. Not just any pathway will get you to the desired destination.

ii) Moreover, his objection conflicts with his admission, based on Tridentine theology, that God does grant persevering grace to some believers.

Now let's turn to how he handles some prooftexts for or against his position:

13. Mt 23:37

Trent uses this as a wedge tactic to relativize the promises in Jn 6, 10, 17. God's will isn't necessarily irresistible. God's will can be frustrated by human freewill. So goes the argument.

i) It's hermeneutically illicit to cite a passage in Matthew to override a passage in John.

ii) [Mt 23:37](#) concerns the attitude of God Incarnate. That's psychologically complex. Some things are true of the Son qua Incarnate that aren't true of the Son qua Son.

iii) Jesus had a human side. An emotional bond with the Jewish people. He was born to a Jewish woman. Had Jewish friends and relatives.

At a human level there will be an element of partiality in Christ's attitude towards the Jewish people. Ironically, that puts this text in tension with freewill theism, which rejects divine favoritism.

iv) Suppose we grant, for argument's sake, that God has some unrequited desires. All things being equal, God wishes he could save Palestinian Jews from the catastrophic Jewish wars. But that conflicts with the atonement. Jews in Jerusalem play an instrumental role in the crucifixion. God's plan requires 1C Palestinian Jews in general to reject the messiah.

If so, the tension isn't between what God wants and a human veto, but between two impossible divine desires. God can spare the Jews from judgment or God can use them to engineer the atonement but he can't do both. If the atonement/crucifixion requires many Jews to repudiate the messiah, then God can't simultaneously spare them from the consequences of their actions. Those are two divergent world histories. They can't be combined in the same timeline.

v) Finally, this is irrelevant to the passages in John. Those aren't about divine wishes but divine promises and predictions.

14. [Jn 6:37-40,44](#)

Trent says the use of the present tense verb implies continuous action. On that view, the fact that someone initially believes in Jesus doesn't mean they can't stop believing at a later date.

i) One issue is Trent's grasp of verbal aspect. This is a contested issue in contemporary Greek grammar. An objection to traditional Greek grammars was imposing an English tense system onto a language with a different perspective. That in Greek, verbal aspect doesn't denote the time of the action but the viewpoint of the speaker. Cf. **S. PORTER, J. REED, & M. O'DONNELL, FUNDAMENTALS OF NEW TESTAMENT GREEK (EERDMANS 2010)**, 84, 110.

Another example is the use of the historic present, which is common in John's Gospel. But it's nonsensical to say the historic present denotes continuous action. So there's no presumption that the "present tense" implies continuous action. In fact, it's been argued that it can denote a timeless state or relation. Depends on the context.

ii) What's the context of [Jn 6:37ff.](#)? It's about individuals converting to Christianity. But what's the timeframe? At the time Jesus spoke, was that era a thing of the past? Something ongoing? Something future?

I think the passages use the present tense because that's more open-ended. People come to Jesus at different times in history. Coming is present for the convert, but the phenomenon of Christian conversion is past, present, and future.

iii) Trent fails to grasp the nature of 6:37b. But as one commentator explains:

Formally it is a "litotes", a figure of speech in which something is affirmed by negating its contrary..."whoever comes to me I will certainly keep in, preserve..."I will never drive away" therefore means "I will certainly keep in". D. A. Carson, The Gospel According to John (Eerdmans 1991), 290.

15. Jn 10:27-28

Trent says that in the Gospels, sheep stray. But that fails to interpret John's Gospel on its own terms. As one commentator explains:

For emphasis, Jesus repeats himself: "but as for you, you do not believe," adding the reason for their unbelief, "because you do not belong to my sheep" (v26)... One might have expected rather, "You do not belong to my sheep because you do not believe"... [but] those who do not "believe" prove that they are not Jesus'

sheep. Behind it is the strong accent on election: those who "believe" do so because they are already Jesus' sheep, his gift from the Father. J. R.

Michaels, The Gospel of John (Eerdmans 2010), 598.

"Lost" sheep are not "found" in John's Gospel (as, for example, in [Lk 15:6](#)). Rather, Jesus' mission is to make sure his sheep "will never be lost, and no one will seize them out of my hand" ([Jn 10:29](#)). He does not come "to seek and to save that which is lost" ([Lk 19:10](#)), but to keep people from ever being "lost". In this Gospel a person is not first lost and then saved (as in [Lk 15:24](#)), but either lost or saved. Both are final, not temporary conditions. Ibid. 380.

16. [Jn 15:2,6](#)

He claims the apostates had to be in Jesus (in the vine) before they defected from the faith.

i) One danger is an overly individualistic interpretation. But the vine imagery is a common metaphor for Israel ([Ps 80](#); [Isa 5](#); [27](#); [Jer 2](#); [Ezk 15](#); [17](#); [19](#)). Cf. E. Klink, *John* (Zondervan 2016), 650-52.

So the emphasis may lie on corporate apostasy. That includes some individuals, but we need to guard against the composition/division fallacy.

ii) Then there's the question of what the vine/branch metaphor corresponds to in real life. In John's Gospel we

have examples of individuals who temporarily believe in Jesus or temporarily follow him (e.g. Judas; 6:66ff. 8:31ff.). So that may be the kind of thing Jesus has in mind.

But that's consistent with Reformed theology. What Reformed theology denies is not that someone can lose their faith but lose their salvation. Not all faith is saving faith.

17. Jn 17:12

He cites this passage to prove that promises about Jesus keeping the chosen notwithstanding, Jesus can and did lose someone the Father entrusted to him or Jesus chose.

But Judas is not an exception. Jesus didn't choose Judas for the same reason he chose the Eleven. Even before he chose him, Jesus knew that Judas would betray him.

That's why Jesus chose him. Judas had an instrumental role to play in the atonement (Jn 6:64,70-71; 13:10-11,18,21-22).

Judas was excluded from rather than included in the sphere of soteriological election and protection. Christ's ability to keep everyone the Father entrusted to him didn't break down in the case of Judas; rather, Judas always had a different function and destiny. Cf. **D. A. CARSON, THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JOHN (EERDMANS 1991), 291-2; 563-4.**

18. Rom 8:28-30

Trent says God predestined those he foreknew would cooperate with his grace. To say *proginosko* means prior choice makes the passage redundant: those he predestined he also predestined.

i) You have to wonder what Reformed commentators on Romans he bothered to read. It's not redundant to give both words a deterministic force; rather, "predestination" in v29 states the goal of prior choice in v29. The first claim says the choice was up to God while the second claim spells out the objective.

ii) In addition, Paul says the same group is called, chosen beforehand, predestined, justified, and glorified. There are no deserters.

19. Rom 8:28-39

Trent says that sin is missing from the list. God will protect us from other things but sin may separate us from the love of God.

That, however, drives an artificial wedge between psychological and external inducements to apostasy. Adversity, suffering, persecution, deprivation, demons, torture, and fear of martyrdom motivate some professing Christians to lose their faith or commit apostasy. And Trent believes that at least some of the apostates were regenerate, justified, sanctified believers. So his interpretation makes this a broken promise.

20. Rom 11:22

He cites this to show that Christians can lose their salvation. But one problem with his appeal is that [Rom 11:22](#) has a corporate context. Collective judgment. Although corporate entities have an individual dimension, inasmuch as they are constituted by individuals, it commits a composition fallacy to infer that whatever is true of the whole is necessarily true of the part, or vice versa. The Babylonian Exile was an

example of collective judgment, yet that included a righteous remnant.

21. Gal 5:4

Trent says you can't fall from a state of grace if you never had it to begin with. In a sense I agree with him, but the question is what "grace" denotes in this verse. Does it mean saving grace? In the larger context of Galatians, I think it's a synonym or shorthand for the Gospel—in contrast to the false gospel of the Judaizers (Gal 1-2). Some of the Galatians are losing their grip on the the Gospel means: justification by faith alone through salvation by grace alone. Their doctrinal understanding has become muddled by false teachers.

22. 1 Tim 2:12-13

He cites this to prove that Christians can forsake their salvation. The threat is not an impossible hypothetical.

i) But this trades on the ambiguity of "Christian" or "believer". It's not inconsistent with Reformed theology that a professing believer can become an infidel.

ii) The passage is ambiguous about what it means for God to remain faithful in that situation. It may mean that God will restore errant believers. Cf. P. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus* (Eerdmans 2006), 510-14 (esp. p514).

23. Heb 6 & 10

He asks how people who were never true believers can be penitent, sanctified, or have the Holy Spirit.

i) The author of Hebrews doesn't use "sanctification" in the sense of inner renewal but cultic holiness. While the experience of the prospective apostates falls short of saving grace, their participation in the life and fellowship of the Christian community puts them in a position of aggravated guilt if they turn their back on those privileges.

ii) And when the author talks about their spiritual experience, that has reference to Scripture. People encounter the Spirit when they encounter the Bible because the Spirit authored the Bible. The apostates don't experience the Spirit in terms of inner renewal. Those aren't the author's theological categories.

iii) More generally, the warning/apostasy passages are worded to evoke the experience of the wilderness generation:

https://faculty.gordon.edu/hu/bi/ted_hildebrandt/otesources/04-numbers/text/articles/mathewson-heb6ot-wtj.htm

It's not the language of systematic theology.

iv) As it stands, the text is a double-edged sword in the hands of the Catholic apologist because, contrary to Catholic theology, it says an apostate cannot be restored. Trent tailors it to fit Catholic theology by asserting that it's hyperbolic when it denies the possibility that an apostate can be restored. How convenient—and arbitrary. His proof-text is hyperbolic when it falsifies Catholic theology but straightforward when (on his interpretation) it falsifies Calvinism.

24. 1 Jn 2:19

i) It's true that [1 Jn 2:19](#) doesn't take the form of a universal statement, but it does establish a principle.

ii) He says the passage doesn't state that the apostates were never Christian in the first place. They may originally have been devout Christians.

But that doesn't work. [1 Jn 2:19](#) is explaining why they later shunned the fellowship. To say they were originally true believers fails to answer that question.

Although the heretical schismatics at one time shared in the fellowship of the Christianity community, something deeper was always missing, and their departure exposes that underlying deficiency. That interpretation explains their departure.

All of what?

Arminians often ridicule Calvin's interpretation of [1 Tim 2:4](#), where he says Paul is not talking about every individual but representative individuals. Here's another example:

Comment on 1 Timothy 2:4. Augustine, in his writings on predestination, decided that the word "all" in this really didn't mean "all" but rather "all the elect." ... The theology of salvation becomes much more messy when we take the Bible as it stands, without imposing our pet theories on it...God really does want all people to be saved, not just the elect.

<https://billdembski.com/theology-and-religion/the-paradoxes-of-hell/>

Now, I happen to prefer the interpretation offered by scholars like Schreiner and Towner:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2014/06/arminian-prooftexts.html>

So I won't be defending the interpretation offered by Calvin or Augustine. But since the proper force of "all" is a perennial issue in exegetical debates between Calvinists and freewill theists, I'll briefly discuss this issue.

1. I'm picking on Dembski because he's highly intelligent. He's not a village Arminian. It's striking that he regards his interpretation as self-evident. Notice that he doesn't even bother to say what he thinks "all" means. He simply uses the word, as if that's self-explanatory.

2. In a philosophically rigorous sense, I think "all" means "for all x" or "for all of x". Take Paul's statement:

For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive (1 Cor 15:22).

If you're a universalist, you regard those two groups as coextensive. But if you're not a universalist, you take it to mean that all who are in Adam die while all who are in Christ will be rejuvenated. Despite the parallel, the two groups are not coextensive. Rather, it's all of x within each domain: the domain of Adam or the domain of Christ. Every son of Adam will die while every Christian will be rejuvenated.

Keep in mind, too, the parallelism is a rhetorical device, so we need to guard against treating that mechanically.

3. It's ironic to compare this with what he says about the scope of Noah's flood:

A face-value reading of these chapters [Gen 4-11] requires, among other things, acceptance of the following highly dubious claims...How, then, to interpret [Gen 4:11](#)?...Consider that scriptural claims to universality are often hyperbolic or eschatological, and thus not fully realized in the present. For instance, Paul in [Rom 10:18](#) describes "there sound" (i.e., the preaching of the gospel) as having gone "into all the

earth, and their words unto the ends of the world". So far as we know, the preaching of the gospel in Paul's day did not extend beyond the Mediterranean basin, the Middle East, and perhaps India. It certainly did not extend to the New World. W. Dembski, *The End of Christianity: Finding a Good God in an Evil World* (B&H2009), 170-71.

On that issue, he isn't taking the Bible "as it stands". He rejects the face-value impression of universality when words like "all" are applied to the scale of the Flood. He's conceding that in Scripture, universal quantifiers are sometimes hyperbolic or generalities rather than exceptionless claims.

4. Finally, although Calvin's interpretation isn't my preferred interpretation, there's nothing outlandish about his distinction. When Paul enjoins Christians to pray for "all people, for kings and all who are in high positions" ([1 Tim 2:1-2](#)), does that mean 1C Christians have a duty to pray for Sargon, Nebuchadnezzar, Ramesses II, Charlemagne, Genghis Khan, Henry the VIII, Louis XIV, Philip II, Montezuma II, and Suleiman the Magnificent? Are they obligated to pray for dead kings or future kings they never heard of? Or does the implied range of reference concern contemporary rulers in the Roman Empire?

Is Calvinism tautologous?

I'd like to make a few brief comments on Brian Abasciano's post:

<http://evangelicalarminians.org/brian-abasciano-whoever-reads-john-316-can-know-that-whoever-is-really-there/>

- 1.** My own position, which is documented by Greek lexicographers, is that, especially in Johannine usage, kosmos has an ethical connotation, denoting the hostile world-order, alienated from God. So it doesn't necessarily mean "everybody", and there are many verses where it can't mean "everybody".
- 2.** By the same token, kosmos doesn't have a default meaning of "everybody". Rather, the word means more than one thing, and the sense is context-dependent.
- 3.** There's a lot more to the argument of Anderson, Bignon, and Gibson than how to render *pas ho pisteuon*. Is Abasciano trying to misleading Arminians by banking on the fact that most of them will blindly accept his summary of the argument rather than consulting the original presentations by Bignon, Gibson, and Anderson?
- 4.** One issue is a stock distinction between sense and reference. For instance, "Peter"
 - i)** *means* rocky
 - ii)** *refers* to Simon bar-Jonah

Sense and reference are separable, for even if "Peter" always has one and the same meaning, it doesn't always have one and the same referent. Millions of men have the name Peter—not to mention fictional characters by that name. That doesn't make them reincarnations of Simon bar-Jonah. The same word can have a single intension but multiple extensions.

5. Hence, it's quite possible for komos to refer to the elect even though it doesn't mean the elect. That's not some ad hoc Calvinistic distinction, but an elementary distinction in lexical semantics.

6. To my knowledge, Mounce and Wallace aren't considered cutting edge. There are more up-to-date Greek grammars (e.g. Stanley Porter).

Does God take pleasure in the death of sinners?

Here's a popular Arminian prooftext:

Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, declares the Lord God, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live? (Ezk 18:23; cf. 33:11).

But for some odd reason, this is not a popular Arminian prooftext:

And as Yahweh took delight in doing you good and multiplying you, so the Lord will take delight in bringing ruin upon you and destroying you. And you shall be plucked off the land that you are entering to take possession of it (Deut 28:63).

One commentator says:

The construction of v63 signals a new and shocking dimension in this litany of horror...Moses begins by speaking shockingly of a change in Yahweh's disposition toward his people. Where previously Yahweh had delighted in

causing Israel to flourish, now he will delight in their destruction. This notion is troubling to modern readers, but read within the ancient conceptional environment, it contrasts sharply with the notions of Israel's neighbors. Where others attributed such calamities to demonic forces and hostile deities, Yahwism refuses to take the easy way out. These statements reflect the other side of Yahweh's passion: When his people trample underfoot his grace, his passions will be ignited against them. D. Block, Deuteronomy (Zondervan 2012), 660-61.

For his part, Currid says it may be "hyperbolic" to highlight the seriousness of the infidelity (449), while McConville says the verse is a "biting rhetorical twist" (408). The basic point is that we need to be consistent. If we interpret [Ezk 18:23](#) literally, then we need to interpret [Deut 28:63](#) literally. If, on the other hand, we interpret [Deut 28:63](#) anthropomorphically, then we need to interpret [Ezk 18:23](#) anthropomorphically.

Likewise, I don't see Arminians brandishing this text:

25 Moreover, I gave them statutes that were not good and rules by which they could not have life, 26 and I defiled them through their very gifts in their offering up all their firstborn, that I might devastate them. I did it that they might know that I am the Lord (Ezk 20:25-26).

As Christopher Wright explains in his commentary, the statement is sarcastic. That, however, should warn us about automatically taking statements in Ezekiel at face value. We need to make allowance for his rhetorical techniques, including perlocutionary register.

Woe to you, Chorazin!

21 Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. 22 But I tell you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you. 23 And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You will be brought down to Hades. For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day (Mt 11:21-23; cf. Lk 10:13; 11:29-32).

Some Molinists say this passage is at variance with Calvinism.

i) If we take the passage to mean that miracles alone are the differential factor, then there's a sense in which that's inconsistent with Calvinism. But in objection to Calvinism, that either proves too much or too little, for it's equally inconsistent with Thomism, Lutheranism, Congruism, Evangelical Arminianism, &c.

The passage itself is silent on the necessity (much less sufficiency) of grace. Taken without qualification, the passage is consistent to Pelagianism or rationalism, according to which faith is merely a conjunction of unaided reason and evidence. There's no need for prevenient grace or sufficient grace. The passage is silent on resistible or irresistible grace alike.

Likewise, it says nothing about libertarian freewill. Keep in mind that Pelagianism and rationalism are consistent with determinism (e.g. John Locke).

Consider, too, that Molinism is a theory of divine providence. It has no distinctive or essential soteriology. Because Molinism was originally a Jesuit innovation, it had to comport with the state of Catholic dogma at the time, but that's incidental to the unique character of Molinism.

ii) In Calvinism, sola gratia doesn't mean faith exists apart from evidence. The presence or absence of suitable evidence can be a differential factor in faith or disbelief. As one Reformed theologian notes:

Faith is the gift of God; but it does not in the least follow that the faith that God gives is an irrational faith, that is, a faith without grounds in right reason. It is beyond all question only the prepared heart that can fitly respond to the "reasons": but how can even a prepared heart respond, when there are no "reasons" to draw out its action? One might as well say that photography is independent of light because no light can make an impression unless the plate is prepared to receive it. The Holy Spirit does not work a blind, an ungrounded faith in the heart. What is supplied by his creative energy in working faith is not a ready-made faith, rooted in nothing and clinging without reason to its object;

nor yet new grounds of belief in the object presented; but just a new ability of the heart to respond to the grounds of faith, sufficient in themselves, already present to the understanding. Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield (P&R 1980), 2:98-99.

If miracles are necessary evidence for some people to come to faith, and God grants that evidence, then miracles can a part of saving grace. God's gracious provision for the lost. In a sense, grace is whatever God does to save sinners.

iii) That doesn't mean evidence alone is adequate, apart from a receptive mind. The very next verse refers to the discriminating nature of saving grace ("**I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children.**") So the preceding passage was never meant to stand alone, in isolation to other differential factors.

iv) Moreover, the passage itself says Tyre and Sidon were denied the opportunity afforded Christ's contemporaries. So God doesn't give everyone the same chance, pace Arminianism, even when, according to their proof-text, the ancient pagans would have responded favorably—given a chance.

It's not just that, according to their proof-text, God didn't even give them an opportunity. It's worse than that! God denied them the opportunity even though he knew that if

they had that opportunity, their favorable response was assured. He could have saved them but he didn't.

Yet Arminians routinely say, in contrast to Calvinism, that God does everything he can to save sinners. He wants everyone to be saved. He does whatever he can, consistent with their libertarian freedom, to make that possible.

But in this case, it's more than a possibility—it's a certainty! According to the Arminian/Molinist interpretation of this text, God was able to save them, without coercion. Had he provided the same kind of miraculous evidence, they'd repent. They'd be heavenbound.

Far from posing a dilemma for Calvinism, this poses a dilemma for the Molinist. They can't resort to the blocking maneuver of infeasible worlds, for by their own admission, this is a feasible counterfactual scenario.

But what, then, becomes of God's "omnibenevolence"? What becomes of divine love as God acting in the best interests of everyone?

v) Jesus is speaking in generalities. After all, some of his own disciples were recruited from the condemned cities. Bethsaida was the hometown of Philip, Peter, and Andrew ([Jn 1:44](#)). And they answered the call when they were residing in Capernaum ([Mt 4:13,18](#); [8:5,14](#)).

Is God too pure to look on evil?

The Bible is very clear that God has nothing to do with evil. There is “no darkness” in God (1 Jn 1:5). Far from intentionally bringing about evil, God’s “eyes are too pure to look on evil” (Hab. 1:13). All evil, therefore, must be ultimately traced back to decisions made by free agents other than God. Some of these agents are human. Some of these agents are angelic. Either way, evil originates in their willing, not God’s.

<http://reknew.org/2014/05/romans-828-what-does-it-mean/>

It's striking to see how badly Gregory Boyd quotes [Hab 1:13](#) out of context. Let's begin by quoting a larger sample of the passage in question:

3 Why do you make me see iniquity, and why do you idly look at wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise.

**12 Are you not from everlasting,
O Lord my God, my Holy One?**

We shall not die.

**O Lord, you have ordained them as a judgment,
and you, O Rock, have established them for
reproof.**

**13 You who are of purer eyes than to see evil
and cannot look at wrong,
why do you idly look at traitors
and remain silent when the wicked swallows up
the man more righteous than he? (1:3,12-13, ESV)**

Here's how Richard Patterson renders the Hebrew in his commentary:

**Why do you make me look at iniquity while You
behold oppression?**

**O Lord, You have appointed them to execute
judgment; O Rock, You have established them to
reprove. Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; You
cannot behold oppression. Why do You behold the
treacherous and keep silent when the wicked
swallow up those more righteous than
themselves (pp129,143).**

And here's how F. F. Bruce renders the Hebrew in his commentary:

You have appointed them for judgment, O Lord; you have established them for punishment, my Rock. You are too pure of eyes to behold wrongdoing, you cannot look on evil; why do you look on treacherous people and remain silent when the wicked swallows up one more righteous than himself? (p852).

i) Contrary to Boyd's denial, it's very clear from Habakkuk that God does have something to do with evil. He is behind the Babylonian resurgence. He uses them as executors of divine judgment against wayward Israel. As Bruce observes, commenting on v12:

The prophet goes on to acknowledge Yahweh's sovereignty over the nations; he ordains or overrules their actions for the furtherance of his purpose in the world. The Chaldean invaders have indeed been raised up by him for the punishment of the ungodly—this the prophet accepts without question (p853).

ii) Habakkuk makes formally contradictory claims about God. He says God both does and does not "look on" evil. So he resorts to paradoxical formulations.

There's a sense in which God does look on evil, and another sense in which God does not. A double entendre. Presumably, Habakkuk means God doesn't look on evil with favor or approval.

iii) Yet God is using evil to punish evil. Poetic justice. Indeed, the Babylonians are even worse than apostate Israel.

Habakkuk senses a tension between the means and the ends. God goes on to explain that having punished apostate Israel by the Babylonian scourge, God will punish Babylon for its own iniquity.

Boyd's description conjures up the image of a king who is pure because he lives within a walled city, surrounded by beauty. There's no crime within the walled city. No moral ugliness.

But outside the walled city is physical and moral squalor. Utopian conditions inside the walls. Dystopian conditions outside the walls.

The king retains his stainless purity because he never leaves the royal city to see the rest of his kingdom. The royal city is walled off from the evil outside the walls, so the king never sees it. He retains his innocence by averting his eyes. By shielding his gaze from the sight of evil. The king can't bear the sight of evil, so he looks away.

There are freewill theists like Boyd who act as if God would be morally tarnished if he even beheld evil. Like some Christians who defined holiness by never watching an R-rated movie. Of course, that's not a position which Boyd can consistently maintain.

BW3 on Romans

In this post I'm going to evaluate BW3's commentary on Romans with special reference to the predestinarian parts. **PAUL'S LETTER TO THE ROMANS: A SOCIO-RHETORICAL COMMENTARY (EERDMANS 2004).**

By way of preliminary observations, he seems unaware of Schreiner's commentary on Romans. Given how once of his stated aims is to counter the Reformed exegesis of Romans, that's a damaging omission, inasmuch as Schreiner's commentary is currently the standard Calvinist commentary on Romans.

He still uses the 1979, second edition of BAGD, instead of the 2000, third edition.

Hous, "whom," at the beginning of v. 29 must refer back to "those who love God," that is, Christians, in v28. The discussion that follows is about the future of believers. Paul is not discussing some mass of unredeemed humanity out of which God chose some to be among the elect. But what are we to do with hoti, the first word in v29? It seems likely that it means for or because here and is not merely an unimportant connective. If so, then vv29 and 30 will explain why all things work together for the good for believers. This working together for good

happens because all along God has a plan for believers (227-28).

That's misleading. What is meant is that having referred to believers in v28, Paul then places that in the larger context of God's comprehensive plan. How they came to be believers in the first place, as well as their final destiny. Paul tells the backstory. Having discussed their present status, he goes back a step to describe how they arrived at that point, then charts their future.

...but this is not how some of the crucial Greek Fathers that came before Augustine read it, including most importantly Chrysostom (228).

How is that supposed to be significant? To begin with, Paul's analysis is steeped in OT theology. But Greek Fathers like Chrysostom had no special insight into the OT. Moreover, Chrysostom comes to the text with his own presuppositions.

It is possible that in such a situation Paul wanted to tell believers not how they became Christians in the first place but rather show God always had a plan to get believers to the finish line, working all things together for good, showing

them how they will be able to persevere through whatever trials they may face along the way (228).

On that view, God has half a plan. Moreover, even his truncated plan can be thwarted. In that case, God doesn't "work all things together" for their good.

Dunn, Romans 1-8, p482, argues that the use of "foreknow" here "has in view the more Hebraic understanding of 'knowing' as involving a relationship experienced and acknowledged." This, however, makes no sense. You cannot have a relationship with someone who does not yet exist, and more particularly you cannot have the experience of a relationship that does not yet exist. You can, however, know something in advance without yet experiencing it, and this is what Paul has in mind here. Cf. Acts 26:5; 2 Pet 3:17 (228n25).

Of course, this represents BW3's attempt to preempt the Calvinist interpretation of *proginosko*. But it suffers from several problems:

i) If he's shadowboxing with Calvinism, why make Dunn his foil? Dunn isn't offering traditional Reformed exegesis of Romans. Dunn is a leading proponent of the New Perspective on Paul.

ii) Even if his criticism of Dunn is on target, how does that present the Reformed alternative to BW3's Arminian preference? For instance, *BDAG* renders the verb in this passage: "to choose beforehand" (866b).

Moreover, BW3's fellow Arminian NT scholar, Brian Abasciano, admits, in a roundabout way, that *proginosko* means "prior choice" in Rom 8 & 11:

While agreeing that God knows the future, including who will believe, the corporate election perspective would tend to understand the references to foreknowledge in Rom 8:29 and 1 Pet 1:1-2 as referring to a relational prior knowing that amounts to previously acknowledging or recognizing or embracing or choosing people as belonging to God (i.e., in covenant relationship/partnership). The Bible sometimes mentions this type of knowledge, such as when Jesus speaks of those who never truly submit to his lordship: "And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness'" (Matt 7:23; cf. Gen 18:19; Jer 1:5; Hos 13:4-

5; Amos 3:2; 1 Cor 8:3). On this view, to be chosen according to foreknowledge would mean to be chosen because of the prior election of Christ and the corporate people of God in him. “Those [plural] whom he foreknew” in Rom 8:29 would refer to the Church as a corporate body and their election in Christ as well as their identity as the legitimate continuation of the historic chosen covenant people of God, which individual believers share in by faith-union with Christ and membership in his people. Such a reference is akin to statements in Scripture spoken to Israel about God choosing them in the past (i.e., foreknowing them), an election that the contemporary generation being addressed shared in (e.g., Deut 4:37; 7:6-7; 10:15; 14:2; Isaiah 41:8-9; 44:1-2; Amos 3:2). In every generation, Israel could be said to have been chosen. The Church now shares in that election through Christ, the covenant head and mediator (Rom 11:17-24; Eph 2:11-22).

<http://evangelicalarminians.org/the-facts-of-salvation-a-summary-of-arminian-theology-the-biblical-doctrines-of-grace/>

Back to BW3:

In Paul's use, "foreknow" and "predestine" "do not refer in the first instance to some limitation on our freedom, nor do they refer to some arbitrary decision by God that some creatures are to be denied all chance at salvation. They simply point to the fact that God knows the end to which he will bring his creation, namely redemption, and that the destiny is firmly set in his purposes" (229, quoting Achtemeier).

i) To say the Reformed reading makes it an "arbitrary decision" is tendentious.

ii) This interpretation fails to explain how the two actions are related in Paul's argument. But in this passage, Paul says God chose them beforehand. That's a way of saying the choice was up to God. God chose them before they were in a position to have any say in the matter.

But that, by itself, leaves things dangling. Why did God chose them beforehand? Choose them for what? And here, predestination supplies the answer. God didn't choose them beforehand, then leave the outcome hanging in midair. Rather, God chose them beforehand with a particular outcome in view. God's plan for them covers both the starting-point and end-point. Origin and destination.

One point which Dunn, Romans 1-8, p485, and others seem to have clearly missed is that we continue to have reference to the same group; once in v29, and three times in v30. The import of this is twofold: (1) Paul is deliberately talking about a group of people—"those who." He does not for instance address individuals, as we saw him doing with the "you " singular in 8.2. Election is seen as a corporate matter. There is an elect group (see below on v33). (2) even more importantly, since vv29-30 must be linked to v28, the "those who" in question are those about whom Paul has already said that they "love God"—Paul makes perfectly clear that he is talking about Christians here. The statement about them loving God precedes and

determines how we should read both hous in these verses and the chain of verbs. God knew something in advance about these persons, namely that they would respond to the call of God in love. For such people, God goes all out to make sure that in the end they are fully comfored to the image of Christ. These verses would have had a very different significance had they read "and those God predetermined would love him, he then justified..." But this is not what Paul says or suggests, not least because it does not comport with his theology of the nature of love (229n28).

Several problems:

i) If God chose them because he knew something in advance about them, then BW3 can't drive a wedge between individual election and corporate election, for by his own lights, God chose them on the basis of his foreknowledge that some of them "would respond to the call of God in love." That's irreducibly individualistic. On that view, God chose some, but not others, because some met that personal criterion. That's a discriminating choice. Conditional election, contingent on who would respond to the call of God in love.

ii) To say God chose a "group of people" is hardly at odds with unconditional election. In Calvinism, God chose a group of people. The elect constitute a group of people. A subgroup in relation to humanity at large. Just as the reprobate constitute a group of people. What makes BW3 imagine that saying God chose a "group of people" is evidence for Arminianism rather than Calvinism?

iii) You have a "chain of verbs" because God intends the same set of blessings for the same set of people. Group-membership in unconditional election carries with it that package of benefits.

iv) It's deceptive for BW3 to say "God goes all out to make sure that in the end they are fully conformed to the image of God," for he believes some individuals will drop out of the race before crossing the finish line. Not all who began the race will finish the race.

v) That also makes nonsense of his claim that God chose them on the basis of foreknowing that they would "respond to the call of God in love." For God would also know that some of them would later commit apostasy, after having responded to God's call.

vi) To say Calvinism doesn't comport with Paul's theology of love begs the question.

vii) To say "the statement about them loving God precedes and determines" how we should read what follows is illogical. That's not a statement about temporal priority. Paul doesn't say they loved God before God chose them. By BW3's own admission, they didn't even exist at this juncture. That's why, even of BW3's construction, it can only have reference to their foreseen responsiveness, not

their actual response. Their love did not and could not precede God's choice.

Moreover, a logical author like Paul can make a statement about the present, then include a flashback to explain how the present situation came about. To say one statement precedes another doesn't mean one fact precedes another.

viii) And why do they love God? Because, as Paul goes on to explain in the same verse, God called them. So the source of their love goes back to God's unilateral and efficacious grace.

The controversial revolution in Pauline studies that produced the so-called new perspective of the 1970s shifted attention away from the late-medieval soul-searchings and anxieties about salvation, and placed it instead on (in Sander's phrase) the comparison of patterns of religion. It was a self-consciously post-Holocaust project, aimed not least at reminding Paul's readers of his essential Jewishness (244, quoting N. T. Wright).

i) The fact that the NNP is driven by a post-Holocaust agenda raises red flags, for in that event the exegesis is controlled by concerns extraneous to the text. A concern to

avoid what is perceived to be an anti-Semitic interpretation. The text is not allowed to mean what Paul intended if that could be construed by some as anti-Semitic.

ii) Decades before the NPP, Schlatter wrote a commentary on Paul. Schlatter was a Lutheran, but at the same time, very sensitive to the essential Jewishness of Paul.

OT references to God knowing someone or his people, that is, to his inclination toward or love for them, sometimes refer to a concept of election (Amos 3:2; Deut 9:24; Exod 33:12,17; Gen 18:19; Deut 34:10), and such passages lie in the background here (247).

Which is contrary to how BW3 glosses *proginosko* in [Rom 8:29](#).

BW3 then quotes from some Intertestamental literature, as well as rabbinical literature (which postdates the NT). Then summarizes Josephus on the Essenes, Pharisees, and Sadducees. He quotes Josephus saying:

While the Pharisees hold that all things are brought about by destiny, they do not deprive the human will of its own impulse to do them, it having pleased God that there should be a cooperation and that to the deliberation (of God) about destiny, humans in the case of the

one who wills should assent, with virtue or wickedness (248).

That, however, is consistent with compatibilism or deterministic concursus.

The relevance of Pharisaism for what Paul says should be clear. He was a Pharisee before his Damascus Road experience, and he affirms both God's foreknowledge, his destining of some things, and human responsibility for sin and the awful possibility of radical rebellion against God by a believer, namely apostasy...He stands directly in the line of the early Jewish discussion by affirming that in the most important matter of all—one's salvation and the possibility of virtuous behavior, humans must respond to the initiative of grace freely, and continue to do so freely after initially becoming a new creature in Christ. The divine and human wills are both involved in such matters (248).

i) Why should Paul's training as a Pharisee supply the frame of reference? Just a page earlier, BW3 admitted that Paul has "reenvisioned whatever he believed as a non-Christian Jew about such matters in the light of Christ..." (247).

ii) If Paul's views of predestination and providence simply copy what he was taught as a Pharisee, then aren't his theological views a historical accident? Had he been trained by the Essenes, he'd be a strict predestinarian. Had he been trained by the Sadducees, he'd be a libertarian. If his theology mirrors the particular school of Judaism in which he happened to be indoctrinated, isn't it a flip of the coin whether or not his theology is correct?

In principle, a Calvinist could say Paul's theology was in some degree socially conditioned. God, in his meticulous providence, conditioned Paul to believe the right things by providentially prearranging events in his life to bring into contact with influences which coincidentally select for true beliefs. But BW3 can't very well avail himself of that deterministic explanation.

iii) Finally, BW3 begs the question by asserting that predestination is inconsistent with apostasy, human responsibility, responsiveness to grace, the involvement of the human will, &c.

So when Paul is referring to the hardening of some, he is not talking about eternal damnation. He is talking about a process in history that is temporal and temporary (253).

i) BW3 erects a false dichotomy between salvation and a process of history.

ii) It's true that hardening, per se, is not synonymous with reprobation. That depends on the divine aim. To what end does God harden individuals? Whether or not hardening results in damnation depends on the context.

iii) To say hardening, if temporary, is not about eternal damnation is logically confused. Sinners are mortal. We have a temporary lifespan. If an individual dies in a state of impenitent unbelief because God hardened him, that individual is doomed. Even if hardening is temporary, that's too late for the divinely hardened sinner who died an unbeliever. Death seals his fate.

Hardening needn't be eternal to result in eternal damnation. A temporary cause can have a permanent effect. If you strangle someone to death, you don't continue to strangle him after he expires. You don't need to.

iv) BW3 fails to distinguish between temporary hardening in reference to individuals and temporary hardening in reference to generations. If God temporarily hardens an individual, that might leave room for the individual's salvation—if God ceases to harden him before he dies.

If God's hardening is transgenerationally temporary, in the sense that he hardened the former generation, but not a later generation, his cessation is too late to benefit the former generation. That generation was doomed. Death is destiny.

Of course, BW3 may not believe that's how God actually operates. My immediate point is that his argument is illogical as it stands.

But Esau's historical role, however determined by God, does not mean that God cursed Esau and damned him for eternity. As the OT context of the saying "Jacob I loved and Esau I hated" (Mal 1:2-3) shows, the subject there is two nations, not two individuals... (253).

i) To begin with, the determinative context isn't Malachi, but how Malachi functions in Paul's argument.

ii) In Rom 9-11, Paul is using individuals as archetypal examples to illustrate general principles. How God dealt with Jacob, Esau, Pharaoh, et al., furnishes an exemplary principle: God's modus operandi. Even if Esau or Pharaoh weren't damned, that misses the point. For Paul is using them to typify reprobation.

Mind you, as an idolater and polytheist, it's almost assuredly the case that Pharaoh was hellbound. But that's inessential to the Reformed interpretation.

iii) Rom 9-11 is about the salvation or damnation of Jews and Gentiles:

http://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/49/49-2/JETS_49-2_373-386_Schreiner.pdf

It is too seldom noticed that the concept of the righteous remnant is used to

further the discussion of God's historical purposes, and in particular his purposes to produce a Jewish messianic figure to save the world. The concern is not with a saved group of Israelites as opposed to a permanently non-elect group of Israelites, for Paul will go on to say that even those Jews temporarily and temporally broken off from the chosen people can and will be regrafted (254).

i) Once again, that's fatally equivocal, for it it would only be hold true if the same set of people are broken off and then regrafted. If, however, Paul is referring to diachronic generations rather than changes within the lives of individuals, then you do have unsaved groups.

ii) Since BW3 espouses conditional election, contingent on God's foresight of individual responsiveness, then in what sense would individuals be temporarily non-elect? If God chose them ahead of time, based on his prescience, then how could there be a time when they were non-elect? On those grounds, their elect status ought to be static.

Election, insofar as the creation of a people is involved, is largely a corporate thing—it is "in Israel" or "in Christ," but the means of getting in is by faith (255).

i) But if the means of getting in is by faith, then election is primarily individual and secondarily corporate. Corporate election is the end-result of individual choice.

ii) BTW, to say election is "in Christ" is by no means at odds with unconditional election. Rather, it means God chose who would be redeemed by Christ. Election is coordinated with redemption. Only the elect are redeemed (and renewed). By the Father's will, the elect are saved in union with Christ, who dies in their stead. His sacrificial death atones for the sin of the elect. It is for their benefit, and theirs alone.

BW3 routinely fails to grasp the nature of the alternative position he opposes.

Election is in Israel in the first instance, and then in Christ (256).

It isn't clear what that's supposed to mean. Is BW3 referring to a historical sequence? Election in Israel and election in Christ don't range along the same continuum. That confuses the historical election of Israelites with the eternal election of heavenbound Jews and gentiles.

It is not some abstract or inscrutable will of God that lurks behind the revealed will of God, for God's will and heart are truly revealed in Christ. Whatever is not known about God must comport with

what God has revealed to the world in Christ. Thus it is not helpful to talk about pretemporal eternal decrees by God, unless one is talking about what God decreed about and for his Son, the chosen and destined one (256).

- i)** Predestination is a revealed truth. Election and reprobation are revealed truths.
- ii)** Who God has elected or reprobated is not a matter of public knowledge. But we could say the same thing about divine omniscience.
- iii)** God's providence is often inscrutable, even though providence is manifested in the public domain.
- iv)** Scripture doesn't say Christ is the Elect One.
- v)** Scripture does refer to "pretemporal eternal decrees" in reference to who's saved and who's lost

Nothing is said about Pharaoh's eternal state (265).

This is one of BW3's persistent confusions. The Reformed interpretation doesn't require Pharaoh to be reprobate. Rather, it's a question of his emblematic significance in Paul's argument. What he and others represent.

If Israel is any analogy, then "hardening" does not mean damning. It involves a temporary action of limited duration. The point of this discussion in any case is to deal with the fate and condition of Israel, not Pharaoh. How does one explain the Jews' rejection of their Messiah? What hope do they still have? Thus far Paul has talked about predestination of two groups—Christians in ch. 8 and Israel in ch. 9. Israel was destined to stumble so that Gentiles might rise, but also so that all might rise up by the grace of God. This destining is not to heaven or hell, but for God's historical purposes, as was the case with Pharaoh (256-57).

BW3 is so shortsighted. A hardening of "limited duration" is sufficient to damn an individual who dies in that forlorn condition. What about the Jewish rejection of Christ? That's a salvation issue. If a Jew rejects the Messiah, and he dies in that condition, his eternal destiny is settled.

BW3 chronically fails to distinguish between Jewish unbelievers and Jews as a people-group. Every few generations, there's a complete turnover. Some die while

others are born. Although there is always a Jewish people-group, the composition is in a state of constant flux.

Even if Paul teaches a future in-gathering of the Jews, that's too late to benefit his 1C contemporaries. They died and went to heaven or hell centuries ago. BW3 is reading this text 2000 after it was written. Most Jews continue to reject Jesus throughout church history, up until now—in addition to the Jews in Paul's own time.

Vv 22 and 23 belong together and may seem particularly harsh. Paul is in the middle of using Jeremiah's metaphor (Jer 18:6) about the potter and the clay to discuss the relationship of God to his creatures (257).

The reader who recognizes the allusion will not slip into the error of seeing 9:14-29 as an excursus on the doctrine of the predestination of individuals to salvation or damnation, because the prophetic subtexts keep the concern with which the chapter began—the fate of Israel—in sharp focus (257n43, quoting Richard Hays).

i) In Rom 9, the source of Paul's metaphor isn't confined to Jeremiah.

ii) More to the point, metaphors don't have a fixed significance. From an exegetical standpoint, the question at

issue is not how Jeremiah uses the metaphor, but how Paul uses the metaphor.

It is difficult to imagine Paul saying that God endured the vessels of wrath because he wanted to show forth his wrath (257).

How is that difficult to imagine? If the vessels of wrath serve as an object lesson, we'd expect God to preserve them for however long is needed to illustrate that lesson.

Furthermore, it is not said that the vessels of mercy are destined for glory beforehand, but that they are prepared for glory beforehand. So the subject is not some pretemporal determination, but rather what ch. 8 has referred to—namely that God did always plan for believers to be conformed to the image of his Son...Thus, Paul would be alluding to the process of sanctification here, which has a pretemporal plan behind it (258-59).

i) This assumes that Paul isn't using "prepared beforehand" as a synonym for predestined. On the face of it, they seem to be interchangeable concepts.

ii) While such preparation includes sanctification, there's no reason to confine it to sanctification.

iii) BW3 arbitrarily differentiates a "pretemporal plan" from "pretemporal determination," without bothering to explain how he thinks they differ, or—more importantly—showing that Paul would accept his distinction. He doesn't exegete that distinction from Pauline usage.

iv) Since he thinks believers can commit apostasy, what does God's plan for them amount to?

Furthermore, as Eph 2:3-4 makes quite evident, someone can start out as a vessel of wrath and later become a child of God by grace through faith (259).

i) He needs to show that the context of [Eph 2:3-4](#) is comparable to Rom 9.

ii) Paul doesn't use the potter/clay metaphor in [Eph 2:3-4](#).

ii) In addition, if predestination is pretemporal, then the result will be a delayed effect. BW3 fails to distinguish between a timeless cause and when that's effected in time.

Foreknowledge [11:2] does not mean foreordination to salvation, clearly enough, unless one assumes that in 11:26 Paul is predicting the salvation of every Jew who ever existed (265).

i) That takes for granted BW3's interpretation of 11:26. To begin with, the meaning of that verse is notoriously disputed. Based, moreover, on OT usage, "all Israel" frequently has a representative scope. In context, it probably denotes the remnant (either a collective remnant or an endtime remnant).

ii) Since *proginosko* here functions as an antonym for "rejected," the elective sense (chosen beforehand) is hard to avoid. And it can't refer to national election at this stage of redemptive history, for the national election of Israel had already served its purpose by the time Paul wrote Romans.

Contrary choice

I'm going to make a few comments on this article: Paul Himes, "**WHEN A CHRISTIAN SINS: 1 CORINTHIANS 10:13 AND THE POWER OF CONTRARY CHOICE IN RELATION TO THE COMPATIBILIST-LIBERTARIAN DEBATE.**" **JETS 54 (JUNE 2011): 329-344.**

A couple of general observations before I delve into the details:

- i)** Himes is more comfortable with exegesis than philosophy.
- ii)** Apropos (i), his philosophical foils consist of guys like Ware, Nash, and Edwards. But Edwards hardly represents state-of-the-art determinism, while Nash and Ware are scarcely the most astute exponents of determinism.

Ware isn't even a real Calvinist, although I appreciate his critique of open theism. And he's better at the destructive task than the reconstructive task.

What, then, does 1 Cor 10:13 have to do with the compatibilist-libertarian debate? To begin with, one must stress the limits that 1 Cor 10:13 places on the nature of temptation. The verse indicates that the Christian is not forced to succumb to temptation and possesses

the capability to resist. In other words, the temptation has its limits and does not possess the power to force the Christian to succumb to it (or, more accurately, it does not possess the power to render the Christian unable to endure). In other words, the temptation is such that not succumbing to it is possible.

i) To equate predestination with “force” is a popular canard. “Force” suggests that we are acting against our will. That we consciously wish to do one thing, but are made to do something else. However, predestination (or determinism) would generally operate at a subconscious level. We don’t consciously resist what we’re predestined to do, for all our thoughts, feelings, and actions are the seamless effect of predestination. We’re not directly aware of what’s causing them. We lack that detachment or objectivity.

ii) In addition, if predestination is true, then it’s not the temptation that “forces” us to succumb to temptation. Rather, it’s predestination which ensures our succumbence to temptation. If predestination is true, then temptation is not a sufficient condition to ensure succumbence to temptation, for God could predestine that we either resist or give in to the same temptation.

No doubt Himes would not regard that as an improvement over the version he’s attacking. However, his argument isn’t calibrated to the actual position he’s attacking. So that

doesn't derive from his exegesis, even if his exegesis were sound. At the very least he'd need to restructure his argument, assuming his original argument can be salvaged.

Thus, if this paper's interpretation of 1 Cor 10:13 is correct, one must assert that a believer, no matter what the situation, has the ability to choose not to sin (since God does not allow the temptation to get to the point where the end result is, by necessity, sin).

i) This assumes that the verse is dealing with temptation in general, rather than a specific type of temptation. But it's arguable that Paul has specific reference to divine protection against apostasy or sins which lead to apostasy.

ii) If we accept his interpretation, then that's an argument for perfectionism. It's possible that a Christian can lead a sinless life. But is that either Scriptural or empirically plausible?

Furthermore, by "possible," we must mean "a legitimate possibility." One could argue that resisting sin is physically or mentally possible, but that the Christian's pre-set scale of values has

already decreed that he or she will not resist the temptation to sin. Yet this would seem to miss the whole point of the passage and allow the Corinthian believers the very excuse that Paul seeks to deny them. In other words, the Corinthians could simply argue that their scale of values has been set such that they naturally value the city's social life over their own sanctification. Since their own scale of values were set by things outside of their control (including their own character), they could legitimately say, according to a compatibilist scheme, that the temptation was too strong for them at that particular situation, the very point that 1 Corinthians 10 denies.

i) Actually, the notion that our character may preselect our choices is consistent with libertarianism. Prior choices can shape character, which—in turn—conditions subsequent choices.

ii) If a Christian were predestined to sin, would he cite predestination to excuse his sin? But that presents something of a psychological paradox. For, as I already noted, the fact of predestination doesn't imply an

awareness of predestination. That's normally subliminal. We don't directly experience predestination. Rather, we experience the result. We're on the receiving end of the process. Our experience would feel the same if our choices and actions were randomly produced.

Varieties of faith

I'm going to comment on this post.

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/jesuscreed/2012/01/16/warning-passages-ahead-brief-response/>

Before remarking on his specific claims, let's draw a few distinctions:

i) McKnight treats the audience of Hebrews as monolithic, as if the author has only one audience in mind. But the congregation probably reflected a range of individuals.

ii) Apropos (i), people generally attend church as families. Families tend to do things as families. That, in turn, can break down in the following ways:

a) You have one or more devout family members who attend church because their motives are pious.

b) You have nominal or unbelieving family members who attend church because a devout family member attends. In the case of kids, they may attend because they have to. Their parents make them. In the case of parents, one spouse may attend out of deference to the other spouse.

This isn't based on a Calvinist classification scheme. Rather, it's based on the fact that the natural family is the fundamental unit of society. Families do things together. Family members do things with or for other family members.

So, within the same family, people have different motivations for attending church.

Let's classify churchgoers in another way:

i) Devout believers

Christian faith is a central, defining feature of their lives. That's what gives them hope and purpose. That's how they interpret their lives. Gives them inner direction. A unifying frame of reference.

ii) Nominal believers

They are social chameleons. They believe because people around them believe. They believe what people around them believe.

It's a default belief. They can lose their faith (and often do) the moment their faith is put to the test—intellectually, ethically, or emotionally. They can lose their faith (and often do) the moment they are transplanted to a different social environment.

When they lose their faith, they don't have much to lose. Their faith never made their life meaningful. Their life seems just as meaningful or meaningless to them with or without their nominal Christian faith.

iii) Unbelievers

They don't pretend to believe in Christianity, but they don't make a big deal about it one way or the other. They don't protest. That's not their priority. Their social life is more important. They attend church to humor their devout family members. To be involved in the lives of their spouse or kids.

They go through the motions: sing hymns, recite the creed, recite public prayers, take communion.

iv) Heretics

A heretic is a parody of a devout believer. A counterfeit. He's just as passionate about his heretical beliefs as a devout believer. His heresy is something he lives for. All-important.

One again, these distinctions don't presuppose a Calvinist classification-scheme. These are sociological observations. As a matter of common observation, that's the usual breakdown.

v) These categories aren't static. Unbelievers can become believers. Believers can become unbelievers. Devout believers can become nominal believers. Nominal believers can become devout believers.

vi) There is, of course, a difference between the way Arminians and Calvinists classify believers. For Arminians, there is no qualitative distinction between nominal believers and "true" believers. In Arminianism, every believer is a born-again believer, for you are regenerated after you believe, as a result of believing.

In Calvinism, by contrast, there's a distinction between regenerate believers and unregenerate believers, or elect believers and elect unbelievers.

On the one hand, the unregenerate can be nominal believers. On the other hand, the elect can (for a time) be unbelievers.

Of course, McKnight rejects Calvinism, so he might regard that distinction as question-begging. Since, however, he's critiquing Calvinism, he has to consider the Reformed classifications on their own terms. Are they self-consistent? Can Hebrews be consistently read through that classification scheme?

vii) McKnight fails to distinguish between the author's audience and the author's paradigm-cases of faith and infidelity. The author doesn't simply explain the nature of faith and infidelity by how he talks about the audience, by describing the characteristics of the congregants, but also, and primarily, by his examples of the faithful in Old Testamental and Inter-Testamental times (Heb 11)—as well as the faithless Exodus-generation (Heb 3-4). And he analogizes from these past exemplars—for good or ill—to the situation of the congregants.

Moving to the specifics:

viii) McKnight frames the issue in terms of Calvinism v. Arminianism. However, many Arminian Baptists affirm some version of eternal security. Doesn't McKnight know that?

ix) Likewise, McKnight rejects the "rhetorical" interpretation, yet Ben Witherington favors the "rhetorical" interpretation in his commentary on Hebrews. Doesn't McKnight know that?

x) He creates a false dichotomy between "Two kinds of people and/or two kinds of faith" But faith is a property of people, a property of believers. So if there were two (or more) kinds of faith, that would be embodied in different people.

xi) Moreover, the same person can have an evolving or devolving faith. So it's not as if we automatically pair off one kind of faith per person. There's some fluidity.

Indeed, apostasy is a good example of that. Some believers retain their faith while others lose their faith. Some mature while others are spiritually retarded.

First, if the sin to worry about is apostasy, and O'Brien calls it "irreversible apostasy," how can a person with non-genuine (spurious) faith be warned about apostasy? What are they apostasizing from? (The only answer can be their non-genuine faith because that is all they have.) I contend this makes no sense. Big question: What does apostasy mean for the one who doesn't really have genuine faith? (The sin of Hebrews is too violent to be anything other than something profoundly serious; I can't see it being apostasy from less than real faith.)

The answer depends in part, on whether McKnight is seeking a general answer, or else an answer specific to Hebrews. In relation to Hebrews, the conventional view is that congregants are in danger of reverting to Judaism. A

defection from Christianity to Judaism. That's the specific form apostasy takes in this letter.

McKnight himself rejects that interpretation, although he doesn't present his alternative.

Second, if the exhortation is to continue or persevere, how can a person with non-genuine faith be exhorted to continue? In what, their non-genuine faith?

In relation to Hebrews, they are to continue in the Christian faith, and their continuance will, itself, be a mark of genuine faith. A test of commitment. How much it really means to them-or not.

The only answer here is that the non-genuine faith person should be urged to repent and to believe or to enter deeper from a spurious and inadequate non-saving faith into a real, genuine saving faith. When this topic arises at the end of Hebrews 5 and the beginning of Hebrews 6 there's no evidence the author thinks of these people of having spurious faith, but instead of having faith that needs perseverance. In other words, it's just

how the author says it: immaturity (or the “elementary”; 6:1) needs to move onto maturity. The elementary is not “spurious” but an immature version of the real thing.

But as I noted before, the author doesn't explain the nature of faith merely by reference to his audience, but also by comparing his audience to past saints and past apostates. So [Heb 6:1](#) has to be supplemented by that other material.

The exhortation to continue then can only apply for O'Brien to the genuine saving-faith person (in which case the whole conditionality issue becomes hypothetical or only rhetorical and not real — an issue that needs a different discussion).

This makes two mistakes I noted at the outset:

i) McKnight acts as if there's only one audience for the exhortation. As if all the congregants are in the same condition. But mass communication (i.e. a public letter) isn't that discriminating. The author will make a number of general observations that apply to some members of the congregation, but not others.

ii) McKnight also acts as if the condition of each congregant is static. But the very crisis this congregation is undergoing can be a refining (as well as winnowing) experience. In a crisis, a nominal believer can either lose his faith or become a devout believer.

In O'Brien's sketch the warning passages are working with their eyes on two different faiths: genuine-faith people and non-genuine-faith people. I contend this is impossible to prove apart from one's already-at-work Calvinistic assumptions. I see no evidence for two groups until the final day; at the moment of writing they are believers. The writer of Hebrews never suggests anyone has spurious faith; he worries those with faith will not persevere.

Third, it is not accurate to say genuine faith and spurious faith are clear in the book. That, again, is an imposed category: what is clear is that some believe and are saved and others shrink back and are damned. To say there are two kinds of faith requires a text where the author makes that kind of category clear. (And the word "faith" ought to be present with some kind of adjective that shows the author thinks some have a spurious faith.) What is

present in Hebrews is an author who thinks his readers/listeners will persevere or not persevere.

This commits another mistake I noted at the outset. McKnight is myopically focused on the condition of the audience while ignoring the examples that the author gives to illustrate his argument. On the one hand you have the faithful in Heb 11.

On the other hand you have the wilderness generation. They never exercised faith. Despite witnessing God's miraculous deliverance and miraculous provision, it never took.

The theme of apostasy doesn't begin with chap. 6. Rather, that begins with chap. 3. Heb 3-4 are programmatic for 6.

Notice that the author says the audience has an "initial experience of the gospel" and then later says they "were never true believers." I agree with the first but the last category is imposed from without on the basis of other conclusions, namely that if one does not have perseverance one never really had genuine faith. This is the QED, and it doesn't work to assume this stance in order to explain one's view. There are

two kinds of people, not two kinds of faith. There is one kind of faith: faith. Some will persevere and some won't. One faith, one kept and one discarded.

There's a difference between hearing and trusting. Many heard, but only some took it to heart.

Again, the authentic vs. spurious is a way of framing the problem. I prefer it to frame it as "faith" that perseveres and to salvation vs. faith that doesn't persevere and that leads to judgment. The use of "spurious" suggests it wasn't the real thing from the beginning, which I think is his point but which is precisely the point that needs to be proven. And this is clear in that O'Brien says in this paragraph "and never was one." Now that's the point that has to be shown, and the only way to show this is to assume that genuine faith perseveres vs. ungentine faith that does not persevere, when the author seems to be using this set of categories: faith that perseveres saves

and faith that doesn't persevere doesn't save.

No, that's not the only category. The wilderness generation never responded in faith.

The issue is whether the "faith" is real in each case; I think so. He needs to show that some people do not really have genuine faith.

Try the wilderness generation.

What does it mean to have "initial" faith or an "initial experience of the gospel" in such terms if it doesn't mean to trust in Christ?

Hearing the gospel isn't the same thing as *trusting* Christ. Even *believing* isn't the same thing as *trusting*.

And a crisis is often a way of testing the difference between hearing and believing or believing and trusting. That has a winnowing effect. It's easy to believe something when it doesn't cost you anything. It's easy to superficially believe something when you don't have to live what you superficially believe.

Again, in Hebrews 5 to 6 the author brings this up. The initial experience is not spurious, but real.

McKnight is equivocating. There's no such thing as a spurious *experience*. Either you have an experience or you don't.

The question is *what* you experience. The congregants were evangelized. Some of them witnessed miracles.

Likewise, the Exodus-generation had a genuine experience of God's deliverance and providence. But they never put their faith in God. They constantly distrusted God.

Not an outsider and not one who is on the edge of church life?

Both nominal believers and unbelievers can be in the thick of church life. Some pastors are nominal believers or closet unbelievers. Many congregants participate in church life because they have devout family members.

I still see a moral problem of a warning with the consequences of hell/eternal damnation that, in fact, can't happen because it would impugn God's

faithfulness. How can a warning be given with consequences for disobedience be given if those consequences can't happen — and still be morally justified?

Warnings have deterrent value. Like Arminians generally, McKnight is confusing predestination with que sera sera fatalism. As one philosopher explains:

Determinism is the thesis that everything that occurs including our deliberations and decisions, are causally necessitated by antecedent conditions. Fatalism, by contrast, is the thesis that our deliberations and decisions are causally ineffective and make no difference to the course of events. The Oxford Handbook of Free Will, 232.

Craig on Rom 9

I'm going to comment on William Lane Craig's creative interpretation of Rom 9:

http://www.reasonablefaith.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=6675&printer_friendly=1

One of the striking things about Craig is how carefully he prepares for his debates with liberals and atheists, but how poorly prepared he is in responding to Calvinism. Craig is a very sophisticated philosopher, but a very unsophisticated theologian.

Typically, as a result of Reformed theology, we have a tendency to read Paul as narrowing down the scope of God's election to the very select few, and those not so chosen can't complain if God in His sovereignty overlooks them.

i) Where is Craig's evidence that according to Calvinism only a "very select few" will be saved?

ii) Craig's alternative to unconditional election is to say that "God has chosen to save those who have faith in Christ." But even if we grant conditional election for the sake of argument, that doesn't predict for how many will be saved. That doesn't predict for how many will believe.

In principle, conditional election could just as well result in God saving a “very select few.” There’s no presumption that most men and women will respond favorably to the Gospel—even if they had occasion to hear it. So Craig’s implied contrast is fallacious even on its own terms.

The problematic, then, with which Paul is wrestling is how God's chosen people the Jews could fail to obtain the promise of salvation while Gentiles, who were regarded by Jews as unclean and execrable, could find salvation instead.

Is *that* the problematic? To judge by key passages like [Rom 9:6a](#) (cf. [Isa 55:11](#)), [11:1-2](#), & [11:29](#), isn’t the real problem Paul is wrestling with whether God can be trusted? Does God keep his promises? Or does Israel’s unfaithfulness nullify God’s faithfulness?

To reduce God’s promise to Israel to a hypothetical promise, ultimately contingent on Israel’s faith, wouldn’t generate the dilemma that Paul poses. For, as Paul frames the issue, Israel’s lack of faith is the problem, and not the solution to the problem. What generates the *prima facie* dilemma is the stark contrast between God’s irrevocable commitment to Israel ([11:29](#)) and Israel’s present infidelity. If history has falsified God’s promise to Israel, then God loses all credibility.

So—and this is the crucial point—who is it that God has chosen to save? The answer is: those who have faith in Christ Jesus. As Paul writes in Galatians (which is a sort of abbreviated Romans), "So you see that it is men of faith who are the sons of Abraham" (Gal. 3. 7). Jew or Gentile, it doesn't matter: God has sovereignly chosen to save all those who trust in Christ Jesus for salvation.

i) That only pushes the question back a step, for it fails to explain the source of faith. Why do some have faith while others lack faith?

ii) And it fails to resolve the dilemma Paul posed. For Paul, if God's promise to Israel lapsed when Israel lapsed, then that would call into question God's fidelity—whether to Israel or the gentiles. For Paul, God's promise to Israel implies a favorable outcome. Something that extends into the future.

That's why Paul can go on in Romans 10 to say, "There is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and bestows his riches upon all who call upon him. For 'everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be

saved'" (10. 12-13). Reformed theology can make no sense at all of this wonderful, universal call to salvation. Whosoever will may come.

i) That's not universal; rather, that's categorical.

ii) Needless to say, Reformed theology can make perfect sense of the promise that whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

Paul's burden, then, in Romans 9 is not to narrow the scope of God's election but to broaden it. He wants to take in all who have faith in Christ Jesus regardless of their ethnicity. Election, then, is first and foremost a corporate notion: God has chosen for Himself a people, a corporate entity, and it is up to us by our response of faith whether or not we choose to be members of that corporate group destined to salvation.

i) If it's "up to us," then that would never generate the dilemma which Paul poses. On that view, Israel could totally defect. But Paul takes the position that for God to be true to

his promise, he must preserve a remnant. Indeed, God must even reinstate Israel at some future point.

ii) Notice how Craig upends the Biblical notion of election. In Scripture, God does the choosing; but for Craig, we do the choosing.

iii) If election is contingent on our libertarian faith, then that's fundamentally individualistic rather than corporate. Corporate identity is a side-effect of one's individual identity as a believer. And it's not up to God who will or won't believe.

Of course, given God's total providence over the affairs of men, this is not the whole story. But Molinism makes good sense of the rest. John 6. 65 means that apart from God's grace no one can come to God on his own. But there's no suggestion there that those who refused to believe in Christ did not do so of their own free will.

Jn 6 doesn't chalk it up to libertarian freewill, but sin. Moreover, disbelief is the result of divine hardening (Jn 12:39-40). Same thing in Romans (11:7).

God knows in exactly what circumstances people will freely respond to His grace

and places people in circumstances in which each one receives sufficient grace for salvation if only that person will avail himself of it.

There's nothing in Rom 9 or Jn 6 to that effect. Indeed, that cuts against the grain.

Imprecations

Rauser is venting again:

I have been arguing that there is something morally problematic about the imprecation which expresses hatred of one's enemy and relishes the coming destruction of one's enemy.

There's no reason to take it that personally. I don't have to have a personal hit list to sing the imprecatory psalms. I don't have to hate anyone.

Moral satisfaction can be quite disinterested. Say I read about some atrocity in the news. I don't know the perpetrator or his victim(s). But part of genuine compassion for the injured party is to share their sense of outrage, to take vicarious moral satisfaction when the perpetrator is caught and punished. He may mean nothing to me personally. But you can't truly care for the injured party unless you care that justice be done.

I hope the Calvinists who pray the imprecatory psalms can appreciate why other Christians do not.

I appreciate the fact that they are subdermal unbelievers like Rauser.

I suspect that most people will agree that the picture of people dancing while a rapist writhes in agony on the gallows looks ugly, even immoral.

Bracketing Rauser's hyperbole, this illustrates his sociopathic lack of empathy for the injured party. Reveals the fact that Rauser is a pampered, bratty, spoiled little limousine liberal.

You have to wonder how many rape victims he's interviewed. Did he ever bother to ask them if they'd find that picture "immoral"?

But I don't understand at all delighting in the agony inflicted on those evildoers for their sin. In fact that looks absolutely contrary to what I think a moral person conformed to the image of God should look like. So to say that this is exactly what a moral person conformed to the image of God should look like suggests that my most basic moral intuitions

*(intuitions shared by most people
thankfully) are fundamentally mistaken.*

Yes, I think Rauser is morally warped.

*If the imprecatory Calvinist has no such
grief then he or she must deny that there
was any such goodness in their
relationships with the reprobate. There
was nothing lost. There is nothing to
grieve or lament.*

i) Again, you don't have to sing the imprecatory psalms with a personal enemy in mind. Rather, you can think about those who brutally persecute the faithful throughout history, as well as now.

ii) Moreover, the "enemy" in the imprecatory psalm needn't be a former friend. It needn't be someone who used to be close to you before he betrayed you. He may always have been your sworn enemy.

iii) The imprecatory psalms don't represent everything we may feel about the lost. It's quite possible to have mixed emotions or conflicted feelings.

*Finally, let's put this in personal terms.
On that final day a father who is saved*

discovers that his daughter, his beloved daughter, is reprobated for eternity. The Calvinist wants us to view that father, now perfectly sanctified, laughing in anticipation at his daughter's impending damnation as he delights in God's swift justice. As I said, if this is really true, if this is what a perfectly sanctified individual looks like, then the intuitions most of us have about love are fundamentally mistaken. And the love that that father shares now with his daughter really is chimerical. There is nothing to lament, there is no loss at all. There is only a growing chorus of praise as the father watches his daughter being cast into the flames forever.

i) This emotionally manipulative objection isn't unique to reprobation. If we deleted reprobation from the paragraph and just had eternal damnation, Rauser would level the same objection.

ii) For that matter, there are parents who repudiate the Christian faith when their child dies from a terminal illness or tragic accident.

iii) Rauser is an annihilationist. But we could easily recast his objection in those terms:

Finally, let's put this in personal terms. On that final day a father who is saved discovers that God zapped his daughter, his beloved daughter, out of existence. The annihilationist wants us to view that father, now perfectly sanctified, laughing in anticipation at his daughter's oblivion as he delights in God's swift justice. As I said, if this is really true, if this is what a perfectly sanctified individual looks like, then the intuitions most of us have about love are fundamentally mistaken. And the love that that father shares now with his daughter really is chimerical. There is nothing to lament, there is no loss at all. There is only a growing chorus of praise as the father watches God obliterate his daughter.

iv) The imprecatory psalms, as well as taunt-songs in Revelation, don't address (one way or the other) the fate of lost friends and relatives. Rather, they're dealing with those

who persecute the faithful. Those who oppress the righteous.

v) It's often hard to tell if Rauser just likes to demagogue an issue or if he really operates with this fundy backwoods paradigm.

But there's no reason to think that we actually see the damned "cast into the flames."

a) To begin with, the imagery is figurative.

b) In addition, taunt-songs belong to a stock genre. This is not a photographically realistic preview ("Coming attractions") of the final judgment, but a literary convention. There's no good reason to think we will actually witness the fate of the damned.

Abasciano on Rom 9

I'm going to comment on some sections from Brian Abasciano's online dissertation regarding Paul's Use of the OT in [Rom 9:1-9](#). I take it that this is now the major Arminian alternative to the Reformed interpretation of Rom 9.

His dissertation has since been published, along with a sequel. The dissertation is focused on [Rom 9:1-9](#), whereas the sequel takes it up through v18.

I haven't read the sequel. (I wonder how many Arminians have.) However, his dissertation is the programmatic work which lays out his basic interpretive strategies, so I wouldn't expect the sequel to mark a signal advance over the original argument, but simply extend the original argument. As he himself says:

The insights we have gained through the present study carry implications for virtually every verse in the rest of Romans 9-11. As the introductory and early stages of Paul's argument, Romans 9:1-9 set an orientation with which to approach the larger passage (357).

I'll be quoting and commenting what I take to be his major arguments. I won't bother to transliterate the Greek phrases. You can look that up for yourself.

This presupposition then affects one's reading of Paul, a presupposition which has often simply been carried over automatically from individualistic western culture. An individualistic reading of Paul has long been the overwhelmingly dominant approach, until only recently with the appearance of the work of E. P. Sanders and the ensuing "new perspective on Paul." Sanders' work helped to usher in a far greater appreciation of the concept of covenant in Paul's thought resulting in a far greater emphasis on corporate over against individual concerns, particularly concerning the relationship of Jews and Gentiles in the Church of Christ. (108-09).

i) I find this odd because it isn't clear to me who he's alluding to. To judge by what he says elsewhere, Abasciano is shadowboxing with Calvinism. That seems to be the primary target of his dissertation.

Yet a covenantal orientation is hardly at odds with Calvinism. Calvinism is big on covenant theology.

Lutheranism, with its emphasis on sola fide, might be a better candidate for an “individualistic” reading.

ii) At the same time, the binary antithesis between a corporate orientation and an individualistic orientation is quite simplistic. For groups consist of many subsets. For instance, you could subdivide OT Jews into a group of pious Jews, a group of nominal Jews, and a group of idolatrous Jews.

So if we oppose corporate identity to individual identity, just which corporate entity are we referring to? There’s more than one. Put another way, individuals form groups, and individuals can be grouped together in a variety of different ways, depending on what commonality you wish to isolate. Men, women, priests, elders, tribes, &c. As social beings, human beings form many different, often overlapping associations.

Consider the doctrine of the remnant, which is a group within a group.

First, we must recognize that Paul’s thought was thoroughly covenantal, focused on the fulfillment of the covenant purposes of God in Christ and their consequences for Jews and Gentiles (110).

Paul is best taken as a covenant theologian, which means that the theological concept of covenant is foundational to his theology,⁸ coloring and directing much of his thought. Paul conceived of the

gospel and the events of salvation-history wrought in Christ as the outworking of the covenant between God and Israel described in the Scriptures" (353).

Once again, how does that distinguish Abasciano's overarching approach from the approach of Gregory Beale, Thomas Schreiner, or O. Palmer Robertson?

Second, for Paul and virtually all Jews (and non-Jews in Mediterranean and Hellenistic culture) of his time, the group was primary and the individual secondary. This is an essential point to grasp for interpretation of Paul and the NT. Modern westerners tend to view social reality in the opposite way: the individual is primary and the group secondary. So the individual is viewed as standing on his own, and corporate concerns are subordinated to individual concerns. One's view of the group is conditioned by one's view of the individual so that the group both draws its identity from the individuals in the

group and is seen as merely a collection of individuals. But I would contend that Paul's (and his culture's) perspective was essentially corporate. The individual was not viewed as standing on her own, but was seen as embedded in the group to which she belonged. Corporate concerns generally took precedence over individual concerns, and when it did not, this was judged as wrong (110).

A statement like this invites so many qualifications and counterexamples that it seems pretty useless. Paul himself is very much the odd man out in [Rom 9:1-5](#). His own people-group regarded him as a renegade Jew. Likewise, the Jewish Christians in Rome were outliers in relation to mainstream Judaism. Cut off from the Jewish community.

Yes, they form alternative communities, but that's a bottom up process, not a top down process. The Christian movement was a grass roots movement—recruiting individuals. Picking them off here and there.

Applied individually, Christian calling refers to conversion, when one comes to share in the name and attendant blessings of the eschatological messianic community. To be sure, election and its

appellation (i.e., calling) have to do with eschatological salvation, which necessarily affects individuals. But both of these divine actions apply first and foremost to the people of God as a group, and then to individuals as members of the elect people.⁷ Therefore, election and calling are conditional upon faith in Jesus Christ. In traditional theological terminology, Paul's use of the OT in Romans 9:1-9 argues for an Arminian rather than a Calvinistic interpretation of Romans 9, albeit on untraditional grounds (352).

So Abasciano's version of corporate election is conditional election, where God chooses believers. But that's essentially individualistic. God isn't choosing a group. God doesn't make them a group. Rather, God is choosing individuals who implicitly comprise a group (of believers), apart from any action on God's part. What makes them a group isn't God's choice or election, but the fact that, as believers, they share something in common.

iii) By contrast, unconditional election radically undercuts individualism, for membership in that group is based on God's unilateral grace rather than the responsiveness of this or that individual.

What Paul says about Jews, Gentiles, and Christians, whether of their place in God's plan, or their election, or their salvation, or how they should think or behave, he says from a corporate perspective which views the group as primary and those he speaks about as embedded in the group. These individuals act as members of the group to which they belong, and what happens to them happens by virtue of their membership in the group (112).

i) Well, it's often true at the historical level that what happens to them individually is bound up with their social identity. For instance, the righteous remnant goes into exile with the apostate majority. They suffer alike.

But does that also apply to "their place in God's plan, or their election, or their salvation"? Does the group drag down the individual? Take him with them to hell?

Doesn't God's plan distinguish the fate of individuals from the fate of groups? Are they conterminous?

ii) I don't think the corporate perspective is primary. Rather, the divine perspective is primary. Corporate Christian identity is the result of something God does. That's secondary. The effect of something else. What's

primary is what causes that outcome. What's primary isn't corporate election or individual election, but *divine* election.

Thus, I agree with Wright's basic approach, which takes Romans 11 to describe the salvation of the Church of Jews and Gentiles in Jesus the Messiah, and to convince a majority Gentile church in conflict over Jew-Gentile issues of a mission which includes—and I would stress, prioritizes—Jews.²³² The fact that Paul began his discussion of the whole matter by redefining Israel as those who believe in Jesus Christ (or at least believing Jews) should alert us to the probability that Paul has thus laid the foundation for understanding the salvation of Israel described at the end of the discussion (116).

This raises another issue. Much of the time Abasciano describes the church as the new Israel in ways that seem indistinguishable from a Reformed amillennialist like O. Palmer Robertson—or a New Perspective preterist like N. T. Wright.

However, many Arminians are also dispensationalists. The Society of Evangelical Arminians has been plugging Abasciano's work on Rom 9, ever-eager to find a new club to whack Calvinism, but the question is whether his case for an Arminian interpretation of Rom 9 can be extracted from an eschatology and/or ecclesiology which seems to be diametrically opposed to the dispensationalism that many Arminians hold dear.

Paul's allusions reveal that his calling language speaks of the naming/identification/recognition of God's covenant people. Even near the end of the chapter Paul is still speaking of calling (9:25-26), where it is crystal clear that he speaks of the naming of God's people as his sons (350).

For Paul, the divine call is not a gospel summons that irresistibly creates a response of faith and obedience; rather it is a naming of those who are in Christ through faith as his covenant people (352).

i) Abasciano doesn't spell out why he thinks that's significant. But, reading between the lines, he apparently imagines that this undercuts the Reformed category of effectual calling. If so, the inference is fallacious.

ii) Apropos (i), effectual calling isn't dependant on Pauline linguistic usage, as if dogmatic terminology has to match or map onto Biblical terminology. Effectual calling is a

theological category based on a range of Biblical data.
Based on concepts, not words.

iii) Moreover, there's no reason to think Paul's usage in Rom 9 is definitive. That's just a sampling of Pauline usage. Why assume that Paul's usage is uniform?

iv) There are Pauline examples where election and calling are clearly predestinarian or "effectual" (e.g. [Rom 8:29-30](#); [Eph 1:4](#); [2 Tim 1:9](#)).

We have observed a dynamic interaction between God's sovereignty and human will and action in the OT texts that has been suggestive for understanding Paul's rhetoric. Paul regarded God as both omnipotent (cf. Gen 18:14) and just, one who would never treat the wicked and the righteous indiscriminately. He held a conception of the divine sovereignty that found God to maintain ultimate control while limiting his own determinations to some extent so that he might respond to the free will of his creatures and grant them important roles in the outworking of his cosmic plan of salvation (352).

Paul speaks not of unconditional eternal decrees regarding individual election and salvation, but of

the corporate election and naming of God's people (352).

i) What is that supposed to mean, exactly? Does Abasciano mean Paul doesn't use the terminology of Reformed scholasticism in Rom 9? Is so, big deal. Arminius uses lots of scholastic terminology you don't find in Pauline usage, either.

ii) Even if Paul didn't speak of "eternal" election in Rom 9, the eternal aspect of election can still be a presupposition of Paul's discussion. Paul doesn't come to Rom 9 in a vacuum. Paul brings to Rom 9 a Jewish view of God. Take the eternal creator God of Rom 1.

So even if the perspective of Rom 9 is largely focused on redemptive history, that's not where God first comes into the picture. Paul's God is responsible for the historical process in the first place. So what God is doing in history reflects back on God's prehistoric purpose for history.

iii) In addition, Rom 9 comes on the heels of [Rom 8:29](#): "for those whom God chose beforehand, he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son."

(BTW, when I render *proginosko* as "choose beforehand," that's not a Calvinistic rendering. That's the definition given in BDAG, 866b.)

That's what lies behind God's activity in the patriarchal narratives and the Exodus. Redemptive history is the outworking of that antemundane plan.

And I'm just confining my immediate analysis to Romans. Yet that aspect of Pauline theology is attested in other Pauline writings (e.g. Eph 1).

Paul's focus on faith in Christ establishes his covenantal theology upon grace, for the divine favor is provided in Christ/the New Covenant and is accessed (Rom 5:2) and maintained freely through faith in Christ. For Paul, grace and faith go hand in hand; faith is what makes effective possession of the promises of God according to grace (Rom 4:16) (355).

This sidesteps the question concerning the source of faith. On Abasciano's construction, divine grace is ultimately reactionary rather than proactive—responsive to human faith. God makes a gracious promise, but only believers are the beneficiaries of that promise. Which is fine as far as it goes, but what makes them believers in the first place? Does that come naturally to sinners? Or do sinners have a predisposition that's antithetical to faith (e.g. [Rom 8:7](#); [1 Cor 2:14](#))? If so, what's the differential factor? Why are some people believers while others are unbelievers? Does faith originate with the sinner, or does that have an outside source (e.g. [1 Cor 2:13](#)).

While the vocabulary of God's righteousness is rich and multifaceted, to

a significant degree it should be understood covenantally as God's faithfulness to fulfill his promises. Likewise, the vocabulary of human righteousness should be understood as referring especially (though by no means exclusively) to covenant membership (356).

Here, Abasciano is redefining the traditional Protestant doctrine of justification according to the New Perspective on Paul. Yet, to my knowledge, classical Arminianism reaffirms the traditional Protestant understanding of justification.

If Arminians accept his interpretation of Rom 9, that commits them to the New Perspective on Paul in this respect. Are they aware of that?

To begin with, we have seen that the background of Romans 9:9/Genesis 18:10, 14 identifies the ultimate purpose of Abraham's covenantal election to be the fulfillment of the Lord's promise to Abraham. In the context of Genesis, God's promise is to culminate in the blessing of all the nations of the world in Abraham. This is

the purpose of Abraham's election according to Genesis 18:17-19. All of this in turn suggests that the debated phrase ἡ κἀτι ἐκλογῆς προ, ἧς οὐκ ἐστὶν ἔθνη/ ἧς οὐκ ἐστὶν ἔθνη in Romans 9:11 refers to the same purpose of election, 18 found as it is in the Abraham cycle of Genesis to which Paul continues to allude in Romans 9:10-13 (cf. Rom 4 and its concern for inheritance of the Abrahamic promises). Thus, Paul's use of the Old Testament again steers us away from an individualistic predestinarian reading of Romans 9, now specifically of 9:10-13, and helps us to see that Paul maintains focus upon God's right to identify whom he will as his covenant people. More specifically, he maintains focus upon God's plan of including Gentiles in the covenant and the necessary consequence of excluding unbelieving Jews, since faith is the means by which the whole world, Jews and Gentiles, can participate in the covenant and its blessings (357).

Why does Abasciano imagine that a divine plan which includes Gentile believers while excluding Jewish unbelievers is at odds with predestination?

This perspective is confirmed by the fact that 9:10-13 actually supports 9:8, furnishing further substantiation for the contention that it is the children of the promise (rather than the children of the flesh), who believe in Christ and have the Spirit, that are regarded as children of God and covenant seed (357-58).

i) Once again, how is that opposed to predestination?

ii) Moreover, “children of the flesh” represents a classic principle of corporate identity. You are not counted as a discrete individual, but as a member of your clan, tribe, &c. In Abasciano’s own words, “These individuals act as members of the group to which they belong, and what happens to them happens by virtue of their membership in the group.”

From a corporate perspective, we should treat Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, Israel and Edom the same way. But, of course, God differentiates.

Hence, Paul’s consideration of the divine decision about Jacob and Esau before

they were born applies to the character of Israel's corporate election and is employed to argue that the fulfillment of God's purpose/promises to bless the world rests not on human works but on his sovereign freedom to designate whom he will as his covenant people on whatever basis he chooses. Individuals figure into the picture by consequence of their participation or lack thereof in the corporate covenant on the terms God lays down (358).

Which is entirely consistent with predestination.

Surely it would be reading too much into Paul's observation about the prenatal divine decision about Isaac's children to contend that he subtly meant to teach that God makes such a decision about each individual concerning his eternal destiny prior to his own birth (358).

Actually, that's not a "subtle" inference from what Paul says. Rather, that's fairly overt.

It is better to take Paul's own cue by paying attention to the interpretation of the observation that he provides: that God's purpose to save the world is accomplished by an election based not on works, but on God's own decision about who he will designate as his covenant people. Forlines, 258, is correct to point out that, "The fact that God's choice of Jacob was made before he was born does not within itself prove that God's choice was not by works. God in his foreknowledge could have chosen Jacob on the basis of works if He had desired to do so." Indeed, some have astutely argued that Paul here counters a certain stream of Jewish theology, represented by Philo, Leg. All. 3.88, that took Jacob's election to have rested on God's foreknowledge of his deeds (e;rga) (see Dunn, 543; Moo, 583 n. 60). This seems probable, but even if not, it at

least shows contemplation of God's foreknowledge to be a factor in the first century discussion about the basis of election. This suggests that Paul was not arguing that the fact of the prenatal divine decision necessarily proves his conclusion, but that it supports and emphasizes it; his comment provides an interpretation of the event, and the interpretation he provides denies works as a basis of election and highlights God's freedom in election"(359n20).

i) Yet Paul's point in 9:11 is that God didn't take their predisposition into account.

ii) Moreover, Jacob is hardly a paragon of pious faith. In Genesis, Jacob is a conman. I think the reader of the Jacob cycle would rightly conclude that God went out of his way to pick such unpromising material just to prove that the fulfillment of his covenant with Abraham depends on God rather than man. God chooses Jacob in spite of who he's like, not because of who he's like.

Jacob is surely a weak link in the chain. It's only the providential orchestration of events that keeps the line of promise from breaking down at this juncture (and others).

Indeed, Paul's intertextual use of the concept supports the claim, based on the deduction that the works/calling contrast of 9:12 is equivalent to the familiar Pauline works/faith contrast used earlier in Romans, that its reappearance in 9:12 implies faith as the condition of election in the New Covenant.²⁰ For the divine call is pronounced over those who believe (358).

- i)** Jacob wasn't a believer in the womb, so God didn't elect him on that basis.
- ii)** Moreover, Jacob was pretty faithless until God put him through a refining process.
- iii)** Faith is not a condition of election or calling in [Rom 8:29-30](#), which is programmatic for Rom 9.

*See esp. our exegesis of Rom 9:7-8 and the discussion of the phrase *ta. te,kna th/j evpaggeli,aj* and the concept of calling in ch. 4 above. It is significant that the designating call of God spoken of in Rom 4:17 is based on faith, and in the context of establishing the Gentiles as part of Abraham's*

covenant seed, “calls the things not existing as existing,” while the indisputably naming call of God in Rom

9:25-26 calls “the one who was not my people, ‘My People’,” and “sons of the living God,” “and the one not beloved, ‘My Beloved’,” also referring to Gentiles who are said shortly thereafter to attain righteousness by faith” (Rom 9:30).

Similarly, Romans 9:15’s citation of Exodus 33:19 cannot be interpreted as some sort of statement of God’s righteousness in unconditionally electing individuals to salvation or damnation as was common in the past and as is still advocated by a handful of influential commentators. This verse requires a detailed exegesis founded upon the analysis of its Old Testament background which we have provided in chapter three that goes beyond the scope of our present purposes (359).

Actually, it doesn’t. What matters is how the verse functions in Paul’s argument. How does Paul use the verse? Paul’s framework supplies the primary context.

Here we can only make a few suggestive observations. First, Paul's use of the Old Testament in Romans 9:1-9 urges us to take 9:15 as a statement of God's merciful character and freedom to determine the basis on which he bestows his mercy, and therefore, who will receive it. Moreover, his mercy in this intertextual context again has to do with covenant and election. In Exodus, God speaks in relation to the question of whether he will again acknowledge Israel as his covenant people. Thus, Paul is again defending God's right to choose whom he will as his covenant people generally and his righteousness in electing the Church specifically. As for the concept of the hardening of Israel to which Romans 9:15 is directly connected, our examination of Paul's use of Exodus 32-34 would suggest both a divine judicial hardening rather than a divine prevenient decree and a stress on Israel's own character and guilt (359-60).

You can't simply reduce Paul's use of Exodus to the OT situation, for Paul is taking that back a step further. It's not that what Paul says is at odds with the original setting. Rather, Paul is going behind the scenes to consider God's ulterior purpose. What is God's goal in history?

Paul used this hardening of Israel as an explanation of her unbelief to defend himself against criticisms based on the failure of his mission among Jews in 2 Corinthians 3:7-18, again in allusion to Exodus 32-34 (and again, see below). This all touches upon the question of whether in Romans 9-11 Paul presents the hardening of Israel, and therefore God, as the cause of Israel's unbelief or as the result of it. The data we have been reviewing suggests that the answer is not simply one or the other, but a complex combination of both. First and foremost, Paul's use of Exodus 32 at this point would suggest that his emphasis is on the guilt of Israel for their own sin and unbelief, and consequent rejection from the covenant under its fatal curse. That is certainly the emphasis of Exodus

32-34, the context of which is all the more significant for Paul's viewpoint, since he returns to it again when he first addresses the concept of hardening in Romans 9:14-18 (cf. Ex 33:19). But this self-hardening has brought the judgment of God upon Israel, contributing all the more to their sin and unbelief, and naturally leading them to the ultimate apostasy—the rejection of Christ—bringing upon them an even more severe hardening according to the cycle of judicial hardening, without absolutely preventing any from believing (cf. Rom 1:18-32; 11:5, 7-10, 13-14, 23, 30-31). (213).

i) But Paul doesn't say divine hardening is a response to Israel's "self-hardening."

ii) Moreover, Paul isn't confining himself to the disbelief of the Exodus generation, but Jewish unbelievers in his own time. And Paul tells us in Rom 11 that divine hardening is instrumental to the evangelization of the Gentiles—and subsequent restoration of Israel. Therefore, it can't be an incidental response to Jewish unbelief. Rather, that is part of God's grand strategy.

Moreover, Paul argues throughout the passage that God's judgment and hardening of Israel was for the purpose of mercy to both the Gentiles and the Jews (see esp. 9:22-29; 11:11-32). It would appear that Paul draws this general idea from Exodus 32-34 as he interprets his own ministry through its narrative (216).

In which case divine hardening is the cause of Jewish unbelief rather than the result of Jewish unbelief inasmuch as Jewish unbelief is a premeditated means to an end.

It is also noteworthy that interpreters have found the traditional theological tension between divine sovereignty and human will/action in the interaction between God and his servant Moses in Exodus 32-34.

Keep in mind that Paul doesn't say there's a tension between divine and human agency. That's not an exegetical conclusion. Rather, that's simply an impression which some interpreters have, because they can't harmonize the two in their own minds. Paul himself doesn't indicate that this is a tension in his own thinking.

For that is yet another prominent motif widely recognized in Romans 9-11. Paul's allusion to a context filled with dynamic interaction between divine and human roles in the plan of salvation would suggest a model for understanding his musings over these issues. Just as the Lord limited his own determinations to some extent by granting to Moses a decisive role in his plan, and to a lesser extent, to Israel herself vis-à-vis the opportunity for repentance, so does he now limit his sovereignty, giving both Paul and Israel (and Gentiles for that matter) decisive roles in the outworking of his plan for the salvation of the world. While God remains in control of the overall direction of everything, he does not determine every minute detail, but responds to the wills and actions of his creatures in general, and Paul and Israel in particular. His sovereignty involves the prerogative to relent of judgment in

response to intercession and repentance *(217).*

i) Abasciano's statement is ambiguous. What does he mean by "dynamic interaction between divine and human roles in the plan of salvation"?

a) Does he mean humans have a role in the planning stage?

b) Or does he mean humans have a role as a result of the plan?

(a) doesn't follow from (b). Humans aren't planners in the plan of salvation. They don't coauthor the plan with God. God doesn't solicit their input in the planning phase. After all, they don't even exist at that stage.

Rather, the plan assigns a role to humans. Their historical role is a result of God's prehistoric plan.

ii) What does he mean by saying the human participants have a "decisive role" in the outcome? Does he mean, for instance, that the Jews could scuttle God's plan for the salvation of the gentiles? Does God delegate or relegate the eternal fate of one human being to second parties? Does your salvation or damnation depend on whether another human being is fickle or faithful?

iii) Since, in Rom 9, the Jews are disobedient, wouldn't we expect their disobedience to sabotage the outworking of God's plan unless their disobedience is, itself, a planned event which furthers the implementation of the plan?

iv) To say God limits his “determination” is ambiguous. To say that God didn’t implement his plan through direct divine agency doesn’t mean he limits his “determination.” Everything can be predetermined even though God employs second causes to bring that about. On the face of it, Abasciano’s inference is fallacious.

v) The question of how a predestinarian God interacts with rational agents raises issues parallel to how a timeless God interacts with timebound agents. For instance, if a timeless God has a dialogue with a timebound creature, a timeless God will effect a temporal sequence. The human will hear God speak to him before or after the human speaks to God. That doesn’t mean God is literally waiting for the human speaker to finish. Rather, that’s just a special case of how a timeless God effects a chronological order—rather like a director who films a screenplay. In the screenplay, one thing follows another. And the final cut reflects that sequence.

But that doesn’t mean the screenplay is shot in that order. A screenplay is often shot out of sequence, then edited into a chronological sequence.

Likewise, a predestinarian God will relate to human beings on their own level. And this is empirically equivalent to what we find in the Pentateuchal narratives.

Take a boy who hides his father’s car keys. Maybe his father saw where the boy buried the keys. But the father has a conversation with his son. Questions him about the missing car keys. The father already knows the answer. But he wants his son to show him where the keys are buried. He’s using this conversation to draw him out, make him assume responsibility for his actions.

He will feign ignorance. Ask a series of rhetorically leading questions which increasingly reveal the fact that he knew the answer all along. This is not a learning experience for the father, but the son.

vi) Abasciano also needs to show how he distinguishes his hermeneutical approach from a Mormon or neotheist reading.

vii) Keep in mind that Abasciano's argument marks a tacit shift from exegetical theology to philosophical theology. He's postulating what must be the case for God to "dynamically interact" with humans. That's not an exegetical datum. That's not something given in the text itself. Rather, that's a philosophical background consideration.

Nothing wrong with considering background factors, but his position has no antecedent advantage over the philosophical alternatives.

Prevenient grace

Brian Abasciano is president of SEA. He's a well-trained NT scholar. So it's instructive to see his positive case for prevenient grace:

As we have noted, because human beings are fallen and sinful, they are not able to think, will, nor do anything good in and of themselves, including believe the gospel of Christ (see the description of Total Depravity above). Therefore, desiring the salvation of all and having provided atonement for all people (see "Atonement for All" above), God continues to take the initiative for the purpose of bringing all people to salvation by calling all people everywhere to repent and believe the gospel (Acts 17:30; cf. Matt 28:18-20), and by enabling those who hear the gospel to respond to it positively in faith. Unaided by grace, man cannot even choose to please God or to believe the promise of salvation held out in the gospel. As Jesus said in John 6:44, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him." But thanks be to God, Jesus also promised, "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself" (John 12:32).

Thus, the Father and the Son draw all people to Jesus, enabling them to come to Jesus in faith.

Continuing Jesus' mission to save the world, the Holy Spirit has come to "convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment" (John 16:8). Even though unbelievers "are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart" (Eph 4:18), the Lord opens people's hearts to respond positively to the gospel message (Acts 16:14).

All of this is what is known in traditional theological language as God's prevenient grace. The term "prevenient" simply means "preceding." Thus, "prevenient grace" refers to God's grace that precedes salvation, including that part of salvation known as regeneration, which is the beginning of eternal spiritual life granted to all who trust in Christ (John 1:12-13). Prevenient grace is also sometimes called enabling grace or pre-regenerating grace. This is God's unmerited favor toward totally depraved people, who are unworthy of God's blessing and unable to seek God or trust in him in and of themselves. Accordingly, Acts

18:27 indicates that we believe through grace, placing grace preveniently (i.e. logically prior) to faith as the means by which we believe. It is the grace that, among other things, frees our wills to believe in Christ and his gospel. As Titus 2:11 says, "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people."

<http://evangelicalarminians.org/the-facts-of-salvation-a-summary-of-arminian-theology-the-biblical-doctrines-of-grace/>

i) We might start by asking what motivates the doctrine of prevenient grace. The answer, I believe, is that Arminians wish to avoid Pelagianism or semi-Pelagianism. They wish to stake out a mediating position between Calvinism and Pelagianism. So they assert the priority and necessity of divine grace in relation to faith. God, not man, must take the initiative.

ii) What's noteworthy about Abasciano's documentation is that not one of his prooftexts suffices to prove his distinctive claim. It's striking that he isn't even aware of the palpable disconnect.

On the face of it, none of his prooftexts selects for prevenient grace rather than irresistible grace. Yet that contrast is crucial to his position.

Notice what I'm not saying. In this post I'm not attempting to show that his prooftexts really teach irresistible grace. Rather, I'm commenting on what they don't show.

None of his prooftexts indicates that the grace in question merely enables the unregenerate to believe. None of his prooftexts indicates that the grace in question frees the will to either believe or disbelieve the Gospel. They don't say or imply that the recipient of this grace is at liberty to respond positively or negatively.

Even if his prooftexts were consistent with resistible grace, they seem to be equally consistent with irresistible grace. Likewise, none of his prooftexts distinguishes pre-regenerating grace from regenerating grace.

For some odd reason, Absciano acts as if his prooftexts obviously establish his claim, even though they evidently fall short of what he claims for them. Yet, presumably, these are his best prooftexts for prevenient grace.

iii) It's also strange to see him quote [Tit 2:11](#) in this context. Given the Arminian interpretation of "all," why isn't this a prooftext for universal salvation rather than prevenient grace? Admittedly, there's more than one way to render the Greek syntax, but given the translation he quoted, how does he avoid universalism? (And if he takes issue with the translation, why quote that version?)

Likewise, given the Arminian interpretation of "all," why doesn't [Jn 12:32](#) teach universal salvation? If I draw water, does the water refuse me?

iv) Finally, are contemporary Arminians still committed to the historic fall of Adam? Don't many modern Arminians subscribe to human evolution? If so, how do they finesse original sin, which is a presupposition of prevenient grace?

Gathering the children of Jerusalem

Mt 23:37 is one of the most popular Arminian prooftexts. I've discussed in in some detail a few years ago:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2014/07/o-jerusalem-jerusalem.html>

i) But I'd like to revisit the issue. One complication is how to translate the passage. In order to render the statement in idiomatic English, translations obscure the fact that the same verb (thelo) is used both in reference to Jesus and Jerusalem:

Jerusalem, O Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those who are sent to you! How often have I wanted (ēthelēsa | ἠθέλησα) to gather your children together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! (ēthelēsate | ἠθελήσατε).

It's difficult to capture the contrast in smooth English, using the same synonym. Thelo can mean to wish/will/want/intend/decide/desire, &c. So in that respect, the point of contrast lies between something Jesus wanted to happen and something Jerusalem didn't want to happen. For now I'll stick with the word "want," but revisit that (see below).

ii) Apropos (i), Arminians typically overlook the fact that the passage has three subjects rather than two subjects. It doesn't say:

I wanted to gather Jerusalem but Jerusalem didn't want to be gathered

I wanted to gather the children of Jerusalem but they didn't want to be gathered

Rather, it says:

I wanted to gather the children of Jerusalem but Jerusalem didn't want me to gather her children.

So in that respect the point of contrast doesn't lie between those Jesus wants to gather and their disinclination to be gathered, but between those Jesus wants to gather, and the disinclination of a third party (Jerusalem) to let Jesus gather the second party (the children of Jerusalem). The object of Christ's desire isn't Jerusalem but the children of Jerusalem. It doesn't say the object of his desire rebuffed his desire. It doesn't say he reached out to the children of Jerusalem but they spurned his overtures.

iii) Another question is the nuance of the verb, and whether it has the same nuance in each occurrence. In English, "wish" has a weaker connotation than "will". If Jesus meant that it was his wish to gather the children of Jerusalem, but Jerusalem was resistant, that raises the question of whether he got his wish.

If, however, it means he willed to gather the children of Jerusalem, but Jerusalem was unwilling, it's harder to see how he could fail to accomplish what he willed to accomplish. "Willing" something to be the case is stronger than merely wishing something to be the case.

Likewise, if he "intended" (or "decided") to gather the children of Jerusalem, but he was thwarted, then that means Jesus was mistaken. Intention carries the expectation of success. You intend (or decide) to do something if you think it lies within your power to do it. If you don't think you have the ability to pull it off, then that's something you hope for, not something you're in a position to decide the outcome on.

iv) It would be consistent with open theism for the Son of God to intend or decide something but belatedly discover that he didn't have the foresight or mojo to carry out his intentions. So this would make it a better proof-text for open theism than classical Arminianism. So if the verb has the stronger nuance, that's a problem for classical Arminianism.

v) Returning to (ii), if Jesus wills to gather the children of Jerusalem, but the Jerusalem is unwilling, it doesn't mean his design was overruled unless gathering the children of Jerusalem somehow depends on the cooperation of Jerusalem. Remember, there are three subjects in play. Rather, Jesus and Jerusalem both have designs on the children of Jerusalem—contrary intentions.

What if the thrust of the statement is just the antithesis of the Arminian interpretation. Jesus gathers her children despite the opposition of Jerusalem. His success does not depend on whether Jerusalem complies. After all, he's not even attempting to gather Jerusalem. Rather, the children of Jerusalem are distinct from Jerusalem.

vi) What does Jerusalem—in contrast to her children—represent? Presumably, the religious establishment. Most of the religious leaders were hostile to his ministry. But that doesn't mean they have the power to veto his outreach to

the children of Jerusalem. He doesn't need their permission to gather Jews to himself. Indeed, throughout the Gospels, he draws followers despite the vehement opposition of the religious authorities. They can't compete. They are impotent to stop him. So what if the thrust of the statement is actually that Jesus will gather the children of Jerusalem in spite of everything the religious establishment does to obstruct his ministry? Throughout the Gospels, Jesus bypasses the religious authorities. They can't stand in his way. He doesn't require their consent to save Jews in their midst. He prevails while his adversaries will be left out in the cold.

Whoever

This is strikingly confused:

<https://www.billmounce.com/monday-with-mounce/does-john-3-16-say-whoever>

i) John doesn't say God loves the world. John didn't write in English. We've been conditioned by a traditional rendering, but that's prejudicial.

ii) John says God loves the kosmos. So the question is what kosmos means in Johannine usage.

iii) Yes, pas is indefinite, but that's not independent of the sentence in which it functions. Pas is qualified by "those who believe". So the combination makes it definite. Not "everyone" in general, but everyone who believes.

iv) There's a danger that when people read the Greek NT, they're not reading it from a Greek perspective. They're not getting inside the Greek. Rather, they're superimposing their knowledge of an English translation back onto the Greek. Not translating from Greek to English, but substituting English connotations for Greek words.

Joel Green on penal substitution

Joel Green is a leading Arminian NT scholar and critic of penal substitution. I'm going to comment on some of his objections to Tom Schreiner's exposition of penal substitution in J. Beilby & P. Eddy, eds. *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views* (IVP 2006).

By what logic can it be assumed that anger is quenched by acting on it in this way? That is, even if we grant these two claims regarding the divine "penalty," on what basis does it follow that Jesus' dying quenches the anger directed at us by God? Does the transfer of guilt satisfy the demands of justice? (112).

i) Problem with Green's criticism is that he's raising a philosophical objection to an exegetical question. Schreiner is doing exegesis, not apologetics. Schreiner's aim is not to defend what the Bible says; he takes the revelatory status of Scripture as a starting-point in this discussion. His aim is to interpret the witness of Scripture regarding penal substitution. There are well-worn objections to whether guilt is transferable from one party to another, but while that's worth discussing, that's a separate issue. That can be a question of inerrancy, where a critic of penal substitution admits and rejects the witness of Scripture.

ii) Also, even at a philosophical level, it isn't necessary to defend penal substitution directly (which doesn't mean that can't be done). If, say, one can defend the revelatory status of Scripture, then that indirectly defends whatever Scripture teaches.

Given the anthropathy at work in attributing this sort of anger to Yahweh, can we so easily escape the reality that redirecting anger at an innocent party does not (or at least need not) return the guilty party to good graces? (112).

The human family, not God, needs transformation, a reading that does not mesh well with this emphasis on the atonement as assuaging God's anger (114).

Penal substitution doesn't require a category of literal divine anger or wrath, &c. It can easily translate that colorful language into a more abstract concept like divine justice. Indeed, the necessary presupposition of penal substitution isn't divine wrath, but divine justice. That's the essential principle.

If this logic is explanatory of the divine economy, how are we to understand those biblical accounts in which forgiveness is extended apart from the

satisfaction of wrath (e.g., Mk 2:1-11)? (112).

That's a dubious argument from silence. The fact that Jesus forgave sinners like the paralytic without explicit reference to penal substitution or vicarious atonement doesn't imply that remission is independent of penal substitution or vicarious atonement. Indeed, Jesus would be working at cross-purposes to extend forgiveness apart from his redemptive death. It's more logical to infer that when Jesus forgave the paralytic, that was with a view to his impending death on the cross. That's why he came from heaven in the first place. His redemptive death is the presumptive basis for forgiving sins, in advance of his redemptive death. The relationship is teleological rather than chronological. That's why OT saints can be forgiven ahead of time.

And although that's more abstract, it remains personal. Justice and injustice are properties of moral agents.

Green's alternative disconnects the forgiveness which Christ extended to sinners like the paralytic from his death on the cross, as if Christ didn't have that in mind. It is in his proleptic capacity as the Redeemer that Christ forgave the paralytic. It makes no sense to disengage forgiveness from atonement. That renders the atonement superfluous.

Schreiner has not addressed one of the principal questions raised against the model of penal substitutionary atonement, namely, that it presumes a

breakdown of the inner-trinitarian life of God...How can one claim that the Son had to die on the cross in order to propitiate God's anger? (114).

That objection is misconceived. The Son didn't die to placate the Father's wrath. Divine justice is an attribute which the Trinitarian persons share in common. Although vicarious atonement to satisfy divine justice involves a contrast between Father and Son at the level of action, it does not involve a contrast between Father and Son at the level of justice. It's not as if the Father is the repository of divine justice, rather than the Son. No one person of the Trinity is sole custodian of cosmic justice. As an essential divine attribute, justice is common property of the Father, Son, and Spirit alike.

I'm unsure how the model of penal substitutionary atonement generates transformed life (114).

Green acts as though penal substitution is defective if it fails to address salvation as transformation. But that assumes salvation should be reducible to a single overarching principle. Likewise, it assumes that salvation and atonement ought to be conterminous.

If, however, sin has two basic components—moral corruption and culpability—then it's logical for salvation to have corresponding components. Penal substitution atones for

guilt. That's the work of the Son. Sanctification generates transformation. That's the work of the Spirit. These are distinct, but complementary categories. It would be pointless to sanctify hellbound sinners.

Focussed as it is on the individual, on forensic judgment and on the moment of justification, how can this model keep from undermining any emphasis on salvation as transformation and from obscuring the social and cosmological dimensions of salvation? If the purpose of God will be actualized in the restoration of all things, then how is this purpose served by a theory of penal substitution? How does the model of penal substitutionary atonement carry within itself the theological resolution of racism? What becomes of the soteriological motivation for engaging in the care of God's creation? Against the backdrop of texts like Col 1:15-20 and Eph 2, these are not peripheral questions (114).

i) It's unclear what Green means by the restoration of all things. Only a universalist subscribes to that imagery without qualification. But in orthodox theology, not all agents will be reconciled to God. The damned are permanently alienated from God.

ii) It's unclear what Green means by the "cosmological dimension of salvation" and the "care of God's creation". Although the NT uses "cosmological" language, it doesn't use that in the modern astronomical sense. Most of the universe is lifeless and inhospitable to biological life.

If he's indulging in a radical chic allusion to ecology, that stretches the concept of salvation. It's anachronistic to act as though the NT rubberstamps modern environmentalism, green energy, anthropogenic global warming, &c.

The gift of faith

1. Freewill theists say faith is the empty hand that grasps the offer of salvation. Faith is not a product of saving grace; rather, saving grace is the result of faith.

Let's compare that to [Eph 2:8](#). Here's what one commentator and Greek scholar says:

In Greek, events as a whole are treated as neuter singular things with neuter articles, (e.g., to pisteuein, "believing"), neuter relative pronouns (e.g., Eph 5:5), or neuter demonstrative pronouns, as in v8b (also, for example, 6:1; 1 Cor 6:6,8; Phil 1:22,28; Col 3:20; 1 Thes 5:18; 1 Tim 2:1-3). Hence, the antecedent of touto is the whole event: "being saved by grace through faith". One implication of this proper understanding of touto is that all the components of the event are also referenced as originating not from human capacity or exertion but as God's gift. This means that even the believer's act of believing comes from God, as is said more explicitly by Paul elsewhere:

"For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him..." (Phil 1:29). This is part of the evidence of Protestantism's historic position that salvation is sola gratia and sola fide). Humans contribute nothing of their own to this salvation, since even believing (which the elect are indeed enabled to do) is a divine gift (cf. Rom 3:24-25). In the context of Eph 2:8, the key to this is what Paul had been driving home so forcefully up until now: Before God's gracious intervention, believers were hopelessly dead, with their wills imprisoned by nature in acts that led only to transgression and sin (2:1-5a,12). S. M. Baugh, Ephesians (Lexham Press, 2016), 160-61.

So the gift in the second clause refers, via touto, to "For by grace you have been saved through faith." So God's gift is salvation by grace through faith". Faith is included in the gift. Faith isn't something by which Christians receive the gift, but a part of God's gracious saving endowment.

2. On a related note, freewill theists typically say that for something to be a gift, the recipient must be able to refuse it. Compare that to John Barclay's Paul and Gift (chap. 2), where he reviews different connotations of a "gift" or benefaction in antiquity. Take his category of "efficacy", where gift-giving is powerful, accomplishing its purpose—as when parents give the gift of life to their children or someone is rescued from death. In those situations, the recipient is passive and helpless.

By the same token, he cites a passage from Philo stressing the efficacy of grace to the point of human passivity and inactivity, attributing all to the sovereignty of God.

Moreover, in patronage system of the Roman Empire, a powerful benefactor isn't offering a gift. Rather, he confers a gift.

And the asymmetrical dynamic between social superiors and social inferiors in the ancient world is far more analogous to the relationship between God and creatures than birthday gifts and Christmas presents between peers.

The efficacious concept of gift-giving is incompatible with grace in freewill theism, which is resistible and therefore inefficacious.

Collectives

The scope of "all" figures in debates over the extent of the atonement. In Rom 5, Paul alternates between "all" and "many". That's striking because those aren't really synonyms. They don't have the same meaning. Yet he's using that terminology as if they have the same meaning.

That's in large part because he's constructing rhetorical parallels, where he compares and contrasts X of something with Y of something else. In that context, I'd say "all" is a way of denoting collectives.

It's like comparing one of something to one of something else, only these are aggregates, so he needs a referring term that indicates a class of individuals.

Collectives needn't include every individual in kind. They can be a representative sample.

But it's necessary in human discourse to be able to refer to groups or make general statements about people, so I think "all" is a linguistic device to make statements of that sort. We need a word for that type of referent. How else would Bible writers be able to talk about collectives, if not to say "all" or "many".

Indeed, in that context, "all" may be a misleading translation. If Paul is using a Greek word to denote collectives, then the English word "all" has the wrong connotations.

This really isn't discussed in commentaries or lexicons, because it's not in the first instance about the meaning of particular words, but something back of that. More about

the function of verbal tokens and referring expressions to denote groups or sample groups, collectives, and representative classes. The concept is more philosophical than the meaning a particular word. It's about how to categorize reality. English has a larger vocabulary of specialized terms than Koine Greek to choose from.

Confirm your calling and election

Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall (2 Pet 1:10).

i) This is sometimes thought to pose a problem for Calvinism. If Calvinism is true, how can we do anything to make divine election more certain than it already is? Is it possible to drop out of the elect? A few brief clarifications:

ii) There's a danger of overinterpreting Peter's usage. We need to distinguish between technical usage and ordinary usage. When we encounter words like "election" and "calling," there's a risk of reading later dogmatic usage back into Peter's vocabulary. But we can't assume Peter is using "election" and "calling" in the sense of God's eternal, unconditional election, or effectual calling. That may overload the usage with subsequent refinements in theological nomenclature.

His usage may not be that specialized. Indeed, he may be using "election" and "calling" as synonyms, for emphasis. The same definite article governs both nouns. So the pairing may be rhetorical.

iii) If his usage is nontechnical, then "calling" and "election" refer to God's initiative in salvation. We are saved by grace. It begins with God.

iv) In Reformed theology, although regeneration is the result of God's prior, unilateral action, once a person is born again, there's a sense in which he can "cooperate" in the process of sanctification. Sanctification involves the

cultivation of godly attitudes. "Mortification of sin". Using the "means of grace". These are conscious actions on our part. Moreover, holiness is a matter of degree. Some Christians are more saintly than others. As A. A. Hodge and B. B. Warfield explain in their article on sanctification:

(1) The soul after regeneration continues dependent upon the constant gracious operations of the Holy Spirit, but is, through grace, able to cooperate with them.

(2) The sanctifying operations of the Spirit are supernatural, and yet effected in connection with and through the instrumentality of means: the means of sanctification being either internal, such as faith and the cooperation of the regenerated will with grace, or external, such as the word of God, sacraments, prayer, Christian fellowship, and the providential discipline of our heavenly Father.

(3) In this process the Spirit gradually completes the work of moral purification commenced in regeneration. The work has two sides: (a) the cleansing of the soul from sin and emancipation from its power, and (b) the development of the implanted principle of spiritual life and infused habits of grace, until the subject comes to the

stature of perfect manhood in Christ. Its effect is spiritually and morally to transform the whole man, intellect, affections, and will, soul, and body.

(4) The work proceeds with various degrees of thoroughness during life, but is never consummated in absolute moral perfection until the subject passes into glory.

v) In Reformed theology, "cooperation" with sanctifying grace isn't "synergistic" in the libertarian sense. Our cooperation is, itself, the result of grace. Moreover, the outcome is assured.

vi) Salvation begins with God's initiative, but it doesn't end where it begins. Having revived those who are dead in sin, they can pursue the journey of faith until they arrive at their final destination. In that way we "validate" God's initial intervention.

Pray for King Tut!

2 First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, **2** for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. **3** This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, **4** who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. **5** For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, **6** who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time (**1 Tim 2:1-6**).

Vv 2,6 constitute an Arminian or universalist proof-text. On this general interpretation, the scope of prayer is commensurate with the scope of redemption and/or salvation. We should pray for everyone because Jesus redeemed everyone and God wants everyone to be saved.

Suppose we grant that linkage. If so, that's actually an argument for limited atonement.

Take the purpose clause in v2, which either expresses the purpose or desired result of prayer for rulers. Why does Paul direct Christians to pray for rulers? Not for the ruler's sake (although that might be a fringe benefit), but for the sake of Christians. Pray for your rulers because their policies will,

for better or worse, impact the lives of Christians who live under their rule. Pray for wise, benevolent rulers.

But in that event, this is not a summons to pray for all rulers. Rather, it's only a summons to pray for rulers under whose jurisdiction you live, work, and worship. Contemporary rulers.

Given that rationale, it would be pointless to pray for dead rulers. Pointless for 1C Christians to pray for King Tut, Nebuchadnezzar, Alexander Great, &c. They do not, and never will, rule over you.

By the same token, it would be pointless to pray for future rulers or distant rulers whose policies can have no effect on you at your own time and place. Paul doesn't intend 1C Christians to pray for Napoleon, Montezuma, Disraeli, Catherine the Great, Cardinal Mazarin, Sun Yat-sen, Chairman Mao, or Teddy Roosevelt. For the administration of future rulers or distant rulers has absolutely no bearing on the lives of 1C Christians.

(To be sure, Christian readers need to mentally update this command, but the same restrictions apply.)

Not to mention the absurdity of a command (on the Arminian/universalist interpretation) to pray for rulers you never heard of. How could you? You have nothing to go on. You can't even get started.

So Paul can't be directing Christians to pray for all rulers, but only some rulers. For the scope of the prayer is qualified by the purpose clause. If, however, the scope of the prayer falls well short of universality, then, by parity of argument, so does the scope of redemption and/or salvation.

One can resist the conclusion by denying a parallel between the extent of prayer and the extent of atonement, but I'm just discussing the Arminian/universalist interpretation on its own grounds.

And even if one were to deny the parallel, the purpose clause is still damaging to the Arminian/universalist interpretation. Although it employs the same universal quantifier ("all") that's a running motif in the overall passage (vv1-6), the force of the quantifier in v2 is clearly delimited by the purpose clause. So Paul can and does use that quantifier in a restricted sense in the very context of the overall passage.

More generally, the Arminian/universalist interpretation carries the tacit implication that we should pray for people we never heard of, people we don't even know exist. Pray for generic persons, persons who, for all we know, may or may not exist—in the past, present, or future. A dragnet prayer for anonymous people, for nonentities, just to cover your bets.

Typically, in Scripture, prayer is more personal and specific. You pray with someone in mind. You don't pray for someone who might possibly exist. You don't pray for blanks.

Even in corporate prayer (e.g. Dan 9; Ezra 9; Nehemiah 9), it's prayer for members of the community to which the supplicant belongs. Like a small town where everyone knows everyone else. It envisions specific sins. It envisions a people with a common history. A known history.

Likewise, you can pray for a specific situation, like a natural disaster. You may not know the victims, but you know the conditions. In that respect, you still know what to pray for.

That, however, is very different than a prayer that's completely in the dark.

What does panta denote?

Freewill theists need to be more flexible about universal quantifiers ("all"). They seize on pas/panta to proof-text universal atonement, yet that's frequently employed as a hyperbolic or idiomatic generality. To take some Johannine examples:

"Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him, and he sat down and taught them" (Jn 8:2).

Does this mean every human being came to the temple that morning to hear Jesus?

How about: **"All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them" (Jn 10:8).**

Is Jesus saying all the OT prophets were thieves and robbers? Hardly.

Or this: **"By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (Jn 13:35).**

Does every human being know that? What about people who don't know any Christians?

Or this: **"Jesus answered him, 'I have spoken openly to the world. I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all Jews come together. I have said nothing in secret'" (Jn 18:20).**

Did that include Jews living in the Diaspora (e.g. Rome, Alexandria)?

What about: **"And they came to John and said to him, 'Rabbi, he who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you bore witness—look, he is baptizing, and all are going to him'" (Jn 3:26).**

Or this: **"Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?" (Jn 4:29).**

Or this: **"So when he came to Galilee, the Galileans welcomed him, having seen all that he had done in Jerusalem at the feast. For they too had gone to the feast" (Jn 4:45).**

Show and tell

A commenter left some remarks on this post:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2015/10/baptism-saves-you.html>

I will respond here. The commenter is Lutheran. Since I'm a Calvinist, I'll use Calvinism and Lutheranism as the frame of reference:

2. Does the N.T. assume the the sacraments are just symbols? If sacramentalists assume the reality why can you just assume they are merely symbols?

i) What I said was NT language is consistent with a symbolic interpretation. So, you'd need something additional to tip the balance either way.

ii) We have two sets of passages: those that index salvation to sacraments and those that index salvation to faith and repentance apart from sacraments.

How do we harmonize those passages? In theory, there are different ways:

a) Does that mean some people can be saved by baptism and/or communion apart from faith and repentance? Are

there different paths to salvation? Presumably, you disagree.

b) On the symbolic interpretation, the sacraments function as vivid theological interpretations of salvation. For instance, the eucharist depicts the death of Christ as a vicarious sacrifice. It teaches Christians that the death of Christ was a penal substitutionary atonement.

The point is not that we are saved by taking communion, but that communion teaches us the meaning of the Crucifixion. Likewise, because water is a cleansing agent, baptism becomes an emblem of forgiveness. And possibility new birth. That's another way of teaching us another facet of salvation. Show and tell.

c) On a sacramentalist interpretation, you might try to combine them. You might say the passages which index salvation to faith and repentance are incomplete. These must be supplemented by the sacraments. There are, however, problems with that.

It depends in part on your overall theology. For instance, Lutheranism affirms universal grace and universal atonement. But if saving grace is channeled through Word and Sacrament, then that localizes saving grace. Saving grace is for all and only those who hear the Gospel and/or receive the sacraments.

Yet at many times and places, people never hear the Gospel and never have access to the sacraments. How can grace be universal if the opportunities to receive grace fall far short of universality? Universal atonement might suggest a universal provision of grace, but that's narrowed by the limited availability of Word and Sacrament. So there's an internal contradiction in that theological system.

Conversely, Calvinism rejects a one-to-one-correspondence between saving grace and sacramental grace. On the one hand, people can be saved apart from the sacraments. On the other hand, some people who received the sacraments are damned.

So how you harmonize them depends on how that fits together with other things you think the Bible teaches. That can rule out certain harmonistic options.

*The N.T does not say the cross saves us,
but Christ on the cross saves us.*

Actually, it says things like:

and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility (Eph 2:16).

by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross (Col 2:14).

So it sometimes uses the "cross" in absolute constructions. But more to the point, it clearly employs the cross as a symbol for the redemptive work of Christ, where the cross is a stand-in for the atonement.

The N.T. states that baptism now saves us. Those are clear texts. We can accept them as is or as the above post tries to do is to simply explain things away.

i) In terms of literary genre, narrative texts can be clearer than epistolary texts, because historical narratives contain local color and atmospheric details regarding the nature of the rite. That's why it's easy to establish water baptism from the Gospels and Acts. By contrast, the NT letters lack those contextual clues, so it's harder to determine if they are referring to literal "baptism" or using theological metaphors.

ii) You assume that *baptisma* means "baptism." But I cited a range of definitions from the standard NT Greek lexicon.

iii) Another problem with your simplistic appeal is that everyone adds qualifications to that passage. For instance, Lutherans think it's possible for someone who's been baptized to lose their salvation. But in that case, baptism didn't save apostates. Baptism didn't save them in the long-run.

So you don't just "accept it as is." You yourself "explain it away" based on other requirements of Lutheran theology.

3. Water gives life with the Word and the water in our baptism. It also means

***death to the old adam as he is drowned
in the waters of baptism.***

Now you're claiming that baptism signifies both life and death. Why should I accept your contention? Where did that come from? Perhaps you're alluding to Lutheran prooftexts for baptismal regeneration (e.g. [Jn 3:5](#); [Tit 3:5](#))? If so, I don't grant your interpretation.

***4.i) Does that mean baptism necessary
for salvation? Can you be saved apart
from baptism? No. The Word of God can
convert a sinner. The Spirit can work
apart from the waters of Baptism, but
this is the normal scenario. (Infant
baptism).***

Okay, but notice how that complicates your simplistic appeal to [1 Pet 3:21](#). You've now conditionalized [1 Pet 3:21](#). If I'm baptized, then baptism saves me.

If, on the other hand, I believe the Gospel, but die in a traffic accident before receiving baptism, then it wasn't baptism that saved me, but something other than baptism.

That, however, isn't what [1 Pet 3:21](#) says. According to you, it says "baptism saves you," yet you admit there are situations in which baptism doesn't save—because something else did the saving. Baptism didn't save the

person now or later. Baptism didn't figure in his salvation at all. Not now, not ever.

ii) Does that mean baptism sufficient for salvation? Is baptism alone all you need to be saved? Baptism saves. It gives us Christ and all his benefits and grants us faith to trust the promises of Christ. Faith is then nourished by the Word, the Lord's Supper, and the absolution we receive as members of the church.

i) That's ambiguous. Did Adolf Hitler go to heaven while Anne Frank went to hell? Did baptism save Hitler?

ii) What exactly saves you in Lutheranism? Is it universal atonement? Baptism? Justification? Absolution? The Eucharist? Is it one thing? More than one thing? Looks like a shell game.

iii) Moreover, if [1 Pet 3:21](#) means "baptism saves you," then that, by itself, doesn't distinguish between the necessity and the sufficiency of baptism. So you're adding lots of qualifications to your proof-text that not only go beyond what it says, but diminish what it says.

iii) What baptism saves you?

a) Does the efficacy of baptism depend on the mode of baptism (e.g. immersion,

sprinkling)? No. Though Sprinkling would be a preferred choice.

But [1 Pet 3:21](#) doesn't say that. So you've added a specification to the text beyond the actual wording.

b) Does the efficacy of baptism depend on the intent of the officiant? No.

But there are theological traditions that think it does matter (e.g. Roman Catholicism).

c) In the case of adults, does the efficacy depend on the intent of the candidate? We approach adults as the N.T. church would have. They are expressing faith so we baptize and catechize them. We trust the Spirit has produced faith in them through the Word.

But [1 Pet 3:21](#) doesn't say that. So you've added a specification to the text beyond the actual wording.

d) Does the efficacy of baptism depend on the orthodoxy of the officiant? Is

baptism performed by a heretic valid or invalid? No.

"No" to valid or invalid?

e) Does the efficacy of baptism depend on words as well as the action (e.g. a Trinitarian formula)? We should confess a Trinitarian Baptism as we are placing the name of God of the candidate for baptism. Lutherans will accept other baptisms except from if from certain hereodox charismatic sects or cults like the Mormons or Jehovah's witness.

So you've added another qualification to [1 Pet 3:21](#), beyond the actual wording.

f) Can a layman perform baptism, or must it be a church officer? Yes, but it would be preferred if the local pastor would be the one to baptize and they will be the pastor of the baptized.

Notice that you have to supply all these specifications from outside your prooftext. The text itself doesn't say the presence or absence of these qualifications is what makes the baptism in question salvific. So it's not nearly as "plain and clear" as you imagine.

5. I don't get trying to nail a point with the word and how many times it is used. There should be clear enough evidence with 4 usages relating baptism and salvation to drive home a point. The most clear and plainest reading of the texts should be accepted.

i) Because you can't simply import the entire context back into the meaning of an individual word. You're getting that, not from the meaning of the word itself, but from the surrounding text in which it's used. A word doesn't mean everything the context means.

ii) For a word to become a technical term (apart from stipulative definition), it must be employed often enough in a particular context to acquire a specialized connotation through repeated usage. Three or four occurrences, even if these were unambiguously about baptism, hardly establishes stereotypical usage. For the context of a word to rub off on the word, it must be used often enough to trigger that context even when the context is absent. In the nature of the case, idiomatic usage requires a certain frequency before it counts as idiomatic.

Take the word "martyr," which derives from "witness"—in secular Greek. And that's how it's employed in NT Greek. But in patristic usage, it becomes a technical term for Christians who were executed for their faith. That's not what it originally meant. It eventually picked up that specialized connotation through frequent contextual usage. Once that association is cemented, it has that meaning independent of an explicit setting where the God's people are put to death for their faith.

Consider Antipas ([Rev 2:13](#)). At that stage in the evolution of the language, *martus* means "witness." It is not, as of yet, a technical term for "martyr". Although Antipas is, indeed, a martyr, it's not the word itself, but the context, which supplies that identity. However, it is cumulative occurrences *like* that which will turn it into a technical term for "martyr".

Another example is how Catholics bungle justification because they fail to distinguish between Paul's specialized, idiosyncratic use of the *dikaioo* word-group and the non-technical usage of James. Paul's repeated usage is jargonistic in a way that James is not.

6. There is a literal death in baptism(the old adam, and a new life is given as we are united to Christ by baptism and given faith to trust the promises of God.

That's equivocal. You're comparing physical death to the mortification of sin.

7. The context doesn't reach to the Lord's Supper. It is enough for Paul to stress our unity in that we have 1 Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one Father. The fact that baptism is placed in this context would highlight the importance placed on baptism and its connection to faith, and our unity with the Lord and the Father.

Why is baptism a hallmark of unity, but not communion?

8. I do not think this passage demonstrates anything different that Luke records in Acts, John in his Gospel, or Peter. Baptism kills the old adam and grant us life and faith in Christ.

i) You're not exegeting [Col 2:12](#) on its own terms. Rather, you're glossing it in reference to random material outside the text and context.

ii) In addition, scholars (e.g. F. F. Bruce, M. J. Harris, B. Metzger, D. Moo, P. T. O'Brien, R. McL. Wilson) generally don't think it uses the same word as [1 Pet 3:21](#)—much less Acts and the Gospel of John, which don't use that word, either.

You're overlooking the fact that I'm referencing passages which use the same Greek noun: *baptisma*.

9. Noah's family passed through the waters of death in the Arc and were brought to new life. We to pass through the waters of death in baptism and are raised to new life in Christ. The water does not save us, but the Word of God (the promises) united to the Word save us as we are united to Christ.

But you're not getting all that from [1 Pet 3:21](#).

Again, Lutherans do believe that people can be saved apart from the waters of Baptism because we do believe in that the Word of God can bring new life to men. We trust God at His Word. He saves through Baptism and He can save through His Word.

You're interjecting distinctions into your prooftext that aren't contained in your prooftext. So appealing to the "clearest, plainest" text is deceptive. What you've really

done is to begin with Lutheran systematic theology, then modify [1 Pet 3:21](#) to shoehorn into that preexisting framework.

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem

29 “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the monuments of the righteous, 30 saying, ‘If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.’ 31 Thus you witness against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. 32 Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers. 33 You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell? 34 Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town, 35 so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. 36 Truly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation. 37 “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers

her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! (Mt 23:29-37).

i) Mt 23:37 is an Arminian prooftext. There's the contrast between "I would" but "you wouldn't."

ii) One question is the sense in which God/Jesus "would have" gathered them. What's the nature of this divine action? How is that expressed? Likewise, in what sense is this rebuffed?

One problem is that editions of the Bible typically separate v37 from the preceding verses. That formatting breaks up the flow of argument. But in context, v37 continues the theme of God sending prophets to Israel. So the way in which God "would have" is by sending prophets. And the way in which "you wouldn't" is by rejecting God's prophets.

However, rejecting the prophetic word is perfectly consistent with predestination. Indeed, we have explicit Biblical examples of God hardening the audience to ensure their lack of receptivity.

iii) There's also a striking parallel between Mt 11 & and Mt 23. In both cases, Christ reprimands cities for their refusal to accept prophetic correction:

20 Then he began to denounce the cities where most of his mighty works had been done, because they did not repent. 21 “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would

have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes.

22 But I tell you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you.

23 And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You will be brought down to Hades. For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day.

24 But I tell you that it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you” (11:20-24).

Yet their refusal is ultimately attributed to divine agency:

25 At that time Jesus declared, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; 26 yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. 27 All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him (11:25-27).

There's a distinction between seeing and perceiving. They all saw his miracles, yet not all responded accordingly. Human perceiving is a result of divine revealing, whereas human seeing without perceiving is a result of divine concealing. Absent inner illumination, external evidence

doesn't yield belief. The favorable or unfavorable response is traceable to divine action.

The complement to [Mt 23:37](#) is [Lk 19:41](#).

41 And when he drew near and saw the city, he wept over it, 42 saying, "Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes ([Lk 19:41-42](#)).

As I've already pointed out, v41 is problematic for Arminians:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2014/07/weeping-for-jerusalem.html>

But the difficulty (for Arminians) is intensified by v42. The use of the divine passive and the motif of divine hardening. As one commentator explains:

(The meaning is probably "God has hidden") from Jerusalem's (spiritual) sight; and this will be made evident by her destruction (for, v43, is hoti = "because"). In a typical biblical combination of thought the Jews are held responsible for the city's fall (they could have known), while at the same

time it is the result of divine decree. C. F. Evans, *St. Luke* (Trinity Press 1990), 684.

Rev 22:19

I recently ran a question by a NT scholar. Here's my question, followed by his answer:

Wesleyan Arminians (e.g. Witherington) cite this verse as a proof-text to demonstrate that a Christian can lose his salvation. How do you explain it consistent with the perseverance of the saints?

I think the main problem is in taking "his share" as virtually a technical, precisionistic term, as if one of the main purposes of the verse were to teach that one can lose one salvation, and that this is being articulated by equating salvation with having a share in the tree of life and the holy city. In fact, the language is similar to Heb 6: as part of the community of faith, one is counted as being heir, and one would have had a share in the tree of life in an absolute sense or decretal sense if one had been one of the elect. But Rev 22:19 is focusing on the working out of the dynamics of grace in time in the community (similar in this respect to Heb 6). An individual is counted as sharing in the heritage of the church while he is in the church. He has "his share" in the inheritance that God promises to all in the community. "His share" describes what belongs

to human appearances; and it matters to God as well, because someone in the church has greater obligations, Heb 10:29; 2 Pet 2:21.

I haven't read Witherington's discussion of this verse, but surely he does not favor the Vulgate reading, "book of life" (instead of "tree of life"). If that were the reading, it would make the text quite a bit harder for a Calvinist. Witherington surely also knows about Rev. 17:8, which is heavily against him on that score. I think it is fair to distinguish the contexts of 17:8 and 22:19 in certain ways. 17:8 comes in the context of other discussions of heavenly books, and that is often used with a decretal meaning. It's about a decree in place from the foundation of the world. 22:19, on the other hand, is about participation in a historical process, and the covenantal penalties (e.g., Kline, *By Oath Consigned*) for violating the terms of the covenant. Arminians typically don't appreciate the complexities that a covenantal approach can include.

The Savior of all

3 This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, 4 who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. 5 For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, 6 who gave himself as a ransom for all (1 Tim 2:3-5).

10 For to this end we toil and strive, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe (1 Tim 4:10).

11 For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people (Tit 2:11).

This comprises a set of popular Arminian prooftexts. They accuse Calvinists of tampering with the plain sense of these passages.

But, of course, the Arminian appeal isn't that straightforward. Because Arminians think human freewill can overrule God's will, they don't think God actually saves everyone, or that God is really the Savior of everyone. So they have to qualify their prooftexts by interjecting "potential" into the passages.

How do Calvinists construe them? Let's consider two interpretive approaches:

i) Tom Schreiner notes that in the Pastorals, Paul is combatting a Jewish heresy which seems to restrict access to salvation to those with the right bloodlines. So Paul would be correcting that heresy by explaining that access to salvation cuts across ethnic and genealogical distinctives. Pedigree can't save you or condemn you. Cf. **PAUL: APOSTLE OF GOD'S GLORY IN CHRIST, 184-85.**

ii) Another explanation is that pagans believed in tribal or national gods. Local patron gods. But if there is only one God, then that's the only God you can turn to for salvation. One God is the source of salvation for anyone. That nicely explains Paul's one-to-all correlation, which has its background in OT monotheism.

How corporate election backfires

Brian Abasciano is a NT scholar and prominent Arminian apologist (indeed, the president of SEA). In that respect, he's a younger-generation version of I. H. Marshall.

Here he's defending corporate election. What's striking is that he defines *proginosko* in a way that's very close to (or identical to) the Calvinist definition. He doesn't think it means foreknowledge in these passages. Rather, it means prior choice.

On that view, we should render [Rom 8:29](#) as:

For those whom he chose beforehand he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son.

[Rom 11:2](#) as:

God has not rejected his people whom he chose beforehand.

And [1 Pet 1:1-2](#) as:

To those who are elect exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, 2 according to the prior choice of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood.

Of course, he'd try to blunt the force of this concession, but it's a damaging concession.

While agreeing that God knows the future, including who will believe, the corporate election perspective would tend to understand the references to foreknowledge in Rom 8:29 and 1 Pet 1:1-2 as referring to a relational prior knowing that amounts to previously acknowledging or recognizing or embracing or choosing people as belonging to God (i.e., in covenant relationship/partnership). The Bible sometimes mentions this type of knowledge, such as when Jesus speaks of those who never truly submit to his lordship: "And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness'" (Matt 7:23; cf. Gen 18:19; Jer 1:5; Hos 13:4-5; Amos 3:2; 1 Cor 8:3). On this view, to be chosen according to foreknowledge would mean to be chosen because of the prior election of Christ and the corporate

people of God in him. “Those [plural] whom he foreknew” in Rom 8:29 would refer to the Church as a corporate body and their election in Christ as well as their identity as the legitimate continuation of the historic chosen covenant people of God, which individual believers share in by faith-union with Christ and membership in his people. Such a reference is akin to statements in Scripture spoken to Israel about God choosing them in the past (i.e., foreknowing them), an election that the contemporary generation being addressed shared in (e.g., Deut 4:37; 7:6-7; 10:15; 14:2; Isaiah 41:8-9; 44:1-2; Amos 3:2). In every generation, Israel could be said to have been chosen. The Church now shares in that election through Christ, the covenant head and mediator (Rom 11:17-24; Eph 2:11-22).

<http://evangelicalarminians.org/the-facts-of-salvation-a-summary-of-arminian-theology-the-biblical-doctrines-of-grace/>

Is Scripture fatalistic?

Then Satan entered into Judas called Iscariot, who was of the number of the twelve ([Lk 22:3](#)).

For the Son of Man goes as it has been determined, but woe to that man by whom he is betrayed! ([Lk 22:22](#)).

Then after he had taken the morsel, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, “What you are going to do, do quickly” ([Jn 13:27](#)).

This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and prior choice of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men ([Acts 2:23](#)).

27 for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, 28 to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place ([Acts 4:27-28](#)).

Arminians brand Calvinism as “fatalistic.” The charge is equivocal, for “fatalism” has more than one meaning.

However, the ultimate question isn't whether Calvinism is "fatalistic," but whether the word of God is fatalistic.

There are different ways of defining a word. One way is to define a word in reference to a paradigm-case. In Greek literature, two Classical examples of fatalism involve Croesus and Oedipus.

In these instances, a father is given an oracle of doom concerning his son. The father takes precautions to sidestep the oracle. However, his very precautions fulfill the oracle.

On this definition, fatalism involves the following elements: (i) the dire outcome is predetermined. (ii) The effort to escape one's fate is the very means by which the fateful outcome is achieved. Put another way, a protagonist facilitates the dire outcome against his will.

Let's compare this to the crucifixion. According to Scripture, God predestined the crucifixion. And not merely the event itself, but the means.

Agents like Satan, Caiaphas, and other members of the Sanhedrin end up precipitating the polar opposite of what they intended. The religious establishment viewed Jesus as a threat to their authority. A threat to the religious loyalties of the rank-and-file. But by their actions they created an unimaginable following for Jesus which continues to this day.

Why did Satan possess Judas? Presumably, Satan thought that engineering the execution of Jesus would defeat Jesus. He would die a failed messiah.

In fact, I imagine that Satan had been spoiling for an opportunity like this for millennia. This was his greatest

coup. To strike a crushing blow with one masterstroke. A decisive victory for the dark side. It fell right into his lap.

Well, Satan had his plan, but behind Satan's plan was God's plan. God planned Satan's plan, and God planned it to backfire.

Before Jesus could rise from the dead, he had to die. Satan becomes the unwitting instrument to thwart Satan's designs. The very means by which he defies God turn out to be the means by which Satan suffers an irreparable setback.

That's a classic form of fatalism. You bring about the very thing you fear through your efforts to cheat fate.

Calvinism is no more or less "fatalistic" Scripture.

Fatalism at the cross

There are different ways to define fatalism. Freewill theists use fatalism as a synonym for Calvinism or predestination, but that's confused. In Reformed theology, there's a predestined chain of events leading up to a particular outcome. In fatalism, by contrast, the outcome is the same regardless of the preceding events.

Another definition is where people unwittingly fulfill an oracle by attempting to avert it. In that sense, the Bible has some fatalistic episodes. One example is the Joseph cycle (Gen 37-50) where his brothers try to thwart the prophetic dream, but their evasive actions ironically facilitate its realization.

A greater example is where Satan engineers the Crucifixion to defeat the Son of God, blind to the fact that Jesus wins in the long-term by "losing" at the cross. In the plan of God, the Crucifixion is a tactical loss. A way to achieve strategic victory. Although Satan may be a criminal genius, his evil blocks his ability to enter into the mind of God. In his effort to defeat Jesus he unwittingly defeats himself. God ironically used Satan as a means to foil Satan.

III. Philosophical considerations

What is Calvinism?

i) When we discuss theological traditions, the tendency is to concentrate on what's distinctive about that tradition. There may be individual distinctives, or there may be a distinctive package. We tend to focus on what differentiates that tradition from the alternatives. That can be misleading inasmuch as there's more, much more, to a theological tradition than what distinguishes one tradition from another.

ii) That said, let's consider the distinctive features. What is Calvinism? At the most general level, Calvinism takes the view that everything happens for a reason. Every event, whether physical or mental events, serve a purpose. Indeed, everything happens for a good reason, including—or especially—bad things. Some events may be intrinsically evil but instrumentally good.

iii) But what is necessary for everything to happen for a reason? In order for everything to be purposeful, to have an explanation, there must be a master plan, in which every event is coordinated in a part/whole, means-ends relation. Everything happens according to plan. God wrote the plot.

I should add that this isn't unique to Calvinism, but holds true for other predestinarian traditions (e.g. Thomism, Augustinianism, Jansenism).

If there are unpremeditated events, then everything doesn't happen for a reason. Some events are brute facts—like sheer luck, which can be good luck or bad luck. Pointless things happen. Tragedies happen that serve no purpose. By chance, the victim was in the wrong place at the wrong time.

When Calvinism says everything is predestined, that means everything happens for a reason. The alternative is that some, many, or most events have no specific rationale. In that regard, they are random events. Inexplicable events.

iv) In fairness, a freewill theist might say everything happens for a general reason: namely, the overarching value of libertarian freedom. But freewill theists typically denounce the idea that some tragedy or atrocity was "God's will". So they deny that every event—especially evil events—happens for a specific reason, or serves a particular purpose.

v) That's a definition of Calvinism at the most general level. Of course, that cashes out in more detailed terms. There's the particularism of grace. Unconditional election and reprobation. Limited atonement.

In theory, critics might not find Calvinism so objectionable if it merely took the view that everything happens for a reason, but in a world where evil occurs, they find that more principle more contentious. And they think reprobation is evil in its own right.

vi) One objection is that it's cruel for the Calvinist God to save only some people when he could save everyone. But bracketing other issues, that's equivocal. Let's pick a figure out of thin air for discussion purposes. Suppose, in the actual world, the elect are 70% of humanity while the reprobate are 30% of humanity. Could the Calvinist God save the 30% in addition to the 70% if he so chose?

That's far from clear. Although there are possible worlds in which everyone is elect, those have different genealogies than a world in which 70% are elect and 30% are

reprobate. If the 30% were elect, they'd make different choices in life. They'd produce different family trees. It wouldn't be saving the same 30% in addition to the same 70%, for almost no one would be the same. In a world where everyone is elect, different people are born into that world due to the choices of their elect forebears.

The upshot is that none of the heavenbound people in a world where 70% are elect would even exist in a world where 100% are elect—assuming death seals your eternal fate. A critic might say the Calvinist God could still save the lost after death, but that moves the hypotheticals outside the boundaries of biblical orthodoxy.

vii) Another objection is that it's a miscarriage of justice for God to punish agents for sins he predestined them to commit. And that might strike many people as *prima facie* counterintuitive. However, it's often the case that we can't properly assess a portion in isolation. Rather, we need to compare to the alternatives.

What does it mean for human choices not to be predestined? When freewill theists say humans have libertarian freedom, does that mean our choices are ultimately uncaused?

Consider dice. Predestination is like loaded dice. The outcome is certain every time, ahead of time.

The alternative is fair dice. It's not that the outcome is strictly uncaused. The laws of physics apply.

Rather, each throw is causally independent of the preceding or succeeding throw. In that sense, the outcome is random or uncaused. Every time you throw the dice, it's like the first time. A particular outcome doesn't make the next

outcome more or less likely. Each time you throw the dice, you might roll different numbers or the same numbers. So it's arbitrary in that regard. In effect, every throw is a fresh start, no matter how often you threw the dice.

This also means that inevitably, the results of throwing fair dice will sometimes coincide with the results of throwing loaded dice. Likewise, odds are that random choices will sometimes coincide with predestined choices. In that case, would it be unjust for God to punish an agent for a predestined choice of that coincided with a random choice?

viii) Conversely, is it just for God to punish an agent for a random choice? Suppose a psychopathic kidnapper took a man's wife and kids hostage. But he gives the man a chance to save his family by throwing dice. If the outcome is six or above, the kidnapper won't shoot them. If the outcome is below six, the kidnapper will shoot them.

But isn't that grossly unfair? The results of one throw are arbitrary inasmuch as each throw might be different. Why should the first and only throw be decisive?

If freewill theism is true, aren't our choices like that? If I roll the dice at noon, I'd get one outcome. If I roll the dice at 11:59, I might well get a different outcome. Likewise, if I roll the dice at 12:01. Yet the God of freewill theism holds me to one particular throw, even though it's by chance that any particular outcome occurs. Picking one particular throw out of a hypothetical sequence, where if the pick was sooner or later, the results would chance.

Suppose a free agent (in the libertarian sense) made a different choice than the predestined choice. But his actual choice, if random, is arbitrary. Given the opportunity to role the same dice multiple times, the results might differ every

time. So why privilege or absolutize the actual choice? Isn't that an artificial sample? Why make that the cutoff when, if he repeated the trial under the same circumstances, the results might turn out differently? Why select for that particular throw as if that's somehow definitive?

ix) However, a freewill theist might object that I've caricatured libertarian freedom. An astute freewill theist will concede that we don't approach decision-making as blank slates. Although our choices may not be predetermined, there are factors that predispose us to opt for one choice rather than another.

On that view, the alternatives aren't confined to fair dice and loaded dice, because libertarian choice is more like throwing biased dice. Unlike loaded dice, which make one outcome inevitable, or fair dice, which make every outcome equiprobable, biased dice make some outcomes more likely than others.

But I don't see how that refinement helps the freewill theist. In that event, is it just for God to punish the agent for his choice unless the agent wasn't equally free to choose one thing rather than another? I'm not saying I agree with that. I'm just considering the libertarian position on its own grounds.

Calvinism is not the problem

Calvinism is deeply unpopular in some circles. But Calvinism is not the problem. If there *is* a problem, *reality* is the problem. Calvinism is a very realistic theology, and that's what provokes the backlash.

Same thing with Scripture. The Bible has many enemies, both inside and outside the church, because the Bible is unsparingly realistic. The Bible is not the problem. If there is a problem, reality is the problem.

For instance, you have professing Christians who are deeply offended by OT warfare. They "solve" the problem by censoring the Bible. They may consign the offending passages to fiction.

It's as if you had a film censor living in Mogadishu. He edits out all the violence in Blackhawk Down because that's too gruesome and graphic. After the violent scenes in Blackhawk Down wind up on the cutting room floor, he can revise the rating from R to PG. It's now suitable for family viewing. Problem solved!

He then exits the editing room to go outside, where he gingerly picks his way through the body-strewn streets of Mogadishu.

Likewise, you have professing believers who rewrite the story to give it happy ending. Universalists. Or Jerry Walls, with his theory of postmortem salvation. Or William Lane Craig, who supposes that God shakes the dice in his dice cup so that not a single person who never heard the Gospel in this life would believe it even if he had he been evangelized.

Like filming a Disney Princess flick during the Siege of Sarajevo, the contrast between reality and wishful thinking is a bit jarring. Some professing believers have a very compartmentalized outlook. They take great pains to sanitize the text of Scripture, yet they live in a world that bears a striking resemblance to Scriptural depictions.

If there's a problem, it's not with God's word, but with God's world.

God and Corn Flakes

One is the question of free will and salvation. Reformed theology is often identified with determinism—the idea that God determines everything, and we don't really have free choice. From my eating Corn Flakes for breakfast to my having faith in Christ, all of these decisions are determined by God, and if we're not automatons or robots at least, my decisions are only free in some very minimal sense. Well, historical material suggests there is a broader way of thinking about this within Reformed theology.

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2014/september-web-only/softer-face-of-calvinism.html>

Critics of predestination use examples like one's choice of cereal to belittle predestination. Does God really predestine what I eat for breakfast? How silly! Surely God has more important things to predestine. He can leave the little choices up to us.

The problem with that objection is that it's so shortsighted. Small innocuous changes in the present can generate huge changes in the future. In a case/effect world, changing a variable in the past can snowball.

Corn Flakes is a Kellogg's product. Kellogg's is headquartered in Battle Creek, Michigan. That makes it the largest local employer (in Battle Creek). But the primary production center for Corn Flakes is Manchester, England. In the US, corn production is centered in Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Minnesota, Nebraska, and Texas.

Compare that to Wheaties. That's a General Mills' product. General Mills is headquartered in Golden Valley, Minnesota. In the US, white wheat production is centered in Idaho, Michigan, New York, Oregon, and Washington.

If more people eat Corn Flakes, that benefits the economies of Battle Creek, Michigan, Manchester, England, and corn-producing states. If, by contrast, more people eat Wheaties, that depresses the economies of Battle Creek, Michigan, Manchester, England, and corn-producing states, but benefits the economies of Golden Valley, Minnesota and white wheat-producing states.

If Kellogg's is prosperous, that benefits its employees and shareholders. If General Mills is prosperous, that benefits its employees and shareholders. If Kellogg's does better, it can hire more people. If General Mills does better, Kellogg's has to lay people off.

People usually live within commuting distance of where they work. As a consumer, you will patronize local businesses. The local supermarket will benefit from your presence. And so on and so forth.

Where you live impacts who you meet and mate with. If you grew up in Battle Creek, Michigan, you will probably have kids by someone else from Michigan. If, by contrast, you grew up in Golden Valley, Minnesota, you will probably have kids by someone else from Minnesota. Same thing with corn and wheat producing states.

How many people choose Corn Flakes over Wheaties, or vice versa, affects who will or will not be born. It affects where various crimes like murder will occur. It affects where—or whether—you will attend church. That, in turn, can affect whether you go to heaven or hell.

This generates two diverging timelines. The existence or nonexistence of some humans in relation to other humans who take their place. Increasingly different events the further into the future past changes ramify. Alternate histories. What might seem like a trivial choice in the present has vast, complex consequences down the line—for good and ill.

From exile to Eden

There are various introductions to Roman Catholicism. Cardinal Ratzinger wrote a modern classic. More recently are entries by Robert Barron and Thomas Joseph White. Barron's book was based on the script for his 10-part documentary film. Ratzinger uses the framework of the Apostles' creed. White's organization owes more to systematic theology. Barron uses the Incarnation as a unifying principle—plus Catholic art as well as thumbnail biographies of notable Catholics.

This raises the question of how a Protestant might write an introduction to the evangelical faith. How would we present the alternative? There are different approaches. You could take the approach of systematic theology. You could take the approach of historical theology and church history. Another possibility is to take a more existential approach. I don't have time to write a whole book, but here's a sketch:

Each of us is on a journey. We were born in exile. Our progenitors were banished from the garden. We lost the tree of life. We face into death.

We came from God. Some of us are on a journey back to God, while others are on a journey away from God.

We were born at sea. Born aboard a ship. There were passengers before we were born. There will be passengers after we disembark. We don't end with the same passengers with whom we began. Some passengers disembark at the harbor of heaven while others disembark at the port of hell.

God is interpersonal by nature. One God in three persons, who mirror one another. The inmost circle of reality. But God shares his beatitude by making creatures are able to enjoy the gift of life. The inmost circle of the Triune God ripples out in concentric circles of creation. Like our Creator, we are social beings.

We are creatures of time and space while our Maker exists above and beyond time or space. The Son left the inmost circle of the Triune fellowship to invade the outermost circle of his alienated creation. Like a child separated from his parents by the dislocation of war, we grew up never knowing our Creator. Like an estranged child who meets his father for the first time, we see in Jesus the face of our Maker.

Every now and then, miracles break into our world to remind us of another, greater, better world beyond our fleeting, dying world. Not miracles enough to transform our world, but sufficient to point beyond our world, like flashes of lightning that illuminate trail and the distant destination. A sign, special providence, or answered prayer to renew our hope. Sometimes we walk in twilight. Sometimes we walk in darkness. But when we despair, when we feel utterly forlorn, a flash of lightning shows the way forward.

There is darkness without and darkness within. We need redemption and renewal to enlighten the darkness within. Revelation to illuminate the trail ahead as well as redemption and renewal to illuminate our darkened hearts.

Darkness is otiose. It creates nothing. Left to itself, darkness remains darkness. It has no spark. To irradiate the moral darkness of our hearts, the match must come from something—or Someone—outside ourselves.

The Fall was Adam's error, but it wasn't Heaven's error. There are children of light born to children of darkness. Children of the dawn whose existence emerges from children of the night. That was God's plan all along. In the world to come, the sons of dawn will praise the wisdom that brought them about and brought them out. In the beginning, God separated the light from the darkness. And he continues to do so throughout church history. And he will do so at the Consummation of all things.

Drawing straws

Although I've spent a lot of time over the years critiquing freewill theists like Roger Olson and Jerry Walls, because they have a popular following, they're hardly the most able exponents of that position. Far higher on the food chain is Peter van Inwagen. Let's consider his argument.

*When I myself look at contemplated future courses of action in the way I have described above, I discover an irresistible tendency to believe that each of them is "open" to me...I find myself with the belief that sometimes more than one course of action is open to me, and I cannot give it up...I don't find the least plausibility in the hypothesis that this belief is illusory. Peter van Inwagen, *Metaphysics* (Westview Press, 4th ed., 2015), 282-83.*

In a sense I agree with PVI, but not with the conclusion that he draws from his experience:

i) He's describing a psychological impression, but psychology isn't conterminous with ontology. Our psychological impressions don't necessarily map onto the extramental world.

ii) Apropos (i), surely it's possible to *imagine* future courses of action that seem to be open to us, but are in fact infeasible. For one thing, when we contemplate alternate courses of action, that's very sketchy. We don't entertain of all the intervening links that chart a pathway from the present to the future outcome. We don't know enough. There are too many variables. Rather, we take our current situation as the frame of reference. We contemplate different outcomes. But in many cases, those imaginary trajectories may not be open to us, because they depend on many independent variables lining up in one particular direction, and we don't control most of the variables. Sometimes we can manipulate circumstances to achieve our goals, but in many cases our goals are stymied. In fact, after writing this paragraph, I read the following observation:

We all use our imaginations to foresee the future, whether we're planning the rest of the day or the rest of our lives; and despite our best efforts, nothing guarantees that what we imagine will come to pass. Indeed, rarely does the future heed our plans. Each morning I plot the coming hours, and seldom to my designs unfold without a hitch. On most days, unforeseen circumstance interrupt, and I end up improving, deferring activities, changing course. The same is

even more true of my long-term planning: the further into the future my imagination has projected itself, the less prescient it's been. Indeed, only rarely have I seen the far future approximately as it's come to pass. My life illustrates chaos theory: I can't predict or control things because there are always too many variables. The result is that most of my personal goals have turned out to be useful fictions. They've given me something to shoot for, but they've rarely been realized, at least in the forms I'd first imagined them. D. Allison, Night Comes (Eerdmans, 2016), 81.

Suppose C is my objective, yet I can't achieve C unless and until I do B, and I can't do B unless and until I first do A. But that means the effort to achieve the goal may break down somewhere in the process.

So there *is*, in fact, an illusory quality to many of these future courses of action. In some cases they aren't coherent, because they depend on a chain of events that is in conflict with actual and inexorable causal chains that are already in place.

Perhaps what he means, as he expresses himself elsewhere,

It is at least very plausible to suppose that Jack is not, during the course of his deliberations, able to hit the right-hand side and is not able to hit the left-hand side. But such cases are not decisive, since they involve the concept of success or at least the concept of result: they are cases in which in which an agent is now faced with a choice between doing A and doing B, and in which, if the agent should endeavor to do A or should endeavor to do B, whether the agent would succeed in either endeavor is now undetermined. The Oxford Handbook of Free Will, 2nd ed. (Kane, ed.).

This would also dovetail with his denial that access to alternate possibilities is a necessary condition of libertarian freewill. If, however, freedom of choice reduces to mental acts of choosing between one contemplated future course of action and another, without corresponding, extramental forking pathways, then it's unclear what is meant by the claim that future *courses of action* are open to the agent. If his position boils down to the *psychology of choosing*, with no matching *ontology of doing*, then the "courses of action"

are imaginary. Figments of the imagination. If you can't act on your decision, then the whole framework of forking paths and future course of action seems to be a rhetorical flourish.

iii) From a Calvinistic or compatibilist standpoint, these aren't illusory in a deceptive or useless sense. The process of deliberation is how we settle on a course of action. By comparing and contrasting hypothetical alternatives and considering the respective consequences, contemplating of the alternatives is what induces us not to opt for any of the alternatives. Their practical value is to make us see that the course of action we actually settle on is preferable.

iv) In addition, there are many situations in which we don't deliberate, either because we don't have a range of options to consider, or because the alternatives are so unappealing. Only one option is viable or attractive.

The way he defends freewill theism seems counterproductive. On the one hand he raises a familiar moralistic objection to determinism. On the other hand, he seems to concede that on his view, indeterminism takes the decision out of the hands of the agent:

If it goes to the left, that just happens. If it goes to the right, that just happens... There is no way to make it go one way rather than the other...It is a plausible idea that it is up to an agent what the outcome of a process will be only if the agent is able to arrange things in a way

that would make the occurrence of this outcome inevitable and able to arrange things in a way that would make the occurrence of that outcome inevitable. If this plausible idea is right, there would seem to be no possibility of its being [up to the agent] what the outcome of an indeterministic process would be (278).

But how is the agent responsible for such choices? He toys with agent-causation, but finds that opaque.

The judgment that you shouldn't have done X implies that you should have done something else instead; that you should have done something else instead implies that there was something else for you to do; that there was something else for you to do implies that you were able to do something else; that you were able to do something else implies that you have free will. To make a negative moral judgment about one of your acts is to evaluate your taking one of the forks in the road of time, to characterize that

fork as a worse choice than at least one of the other forks open to you. (Note that if you had made a choice by taking one of the forks in what is literally a road, no one would say you should have taken one of the other forks if all the other forks were blocked.) A negative moral evaluation of what someone has done requires two or more alternative possibilities of action for that person, just as surely as a context requires two or more contestants (268).

i) That sounds plausible. Indeed, it's the primary argument for libertarian freewill. However, it fails to draw an elementary and fundamental distinction between psychology and ontology. Even if, metaphysically speaking, alternate courses of action are available, that doesn't mean an agent is able to access those alternatives if he's psychologically ill-disposed to avail himself of the opportunities. Take a psychopathic killer. He's too morally hardened to do the right thing. He's lost the capacity for virtuous action. If we view freedom as a relation between deliberation and opportunity, there are two sides to the relation. Even if (ex hypothesi) freedom of opportunity were a necessary condition of freedom, it's not a sufficient condition unless the agent is open to the pathways that are open to him. That's why we say some people are in a state of diminished responsibility. Take a person with senile

dementia. They may have the same objective opportunities, but they've lost the capacity to make rational decisions. Or take someone acting at gunpoint.

ii) Predestination or determinism doesn't imply that if (ad impossible) you were to attempt do something contrary to what you were predestined to do, a mysterious invisible force would block you or impede you. Hypotheticals and counterfactuals aren't illusory in that sense.

In some cases, there are hypothetical pathways that have no obstacles. There is a coherent alternate plot or alternate timeline. But that's represented in a possible world rather than the actual world. Or, if something like the multiverse is true, in an actual parallel universe.

Ask yourself a question. What would happen if some supernatural agency—God, say—were to "roll history back" to some point in the past and then "let things go forward again"? Suppose the agency were to cause things to be once more just as they were at high noon, Greenwich mean solar time, on 11 March 1893 and were thereafter to let things to on their own accord. Would history literally repeat itself? Would there be two world wars, each the same in every detail as the wars that occurred the "first

time around"? Would a president of the United states call "John F. Kennedy" be assassinated in Dallas on the date that in the new reckoning is called "22 November 1963"? Would you, or at least someone exactly like you, exist? If the answer to any of these question is No, determinism is false. Equivalently, if determinism is true, the answer to all these questions is Yes. If determinism is true, then, if the universe were "rolled back" to a previous state by a miracle (and there were no further miracles), the history of the world would repeat itself. If the universe were rolled back to a previous state thousands of times exactly the same events would follow each of these thousands of "reversions" (270).

i) I think that's generally a good way to expound the distinction between generic determinism and generic indeterminism. However, I'd point out that it can be misleading. There are varieties of determinism. In his essay on "How to Think about Free Will," PVI says "Determinism is the thesis that the past and the laws of nature together determine, at every moment, a unique future" (**JOURNAL OF**

ETHICS 12: 330). I'd just point out that this definition not only doesn't coincide with theological determinism (i.e. Reformed predestination), it doesn't even intersect with theological determinism. By that I mean, a Calvinist subscribes to exhaustive predestination and providence, yet that's not how he defines theological determinism.

In Calvinism, for instance, predestination doesn't imply that all future events are caused by past events. No doubt many future events are caused by past events. But what makes predestination deterministic isn't physical determinism or nomic necessity. One thing doesn't follow another because there must be an unbroken causal continuum between antecedent states and subsequent states. Rather, it's more like screen play where every event is scripted. Or, to take a related comparison, it's like Alfred Hitchcock who said he filmed what he visualized.

In fairness, his argument isn't directed at theological determinism (e.g. Calvinism). So it's not a flaw, in that respect, if his definition fails to map onto theological determinism. Even so, that's a huge omission. How would he need to change his argument if he were targeting Calvinism?

ii) Notice an implication of indeterminism. On this view, you don't exist because you were a part of God's plan. If history was reset, you wouldn't exist. You don't have God to thank for your existence. If you're healthy, if you have a happy marriage, you don't have God to thank for your circumstances. Everything that happens to you is just the roll of the dice. If the dice were rolled a second time, you wouldn't even be here. Whatever happens to you is a matter of sheer luck. Good luck or bad luck, as the case

may be. If indeterminism is true, there's no basis for pious gratitude.

iii) Apropos (ii), his view is that it puts future agents at the mercy of past agents. The options available to future agents, or whether some future agents will even exist, depends on which course of action past agents take. So the fortunes of future agents are enslaved to the often ignorant, capricious, or malevolent actions of past agents. To evoke an illustration he uses in chap. 9, freewill theism is like a situation in which your life depends on drawing the shortest straw, only the drawing is rigged in favor of past agents, because their choices impact the fortunes of future agents.

Mind you, I think there's a sense in which this is true. The problem is if it's just up to human agents. If, by contrast, they are acting in accordance with a divine plan, then there's an ultimate wisdom and justice to how things turn out.

PVI draws a distinction between touchable and untouchable facts. Paradigm examples of untouchable facts include the necessity of the past and the fact that 317 is a prime number (273-76). He compares that to other situations, like whether he has the freedom to stop writing a book (272). If determinism is true, then "all facts are untouchable facts" (276). This is the "hidden mystery" that "lies behind the facade of bluff common sense compatibilism presents to the world" (276).

That, however, is a deceptive comparison. Determinism in general, and predestination in particular, doesn't mean all facts are necessary in the sense that mathematic truths are necessary truths or the necessity of the past is metaphysically necessary. In predestination, everything must unfold due to conditional necessity, not absolute

necessity. In principle, God could predestine alternate outcomes. For all we know, God has predestined alternate outcomes—a multiverse. So these are not the same kinds of facts.

Can God break his promises?

It's commonly argued that if God knows the future, then the future is fixed. If God knows that I will buy a classic Mustang on July 20, 2019, then I cannot fail to buy a classic Mustang on that date.

In my experience, some Arminians respond by saying that our future choices/actions are the source of God's foreknowledge. If I didn't buy a Mustang on that date, then I cause God to have a different belief about the future.

With that in mind, let's take a comparison: can God break his promises? Suppose Charles Wesley complies with the term of John 3:16, but the moment after death he finds himself in hell. He complains to God that God broke his promise. God responds by saying that if Charles Wesley finds himself in hell, that retroactively makes it the case that God never made the promise in John 3:16 in the first place—in which case God didn't break his promise! Has something gone awry in the reasoning?

Why Walls is still wrong

This has become a stock objection to Calvinism:

God could give all persons “irresistable grace” and thereby determine all persons to freely accept a right relationship with himself and be saved.

<https://tyndalephilosophy.com/2016/10/11/whats-not-wrong-with-jerry-walls-argument-against-calvinism/>

But that proves too much since even the freewill theist God could give everyone irresistible grace.

Or the freewill theist God could redefine the terms of salvation. Broaden the terms of salvation sufficiently to save everyone. That wouldn't infringe on libertarian freedom. Even the psychopaths could be consigned to an eternal tropical paradise. Kinda like those Swedish "prisons" that resemble resort hotels.

In addition, as James Anderson points out:

It appears to me that your symbolization of Jerry's premise 5 is incorrect. As you have it, the mere fact that God can give irresistible grace to S entails that S will be saved. But that's not what premise 5

states or implies, nor is it something that the Calvinist ought to grant.

Rich Davis concedes that objection, but adds:

Here's another possibility. My symbolization of (5) is what Jerry intends, but there is a supporting argument for (5)-running in the background, as it were—which employs certain bridging premises.

Problem is, Walls and Davis want the benefit of a bridging premise without having to supply a bridging premise. If they have a supporting argument, let's see it! Freewill theists keep giving us I.O.U.s.

Predestined regret

<https://www.proginosko.com/2019/11/calvinism-and-the-problem-of-contrition/>

Another way to approach it that if I have regrets, God predestined me to have regrets, so there's no tension between my regret and God's decretal will.

By the same token, there's no inconsistency in God willing one thing at one time, then willing something else at a later time, because each serves its purpose at its respective time. Like a screenwriter willing that a character initially be a villain, then, during a later plot development, willing that the character has a life-transforming experience which makes him act heroic.

What the original objection overlooks is the instrumental value of regret. Consider people whose epitaph is "I regret nothing". That's a cringingly superficial outlook on life. A related motto is "Never look back!" In fairness, some folks have such wretched lives that there may be some wisdom to the advice in their case.

Consider two brothers who take each other for granted. They don't dislike each other, but there's no rapport. They aren't close. And there's no urgency since they have decades ahead of them.

Then one day there's a phone call from the ER saying one of the brothers died in a traffic accident. In an instant it goes from seeing each other every day, or being able to see/talk to each other whenever they want, to never seeing each

other for the rest of the surviving brother's life. In a fateful moment it goes from total access to total inaccess.

The surviving brother is overwhelmed with regret, because it's too late to make up for all the lost opportunities. However, it's not useless. Having learned from bitter experience, he can apply that retrospective insight to other neglected (or future) relationships in his life.

Guiltless feelings of guilt

A stock objection to Calvinism is that if our actions are predestined, there's no basis for blame or regret. However, that intuition depends on the illustration. Here's a counterexample:

In “Moral Luck”, Williams famously argues that it makes sense for a faultless lorry driver to experience a kind and intensity of regret about the death of the child who runs in front of the vehicle that it would not be open to a mere bystander to experience. This is not remorse about some voluntary lapse on the part of the lorry driver (since by hypothesis he has done nothing wrong), but regret about an event, the death of the child, that stands in a causal relationship to his exercise of agency in driving the lorry.

https://philosophy.berkeley.edu/file/1023/Wallace_Replies_JAP_Symposium.pdf

Both the bystander and the driver deeply regret the child's death, but for the driver, the regret is more personal even though the accident was beyond his control to avert. Unlike the bystander, the driver is in the causal chain of events

that kills the child. He couldn't stop the trolley in time. The accident was inevitable, given the confluence of factors.

Although he's blameless, he's haunted by the child's death because he was operating the trolley. In a sense, he killed the child. If he hadn't been the driver, he wouldn't feel the same way.

Thereafter, the child's death is always in the back of his mind. He feels some responsibility for the tragedy, even though he's inculpable. But from the standpoint of freewill theism, how can blame and regret be detached? Why feel guilty if you're guiltless?

The Bruised Reed and Smoking Flax

1. I'd like to discuss two disparate objections that share a common principle. On the one hand, atheists taunt Christians who seek medical treatment for a life-threatening condition. If you really believe in heaven, why are you afraid of death?

On the other hand, freewill theists say Calvinism is incompatible with regret. If you really believe that God predestined every event, why do you feel disappointed or indignant at how things turn out?

These objections are wedge tactics. They share the common assumption that conflicted feelings are hypocritical in this situation. Or that conflicted feelings betray the fact that you don't really believe what you profess.

I've discussed both these objections before. Now I'd like to take a different approach.

2. That's not a reliable principle. For instance, suppose you have a teenager who commits suicide. As you're flipping through a family photo album, you have conflicted feelings when you see pictures of your late son (or daughter). You remember them at that age. You remember how you felt about them at that age. But now, in retrospect, you view those nostalgic pictures through the tinted lens of suicide.

On the one hand you are grateful to have had them in your life for as long as you did. On the other hand, there's the inconsolable sorrow. Maybe resentment.

The fact that you regret their suicide doesn't mean you regret having them at all. Although you'd rather have a child who didn't commit suicide, that doesn't mean you regret having that child. It doesn't necessarily mean you

wish you had a different child. You just wish the child you had didn't do that to himself, and to the loved ones he left behind.

It's not disingenuous to have conflicted feelings—powerfully conflicted feelings—in that situation. Although you'd rather have a teenager who didn't commit suicide to a teenager who did commit suicide, you'd rather have a teenager who committed suicide to wishing they were never born.

It's malicious for atheists to allege that Christians must be insincere if they balk at death. It's malicious for freewill theists to allege that Calvinists must be insincere if they balk at evil.

3. That said, death is a test of faith. Some professing believers balk at death because they're nominal Christians. They sang hymns about heaven when death was far away, but now that they're having to come to grips with that impending and sobering reality, it reveals the fact that they were paying lip-serving to inspirational theology. In addition, there are true believers who cling to life when it's time to let go. Their desperation exposes their weak faith. And it's a good thing that the prospect of death shakes them up. That's an opportunity to take stock and get serious about the faith they profess.

We're not saved by the strength of our faith. We've not saved by our faith. Ultimately, we've saved by grace. Faith is a candle to God's match. It's not the flickering candlelight, but the fire of God's grace, that keeps the candle burning. Not the candle flame, but the lighter. The spark feeding the flame. Even when the flame goes out, grace reignites the candle.

The limits of regret

R. Jay Wallace, *The View from Here: On Affirmation, Attachment, and the Limits of Regret* (Oxford 2013).

The central thesis of R. Jay Wallace's fascinating essay in moral psychology is that it is easy, when reflecting on our lives from our current temporal standpoint, to make a mistake in how we think about the past events that have shaped it. Assume that your current life is one that you would affirm as worth living. Suppose also that you look back on certain past events with a degree of ambivalence. They were, you believe, wrong at the time. Yet, they have formed a necessary part of a chain of events that has led to the constitution of your current outlook. You affirm the events in the sense that you do not want them to have been otherwise. This thought excludes the possibility of regretting them, as that is to wish that they had been otherwise. Nevertheless, you also believe that your actions were, at the time, rationally unjustified. Can this combination of attitudes be consistent?

Wallace thinks that it can. He diagnoses a tempting mistake, namely, to think that an inability to regret

is, itself, a form of affirmation in a way that excludes the thought that the past action was unjustified. However, for Wallace, affirmation means that while you cannot regret the past action, you can still believe it was unjustified at the time. The standpoint of retrospective assessment is constrained by this fact, such that "we can find ourselves unable to regret actions of ours that were unjustifiable at the time" and "committed to affirming features of our lives and of the world we inhabit that are objectively lamentable".

That idea -- that our appraisal is situated in a perspective dependent on a range of presupposed contingencies in the past...Wallace's general thesis is illustrated by a range of cases: in the first imagined example -- made famous by Derek Parfit - - a teenager conceives a child for reasons that, at that time, made the decision unjustified given her situation. However, the experience of being a parent "shifts" the woman's standpoint of appraisal so that she experiences the past decision as unjustified, but not as one that she can regret. She can affirm a past decision that was rationally unjustifiable. Wallace believes that, hitherto,

attempts to resolve this paradox have involved different frameworks of evaluation or different ways of conceptualizing the same values. So his buck passing approach focuses instead on the relevant "reasons for action and response" on the part of the young mother. (p. 94) Her changed situation means that she has new reasons to love and care for her child that she can affirm while acknowledging the good reasons that she had in the past not to conceive a child so early in her life. For Wallace, if there is an air of paradox about such a case, it is generated by the idea of the impersonal evaluation of an outcome. By focusing, instead, on the reasons grounded on evaluative attitudes, the asymmetry between the reasons at the time of decision and those that feature in retrospective assessment no longer generates a paradox.

<https://ndpr.nd.edu/news/the-view-from-here-on-affirmation-attachment-and-the-limits-of-regret/>

Another reviewer extends the analysis to his own example:

Consider the mother of a child born out of war rape. Suppose that she loves her child just as any

other mother does. I would presume that her attachment to the child does not involve that she affirms the rape. Why would she do that? In her head and in her heart, she clearly separates the tragedy that brought about her child from the child that she loves, who played no role in that tragedy. Nor would I presume that affirming the tragedy is a condition for loving her child wholeheartedly, or for loving him more than she actually does. While casting a dark shadow on her life, the tragedy in no way enters or structures the nature of the loving relation between her and the child. Consider next the following three examples, which, while sharing the same structure as the example above, gradually bring the subject matter closer to home or normality.

Consider first parents of handicapped children. Many such parents will love their children wholeheartedly while at the same time not affirming the unfortunate conditions necessary to their child's handicap. Some of them, for example, will donate money to research aimed at making their child's condition a thing of the past. Most of them will do all they can to neutralize the

debilitating effects of the handicap. Now move to the case of children born to parents who eventually end up divorced and in bad terms. Presumably, some of these parents will regret having married each other, and hereby fail to affirm the conditions of their children's existence.

Yet I doubt that this fact would change much to their love for their children. Finally, and in a similar mode, consider love for any of the persons you may currently love, be it your spouse, your child, your friend, or your parent. Why think that these relations are any different from the ones above? Why think that the way in which we love others often involves any attitude whatsoever, beside disregard, about the historical conditions necessary for the existence of the object of our love?

[http://www.academia.edu/28980205/Review_--
_R._Jay_Wallace_The_View_from_Here_On_Affirmation_Attachment_and_the_Limits_of_Regret](http://www.academia.edu/28980205/Review_--_R._Jay_Wallace_The_View_from_Here_On_Affirmation_Attachment_and_the_Limits_of_Regret)

And in the author's own words:

One of these is the perspectival character of our retrospective attitudes. We look back on things that

have happened from a particular point of view, one that is conditioned importantly by the attachments that we have then formed. The young girl, as she grows older and looks back on her adolescent decision to conceive, thinks about it as someone who now loves the person that the earlier decision brought into existence. Insofar as our attachments evolve through time, it follows that rifts may develop between the standpoint of decision and the standpoint of retrospective reflection, with sometimes surprising effects. Thus, in the case of the young girl's child, the mother may find that she cannot regret her decision to conceive, even though it was the wrong thing to have done at the time. There are decisions that were not justified that in this way become inaccessible to regret on the part of the agent who took them.

Furthermore, he cannot know, at the time when he made this decision, whether it would turn out to be the right thing to do, because he cannot then know for certain from what standpoint he would eventually come to look back on the decision.

In the agential cases, we settle the counterfactual question of what we would do if we could unspool

the film of time and redeliberate an earlier decision that we have taken, thinking about this question from the perspective of our present attachments. In impersonal cases involving the past, by contrast, the question we address is doubly counterfactual; we ask, in these cases, what we would do if we both were able to unspool the film of time, and were in possession of powers and capacities that enabled us to intervene in the course of natural events (stopping the tsunami before it strikes land, for example).

What other strategies might be adopted for resisting this pessimistic conclusion? One possibility would be to place temporal restrictions on the operation of the affirmation dynamic. Perhaps attachment involves a commitment to affirm the immediate historical conditions of its objects, but the commitment diminishes as the chains of historical causation reach back into the remoter past.⁵ This would rescue us from the unnerving thought that we might be committed to affirming distant historical calamities and disasters without which (for instance) the people we now love would not have come to exist. But this strategy seems to

me unsatisfactory: once the affirmation dynamic is set in motion, it is arbitrary to block its more unpalatable commitments by postulating a “statute of limitations” on its operation.

https://philosophy.berkeley.edu/file/1023/Wallace_Replies_JAP_Symposium.pdf

This raises some theological issues:

i) Freewill theists sometimes allege that Calvinists can't express regret if they believe all events are predestined. But as philosophers like Parfit and Wallace demonstrate, the issue isn't that parochial. The paradox of regret has counterparts in freewill theism.

ii) In addition, the principle of retrospective justification is germane to theodicy. How we assess the goodness or badness of an event varies according to our temporal perspective. We might view an impending event with apprehension or horror. And it may be dreadful when it happens. Yes in hindsight, when we're able to put enough distance between ourselves and the event, we may view it more positively. Our evaluation may shift with the passage of time, which provides a larger context. So one issue in theodicy is which temporal viewpoint should be the basis of comparison. Past or present, prospective or retrospective?

iii) I don't think there's anything essentially contradictory in having ambivalent feelings about the same event. Both forward and backward-looking viewpoints can both be valid, as limited but complementary perspectives on the same event. The same event may be regrettable in some

respects, yet be a cause for gratitude in other respects. That's because events can be morally complex: As another reviewer notes:

First example: the young girl's child. A girl of 14 decides to have a child, though she is clearly not in a position to care for it adequately, as she would be if she waited until she was an adult. The decision also disrupts her life and limits her opportunities in ways that having a child later would not. But she loves the child, and despite its disadvantages the child itself is glad to have been born. Neither of them can wish the child did not exist, or regret the young girl's decision to give it birth. Yet it seems that it was a decision she should not have made.

Second example: disability. An amputee dedicates himself to becoming a world-class athlete and competes successfully in the Paralympics. Or a person born deaf finds the meaning of his life through immersion in the kinds of communication available only to people who lack the ability to hear. The way these people value their lives seems to exclude regretting their disabilities, but does that imply that such disabilities should not be prevented or repaired if possible?

Wallace's view is more complicated than this, however, because it also has a place for what he calls 'deep ambivalence'. Sometimes we can't avoid both affirming and regretting something that was objectionable but has played too important a role in shaping our lives to be simply rejected. To take an example of a kind Wallace does not discuss, suppose someone fails to marry his true love: she marries someone else, or dies. He then marries someone with whom he is not in love, has children and builds his life and commitments around these attachments. Though they are intimately involved in the way he values his actual life, he may always wish he had married the other woman, and regret that he didn't. Yet according to Wallace the affirmation of his actual life spreads backwards to encompass his not having done so, which is its necessary condition. If Wallace is right about this, then deep ambivalence is inevitable in such a case: there is a conflict between valuing one's actual life and regretting that it wasn't different.

<https://www.lrb.co.uk/v36/n07/thomas-nagel/an-invitation-to-hand-wringing>

iv) However, the retrospective viewpoint can be relatively superior—because it views the same event, not in temporal isolation, but in the totality of its effects. That doesn't negate what may be bad in the original event, but it brings additional, compensatory or mitigating factors into consideration. Assessing the same event in temporal isolation is artificially truncated.

Falling on a grenade

An observation I made today on Facebook:

Calvinism doesn't teach that God created the reprobate for the purpose of their going to hell.

It's true that God intends the reprobate to end up in hell, but that doesn't mean hell is the goal of reprobation.

To take a comparison: consider a soldier who throws himself on a grenade to save the lives of his comrades. That kills him. That's the last thing he did. That's the end-result. But that wasn't the goal of his action—"Yea, I wanna get my guts blown out!". Rather, the aim was to shield his comrades by absorbing the explosion. Dying was a side-effect of his intentions. A means to an end.

God can create the reprobate in large part for what they do in this life. As agents, they make certain things happen. They help to drive the plot of world history.

Disinterested love

*As William Hasker writes, “All sorts of experiences and relationships acquire a special value because they involve love, trust, and affection that are freely bestowed. The love potions that appear in many fairy stories (and in the Harry Potter series) can become a trap; the one who has used the potion finds that he wants to be loved for his own sake and not because of the position, yet fears the loss of the beloved’s affection if the potion is no longer used,” D. Baggett & J. Walls, **Good God: The Theistic Foundations of Morality (Oxford 2011), 242n14.***

i) Does the Arminian God love us for our own sake? In classical Arminianism, election is conditional rather than unconditional. In that case, God’s love has strings attached. God’s response is contingent on our foreseen response to him.

By contrast, unconditional election is a paradigmatic example of disinterested love. Indeed, God loves us in spite

of ourselves.

ii) Also, while this illustration is very romantic, it's not very realistic. No doubt it's flattering to think a woman simply loves a man for his own sake, but in many cases, isn't there a pragmatic consideration?

Take two versions of Jerry Walls as a bachelor. In both versions, Jerry has the same appearance and personality. But in one version, Jerry is the heir to a great fortune. In another version, Jerry works at a 7/11. Which version do you think a woman is more likely to marry? The version who works a dead-end, low-wage job—or the independently wealthy version?

The card you draw

Debates over Calvinism and freewill theism often revolve around the allegation that Calvinism is committed to "causal determinism". In my experience, freewill theists rarely if ever define either term.

It's interesting to compare determinism to causation. What does it mean to cause something? Suppose I'm in a poker game. If the deck is randomly shuffled one way, I'll draw a particular card, and if it's randomly shuffled another way, I'll draw a different card. If we keep all the other variables the same, there's a sense in which changing that one variable makes the difference. Depending on the card I draw, I will bet, bluff, call, raise, or fold.

But in a larger sense, that's not the only thing that causes me to play my hand a particular way. Depends on the other cards in my hand. Depends on how I read the other players, which in turn depends on the composition of the players. Depends on whether I'm in a good mood because I'm savoring a nice bourbon, or whether I'm in a bad mood because I just broke up with my girlfriends. Depends on how much money I can afford to lose.

We might say they don't make the difference in the sense that if we just change one variable, then that's what makes the difference. But we could change one of those variables, instead.

So there's no one variable that causes the outcome, but the combination. They all make a difference to the outcome.

For better, for worse

Many Christians take the position that God is responsible for all the good things that happen to us, but not for any of the bad things that happen to us. Indeed, their primary objection to Calvinism is that Calvinism makes God responsible for the bad things as well as the good. From their viewpoint, that's self-evidently wrong. They can't think of a worse thing you could say about God. They can't imagine how some Christians actually believe that.

Because this is so obvious to them, they don't give it a second thought. Or if they do give it a second thought, they spend their time elaborating how unspeakably abhorrent that would be. They never stop to question their assumption.

Speaking for myself, I have just the opposite instinct. Of course, I believe that God is responsible for everything that happens. But suppose, for the sake of argument, that I had a choice: either God is only responsible for the good things that happen to me or else he's only responsible for the bad things that happen to me.

If push came to shove, I'd opt for the "evil" alternative. Given a choice, I'd rather that God be responsible for the bad things rather than the good things.

Where the good things are concerned, I have nothing to fear. Nothing to lose. I'm safe. They pose no threat to me or my loved ones. The good is risk-free.

But evil can do me harm. Evil can harm my loved ones. Where evil is concerned, I'd have everything to fear,

everything to lose—unless God is behind the evil. Unless God limits the evil. Unless the evil serves an ulterior good.

If God is responsible for the evil that befalls me or my loved ones, then no matter how bad it gets, it will never get as bad as it could. It will never involve irreparable harm or irremediable loss. If God is responsible for the evils in my life, then there's a floor beyond which it won't go. If everything, including every evil event, unfolds according to God's wise, beneficent plan and providence, then evil is not a bottomless pit. Not for his children.

Every evil that befalls me as a Christian, however horrible, will be a redeemable evil. There is hope. There is good awaiting me on the other side of the ordeal—in this life or the next.

Many of us come to a point in life, sooner or later, where life closes in on us. Where, despite our best efforts to avoid it, our worst fears come true. Sometimes we can see it coming, and we feel helpless to stop it. We hope and pray that it will turn aside at the last moment, but it doesn't.

Instead of waking up from a nightmare, you wake up to a nightmare. That awful sinking sensation. To know you're cornered. Everything that could go wrong went wrong. All the dice line up against you.

It's in times like these, as we cling to a windswept rock, that knowing God is behind our ordeal is a source of hope and strength and consolation. Indeed, the only source of hope and strength and consolation. In knowing this, we know that this is not the end. This is not the epitaph. If God is behind it, then God is also in front of it. To bless us. To do us good.

For better and for worse. But not for the worst—but for the best.

Praying for the lost

rogereolson says:

June 26, 2012 at 1:11 pm

I thought I gave my suggestion for prayer for unbelieving friends and loved ones in the post, didn't I? I pray for God to bring circumstances into their lives that will increase their awareness of their need of him.

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2012/06/what-i-admire-about-calvinists/comment-page-1/#comment-31421>

Up to a point, that's a good prayer for the lost. But what type of circumstance is best suited to increase an unbeliever's sense of needing God? The obvious answer is: tragic circumstances. Death. Cancer. A degenerative illness. A frightening accident. A crippling injury.

It's easy for us to feel safe and self-reliant until tragedy hits close to home. That suddenly makes us aware of how terribly vulnerable we are, as well as those dear to us.

And that's not just theoretical. In reality, tragedies often result in bringing unbelievers or nominal believers to the faith. Or restoring backsliders. An actual loss or a near miss can have that jolting effect. A sudden and severe deprivation, or a harrowing close call, involving us or

someone we love, is the type of circumstance that naturally shakes the indolent out of their complacency.

But here's the catch: Olson doesn't believe that God is responsible for tragedies. So, according to Olson, the type of circumstances most amendable to converting the lost are the very circumstances which God never causes.

Why should we turn to God when tragedy strikes if God has nothing to do with it? It's not a warning from God. It's just a fluke.

But what other circumstances specifically point to our need for him? When all is well, we don't feel needy.

Arminians at prayer

I'm going to comment on some statements by Roger Olson about an Arminian theology of prayer:

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2012/06/what-i-admire-about-calvinists/>

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2012/06/more-about-prayer-for-unsaved-loved-ones-and-friends/>

A case in point is prayer for friends and loved ones who are not saved. I know many non-Calvinists who pray, and see nothing wrong with praying, that God will simply “save” them. Of course, only a Calvinist (whether by that label or under another one) can reasonably ask God simply to “save” someone.

It's true that a Calvinist, consistent with his theology, can pray for the lost without all the mental reservations that Arminianism logically requires. A Calvinist has far more freedom in prayer. And that's one more reason to be a Calvinist.

My experience of non-Calvinist Christians (from membership and leadership in about 12 churches during my lifetime) is that they are not, by and large, theologically trained at all. They have picked up pieces of this and that (theologies) and pasted them together in ways that seem good to them without any real reflection on the outcome (the eclectic worldview, theology that results from that informal process). I'm not saying that doesn't also happen among Calvinists; I'm just saying it's not as common IN CALVINIST CHURCHES.

What I long for is a church that knows it is not Calvinist and teaches non-Calvinist theology/doctrine (about God's sovereignty) and actively helps members and attenders develop spiritual lives that are consistent with non-Calvinist (e.g., Arminian) beliefs.

Recently I visited a church I know is not Calvinist (although there may be a few Calvinists sprinkled among the members) in overall ethos. A mature Christian person gave a "testimony" from the pulpit during the Sunday morning worship service. He concluded with (paraphrasing) "I don't know why

God chose for my mother to have cancer” (but I’m learning to live with that, etc.).

I heard that and subtly looked around to see if anyone whose face I could see registered any kind of surprise or dismay. None. I mentioned it to a few people who are members of the church and who I know are not Calvinists; they didn’t think anything of it. Their response was of the nature of “Well, that’s his belief about God and so who are we to question it?” What I think they really meant was “If that’s what makes him feel comfortable....”

However, I am convinced that if I took that man aside and queried him about God and, say, the holocaust, he would deny divine determinism.

I could give numerous similar examples of what I’m talking about. I’ll mention just one more.

I knew a husband and wife who were most definitely not Calvinists and do not believe in divine determinism as a true account of God’s sovereignty. However, after their son’s death in a car accident, they talked about it as if they were Calvinists! For example, they loved to tell friends how God planned

and executed the accident so that their son did not suffer any pain; he was killed instantly.

It's true that many laymen (and even many pastors) lack theological consistency. That said, Olson's criticism is quite ironic. He's accusing many Arminians of failure to be consistently Arminian. Yet Olson's theology of providence is inconsistent with traditional Arminian theology. When Olson denies that God causes natural evil, or that God is responsible for natural evil, that's contrary to his exposition of Arminius. And it's also inconsistent with Charles Wesley. Olson has a revisionist theology of providence.

Olson's criticism reminds me of atheism. Atheism logically commits the atheist to deny moral norms or mental states (e.g. moral relativism/nihilism, eliminative materialism). But because that's so unnatural, atheists keep reverting to statements that are inconsistent with their atheism.

Likewise, because Arminian theology is so unnatural in the way it dichotomizes reality, that makes it hard to live by what they say they believe. Arminians keep slipping back into default Calvinism.

Here is how I teach my students. DO NOT wait until your parishioners experience a tragedy to talk with them about God's sovereignty. If you are a Calvinist (many of them are), teach that to your congregation and clearly communicate

its implications for practical life including how to understand evil and innocent suffering. If you are not a Calvinist, figure out your theology of divine sovereignty especially as it relates to salvation, evil and innocent suffering (I'll be happy to help! :) , and teach your congregants about that. Do not wait until they face horrible tragedy and then try to answer their cries of "Where is God!?"

I agree with him that we shouldn't wait until tragedy strikes to work out our theology of providence. However, Arminian theology is not a silver bullet to slay questions like "Where is God!?" in the wake of personal tragedy.

Because I like my prayers to be consistent with my beliefs (e.g., about God's sovereignty and about reality) I never ask God to change the past. I don't think God can do that. I think it's even incoherent to talk about changing the past. In that I agree entirely with Calvinist philosopher-theologian Paul Helm.

However, I clearly recall an incident where my mother prayed that God would work it out that whoever found her purse (which was no longer where she lost it) would turn out to be a Christian or at least an honest person and return it to her. Of course, at the point of her prayer, she was asking God to change the past (or assure that something that already happened have happened in a certain way).

I didn't criticize her; she was my mother and I was pretty young and didn't want to show her disrespect or get into an argument with her. I let it go. What harm did it do? None.

However, if someone asks my theological opinion about praying for God to change the past, I will kindly tell them I don't believe in it and explain why. (For example, there's not a single example in Scripture of it and it's illogical.)

i) Olson's objection is confused. He fails to distinguish between changing the past and affecting the past. If God is timeless, then it's feasible to pray for a past event (if we don't know the outcome), and have God answer our prayer. God doesn't have to hear the prayer in our timeframe to prepare the answer, or arrange events accordingly.

ii) On the other hand, many contemporary Arminians reject divine timelessness. In that case, affecting the past through prayer may not be coherent.

Normal language interpretation would seem to me to indicate that asking God to save someone, without any qualifications, is tantamount (whatever is intended) to asking God to do the impossible (from an Arminian perspective).

So, if a person asks me about such praying I will lead off the discussion with “What do you intend for God to do?” If the person says “I am asking God to intervene in their life to force them to repent and believe” I will say “That’s not possible” and explain why. If the person says “I am asking God to bring circumstances into their life to show them their need of him...” I will say “Well, that’s not what I think those words mean, but okay, if that’s what you mean, God knows what you mean and so go ahead and pray that way.”

It seems to me that “God, please save my friend” without qualifications normally means “God, break my friend’s will and force him to repent.” Perhaps

not everyone who prays that prayer means that, but that's what the words alone imply. That's not consistent with Arminian belief. In my opinion, only a Calvinist (or maybe also a Lutheran) can pray that way consistently.

Olson is assuming that some Arminians pray this way because they haven't thought through their position on Arminian soteriology and providence. But I think that's somewhat naïve.

Fact is, Arminians may pray that way because they don't care about the theological niceties of Arminianism. What they care about is the fate of their loved ones. Where the wellbeing of loved ones is concerned, people can be quite ruthless or unscrupulous. They will do whatever it takes. When push comes to shove, they want God to save their loved one by any means necessary. Abstractions about freewill take a back seat to the urgency and gravity of the situation.

It's like hiking in the wilderness. Suppose, due to a terrible accident, your friend is pinned under a rock. You don't want to amputate his arm. But if that's the only way to save his life, you will take extreme measures.

And my opinion in this case is—it depends on what you mean because God always knows what you mean and you're

praying to God. And if you mean to ask God to violate someone's free will and force them to be saved, then I don't think that's proper. If you mean to ask God to bring circumstances into a person's life that will probably convince them of their need of salvation, then it's proper. But why not pray with words that communicate what you mean?

i) I agree with Olson that our prayers should be theologically consistent.

ii) On the other hand, boldness in prayer can be a theological virtue. If Arminian theology causes a Christian to be very hesitant in prayer, to constantly second-guess himself, to suffer from the paralysis of analysis, then so much the worse for Arminianism. If Arminianism puts Christians in a straightjacket when they wish to pray, then that's just one more strike against Arminian theology.

iii) In addition, it isn't necessary to censure our prayers. Christian prayer has a built-in filter. This is not like paganism, where, if you inadvertently ask the gods for the wrong thing, they will give you what you ask for, to your detriment.

When we pray to God, we don't have to phrase our prayer with lots of riders, caveats, and escape clauses, to avoid the danger of praying for the wrong thing. Christian prayer isn't

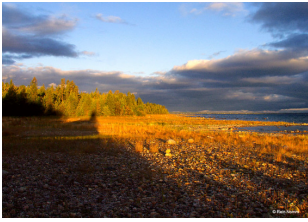
like an insurance contract, where everything you say has to be hedged about with cautious qualifications.

It's not like, an hour after you prayed, the horrid realization dawns on you that you left something out, but it's too late to go back and fix it, because the ink has dried on your signature, and now you're doomed to get what you ask for. Prayer shouldn't be a trial by ordeal. We shouldn't approach God with extreme trepidation, for fear of tiny missteps with calamitous consequences.

God makes allowance for our flawed prayers. He filters out the detritus. That's understood going into the prayer. The efficacy of prayer is not dependent on the wisdom of the supplicant, but on the wisdom of the prayer-answering God.

Prayer is like a son asking his dad for something. The son may express himself poorly, but the father knows what his son means and, more importantly, what his son needs.

The sun behind the shadow



When Calvinists, honoring God's self-revelation in Scripture, say God predestined everything that happens, including the Fall, and other evils, Arminians are livid. They think that's blasphemous.

But to say *God* stands behind evil is just another way of saying *good* stands behind evil. Behind evil, no matter how bad it gets, lies good. Ultimate good. Supreme good.

On this view, evil isn't ultimate. On this view, evil contains the seeds of its own destruction. If good underlies evil, then good blossoms from evil. A blessing in disguise.

But on the Arminian view, it's evil all the way down to bedrock. Evil as its own source. Evil as its own ultimate. You have two ultimates: good and evil. God doesn't backstop evil.

On this view, evil is evil. Nothing more and nothing less. Pure, undiluted evil. That's all it is. All it ever was or will be. It has no meaning, reason, purpose. No redeeming value. No compensatory good within itself. Just a bottomless pit.

Paul Newman's son died of a drug overdose. Years later, Newman said: "It's an event that never gets better. It gets different but it never gets better."

Not surprisingly, Newman hit the bottle after his son died. It never gets better. Merely bad in a different way.

A shadow that tails you wherever you go. Darkens everything you do.

Roger Olson's entire life has been overshadowed by his mother's death when he was young. And that's because he can only see it as an unmitigated evil. He can never thank God. Never see the sun behind the shadow.

That's the Arminian view of evil. If we can't see God behind evil, we can't see good behind evil. In that sense, we never get beyond it. Behind evil is evil. Through-and-through.

Whatever hope there is can only be in spite of evil, not because of evil. Evil itself is a dead loss. Incurable. Intractable. At most, we can replace it with something good.

God's playmates



JD Walters directed me to a paper by Alan Rhoda which lays out a freewill theist model of providence:

<http://alanrhoda.net/papers/Beyond%20the%20Chessmaster%20Analogy.pdf>

Rhoda helpfully begins with a general definition of his position:

Open theism is a theory of divine providence according to which God has sovereignly chosen to create a world in which his creatures have significant freedom to determine the direction of events. As a consequence of God's decision, there is no such thing as a completely settled future for him (or anyone) to know. That is to say, there is no complete and unique sequence of events subsequent to the present that is or that is going to be the actual future.

Instead, there is a branching array of possible futures.

Let's compare his definition with some other statements:

Similarly, while it is plausible that no one can thwart the Chess Master's general goal of victory, a determined opponent could easily thwart many of the chess master's specific goals, especially if they were announced beforehand.

[Sanders] This means that though God's overarching purposes for creation cannot be frustrated, his particular desires for individuals and situations can be frustrated.

A God who does exhaustive contingency planning, one who, for every possibility, has formed a conditional resolution—if this should happen, then I will respond thusly—has no need for ad hoc decision-making. The decisions have already been made. What remains to be seen is which conditional resolutions will be carried out, that is, what actions God will perform in response to his creatures...Either God is able to do exhaustive contingency planning or he is not. If he is not, then

that must be because he cannot anticipate all of the possibilities. But on a theistic worldview, all possibilities ultimately derive either from God's nature or from God's will, and so inability to anticipate all possibilities would seem to point to a failure of self-knowledge on God's part, a failure that in turn seems diametrically at odds with the core theistic idea that God is a perfect knower. Alternatively, if God can do exhaustive contingency planning, then why wouldn't he? It wouldn't take a taxing effort on God's part to do so, and not to do so would be to court unnecessary risks that might endanger not only God's chances of obtaining his goals for creation but also the long-term prospects of those creatures who have allied themselves to God. I submit that this would amount to inexcusable recklessness on God's part. If God can do exhaustive contingency planning, he definitely should.

But if, due to his exhaustive contingency plans, God's overarching goal cannot be thwarted, then in what sense do "his creatures have significant freedom to determine the direction of events"? If God always wins in the long run, because he has a back-up plan for every play we make, then we aren't determining the direction of events. At best we can stall for time. Postpone the inevitable.

But no matter what we choose to do, Rhoda's God will always beat us in the long run. For every move we make, he has a countermove. So Rhoda's model of providence is essentially fatalistic. No matter what you do, God gets his way. So what you do makes no difference to the ultimate outcome. Why endow creatures with the freedom to choose between alternate timelines if every alternate timeline leads to the same place?

Indeed, as Rhoda goes on to say:

In a mutually disadvantageous situation, the player that has the ability or the resources to "hold out" longer can generally induce the other player to compromise on his or her terms. For example, in the game of Chicken, the more courageous (or, rather, foolhardy) driver will usually win because he is prepared to hold out under the threat of collision longer than the other player. Similarly, since God is generally prepared to mete out punishment longer than we are prepared to endure it, he can often induce repentance (at least for a time).

So Rhoda's God endows his creatures with "significant freedom to determine the direction of events," then punishes them when they exercise their God-given freedom to influence the course of events. What's the point of having significant freedom on those terms?

Likewise, if God can always hold out longer than the human player, it's futile to play against God. So isn't the entire exercise a charade?

When God invites us into a loving relationship with himself, he's looking for a win-win outcome. We win in life not by competing with God, but by cooperating with him.

What if I don't want to have a "loving relationship" with Rhoda's God? What if I just don't like him? Normally we get to choose our friends.

Mind you, there'd be a strong incentive to play along with Rhoda's God. And that's because Rhoda's God is a lot like Trelane (The Squire of Gothos) and Damien (The Omen). For sheer survival's sake, it's prudent to pretend to like him. To humor him. To keep him amused.

Indeed, with a God like that, even if you could beat him at his own game, you'd let him win every time. Make him think he's a better player than he really is.

For when Rhoda's God becomes bored or frustrated, he's dangerous to be around. Has second thoughts about

making the human race, so he destroys everyone except for Noah and his family. If Rhoda's God gets tired of his playmates, you better watch out!

Consider the following passage from Jeremiah 18:7-10 (NASB):

At one moment I might speak concerning a nation or concerning a kingdom to uproot, to pull down, or to destroy it; if that nation against which I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent concerning the calamity I planned to bring on it. Or at another moment I might speak concerning a nation or concerning a kingdom to build up or to plant it; if it does evil in My sight by not obeying My voice, then I will think better of the good with which I had promised to bless it.

This passage tells us that God will adjust his strategy from blessing to punishing (or vice-versa) in response to whether a particular nation submits to God or rebels against him.

Two problems:

i) In this passage, God doesn't change his policy. Rather, God has a standing policy. A consistent policy. The policy

doesn't change. The policy varies with the situation, but that variation is built into the policy.

ii) This passage is entirely consonant with predestination. God has predestined that if a nation does x, he will do y, and if a nation does other than x, he will do z. Moreover, God has predestined whether a nation will do x or other than x.

Given that God has a choice in what sort of 'Creation Game' to play, a natural question, and a key one for understanding divine providence, is why God would choose to play the sort of Creation Game that he has rather than some other kind of game. To answer that question we have to think about the value of a game. What sorts of factors tend to make a game worth playing? I will identify several such factors and argue that they suggest that God would, all things being equal, prefer to exercise his providence along open theist lines.

Intuitively, there are at least four overlapping factors that can make a game intrinsically more worth playing, at least where human players are concerned...Another desideratum (for us) is that a game have significant and diverse outcomes in which differences in outcomes are predictably, though not necessarily inexorably, correlated with

the players' strategic choices. Thus, in the game of life in which we all find ourselves, we each have a variety of strategies to choose from. For this choice to be worth taking seriously, for the game to be worth taking seriously...

But on Rhoda's model, we can only affect short-term outcomes, not long-term outcomes. Diversity won't make a dime's worth of difference over the long haul.

If that's right, then it is reasonable to expect that God would prefer to play a Creation Game in which the stakes, both for himself, and for the other players, are non-trivial...Finally, the best games (for us) have uncertain outcomes. Of course, we wouldn't want outcomes to be completely uncertain, otherwise there would be no predictable correlations between strategies and outcomes...The main reason why the best games have uncertain outcomes is because those that don't are comparatively boring. That's why so many games involve randomizing devices, like dice or shuffled cards. That's why people don't want to know in advance who is going to win the Super Bowl or the World Series. It eliminates the suspense. For games

like chess, knowing exactly how the game was going to go would obviate any reason for actually playing it through. One could just contemplate the series of moves in one's head. Similarly, if God knew exactly how the Creation Game was going to play out, then one wonders why he would actually initiate the game rather than simply contemplate a virtual "creation." ...Hence, it is at least somewhat unclear why God would choose to initiate a Creation Game unless it were one in which not even he could predict with certainty exactly how it would turn out.

It suggests that God would want the Creation Game to be a meaningful one, with potentially high stakes for the players involved, including God himself. And, finally, it suggests that God would rather have a Creation Game in which there is some degree of genuine risk for him, such that there is no advance guarantee that all of his specific preferences will be met. In short, these reflections suggest that God would play the very sort of Creation Game that open theists believe he is playing.

i) But on Rhoda's model, there is no risk to God. Even if God loses a hand, he never loses a game. He may win some

and lose some in the short term, but he always wins in the long-term.

ii) Moreover, losing doesn't cost God anything, except his pride. He can't be physically hurt.

iii) By contrast, it's his playthings who have everything to lose. Everything to fear. When Rhoda's God gets mad at his playmates, he becomes vindictive. An unholy terror. Rhoda's God is like a child God. Like Damien or Trelane.

iv) Rhoda's God creates playmates because he's easily bored. He needs someone to play with. He needs to be entertained.

We're his pets. He creates us for his personal amusement. Like a puppy dog or a toy soldier. But Rhoda's God is easily frustrated. Has a short-fuse. When he gets mad at the puppy, he sets it on fire, then feels bad later on.

From a non-open theist perspective, God's rationale for playing any sort of creation game remains somewhat opaque. According to theological determinists like John Calvin and Jonathan Edwards, God has chosen a risk-free strategy that involves his ordaining what all of the created players will do. But if that's so, then created players are not genuine players in the game-theoretical sense.⁴² Instead, they

are like the pawns on the chessboard and it is as though God were playing chess with himself. Alternatively, the type of Creation Game envisaged by theological determinists is analogous to God's playing a game of solitaire with a stacked deck. For us, playing that sort of game might be a way to "kill time," but it would hardly be very interesting or challenging. Thus, it is unclear at best why God would choose to play such a game.

In Calvinism, God creates the elect for their own enjoyment rather than his enjoyment. God is generous. He spreads the goodness around. He doesn't make the elect for what he gets out of it. He needs nothing. But he makes the elect to share in his beatitude.

Evidently, the notion of disinterested love is a foreign concept to Rhoda. That God would bless his creatures, expecting nothing in return, is an alien notion to Rhoda.

Advance warning

Arminian Roger Olson as well as neotheist Gregory Boyd have both been critical of John Piper when he attributes natural disasters to divine agency.

Let's consider a natural disaster like the 1900 Galveston hurricane, which resulted in 6-12K fatalities. The reason that hurricane killed so many human beings is because, back in 1900, we didn't have the technology to assess hurricanes on a scale of 1-5, or predict when and where they'd make landfall. As such, Texans had no advance warning of the impending catastrophe.

By contrast, Olson's Arminian God has exhaustive knowledge of the future. Olson's God knows what would happen if he gave the Texans advanced warning, as well as what would happen if he didn't.

What about Gregory Boyd? Since hurricanes are not the result of libertarian freewill, there's no reason why Boyd's God couldn't know when and where the Galveston hurricane would make landfall. But even if (arguendo) Boyd's God didn't know for sure, surely his God could forecast the event at least as accurately as the National Weather Service.

Why doesn't Olson's God or Boyd's God give potential victims advance warning? That wouldn't abridge their libertarian freedom. To the contrary, advance warning would *enhance* their freedom of choice. Give them *more* alternatives to choose from. Give them *more* freedom of opportunity. Same thing for Molinism.

If you don't know that a high-category hurricane is headed your way, you can't take precautionary measures. Ignorance *limits* your field of action. *Limits* your viable options.

But if you're given due warning, even if you choose to disregard the warning, at least you had a choice (as libertarians define "choice").

Not only does the freewill defense fail to explain God's nonintervention in predictable natural disasters like hurricanes, but the freewill defense *aggravates* the problem of evil in this situation—for advance warning is not only *consistent* with libertarian freedom, it represents an *expansion* of freedom.

It's not as if the 1900 Galveston residents chose to die in the hurricane. They didn't know any better. Given the chance, many of them would have self-evacuated.

Disaster prevention

Even if the freewill defense were a successful theodicy to account for moral evil, that still leaves the familiar conundrum of natural evil unaccounted for. A backup defense is the stable environment theodicy. We can't make meaningful decisions unless our choices have predictable consequences.

By way of reply:

i) This theodicy doesn't single out Arminianism. A Calvinist can help himself to the same argument.

ii) Arminians aren't deists. They believe in miracles. So they don't think the uniformity of nature is absolute. That being the case, what is their threshold for too much divine intervention in nature?

iii) Assuming (arguendo), that divine prevention of natural disasters would be too destabilizing, how does that hinder God from warning prospective victims of impending disaster?

After all, scientists try to devise early warning systems. We're fairly good at predicting hurricanes.

In fact, don't stability and predictability go hand-in-hand? If natural disasters were predictable, humans could plan accordingly. That wouldn't make their lives less stable, but more so.

Suppose oceanographers learn to predict tsunamis, volcanologists learn to predict eruptions, meteorologists learn to predict tornadoes, seismologists learn to predict

earthquakes, and so on. Would Arminians oppose this early warning system on the grounds that it destabilizes human society?

But if it's okay for scientists to give us advance warning of impending natural disasters, why hinders the Arminian God from doing the same?

iv) Yet we can take this a step further. How does preventing natural disaster render human existence less stable? For instance, don't we have flood control technology to protect communities from a catastrophic deluge?

Suppose seismologists figure out how to prevent cataclysmic earthquakes by releasing a little pressure at a time. Wouldn't that make human life more stable rather than less stable? Would Arminians oppose that technology?

Rosemary's Baby

Weaver's (and others') complaint against penal substitution is not that it involves violence; it is that it makes God violent thus justifying our violence. Weaver knows very well the cross was violent, but he wants to make clear the violence was committed not by God but by Satan and sinful people. I agree. And that's what I grew up hearing.

From the human perspective, Jesus' crucifixion WAS a lynching, abuse. All admit that. The debate is whether it was at the hands of God or humans/Satan. I am arguing it was at the hands of humans/Satan, not God's. There I'm with Weaver and others who argue for nonviolent atonement.

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2011/11/did-god-kill-jesus/>

Many Christians have concluded that in order for God to accomplish his goal for creation, everything that happens in world history must somehow fit into his sovereign plan. This assumption has permeated the Church throughout most of its

history. The assumption is often expressed in clichés Christians are sometimes prone to recite when confronting tragedies like cancer, crippling accidents, or natural disasters. Believers sometimes attempt to console themselves and others with statements like, “God has his reasons,” “There’s a purpose for everything,” “Providence writes straight with crooked lines,” and “His ways are not our ways.”

I call this understanding of God’s relationship to the world “the blueprint worldview,” for it assumes that everything somehow fits into meticulous plan and mysterious purposes of God—a divine blueprint. The view takes many different forms, but each version shares the assumption that, whether ordained or allowed, there is a specific divine reason for every occurrence in history. As traditional and popular as the blueprint worldview is, it is not without significant difficulties. For one thing, this view makes it exceedingly difficult to reconcile the evil in our world with the perfect goodness of God, especially when applied to specific instances of suffering and evil.

The world is caught up in a spiritual war between God and Satan. Unlike the blueprint worldview, the warfare worldview does not assume that there is a specific divine reason for what Satan and other evil agents do. To the contrary, God fights these opponents precisely because their purposes are working against his purposes.

Suffering takes on a different meaning when it is considered in the context of a cosmic war as opposed to a context in which everything is part of God's meticulous plan and mysterious higher good. In the warfare worldview we would not wonder about what specific divine reason God might have had in allowing little children to be buried alive in mud or a little girl to be kidnapped. Instead, we would view these individuals as "victims of war" and assign the blame to human or demonic beings who oppose God's will.

<http://www.gregboyd.org/essays/essays-spiritual-warfare/intro-to-warfare-worldview/>

I quote these two passages to highlight a fact that's often overlooked in debates between Calvinists, classical Arminians, and Arminian open theists. The corollary of

making God less powerful is to make Satan more powerful. Like a seesaw, when you lower God, Satan rises.

In Calvinism, Satan is just a pawn on God's chessboard. Indeed, Satan is the ultimate dupe. Although he's rebelling against God, God decreed his rebellion to contribute to the realization of God's overall plan. So God is playing Satan like a chump.

But in theological systems that reject predestination and meticulous providence, Satan becomes more godlike while God becomes less godlike. I don't mean Satan becomes godlike in terms of moral character, but in terms of power relative to God. On this view, the devil is like a resourceful guerilla warrior whom God lacks the ability to crush. Rather, it becomes a protracted battle, where God wins some skirmishes, but loses others. Like those many Antichrist-themed Hollywood movies where the devil is on the ascendant.

It's ironic that Arminians like Olson say Calvinism makes God devilish, for it's Olson and his ilk who are actually magnifying the devil. They build up the devil every time they bump God down a few notches. If Arminians accuse Calvinists of making God Satanic, Calvinists could just as well accuse Arminians of making Satan godlike.

Of course, Olson, Boyd, and Weaver think God wins the war in the end, yet that's only because they're getting God's side of the story. But given their lofty view of Satan's near omnipotence, doesn't the Bible give slanted war coverage? If God has such a hard time stamping out the devil, maybe the Bible is hortatory war propaganda by the losing side. Should we switch teams before it's too late?

Doppelgänger

One of the stock objections to Calvinism is the allegation that according to Calvinism, the spiritual experience of the reprobate may be indistinguishable from the spiritual experience of the elect.

i) To begin with, evangelical Arminianism believes that some people are deluded about their salvation. For instance, there are nominal Christians and progressive Christians who imagine they are heavenbound, when in fact they lack saving faith. Not to mention members of cults who imagine they are heavenbound (e.g. Muslims, Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses). So Calvinism is hardly unique in taking the position that people can be deluded about their salvation. It doesn't require an inner experience by an outside agent (God, Satan) to produce that delusion. Mundane factors can have that effect.

ii) It depends on what is meant by indistinguishable. Is the allegation that they have the same spiritual experience? If so, that's not the case. The elect experience regeneration and sanctification while the reprobate do not.

iii) Or does it mean that even though their psychological experience is different, they have no intersubjectival basis of comparison to determine whether their perception is what the elect experience or the reprobate experience? Even if that were the case, so what? Assuming that's a consequence of Calvinism, how does that disprove Calvinism?

Let's take a comparison. Here's a philosopher invoking the science-fiction scenario of machines that can duplicate a human being. He's using this thought-experiment to

undermine dualism, but we could tweak it to stipulate that the machine duplicate the soul as well as the body:

Those who believe this will concede, after a moment's reflection, that just as most of the duplicate's memories will not be real memories, so most of his beliefs about himself and his history will be false. The duplicate will, for example, believe that he is the [original] Alfred, and he is not. That is, he is not a man who has existed for such-and-such a number of years (he is only a few minutes old) and is married to Winifred (he has never met her), and so on. The duplicate has no sense of Alfred. He is someone else, for if you stick a pin into Alfred, the duplicate feels no pain. Nevertheless, it seems to the duplicate that he is Alfred. What it is like to be the duplicate is just exactly what it is like to be Alfred. If Alfred was unconscious when he was duplicated, and if he and the duplicate were then "scrambled"...no one, including Alfred and the duplicate,

could ever know which was Alfred and which was the duplicate. P. van Inwagen, *Metaphysics* (Westview Press, 4th ed., 2015), 264.

In this scenario, the original and his duplicate are physically and psychologically interchangeable. Exact same mental furniture. Same memories and psychological makeup. Identical bodies. There's nothing they can point to differentiate the original from the duplicate.

Now that might have unsettling consequences. But you can't disprove it just because it generates an identity crisis. You can critique it on other grounds, as unrealistic or impossible. But the fact that it has unnerving or creepy consequences doesn't make it false. And that's much more extreme than comparing elect and reprobate.

Molinism, Question-Begging, and Foreknowledge of Indeterminates

I'm going to make some comments on this defense of Molinism: John D. Laing "Molinism, Question-Begging, and Foreknowledge of Indeterminates," *Perichoresis* 16/2 (2018): 55–76.

Calvinism is ill-equipped to deal with genuine randomness, as should be abundantly clear. Ian Barbour rightly takes issue with William Pollard's suggestion that God's providence is located in his control (in a deterministic way) of subatomic and atomic structures/movements. He first objects to the total control afforded God in this model because it leads to predestination, a doctrine Barbour sees as denying human freedom and the reality of evil (Barbour 1990: 117). While Barbour's interpretation of predestination is questionable, he is still correct that Pollard's view is inconsistent with the reality of chance/indeterminacy. Barbour goes on to criticize the model for its lopsided view of providence as divine use of unlawful aspects of nature and for its implicit reductionism, but these are of little concern here. What is important is the removal of real indeterminacy under any deterministic model of

providence, no matter how much the proponent wishes to engage modern physical theory.

The most important similarity between the two types of counterfactuals is that they both lack control from without. That is, both libertarianly free actions and random events, by definition, cannot have an external control directing their specific outcomes, but this is not to say that they cannot have true statements about how they will result. [I am loathe to suggest that creaturely freedom is random, thus adding weight to arguments of determinists who claim that libertarian freedom is incoherent and/or arbitrary. Nevertheless, there are some similarities between libertarianly free actions and random events that allow for an analogy.] Just as Molinism allows God to use counterfactuals of creaturely freedom to (weakly) actualize his desires by means of the free actions of his creatures, so also it allows him to establish order and determinateness at the macro-level while retaining genuine indeterminateness at the micro-level by means of counterfactuals of subatomic particle movement. That is, propositions such as If situation S were to obtain, particle P would randomly move

to location L could be used by God to guide and/or govern subatomic particles without causally determining their movements by weakly actualizing situations like S so that the larger picture of the creation is characterized by orderliness. Of course, a few caveats must be noted. First, it could be the case that none of the true counterfactuals of random subatomic particle movement result in the particle being where God wants it (and so God's options are limited by the true counterfactuals).

i) It's fascinating to see an SBC theologian take the position that God lacks control over some purely natural, inanimate processes and events. That's a very radical restriction on divine providence.

ii) In addition, there are deterministic as well as indeterministic interpretations of quantum mechanics. The many-worlds interpretation is deterministic.

iii) Even if physical determinism is breaks down at the subatomic level, that doesn't mean there can't be immaterial determinants. To take a comparison, in substance dualism an immaterial mind can move the hand. Some material effects may have immaterial causes. Indeed, creation ex nihilo is premised on that distinction. So are miracles that bypass natural media.

Elsewhere, I have argued that Molinism may prove fruitful in explaining how God could create by means of a process like neo-Darwinism that incorporates random processes (in this case random genetic mutations) by appeal to what I called counterfactuals of random genetic mutation. Truths about how random mutations would in fact result could be used by God to bring about the creatures he desires. At the same time, the limitations Molinism places upon God's ability to determine the true counterfactuals (of freedom and of random genetic mutation) help explain features like vestigial organs which seem problematic for models of creation and intelligent design that use more deterministic assumptions. The argument relies upon analogies between counterfactuals of creaturely freedom and counterfactuals of random genetic mutation and between the free will defense and a similar defense of

intelligent design by progressive creation or evolutionary creation.

i) That equivocates over the definition of "randomness" in biology. To my knowledge, when evolutionists biologists say the process of evolution is "random", they don't mean it's indeterminate, but that evolutionary developments are independent of what's beneficial to the organism. Mutation may be, and often is, nonadaptive.

Laing is using "random" in a way that precluded guided evolution. Because evolution is (according to him) an indeterministic process, it can't be divinely directed.

Likewise, to my knowledge, vestigiality is defined as a characteristic that used to be functional, but has lost functionality, like blind cave fish. But that doesn't mean the process is indeterminate.

ii) So Dembski was threatened with termination for espousing old-earth creationism (even though his position was well-known at the time of hiring), but it's permissible for Laing to promote theistic evolution as a SWBTS prof? In fact, he's a contributor to BioLogos, the flag ship of theistic evolution. Yet he teaches at SWBTS!

The avengers

One objection to Calvinism goes like this: the Calvinist God is like a Mafia Don who puts out a hit on a rival. He doesn't pull the trigger. Rather, he hires a triggerman to do it. Yet the Don is just as blameworthy, if not more so, than the triggerman.

And it's true that the distinction between proximate and remote causation isn't necessarily exculpatory, as this example illustrates. So this seems to be the principle: if it's murder for me to kill someone directly, then it's murder for me to facilitate their death. That sounds plausible, but is it true?

As I've often said, what we find intuitively plausible usually depends on the example. Changing the example can change the intuition.

Let's take a morally complex example. After WWII, some Nazi's become fugitives from justice. I don't mean Nazis in the sense of forced conscripts, but zealots who were devoted to the cause, viz. Josef Mengele, Walter Rauff. Some of them fled to Latin America, where they hid out or found safe haven.

This gave rise to Nazi hunters. But some Jews took it a step further, becoming assassins (rather like the OT avenger of blood). They were called the Nakam.

Now, it might be possible to argue that their actions were just reprisal. But for discussion purposes, let's stipulate that assassinating Nazi war criminals is murder.

Suppose I'm living in Latin America. I recognize one of my neighbors as a Nazi war criminal.

Suppose the Nakam are hot on the trail of my Nazi neighbor. They come knocking, show me photos, ask me if I know him by name or by sight.

I realize that these are Jewish assassins. If I give them accurate directions, they will murder him. Does that make me complicit in murder, if I accede to their request?

Although it would be murder if *I* killed him, surely I have no duty to protect him. I have no duty to lie to the Nakam to shield him from retribution. It's his fault that he's at risk. He brought it on himself.

This seems to be a case where a second party could facilitate murder without his own action being tantamount to murder. Even if their action is blameworthy, and my action wittingly facilitates their action, that doesn't make my action blameworthy in a case like this.

Freewill theism and evil

The problem of evil is often locked into two-sided debate between Calvinists and freewill theists. The freewill theists are confident that evil is a particular, indeed intractable problem for Calvinism—from which freewill theism is luckily exempt. There are, however, outside observers who think freewill theism operates within the same flawed framework:

One thing I noticed that many of the contributors had in common is a dissatisfaction with the very structure of typical defenses or theodicies, because (the thought goes) the very idea that God allows evil for the sake of some good (even one, as the skeptical theists might say, that we should not expect to be able to identify) would put God into an immoral relationship with those who suffer, because he'd be trading off their suffering for some other good, which would be an immoral way to treat someone. Those who endorsed some version of this line of thought reacted to it in a variety of ways: some wanted to

rethink the personality of God in order to deny that he is part of our moral community, while others wanted to rethink the perfection of God so that we can think of him as an imperfect parent. I do think that this line of thought reflects a general turn in the literature on the problem of evil, from arguing about whether we can identify goods that outweigh and require evils, to discussing the ethical principles that would apply to God himself. I myself have most often encountered this turn in some critiques leveled by Abrahamic theists against other Abrahamic theists: the common argument against theological determinism, namely, that it entails that God bears some morally objectionable relation to evil and suffering, even if there is a great good that requires him to allow the evil.[3] The fact that so many in this volume see the problem as applying not just to theological determinists but to any standard theist is striking, and seems to me correct:

everyone needs to address the question of God's own ethics. Unfortunately, none of the contribution addresses that question in any real depth, certainly not coming even close to the depth of Mark Murphy's God's Own Ethics.[4] So one useful lesson of this book is that we should try to explore the issue of what ethical principles should apply to God. However, we'll need to look elsewhere for a deep and thorough exploration of that subject.

<https://ndpr.nd.edu/news/the-problem-of-evil-eight-views-in-dialogue/>

Reformed exclusivism

Critics of Calvinism regard Calvinism as an especially harsh version of exclusivism. They castigate unconditional election and they criticize the Reformed position that regeneration is causally prior to faith. The point of this post is not to defend those tenets directly, but to consider a potential fringe benefit.

i) In traditional evangelical exclusivism, premortem faith in Christ is a prima facie prerequisite of salvation. But there are caveats. That's usually confined to mentally competent individuals. Exceptions are often made for those who lack the cognitive faculties to exercise Christian faith. People below a certain age. People with severe congenital brain damage.

Christians who become senile. Christians with brain cancer. The latter two lose their faith, but they don't lose their salvation. Rather, they lose the cognitive faculties to believe.

That's not necessarily the same thing as declaring all those groups to be heavenbound. Because Scripture doesn't give definitive answers to the salvific status of special cases, some evangelical theologians suspend judgment while others stake out the universal salvation of all who die before the age of reason (to take one example).

ii) Although Scripture attributes salvation to faith in Christ, Scripture also attributes salvation to regeneration. It's lopsided to focus on saving faith to the exclusion of saving regeneration.

iii) According to evangelical freewill theism, faith causes regeneration. According to Calvinism, regeneration (in tandem with the Gospel) causes faith. In Calvinism, regeneration is causally and sometimes temporally prior to saving faith. There can be a chronological gap between regeneration and saving faith. For instance, God can regenerate someone as a young child or even in the womb, but they may not come to faith until they reach the age of reason or later. Likewise, in Calvinism, election is logically/teleologically prior to conception (indeed, prior to time).

iv) Suppose (ex hypothesi) that God regenerates a Muslim with a view to the Muslim coming to Christian faith, only God regenerates the Muslim several years before he comes to faith in Christ. At that stage in the process, the Muslim hasn't been exposed to the Gospel. But suppose the effect of regeneration is to make him doubt or lose faith in Islam. At that stage he lacks an alternative. But regeneration broke through the social conditioning which made Islam unquestionable prior to regeneration. And suppose that prompts him to search for religious alternatives—until he discovers a Bible. Regeneration planted a seed that eventually germinated in faith. But there was some delay.

v) In principle, God might elect or regenerate someone who's killed in a traffic accident before coming to faith in Christ. I wouldn't press that. In general, God coordinates election and regeneration with the Gospel.

That said, I'm not sure how we can rule out the possibility that God elects and regenerates some people who die before coming to Christ. Their faith will be postponed to the afterlife. Indeed, many Calvinists already believe that happens in special cases (see above). Is salvation a matter

of lucky timing? If you die a minute before, you're damned?

Ironically, something freewill theists find so objectionable in Calvinism has the potential to make it more magnanimous than traditional evangelical freewill theism. Not something to bank on, but an open question in Reformed theology. By contrast, faith and regeneration are chronologically inseparable in traditional evangelical freewill theism, resulting in a harsher version of exclusivism.

Calvinism is the worst theodicy—except for all the others

Churchill's quip reminds me of Calvinism and its critics. Here's a fascinating extension of Peter van Inwagen's theodicy:

God has a criterion for salvation. And he has a policy of enforcing it that goes as follows: If a creature meets the criterion for salvation, then admit him to Heaven. Otherwise he will end up in Hell. In creating a chancy world with free creatures and orderly laws of nature, God risked creating people that would not meet that criterion. For all we know, that is his plan and this is the world he created. And for all we know, just as it is not determinate that there is a minimum number of horrors required to realize the divine plan, it is not determinate that there is a minimum cutoff for satisfying the criterion of salvation. For any person in the indeterminate range that God saves, he may just as well have saved a slightly worse person who is also in that

range. But this is no moral flaw of God's, because – given that the criterion of salvation is indeterminate – it is not possible to always satisfy the proportional justice principle. In practical sorites situations, moral agents must arbitrarily discriminate between points in the series. For all we know, God faces a practical sorites in his plan of salvation. So, for all we know, premise (6) of Sider's argument is false. p408.

SULLIVAN, M. (2013) PETER VAN INWAGEN'S DEFENSE, IN THE BLACKWELL COMPANION TO THE PROBLEM OF EVIL (EDS J. P. McBRAYER AND D. HOWARD-SNYDER), JOHN WILEY & SONS, LTD, OXFORD, UK,CH27

How's that supposed to be an improvement over what freewill theists find objectionable in Calvinism? Basically, salvation and damnation are the result of getting lucky or unlucky.

God's foundling

Traditionally, Calvinists focus on theological metaphors like the New Birth or death in sin to illustrate the helplessness of the lost. A neglected theological metaphor is adoption. Paradigm-examples include God's "adoption" of David and God's "adoption" of Israel. A graphic example is Ezk 16, where a newborn who was left to die is rescued by a passerby. The adoption metaphor may be related to the OT concern for orphans. And it's a major theological category in the NT.

Take the scenario of an orphanage. The kids are neglected because they don't receive the kind of individualized attention and affection that normal kids do. They have no one to call their own. No one they belong to. No adult who's their frame of reference.

Suppose an orphan like that is adopted by a loving parent or parents. This is like a second life. Although they preexisted their adoption, there's a sense in which life truly begins for them after their adoption. Now they suddenly have the life they longed for. They are showered with blessings.

In Arminian theology, the blessings of salvation flow from the headwaters of faith. Blessings contingent on the autonomous act of faith.

In Reformed theology, the blessings of salvation flow from the headwaters of grace. Blessings contingent on the unilateral act of God. Adoption is an image which powerfully illustrates that difference.

Recentring the "freewill" debate

The most salient change I would make, although perhaps not the philosophically most important one, is that I would not now use the phrase 'free will'. In fact, I would not use even the adjective 'free' — I would not speak of free actions, free agents, or free choices. Nor would I use the adverb 'freely' and the noun 'freedom'. In my view, these words have little meaning beyond that which the philosopher who uses them explicitly gives them, and yet philosophers persist in arguing about what they do or should mean. They enter into disputes about what "free will" and "free choices" and "acting freely" and "freedom" really are. These philosophers have fallen prey to what I may call verbal essentialism. That is to say, it is essential to their discussions that they involve certain words: 'free', 'freely', 'freedom'. ... It would be impossible to translate their

discussions into language that did not involve those words. Peter van Inwagen, The Harvard Review of Philosophy (2015), 22:16-17.

http://andrewmbailey.com/pvi/Thoughts_on_Essay.pdf

Calvinist/Arminian debates often go like this: Arminians say they believe in freewill, and they deny that Calvinists believe in freewill. Calvinists typically reply that they believe in freewill, too, they just have a different concept of freewill. But should we frame the debate in terms of freedom, viz. Can agents whose actions are determined or predetermined be "free"?

The problem with that framework is that what philosophers are typically after in this debate is a different question. Not, "Are we free?" but "Are we morally responsible?"

Now, libertarian freedom is often invoked as a necessary condition for praiseworthy or blameworthy actions. I'm not suggesting that we can avoid the issue of freedom in debating the nature of moral responsibility.

Yet for analytical clarity, we should distinguish between the primary issue and secondary issues. Whether or not we're morally responsible is the primary issue, the starting-point, while the question of what conditions are necessary and sufficient for an agent to be morally responsible, is secondary inasmuch as explanations are attempts to ground it—unless it is groundless (i.e. uncaused). Casting the issue

in terms of freewill gets us off on the wrong foot. We need to recenter the debate.

Because "freedom" is a cipher, both sides explicate the concept of freedom. For instance, libertarians unpack that in terms of ultimate sourcehood and/or ability to access to alternate possibilities, &c, while Fischer appeals to regulative control and guidance control.

But in that event, "freedom" does no work. That's just a verbal placeholder. It's the underlying categories that do the work. So why not drop the ambiguous or opaque word "freedom" and go straight to examination of the categories?

An exception would be the relation between freedom and foreknowledge, where the primary issue isn't moral responsibility, but something else.

"If I can't love Hitler, I can't love anybody"

Eric Reitan As AJ Muste said in an attempt to explain the nature of Christian love, "If I can't love Hitler, I can't love anybody."

https://www.facebook.com/JerryLWalls/posts/10155203237135676?comment_id=10155203485455676&reply_comment_id=10155203651375676&comment_tracking=%7B%22tn%22%3A%22R9%22%7D&pnref=story

Eric Reitan is a prominent pacifist, while Muste was a Marxist pacifist. However, this does encapsulate, in a dramatic way, how freewill theists conceptualize Christian love. So let's scrutinize the claim:

1. Clearly there's no logical contradiction in selectively loving some people rather than all people. If I love some people, but don't love other people, that's logically consistent.

Notice I'm not making a value judgment on the propriety of that attitude. I'm just making the observation that this statement is false from a logical standpoint.

2. Just as clearly, it's psychologically possible to selectively love some people rather than all people. And that's not just in principle. I daresay that's universal human experience. It's nonsense to say that if I can't love Hitler, then I can't love my parents or grandparents or siblings or spouse or kids or friends.

Notice, once again, I'm not making a value judgment on the propriety of that attitude. I'm just making the observation that this statement is false from a psychological and sociological standpoint.

It's important to draw these distinctions in part because, in my experience, internet freewill theists are prone to indulge in virtue-signaling. They engage in self-congratulatory comparisons that have no basis in reality. Back-patting rhetoric.

3. At best, then, the statement is mean to express an ideal. What ought to be the case.

And it's true that Scripture commands Christians to practice love in general. Love our neighbors. Love our enemies.

4. That, however, also turns on the definition of love. Consider two candidates:

i) An emotion. Affection.

Certainly that's a valid definition of love, but is in applicable in this context? For instance, there are currently about 7 billion humans on the planet, but I don't have affection for most of them because I don't know that most of them exist. I don't know who they are. The figure is just an abstraction. I know that they exist in the sense that there must be that many individuals to comprise that total, but I don't know them all as individuals. I can't have the same affection for them that I have for someone I know.

On that definition, not loving someone doesn't mean hating them. If I don't know you exist, I don't love you, hate you, like you, or dislike you. I have no feelings about you whatsoever.

ii) An action. Acting in someone's best interest.

That's a common alternate definition. And I think it's often valid.

That distinction makes it possible to distinguish affection from compassion. I don't have to have affection for someone to have compassion for someone. Compassion can be more abstract. Imagining myself in their situation.

5. But in a fallen world, it isn't possible to love everyone in the sense of (4). I can't simultaneously act in Hitler's best interests and Jewish best interests, because those are diametrically opposed. Hitler posed an existential threat to Jews. I can love Hitler at the expense of Jews, or I can love Jews and the expense of Hitler, but I can't do both at the same time. Take the plot to assassinate Hitler.

So this aphorism ("If I can't love Hitler, I can't love anybody") turns out to be an unwitting *reductio ad absurdum* not only of universalism but Arminianism.

Fatal snapshot

One consequence of being a celebrity is that folks are continually snapping photos of you. There are paparazzi who tail you relentlessly. There's a snapshot of James Dean tanking up at a Sherman Oaks gas station. There he is, in the prime of life, having a blast, on a warm sunny day in Southern California. A picture perfect scene. Or so it seems.

Now, because he was a movie star, there are many snapshots of Dean. So what, if anything, makes this particular snapshot special—compared to hundreds of others? Thousands of others?

It's a snapshot of his silver Porsche 550 Spyder. That's the car he died in. And the snapshot was taken September 30, 1955. That's the day he died, at 5:45 pm, in a fatal collision. In other words, it was taken just hours before his untimely demise.

And that makes the snapshot ominous. The viewer knows something he doesn't. Dean has no inkling that a few hours later, he will be dead. For him, that lies in the unforeseeable future, however near in time—whereas, for the viewer, it lies in the past. We know the trajectory. We're looking back on that. We mentally begin with how it ended, and view the snapshot in light of the denouement. That snapshot, which is nothing special in prospect, takes on haunting significance in retrospect. We know that he's doomed. And it's too late to warn him. Nothing can save him.

Now, at the moment the snapshot was taken, it wasn't fatalistic. Indeed, if any one of any number of things had happened slightly differently, he'd still be alive, vibrant, and

youthful the next day—with a full life ahead of him. Had he arrived at the intersection a few moments sooner or later, they'd miss connections. Had the driver of the other car arrived at the intersection a few moments sooner or later, they'd miss connections. If one of them had a flat tire on the way, they'd miss connections. And so on and so forth. But the past is unalterable. And when we see that snapshot, with the benefit of hindsight, it has a fatalistic vibe. Not fatalistic in advance of the fact—but after the fact, nothing can be done to avert the outcome.

Incidentally, it's edifying to consider all the near misses in our lives. In the nature of the case, we're often unaware of a near miss because it didn't happen. There's nothing to notice. In some cases we're conscious of a close call, which makes us thankful. But those must be greatly outnumbered by all the close calls that escape our notice. Had the timing or placement been even slightly different, we wouldn't be here. To make it this far, consider how many times we averted disaster by a few meters or moments. Changing just one variable five, ten, twenty, or fifty miles up the road may preempt a chain reaction.

Now suppose that due to a temporal anomaly, when you check your mail on September 29, 1955, there's a manila envelop containing two snapshots. One snapshot shows Dean at the gas station, and the other snapshot shows the scene of the accident. In that case, is the accident a foregone conclusion?

Hypothetically, if you knew what you were looking at, and you had a chance to forewarn the actor, the accident would still be preventable. But suppose there's no way to contact him. Is the accident a *fait accompli*, even though this is a day before the two scenes depicted in the snapshots? In that event, isn't the collision bound to happen?

i) This illustrates the dilemma between freedom and foreknowledge. If God knows the future, can the future turn out contrary to God's knowledge? Suppose God has, in effect, mental snapshots of Dean at the gas station as well as the crash site.

ii) Some freewill theists might object that it's disanalogous because God doesn't have advance knowledge of the future. Rather, God is outside of time.

However, I didn't frame the question in terms of what God knew before it happened, but the sequence of events. Not God's relation to time, but relations within time. If, moreover, God has timeless mental snapshots of these two scenes, then how can events play out any differently?

To be sure, God has mental snapshots of alternate timelines. The point, though, is that he knows which one of those many timelines maps onto the real world, in contrast to all the counterfactual timelines. And if, in addition, God creates a world with a history corresponding to those mental snapshots, then how can it deviate from his mental snapshots of the past or future?

iii) A freewill theist might object that if the future were different, then God would have different mental snapshots of the future. If the future were different, the future God knows would be a different future.

But even so, that's not what's going to happen. Only one timeline will happen. If the manila envelop had snapshots depicting a different outcome, then, of course, Dean won't die in the accident. But isn't that beside the point? The envelop doesn't have those snapshots. Rather, it has snapshots of Dean at the gas station, and the crash site.

Given those snapshots (of tomorrow), how can events unfold any differently tomorrow?

iv) Moreover, the question is whether Dean, or the other driver, or some other participant in the chain of events, has the power to change God's knowledge of the future (were they to do something different). It's not a question of our general ability to do one thing or another, but whether that's open-ended in relation to a fact about God's knowledge. This becomes a debate over the fortunes of Ockhamism. But a basic problem with Ockhamism is that it seems to stand in tension with the fixity of the past. As one philosopher put it,

It seems to me that it is very difficult to give an account of the necessity of the past that preserves the intuition that the past has a special kind of necessity in virtue of being past, but which has the consequence that God's past beliefs do not have that kind of necessity. The problem is that God's past beliefs seem to be as good a candidate for something that is strictly past as almost anything we can think of, such as an explosion last week. If we have counterfactual power over God's past beliefs, but not the past explosion, that must be because of something special about God's past

beliefs that is intuitively plausible apart from the attempt to avoid theological fatalism. If it is not independently plausible, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the Ockhamist solution is ad hoc.

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/free-will-foreknowledge/#2.3>

v) A freewill theist could take the radical step of denying the fixity of the past, but if there's a conflict between the fixity of the past and counterfactual power over the past, what gives? Which principle is more plausible and fundamental? When push comes to shove, I think it's arguably the case that the fixity of the past takes precedence. For some detailed analysis:

<http://www.andrewmbailey.com/jmf/FFFP.pdf>

vi) Another question is whether timeless beliefs are analogous to the past. If even the past is necessary, albeit "accidentally" so, despite the fact that time is contingent, then a fortiori, timeless states should be at least as necessary, if not more so. What's timeless is inherently immutable, whereas temporal events only become immutable when they lie in the past.

vii) A friend of mine noted that a freewill theist might parry the argument by shifting to the question of what grounds God's beliefs, what they metaphysically "depend" on. If they

are grounded in the creature's free action, that is if they metaphysically depend on the creature, then this is enough for libertarian freedom (it's argued). So even if we can't do otherwise given God's infallible beliefs, so long as it's us who ground his belief, that's enough for libertarian freedom.

That move concedes that libertarian freedom is inconsistent with God's knowledge of the future if freedom is defined as liberty to do otherwise in the same situation. So the argument is successful against libertarian freedom in that sense.

If so, the issue shifts to the philosophical prospects for libertarian freedom defined by ultimate sourcehood. That requires different arguments and counterarguments.

Can God stop evil?

Christianity teaches that whenever evil is done, God had ample warning. He could have prevented it, but He didn't. He could have stopped it midway, but He didn't. He could have rescued the victims of the evil, but - at least in many cases - He didn't. In short, God is an accessory before, during, and after the fact to countless evil deeds, great and small.

http://www.andrewmbailey.com/dkl/Evil_Freedoms_Sake.pdf

There's a difference between preventing an event and stopping an event in progress. In predestinarian traditions (e.g. Thomism, Augustinianism, Jansenism, Calvinism), there's a sense in which God cannot stop evil midway. In predestinarian traditions, everything happens according to plan. Once God implements a particular plan for the world, the series of events is unstoppable.

In that sense, although God can't stop a chain of events in midstream, God can prevent the outcome by implementing a different master plan. But once that plan is in place, everything happens like falling dominoes. (The same holds true for Molinism.)

This doesn't rule out petitionary prayer, for that, too, figures in the master plan.

Is God exempt?

I'll respond to a statement that a commenter left on my blog:

I'm not sure how to answer the atheist objection that it's special pleading and ad hoc to appeal to God's special prerogatives (as God) to get out of the dilemma that the types of evils God allows/permits (and ordains in the case of Calvinism) would be evil on our part if we allowed or planned them but somehow not evil for God if He allows or plans/ordains them.

I believe that by faith, but I'm not sure how to rationally defend that to an atheist (though, it's much easier against an Arminian who accepts Biblical authority). Especially if I include in the problem of evil the uniquely Calvinistic view of reprobation (and pre-damnation as some Calvinists make a distinction). The atheist question is "How does appealing to God's superior ontology and

status as Creator, the most perfect and supreme being and who is allegedly the standard of goodness exempt Him from being guilty of evil for allowing and ordaining such things when of all beings in existence He's the most capable of preventing them?" It's not merely that God is supposed to be guilty, but especially guilty because God, in His omnipotence, can prevent them from occurring.

And in the case of Calvinism, God doesn't passively permit, but actively ordains evils and reprobation. As I've been asked, "How can Calvinists claim God is good with a straight face?" Allegedly, there's cognitive dissonance involved.

Ryan Hedrich already gave a good response. Now for me:

i) It's true that some Calvinists are too quick to invoke divine authority as a solution. Although that response is true at a certain level, it's not an explanation, and it's only persuasive for someone who already agrees with the theological framework—yet that's the very issue in dispute.

In fairness, I've seen Arminians stipulate that God has a morally sufficient reason for permitting inscrutable evils. But, of course, that appeal has no explanatory value, and begs the question. Likewise, Marilyn McCord Adams contends that divine and human goods are ontologically incommensurate. So these maneuvers are hardly confined to Calvinists.

ii) Suppose you have a fictional character in a story who enjoys foresight regarding the future. To be precise, he foresees two possible futures: what will transpire if he intervenes and what will transpire if he doesn't intervene. He often finds himself in situations where he could prevent some tragedy, yet he refrains from doing so. For instance, he sees a house fire. He's in a position to rescue one of the children who's trapped inside. Yet he does nothing. To outside observers, his inaction appears to be reprehensible.

But here's the dilemma: what if by preventing a short-term evil he causes a long-term evil or preempts a second-order good? Whenever he intervenes, there are tradeoffs. By preventing harm to some people, his action has the side-effect of harming others, or eliminating some resultant good.

What if he knows that the child, had he survived, would have a tenth-generation descendent who's a serial killer? Or what if he knows that if the child dies, the parents will procreate another child to take the place of the child they lost in the house fire. If he intervenes, he deprives the replacement child of existence. So which life takes precedence? On either scenario, someone loses out. Someone will benefit from his action or be harmed by his action. There's no timeline that secures all the same goods while eliminating every evil. In each alternate timeline,

some evils are offset by some goods while some goods come at the cost of some evils.

A fallen world is a network of good and evil. Some evils cause some goods. Some goods cause some evils. Some goods preempt other goods.

iii) Or suppose you had a video game with artificially intelligent characters. Should the gamer forestall harm to his characters? Well, that depends. The game has a plot. One thing leads to another. Some characters come into existence as a result of what other characters do, including the actions of villainous characters. You might even have the heroic son of a villainous father. By preventing certain harms to certain characters, the gamer is robbing some potential characters of existence. Likewise, by eliminating all the villains, he eliminates some of the heroes, whose existence is contingent on the prior actions of the bad guys. Some good guys wouldn't exist if some bad guys didn't exist. Suppose a bad guy kills the boyfriend of a female character. As a result, she marries someone else, and has a son by him, who turns out to be a hero. (Or has a daughter who turns out to be a heroine.) In this case, preventing one murder takes another life. So eliminating some evils must be balanced off the resultant goods that you thereby eliminate, or alternative evils that take their place.

iv) The fact that humans are related to other humans, whereas God is inhuman, can in some measure justify differential treatment. To take a few examples, suppose a grown son commits a heinous murder. He is sentenced to death. It would be cruel to require his family to carry out the sentence. It's better to delegate execution to a disinterested third-party.

Likewise, suppose you're given a choice between saving your mother's life and saving the lives of fifty innocent people. Objectively speaking, it could be argued that saving fifty innocent lives is better, or more obligatory, than saving one life. But it would be unbearable for a son to sacrifice his own mother to save fifty strangers. Moreover, it's not even clear that his duty to the common good overrides his filial duty.

There are situations in which it would be right for an angel or an alien from Alpha Centauri to do something which would be wrong for a human to do, precisely because the alien or angel isn't human. He doesn't have the same social obligations or emotional investments where humans are concerned. He can act with greater moral detachment.

v) Finally, everyone who suffers evil is evil in some degree. Take a mob family. Mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles, husbands, wives, siblings, cousins. Some members of the mob family may be much more evil than others. Still, there's a sense in which none of them deserves to be immune from harm. And some of them richly deserved to be harmed.

Scotus, Anselm, and Owen

Here's a potentially interesting objection to limited atonement:

Three theories of atonement are particularly used. The Acceptilation theory of Duns Scotus, which determines the meaning of the cross from the extrinsic acceptatio of God, is used to ascertain the value of Christ's work from the will or intention of God [e.g. John Owen, Francis Turretin]. The Satisfaction theory of Anselm is employed in asserting that Christ through his death merited "faith, repentance, and the Holy Spirit" for the elect" [e.g. Turretin, J. Heidegger]. The Penal Substitution of Luther is used to decry the "double jeopardy" of unlimited atonement, since the cross, having punished sin and therefore satisfied divine wrath, must save within itself and require no further punishment or satisfaction [e.g. Owen, Turretin, J. Heidegger].

The difficulty in employing such divergent theories of the atonement can be best illustrated through the oft-repeated phrase that the death of Christ is "sufficient to save all men," but due to the intention

of God is "efficient for the elect alone"—a phrase used by proponents of both limited and unlimited atonement. Initially Christ's work is interpreted here through the theory of Anselm, a theory which exults in the intrinsic "sufficiency" of his sacrifice and infinite dignity of his person, but then it is immediately overturned by the extrinsic consideration of the divine will, which according to Duns subjugates the "efficiency" and merit of Christ to the acceptance or ultimate intent of the Father. How can anything be inherently infinite in dignity and then be limited in value before God? Are Christ in his works and the Father in his will opposed?

Stephen Strehle, "The Extent of the Atonement and the Synod of Dort." *Westminster Theological Journal* (1989), 1n1.

How should we assess this objection?

i) Strehle isn't making a case for the Amyraldian alternative. Indeed, he thinks that operates within the same flawed framework—as he explains later on.

ii) Although he says these are "divergent" theories, he doesn't explain how the satisfaction theory and the penal substitutionary theory contradict each other. Even if these two theories developed independently of each other, they may be conceptually harmonious.

iii) His specific example is how the acceptance theory allegedly contradicts the satisfaction theory.

iv) I do think the language of "infinity" is ambiguous.

v) On the face of it, it's easy to come up with counterexamples in which something that's intrinsically efficacious can be limited in application. Suppose you have an efficacious antidote for snakebite. Yet you are free to selectively administer the antidote to some patients to the exclusion of others. Suppose a member of the Medellín Cartel is envenomated by a Bushmaster. You could save his life by administering antivenon, but because he's responsible for torturing and murdering innocent people, you have no duty to save his life, so you administer a placebo instead.

Perhaps Strehle would say that's not analogous to the kind of intrinsic/extrinsic distinction he's drawing. If so, his objection, as it stands, is too vague to demonstrate that these are divergent theories of the atonement.

Deviant atonement

*Even if unbelief is dealt with at the cross, according to unlimited atonement, faith is still required for the application of the atonement that has been accomplished. In this case, there is no double-payment objection to answer, because those who are damned have simply not exercised the faith requisite for redemption. Christ dies for their sin, all right—including their unbelief; but if they do not have the faith necessary to have the benefits of his death applied to them, then they suffer the just punishment for their sin regardless. Oliver Crisp, *Deviant Calvinism* (230).*

So Christ died to redeem unbelievers, who will still be damned because they are unbelievers! That's really ironic. Critics of 5-point Calvinism think it's a travesty of justice. Yet they resort to this Kafkaesque alternative. A divine Catch-22, as if God takes malicious delight in trapping them in this circular predicament.

Denying Christ

I. 4-point Calvinists raise a stock objection to limited atonement: How can they be blameworthy for refusing to believe in Jesus if Jesus never died for them or made atonement for them?

One way 5-point Calvinists respond is to note that disbelief in Jesus is not a necessary condition of condemnation. God can justly condemn you for your sins, quite apart from disbelief in Jesus.

However, 4-point Calvinists may counter that while that's true, the NT says it's culpable to disbelieve in Jesus. For instance:

18 Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God (Jn 3:18).

36 Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him (Jn 3:36).

But if limited atonement is true, how can the reprobate be blameworthy for refusing to believe in something they were never party to? How can they be obliged to believe in Jesus if he is not their Redeemer? How can they believe in him unless redemption was made on their behalf? How can they reject something that was never for them in the first place?

That's a fair question. But in my experience, 4-point Calvinists fail to study how the NT actually defines culpable disbelief in Jesus. They just take for granted that unlimited atonement must be a necessary condition. But is that how the NT frames the indictment?

From my reading, the NT author who accentuates culpability for refusal to believe Jesus is John. This is a recurring theme in the Johannine writings. But from John's perspective, what does it mean to deny Christ or disbelieve in Jesus? John unpacks that concept in two overlapping categories:

1. HERETICAL CHRISTOLOGY

According to John, one way of refusing to believe in Jesus is to deny certain truths about Jesus. For instance:

22 Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, he who denies the Father and the Son (1 Jn 2:22).

every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, 3 and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God (1 Jn 4:2-3).

7 For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh (2 Jn 7).

6 This is he who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ; not by the water only but by the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the one who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth (1 Jn 5:6).

11 And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son (1 Jn 5:11).

Refusal to believe in Jesus means refusing to credit certain theological propositions about Jesus regarding his person and mission.

2. TESTIMONY

To believe in Jesus is to believe in testimonial evidence about Jesus. To disbelieve in Jesus, or deny Jesus, is to disbelieve testimonial evidence about Jesus. In the Johannine writings, there are various lines of testimonial evidence that attest or bear witness to Jesus:

- i)** The Father's testimony to the Son
- ii)** The Spirit's testimony to the Son
- iii)** John the Baptist's testimony to the Jesus
- iv)** OT testimony to Jesus
- v)** Miraculous testimony to Jesus
- vi)** Apostolic testimony to Jesus

For instance:

the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us ([1 Jn 1:2](#)).

14 And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth ([Jn 1:14](#)).

But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me. 27 And you also will bear witness, because you have been with me from the beginning ([Jn 15:26-27](#)).

the Father who sent me bears witness about me. ([Jn 8:18](#)).

Jesus answered them, "I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name bear witness about me ([Jn 10:25](#)).

6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness, to bear witness

about the light, that all might believe through him...

29 The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! 30 This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me.' 31 I myself did not know him, but for this purpose I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel."

32 And John bore witness: "I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him.

33 I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' 34 And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God" ([Jn 1:6-7,29-34](#)).

30 "I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge, and my judgment is just, because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me. 31 If I alone bear witness about myself, my testimony is not true. 32 There is another who bears witness about me, and I know that the testimony that he bears about me is true. 33 You sent to John, and he has borne witness to the truth. 34 Not that the

testimony that I receive is from man, but I say these things so that you may be saved. 35 He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light. 36 But the testimony that I have is greater than that of John. For the works that the Father has given me to accomplish, the very works that I am doing, bear witness about me that the Father has sent me. 37 And the Father who sent me has himself borne witness about me. His voice you have never heard, his form you have never seen, 38 and you do not have his word abiding in you, for you do not believe the one whom he has sent. 39 You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, 40 yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life. 41 I do not receive glory from people. 42 But I know that you do not have the love of God within you. 43 I have come in my Father's name, and you do not receive me. If another comes in his own name, you will receive him. 44 How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God? 45 Do not think that I will accuse you to the Father. There is one who accuses you: Moses, on

whom you have set your hope. 46 For if you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote of me. 47 But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?” (Jn 5:30-46).

Notice that denying Jesus, whether that involves denying testimony about Jesus or theological propositions about Jesus, isn't defined in terms of denying an individual relationship between Jesus and the unbeliever. Rather, it involves denying general truths about the person of Jesus and his divine mission. Denying that Jesus is the Son of God. Denying the Incarnation. Denying that salvation is only available in Christ.

II. A 4-point Calvinist might object that my quotes omit to mention the universal scope of the atonement in the Johannine corpus (e.g. [Jn 1:29](#); [3:16](#); [4:42](#); [1 Jn 2:2](#); [4:14](#)). Therefore, disbelief in Jesus would disavowal what Jesus has already done for the individual.

But one basic problem with such a response is that the culpability argument which the 4-point Calvinist deploys is supposed to be independent of prooftexts for unlimited atonement. It's a common ground argument. It begins with something both 4-point and 5-point Calvinists affirm: refusal to believe in Jesus is blameworthy. It then tries to use that as a wedge to prove unlimited atonement.

If 5-point Calvinists agreed with 4-point Calvinists on prooftexts for unlimited atonement, the culpability argument would be unnecessary. The rationale of the culpability argument is for 4-point Calvinists to start with

something 5-point Calvinists concede—disbelief in Jesus is blameworthy—then use that to establish unlimited atonement. If, however, 4-point Calvinists must shore up the argument by appeal to prooftexts for unlimited atonement, then the culpability argument is a failure.

But, of course, 5-point Calvinists reject that interpretation. They don't think prooftexts for unlimited atonement succeed. So that's no different than the Calvinist/Arminian debate. To quote two commentators:

Some argue that the term “world” here [Jn 3:16] simply has neutral connotations—the created human world. But the characteristic use of “the world” (ho kosmos) elsewhere in the narrative is with negative overtones—the world in its alienation from and hostility to its creator’s purposes. It makes better sense in a soteriological context to see the latter notion as in view. God loves that which has become hostile to God. The force is not, then, that the world is so vast that it takes a great deal of love to embrace it, but rather that the world has become so alienated from God that it takes an exceedingly great kind of love to love it at all. A. Lincoln, The Gospel

**According to St. John (Henrickson 2005),
154.**

If here [1 Jn 2:2] it is a reference to the whole planet, consideration of the historical context in which John wrote makes a more likely interpretation to be the universal scope of Christ's sacrifice in the sense that no one's race, nationality, or any other trait will keep that person from receiving the full benefit of Christ's sacrifice if and when they come to faith.

In the ancient world, the gods were parochial and had geographically limited jurisdictions. In the mountains, one sought the favor of the mountain gods; on the sea, of the sea gods. Ancient warfare was waged in the belief that the gods of the opposing nations were fighting as well, and the outcome would be determined by whose god was strongest. Against that kind of pagan mentality, John asserts the efficacy of Jesus Christ's sacrifice is valid everywhere, for people everywhere, that is "the whole world."

But "world" in John's writings is often used to refer not to the planet or all its inhabitants, but to the system of fallen human culture, with its values, morals, and ethics as a whole. Lieu explains it as that which is totally opposed to God and all that belongs to him. It is almost always associated with the side of darkness in the Johannine duality, and people are characterized in John's writings as being either "of God" or "of the world" (Jn 8:23; 15:19; 17:14,16; 18:36; 1 Jn 2:16; 4:5). Those who have been born of God are taken out of that spiritual sphere, though not out of the geographical place or physical population that is concurrent with it (Jn 13:1; 17:15: see "In Depth: The "world" in John's Letters" at 2:16).

Rather than teaching universalism, John here instead announces the exclusivity of the Christian gospel. Since Christ's atonement is efficacious for the "whole world," there is no other form of atonement available to other peoples, cultures, and religions apart from Jesus Christ. K. Jobes, 1, 2, & 3 John (Zondervan 2014), 80.

III. In addition, 4-point Calvinists draw attention to the fact that according to the NT, apostates incur aggravated guilt (e.g. [Heb 10:28-29](#); [2 Pet 2:20-21](#)). But how can they be more culpable than unbelievers in general if they were excluded from the atonement all along?

That's a fair question. I'd say a couple of things:

i) Keep in mind that 4-point Calvinists affirm limited election. So salvation was never available to them. In consistency, 4-point Calvinists need to explain how their objection is applicable to limited atonement, but inapplicable to limited election.

ii) Often the Bible divvies up the human race between believers and unbelievers, but sometimes it subdivides the human race in a three-way classification. Take OT Jews. On the one hand, God did something for them that God didn't do for most pagans. On the other hand, God did something for some Jews that he didn't do for other Jews. God elected some Jews to salvation, but reprobated others. God regenerated some Jews, but hardened others.

Yet even reprobate Jews enjoyed certain benefits and privileges denied the average pagan. The OT makes that clear. So there can be a third category between believers and unbelievers. You can have a subclass of nominal believers or apostates who benefit from their association with the people of God

Owen's dilemma

The Father imposed His wrath due unto, and the Son underwent punishment for, either:

1. All the sins of all men.
2. All the sins of some men, or
3. Some of the sins of all men.

In which case it may be said:

1. That if the last be true, all men have some sins to answer for, and so, none are saved.
2. That if the second be true, then Christ, in their stead suffered for all the sins of all the elect in the whole world, and this is the truth.
3. But if the first be the case, why are not all men free from the punishment due unto their sins?

You answer, "*Because of unbelief.*"

I ask, Is this *unbelief* a sin, or is it not? If it be, then Christ suffered the punishment due unto it, or He did not. If He did, why must that hinder them more than their other sins for which He died? If He did not, He did not die for all their sins!"

– John Owen

i) Is Owen's dilemma sound? Critics object that Owen makes too much of the debt metaphor in Scripture. By the same token, they say he operates with a "commercial" or quantitative model of the atonement: Jesus atones for specific sins.

Critics counter this with a qualitative or categorical model of atonement. As one 4-point Calvinist put it: "the way federal headship works is not by imputing specific sins, but by imputing guilt. Jesus paid the penalty for human guilt, which means that his atonement is applicable to any human being in principle."

ii) I don't think the conventional objections to Owen's dilemma succeed. Whether he operates with a commercial theory of the atonement had been disputed.

iii) More to the point, his dilemma doesn't rely on Owen's theory of the atonement, but the theory of his opponents. So long as his opponents subscribe to penal substitution, the argument goes through.

iv) Historically, many Arminians reject penal substitution because they concede Owen's dilemma. They admit that if you combine penal substitution with universal atonement, that entails universal salvation. The way to relieve the dilemma is to ditch penal substitution. So the argument does not depend on Owen's theory of the atonement (whatever that may be).

v) I don't see how framing the issue in terms of a qualitative atonement salvages the Arminian/Amyraldin position. It's trivially easy to recast Owen's dilemma in those terms. Is refusal to believe in Jesus culpable? That's a premise that Arminians and Amyraldians typically grant. Indeed, that's a premise they deploy in attempting to argue for unlimited atonement: how can refusal to believe in Jesus blameworthy if Christ never died for the reprobate?

If, however, Jesus died to make atonement for generic guilt, for human guilt in general, then culpable unbelief is covered by the atonement. So I don't see how a qualitative

paradigm circumvents the force of Owen's dilemma. If refusing to believe in Jesus is culpable, and Jesus paid the penalty for human guilt, then culpable unbelief is included in the atonement. The category of guilt includes all instances thereof.

vi) Speaking for myself, I doubt human guilt is a conglomerate entity that's separable from the specific sins of specific sinners. I don't think Christ atones for guilt in that sense, as if guilt can be detached from guilty agents, to become a free-floating mass of guilt. Guilt is personal. Jesus didn't die for an abstraction. Rather, Jesus died for sinners. He makes atonement for particular sinners. The sinner is prior to the sin. Guilt is just a property of sinners.

The qualitative paradigm reminds me of the treasury of merit, where the supererogatory deeds of the saints produce so many pints of merit, which go into a general reservoir of merit. The pope plunges a big dipper into the reservoir when he needs to dole out so many gallons of merit. I don't think of merit and demerit in such anonymous terms. I don't view one sinner's guilt and another sinner's guilt blending into a generic human guilt, like adding drops of water to a bucket.

God's honor

If there's anything that gets God angrier than disrespect, it's loss of face...Moses understands this: when God threatens to destroy the ever-complaining Israelites, Moses persuades him to relent by appealing to his vanity-what will people think? Louise Antony: "Does God Love Us"? M. Bergmann et al eds, Divine Evil: The Moral Character of the God of Abraham (OUP, 2007), 42.

I've commented on this once before, but I'd like to expand on what I said. In the OT, Yahweh does, indeed, seem to be very concerned with his image.

In addition, Calvinists often accentuate God's glory. Everything happens to the honor of God's name.

However, this does invite a prima facie objection: Why should God care what people think of him? If he's vastly superior to mere humans, why would he covet our opinion of him? Isn't this obsession with his reputation incongruous? There is something almost comical about Abraham, Moses, and even Satan (Job 1-2) dickering with God. Is God that insecure? Can he be manipulated?

I'm deliberately putting this in somewhat irreverent terms, both because that's how atheists depict Yahweh, and

because I suspect some Christians have found this to be a disturbing characteristic of Yahweh. Indeed, I've read Arminians attack this trait in Reformed theism, even though that's just mirroring God's self-depictions in the OT—as well as the NT, for that matter. By way of reply:

i) I actually doubt that God is personally bothered by humans who disrespect him. I think God is too big for that. We can't hurt his feelings.

ii) If, however, God is the exemplar of all that's good and true, then to disrespect God is to disrespect the source of all that's good and true. By definition, that's evil. Not only is that bad, but it's bad for the person who does it.

iii) In addition, let's take a comparison: there are many cultures in which a deterrent to misconduct is fear of dishonoring the family name. For instance, a teenage son might be tempted to do wrong, but because he knows that if he's caught, that will shame his father, he resists temptation.

And that's a good thing. If you have good parents, you should avoid conduct that makes them look bad. "What will people say?"

To some extent, people are inclined to judge parents by their kids. For instance, there are situations in which juvenile delinquency is a reflection on bad parenting.

(Of course, there are many exceptions. Despite their best efforts, parents can raise kids who turn out badly.)

Moreover, even if no one blames the parents, it greatly pains the parents when their kids get into serious trouble.

Indeed, parents may feel more humiliated than their misbehaving kids.

As a matter of divine pedagogy, God often assumes the role of a husband or parent who's been dishonored by his wife or kids. I think that's playacting, but it serves a purpose. If it's wrong to dishonor a human mentor, surely it's a greater wrong to dishonor God. It's a harmful attitude. God can't be harmed, but we can harm ourselves or others by behaving dishonorably. God is not embarrassed, but we should be.

Interventionist theism

Jeff D:

I have trouble seeing much of a difference between Calvinism and deism, functionally. The Calvinist God created the world he created. End of story. How can the Calvinist God be meaningfully described as an "interventionist." It seems hard for God to intervene in a universe where God knows how the future will unfold is because he predetermined that is the way the future would unfold. What is [he] intervening with, himself?

To some extent I think this is a semantic quibble, although it goes to deep questions concerning the nature of God and causality. Let's begin with some exposition:

i) In mainstream Calvinism, God subsists outside of time and space.

God has made a physical universe. The physical universe includes physical causes. Natural processes.

The physical universe is like an automated machine. It does whatever it was programmed to do, no more and no less. The same kind of cause will produce the same kind of effect.

That's, in part, what we mean by ordinary providence.

However, the created order is not confined to the physical dimension. There's mental causation. The created order includes finite minds. Some finite minds are discarnate agents (angels) while other finite minds are embodied agents (humans). In addition, reality includes the divine mind, which exists outside the created order.

Unlike physical processes, which are thoughtless, intelligent agents can exercise rational discretion. Moreover, intelligent agents can manipulate a natural process to produce a desired effect that's different than what the natural process would produce absent the intervention of an intelligent agent.

That can involve mundane things like technology, or supernatural events like miracles. There are basically two kinds of miracles:

a) Classic miracles which circumvent natural processes. In the case of a classic miracle, the effect is not the result of the antecedent state. Rather, it's discontinuous with prior conditions leading up to that event. It has a mental rather than physical cause. It's not the end-result of a preceding chain of events.

b) Coincidence miracles which utilize natural processes. A coincidence miracle is the coordinated result of independent chains of events converging for the benefit of a particular

individual or group. It reflects the discriminating intention of a powerful agent.

ii) Deism asserts the uniformity of nature. The universe operates according to natural laws. Natural events are law-like in the sense of mechanical regularity. The same kinds of things always happen. A closed system. A seamless causal continuum.

According to the classic metaphor, we inhabit a clockwork universe. God made the watch, wound it, and set it. Thereafter it runs of its own accord. It requires no maintenance.

Deism regards a miracle as analogous to a mechanic on the night watch who must superintend the machinery in case of malfunction. The mechanic must repair it in case it breaks down.

Or to continue with the watchmaker metaphor, God must periodically rewind or reset the watch if it runs down, runs fast, or runs slow. But that makes God a poor designer. So goes the argument.

Deism makes no allowance for supernatural mental causation as an integral element in natural history.

iii) In theological discourse, "intervention" is a term of art. As I use the term, an interventionist God is a God who works miracles and answers prayer—to take two paradigm examples. A Deist God or noninterventionist deity is a God who does not work miracles or answer prayer.

Put another way, divine "intervention" is synonymous with God's ongoing involvement in natural history and especially human history. By contrast, a Deist God is uninvolved in the

subsequent course of world history. His participation begins and ends with the initial act of creation. (In some versions of Deism, God will judge the wicked when they die).

There are critics of "interventionist" terminology. They think the terminology has misleading connotations. For instance:

Some biblical fundamentalists think of God as an engineer who designed and created species of animals and plants like a watchmaker designing a watch. Ironically, this God of the world machine has more to do with science than with the bible or traditional Christian doctrines. When the machine model of nature took hold in seventeenth-century science, a new image of God came into being as a supernatural engineer, a machine-maker separate from nature.

You don't believe in this kind of God, and neither do I. In traditional Christian theology, God is not a kind of craftsman, or demiurge, who makes the world in the first place and then retires, leaving it to work automatically, except for occasional interventions when he arbitrarily suspends the laws of nature. God is not a demiurge, and not a meddler with machinery. According to the traditional understanding in Christian and other theologies,

God is the ground of all being, the reason why there is something rather than nothing. He sustains the world in its existence from moment to moment, and is doing so now.[1]

<http://www.thebestschools.org/sheldrake-shermer-god-and-science-opening-statements/>

Problem: "miracle," as used in these controversies, is not a biblical category. The God of the Bible is not a normally absent God who sometimes "intervenes." This God is always present and active, often surprisingly so...The "closed continuum" of cause and effect is a modernist myth. The God who does not "intervene" from outside but is always present and active within the world, sometimes shockingly, may well have been thus active on this occasion.

<http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=17>

In English theology, the easy-going pre-Enlightenment assumption that the world of creation gave reliably straightforward witness to a good creator (I cited Bishop Butler above; we might include writers like Joseph Addison, too) had been shaken to the core by the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, which as Susan Neiman has argued must be seen as one of the proximate causes at least of the Enlightenment revolution.[12] That revolution attempted to solve the problem, as well as several others, by cutting God loose from the world, drawing on the old upstairs/downstairs world of English deism. Religion became the thing that people did with their solitude, a private, inner activity, a secret way of gaining access to the divine rather than either an invocation of the God within nature or a celebration of the kingdom coming on earth as in heaven. God became an absentee landlord who allowed the tenants pretty much free rein to explore and run the house the way they wanted, provided they checked in with him from time to time to pay the rent (in much middle Anglican worship until the last generation, taking up the collection has been the most overtly sacramental act) and reinforce some basic ground

rules (the Ten Commandments, prominently displayed on church walls, and the expectation that bishops and clergy will 'give a moral lead' to society). As we know, the absentee landlord quite quickly became an absentee, as in Feuerbach, whom Robinson quotes to this effect (p. 50) without any sense that Feuerbach himself has been subjected to damaging critique.

My sympathy for his plight has grown over the years as I have lived within the continuing split-level world of much English piety. The word 'miracle' is a case in point. Most people, not least in the media, still think of it as meaning an action performed by a distant, remote deity reaching in to the world from outside—just as to many people, still, the word 'God' itself conjures up a basically deist image of that kind of a being. I know that in fact that word 'supernatural' has a longer history than this and that, for instance, mediaeval theologians were able to use it in such a way that it did not carry the baggage of an implied deism or semi-deism [192] (by which I mean the view which, while sharing deism's gap between God and the world, holds that from time to time this 'God' can

and does 'intervene'). But I continue to find that this model dominates UK theological discourse, particularly among those of, or near, Robinson's generation. Thus, for instance, when I have written about Jesus' mighty acts, or about the resurrection, I have often been heard to be affirming one kind of post-Enlightenment supernaturalism (with an 'interventionist' God) over against one kind of post-Enlightenment naturalism (with a 'non-interventionist' God), even though I have frequently and explicitly renounced precisely this distinction and the framework which facilitates it (to the consternation of my 'supernaturalist' friends).

http://ntwrightpage.com/Wright_Doubts_About_Doubt.htm

iv) There's some truth to these criticisms, but they are confused.

a) In classical theism, God *is* an "outside agent." God exists apart from the creation. God exists apart from the space-time continuum.

b) There are different ways of making something. I can plant an orchard, then abandon the orchard. What the orchard will be like 50 years later has nothing to do with

me, beyond my initial contribution. It will be very different than if I tended the orchard on a regular basis.

c) Compare that to a novelist. The novelist exists outside the story. Yet he's involved in every detail of the story. In one respect, he causes everything to happen, from start to finish. The novelist is responsible for everything that's said and done in the course of the story.

But in another respect, characters drive the course of events. Conversely, characters react to events. Characters within the story drive the plot. They influence other characters. And they themselves are influenced by their circumstances.

You have both primary and secondary causation.

d) Does the God of Calvinism "intervene"? Depends on what you mean. As I said at the outset, I define an interventionist God as a God who does things like working miracles and answering prayer. That's clearly consistent with Calvinism.

I don't define an interventionist God as a God who alternates between participation and detachment. Indeed, the usual rap against Calvinism is not that God is too remote, but that God is too involved. Critics of Calvinism think God ought to be more detached.

Freewill theists limit divine intervention. Too much intrusion would either infringe on human freedom or trivialize the consequences of free choices.

Clearly the Calvinist God doesn't intervene in the sense of acting at cross-purposes with his plan. But why should we define divine intervention in *that* way?

v) There are, of course, freewill theists who think God intervenes in the sense that he has to jump in every so often to make midcourse corrections lest things get totally out of hand. But that's not how Calvinism uses the term.

The part I don't really get is that Calvinists insist it is vitally important to point out that God knows all the possible games of chess the two players could have theoretically played. I guess I agree that that is knowledge that God has, but why is that relevant? God knows that it is theoretically possible two people could sit down for chess and just move their knights back and forth over the same spaces until they die of old age. So what? Why does that matter? Like I said, I think the important thing is that God knows ahead of time what game of chess the two players will actually play and the game of chess they would have played if he had not intervened on white's 10th move.

It's relevant for God to have counterfactual knowledge since God must be in a position to know what the possibilities are

in order to instantiate a particular set of possibilities in space and time. God made the world by selecting and combining some possibilities to the exclusion of other possibilities. It doesn't a blind draw.

It amounts to God predetermining every move and pretty much playing chess with himself. When he is intervening, he is intervening with himself because he created a person to act one way, but finds it necessary to nevertheless intervene in time to bring about his predetermined outcomes.

i) One limitation of the chess analogy is that ordinarily, chess pieces are unintelligent. If, however, the chess pieces were rational agents, then you'd have some pieces playing against other pieces. Indeed, the pieces on one side strategize with each other on how to defeat the other side, and vice versa. And as the game progresses, from their perspective (unlike God's), they adapt their strategy to the changing situation.

ii) The other problem is that Jeff is hung-up on a particular connotation of "intervention."

iii) In addition, a lot depends on the metaphor we use to illustrate the point. If, instead of chess, we use a novel, you could say the novelist is telling himself a story. If, however, the characters were real people, like sentient virtual

characters, then they experience the story. They are an audience for the story, like stage actors.

Cybernetic theology

How does God know the future—or does he? Some Christians might consider the question presumptuous. That's a mystery!

However, [Isa 46:10-11](#) indicates that God knows the future by willing the future.

Conversely, freewill theism posits a condition (man's libertarian freedom) that poses an impediment to divine foreknowledge. And philosophical theologians of all stripes concede the dilemma. Some freewill theists labor to reconcile divine foreknowledge with libertarian freedom. But that shows they are acutely aware of the tension.

1. To take an illustration, suppose we compare God to a cyberneticist. Suppose a cyberneticist creates 100 robots. Each one has different programming. The cyberneticist knows what each one will do if he activates it.

Likewise, he knows how they will interact with each other. Depending on which robots he activates, the results will be different.

The unactivated robots are like possible worlds. And the cyberneticist is the source of all these alternate scenarios.

That's analogous to Reformed theism.

i) This has significant upsides. It clearly grounds divine foreknowledge and counterfactual knowledge.

ii) It preserves the sovereignty of God, as the absolute Creator.

iii) A potential downside is the complaint that determinism implicates God in evil while robbing man of moral responsibility. Of course, that's an ancient, perennial debate. If we stick with the robotic metaphor, that raises to the question of whether androids are personal moral agents. That's a popular topic in science fiction literature, going back to Asimov's *I, Robot*. To insist that a robot can't be a person or moral agent simply begs the question.

2. Contrast that with freewill theism. The cyberneticist dies. Years later, an investigator discovers his secret laboratory.

In Molinism and Arminianism, the investigator knows, by consulting the notes of the cyberneticist, what the robots will do, individually or in combination, if activated.

However, he doesn't know it because he made them. He doesn't know it because he programmed the robots. He is not the source of what they will do, if activated. Rather, what they will do is the source of his foreknowledge or counterfactual knowledge.

i) A potential upside is that it seems to diminish the tension between divine agency and sin. However, it has many downsides:

ii) With respect to (i), there are roughly two aspects to the problem of evil: (a) How can God be blameless? (b) How can man be blameworthy? Even if this model explains how man can be blameworthy, it fails to exonerate God from complicity in evil. The outcome is still dependent on something God did. In that respect it's no improvement over the perceived problem of (1).

iii) It fails to explain how God can know the future. Indeed, it seems to remove a necessary condition for divine foreknowledge.

iv) In fact, it fails to explain how God can know all possibilities. He's not the source of these possibilities. On this view, what humans would do is a given. Autonomous possibilities. God must adapt to that framework.

v) If human choices are ultimately uncaused, then how are we responsible for them? In what respect are they our choices if they are ultimately uncaused? If, on the other hand, they are ultimately caused, then isn't that deterministic?

vi) It reduces God to a Demiurge. There's a realm of abstract possibilities independent of God. Equally ultimate. God simply chooses which ones to switch on.

3. In open theism, he doesn't even know for sure what they will do. Their programming is adaptive and stochastic. Once activated, it takes on a life of its own. The end-game is unpredictable from a distance.

i) One upside is that denial of divine foreknowledge is more consistent with man's libertarian freedom—assuming man has libertarian freedom.

ii) A downside is that it makes God a mad scientist who activates robots to find out what they will do.

A freewill theist might exclaim that by comparing God to a cyberneticist, I've just conceded that Calvinism reduces men to robots! But aside from the fact that that my illustration is metaphorical, I'm using variations on the

same robotic metaphor for Calvinism and freewill theism alike.

Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?

In his recent interview with apostate Dale Tuggy, Oliver Crisp suggests that St. Paul ducks a tough question in [Rom 9:19](#) with a rhetorical riposte in v20. But that's somewhat misleading:

i) To begin with, Paul's audience consists of Christians and Messianic Jews. So an argument from authority is not out of place in that context.

ii) Paul doesn't merely leave it at that. He sketches an answer in vv21-22 which give an overarching reason. So it's not arbitrary.

iii) But ultimately a question like that is unanswerable within the confines of a pastoral letter. It gets into very intricate issues of morality, modality, and metaphysics. Any detailed answer would be much too technical and time-consuming.

There's a difference between answers and explanations, in the sense that it's possible to give short answers, but not always possible to give short explanations—such as explaining your answer. It's hard to see how Paul could give a short explanation to that challenge. The issues are too involved. He couldn't give an adequate explanation even if he had one. That would be a treatise unto itself.

iv) Of course, if Paul was a freewill theist, he could easily parry the accusation by stating that we are able to resist God's will.

v) Moreover, there's no presumption that Paul had even an adequate explanation up his sleeve. Like many other Bible writers, he can only share what's been revealed to him.

vi) Finally, as a friend of mine commented: how one answers a question will depend in part on what one takes to be the motives behind the question . At a superficial level, Jesus himself 'ducks' some of the questions posed to him.

Oliver Crisp on universalism

In his interview with apostate Dale Tuggy, Oliver Crisp says there are NT passages that seem to press in the direction of universal salvation and other passages that seem to press in the other direction. So there's a kind of tension in the NT concerning which set of data you use to privilege the other. Do you use the universalistic passages as your control to understand particularistic passages or vice versa? What hermeneutical decision is a work there?

That raises a legitimate question of systematic theological method. What's the proper starting-point? By way of response:

i) The way he frames the alternatives is too generic. If you had some passages which *prima facie* affirm that all will be saved and other passages which *prima facie* affirm that some will be saved, you could fold the latter into the former. If all are saved, then that includes some. The whole includes the part.

ii) However, the Biblical descriptions are more specific. They don't merely say that some will be saved, but that some will not be saved. They don't merely affirm the salvation of some, but disaffirm the salvation of others. So that precludes a facile harmonization in which you simply make the universalistic passages as the frame of reference. For Scripture frames the relation in antithetical terms.

iii) In addition, although passages which specify the eternal damnation of the lost are not especially numerous, there are many more passages which simply deny that everyone will be saved. Even if a universalist could somehow neutralize the passages which explicitly say

the lost will suffer eternal damnation, that wouldn't clear the field for universalism—for you still have all the other passages which deny that everyone will be saved—even if they don't use certain adjectives (e.g. "eternal").

iv) Finally, universalism poses a much greater threat or challenge to Arminianism (and variations thereof) than Calvinism. Arminians and universalists quote the same passages to proof-text their respective positions. As such, Calvinists don't have to devise new arguments or new interpretations to refute universalism. Rather, they have ready-made arguments. They can redeploy the preexisting arguments they use in response to Arminians.

Calvinists are used to fielding appeals to universalistic passages. Arminians do that to proof-text universal atonement, universal provision, God's universal redemptive desire. So that's part and parcel of the traditional Calvinist/Arminian debate.

By contrast, Arminians can't very well deploy the universalistic passages to counter a universalist, for a universalist lays claim to the very same turf. Indeed, a universalist enjoys a certain advantage over an Arminian in that regard, for he can accept the universalistic passages as is, whereas the Arminian must introduce some qualifications.

Arminians can try to parry the universalist appeal by quoting passages about eschatological judgment. But Calvinists occupy the same ground in that respect. So it's very hard for Arminians to find any proof-texts they don't share with one opposing side or another

Tug-of-war

Freewill theists typically act as though the distinction between God "causing" evil and God "permitting" evil is morally crucial. I'm going to develop an illustration by philosopher Stephen Mumford which a friend shared with me. Ironically, I like his illustration, but disagree with his interpretation.

Take a tug-of-war. Suppose you begin with two evenly-matched teams. They may be evenly matched because both sides have an equal number of teammates, and each teammate is equal in size and strength to his fellow teammates, as well as the opposing teammates. They are numerically and individually equally matched.

Or they may be aggregately evenly matched. Maybe one side has fewer teammates than the other, but its teammates are bigger and stronger than the opposing side, as a result of which each team pulls with the same amount of force. The qualitative advantages balance out the quantitative disadvantages, or vice versa.

This results in a stalemate. Neither team can win.

So what would it take for one team to win? There are two ways that could happen.

- i)** By adding another teammate to one side. That would tip the balance of power in its favor.
- ii)** By subtracting a teammate from one side. That, too, would shift the balance of power.

We might say adding a teammate causes that team to win the tug of war. Just enough extra force.

But by converse logic, we might say subtracting a teammate causes that team to lose. Indeed, it's hard to see how that inference can be avoided. As philosopher David Lewis once said: "We think of a cause as something that makes a difference."

If a teammate decided to quit, he'd naturally be blamed for causing his team to lose. His team lost when he stopped pulling the rope. It was a group effort which could not afford a single defection.

The opposing team won because his team lost, and his team lost because he gave up. In that respect, he caused the opposing team to win. It couldn't win unless his team lost. His team losing was a necessary and sufficient condition of their winning. He made it happen. His action was the differential factor. The tipping point.

Furthermore, we could recast the issue in terms of rendering an outcome certain. In this case, not pulling ensured defeat. Just as adding a teammate guaranteed (or determined) victory for one side, subtracting a teammate guaranteed (or determined) defeat for the other side.

Who dwells in inapproachable light

I'm going to make some addition comments on this post:

<https://philosophyandtheism.wordpress.com/2014/07/08/god-in-time-yes-temporal-god-no/>

I'll be quoting Nate Shannon, then responding:

I think you're leaning toward something Helm seems to say, which is that history is merely this: pulling back the curtain to reveal the decree. That's hyper-Calvinism. I fear you'll lose the free offer, and history itself (if consistency is the order of the day).

From a predestinarian standpoint, what's wrong with understanding history as pulling back the curtain to reveal the decree? History is the eventuation of the decree. A spatiotemporal transcription (as it were) of the timeless decree. The decree is in advance of the fact, but we discover the contents of the decree after the fact by observing what actually happens.

Shannon falls into the familiar trap of acting as if predestination is synonymous with fatalism. But predestination doesn't make us passive spectators. The decree includes our actions and reactions. Our predestined participation contributes to the appointed outcome.

If we say God is God (a se), and we can agree on that I'm sure, then what does Ex 19 say? Nothing of significance? Epistemological apparitions only? Phenomena 'improperly' called 'God' (I won't give this ground to Kant)?

Who is claiming that a symbolic presence is "improperly" called "God"?

The distinction between appearance and reality hardly began with Kant. That's not a uniquely Kantian distinction. When I see a mountain at a distance, I perceive the mountain at eye-level. I seem to be as tall as the mountain. Does that commit me to Kantian epistemology? Does Shannon believe I really am as tall as the mountain?

Or perhaps that God condescended by way of covenant? The question is, at the end of the day: does God do what Ex 19:20 says he does? My concern is that some philosophico-theological commitments impose upon such passages a hermeneutic such that Ex 19:20 cannot say what it in fact says.

i) Shannon acts as if his interpretation is metaphysically neutral. As if he brings no presuppositions to the text. He just takes it as is. But that just means he's oblivious to his own unexamined filter.

ii) There's a rudimentary distinction between what a text says and what it means. Take sarcasm, where what the speaker means is the opposite of what he says.

I don't disagree with this excerpt from Turretin, except for this description: ". . . a symbolical presence, when under some visible symbol he manifests himself to believers . . ." I don't think Scripture will allow us to say that the pillar or the fire or the burning bush were symbols but NOT the presence of the Lord. Put it this way: I disagree that we must, a priori, disallow the 'spatio-temporal' presence of God such as that described in Ex 19:20. I am not saying that God cannot be present only symbolically or metaphorically or anthropomorphically (though I do think this language is often just window dressing for 'not actually there' - denial of what Scripture plainly teaches); but the hermeneutic I'm uncomfortable with does indeed proscribe a priori the sort of divine presence described in Ex 19:20. It won't allow God to be present non-symbolically. So if

anyone is in the position to launch a Job 38:2 response, it's me, on behalf of Scripture.

The incursion of natural theology into our theology proper precludes, that is, a priori disallows, a faithful reading of Scripture where it clearly teaches that the LORD was present on the top of Mt. Sinai.

i) Shannon operates with a face-value hermeneutic. One problem with his approach is that we've been down this road before, with Clark Pinnock, Gregory Boyd, et al. How would he ever win an argument with an open theist, or even a Mormon? They make the same hermeneutical claims.

ii) His hermeneutic is jejune by the standards of narrative theology ("the poetics of narrativity"). For instance, our first impression in reading Genesis might be that God is a bungler. Yet the reader is expected to interpret the historical action with the benefit of hindsight. There's a distinction between the hidden plot and the apparent plot. As we look back on the sequence of events, God's providential guidance emerges from a retrospective reading.

iii) It doesn't occur to Shannon that he himself is making a priori demands on the text. He has a preconception of what God's "presence" must entail. Take a comparison: Suppose a wife tells her husband, "I spoke to Ken [their son] this morning."

That could mean she spoke to Ken face-to-face. Or it could mean they spoke over the phone. Did she really not speak to Ken if she only heard his voice in the receiver? If you

wish to be pedantic, you could insist that that wasn't really his voice, but an electronic simulation of his voice. Does that mean it's false to say she spoke to her son?

When Ken speaks to his mother by phone, is he "present"? Well, he's not present in person. He's not in the same room with her. Yet he has a projected presence. He's present to her in a way he wouldn't be if he didn't speak to her at all, whether in person or over the phone. Because they stay in contact, they aren't cut off from each other. It's a matter of degree.

Now perhaps Shannon considers that an inadequate model of presence. If so, that's a reflection of his preconceived notion.

iv) Ezekiel's prophecy opens with a classic, extended theophany. But consider how Ezekiel's qualifies the event:

"Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord" (Ezk 1:28).

Does Shannon think the Lord was present with Ezekiel at that particular time and place? "Present" in what sense? Notice the buffers. There's the "*Lord*," then there's the "*glory of the Lord*," then there's the "*likeness of the glory of the Lord*," then there's the *appearance* of the likeness of the glory of the Lord.

In Ezekiel's interpretation, the Lord is several steps removed from Ezekiel's experience. Ezekiel didn't experience the Lord directly. He didn't observe the Lord in himself. Rather, what he saw was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord.

Ezekiel goes out of his way to introduce these distancing formulas to distinguish the theophany from the Lord. Yet Shannon's hermeneutic collapses that transcendent inaccessibility.

Or take Paul's classic doxology:

"who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. To him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen" (1 Tim 6:16).

In Scripture, there is no unmediated divine presence. Rather, when God makes himself "present" to his creatures, that's refracted through natural media.

But the point is that a priori, a Chalcedonian proper says that the LORD can be present 'in the flesh', or spatio-temporally; and a posteriori, if you like, we may find in Scripture that in fact he is (on the top of Mt. Sinai, for example).

That's confused on several grounds:

i) It confuses the order of being with the order of knowing. Even if in light of the subsequent revelation of the Incarnation, we identify the Sinai theophany as a Christophany, God wasn't present "in the flesh" at Sinai.

ii) If, moreover, Shannon thinks God can be present in that anachronistic sense, then the Incarnation is superfluous.

iii) Furthermore, the Incarnation doesn't mean God qua God "enters" space and time. Ironically, it's not classical theists who resort to metaphors at this point. Rather, it's folks like Shannon whose conceptual scheme is unconsciously metaphorical, but they lack the critical detachment to appreciate the picturesque metaphor they are using to conceptualize the event.

Is it evil to decree evil?

One of the stock objections to Calvinism goes like this: If it's wrong to do wrong, then it's wrong to cause or determine someone else to do wrong.

No doubt this has a certain facile appeal. It seems to be logical. But is it really? One way to test naive intuitions is to consider counterexamples.

i) Suppose a motorist is driving along a lonely backroad. Suddenly a 10-year-old boy emerges from the tall grass, waving his hands.

The motorist stops. The boy explains breathlessly that he and his little brother were playing in the field when his brother fell into an abandoned mine shaft.

Normally, the motorist would park his car on the shoulder and check it out. It's his duty to render assistance in that situation.

Yet, for some inexplicable reason, the motorist hesitates, then drives away, leaving the frantic boy behind. He feels guilty.

Unbeknownst to him, this was a trap. The father uses his son to waylay unsuspecting drivers. When they follow the boy into the field, the father emerges from the tall grass, shoots them in the back, and steals their wallet.

On this occasion, God suppressed the motorist's altruistic urge. Although the motorist did wrong by failing to heed his conscience, this saved his life.

ii) Let's consider a variant on the same story. A motorist is driving along a deserted road at night. Up ahead he sees a woman by the side of the road. The hood of her car is raised.

He knows he has a moral obligation to come to the aid of a vulnerable woman, yet from some inexplicable reason he continues driving.

As it turns out, this was a trap. The woman is the girlfriend of a sociopath. Her sicko, psycho boyfriend hides in the backseat while she plays the stranded motorist and flags down well-meaning drivers. When a good Samaritan tries to help her out, the boyfriend emerges from the car, kneecaps the good Samaritan, tosses him in the trunk, drives to their lair, and proceeds to vivisect his latest victim.

On this occasion, God suppressed the motorist's altruistic urge. Although the motorist did wrong by disregarding his sense of duty, this saved his life.

iii) Perhaps a freewill theist would say that because God caused or determined the motorist to ignore his conscience, the motorist didn't do wrong. Didn't sin.

But in that event, in what sense did God make him do wrong? And if (ex hypothesi) the motorist didn't sin—because God determined his inaction—then in what sense did God do wrong by determining his inaction?

Doesn't the original objection generate a dilemma for the objector?

iv) A freewill theist might object that these are unrealistic scenarios.

a) That's generally true, although I'd venture to say there must be real-life situations in which a Christian was subconsciously dissuaded from taking a particular action by God because God was protecting him from harm. I expect some Christians have discovered, in hindsight, that God intervened to protect them, even though they were unaware of the fact at the time.

b) A fixture of philosophical analysis is to consider counterexamples. This isn't just an intellectual game. Philosophers want to produce generalizations. The way to test a generalization is to consider counterexamples. If there are exceptions, then does the principle still hold true? This is important in ethics.

v) But let's consider a more realistic scenario. Suppose predestination is true. Historically, many people died in childhood. That's still the case in the Third World.

Some children die of neglect. They had neglectful parents or guardians. Some died in orphanages.

I'm sure the cumulative number of neglect fatalities is high. If it's wrong to cause a child to die of neglect, is it wrong to cause someone to cause a child to die of neglect?

Normally, we'd say that's true. But aren't we making tacit assumptions about how the child would turn out had he grown up?

Odds are, some children who died of neglect would become violent criminals if they survived. Of course, you and I aren't privy to those counterfactual outcomes. But we're considering this from a divine perspective.

If God causes or determines a parent or guardian to cause a child in their care to die of neglect—a child who, had he survived, would grow up to be a serial killer—did God do wrong by causing (or determining) the parent or guardian to do wrong?

Although it may seem counterintuitive to say so, in this situation, God is inculpable for causing a second party to do something culpable.

vi) A freewill theist might object that even if it wasn't wrong for God to do that, this won't suffice for other situations which lack those mitigating circumstances. But even if that's the case, I'm probing the question of whether, in principle, it is intrinsically wrong for God to cause or determine a human to do wrong. If there are exceptions, then a freewill theist can't object to Calvinism on those grounds as a matter of principle. He must downshift to a case-by-case analysis.

vii) Apropos (vi), according to skeptical theism, there may often be extenuating circumstances which mitigate an apparently gratuitous evil, but we're in the dark. Moreover, freewill theists resort to skeptical theism when they posit that God always has some morally sufficient reason for permitting horrendous evil, even if we can't imagine what the reason might be. So it's not as if the Calvinist is guilty of special pleading at this point. Or if he is, the freewill theist is equally guilty.

Simplicity is complicated

Alexander Pruss has been commenting on a post of mine. I'll reproduce our exchange, then respond to his latest comment, as well as a follow-up post of his:

<http://alexanderpruss.blogspot.com/2014/05/simplicity-and-divine-decisions.html>

ALEXANDER R PRUSS

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Even on Calvinism we have the problem of how God knows what he decided to do. God's decisions are contingent. Do they affect God? Then we seem to get a violation of immutability or at least simplicity. An extrinsic model of divine beliefs, on which his beliefs about contingent things are partly constituted by the contingent truths, solves all the problems.

STEVE

If those contingent truths are dependent on what humans will freely do (in the libertarian sense), then isn't God's knowledge (of those contingent truths) affected by our

choices (pace impassibility)?

Seems to me that you're now resorting to an idiosyncratic definition of impassibility. That's why I quoted from Brian Davies (the 3rd ed. of his intro to the philosophy of religion, p5).

So you're shifting ground from your original argument.

The fact that God's knowledge of his own decisions is "contingent" on his own decisions is entirely consistent with God being unaffected by the *world*.

And in what sense would he be *affected* by knowing what he decided to do? It's not as if there's a shift between prior ignorance and subsequent knowledge. If God is timeless, it's not even that he knew what he was going to decide before he made his decision. Rather, there was no prior state or prior moment of indecision in the first place. So God hasn't undergone any change by that relation.

How is a violation of simplicity equivalent to a violation of impassibility?

On the face of it, doesn't your statement that God's decisions are contingent violate divine simplicity? Given divine simplicity, aren't God's decisions as essential or necessary as God in himself?

ALEXANDER R PRUSS

It's true that those who are Calvinists in the strongest sense of thinking that we have no alternate possibilities ever (one could be a Calvinist in a weaker sense of thinking that we have no

alternate possibilities with respect to salvation, but we have alternate possibilities with respect to less significant actions) don't have the impassibility problem. But Calvinists still have the problem that they have to admit that there is an order of explanation in God, even if not of time: first in the order of explanation comes a contingent divine decision (unless one takes Edwards' view that God's own actions are determined--which leads to trouble for omnipotence and God's sovereignty over his own actions) and then comes his belief that he has so decided.

Likewise, Calvinists who, like Calvin and Turretin, believe in divine simplicity -- and there is certainly good reason for them to do so -- will still have the problem.

STEVE

I disagree with Edwards on that point. However, doesn't simplicity have the same consequences?

If God is actus purus, if there's no unrealized potentialities in God, then aren't all divine decisions and actions

necessary/necessitated?

Likewise, if even divine decisions or actions are identical with God's essence, then God has no contingent relations, but only essential relations. So, once again, aren't all divine decisions and actions necessary/necessitated?

ALEXANDER R PRUSS 5/12/2014 10:09 AM

It's true that those who are Calvinists in the strongest sense of thinking that we have no alternate possibilities ever (one could be a Calvinist in a weaker sense of thinking that we have no alternate possibilities with respect to salvation, but we have alternate possibilities with respect to less significant actions) don't have the impassibility problem.

i) Pruss has now conceded that his original argument, based on impassibility, fails against Calvinism.

ii) BTW, what he calls "strong Calvinism" just is Calvinism. That every event is predestined is normative, mainstream Calvinism.

There are some scholars like Muller and Crisp who are trying to broaden the definition of Calvinism. But I think

their personal sympathies betray them into historical revisionism.

iii) Just to be clear, Calvinism doesn't deny alternate possibilities. What it denies is that humans can access alternate possibilities. That's not to deny that there are alternative possibilities which inhere in God, possibilities which God could access, had he so chosen.

But Calvinists still have the problem that they have to admit that there is an order of explanation in God, even if not of time: first in the order of explanation comes a contingent divine decision (unless one takes Edwards' view that God's own actions are determined-- which leads to trouble for omnipotence and God's sovereignty over his own actions) and then comes his belief that he has so decided.

I don't see how that's a problem. There's a sense in which some divine beliefs are logically dependent on other divine beliefs. It's a necessary truth that every blue object is a colored object. Is that timeless order of explanation theologically problematic? If that's not a problem of necessary truths, why is that a problem for contingent truths?

iv) In your post, moreover, you admit that "Thomists, and presumably some Calvinists as well, can reduce (3) to (2): God's decision is identical with his knowledge of his decision." So doesn't that dissolve the (allegedly) problematic distinction?

v) There are some philosophers who deny that God even has beliefs. They have a specialized conception of what it means to have beliefs.

Likewise, Calvinists who, like Calvin and Turretin, believe in divine simplicity -- and there is certainly good reason for them to do so -- will still have the problem.

We need to unpack simplicity:

i) God has no spatiotemporal parts.

ii) There is no essence/existence distinction in God.

iii) God is not an instance of his attributes. God is the exemplar. He doesn't exemplify abstract properties.

iv) There is no potential/actual distinction in God.

v) There is no metaphysical complexity in God. Each attribute is identical with every other attribute.

Speaking for myself, I grant (i-iii).

(iv) needs to be finessed to preserve divine freedom. For instance, God is actually omnipotent, but the exercise of divine omniscience is selective. Hence, there are unrealized potentials. Unexemplified possibilities.

I'm dubious about (v). For one thing, the distinction between justice and mercy is essential to Calvinism.

(v) is in prima facie tension with divine freedom, and with the Trinity. There's also the question of whether it's even coherent.

The appeal of (v) is that it automatically yields other values like divine timelessness. However, one can have divine timelessness without the baggage of simplicity.

Moreover, that raises the question of whether simplicity really makes a distinctive contribution to the discussion. Is it something over and above the attributes it conglomerates? Or is it just an umbrella term?

Even if we make both of these controversial moves, we still have the distinction between God's essential nature and his contingent decisions (which are then identical with his knowledge of the decisions and his

knowledge of creatures' responses thereto).

Isn't that distinction necessary to maintain divine freedom?

For those Christians who are unimpressed by the strength of the traditional commitments (in the pre-Reformation tradition, but also in people like Calvin and Turretin) to divine simplicity, and the arguments for divine simplicity, the natural solution will appear to be to deny divine simplicity, and then not worry about the problem.

Several issues:

i) We need to distinguish between Reformed distinctive and Reformed essentials on the one hand, and Reformed traditions which are a carryover from the pre-Reformation church. Because Calvinism is historically conditioned, like every theological tradition, some elements of the traditional Reformed package are "historical accidents." They are not essential (much less unique) to Calvinism.

ii) So it's a question of theological priorities. If, say, simplicity is in tension with divine freedom, what gives? In the web of Calvinism, what is central and what is peripheral? In my opinion, divine freedom is more important than divine simplicity. If a Calvinist were to sacrifice divine simplicity (i.e. God is devoid of metaphysical complexity), I don't think he's lost anything essential to Calvinism. Divine simplicity is not, from what I can tell, a revealed truth. And it's not a sine qua non of Calvinism.

Calvinism largely overlaps with classical theism, but that package isn't logically tight in every respect.

They should still worry about the problem. For if one denies divine simplicity and holds that God has at least the two distinct constituents: his essential nature, N, and his contingent decisions, D, then one has to say something about the relationship between these two. Clearly, D is in some way explained by N: God acts as he does in part because of his essentially perfectly good character. The explanation is not a grounding-type explanation—to make it be a grounding-type explanation would be to hold on to

a version of a divine simplicity explanation. In creatures, the corresponding explanation of decisions would be causal: the character causes (deterministically or not) the decision. So it seems that we have something very much like a causal relationship between N and D. And this in turn makes D be very much like a creature, indeed perhaps literally a creature. Since D is a constituent of God, it follows that a constituent of God is very much like a creature, perhaps literally a creature. But this surely contradicts transcendence! Now perhaps one can insist that the relationship between N and D while being akin to causation is sufficiently different from it that D is sufficiently different from a creature that we have no violation of transcendence. Maybe, but I am still worried.

So if I am right, even if one denies divine simplicity, a version of the problem remains. And so the problem may not be

a problem specifically for divine simplicity.

i) I think this analysis has it backwards. If simplicity is true, God's decision is identical with his knowledge of his decision. However, even if simplicity is false, it can still be the case that God's decision is identical with his knowledge of his decision. I don't see that particular claim requires simplicity in general.

ii) There's a difference between God acting consistent with his goodness and his goodness necessitating his action. To say God can't act contrary to his goodness is not to say his goodness singles out one particular course of action.

iii) Must a dependence relation be cashed out in terms of causation? A triangle is dependent on its three-sidedness. But it would be eccentric to claim the three sides cause a triangle. Although a triangle is constituted by its three-sidedness, that's not a causal relation, that I can see.

Same thing with logical implication. The conclusion is dependent on the premises. But that's not a causal relation.

Pruss might object that I'm using abstract objects to illustrate my point, whereas he's referring to truth of fact rather than truths of reason.

To begin with, since contingent relations are the point in dispute, I'm using abstract objects in contrast to contingent relations because we need a different kind of comparison to avoid the issue in contention. And I'm using that to make

the point that a dependence relation is not inherently causal.

iv) One issue is whether causation involves time. Even if the cause is timeless, the effect is temporal. If, however, the relation is timeless, is it still meaningful to define it as causal?

v) Take the teleology of the divine decree. If vicarious atonement is a precondition of divine forgiveness, then you have a means-ends explanatory order. Forgiveness is contingent on vicarious atonement. A dependence relation. Specifically, a teleological relation. But the teleological order isn't, itself, causal, even if it will be implemented in a cause/effect relation.

vi) Take the Father's knowledge of the Son? Isn't that dependent on there being a Son to know? Does the object of the Father's knowledge cause the Father's knowledge?

vii) Finally, as a friend of mine pointed out, faithful Catholics are committed to the eternal generation of the Son and the eternal procession of the Spirit. But by Pruss's argument, doesn't that dependence relation make the Son and Spirit "creatures" of the Father?

BTW, there are Calvinists (e.g. Warfield, Helm, Frame) who reject the monarchy of the Father.

Pruss on God's knowledge of the past

Commenting on a post of mine, Dr. Pruss draws attention to an interesting symmetry between God's knowledge of the future and the past:

[Alexander R Pruss5/09/2014 6:00 PM](#)

I think it is deeply puzzling how God knows our future free choices. But it is no more puzzling than the deeply puzzling question of how God knows our past free choices. The problem in both cases is this: How can our actions affect the beliefs of a transcendent being? Whether our actions are in the past or in the future makes no difference here.

(Now, granted, on growing block theories there is a difference, in that past actions and past persons (if there are any persons who don't exist forever) are real and future ones aren't. But on both presentism and eternalism there is ontological symmetry between past actions/persons and future actions/persons. And growing block is false. :-))

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2014/05/when-smoke-clears.html?showComment=1399672858245#c296346453717369103>

I believe he's alluding to divine impassibility, which Brian Davies defines as "not able to be causally modified by an external agent," "God cannot be altered by anything a creature does."

To flesh this out, I think Pruss is suggesting a paradoxical trilemma:

- i)** Humans have libertarian freedom
- ii)** God is impassible (i.e. can't be affected by the world)

iii) God knows our past and future choices

I say that's a paradoxical trilemma because Pruss presumably affirms the truth of all three propositions.

In reponse:

- 1.** A Calvinist will relieve the trilemma by denying (i). From my perspective, it's a false trilemma.
- 2.** Jerry Walls will relieve the trilemma by denying (ii-iii).
- 3.** Where revealed truths generate an apparent contradiction, I think appeal to mystery or paradox is legit. That's an argument from authority (revelation), which is legit so long as the authority is legit.

But I don't think human libertarian freedom is a revealed truth. At best, it's a philosophical construct. So it can't take refuge in an argument from authority. It stands or falls at the bar of reason.

Worse, I think human libertarian freedom contradicts revealed truths regarding predestination, meticulous providence, divine hardening, &c.

In Calvinism, God knows our past and future choices because he predestined them. That doesn't generate any tension with impassibility, for God is affecting the creature, rather than vice versa.

Dissonant messages

The consistency and infallibility of Scripture is a traditional presupposition of the Calvinist/Arminian debate. Both sides traditionally assume that Scripture consistently teaches one or the other position. And that's a revealed truth. It's just a question of ascertaining what the Bible teaches.

However, modern Arminians (especially in academia) often have a more liberal view of Scripture. For instance, Asbury Seminary is the flagship of Arminian seminaries. Here's what Bill Arnold, who's an OT prof. at Asbury, recently said:

I agree that there are many topics in the Bible for which we have diverse voices that sometimes present dissonant messages. Christian biblical theology takes all the dissonant voices and traces progressive messages and themes across the canon, but always including every text. A truly “biblical” theology does not set out deciding which texts fail to express the mind of God. The very presence of a verse in the Bible is witness to its lasting value. These texts are Israel’s witness (Brueggemann’s “testimony”) to the mind of God, and the

early church's witness to God's continued work through the Messiah.

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/bibleandculture/2014/03/15/a-response-to-adam-hamiltons-3-buckets-approach-to-scripture/#comment-1289335436>

i) On this view, there's no expectation that Scripture has a consistent position on the Calvinist/Arminian debate. It could, by turns, teach Calvinism and Arminianism alike, expressing dissonant messages.

It that case, it would be artificial and reductionistic to harmonize these discordant voices.

ii) In addition, even if consistently taught Arminianism, once you repudiate inerrancy, that could be consistently wrong. And Arnold is far from alone in this respect. It's not uncommon for Arminian academics to deny the inerrancy of Scripture.

Divine hiddenness and freewill theism

One popular argument against God's existence is the divine hiddenness argument. The basic argument goes something like this: If God exists, he'd do everything he reasonably could to make as many people believe in him. Since that hasn't happened, God doesn't exist.

There are many sophisticated formulations and variations on this basic argument, as well as many sophisticated counterarguments—which reflect the varied theological commitments of the philosophers in question. Here's a more detailed version:

The second version starts with a more particular premise concerning the God described by the New Testament, especially on the evangelical Christian interpretation of that text.³ According to this version of ADH, the (evangelically interpreted) New Testament makes it clear that God wants all of God's human creatures to believe the truth of 'the gospel message', one of whose crucial elements is that '[t]he ruler of the universe sent his son to be the savior of humanity'.⁴ The particularity of that initial premise allows the second version

to go more quickly than the first: the God described by evangelical Christianity would see to it that all cognitively and affectively capable human beings believed the gospel message. Yet only a minority of all cognitively capable human beings have ever believed the gospel message, including the claim that the ruler of the universe sent his son to be the saviour of humanity. So no God of the kind described by evangelical Christianity exists.

Contemporary demographic data illustrate the lopsided distribution of theistic belief. The populace of Saudi Arabia is at least 95 per cent Muslim and therefore at least 95 per cent theistic, while the populace of Thailand is 95 per cent Buddhist and therefore at most 5 per cent theistic. The approximate total populations are 26 million for Saudi Arabia and 65 million for Thailand.

Why on earth (literally) should the territory of Thailand harbour a high proportion of souls predestined for

damnation and that of Saudi Arabia or (better, for Calvin) post-Reformation Europe a much smaller proportion?

But even if one concedes the value of the world's religious diversity, response (6) does nothing to explain why this diversity manifests itself so often in clusters of believers, many of which exist in isolation from one another; why doesn't this valuable diversity flourish within the cultures of Saudi Arabia and Thailand? Theistic explanations must account for this geographic patchiness in terms of reasons God might have for allowing it, and such reasons seem hard to find.

http://philosophy.acadiau.ca/tl_files/sites/philosophy/resources/documents/Maitzen_Hiddenness.pdf

One response is that God doesn't make himself more evident to more people to avoid permanent rebuff from immature believers who might become resentful over evils they or their loved ones are made to suffer and blame God (Travis Dumsday). However, that fails to explain why God allows them to die in unbelief.

i) I think the divine hiddenness objection is a powerful argument against freewill theism. It's trivially easy to think of examples by which God could lead more people to believe in him. So the very fact that we resort to theistic proofs undercuts freewill theism. Theistic proofs would be unnecessary if God directly manifested himself to more people.

ii) The hiddenness argument lacks the same traction when it comes to Calvinism. Calvinism denies a key premise of the argument. God never wanted everyone to believe in him. So the fact that there are many unbelievers is

consistent with Calvinism. Indeed, that's an implication of Calvinism, given reprobation.

iii) Still, that, of itself, doesn't explain the demographic disparities. What about that?

To begin with, Maitzen's comparison between Muslims and Buddhists is theologically clueless. From an eschatological standpoint, Muslims are no better off than Buddhists. Believing in a false god is no improvement over believing in no god. Idolatry is no better than atheism. Both Muslims and Buddhists are hellbound.

iv) To suggest, as Maitzen does, that Buddhists are atheists is simplistic. Folk Buddhism is not atheistic. And folk Buddhism is more demographically representative than philosophical Buddhism.

v) More to the point, we need to consider the demographic distribution in time as well as place. Over the centuries, there's been an exponential growth in human population:

http://www.census.gov/population/international/data/worldpop/table_history.php

It wasn't until around AD 1800 that the total population crossed the 1 billion threshold. And it's currently about 7 billion. So historically unreached people-groups could make up for lost time in a hurry. That's because there's a far larger percentage of humans living in the recent past, present, and projected future. Hence, Africans, Indians, and Asians could overtake Caucasians in the sum total of Christian adherents. Given the rapid acceleration in population growth, it takes less time than you might imagine for unreached people-groups to catch up with 2000 years of church history, and surpass the northern

hemisphere. Cumulative totals must take time and well as place into account.

Perfect freedom

I'm going to comment on some statements by Alexander Pruss:

<http://alexanderpruss.blogspot.com/2013/11/moral-and-perfect-freedom.html>

Before getting to the specifics, we need to define "love."
"Love" can mean at least two different things:

i) Affection

ii) Acting in the best interests of another

It's possible to act on behalf of another despite not having affection for them. Indeed, there's something commendable about doing good to those you dislike.

With this distinction in mind, one notices that there is a difference in value between God's creating a being that inevitably loves him back and his creating a being that gets to choose whether or not to love him back. Even if a being that inevitably loves him back is no better, God's action of inviting someone into communion with him very much has something very significant to be said for it that God's creating

someone who will inevitably be in communion with him doesn't.

Unfortunately Pruss doesn't explain what makes that "very significant."

The second point is this. There is a value to loving someone by choice. Now when God and St Francis love each other, each loves the other by choice. Francis chooses to love God, while being able not to. But God likewise chooses to love Francis, while being able not to.

- i)** Pruss is half right. Ironically, that's the principle underlying double predestination. God is free to "love" some, but not love others. Unconditional election and reprobation.
- ii)** Is love a choice? Depends on whether we define "love" as affection or a loving action on behalf of another. Humans can't simply choose who they have affection for. But they can choose how to treat another.
- iii)** Apropos (ii), we choose our friends, but we don't choose our relatives. However, we tend to choose friends on the basis of those with whom we have natural rapport. We choose to associate with them, but we don't choose to like

them. Rather, because we find some people likable, we want them to be our friends.

iv) Conversely, it's a Christian virtue to befriend someone you don't like. Be a friend to them because they need a friend, without the expectation that they will be a friend to you.

v) Libertarian theism is confronted with a dilemma: freewill theists typically wish to say that humans are free to love or withhold love from God, but God isn't free to love or withhold love from humans.

Pruss's position is more symmetrical, but in that event, why does he oppose Calvinism?

A certain symmetry and equality in love are particularly valuable. In the Trinity, we have a symmetry: no Person of the Trinity has the freedom to fail to love another. But we automatically start off with God having a choice whether to be in a relationship of love with a creature, namely through his having a choice whether to create the creature. It makes for deeper equality and symmetry if the creature also has a choice about how to respond to God.

No doubt that would make for a deeper equality and symmetry, but what if the relationship between God and sinners is inherently unequal and asymmetrical—like a mother and her newborn baby?

A love relationship that is chosen on one side but not on another is less valuable through the asymmetry. Imagine a woman who chose to have a baby had a drug that would ensure that the child would love her back. She had a choice, to some degree, whether to love the baby. But she refuses the child a choice about whether and how to reciprocate the relationship.

i) Once again, the reflects the systematic equivocation which runs through Pruss's analysis. He keeps blurring two different kinds of love. As a rule, parents and children don't choose to love each other (in the sense of affection). That's built in. Even in marriage, we try to marry someone with whom we're simpatico.

ii) Pruss's standard is subversive. A fundamental feature of divine love, as well as the Christian ecotype, is loving the other even when reciprocity is absent. Loving someone in spite of their animosity. God's love for sinners is a paradigm case.

Or take a parent who continues to love a very difficult teenager. Or take a grown child who cares for an elderly parent with senile dementia. Not only is the feeble-minded parent unable to love in return, but the feeble-minded parent may be resentful and resistant. The grown child is caring for the parent despite the parent's inability to appreciate the loving intent.

Must God love me?

Jerry Walls gave a lecture at Houston Baptist U, available on YouTube, entitled "What's Wrong with Calvinism?"

Towards the end of the lecture, Jerry said there are some things God can't want to do. God can't choose to love or not to love. For God, loving everyone is necessary rather than optional.

I've been a Calvinist for about 30 years. I've been a Christian for about 38 years. So I've had time to eternalize my theology. It isn't just theoretical. It's something I live with, live for.

So it's good to let Jerry's alternative sink in. What would be the impact on my devotional life if I thought God had to love me? How would that change my view of God? How would that affect how I relate God?

Well, it would move God off-center. God would cease to be the central figure in my life and heart. If I shared Jerry's view of God, I wouldn't have a devotional life.

Believing that God loves me because he must, because he cannot not love me, rather than loving me in spite of who I am, would instantly erase my gratitude. Why be grateful for something I can take for granted?

Frankly, I can't respect a God who has to love me. God would be a poor judge of character if he loved me because he had to. I'm not that lovable. I don't deserve it. I love God, not because he has to love me, but because he chose to love me despite my utter unworthiness.

There's a sense in which I might still appreciate God's irrepressible love, in the way P. T. Barnum enjoyed the fact that a sucker was born every minute.

At best, God would be a necessary presupposition, like time or oxygen. Mind you, there's a sense in which God is a necessary presupposition. But he's far more than just a background condition.

A God who loves me because he has to reminds me of those pitiful women who are stuck on losers. They keep going back to the loser boyfriend or abusive husband. They cannot not love the loser boyfriend or abusive husband.

That may also explain Jerry's air of entitlement. His theism is a recipe for a church full of spoiled brats.

Must God choose the best?

*If God is supremely good then he could only choose those possible outcomes, instantiate those possible worlds, which are consistent with his having his character, since to act inconsistently is a defect which God could not have. And since God is supremely good it must be supposed that God chooses from all possible worlds that world which is the best, the best of all possible worlds, since to suppose that he might choose a world which was less than the best is to suppose that he might do something which was inconsistent with his supremely good nature. P. Helm, *Eternal God* (Oxford, 2nd ed., 2010), 172.*

I agree with the first sentence, but I disagree with the second sentence. The paragraph is set up as if the first sentence is the premise, to which the second sentence is the conclusion. But there's no connecting argument to show how the second sentence derives from the first. No reason is given as to why, if God is supremely good, he must

choose the best possible world. That implication is assumed rather than explained.

What's the implicit argument? It seems to involve a type of symmetry between God and the world, where the greatest conceivable being must choose the greatest conceivable world.

i) If that's the argument, then it's equivocal. Any created order is bound to be inferior, both in kind and degree, to God. So there's no direct correlation between the excellence of God and the excellence of the world. There will always be a mismatch. The world will never come up to God's level of perfection. Not even close.

ii) Moreover, a lesser possible world might encapsulate a unique or distinctive good that isn't captured by a greater possible world. So even assuming there's a best possible world (a very dubious assumption), the best possible world won't necessarily be better in every respect. The best possible world might well be inferior to a lesser world in one or more respects.

Children of a Lesser God

It is good to remind yourself that you could be wrong and to recommit yourself to your desire to know if you are wrong.

I think that Calvinism makes certain claims about the Christian God which are false and are, among other things, inconsistent with his metaphysical perfection. I reject those claims.

You think that Arminianism makes certain claims about the Christian God which are false and are, among other things inconsistent with his metaphysical perfection. You reject those claims.

But will you shine Dr. Olson's shoes if you're wrong? (I'll gladly shine John Piper's shoes if I'm wrong.)

Heck, if I'm wrong about Calvinism I'll even clean the mud off of Mark Driscoll's scuffed up Doc Martens.

If I'm wrong.

Before responding directly, let's put Rauser's statement in a broader context. He says Calvinism makes certain claims about God that are "inconsistent with his metaphysical perfection."

But that's a somewhat euphemistic way of expressing his true sentiments. Here's a sampling of some other statements he's made:

I hope the Calvinists who pray the imprecatory psalms can appreciate why other Christians do not.

<http://randalrauser.com/2012/01/imprecations-for-arminians/>

If I were to summarize the problem with GBB in a single sentence it would be this: in multiple instances the book's defense of God's behavior depends at least in part on obscuring the depth of the problem at issue. Whether the issue is punishing an entire nation for the sins of its leaders or committing genocide or causing the mauling of youthful tormenters, Lamb's defense depends on

multiple arguments with implausible moral premises which obscure the nature of the issue of debate.

<http://randalrauser.com/2012/11/how-good-is-god-behaving-badly-a-review/>

But the text is still deeply problematic for it still affirms the appropriateness of sacrifice as a means to relate to God (presumably including human sacrifice; more on that below) and it also affirms the appropriateness of asking a father to commit a truly heinous act.

As for Abraham specifically, if it is intrinsically wrong to engage in an act, then it seems also intrinsically wrong to ask a person to commit the act, even if your intention is ultimately that they not perform the action. For example if rape is intrinsically wrong then it is wrong to ask somebody to rape a third party, even if your ultimate intention is that they not do so. I think the intuition is very strong that it is inherently wrong to engage in acts of devotional killing of one's child to a deity. But then it is wrong for a third party -- even

if that party is God -- to ask a person to engage in that action, even if God intended ultimately that they not follow through with it.

<http://randalrauser.com/2011/04/is-god-a-moral-monster-a-review-part-2/>

i) One of the striking, but hardly unusual features of his position is the way Rauser's objection to the Calvinist God dovetails with his objection to the OT God.

In addition, Rauser is a militant critic of everlasting punishment. So he also has a problem with the NT God. He is, by turns, antagonistic to Reformed theism, OT theism, and NT theism. His objections to Calvin's God shade into his objections to Yahweh and the NT Judge. They are pretty much interchangeable.

He relieves the tension by denying the inerrancy of Scripture. That enables him to cherry pick which passages he accepts and which he rejects.

ii) This, in turn, raises the question of what he means when he says he's open to the possibility that he might be wrong, and, what is more, that he'd be prepared to embrace John Piper's God if proven wrong.

But what does that hypothetical admission refer to? Is he saying that he might be wrong about the existence of the Calvinist God? Or that he might be wrong about the character of the Calvinist God?

Or are these linked? That if the Calvinist God is the true God, then that, in turn, automatically revises Rauser's

conception of what constitutes a metaphysically perfect God?

iii) Let's take a comparison. Protestant debates over baptism or the millennium are purely exegetical debates. It's just a question of which side has the best interpretation and integration of the Biblical data. In that event, it wouldn't be hard to switch sides.

But Arminians like Rauser have raised the stakes where God is concerned. They've assured us that Calvinism has dire consequences for the character of God if Calvinism were true.

Given that posture, it's hard to see how they can walk back those statements and suddenly regard the Calvinist God as worshipful in case it turns out that he's the real deal. After all, the usual way in which the hypothetical is framed is not that if the Calvinist God existed, then we'd be wrong about our moral intuitions, that the Calvinist God would be praiseworthy. Just the opposite, the usual way in which the hypothetical is framed is that if the Calvinist God existed, then that would be a morally monstrous state of affairs. The worst-case scenario. The worst of all possible worlds. Worse than Satan. A cosmic Hitler.

It's difficult to see how Arminians who cast the issue in such Manichean terms can climb down from that characterization and do a last-minute change of heart regarding the worshipfulness of Calvin's God. Seems a bit like the Vichy collaborators: If you can't beat 'em, join 'em.

To take a comparison, suppose you came to the conclusion that Moloch was the true God. Would that mean Moloch was a metaphysically perfect God after all? Or would that mean an evil God actually exists?

iv) Finally, Rauser turns the question back on the Calvinist. Fair enough.

Hypothetically speaking, there are degrees of worshipfulness. Some Gods (or gods) would be more worshipful than others.

Suppose Zeus was real. In some respects he'd be a superior being. Not morally superior. Even the Greeks didn't think he was very admirable. But superior in the sense of superhuman. More knowledgeable. More powerful. So you'd have to show him respect, just as you'd have to show a grizzly bear respect.

Now the Arminian God is clearly several notches above Zeus. Arminian theism is greatly influenced by Scripture.

Still, the Arminian God is a lesser God compared to the Calvinist God. He does less for his people than the Calvinist God. And he does less because he's less capable.

His creatures wield some power over the Arminian God, whereas his creatures wield no power over the Calvinist God.

As William Lane Craig put it, God must play the hand he was dealt. The cards are our autonomous choices. These are independent of God. And not all possible worlds are even feasible worlds.

Likewise, God's knowledge of the future is caused by what we will do. So he is dependent on his own creation to some degree.

All told, the Arminian God would be less worshipful than the Calvinist God. He's a smaller God. Lesser in what he is and does. A greater being than human beings, but a lesser being than the Calvinist God.

Notice that I'm judging Arminian theism on its own terms. By its own claims.

But even within his limitations, the conduct of the Arminian God raises questions about his goodness. As one philosopher recently noted:

Long ago, I remember reading with great curiosity Rabbi Kushner's When Bad Things Happen to Good People? How disappointing that Kushner's intellectual answer seemed to be that God isn't omnipotent. (His practical answer not to worry about the question but just to do good is much better.) The idea of limiting divine attributes in part to answer the problem of evil has recently had some defense (e.g., here and in the work of open theists), so I guess it's time to blog the objection to Kushner—which applies to the others as well—that I had when I read him, with some elaboration.

Basically, the objection is that as long as God remains pretty good, pretty smart (he was smart enough to create us!) and powerful enough to

communicate with us (Kushner at least accepts this), then serious cases of the Problem of Evil remain. Moreover, these cases do not seem significantly easier to solve than the cases of the Problem of Evil that were removed. Consequently, the intellectual benefit with regard to the Problem of Evil is small. And the intellectual loss with regard to the simplicity of the theory is great—the theory that God has all perfections is far simpler.

Start by considering a deity whose goodness is unlimited but whose knowledge and power are fairly limited.

Consider, first, the problem of polio. This is certainly a horrendous evil. And the limited deity could have alleviated a significant portion of the problem hundreds of years earlier simply by whispering into some people's ears how to make a vaccine—surely any deity smart enough to create this world would be smart enough to figure out how to make vaccines. Maybe the limited deity couldn't have prevented all cases, in the way that an unlimited God could. But given that neither did the wholesale prevention happen nor did the partial prevention by vaccines happen as early as it could have.

Consider, second, the many cases where innocent people suffered horrendously at the hands of attackers, where the attack could have been prevented if the people had been warned. Even a deity of limited power and knowledge should be able to see, for instance, that the Gestapo are talking about heading for such-and-such a house, and could then warn the occupants. (I am not saying that such warnings were never given—for all I know, they were in a number of cases. But I am saying that there are many cases where apparently they were not.)

Moreover, even if one limits the goodness of the deity, and only claims that he is pretty good, the problem remains. For unless the deity had a very serious reason not to tell people about vaccines and not to warn the innocent victims of horrendous attacks, it seems plausible that the deity did something quite bad in refraining from helping, so bad as to be incompatible with being pretty good. (If the deity had a reason that fell a little short of justifying the refraining, then that might be compatible with being pretty good; but a reason would have to be pretty serious for it to fall only a

little short of justifying the refraining when the evils are so horrendous.) So even if one thinks that the deity has limited power and knowledge and is only pretty good, the problem of finding very serious reasons for the deity's non-interference remains.

Granted, the problem is diminished, especially if one has decreased the belief in divine goodness. But notice that the decrease in belief in divine goodness is the most religiously troubling aspect of a limited God doctrine. And even that does not make the problem go away.

<http://alexanderpruss.blogspot.com/2012/12/limiting-god-to-solve-problem-of-evil.html>

The freewill defense won't avail in these cases, for divine intervention of this kind wouldn't abridge human freedom. Indeed, it would give humans more choices. More opportunities.

Is God the author of good?

Arminians typically obsess about Calvinism making God the “author of evil.” But another question is whether Arminianism is able to make God the author of good.

I think every attempt to explain why foreordaining evil, immorality, is not morally wrong is a (possibly unconscious) subterfuge. I think it is self-evident that to plan and render certain someone else’s sin is to participate in that sin no matter what one’s own intentions were because, to do this, in a way that would absolutely assure the outcome, one would have to also plan and render certain the sinner’s morally wrong intentions.

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2012/01/strong-meat-not-milk-are-some-things-impossible-to-believe/>

There are several problems with this argument:

i) To begin with, let’s clarify his argument. His fundamental objection is not to planning or ensuring the outcome, per se. Rather, his objection is to the consequences of planning and ensuring the outcome. What he deems unacceptable is

how that would make God a “participant” in the outcome—where the outcome is evil, or the result of evil human intentions.

ii) There are, however, other ways of making God a participant in the outcome short of planning or ensuring the outcome.

If, according to Arminianism, God makes a world with foreseeable evil events, then he’s a participant in the end-result. That outcome wouldn’t result apart from God’s creative contribution to the outcome.

Likewise, according to Arminianism, God’s providentially enables the sinner to sin. So that makes God a participant in the sinner’s sin.

iii) But let’s examine the issue from another angle. Olson apparently thinks it’s okay for God to plan or ensure moral goods, but not moral evils.

But the problem with this dichotomy is that, in a fallen world, good and evil are often causally intertwined—like the parable of the tares ([Mt 13:24-30](#)). For one thing, human beings are social creatures. Many human endeavors involve our collective effort. So you can’t evaluate the outcome from individual intentions alone, for different contributors have different intentions—for good or ill.

For instance, suppose two medical researchers collaborate to discover the cure for a terrible disease. One scientist is motivated by humanitarian concerns. He wants to alleviate pain and suffering. Premature death.

His partner is motivated by selfish, vainglorious ambitions. He wants to be famous. Win a Nobel prize. Have a cure

named after him. Be cited in medical textbooks.

Now Olson presumably thinks the cure is a good thing. Does he therefore think the Arminian God planned and rendered certain that morally good outcome?

Yet that scientific discovery is causally contingent on a scientific collaboration. Does he think the Arminian God planned or ensured the virtuous intentions of the philanthropic partner while leaving the sinful intentions of his collaborator unplanned and uncertain?

But in that case, how did the Arminian God plan or ensure the scientific discovery? If the outcome results from the accidental conjunction of random variables that coincidentally intersect with planned variables, then the outcome can't be divinely planned and rendered certain.

Except for certain causally discrete miracles which God performs directly, it's hard to see how Olson can attribute any morally good complex event to divine planning and providence. And in that case, there's not much to thank God for.

The transmission of original sin

1. Original sin has two sides: (i) the condemnation of Adam's sin and (ii) moral corruption/spiritual inability. (i) seems unfair. I've discussed that on multiple occasions. In this post I'd like to focus in (ii).

2. One question is whether the Bible teaches original sin. Considered in isolation, Gen 3 doesn't seem to teach original sin. However, that's followed by a drastic escalation in evil, leading up to the flood. And it continues after the flood. OT history is a record of pervasive depravity, both in pagan cultures as well as Israel. The extent and intensity of human evil is hard to explain unless there's a predisposition to evil.

In the NT, two classic passages are [Rom 5:12-21](#) & [1 Cor 15:21-22](#). The text in 1 Cor 15 is about death, while the text in Rom 5 is about condemnation as well as death.

Over and above that are Pauline texts about the moral and spiritual blindness, hardness, and deadness of the lost. About their captivity to raw destructive passions. Again, it's hard to explain that if humans are born moral blank slates.

Finally, a theme of John's Gospel and 1 John is how the mission of Christ exposes the preexisting animus towards God and good. That dovetails with the Pauline picture.

3. A difficult issue in Christian theology is the transmission of original sin. In terms of guilt and condemnation for Adam's sin, that gave rise to debates over immediate and imputation in Reformed theology. I think proponents of immediate imputation have the better of the

argument. Again, that raises questions of fairness, but I've addressed that elsewhere.

4. But what about the transmission of moral corruption? What's the metaphysics or mechanics of original sin in that respect? That's something else theologians struggle with. Different models are proposed.

Let's take a comparison: from what I've read, feral children are psychological inhuman. For normal psychological maturation to occur, humans require socialization during their formative years. There's a narrow window of opportunity that closes. If humans don't receive the necessary socialization during that period, no amount of remedial socialization will fix the deficit. The tragedy of feral children is the fact that they already passed the threshold where it's possible for them to develop a normal psychological makeup. No matter how much affection and attention they receive, it's too late for them to become psychologically human. It would take a miracle (which God may provide in the afterlife.)

Nothing was done to them that directly caused that deficient. They weren't physically, verbally, and psychologically abused. Rather, their condition is the result of severe neglect. Humans aren't like Jem'Hadar babies programmed to automatically mature psychologically as soon as they pop out of the incubation chambers. Our psychological makeup isn't purely internal and self-contained, waiting to unfold like clockwork. To be psychologically complete and mature requires something from the outside.

By analogy, the transmission of original sin needn't be caused by some positive factor or determinant, but by the

absence of some external factor that's necessary to complete our moral formation. Something lost in the Fall.

The metaphysics of original sin

I'm going to revisit the issue of whether original sin is fair. It's a topic I've discussed from various angles. For instance.

<https://triablogue.blogspot.com/2015/04/vicarious-responsibility.html>

1. In the Genesis narrative (Gen 2-3), as I construe it, humans are naturally mortal but with a potential for immortality, contingent on access to the tree of life. When Adam and Eve are expelled from the Garden, they lose their shot at immortality. And that's a lost opportunity for their posterity as well. To be born outside the Garden is to be consigned to morality, as the default state of humans, absent the tree of life.

For Adam and Eve, the lost opportunity of immortality is punitive. But is it punitive for their posterity, or is that merely a side-effect of what their ancestors did?

To take a comparison, suppose a businessman becomes rich through hard work, but squanders his fortune through compulsive gambling. As a result, his kids inherit nothing. But they aren't being punished for their father's gambling debts.

Now, a common objection is that it's unfair for humans to suffer the dire consequences of what was done by a second party (Adam and Eve), without their consent. But whether that's unfair depends on whether humans are entitled to immortality.

To revert to my comparison, it's not a miscarriage of justice if the kids of the impoverished rich man inherit nothing. They didn't earn the money. It wasn't theirs to lose.

The question is whether the imputation of Adam's guilt is directly punitive, or more in the nature of a hereditary liability, for something humans never had a claim on in the first place.

Likewise, the question of whether original sin is damnatory, or whether that's reserved for actual sin.

2. Is it fair to be born with a sin nature? Not only do kids inherit physical traits from their parents, they inherit psychological traits from their parents. And I think that's evidence for traducianism. I'm a Cartesian dualist traducian.

If alcoholism runs in your family, you may have a chemical or genetic predisposition to alcoholism. That's unfair, but you wouldn't even exist if the deck was reshuffled.

Likewise, you might inherit a bad psychological trait. Suppose your dad has a short temper, which you inherit. You might say that's unfair, but you wouldn't even exist without the father you had. That's part of your psychological makeup, and your origination depends on it. Some psychological traits can be modified or eradicated, but that's after the fact. They can't be eradicated in advance without eliminating you!

The Magician's Nephew

How could evil originate in a good world? Or did it? In *The Magician's Nephew*, Lewis solves that theological conundrum by making the source of evil a malevolent invader from another world. Lewis has a comparable device in *Perelandra*.

I remember a Bible scholar who said the Tempter in Gen 3 performs the same function. Since Eden was initially devoid of evil, it had to enter the garden. The source of evil lay outside the garden rather than the inside the garden.

Although that may finesse the proximate source of evil, it only pushes the question back a step. It can't explain the ultimate source of evil. How did the malevolent invader become evil in the first place? How did evil originate wherever he came from?

The issue is sometimes framed in terms of how a holy or perfect agent could ever find evil appealing in the first place.

It's like asking how a movie villain became a villain. At one level, there may be an explanation inside the plot or narrative. There may be a backstory about some pivotal event that took him in the wrong direction.

At another level, outside the story, he's a villain because the director had the idea of a villainous character, and he turned his idea into a movie. It began in his mind. The villain was originally a thought. The villain in the story objectifies the director's imagination. At that level, he does dastardly things in the movie because he does dastardly things in the

director's imagination, and the movie character is a projection of the director's imagination.

There's the additional fact that while Adam was initially sinless, that doesn't mean there was no room for improvement. A quest for knowledge isn't inherently wrong. Intellectual curiosity is a good thing.

In this case, it's forbidden knowledge, but that combines something innocuous with something prohibited. There can be wrong ways to acquire something good.

Moreover, certain kinds of knowledge are corrupting. Getting inside the mind of a serial killer is corrupting. Likewise, learning about evil by doing evil is corrupting. Then there's second-order evils where an agent must commit one kind of evil to be in a position to experience another kind of evil. Some kinds of knowledge are safe for God but dangerous for creatures.

Hilbert's Hotel

Supralapsarian Calvinism is sometimes classified as a *felix culpa* theology. Conversely, you have atheists who say, Why did God create Satan, knowing what would happen?

Suppose Adam and Eve never fell. What would the world be like? Would it be better, worse, or both better and worse?

Minimally, Adam's posterity wouldn't die of old age. Perhaps, if Adam and Eve ate from the tree of life, their immortality would be transmitted to their posterity. Or perhaps their posterity would need to eat from the tree of life. Or perhaps, as they colonized the earth, they'd take seeds from the tree of life and plant it elsewhere.

Or maybe God would simply confer immortality on Adam's posterity, apart from the tree of life. It's unlikely that fruit from the tree of life had chemical properties that conveyed biological immortality. How is that naturally possible? Rather, it's more likely that God simply attached a blessing to that object.

In theory, Adam's posterity might still be vulnerable to death by causes other than senescence. Perhaps God might providentially protect them from death by other causes. Or perhaps God would let them die, but miraculously restore them to life.

It seems unlikely that an intermediate state would exist in an unfallen world. In a fallen world, the intermediate state exists because people die at different times over the millennia, but at the Parousia, death will cease, and all the dead will be restored to life all at once. (According to amil

eschatology. Premil eschatology is more complex, but the net effect will be the same.)

But in an unfallen world, there wouldn't be that cutoff. So there wouldn't be any point in people dying, then passing into an intermediate state.

The upshot is that in an unfallen world, the human race would continue to reproduce until it reached an optimum population level. In theory, that might be confined to the garden of Eden. If so, that would be a small population.

Or perhaps Adam's posterity would outgrow the garden and proceed to colonize the more hospitable regions of the globe. But to avoid the detrimental effects of overpopulation (e.g. famine, starvation), it would have to plateau. Suppose at that point God made the women infertile.

Reproduction would terminate with a stable, unchanging population. However many generations of Adam's posterity until it hit the optimum population threshold. That would be the last generation. Frozen in place. Further procreation would be unnecessary to maintain a replacement rate, since no one would die—or if they died, they'd be restored to life.

That would be a good world. Better in some respects than a fallen world. However, the overall population would be far smaller. An absolutely static, invariant population.

One fringe benefit of mortality is that it frees up time and space for far more humans to exist. Some of them are hellbound but some of them are heavenbound. Yet the heavenbound humans wouldn't exist in a world where there's a final generation once reproduction reaches the optimum population size. There's no more room for

additional generations. The cutoff comes early in human history.

In one respect, a fallen world is worse because it contains hellbound individuals. But that's offset by the greater number of heavenbound individuals, since they don't have to coexist at the same time and place. Because they exist diachronically rather than synchronically in the same place, procreation can continue indefinitely.

God might still decree a terminus, but it will be very far out compared to an unfallen world. The cumulative population will be vastly larger. Eventually, they all exist simultaneously, but not at the same location.

Heaven is more capacious than Hilbert's Hotel. Never runs out of guest rooms. Always a vacancy!

Enter at your own risk

Peter van Inwagen is a leading freewill theist. In his book on *The Problem of Evil* (Oxford, 2006), he presents a theistic evolutionary version of original sin (85ff.). I'll quote some statements, then comment on them:

Natural evil, according to the expanded free-will defense, is a special case of evil that is caused by the abuse of free will; the fact that humans are subject to destruction by earthquakes is a consequence of an aboriginal abuse of freewill (90).

As regards physical suffering and untimely death, rebelling against God is like disregarding a clearly worded notice, climbing a fence, and wandering about in a mine field. If someone does that, it's very close to a dead certainty that sooner or later something very bad will happen to him. But whether it's sooner or later, when and where it happens, may well be a matter of chance. In separating ourselves from God, we have become, as I said, the playthings of chance (103).

i) I think there's an element of truth to this. Although I think some natural evils are second-order consequences of

sin, I don't attribute all natural evils to the Fall. Rather, I think the Fall removes the providential protection from natural evils that humans would otherwise enjoy.

ii) As a Calvinist, I don't think anything happens by chance. That said, Inwagen's position is problematic on freewill theist grounds:

iii) Regarding the metaphor of someone who disregards a warning sign, the problem with that comparison is that it's too individualistic. If, indeed, everyone suffered because each of them disregarded the warning sign, then Inwagen's illustration would be apt. However, Inwagen is moving within a framework where some humans innocently suffer as a result of what other humans did wrong. Everyone doesn't climb over the fence. Rather, many humans are born within the fenced-in minefield. It's not about getting in, but getting out.

And the notion of collective punishment is problematic for freewill theism. How is it fair to suffer for the misdeeds of someone else? I should only suffer the consequences of my own free choices. I should not be made to suffer the consequences of someone else's misguided decisions.

Put another way, if a freewill theist grants the justice of collective punishment, then it's much harder to see how he can attack Calvinism.

iv) It also depends on who climbs over the fence. If an inquisitive 10-year-old boy climbs scales the fence, we don't normally think he deserves whatever he gets. We make every effort to rescue him before he steps on a land mine. So are we comparing the fence-jumper to an adult or a child?

In my experience, freewill theists typically compare humans to children in relation to God.

v) Finally, it's arguable that disclaimers like "use or enter at your own risk" aren't necessarily exculpatory. If an adult disregards the warning, he's responsible for his own actions. That, however, doesn't mean the person who created the hazard is therefore off the hook.

Take human hunting. Suppose an enterprising businessman creates a hunting range in which men pay to hunt one another. Say these are big game hunters who are bored with hunting animals. That's no longer a challenge. They wish to take it to the next level. The fact that it's voluntary hardly exonerates the businessman of wrongdoing.

Kismet

When John Piper preached at our church two weeks ago, he talked about the very high view Muslims have of the sovereignty of God. They believe in a God who ordains whatsoever comes to pass. They believe in a God who knows the hairs on our heads. They believe in a God who can do as he pleases. So is there any difference between a sovereign Allah and the sovereign God of the Bible? Piper argued that in Islam the sovereignty of God operates independently of his other attributes, such that Allah can be capricious and arbitrary in his exercise of divine power. This is, no doubt, how some Christians see the Reformed view of God and why they reject it so strenuously.

<http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevindeyoung/2013/12/20/something-better-than-sovereignty/>

i) I agree with the overall point that Piper and DeYoung are making. Sovereignty all by itself is not a good thing. Calvin

led the way in that respect when he attacked theological voluntarism. To isolate God's will from his other attributes results in an amoral sovereignty. Unlike Allah's sheer will, Yahweh's sovereign will is characterized by his wisdom and goodness.

ii) However, I think both men oversimplify Islam. In my younger days I did a lot of reading on Islam, so I may be rusty, but as I recall, we need to consider a number of issues:

iii) When we talk about Islamic theology, what are the sources? The Koran? The Hadith? Traditional commentaries on the Koran? Muslim jurisprudence? Islamic Kalam? What about contemporary Islam, which interacts with medieval and modern philosophy?

iv) We need to draw further distinctions:

a) Fatalism. No matter what happens, the outcome is the same. That's consistent with libertarian freedom. There could be alternate routes, but they all lead to the same destination.

b) Determinism. This takes different forms. From what I've read, the Asharites espouse a roughhewn version of compatibilism.

By contrast, Al-Ghazali propounded occasionalism. There are no second-causes. Every event is the direct effect of Allah's immediate causation.

c) Predeterminism. That can take the form of a master plan. Everything happens according to plan. Something can be determined without being predetermined.

d) Or it can involve physical determinism, where the present is the inevitable result of prior states. A chain of cause and effect. That's different from occasionalism, where the present is causally discontinuous with the past.

e) Providence

A plan requires something over and above the plan itself to implement the plan. Primary or secondary causality.

iv) Some Muslims (e.g. Asharites) were determinists while other Muslims (e.g. Mutazilites) were indeterminists.

The Koran has a references to a divine tablet. On one interpretation, that suggests a script or blueprint. Everything that happens is scripted. That would be a predestinarian metaphor. It's all written out in advance.

However, the Mutazilites turned that around. Allah sees the future, and writes down what he foresees. He's writing history ahead of time. He's writing history before it happens. Writing about the future as if already lies in the past. But the future is not scripted. Rather, the tablet transcribes the future.

I think the predestinarian interpretation is more plausible, but we're just dealing with a few passing references in the Koran.

v) The Koran also talks about God guiding some people and leading others astray. That's deterministic, but not necessarily predetermined. Indeed, that's consistent with fatalism.

One interpretive difficulty is knowing where Muhammad got his ideas. I suspect fatalism often personifies the apparent randomness of life. There often seems to be no rhyme or reason to who lives and who dies, who prospers and who suffers. You can do all the right things, and still come to a horrible end. So it seems like you were doomed all along. Conversely, some people seem to be lucky. Or they get away with things. That may lie behind many Koranic passages.

You also have astrology or astrological fatalism in folk Islam.

Freewill theism as Neopaganism

It's striking how freewill theism reprimates pagan principles. Before making comparisons, let's expound what I mean. The pagan worldview oscillated between chance and fate. That's because paganism has no single, omnipotent, omniscient Creator God. No creation ex nihilo.

In paganism, the world is a patchwork of independent power centers: personified natural forces. Stronger gods and weaker gods. Ancestral spirits. Gods with different spheres of influence. Some gods know more than others. But all the gods are finite in knowledge and power.

In Greco-Roman mythology, the Fates represented fatalism. The Fates were sisters and goddesses. They were the daughters of night—an ominous pedigree.

They are classically represented as spinning thread, measuring thread, and cutting thread. That represents the lifespan of each individual. That predetermines the time of death.

The specter of fatalism is also represented by dire oracles (e.g. Croesus, Oedipus).

Likewise, the development of astrological fatalism. Your destiny was written in the stars.

This generates a familiar dilemma: if the future is known, it must be settled in advance. But if you know your future, does that not give you an opportunity to change it?

Conversely, chance or luck was represented by the goddess Tyche or Fortuna.

On the face of it, chance and fate are opposing principles. However, they may consistently coexist if both are less than universal in scope and sway.

Classicists debate whether the Fates were absolute autonomous powers whom even the gods could not overrule. I have no reason to think Greco-Roman mythology was consistent in this regard. As the mythology evolved, it was natural to unify more phenomena under Zeus, but it didn't start out that way. You had varied traditions which originated independently in place in time. Later, there's an effort at synthesis. Zeus becomes a unifying principle. And you have philosophical conceptions, like Aristotelian theism.

One might ask what it was in pagan experience that gave rise to their beliefs about fate and fortune. For now I will content myself with speculation.

On the one hand, some events, like death, are inevitable. Ultimately inescapable.

On the other hand, some people seem to be lucky while others seem to be unlucky. There's a certain apparent randomness to weal and woe.

So even though these principles tug in different directions, they both appear to be true some of the time.

And we see both principle vying for dominance in freewill theism. For instance, the chance element in open theism is its radical commitment to libertarian freedom. The ultimate contingency of the future. Uncaused events (i.e. free choices).

But to curtail the destabilizing consequences of this principle, open theists invoke the classic deus ex machina of the cosmic chess master. No matter what move you make, he will beat you every time. Yet that's just like inexorable fate.

Likewise, in Molinism:

The counterfactuals of creaturely freedom which confront Him are outside His control. He has to play with the hand He has been dealt.

<http://www.reasonablefaith.org/molism-and-the-soteriological-problem-of-evil-once-more>

Just like the Fates. Even the gods can't overrule them.

There are feasible and infeasible possible worlds. God can only choose from among the live options. The rest are out of his hands. That's classically fatalistic in positing ultimate autonomous entities to which even God must defer.

By the same token, Craig says:

This event was the result of an incomprehensible multitude of free human choices which God did not determine. If her parents had decided not to travel on this flight because of a

dream, then God's plan would have taken a different course. His providential planning would have to have taken into account that free choice instead of the choices He did have to work with. God's providential plan does not override human free choices.

<http://www.reasonablefaith.org/indonesia-air-asia-qz8501-and-the-problem-of-evil>

It's as if once the ill-fated parents board the plane, God must allow the natural consequences of their free choices to run their course unimpeded. Their doom was sealed the moment the cabin was sealed. God mustn't override the results of our free choices. Que sera sera. Once he flicks the first domino, his hands are tied thereafter. He just watches them fall.

Bad karma

1. Suppose my parents are indifferent to religion. Not especially religious or especially irreligious. They just don't care. It doesn't figure in my upbringing one way or the other.

As I hit the teens, I begin to ask the "meaning of life" questions. In a few years I will leave home. Decide what to do with my life. I have my whole life ahead of me. Is this all there is? If so, is that enough?

To simplify, let's say the philosophical options boil down to atheism and Christian theism. Should I investigate both options?

As I've often said, investigating atheism is a waste of time. But people object: what if atheism is true? Don't the facts matter?

2. Let's explore that question. Do the facts matter? In what respect do the facts matter? Let's draw a few distinctions:

i) Do the facts matter?

ii) Does knowing the facts matter?

To break this down a bit further:

i) Do the facts make a difference?

ii) Does knowing the facts make a difference?

Let's consider a few examples:

3. Suppose I consider the best college to apply to. What's the best college for me? For my needs?

Makes sense for me to investigate different colleges.
Compare and contrast what they offer.

Or does it? Depends on how early or late into the process I begin my investigation. Suppose the application deadline has passed.

In that event, it's pointless for me to even begin my investigation. Because it's too late for me to be admitted, there is no point in doing something pointless.

In a sense, the facts matter. But they matter in the sense that at that juncture, it makes no difference. The outcome is a foregone conclusion.

4. Suppose a teenager is gravely injured in an accident. He's rushed to the ER. He's fast-tracked to the OR. The surgeons patch him up as best they can. Stop the internal bleeding. Stabilize his condition.

However, he suffered irreparable damage to one or more vital organs. He will succumb to his injuries in a few hours.

Moreover, the hospital has been unable to reach his parents. His only "family" at that point is the nurse or attending physician.

Suppose he regains consciousness after the anesthetic wears off. He begins to ask questions. Will he be alright?

Should they level with him? Should they tell him that he's going to die in a few hours? Or should they lie to him so

that he will die happy? In a few minutes he will slip into a coma and never regain consciousness.

From a Christian perspective, it would be good to pray with him and for him. Prepare him mentally and spiritually for death. But, of course, that's not an atheistic consideration.

Do the facts matter? They matter in the sense that he's dying. But does knowing that matter? There's nothing he can do with that information. His fate is sealed.

5. Suppose you live in Nebraska. Suppose you're bitten by a rattlesnake. Do the facts matter?

Depends. Whether or not you're bitten by a bullsnake or a rattlesnake makes a difference in the sense that a rattlesnake is venomous and a bullsnake is nonvenomous. One is life-threatening, the other is not.

By the same token, knowing the species can make a difference. You know if you need to seek medical intervention. And you are able to identify the species. It can be the difference between life and death.

But suppose you're an exotic snake collector. You were bitten by a Bullmaster.

Do the facts matter? In one sense yes, in another sense no.

The Nebraska ER carries antivenon for local rattlesnakes, but not for Latin American vipers. So you're out of luck. You will die.

This isn't just a question of place, but period. The same holds true if you were bitten by a rattlesnake in 19C

Nebraska. No antivenom back then.

6. To vary the illustration, suppose you're bitten by a Taipan in the Outback. You're too far from civilization to get back in time. Do the facts matter?

You are going to die whether or not you know that you were bitten by a Taipan. Even if you do know, there's nothing you can do to change the end-result.

7. These examples are fatalistic, in the classical sense. Suppose you do something, perhaps unwittingly, to offend fate. Break a secret taboo. Trespass an invisible line. As a consequence, you are fated to die on the Ides of March.

Do the facts matter? They matter in the sense that you are doomed. But because you are doomed, because that's a fact, then many other facts don't matter. That one fact nullifies other facts which would otherwise be salient absent that particular fact.

There are lots of different things you can do between now and the Ides of March, but nothing you do will change the outcome. That fact makes other facts irrelevant.

If you're not fated to die on the Ides of March, you needn't take special precautions to avert it—and if you are fated to die on the Ides of March, no special precautions will avert it.

Indeed, you might be better off not knowing that you're a marked man. If you know that you are going to die, come what may, on the Ides of March, you will be a nervous wreck for your remaining time.

Or suppose, for the sake of argument, that the date isn't etched in stone. You can resort to stalling tactics which may delay the day of reckoning. Evasive maneuvers may buy you a bit of extra time.

Does that make a difference? In a sense. But the end-result will be the same. Fate has so many creative ways of killing you. Every alternate route is booby-trapped.

You won't be able to enjoy the extra time, because you will spend every waking moment on the lookout for the hidden dangers that lie in wait around every corner.

8. At most, it would make sense to investigate the question of whether atheism entails moral and/or existential nihilism. If that's the case, then it would be irrational for you to continue your investigations even if—or especially if—it turns out, on further investigation, that atheism is true. If you find out that something is pointless, then there's no point in learning more about it. Atheism is like those fatalistic scenarios I just ran through.

9. I use this as a limiting case. I don't think atheism is true. Indeed, atheism leads to alethic relativism.

Between the devil's advocate and the deep blue computer

1. In chapter 4 of **WHERE THE CONFLICT REALLY LIES**, Alvin Plantinga discusses quantum mechanics. Plantinga's aim is twofold: to show that quantum mechanics is compatible with miracles/special providence—as well as human/divine agents who enjoy libertarian freedom.

Calvinists face a somewhat different challenge, and that is whether quantum mechanics is compatible with "theistic determinism".

2. Before proceeding, we need to define our terms and draw some distinctions.

i) There's a sense in which Calvinism is deterministic. The reservation I have with that characterization is that "determinism" is an imprecise way to classify Calvinism. That's because an outcome can be determinate without being predeterminate. And there's more than one sense in which that might be the case.

For instance, if an outcome is directly caused, then it's not the end-result of a chain of events leading up to that outcome. In that regard, the outcome is determinate but not predetermined.

To take a different kind of example, an outcome can be determinate but unintended. It wasn't predetermined in the sense of premeditation. For instance, chemical reactions are determinate but not predeterminate in that sense.

Calvinism is deterministic in a more specific sense than generic determinism, because Calvinism has a doctrine of predestination in particular rather than a doctrine of determinism in general.

Predestination is a type of premeditation. Everything happens according to God's master plan for the world. In that regard, "determinism" fails to capture the divinely intentional element of Calvinism.

ii) Calvinism is neutral on physical determinism. Whether or not all physical events are physically determined is a matter of indifference to Calvinism inasmuch as the fundamental determinant in Calvinism is predestination. But predestination isn't synonymous with physical determinism since the locus of predestination is God's immaterial mind and will. God's blueprint for the world as well as God's resolve to implement his plan.

iii) In Calvinism, there's more than one causal modality by which God's plan eventuates. There's God's timeless creative fiat. There's an order of second causes. And there are miracles which circumvent a chain of second causes.

3. In addition, there are two different definitions of libertarian freedom:

There seem to be at least two different fundamental notions of what free will is in the contemporary literature. The first of these, which seems to have garnered the most attention in the last century, works under the assumption that for a person to rightly be said to have free will, she must

have the ability to do otherwise than what she does, in fact, do. Under this view I could be said to have freely chosen to drive to work only if I also could have freely chosen, for example, to bike to work or to skip work altogether. This approach to free will is referred to as a 'leeway-based approach' (cite my book) or an 'alternative possibilities approach' (see Sartorio (2016).)

In contrast, a smaller percentage of the extant literature focuses primarily on the issues of 'source,' 'ultimacy,' and 'origination'. This second approach doesn't focus immediately on the presence or absence of alternative possibilities. On this approach, I freely choose to drive to work only if I am the source of my choice and there is nothing outside of me from which the choice is ultimately derived.

In what follows, we refer to the first of these conceptions—the conception that free will is primarily a matter of having alternative possibilities—as the 'leeway based' conception. Similarly, we will refer to the second of these conceptions—that free will is primarily a matter of our being the source of our choices in a particular way—as the

'sourcehood' conception. (John Fischer and Carolina Sartorio refers to sourcehood views as 'actual sequence' views; see Fischer (2006) and Sartorio (2016)).

Both of these notions can be seen in the following passage taken from Robert Kane:

We believe we have free will when we view ourselves as agents capable of influencing the world in various ways. Open alternatives, or alternative possibilities, seem to lie before us. We reason and deliberate among them and choose. We feel (1) it is 'up to us' what we choose and how we act; and this means we could have chosen or acted otherwise. As Aristotle noted: when acting is 'up to us,' so is not acting. This 'up-to-us-ness' also suggests (2) the ultimate control of our actions lies in us and not outside us in factors beyond our control (Kane (2005), 6). Kevin Timpe, Routledge Companion to Free Will.

4. Apropos (3), we need to disambiguate libertarian freedom (as defined above) from Calvinism.

i) I'd say that the ultimate sourcehood definition is straightforwardly at odds with Calvinism. Human agents can't be free in that sense.

ii) But the leeway definition is equivocal. We need to distinguish between alternate possibilities in the psychological sense in contrast to alternate possibilities in the metaphysical sense.

By "psychological", I mean human agents can imagine alternate pathways. And when we make a choice, that often involves mentally comparing and contrasting alternate pathways.

That's consistent with Calvinism. According to Calvinism, God has predestined rational agents to make choices by engaging in that type of deliberation.

Likewise, it's consistent with Calvinism that human agents can and do influence the world in various ways.

iii) That, however, doesn't entail that there are open alternatives in the metaphysical sense because not everything that's conceivable is feasible. Although we can entertain many apparent possibilities, it doesn't follow that we can act on all of them. Indeed, it's a commonplace of human experience that there's often a disappointing shortfall between imaginary pathways to our goal and realistic pathways to our goal.

Pathways that seem to lie wide open may in fact have washed out bridges along the way. That's in part because

human imagination is very shortsighted. When we contemplate a course of action, there are many intervening steps that fall outside our ken.

In addition, our pathway may be blocked by other agents. What seems to be an unobstructed pathway in the mind often hits a wall when we attempt to act on our choice.

iv) Finally, Calvinism affirms that unlike human agents, God does have leeway freedom. God can access alternate possibilities. God does have open alternatives at his disposal.

5. One of the complications with assessing the relationship between freedom and determinism vis-a-vis quantum mechanics is the absence of an agreed-upon interpretation of quantum mechanics. There are deterministic as well as indeterministic interpretations of quantum mechanics. There's insufficient evidence to ascertain which is correct. At least according to the current state of the evidence, some deterministic and indeterministic interpretations are empirically equivalent. And it may be that even in principle, there can never be sufficient evidence to settle that dispute. It's striking the degree to which debates over the proper interpretation of quantum mechanics resorts to thought-experiments.

6. Suppose, for the sake of argument, that quantum mechanics is actually deterministic. That would amount to physical determinism at a subatomic level. If true, then that doesn't generate even a prima facie tension between predestination and quantum mechanics.

7. But suppose, for the sake of argument, that quantum mechanics is actually indeterministic. If some physical events or outcomes are physically uncaused or

indeterminate, is that consistent with universal predestination?

Let's consider an analogy. At present, I believe there are computer chess players that can beat the very best human players.

Suppose, for discussion purposes, we grant that human chess players have libertarian freedom. Suppose choosing which move to make originates with the player.

Likewise, there's a sense in which a player has leeway freedom. As he scans the board, the pieces, and their position, many alternate pathways lie open to him. That's not just imaginary. It corresponds to objective reality in terms of empty spaces on the board and different ways in which different kinds of pieces can move. There are multiple opportunities for action. In that respect, there's more than one way ahead.

Ah, but here's the catch. Because the computer is unbeatable, every pathway leads to defeat. Every alternate course of action leads to checkmate.

It follows that a determinate outcome is consistent with indeterminate choices. Although it might seem that determinism and indeterminism are antithetical, they can be combined. Even if every pathway is indeterministic, the denouement is the same in each case.

8. I'm not suggesting, from a Calvinistic perspective, that chess players have libertarian freedom. Rather, I'm using an a fortiori argument (*a maiore ad minus*). If even in the greater case, where indeterminate choices are nevertheless consistent with determinate outcomes, then mutatis mutandis, that holds true in the lesser case where leeway

freedom (and ultimate sourcehood) is false. And that's an analogy for quantum mechanics, even on indeterministic interpretations, where causal determinism is false at the subatomic level.

Does Calvinism make God the "author of sin"?

Most certainly I have with set purpose taken up the case of God and demonstrated with utter clarity that God is not the author of sin. The Secret Providence of God. John Calvin; edited by Paul Helm (Crossway Books, 2010), 92.

And this is the decree of reprobation, which does not at all make God the author of sin (a blasphemous thought!) but rather its fearful, irreproachable, just judge and avenger. Canons of Dort, Article 15: Reprobation.

God from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass; yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin. WCF 3.1.

In my experience, when Calvinists deny that God is the "author of sin", Arminians regard their denial as nonsensical and sophistical. If God predestined sin, then how can God not be the "author of sin"?

The source of the problem is that Internet Arminians typically trade on the connotations of "authorship" in popular modern English usage. Needless to say, that's not the linguistic frame of reference for historical theological usage. Calvin wrote in Latin and period French. The canons of Dort were originally written in Latin. Although the Westminster Confession was written in English, it reflects traditional theological usage.

To take a comparison:

L. J. Paetow, The Arts Course at Medieval Universities (Dubuque: Brown Reprint Library, 1910), 53n2, states that in almost all manuscripts from the thirteenth century on, we find actor and not auctor in the sense of "author". M. D. Chenu in "Auctor, Actor, Autor," Bulletin de Cange, II, (1927), 81-86, explains that the confusion between "actor" and "auctor" was more a problem of etymology and meaning than of orthography or scribal neglect. Auctor (from augeo), originally

meant in the broadest sense of the word "He who produces, makes something, a statue, edifice, some kind of work and very particularly a book"; actor (from ago) also designated "he who makes something," in the broadest sense of the word. It was not however applied to the composition of a book, but remained open to mean any human activity. Nevertheless, the meaning actor remained close to the concept of auctor to the extent that confusion existed in manuscript transcriptions of these words. Cynthia Jane Brown, The Shaping of History and Poetry in Late Medieval France (Summa Publications, 1985), 158n3.

If *actor* was a synonym for *auctor*, then to deny that God is the "author" of sin means that God is not the agent, viz, God is not the *doer* or *performer* of sin. Rather, it's the human agent (or demonic agent) who *commits* sin.

In that sense, it's perfectly coherent for Reformed theologians who deny that God is the author of sin—so long as they have a theology of second causes.

The authorship of evil

1. Is God the author of sin? Freewill theists routinely allege that Calvinism makes God the author of sin.

At one level, this accusation doesn't amount to much because it's just a metaphor. Since a metaphor isn't literally true, calling God a metaphor doesn't say anything unless you can define your terms. If it merely means that God is the "author of sin" in a figurative sense, then that's not unique to Calvinism. Consider the description by Thomist Ed Feser:

God as primary cause is like the author of the novel. God's effects are therefore not to be sought merely in otherwise unexplained natural phenomena, any more than an author's influence extends only to unusual plot points. Just as a novelist is responsible for every aspect of the story, God is the source of all causality, including ordinary, everyday causes for which we already have good scientific descriptions.

<https://www.firstthings.com/article/2012/12/conflict-resolution>

2. Does what does the metaphor literally mean? Is it a figurative synonym for causation? If God is the author of sin, this means that God is the cause of sin.

However, if that's what they mean, it doesn't do much to move the ball since we then need to define "cause."

Human beings have an intuitive notion of causality. But the problem with raw intuition is that it can either be wrong or inaccurate. Philosophers try to refine our raw intuitions.

Here's an attempt by three different philosophers to define causation: either the generic idea or a special case of causation.

"We think of a cause as something that makes a difference, and the difference it makes must be a difference from what would have happened without it. Had it been absent, its effects – some of them, at least, and usually all – would have been absent as well"

The basic idea of counterfactual theories of causation is that the meaning of causal claims can be explained in terms of counterfactual conditionals of the form "If A had not occurred, C would not have occurred".

In terms of counterfactuals, Lewis defines a notion of causal dependence between events, which plays a central role in his theory (1973b).

(2) Where c and e are two distinct possible events, e causally depends on c if and only if, if c were to occur e would occur; and if c were not to occur e would not occur.

This condition states that whether e occurs or not depends on whether c occurs or not. Where c and e are actual occurrent events, this truth condition can be simplified somewhat. For in this case it follows from the second formal condition on the comparative similarity relation that the counterfactual “If c were to occur e would occur” is automatically true: this formal condition implies that a counterfactual with true antecedent and true consequent is itself true. Consequently, the truth condition for causal dependence becomes:

(3) Where c and e are two distinct actual events, e causally depends on c if and only if, if c were not to occur e would not occur.

Negative causation occurs when an absence serves as cause, effect, or causal intermediary...So what is causation? What is it that positive and negative causation shares, and that misconnection lacks? The moral I would draw is that causation involves at least some aspect of difference making. In both positive and negative causations, whether or not the cause occurs makes a difference as to whether or not the effect will occur...causation has a counterfactual aspect, involving a comparative notion of difference making, J. Schaffer, "Causes need not be Physically Connected to their Effects: The Case for Negative Causation," C. Hitchcock, ed. Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Science (Blackwell 2004), 197-214.

We normally classify as natural things which nature unaided by agency if given

a free hand, would do or produce, and as artificial things nature, unaided by agency, would not do or produce (or would not do via the specific means in question)...counterfactual refers to things running contrary to what, in the relevant sense, would (or might) have resulted or occurred had nature operated freely, Del Ratzsch, Nature, Design, and Science(SUNY2001), 4-5.

Let's illustrate some of these efforts to define causation. A caged predator is in an artificial state. If I cage a tiger, that prevents the tiger from doing what it would naturally do. Put another way, I prevent the tiger from doing what it would otherwise do.

Conversely, if I release the tiger, I remove the artificial impediment which hinders it from doing what comes naturally. From doing what it would otherwise do absent the artificial restraint.

Likewise, if I dam a river, I prevent nature from taking its course. Prevent it from doing what it would otherwise do if left to its own devices.

Conversely, if I release the water, I then allow nature to take its course.

In examples of negative causation, involving a

counterfactual theory of causation, events have a default setting in terms of what would eventuate absent artificial intervention.

Let's apply this analysis to Calvinism. Arminians claim that Calvinism makes God the "author" of sin because the decree ensures the outcome. Given the decree, the human agent could not have done otherwise. And they think that element of "determinism" inculpates God.

But if God decreed the Fall, then does that make God the cause of Adam's sin?

By way of answer, we might begin by asking if the decree makes a difference to the outcome? To answer that question, we'd also have to ask, difference in relation to what? A difference in relation to what would otherwise transpire had that outcome not been predestined?

But it's hard to make sense of that answer when we're dealing with God's choice of merely possible outcomes. The decree doesn't represent an act of divine intervention, whereby God prevents Adam from doing something he would naturally do if given a free hand.

Left to his own devices, there's nothing in particular that Adam, as a possible agent, would do. A merely possible agent has no default setting. As possible agent can do as many different things as you can coherently hypothesize for him to do. And because these alternate possibilities are mere possibilities, there is no particular course of action which a possible agent would choose.

When God decrees the occurrence of a hypothetical scenario, it's not as if he's making the agent do something contrary to what the agent would otherwise do, if given a

free hand. For there's no one thing a possible agent would do.

Out of the various abstract possibilities, God is selecting one possible outcome to be the actual outcome. That divine action makes a difference in the sense that, absent divine action, there would be no outcome at all—but not in the sense that, absent divine action, Adam would do something else.

The actual outcome corresponds to one possible outcome, which God selected from other possible outcomes.

Some possible outcomes are random outcomes. A royal flush can be a random outcome. While a royal flush is improbable, the odds are that, sooner or later, a card player will be dealt a royal flush.

Suppose that God decrees a royal flush. In that case, the outcome is both random and certain. The decree ensures the outcome, yet the outcome which it thereby ensures is a random result.

There is a possible world in which a possible card player will be dealt a royal flush—due to random permutations of the combinatorial variables. If God selects that world, then the actual outcome will coincide with that possible outcome. The possible outcome is indeterminate, but the actual outcome is determinate inasmuch as the actual outcome realizes one possible outcome—to the exclusion of other possible outcomes.

The possible outcome is indeterminate inasmuch as there is more than one hypothetical outcome. There are as many hypothetical scenarios as God can coherently hypothesize.

Rolling the hypothetical dice results in different hypothetical results. Rolling the actual dice results in one, and only one, actual outcome since the very fact that it's actual rather than merely possible means that God chose to instantiate that particular outcome. Possible outcomes could be otherwise, but actual outcomes could not be otherwise.

And while a possible outcome could be otherwise, that doesn't mean a possible outcome would be otherwise. Indeed, that's nonsensical.

Birth defects

The first point immediately confirmed in my heart was theological: God did not do this to my child. God is not the author of evil. God does not terminate sweet lives with a pulmonary embolism. Pulmonary embolisms are a result of the bent nature of this world. As Ann kept repeating, "God is not the problem; he is the solution."

One primary reason I am not a Calvinist is that I do not believe in God's detailed control of all events. Why? First, because I find it impossible to believe that I am more merciful or compassionate than God. Second, because the biblical portrait shows that God is pure light and holy love. In him there is no darkness, nothing other than light and love. And third, the words, "The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away," from the lips of Job (1:21), are not good theology. According to Job 1, it was not God but the Devil who took away Job's children, health, and wealth. God allowed it to happen, but when Job said these words, as the rest of the story shows, he was not yet enlightened about the true nature of the source of his calamity and God's actual will for

his life. God's will for him was for good and not for harm.

The beginning of "good grief" starts with the premise of a good God. Otherwise, all bets are off. If God is almighty and malevolent, then there is no solace to be found in him. If God is the author of sin, evil, suffering, the Fall, and death, then the Bible makes no sense when it tells us that God tempts no one, that God's will is that none should perish but have everlasting life, and that death is the very enemy of God and humankind that Jesus, who is life, came to abolish and destroy.

The phrase, "It's all God's will," is cold comfort.

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2012/april/when-a-daughter-dies.html>

i) In this post I'm not going to pounce on Witherington. He's suffered an irreparable and desolating loss. So I'd never initiate an argument with him over what he wrote. I make allowance for his state of mind.

ii) That said, I'm quoting his statement because, if you don't cite a specific example from a respected spokesman, you're often accused of burning a straw man. Quoting him documents the fact that I'm not caricaturing contemporary Arminianism. Roger Olson has made many similar claims. I'm simply using Witherington's statement to illustrate a

position that seems to be gaining ground in contemporary Arminian circles.

iii) I'm not going to comment on his prooftexts. That's an argument for another day.

iv) Instead, I'd like to ask a question:

What do Arminians tell kids with serious birth defects?

I have in mind birth defects like spina bifida, Autism, Down syndrome, Prader-Willi syndrome, Fragile X syndrome, blindness, deafness, phenylketonuria, hypothyroidism, adrenoleukodystrophy, Rett syndrome, Ebstein's anomaly, pulmonary stenosis, muscular dystrophy.

Suppose a Calvinist has two kids: one in perfect health, but the other has a serious birth defect. The Calvinist can tell them that God made them both. God had a good reason for giving one child a serious birth defect. Your life is meaningful. Even your genetic condition is meaningful. It's ultimately for the best.

God could make a different you, but it wouldn't be a better you. You are good the way you are, right now.

God was able to make you healthy, but even a birth defect can be a source of good, a kind of good that wouldn't exist if God hadn't made you this way.

If you die in Jesus, God will heal you, but having gone through this ordeal makes you a better person than if you didn't have to cope with this ordeal. And it can be a blessing to those around you.

Whether God cures you in this life or the next, you are just what God meant you to be at this point in his plan for your life. You're not a cosmic accident. You're not a mistake.

But an Arminian parent, who shares the viewpoint of Olson and Witherington, can't tell his child that God made him that way. He can't tell him that God made him that way for a wise and worthwhile purpose.

If a child suffers from a serious birth defect, that's the result of the Fall, or autonomous natural laws.

God made your healthy brother the way he is, but God didn't make you the way you are. You're the defective product of a defective process.

If God is only the source of the "good" stuff, while the "bad" stuff (i.e. natural evil) comes from something or someone other than God (sin, evolution, the fall, a stochastic process), then you didn't come from God the way your brother did. At most, only a part of you—the "good" part—came from God—unlike your brother. You're not as good as your brother. God didn't do as much with you. The rest of you may even be Satanic. You didn't come from God—unlike your healthy brother.

Both Calvinism and Arminianism trace birth defects to the fall, but for Arminianism, that's as far back as it goes. And nowadays, some Arminians deny the fall of Adam. They chalk it up to evolution. Or the laws of nature.

When your number's up

I'm going to briefly discuss the possibility of precognition. Or, to put it more prosaically, the possibility of prophecy.

A metaphysical objection to precognition is that if we know the future, that gives us a chance to alter or avoid the future. But in that event, what was the future we foreknew? Precognition seems to generate retrocausal paradoxes. That, however, depends on the nature of the event, the specificity of the oracle, and the incentive of the foreseer to evade the outcome.

Let's consider some hypothetical counterexamples.

i) Suppose the oracle warns you that you will die in a freak accident. Even if you're motivated to avoid premature death, having advance knowledge that you will die in a freak accident doesn't enable you to avoid that outcome. In the nature of the case, a freak accident is hard to anticipate or prepare for. So many different incidents could constitute a freak accident. The "freakish" concurrence of independent events is so unexpected that you can't avoid stepping into the trap. The oracle doesn't even tell you what kind of freak accident will kill you. You don't know what to be on the lookout for. It will zap you before you know what hit you.

ii) Suppose the oracle warns you that you will die of food poisoning. There are two ways you can thwart the oracle. You can stop eating. In that event you will die of starvation. You can kill yourself.

But even if, in that case, you're in a position to thwart the oracle, you have no particular incentive to do so. After all, whether or not you die of food poisoning, you're bound to

die sooner or later. Evading a deadly oracle by killing yourself is no advantage in that respect. It's not like the alternative to the oracle is preservation. Rather, the only way to cheat fate is to beat it to the punch.

In practice, you wouldn't do much of anything different. You continue to eat. At some point you will die of food poisoning, but that may be years from now. Better to make the most of your remaining time, however long that may be, than to die even sooner by your own hand. Why cut it short? You're only motivated to cheat fate of that's beneficial to you.

When your number's up, that's that. No point expediting your demise.

iii) The oracle warns you that you will die in a traffic accident.

a) You might try to evade that. However, there are severe tradeoffs. Avoidance will require you to radically change your lifestyle.

You will have to relocate to a log cabin in the wilderness. Live off the land. Even if you could successfully thwart the oracle by doing that, the tradedown might not be worth it to you.

b) Moreover, that's not a sure bet. After all, you rely on transportation to get out of town. You must initially use transportation to put civilization behind you. But what if fate is lying in wait for that very opportunity?

c) Or fate might arrange for a Cessna to crash into your log cabin.

iv) Suppose the oracle warns you that you will be mugged at 3:15 at the intersection of Park Avenue and 5th Avenue. In principle, you can cheat fate by not being there at that particular time.

However, the success of your plan depends on how resourceful fate is. Suppose the battery in your wristwatch dies. You glance at your watch, it says 2:30. You figure you have plenty of time walk past that alley before the mugger gets there. But in reality, it's later than you think—because your watch stopped several minutes ago.

v) Let's toy with variations on Oedipus. Suppose, at age 18, the oracle warns you that you will accidentally kill your parents.

a) You try to cheat fate by moving out of state. But unbeknownst to you, the couple who raised you weren't your biological parents. They kidnapped you as a baby.

b) Unbeknownst to you, the town you move to is where your biological parents live. In fact, you move to the house next-door.

You put a container of flammable liquid under a garage window. At the time you put it there, it's shaded. But during the course of the day, it falls under direct sunlight, overheats, and explodes. Your house is engulfed in flames, which spread to the house next-door, and your parents die in a house fire.

c) Or suppose the couple who raised you were your biological parents. Everyday you phone your mother. One day she's in the kitchen, washing dishes, when the phone rings.

Because she's in a hurry to answer the phone before you hang up, she doesn't notice a puddle of water under the sink. In her haste she slips, falls, hits her head, and dies from a subdural hematoma. Your dad comes home, discovers his dead wife, and shoots himself in grief.

You innocently set in motion a chain of events which led to the death of your parents.

vi) These are fanciful examples. Let's take a real-life example: the life of Joseph (Gen 37-50).

Joseph has two prophetic dreams. His brothers bitterly resent his dreams because they resent the prospect of their younger brother ruling over them.

They therefore try to cheat fate by conspiring to kill him. After all, if he's dead, he will never be in a position to rule over them.

However, some slavetraders "just happen" to come by as they are deciding whether or not to go through with their murderous plot. They don't really want to have his blood on their hands. That was only a means to an end. They just want to have him out of their hair.

How could they anticipate the famine? How could they anticipate that a foreigner (Joseph) would someday become the CEO of Egypt? What are the odds?

Likewise, what are the odds that Pharaoh "just happens" to have two prophetic dreams at about the same time that two of his disgraced courtiers are in prison, who "just happen" to have their own prophetic dreams, who "just happen" to have Joseph as their cellmate?

As a result, word of Joseph's reputation as an oneiromantist gets back to Pharaoh. And so on and so forth.

This plot is classically fatalistic in the sense that the evasive maneuvers of the antagonists are the very means by which the oracle comes true. They know just enough to know what will happen, but not enough to know how (when, where, by whom) it will happen. So they unwittingly make it happen in their effort to prevent it from happening.

Can we cheat fate?

Nowadays, fate is generally reserved for fantasy and science fiction movies. On one scenario, the protagonist has a dream about the future. But that poses a dilemma. If he can truly foresee the future, then that seems to mean the future was written in advance, in which case there's nothing he can do to alter the future. Usually, though, the protagonist is defiant. He views the premonition as a challenge or opportunity to deflect the foreseen outcome.

But what about real life? Is there such a thing as fate in real life?

1) EPISTEMOLOGICAL FATE

Some events are inevitable due to our ignorance of the future. Our ignorance of the causes leading up to the outcome. Take a fatal traffic accident. In principle, that's easily avoidable. Usually, a traffic accident is all about timing. Change a single variable in the chain of events, and you escape. If the driver leaves the house a minute sooner or a minute later, he avoids the accident. If he stops at the yellow light rather than speeding through the yellow light, at the intersection three blocks from the scene of the impending accident, he avoids the accident. If he turns left instead of right, he avoids the accident. If he stops to buy his wife flowers, he avoids the accident. He never crossed a line of no return. Every step of the way there was an out.

Starting with the accident, we can systematically trace it back through a series of links in the chain. From the moment he left home (or left work for the return trip), he was fated to die in the traffic accident. But that's something

we can only see after the fact. Because he can't see it coming, it's too late for him to step out of the way.

II) ONTOLOGICAL FATE

Some events are inevitable despite our knowledge of the future. Medical science may be close to telling you ahead of time if you will develop an incurable degenerative illness, like Parkinson's, Huntington's, or multiple sclerosis. That's very much like fate in the Classical sense. You are doomed. You know you are doomed. And there's nothing you can do, short of suicide, to avoid it.

This also raises the question of whether it's better to know your medical fate, or remain in blissful ignorance. That's a dilemma, for there are tradeoffs on both scenarios.

On the one hand, if you knew that you were going to develop a degenerative illness, then you might well make better use of your time. Make the most of your opportunities. Not take friends and family for granted. Not fritter away your best years on trivia.

On the other hand, knowing how the story ends, if it ends badly, casts a shadow over your life long before you develop the disease. It robs you of hope. It's hard to enjoy the present when you know what awaits you just around the corner. Lurking in the shadows.

Random determinism

1. One of the dividing lines in historical theology is the difference between freewill theism (e.g. open theism, simple foreknowledge Arminianism) and predestinarian traditions (e.g. Calvinism, classical Thomism, Augustinianism, Jansenism). Molinism tries to split the difference, combining elements of predestination and meticulous providence with libertarian freedom.

In my experience, freewill theists, at least the internet variety, typically classify Calvinism as committed to "causal determination". That's become a rhetorical trope.

Conversely, there's an attempt in some quarters (e.g. Richard Muller, Oliver Crisp) to promote "libertarian Calvinism". I think that's confused on both historical and philosophical grounds.

2. Determinism and indeterminism are usually treated as opposites. Contrasting or contrary principles.

On the one hand, the natural world generally—perhaps invariably—operates according to physical determinism. Like a machine.

A possible exception is quantum events. There are, however, deterministic interpretations of quantum mechanics. And even if quantum events are physically determinate, they could still be predestined (since predestination isn't a physical determinant).

In the popular imagination, dynamic systems are indeterminate. However, from what I've read, the key distinction in chaos theory isn't indeterminism but

nonlinearity. Dynamic systems are, in fact, deterministic, but nonlinear:

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/chaos/>

Indeterminism is often related to randomness. A classic example is throwing dice. The outcomes are random in the sense that if the dice are fair, each throw of the dice is causally disconnected from the preceding or succeeding throw of the dice.

However, the outcome isn't uncaused. It's unpredictable because there are too many variables to consider. Yet the outcome remains determinate.

3. At the other end of the spectrum, God is the freest entity in the world. God's actions are indeterminate in the sense that nothing absolutely causes God to choose one way or another—although God has reasons for his choices.

This is sometimes taken to imply that God's choice of which world to create (or not create) is arbitrary. However, God isn't forced to choose between different options, since God can instantiate multiple options (i.e. a multiverse). So there's no dilemma.

4. One neglected consideration is that the same outcome can be both random and determinate. That might seem counterintuitive, but it's a familiar principle. Consider algorithms to generate randomized outcomes. To my knowledge, that's central to encryption technologies.

Or take a state lottery, which is random by design. Computerized randomization.

But that's deterministic randomness. The system is designed to ensure random results. You might say it's "rigged", but rigged to guarantee random numbers. In that respect, randomness isn't synonymous with indeterminism. In theory, the world might contain genuinely random events, but still be thoroughly deterministic.

Chess or Dominos?

According to a common Arminian analogy, God is like a Grand Master chess player while we are mere novices. We can make our moves, but God is going to win the game no matter what we choose to move.

There are two problems with this analogy. The first has been discussed here before, in that such an analogy simply *is* the definition of fatalism. Fatalism is when the end is assured no matter what choices are made by the actors involved. In Greek mythology, where this concept first emerged, this is seen in the fact that someone is told their future doom, and in seeking to avoid that future doom the actor brings about the very doom that he was seeking to avoid. To give an example, suppose someone is fated to die by drowning. To avoid this, he moves to the middle of the desert, makes sure that there are no bodies of water nearby—not even sinks or bathtubs. On the day he is fated to drown, he is thirsty and gets a cup of water. While drinking, he hiccups, inhales the water into his lungs, and drowns. Thus, his fate is confirmed despite how hard he tried to get around it.

This is precisely what the chess analogy does, however. No matter what moves the player opposite God makes, he is fated to lose the game. It is impossible for him to make a move that would checkmate God, in such an analogy.

It is important to make a distinction between this and the Calvinist view of determinism. Under Calvinism, were it not for the *exact* choices that we make, the end result would not attain. In other words, contra the Arminian position that no matter what choice we make God will win in the end, the Calvinist position is that God will win in the end *precisely*

because he has ensured what choices we will make.

In this sense, Calvinism is more akin to someone who has set up an elaborate Rube Goldberg machine. Or for a simpler concept, think of a set of dominos. He pushes the first domino over, and the last domino is destined to fall because every single needed domino is in the exact position it needs to be in so that when it falls it will push over the next domino. If the domino were to be in a different position, the cascade would stop and the final domino would not fall.

With this in mind, we can now look at the second problem the chess analogy exposes in Arminianism. Under the chess analogy, none of our choices actually matter. Whether we move a pawn or a knight for our first move will not impact the fact that we are going to lose the game. As such, if the chess analogy is an accurate representation of Arminianism, then what it teaches us is that our free will is irrelevant to the end goal God has in mind. Our choices simply do not matter one bit. We can choose anything and it won't affect the outcome.

In other words, the chess analogy offers us freedom in exchange for irrelevance. Just as it does not matter that the man fated to drown moved to the middle of the desert, so too it does not matter what we choose to do with our lives. The end is has been fated. This trivializes our choices and renders them nonsensical.

On the contrary, however, the Calvinist view demonstrates that our choices are meaningful and, indeed, *necessary* for the end God has in mind. Without our exact choices being exactly what they are, the end result would not attain at all. The end, therefore, is dependent upon what we choose. Our choices simply are the plan that God has put in place.

So what are we to make of these choices under Calvinism? They are, as the Westminster Confession calls it, the secondary causes by which God enacts His will. Our choices are what God uses to enact His will. He has created each and every one of us, knows us intimately and knows what influences must be in place in order for us to make the exact choice needed to render His will enacted. Unlike the chess master who must wait for us to act in order to know what to do next, God is an artist who has put the pieces of his carefully constructed scenario into place so that each bit will function precisely as intended along the entire path.

Thus, if you believe that the chess analogy is an accurate representation of Arminian theology, and you also believe that your choices are relevant and matter, then you cannot consistently hold to Arminian theology. But there is still plenty of room for you in the Calvinist camp.

Time loop

There are different models of providence. I'll use the metaphor of a roadmap to illustrate the differences:

1. CALVINISM

On this view, God is the cartographer, and God has mapped out the entire future. However, the map is invisible looking ahead. The map becomes progressively visible as the traveler moves forward into the future. The map is retrospectively visible, but never prospectively visible. So he's always going where the map directs, but he doesn't know that in advance. The roadmap was always there, in meticulous detail, but it can only be seen with the benefit of hindsight, like a passenger seated facing the rear window. In this sense, the traveler is backing into the future. He seems to be traveling blind, yet his every step was mapped out.

2. CLASSICAL ARMINIANISM

I'm using "classical Arminianism" as a synonym for simple foreknowledge. Like Calvinism, the future has been exhaustively mapped out, for God creates the world that he foresees. But unlike Calvinism, humans are cocartographers with God.

Because the map is a facsimile of divine foreknowledge, it's as though the human traveler has two lives, back-to-back, only he took an amnesia pill the first time around, so he doesn't remember that he's repeating the exact same journey. His future was mapped out every step of the way, like he's retracing his steps. Stepping into his own

footprints. He cannot deviate from the roadmap, since foreknowledge is history ahead of time. Because his future is mapped out, it's like he's reliving the his past. Although the future trajectory of the map is invisible, it's there all along. That's the route the traveler is bound to take. That road and that road only. Once God makes a world that matches what he saw in the crystal ball, it's too late for the future to turn out any other way.

3. MOLINISM

In this respect, (3) is like (2). God has many different roadmaps of the future. Some are infeasible. He picks one roadmap to instantiate. Possible persons contributed to the route, but God alone chooses which map to actualize. The map charts a complete world history, so the future was mapped out in advance. It's like déjà vu, only human agents drank from the River Lethe at the destination of the journey, so they've forgotten the journey when, in effect, they repeat it. As with (2), it's just like they lived twice, and the second life duplicates the first. Although the future trajectory of the map is invisible, they have, in effect, been there before—like a time loop.

4. OPEN THEISM

On this view, there is no roadmap. God is a fellow traveler. No one knows what lies around the next bend. No one knows what lies over the next hill. God and his human traveling companions are drawing the map as they go along. Both God and man discover the future as that eventuates, moment by moment. Unsuspected dangers lie ahead. No one knows what to expect. They're venturing into the undiscovered country without a map or compass.

Anything could happen. The map is drawn after the fact, at which point it's always too late to use it.

5. OCCAMISM

Some freewill theists might take issue with my characterization of (2)-(3). They say humans have counterfactual power over God's past beliefs (or timeless beliefs). If we chose to do something different, then God would have different foreknowledge. So it's not too late to redraw the map, since the ink is never dry.

But a problem with that deceptively appealing explanation is that it suffers from the same antinomies as time-travel scenarios in which a man steps into the time machine and heads back into the past to alter the future. But that's paradoxical because he thereby erases the future he came from. It's like he never existed in that future timeline, because his past action replaces the original timeline with a new timeline. Although Occamism isn't identical with retrocausation, it generates the same antinomies:

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/free-will-foreknowledge/#OckhSolu>

<http://www.andrewmbailey.com/jmf/FFFP.pdf>

http://www.andrewmbailey.com/jmf/Truth_Freedom.pdf

http://www.andrewmbailey.com/jmf/Rereading_Pike.pdf

Why debate Calvinism?

Since your salvation doesn't hinge on whether or not you believe in Calvinism, what's the point of debating Calvinism? What practical difference does it make whether you're a freewill theist or Calvinist?

As a matter of fact, it is possible to become obsessed with this debate to the exclusion of other important issues. It shouldn't be all about Calvinism all the time. That said, the difference has practical consequences:

1. Theological positions tend to develop internally to the point of taking their assumptions to their logical extreme:

i) Open theism resolves the tension between freewill and foreknowledge by ditching foreknowledge. But how can you trust a God who's in the dark about the future? How can you trust a God who gambles with human lives?

ii) There's often a shift from exclusivism to inclusivism. If God loves everyone, wants everyone to be saved, made provision for everyone to be saved, how's that consistent with restricted opportunities to take advantage of that provision? What about those who never heard the Gospel? Inclusivism logically demotes the urgency of missions and evangelism.

iii) Apropos (ii), this life isn't an even playing field. Spiritual opportunities vary drastically. That nudges freewill theism towards postmortem evangelism/conversion. And that, again, logically demotes the urgency of missions and evangelism.

2. Freewill theists sometimes alleged the predestination negates petitionary prayer. If true, that's a very practical issue. Conversely, open theists argue that divine foreknowledge is providentially useless because it's too late for God to intervene. If so, that would negate petitionary prayer.

3. Calvinism and freewill theism will give some different answers to the problem of evil. And that's a pastoral issue as well as a philosophical issue. Some theodicies can be adapted to Calvinism and freewill theism alike, but other theodicies pair off with Calvinism or freewill theism.

4. Freewill theism may erode inerrancy and commitment to biblical authority by appealing to moral intuitions that trump the witness of Scripture in case of conflict. There are freewill theists who admit that if Scripture taught Calvinism, then they choose their moral intuitions over Scripture. They repudiate the God of Scripture in that event.

Another example is that some freewill theists reject OT theism for the same reason they reject Reformed theism: they think the Calvinist God is too harsh, and they think Yahweh is too harsh.

5. Apropos (4), some freewill theists seem to think Calvinism is worse than atheism. So what's their fallback if they lose confidence in freewill theism? Since Calvinism is not an option, do they land in atheism?

6. Views on the necessary preconditions of moral responsibility can impact law and social policy:

i) If homosexuals don't actually choose their "orientation," then that's exculpatory in case libertarian freedom is a necessary precondition for moral responsibility. So it would

be unfair to discriminate against homosexuals in any respect.

Same with gender dysphoria. They ought to be accommodated if they didn't choose it.

ii) The insanity defense takes libertarian freedom for granted. If you're too evil to know the difference between good and evil, that's exculpatory. If you can't help yourself because the urges are overpowering, that's exculpatory.

7. A common objection to Calvinism is that a Calvinist can't tell everyone "God loves you!" But does everyone need to think that God loves them, or is that presumptuous? There are hardened sinners who believe God loves them because they have such a high opinion of themselves. How could God not love such a wonderful person as themselves! They'd benefit from being told that maybe God doesn't love them. They need to be shaken out of their complacency.

8. Freewill theists are more likely to reject penal substitution. That impacts how we preach the Gospel.

9. Although all classic Protestants subscribe to sola fide, Calvinists have a way of unpacking the concept in terms of a threefold imputation. That has more explanatory power than a bare affirmation of sola fide.

10. Traditional Catholicism has radically different views of how God saves people. Saving grace is mediated by the sacraments, which are mediated by the priesthood. Likewise, the intercession of the saints. That's a different theological paradigm than Calvinism. Are you putting your faith in Jesus for salvation-or Mary? Or a wafer? Or priestly absolution? If you're wrong, that makes a practical difference. Conversely, post-Vatican II theology is edging

towards universalism. That, too, is a different theological paradigm than Calvinism. If you're wrong, that makes a practical difference.

11. When a Calvinism debates a classical Arminian or Lutheran, they take Protestant essentials for granted. But when a Calvinist debates a Catholic, then the contrast involves divergent views on a wider range of issues, like the locus of interpretation.

12. Christians have to believe something. They can't leave all the blanks unfilled. Although they can suspend judgment on some controversies, they must take sides on some issues. Otherwise, their faith is a cipher. So the debate over Calvinism is part of that larger demand.

When God comes to a fork in the road

One issue that sometimes crops up in debates over Calvinism is whether God has libertarian freedom. Could God have chosen otherwise, or are his choices determined?

That debate isn't confined to Calvinism. It goes to larger issues like the principle of sufficient reason. Likewise, whether God can or should be able to change his mind.

There's disagreement within freewill theism on how to define freedom. There are two basic models: leeway freedom and ultimate sourcehood.

Leeway freedom is the ability to choose between alternate possibilities, given the same past—up to the moment of choice. In a sense, I'd say mainstream Calvinism affirms God's leeway freedom insofar as God was free to make the world, not make the world, or make a different world. God had many live options at his disposal.

However, it's misleading to say God has libertarian freedom in that sense, for unlike human agents, God doesn't have to choose between two (or more) alternatives. In principle, he can act on both alternatives. In principle, he can create a multiverse which exemplifies multiple timelines. Perhaps he has. In that respect, God has greater freedom than libertarian freedom.

If God's choices were determined, they'd be determined by his own reasons, and not by something outside himself. However, there's a hidden assumption behind that way of framing the issue—as if God is confronted with a binary choice: either doing A or doing non-A. But God doesn't face that limitation. It's within his power to opt for both

alternatives. In principle, he can create more than one possible world. When God comes to a fork in the road, he can simultaneously go right and left (figuratively speaking).

Putting God in a bubble

rogereolson says:

December 31, 2012 at 10:11 pm

It seems to me a key difference between Calvinism and Arminianism (and this difference existed also between, say, Luther and the Anabaptists) is that one side sees evil as having purpose above, higher than the purpose of the creature (e.g., selfishness). It has divine purpose, ultimate purpose. The other side regards evil as a surd, lacking any purpose at all. God can bring good out of it, but it has no divine purpose behind it. God never intended for it to come into existence.

Apparently, Roger Olson's solution to the problem of evil is to place God in an airtight container, sealed off from evil. That way, evil never touches God. But there are multiple problems with his solution.

i) Given his other theological commitments to divine foreknowledge, creatorship, and providence, Olson cannot consistently deny God's intention for evil to come into existence. The existence of evil is contingent on the existence of certain initial conditions. And the Arminian God has a hand in those initial conditions.

For instance, child murder is a stock example that Olson is fond of arraigining against Calvinism. He says the Calvinist God is morally monstrous for determining the occurrence of child murder.

However, if a child is murdered, then the Arminian God intended that to happen. That evil is the long-range result of things God did in conjunction with things the murderer did. By creating the world, God sets in motion a series of events leading up to the murder. And God knows the outcome ahead of time. So this isn't an accident.

At best, Olson could argue that God didn't directly intend the child murder. He could contend that that's the incidental consequence of something God primarily intended.

Still, God knew that by doing what he did, the murdered child would be a side-effect of his creative fiat and providential governance.

ii) In addition, Arminians are committed to a counterfactual theory of causation. Arminians typically attack Calvinism on the grounds that a determined agent lacks the freedom to do otherwise. He lacks access to alternate possibilities.

But that, in turn, commits the Arminian to those alternate history scenarios in which something else will happen in the future because of something which *didn't* happen in the past. For instance, World War I would not have taken place if Archduke Ferdinand of Austria hadn't been assassinated on June 18, 1914.

That's negative causation. On that definition, God's inaction causes evil. As one philosopher explains:

It is common to talk about what doesn't happen causing that which does and to talk about what does happen causing that which doesn't. Examples abound. A lack of rain causes forest fires and poor harvests. Pushing the emergency stop on an industrial machine can prevent accidents. Brushing with a fluoride toothpaste can prevent cavities. Each of these cases describes a scenario where we are inclined to judge that an absence either causes or is caused. These are paradigm cases of a seemingly ubiquitous phenomenon — negative causation. Negative causation is either by prevention — causation of an absence — or omission — causation by an absence. We can also have prevention by omission. In short, negative causation occurs any time we have an absence as a cause, effect, or both.

MICHAEL HARTSOCK, ABSENCES AS CAUSES: A DEFENSE OF NEGATIVE CAUSATION, 2.

When the Arminian God allows the killer to murder the child, God's failure to prevent the murder causes the murder. Divine inaction causes an alternate future in which something else will happen because of something God refrained from doing in the past. Negative causation is implicit in counterfactual causation. Certain future events occur, not only because certain past events occur, but because certain prior events don't occur. If the past was different, the future would turn out differently. The absence of divine intervention causes a different timeline to unfold.

iii) However, let's suppose, for the sake of argument, that Olson could successfully isolate God from evil. That wouldn't exonerate God. Rather, God would be culpable if he were that detached in the face of horrendous evil.

Suppose a homeowner has a swimming pool in the patio. He's sitting outside on a beach chaise while his 2-year-old son is playing in the front yard.

Suppose he goes inside to take a phone call. He deliberately turns his back on the patio so that he can't see what his son is doing through the sliding glass doors. After he returns to the patio, he sees the lifeless body of his son, floating in the pool.

The police come and question him. His defense is that he didn't intend that to happen. Indeed, he deliberately put himself in a position where he couldn't see what was going on. He had nothing to do with the tragedy. He made a point of having nothing to do with the tragedy. His son's accidental death was a surd evil, lacking any purpose at all.

Would we conclude that the father is guiltless? Hardly. He is responsible for his young son's death by drowning precisely because he went out of his way to isolate himself from that

eventuality. He had a duty to be more attentive. To be more involved.

Freewill theism and induction

A natural law theodicy is a standard theodicy in freewill theism. According to that theodicy, moral agents require a stable environment for their deliberations and choices to have predictable consequences. Absent that, they can't be held responsible for their actions.

I'd mention in passing that Calvinism can use that theodicy, too. Calvinism has a doctrine of ordinary providence. And there's value in having a world where actions generally have predictable choices. That's not unique to freewill theism.

If true, a natural law theodicy has the fringe benefit of grounding induction. On this view, God made a world in which, all things being equal (*ceteris paribus proviso*), the future resembles the past. That makes it possible to justifiably extrapolate from the past to the future.

But here's a snag: a standard definition of libertarian freedom is leeway freedom: an agent can opt for two or more courses of action under the exact same circumstances. So there are ever so many different and divergent ways to complete the future. Given the same past, and billions of free agents, there are countless ways the future might turn out. Moreover, the choices of multiple free agents interact with each other or counteract each other. In addition, this impacts natural events inasmuch as humans often manipulate natural process to yield desired results.

On the face of it, this renders the future utterly unpredictable, and destroys any basis for induction. Anything that's naturally possible could happen.

In Calvinism, by contrast, although God had the freedom to choose between alternate timelines, yet having settled on a particular outcome (predestination), the outcome is fixed. By virtue of the decree, there's only one pathway from past to future.

Two doors

I've discussed this before, but I'd like to use a different example to illustrate the point. Freewill theism touts the necessity of having freedom of opportunity. To have "real" freedom or a "real" choice means having alternate courses of action available to you.

But here's the problem. Say you're standing in front of two doors. You can choose between Door A and Door B. In a sense, that's freedom of opportunity. You have two options to choose from.

But here's the catch: the doors don't have windows. They're opaque. So you don't know what lies behind each door. You don't know in advance where each door will take you.

Moreover, whichever door you go through locks behind you. So you're trapped by the choices you make.

Even though you can pick one or the other, it's a blind choice. You might as well flip a coin.

What if you go through Door A and find out that as a bad choice. But you couldn't know that before you did it, and once you do it it's too late to try Door B instead. You're stuck with the choice you made even though you couldn't foresee what you were getting into.

In addition, you didn't get to choose what your options are. Rather, you're confronted with options, and you have to make a choice from the options you're given. But what if none of them are the options you wanted?

And this isn't just a metaphor. This is what happens to us in real life. This is how "choice" actually plays out. Open theism is so shallow in that regard.

At least in Calvinism, there's the promise that everything happens for a good reason, even if you have to go through hell on earth in this life. But in freewill theism, you make conscientious decisions with catastrophic unintended consequences for yourself or your loved ones, and it may be utterly pointless. Just your hard luck.

Flying blind

1. I've commented on this before, but I'd like to attack it from a new angle. A common plank in the freewill defense is appeal to natural law. In order to make morally responsible decisions, our choices must have predictable consequences. That requires the uniformity of nature. Hence, God can't intervene too often without having disruptive effects.

2. I think there's a grain of truth to this theodicy. And it's hardly exclusive to freewill theism. Popular caricatures notwithstanding, Calvinism isn't fatalism. In Calvinism, it's not merely the outcome, but every step leading up to the outcome that's predestined. Hence, breakfast won't cook itself whether or not you get out of bed.

3. An elementary problem with the freewill theist appeal is that life is often unpredictable. Much of the time we're flying blind. We can't reliably anticipate the end-results of our actions. It's just a guessing game. And even when the consequences are foreseeable, there's a big difference between having a purely intellectual grasp of the consequences, and having to actually experience the consequences.

Many people, including many Christians, if they only had the benefit of hindsight, would avoid making some of the decisions they did. And that isn't merely regret over impulsive decisions. You can make a thoughtful, conscientious decision, with the best available information at the time, only to have that blow up in your face. You can make a reasonable, responsible decision, then helplessly watch it turn out for the worst.

4. According to freewill theism, moreover, a large part of what makes the future so unpredictable is the libertarian freedom of human agents. And the further into the future you project, the harder it is to extrapolate from present trends.

It's like a game of chess. Good players think ahead, several moves deep. But each subsequent move in that calculation is exponentially more complex than the previous move, because each subsequent move is contingent on which of all the possible moves opened up by the previous move the player will opt for. Each player's next move must consider multiple chains or nested outcomes of hypothetical moves and countermoves, branching into infinity.

Nothing could be more destabilizing to predictable consequences than the wave interference generated by so many competing agents. So many countervailing choices by other agents, which neutralize your singular choice.

5. It might be objected that my argument commits a category mistake, inasmuch as the uniformity of nature is categorically different from the libertarian ability of human agents.

But in a couple of respects, that's an arbitrary place to draw the line:

i) If predictable consequences are a necessary condition of praiseworthy or blameworthy choices, then it's ad hoc to insist on the uniformity of nature, while allowing human freedom to run riot. For that undermines the principle at least as much as heightened divine intervention.

ii) Furthermore, the dichotomy isn't nearly that cut-and-dried. Human agents manipulate natural processes to

produce outcomes that would not occur if they let nature run its course. Examples are endless. Consider just one: the sarin gas attack in the Tokyo subway. In one sense, that exploited the laws of nature to produce a chemical weapon. However, that combined natural elements in unnatural ways.

In sum, the freewill defense appeals to two divergent principles. They tug in opposing directions.

Is God an evildoer?

In theory, there are different ways in which God might relate to evil:

- i)** Allows
- ii)** Determines
- iii)** Causes
- iv)** Commands
- v)** Commits

Freewill theists grant that God allows evil. And they say Calvinism makes God "causally determine" evil, which they set in contrast to their own position. However, they rarely define their terminology. Some freewill theists think the OT contains "abhorrent commands" or "texts of terror," and they deny that God issued the commands which the narrator attributes to him.

Normally, both sides (Calvinists, freewill theists) deny that God *commits* evil. They strive to put some kind of buffer between God and evil. To say that God commits evil is typically discountenanced as wholly unacceptable. On a spectrum from allowing to committing evil, committing evil is the worst. Of all the theoretical ways God might relate to evil, that's off the table. That can't be exonerated. If God commits evil, that makes God evil.

In my experience, that's the usual position. However, in a book review, Michael Almeida makes the following observation:

Since God has the traditional attributes of perfect beings Rowe concludes that it is impossible that God should choose to perform an evil action. But it is not at all clear why Rowe urges that " a being who freely chooses to do what it knows to be an evil deed thereby ceases to be a perfectly good being"(p. 26). Certainly in ordinary moral contexts no one would make such a claim. Suppose a being freely chooses to do what it knows to be an evil deed because it necessarily faces a moral dilemma. If an agent necessarily faces a moral dilemma then there is nothing the agent could have done to avoid the dilemma. Indeed there is nothing that an omnipotent being could have done to avoid the dilemma. The agent must choose some wrong action or other. It is difficult to see how the agent's choice might nonetheless be blameworthy or how that choice might reflect poorly on his character. Since blamelessly choosing to do wrong does

not diminish moral perfection at all, it cannot be assumed that necessarily a perfect being does not choose to do wrong. Almeida, Michael (2006) "Book Review: Can God Be Free?," Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers: Vol. 23 : Iss. 3 , Article 8.

And that's of more than hypothetical consequence. For the freewill defense is usually cast in terms of how God's hands are tied. He'd like a better outcome, but he's stymied by the intractable defiance of free creatures. Given the freewill defense, God is routinely confronted with moral dilemmas, because human agents remove the best options from consideration. God stuck with the worst remaining options. So freewill theism leaves God with no choice but to commit evil, and does so on a regular basis.

In Calvinism, by contrast, creatures never back God into a corner. Ironically, then, the Calvinist God is never in a position that requires him to be an evildoer—whereas the freewill theist God often finds himself in that predicament. So their theology and theodicy commits freewill theists to the most odious position along the continuum—one which Calvinism escapes.

The disconnect problem

There is a certain well-known problem facing libertarians—the so-called "luck problem." If an event is undetermined, then it is random, and random events are not within anyone's control. A tad more carefully, if an event is undetermined then it is not determined by the agent's reasons, and this disconnection has the consequence that it is just luck when an undetermined event appropriately corresponds to the agent's reasons. That, in turn, seems to have the consequence that the undetermined event is not something that the agent controls or for which the agent is responsible. There is a standard response to this problem—an agent can control her actions by virtue of her reasons "influencing without determining" her decisions. I will propose that if some influencing is good, then a little more influencing is always better. I will further propose that that leaves the libertarian with no explanation for why influencing is good but determining is bad.

The disconnect problem can be stated thus: if an event E is undetermined, then it is not sufficiently

connected to A's reasons to qualify as being within her control, up to her, or something she has a choice about.

Her resulting behavior would look just like what she should have done on her own, but it would not be in her control because it was coming from "without". It is this externality to the self that is carried over through Case 7. If the start of a chain leading to a volition is disconnected from Agent A's character, then moving that start inside the head will not stop it from being disconnected.

We need to distinguish different ways in which one might lack free will—different ways in which it might not be possible for one to perform an act. The difference I have in mind has to do with the counterfactual effectiveness of my deliberation...If I were to believe that I lacked free will with respect to which door to exit through on the grounds that I believe that one of the doors is locked, then I would not and should not deliberate about which door to exit through. The deliberation would be pointless. Regardless of the outcome of the deliberation, my exit would be through the unlocked door.

*...The determinist chain that produces that action produces it by way of the deliberation. Determinism is not fatalism. If I were to deliberate to a different outcome or fail to deliberate at all, my action would be different. As long as deliberation makes a difference it is not pointless. Mark Heller, "The Disconnect Problem and the Influence Strategy," John. Keller, ed. **Being, Freedom, and Method: Themes from the Philosophy of Peter Van Inwagen** (Oxford 2017), chap. 5.*

Explaining evil, part 1

I plan to do a series of posts on yet another book on the problem of evil: **W. PAUL FRANKS, ED., EXPLAINING EVIL: FOUR VIEWS (BLOOMSBURY 2019)**. Here's a description:

<https://philpapers.org/rec/FRAEEF-2>

I think the problem of evil is overemphasized in atheism and Christian apologetics. If we were starting from scratch, would the problem of evil receive so much attention? I think it's like a social contagion or reinforcing loop where, if you keep saying the problem of evil is the main objection to belief in God, that's the effect of constant repetition. It feeds back into itself in a circular, self-conditioned dynamic.

Strictly speaking, the book isn't about the problem of evil but the preliminary question of how, why, and whether evil exists. For a Christian respondent, that's intertwined with the problem of evil. Christian theology takes the existence of evil for granted, but that's not a given in atheism. Are pain and suffering evil? What is evil from a secular standpoint? Is there such a thing?

I bought the book primarily for the contributions of Paul Helm and Erik Wielenberg. Helm is the preeminent Reformed philosopher of his generation while Wielenberg is one of the best atheist philosophers.

Here is Wielenberg's response to Helm's *felix culpa* theodicy:

(ii) The atonement of sin is so good that it is better that there be atoned-for sin than that there be no sin in the first place (73).

Although that may be how the felix culpa theodicy is usually formulated, I disagree that God's permission/ordination of evil is only justified if a redeemed world is better overall than an unfallen world. Suppose there's a better world than the world in which my loved ones exist. If so, it's a cause for gratitude that God created a lesser world in which my loved ones exist rather than an upscale world in which they don't. God isn't elitist. We should be grateful that our existence is not in competition with "the best". What if we wouldn't make the cut? What if God picks losers rather than winners because he loves the underdog? Existence isn't a meritocracy. Salvation isn't theological eugenics.

Accordingly, it seems that atonement can at best cancel the evil of sin, turning the overall balance of good and evil to zero; I don't see a plausible basis for holding that atonement—as distinguished from divine incarnation—could make the overall combination of sin and atonement into good (74).

To be a redeemed creature, to experience reconciliation and restoration, is a richer experience than never failing in the first place. Which Wielenberg considers:

Diller considers the thought that "there is a special excellence to the quality of relationship that can be known by those once lost who are redeemed"...However, it is hard to see how to justify (ii) on such grounds without thereby committing oneself to such implausible claims as "the strongest marriages are those that have involved a period of divorce, or that the deepest mother-daughter relationship is enabled once the daughter commits patricide" (74).

It's not implausible that the strongest marriages are marriages that weather crisis and conflict, but survive the ordeal. There is, moreover, the interesting phenomenon of divorced couples who reconsider and remarry the original spouse. At the time they were too immature to appreciate each other. But in retrospect they came to realize they were right the first time around. The time apart gave them perspective.

Furthermore, such grounds for (ii) suggest that greater degrees of

alienation make possible more valuable goods of reconciliation later on. In the case of sin, that line of thinking appears to lead to the following problem: "If sin is the occasioning cause of grace...then shouldn't the upright man try to overcome his repugnance to sin, and commit still more sins?" Acceptance of (ii) and the felix culpa theodicy suggests that more sin enhances the overall value of the world, all things considered—a dubious implication (74).

1. That doesn't follow. For one thing, it's not as if humans are morally pristine agents who must devise creative ways to experiment with evil so that we know what it's like. Rather, we're already born with a propensity for evil, and the question is how to break free. I have plenty of regrets without having to devise and explore novel exercises in sinning.

2. Moreover, it's not as if you need to be repeatedly lost and found to have insight into what it's like to be lost and found. Indeed, if you were constantly rescued, it would become blasé and expected. If a hiker is lost in the forest, part of what makes rescue such a relief is the fear that he may not be found. He's in a state of desperate suspense. Waiting in hope and fear.

Michael Peterson writes, "God's original purpose...[thus the highest good for creation is available without creation's descent into sin and evil" (74).

Is that supposed to mean God was blindsided by events and had to scramble to salvage his nearsighted plans?

"agency that is hardened and biochemically twisted (serial killers, child sex murderers, schizophrenics)"...Adam's worry is that God would be insufficiently loving and merciful toward such wrecked and ruined human agents were he to create them in order to display his perfection through divine atonement.

i) I'll bracket the "display his perfection through divine atonement" for another installment.

ii) What exactly is Wielenberg's responding to? Is he saying that's inconsistent with a felix culpa theodicy? If so, how does a felix culpa theodicy require God to be loving and merciful towards serial killers and child sex murderers?

iii) Is he saying that's inconsistent with Helm's Calvinism? If so, does Calvinism require God to be loving and merciful towards serial killers and child sex murderers? In Calvinism

God loves the elect. It's not a presupposition of Calvinism that God is merciful to everyone. Indeed, there's a fundamental sense in which God is unmerciful to the reprobate.

iv) Is he saying that's inconsistent with what it means for God to be a benevolent being, from Wielendberg's perspective? Is Wielenberg supposing that to be good, God must be loving and merciful towards serial killers and child sex murderers? If he's operating from his own standards, then the onus lies on him to make a case for why divine goodness demands that.

Psychopaths lack "the shackles of a nagging conscience"...for psychopaths, "moral...rules are annoying restrictions to be manipulated or ignored. None of these rules have any normative force for them". Psychopaths lack the emotional capacity to grasp the weight of morality and because they are devoid of guilt, see no need for any of their actions to be atoned for. It is hard to see why the existence of a particular sort of damaged agency is necessary for the great good of divine atonement. God could have omitted psychopaths from his grand plan

without sacrificing the need for atonement (75).

- i)** Once again, what exactly is Wielenberg responding to? Since Helm is a Calvinist, he doesn't think everyone is redeemed.

- ii)** Perhaps Wielenberg would say there's a point of tension between a *felix culpa* theodicy and limited atonement. If so, it's up to Wielenberg to explain why psychopaths, serial killers, and child sex murderers must be redeemed for a redeemed world to be better overall than an unfallen world—even assuming that all psychos, serial killers, and child sex murderers are reprobate.

- iii)** Finally, if, according to Calvinism, God regenerates, sanctifies, and glorifies a psychopath, then he will come to perceive how his actions were blameworthy and desperately in need of atonement. Perhaps that discernment will be incomplete in this life. It may only be in heaven that his "wrecked and ruined agency" is fully repaired, although grace can enable him to gain some insight even in this life. Christian apologist David Wood appears to be a real-life example.

Omniscient chess computer

Freewill theists typically think "theological determinism" (i.e. absolute predestination, meticulous providence) makes God blameworthy and human agents blameless. Many or most freewill theists define libertarian freedom as access to alternative possibilities. Let's go with that definition.

Suppose I'm playing computer chess. Suppose the computer is omniscient. It can predict which move I'll make even before I decided what to do next. As a result, the computer doesn't wait for me to make up my mind. Rather, it moves the chess piece to the square I was going to select.

Once a move is made, it can't be undone. Once a move is made, it's too late for me to make a different move. I now lack the freedom to choose an alternate course of action. The computer took that out of my hands. Yet it always makes the same move I was going to make. If I lose the match, who's to blame—the computer...or me?

Suppose the computer always wins because it knows in advance what I will do in every situation, then takes advantage of that information to stay three steps ahead of me. Is that cheating? Does that nullify the value of my libertarian freedom?

Did God will the Fall?

It's common for freewill theists to deny that God willed the Fall. More generally, it's common for freewill theists to deny that God wills moral and natural evils, viz. war, famine, murder, disease, natural disaster, fatal accidents. Bad events lie outside God's will. Bad events are antithetical to God's will. They think it's blasphemous to attribute bad things to God's will. They think Calvinism is wicked for attributing natural and moral evils to God's will.

I'd like to consider one aspect of that denial. Take the Fall. If Adam hadn't sinned, world history would turn out very differently. You and I exist in a fallen world. You and I wouldn't exist in an unfallen world. You and I are the end-product of a complex chain of events which includes natural and moral evils at various turns. Procreation is about men and women meeting and mating at a particular time and place. Even slight changes in the past ramify into the future so that our would-be ancestors will miss connections. For instance, WWII killed millions of people, but by the same token, millions of people exist as a result of the dislocation caused by WWII—who wouldn't be conceived absent that massive disruption.

So that raises a question: if you're the end-product of an evil event that's inimical to God's will, then doesn't this imply that your existence is inimical to God's will? If you exist as the result of some past evil, and if the historical cause of your existence is antithetical to God's will, then isn't the effect antithetical to God's will?

To put it another way, if you could step into a time machine and erase the results of a past evil, would do so—even if that meant erasing resultant future generations from the

space-time continuum? Would you erase your own parents, grandparents, siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins, children, and grandchildren? If the precipitating event that led to their existence was diametrically opposed to God's will, then doesn't that implicate all the consequences?

Fatalism, paganism, and predestination

Many people have an instinctive aversion to the idea of predestination. But one of the interesting things about predestination is the way it requires a Christian worldview to underwrite it. In paganism, predestination is impossible. There's no absolute Creator God. The gods are themselves the product of the ongoing world process. The gods are not omniscient. No one god controls everything. They have territorial jurisdictions.

So it's not possible in paganism for the world to unfold according to a master plan. Many events happen for no reason. Sheer contingency plays a huge role in history. If you reset history at an earlier date, it will never repeat.

Greek mythology has a murky doctrine of the Fates. They predetermine the human lifespan.

Classical fatalism is different from predestination because the outcome is inevitable regardless of what else happens. There is no one chain of events leading to a particular outcome, but multiple paths all converge on the same outcome. Changing the initial conditions doesn't change the outcome. It's not clear that fatalism is even coherent in a pagan worldview, except in the *deus ex machina* sense.

Arminian Gnostics

I'm going to quote and comment on some statements in this article:

[http://evangelicalarminians.org/files/McCall.%20I%20Believe%20in%20Divine%20Sovereignty%20\(Contra%20Piper\).pdf](http://evangelicalarminians.org/files/McCall.%20I%20Believe%20in%20Divine%20Sovereignty%20(Contra%20Piper).pdf)

THOMAS McCALL, "I BELIEVE IN DIVINE SOVEREIGNTY," TRINITY JOURNAL 29.2 (FALL 2008): 205-226.

Why do tsunamis rise up and send walls of water through unprepared and largely defenseless communities, leaving behind in their wake hundreds of thousands of dead, with beaches littered with the broken and lifeless bodies of young children, shattered families, and grief-stricken loved ones?

McCall then proceeds to quote David Bentley Hart. Since McCall's article is available online (see above), I'm not going to manually transcribe the quotes. In addition, Hart says the same things in two online articles about the South Asian tsunami, so I'll copy/paste some representative passages from them to give the reader the flavor of the objection.

The Christian understanding of evil has always been more radical and fantastic than that of any theodist; for it denies from the outset that suffering, death and evil have any ultimate meaning at all.

When confronted by the sheer savage immensity of worldly suffering—when we see the entire littoral rim of the Indian Ocean strewn with tens of thousands of corpses, a third of them children’s—no Christian is licensed to utter odious banalities about God's inscrutable counsels or blasphemous suggestions that all this mysteriously serves God's good ends.

<http://davidbhart.blogspot.com/2006/03/david-b-harts-tremors-of-doubt.html>

Being infinitely sufficient in Himself, God had no need of a passage through sin and death to manifest His glory in His creatures or to join them perfectly to Himself. This is why it is misleading (however soothing it may be) to say that the drama of fall and redemption will make the final state of things more glorious than it might otherwise have

been. No less metaphysically incoherent—though immeasurably more vile—is the suggestion that God requires suffering and death to reveal certain of his attributes (capricious cruelty, perhaps? morbid indifference? a twisted sense of humor?). It is precisely sin, suffering, and death that blind us to God’s true nature.

There is, of course, some comfort to be derived from the thought that everything that occurs at the level of what Aquinas calls secondary causality—in nature or history—is governed not only by a transcendent providence, but by a universal teleology that makes every instance of pain and loss an indispensable moment in a grand scheme whose ultimate synthesis will justify all things. But consider the price at which that comfort is purchased: it requires us to believe in and love a God whose good ends will be realized not only in spite of—but entirely by way of—every cruelty, every fortuitous misery, every catastrophe, every betrayal, every sin the world has ever known; it requires us to believe in the eternal spiritual necessity of a child dying an agonizing death from diphtheria, of a young mother ravaged by cancer, of tens of thousands of Asians swallowed

in an instant by the sea, of millions murdered in death camps and gulags and forced famines. It seems a strange thing to find peace in a universe rendered morally intelligible at the cost of a God rendered morally loathsome. Better, it seems to me, the view of the ancient Gnostics: however ludicrous their beliefs, they at least, when they concluded that suffering and death were essential aspects of the creator's design, had the good sense to yearn to know a higher God.

I do not believe we Christians are obliged—or even allowed—to look upon the devastation visited upon the coasts of the Indian Ocean and to console ourselves with vacuous cant about the mysterious course taken by God's goodness in this world, or to assure others that some ultimate meaning or purpose resides in so much misery.

<http://www.firstthings.com/onthesquare/2008/05/tsunami-and-theodicy>

i) Hart is Eastern Orthodox. By contrast, McCall is a member of the Wesleyan Theological Society, as well as a theology prof. at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. Notice that McCall quotes Hart approvingly. He agrees with Hart. Notice, too, that McCall's two articles are hosted by the Society of Evangelical Arminians.

ii) I wonder if we're not seeing a paradigm shift in Arminian theology. Contemporary Arminians who feel free to deny the traditional view of God as the ultimate cause of natural evil. McCall acts as if this is unique to Calvinism. If so, he's rewriting historical theology.

iii) I also wonder why Arminians like McCall think their denial is even orthodox. Why do they think that's a live option in evangelical theology?

Likewise, why do they think their denial is even plausible? It's as if they imagine that they can simply wish away God's complicity in natural evil. They seem to begin with emotional revulsion at natural evils. Based on their emotional reaction, they say it's "blasphemous" or "odious" or "vile" or "morally loathsome" to attribute natural disasters to God. They then simply deny that God is responsible for natural disasters.

But what makes them suppose that's a credible denial? Denying something doesn't make it go away. Denying something doesn't suspend the laws of logical entailment. An unwelcome truth remains true, even if you shut your eyes, stop your ears, and stamp your feet.

iv) Aren't natural disasters and fatal diseases the result of physical determinism? Natural cause and effect? Where antecedent conditions, events, and natural forces necessitate the result?

If God is the Creator of the world, then he created natural forces. He initiated second causes. He initiated the ensuing chain-reaction.

v) But suppose, for the sake of argument, that we treat natural evils as random events, a la chaos theory. Still, if God is the Creator of the world, then he initiated the stochastic process that produces natural evils.

So on either model, I don't see how McCall can insulate God from complicity in the dire outcome.

vi) Moreover, the Bible attributes natural evils to God. At the very least, that's a prima facie defeater for McCall's position.

vii) Furthermore, I assume McCall believes in God's knowledge of the future. So whether he views natural evils as determinate or indeterminate events, his God was in a position to anticipate the end-result. And God was in a position to circumvent the dire outcome.

McCall's God knows what will happen if he intervenes as well as what will happen if he declines to intervene. McCall can erect as many buffers between God and natural evil as he likes, but that's beside the point, for as long as God can stop it, God is responsible for not stopping it.

viii) McCall can't very well invoke the freewill defense. It's not as if earthquakes, tsunamis, tornadoes, and cancer cells have freewill.

ix) To say that "Being infinitely sufficient in Himself, God had no need of a passage through sin and death to manifest His glory," is utterly confused. This is not about God needing anything for himself to complete himself.

Rather, this is about the nature of finite timebound spacebound creatures who learn by personal empirical experience. And there's a dimension of knowledge by

acquaintance which no amount of knowledge by description can adequately capture.

In the nature of the case, you can't have a manifestation of justice and mercy absent sinners.

x) In a footnote, McCall appeals to either Molinism or Thomism as alternatives to Calvinism. But God is the ultimate source of natural evils in Thomism and Molinism alike.

xi) Finally, McCall endorses Hart's view that natural evils are surd evils. Gratuitous evils. They serve no good purpose.

But how does that even begin to exonerate the Arminian God? To say that God knowingly exposes men, woman, and children to horrendous evils for no good reason? How does that let God off the hook? And how is that an improvement on what McCall finds so objectionable in Calvinism?

McCall acts as though it's just too horrible to believe that God is behind natural evils, therefore he refuses to believe it. Well, by that logic (if logic is the operative word), why not bite the bullet and go all the way with Mary Baker Eddy. Evil is too horrible to believe, therefore there really is no evil. That's all an illusion.

Is God a monstrous madman?

Furthermore, Washington does not in any way benefit from the execution of Andre...

On the other hand, consider this analogy. Imagine a parent who is able to control each and every action of his children, and furthermore is able to do so by controlling their thoughts and inclinations. He is thus able to determine each and all actions taken by those children. He is also able to guarantee that they desire to do everything that they do, and this is exactly what he does. He puts them in a special playroom that contains not only toys but also gasoline and matches, and then he gives them explicit instructions (with severe warnings) to avoid touching the gasoline and matches. Stepping out of sight, he determines that the children indeed begin to play with the gasoline and matches. When the playroom is ablaze and the situation desperate, he rushes in to save them (well, some of them).

When they ask about the situation, their father tells them that this tragic occurrence had been determined by him, and indeed that it was a

smashing success—it had worked out in exact accordance with his plan. He then reminds them of his instructions and warnings and he reminds them further that they willingly violated his commands. They should be grateful for their rescue, and they should understand that the others got what they deserved.

The children are puzzled by this, and one wants to know why such a compassionate father does not rescue the others (when it is clearly within his power to do so). His answer is this: this has happened so that everyone could see how smart he is (for being able to know how to do all this), how powerful he is (for being able to control everything and then effectively rescue them), how merciful he is (for rescuing the children who broke his rules), and how just he is (for leaving the others to their fate in the burning playroom).

Surely the fact that such a man is a monster is beyond dispute...And if he were to add that he did it for the good of his children, we would rightly consider him a madman as well as a moral monster.

<http://evangelicalarminians.org/files/McCall.%20We%20Believe%20in%20God's%20Sovereign%20Goodness.pdf>

THOMAS McCALL, "I BELIEVE IN GOD'S SOVEREIGN GOODNESS: A REJOINDER TO JOHN PIPER," TRINJ 29.2 (FALL 2008): 241-42.

By way of reply:

- i)** McCall is critiquing John Piper's two-wills model of Calvinism. I myself don't subscribe to that model.
- ii)** Piper isn't a philosopher, so there may be some weaknesses in Piper's formulations. For instance, Jeremy Pierce is critical of how Piper formulates the self-glorification of God.
- iii)** I don't know why McCall imagines that God is the beneficiary of election and reprobation. The elect are the beneficiaries.

Perhaps McCall is misled by the ambiguities of God doing something for his own glory. But God has nothing to gain. Rather, the elect gain from the manifestation of God's glory.

iv) If McCall is alleging that the father in this scenario is monstrous simply because he determined the outcome, then that begs the question. In that event he's treating as libertarianism as a given. But that's something he needs to argue for.

v) His illustration is compromised by the parent/child metaphor. That's designed to push the reader's buttons. It's ironic that a libertarian would try to coerce the reader through emotional manipulation.

And he isn't consistent with the metaphor, for within the confines of his illustration, the children have, in fact, done nothing to deserve their fate.

vi) Even parent/child metaphors can backfire. When the Menendez brothers murder their parents, we shouldn't feel sorry for the orphaned brothers!

vii) But if we trade the parent/child metaphor for a judge/felon metaphor, like a judge who sentences a triggerman to death by hanging, that ought to provoke moral satisfaction in the verdict.

viii) Finally, McCall's illustration is an extended metaphor, but it has a literal counterpart. In the real world there are real tykes who play with matches and accidentally set themselves on fire. Some of them burn to death while others survive, but are horribly maimed for life.

McCall's Arminian God can see that coming. He knows what will happen unless he steps in to prevent it. McCall's God has complete control over that situation. He can rescue every child who's on the verge of self-immolation.

Indeed, he ultimately put them in that situation. He created a world in which he foresaw that outcome. By but going right ahead, he guaranteed the outcome. It's inevitable that they will set themselves on fire unless he intervenes—which is clearly within his power to do. Why does he stand by and let the screaming child go up in flames?

Surely it's not because McCall's God must defer to their freewill. Aren't young children in a condition of diminished responsibility? Isn't that a presupposition of McCall's hypothetical scenario? The children don't know any better.

They lack the cognitive development to appreciate the danger. Hence, it's the duty of the father to protect his kids from playing with matches around gasoline. Hence, the father is culpable for exposing them to harm.

Well, shouldn't McCall's God be at least as conscientious a father as a human father ought to be under those circumstances? Shouldn't McCall's God look out for the welfare of little kids who are about to unwittingly commit self-immolation? So why isn't McCall's God a monster?

Sinning that grace may abound

Tom McCall has lodged the following objection to John Piper's theology:

Although Piper insists that we are not to draw it, he admits that the “logical inference” to be drawn from his view is that we might as well live lives of sin in order that grace may abound...And Piper is, of course, well aware that such an inference is in direct conflict with clear biblical teaching...Piper's theological determinism leads him to what can only appear to be an outright contradiction at this point. Suppose that a Christian is convinced by Piper that theological determinism is true, and that all events that occur are determined by God to occur so that God might be glorified maximally.

THOMAS H. MCCALL, “I BELIEVE IN GOD'S SOVEREIGN GOODNESS: A REJOINER TO JOHN PIPER,” TRINJ 29.2 (FALL 2008): 243-44.

<http://evangelicalarminians.org/files/McCall.%20We%20Believe%20in%20God's%20Sovereign%20Goodness.pdf>

I'll make a few comments:

i) Piper is a pastor, not a philosopher. Now Piper is a very influential pastor, so he's fair game. Nevertheless, if McCall is attacking Calvinism, he needs to train his guns on the most sophisticated representatives of Calvinism. As a rule, we wouldn't expect a pastor to be especially adept at fielding intellectual objections to his position. Why doesn't McCall target a Reformed philosopher?

ii) McCall's appeal to Scripture is one-sided. He alludes to Rom 6:1-2. But in the very same letter, Paul also says:

Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more (Rom 5:20)

13 Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure (Rom 7:13)

32 For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all (11:32).

And Paul elsewhere says:

22 But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe (Gal 3:22)

a) So McCall has oversimplified the issue. According to the passages I cited, there is a sense in which God wills sin. God makes things worse in the short term to make things better in the long term. Hence, our understanding of Rom 6:1-2 must be counterbalanced against these other Pauline passages.

b) And this isn't a result of Piper's "theological determinism." Rather, this is *Pauline* theology. It doesn't involve a prior commitment to "theological determinism." Rather, we find this rationale in Romans and Galatians: the instrumental value of sin in God's plan. Even though the magnification of sin isn't God's ultimate purpose, it does serve an interim purpose, as a means to a higher end.

iii) To say that sin glorifies God is not to say that *only* sin glorifies God. God is glorified by virtue as well as vice. So McCall is drawing a fallacious inference. Since sinning is not the *only* way to glorify God, it's not as if Calvinism or Pauline theology entails antinomianism. Likewise, it's not as if the Christian is motivated to sin. For sin is not the only means by which God is glorified. McCall is posing a false dilemma.

iv) Moreover, McCall's proposed dilemma isn't really consistent with "theological determinism." For if God has predestined a particular Christian *not* to sin that grace may abound, then that Christian isn't caught in a hopeless dilemma: to sin or not to sin? For if God has predestined

him not to sin that grace may abound, then either sinning or *not* sinning will not be two equally live options.

Gunslinger rematch

I'm going to comment on some statements in this article: **KENNETH D. KEATHLEY, "MOLINIST GUNSLINGERS REDUX: A FRIENDLY RESPONSE TO GREG WELTY," PERICHORESIS 16/2 (2018), 31–44.**

One weakness in his article is a failure to distinguish between popularizers (Gerstner, Sproul Jr.) and high-level thinkers. In addition, he misclassifies Bruce Ware as a Calvinist, but Ware's position is quite eclectic. He's an Amyraldian Molinist who rejects classical theism.

Initially, in response to the historical challenge of fatalism as espoused by the Greek Stoics and later by Islam, the primary concern of Molinism was to establish the contingency of future conditionals in the light of God's exhaustive foreknowledge (Craig 1988).

i) I don't know what that means. Is Keathley alleging that Molinism was developed in response to Greek Stoicism? Was that a major rival in the 16-17C?

ii) Likewise, Islam had been around for nearly a millennium by the time of de Molina. Is Molinism a belated response to Islam? Wasn't Molinism an alternative to Thomism?

iii) Mutazilite Islam is the Muslim version of freewill theism.

iv) Is Asharite Islam "fatalistic"? Asharite Islam subscribes to occasionalism.

How is Keathley defining "fatalism"? On a classic definition of fatalism, an agent can be the ultimate source of his own actions as well as having multiple courses of action open to him. The catch is that every route and alternate route have the same detonation.

As many Calvinists followed Edwards in embracing determinism (particularly in America)...

Throughout his article, Keathley seems to adopt the view of Muller and Crisp that Calvinism was originally indeterministic, and only took a deterministic turn under the influence of Edwards. But what's distinctive to Edwards has more to do with occasionalism and idealism, not determinism. That traditional Calvinism is antithetical to libertarian freedom had been defended by James Anderson and Paul Manata:

<http://booksandjournals.brillonline.com/content/journals/10.1163/15697312-01103016>

My short answer to his second claim is that I do not think Welty has made his case. And it seems that his argument, if successful, would succeed too well. All

theological systems that uphold the traditional view of God's omniscience would be open to this charge (Welty may contend that that's exactly his point).

Indeed, that's his point. Welty is presenting a tu quoque argument, viz.:

http://maverickphilosopher.typepad.com/maverick_philosopher/2015/11/the-problem-of-evil-and-the-argument-from-evil.html

But what does this say about the efforts of apophatic Calvinists to distance themselves from the implications of causal determinism? Most Calvinists distinguish between primary and secondary causation, and embrace infralapsarianism over supralapsarianism. This is why Welty takes an apophatic approach while leaving determinists to fend for themselves. ('If they are subject to critique, so be it.') Many of our Reformed brethren recognize the moral difficulties

posed by an adherence to causal determinism.

1. Keathley seems to be uninformed about Welty's own position. For instance, he seems to be unaware of the detailed response that Welty and Cohen offered to Walls:

<http://www.gregwelty.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/pc-17-1-Cowan-Welty-Pharaoh.pdf>

<http://www.epsociety.org/library/articles.asp?pid=269&mode=detail>

<http://www.gregwelty.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/pc-17-2-Welty-Cowan.pdf>

2. Because the Calvinist/Molinist debate can spin off in so many different directions, Welty is bracketing certain issues.

3. A weakness running through his article is Keathley's failure to define his terms:

i) What does he mean by X causes Y?

ii) What does he mean by X determines Y?

iii) Is "causal determinism" something over and above causation or determinism? What does causation add to determinism? What does determinism add to causation?

iv) Take David Lewis's definition: "We think of a cause as something that makes a difference, and the difference it

makes must be a difference from what would have happened without it."

On that definition, the Molinist God causes sin and evil by actualizing a possible world containing sin and evil.

I do not believe one can hold that God accomplishes his will via causal determinism and then appeal to mystery. Where, exactly, is mystery to be located? There seem to be three options. One place possibly could be the question as to why God created this particular world knowing that evil would occur. To my knowledge, both Molinists and Calvinists confess this type of mystery. There's no dispute here. A second possible location could be the mystery of how God accomplishes his will through other causal agents. Molinists contend that God, with precision and success, perfectly accomplishes his will through genuinely free creatures primarily by means of his omniscience.

In addition, the Molinist God accomplishes his will by instantiating a particular timeline.

If, concerning God's concurrent actions with other agents, apophatic Calvinists wish to appeal to mystery on this point, then this would not seem necessarily to be an item of conflict between Molinists and Calvinists. Molinists provide a possible model while apophatic Calvinists do not, but both affirm that God can and does perfectly accomplish his will. Again, this creates no problem between apophatic Calvinists and Molinists.

It's one thing to say that it is a mystery how God concurrently accomplishes his will through other agents. It's another thing to say that it's a mystery as to why he is not accountable when he causally determines their sins. If this is what is meant when Calvinists appeal to mystery, then indeed Molinists and Calvinists are at odds at this point.

While that's an important issue in its own right, it's irrelevant to the topic of Welty's essay, which was a tu quoque argument.

*But we are created in the divine image,
so we reflect God's ability to make moral
choices.*

Many freewill theists have a bad habit of using the divine image as a cipher. They attribute certain things to the divine image. They don't bother to exegete the concept of the divine image from Scripture, but begin with their concept of God (a la freewill theism), then read that back into the divine image.

We all agree that the man who hires a hit man is also guilty of the hit man's crime.

And that's in part because the hit man is instrumental to the Don's malicious intentions. On the other hand, using one person to kill another person isn't inherently blameworthy. Generals give orders to foot soldiers in a just-war situation.

God indeed works through the evil done by wicked agents (Genesis 50; Isaiah 10; Acts 2). All Christians affirm this. But it really does matter whether or not those agents were the origins of their respective choices, and that at significant points they possessed the genuine ability to make those choices.

From the viewpoint of a freewill theist. But that's the very issue in dispute. Keathley fails to argue for his key assumptions. He takes them for granted. And he fails to counter arguments to the contrary. So his objection begs the question.

In moral arguments, intentions matter. Even a strongly Reformed voice such as Paul Helm emphasizes this: 'In the case of evil, whatever the difficulties may be of accounting for the fact, God ordains evil but he does not intend evil as evil, as the human agent intends it... There are other ends or purposes which God has in view' (Helm 1994: 190). God's intentions and purposes are different from the evil intentions and purposes of the wicked through whom he works or of those he permits to do evil. Molinism understands these evil persons to be the causal agents of their deeds. Thus, Molinism is not 'sufficiently analogous' to those versions of Calvinism that affirm causal determinism.

But their acting in a particular way is determined by the Molinist God instantiating the possible timeline in which they act one way rather than another. God is a necessary cause of that outcome.

God can permit or allow an evil for just reasons. Consider the following analogy. During World War II, the Allies broke the secret codes of the Germans. According to some historians, the British knew beforehand of German plans to carpet bomb the city of Coventry. It was determined that if special actions were taken to defend the city, then that would tip off the Nazis that the Allies were intercepting their messages. Churchill reportedly made the difficult decision to allow the bombing to occur. Most would agree that Churchill's responsibility is not 'sufficiently analogous' to that of the Axis forces. Similarly, God permits evil but is not culpable for it. God can accomplish righteous purposes through agents that have evil intentions.

Again, consider the following analogy. Imagine the execution of a heinous criminal. Imagine also that the executioner carrying out the death sentence secretly delights in killing other humans, and he enjoys legally performing an act that otherwise

would be considered murder. The executioner's evil intent does not impugn the state's just cause. The intent of both is not 'sufficiently analogous'. Similarly, God uses evil people, but he is not culpable for their evil deeds.

And a Calvinist can help himself to Keathley's examples.

*Those of us opposed to causal determinism are not simply shadow boxing. The challenges posed by determinism to morality become very clear in the writings of Darwinists. For example, in his *The Moral Animal: The New Science of Evolutionary Psychology*, Robert Wright (a former Southern Baptist) argues for genetic causal determinism. He does not hesitate to describe humans as 'puppets' and 'robots'. He disposes of notions such as free will and moral responsibility. Evil does not exist. He laments that humans are 'robots' held 'responsible for their malfunctions' (Wright 1994: 355). The*

primary advocates of determinism are not Calvinists, but atheists and Muslims.

i) That's an inept comparison because it fails to consider what lies behind the determinate outcome. Are these rational determinants?

ii) Moreover, in the AI literature, there's the issue of whether robots are moral agents. Mere automata aren't moral agents, but what about artificially intelligent robots? What about robots that pass the Turing test?

I rejoice that mysterian Calvinists such as Welty also reject causal determinism.

i) He's misinterpreting Welty. Welty's strategy in his essay is to zero in on a particular issue.

ii) As Welty points out in his recent book on the problem of evil, there's no philosophical consensus on the concept of causation.

It may have been helpful if Welty had spelled out clearly what models of human agency he believes to be compatible with apophatic Calvinism. Does he believe that libertarian freedom is a live option for the apophatic

Calvinist? He doesn't say. The mysterian Calvinist seems to be noncommittal on whether or not God causes sin. If God causally determines sins, then the Calvinist position is indeed more problematic than the Molinist position, regardless of a claim to mystery.

i) Yes, there's a sense in which the Calvinist God causes sin. That's not unique to Calvinism. The same holds true for Thomism, Molinism, open theism, Lutheranism, and simple-foreknowledge Arminianism.

ii) Yes, there's a sense in which the Calvinist God determines sin. The same holds true for Thomism, Molinism, open theism, Lutheranism, and simple-foreknowledge Arminianism.

For instance, in a cause/effect world, if a suicide bomber pulls the pin on a hand grenade, it's too late to change his mind. At that point, detonation is inevitable. He crossed a line of no return. Even if we grant for the sake of argument that the outcome was indeterminate up to that tipping-point, once he pulls the cap, the outcome is now determinate. Likewise, if the Molinist God instantiates a particular timeline in full knowledge of the outcome, then his creative fiat locks in that particular course of events.

And it seems that if one denies that God causally determines sinful actions, then

one needs Molinism to get the robust sense of God's sovereign control of all things. For the Christian, the options are divine determinism (either of an occasionalist variety or of an Edwardsian strongest desire variety) or (some form of) libertarianism. What other option is there?

Circumstances also limit one's field of action. If one exit is locked while the other exit is unlocked, I can only use the exit with the unlocked door. That's different from either occasionalism or strongest desire psychology. I don't offer that as an all-purpose alternative, but simply to illustrate Keathley's blinkered imagination.

For the reasons given above, Molinists believe that preserving libertarian freedom makes a significant difference in distinguishing between the just and pure decisions by God either to permit or work through the wicked and impure actions of humans.

If that was Keathley's aim, then he needed to write a different article. As it stands, he's claiming the benefits of his preferred conclusions without providing the supporting

arguments. There are no intellectual shortcuts in this debate. It's philosophically demanding trench warfare.

According to determinism, humans are not agents but rather are mere instruments.

That's his opinion, but he hasn't laid the groundwork for that conclusion.

Should you lock your door at night?

One of the dumber reactions I've seen to the presidential election is the claim that it doesn't really matter who wins or loses because whatever the outcome, God is in control. People who care about elections are faithless. We have nothing to fear. God has already decreed the winner.

I take it that people who say this fancy themselves to be Calvinists. But they play right into the Arminian caricature of Calvinism as a synonym for fatalism.

Do the same people who say this lock their door at night? Or would that be distrustful of God's providence? I mean, if God has predestined the house-burglar to break into your home, countermeasures are futile, right?

In a sense that's true. Yet God hasn't simply decreed what will happen. God hasn't simply decreed who will be president, but who will vote for which candidate and other forms of political activism. The outcome is not irrespective of our efforts, but due to our efforts. Predestination doesn't invite complacency, as if the future will turn out the same way no matter what we do or fail to do.

By the same token, God hasn't necessarily decreed that the house-burglar will break into your home even if you lock the door. Perhaps he has, but you don't know that in advance. Moreover, it's not as if locking your door thwarted God's decree. It's not as though God decreed that you not lock your door, but you overrode his decree and did it anyway. No, if you lock your doors, then that's why he decreed all along. And that may successfully deter the house-burglar. You only know by trying.

Fact is, apart from revelation, we don't know ahead of time what God has decreed. That's something we discover in retrospect, as the future becomes the past. Even people who don't believe in predestination fulfill it. So you don't have to give any thought to predestination. You just do whatever you were going to do. God predestines your motives as well as your choices. You act on whatever reasons you had at the time, which turn out to be the reasons God gave you to act on. Not to mention that a certain amount of decision-making is the result of subliminal considerations. You weren't even conscious of all the factors that fed into your choice.

Some people tie themselves in knots over predestination, but as a practical matter, there's no reason to second guess your actions. It's like saying, if the door is locked, I can't open it. True. But is that a reason not to try the doorknob? No. For if the door isn't locked, then you can open it. And you find out what's possible by giving it a try. Either the door knob will turn or it won't. That doesn't prevent you from finding out which is which. Just go ahead and do what you had in mind. And that's what God predestined!

Newtonian fatalism

I'd like to employ another example to illustrate a theodicy I often use. I don't think there's one silver bullet theodicy. But by combining several, we cover most-every situation.

Before getting to that, I often talk about the problem of evil in fairly clinical terms. That's because I'm discussing the intellectual problem of evil rather than the emotional problem of evil. There's really not much you can say about the emotional problem of evil. That's not generally something that can be handled at a distance. It requires face-to-face contact. Grieving with those who grieve (Rom 12:15).

It's like a doctor who has to break terrible news to a patient. Tell the patient that he has terminal cancer or a degenerative illness. Suppose the patient asks why that happened to him? Well, in some cases, the doctor has an answer. He can say that due to your family history, you have a genetic predisposition to develop gastric cancer or Huntington's disease (or whatever). That's the right answer to the question. But, of course, it doesn't make the diagnosis less any less bleak.

Mind you, even that can sometimes be helpful. The patient knows there's nothing he could have done to prevent it. Early diagnosis wouldn't help. Change of diet wouldn't help.

In the nature of the case, an answer to the intellectual problem of evil will be somewhat dry. That's because we're addressing the philosophical aspect of the problem. I myself have seen the problem of evil up close and personal. Although I often write about it with critical detachment, that

doesn't mean I'm a brain-in-a-vat. It just means I don't discuss family tragedies in public.

Now for the illustration. To my knowledge, there are two tropes about fatalism in the horror genre:

I. DELAYED FATALISM

According to this trope, you can never cheat fate. At best, you can postpone the inevitable. But sooner or later, fate will find you. It will sneak back around and get you when you least expect it. You may temporarily outwit your fate, but eventually it will catch you off-guard.

II. NEWTONIAN FATALISM

According to this trope, you can cheat fate...but there's a catch! You can cheat fate, but someone else will have to take your place. Fate demands a substitute. In this version, if someone could elude fate, and there's nothing to compensate his evasion, that throws the natural order out of whack. In order to maintain cosmic equilibrium, it's life for life and death for death. You can only escape your fate if that's offset by a fall guy.

This has great dramatic potential in cheesy horror films where you volunteer your best friend. For some inexplicable reason, he suddenly finds himself in near-miss freak accidents. One close call after another. Little does he know you gave him up to save your own skin. And when he finds out...

Although this is fiction, it has a real-world counterpart. In a world that's overwhelmingly governed by cause and effect,

every action has a reaction. So Newton's third law has implications for the problem of evil.

If you think about it, it's a sobering fact that saving one life may come at the expense of another life. Someone may die in an accident because of something someone else did a 100 years earlier. A perfectly innocent action in the past may result in future calamity. Thankfully, most of us don't know the future. Even we did, it would be petrifying to see some of the long-term consequences of our benign actions.

Likewise, if your father had married a different woman, or your mother had married a different man, you wouldn't be here. Someone else would be here instead. And so on and so forth.

So when we ask, why didn't God do this instead of that, we need to consider how one thing leads to another. It isn't cost-free. Someone's ill-fortune may pay the price for your good fortune, or vice versa.

Salvation for all

i) I'd like to revisit an exchange I had with Jerry Walls a while back. According to what's become a stock objection to Calvinism, the Calvinist God is (allegedly) able but unwilling to save everyone.

ii) Now that's only a problem on two assumption, one being: the God of freewill theism is willing, but unable to save everyone. However, that claim isn't obviously true. For instance, some freewill theists are universalists. They believe God will wear down the resistance of unbelievers. He's got all the time in the world. Eventually, they will see the light. So critics like Jerry have to show that freewill theism doesn't suffer from the same problem it ascribes to Calvinism.

iii) In addition, the objection only has teeth if you think God is less than good unless he saved everyone he could. But that doesn't chime with my moral intuitions. Irrespective of Calvinism, it's by no means obvious to me that God isn't good in case he damns Pablo Escobar, Charles Manson, Genghis Khan, Joseph Stalin, Josef Mengele, Ted Bundy et al. Pick your villain. Even if I wasn't a Calvinist, freewill theism hardly entails that God can't be good unless he saves ISIS thugs who burn people alive and vivisect children with chainsaws—assuming he was able to do so.

iv) So the point of this exercise is to respond to the freewill theist on his own grounds. I'm not conceding his standards. But the question is whether there are limitations on what even a Calvinist God can do in that regard.

v) As I pointed out to Jerry, the statement is ambiguous. Who's the everyone that God can save? Suppose God

regenerated "everyone" in the womb. Would that save everyone?

It would save everyone in that timeline. But regenerating "everyone" in the womb will produce a different world history than a world in which God doesn't regenerate everyone. Some people who are born into a world where everyone isn't regenerate won't be born into a world where everyone is regenerate. As a result, some people are heavenbound in a world where everyone isn't regenerate from the womb who won't be heavenbound in a world where everyone is regenerate from the womb, because they won't exist in that alternate timeline. So even in deterministic universalism, there still are losers. People who miss out on heaven.

vi) To that, Jerry responded two different ways. One response was to play the Epicurean card. There are, however, serious philosophers like John Martin Fisher who argue that nonexistence, be it prenatal or postmortem, is a deprivation. Cf. J. Fischer, ed. *The Metaphysics of Death* (Stanford 1993); J. Fisher, *Our Stories: Essays on Life, Death, and Free Will* (Oxford 2009).

Let's take a comparison. Suppose I'm a teenager. There's a classmate who's competing with me for the affections of a pretty cheerleader. But I have a time machine. If I go back in time, I can erase him from the space-time continuum. My action will replace the current timeline with a new timeline that has a very similar past, only he doesn't exist. Instead, on the alternate timeline, his parents had conjugal relations a half hour later, conceiving a different son.

I suspect many people would say that's tantamount to murder. Yet my rival classmate never existed in the new timeline. He has no idea what he's missing. From Jerry's

Epicurean perspective, is there anything wrong with a time-traveler who scrubs people from the timeline who happen to cramp his style?

vii) Another response was to invoke postmortem salvation. Jerry said the Calvinist God could regenerate unbelievers after they die. That wouldn't change world history in this life. So there'd be no losers, only winners.

What about that? One stock objection to Calvinism is that God's choice of who's elect and reprobate is (allegedly) arbitrary. Let's grant that objection for the sake of argument.

But by that logic, it's still arbitrary that only the folks in one world history are saved. Even if everyone in that world history will ultimately be saved, what about all the folks who still miss out on heaven because God didn't instantiate an alternate timeline in which different people exist and go to heaven?

So for Jerry's argument to go through, it requires the Calvinist God not merely to instantiate a world history in which everyone is saved, but to instantiate a multiverse in which every conceivable person in infinitely many world histories is saved.

Jerry could duck that by playing the Epicurean card, but I just discussed problems with that. Or he might try to dodge it by withdrawing the charge of arbitrariness, yet that's one of the primary objections that freewill theists level against Calvinism.

viii) Yet a universalistic multiverse may still be arbitrary, inasmuch as there's no logical cutoff regarding how many

possible persons to create. Is there any upper limit on the number of conceivable persons?

And these alternate timelines will generate scenarios in which, say, someone who wasn't tortured in one world history will be tortured in another world history. Likewise, there will need to be an indefinite number of Incarnations to redeem the lost. Even hypothetically, there seem to be limitations on what even the Calvinist God can do in that regard.

Damnation in the multiverse

1. An issue in Christian theodicy is whether a majority of the human race will be damned. An argument for that proposition combines inclusivism with the demographics of church history up to the present. Perhaps future church history demographics will offset the current tally.

2. A more specific issue concerns the ethnic demographics of salvation. As of now, some people-groups are overrepresented while other people-groups are underrepresented. Put another way, salvation is overrepresented in the northern hemisphere compared to the southern hemisphere. Or overrepresented in the west compared to the east. Is geography destiny?

Many Christians believe that some or all who die before the age of reason are saved. But even if that's the case, is it enough to offset the ethnic disparity?

But perhaps that's just the way it is. There's a sense in which grace is arbitrary, since no one deserves it.

3. Suppose, for argument's sake (which may in fact be true), that most folks on planet earth will be damned. Does that mean a majority of the human race will be damned? And does that mean more Caucasians are saved than other ethnic groups? Not necessarily. An unspoken assumption behind that inference is that humans only exist on planet earth, in our universe. But is that a secure assumption? What if there's a multiverse? Before addressing that question directly, I need to lay some groundwork.

4. Let's turn to modal metaphysics. There are at least two reasons to believe in possible worlds:

i) A capacity for hypothetical reasoning is a feature of human intelligence. That's one of the things which sets us apart from animals. A lot of our decision-making involves hypothetical reasoning. We mentally compare and contrast alternate courses of action. If I do this, what are the likely consequences? If, instead, I do that, what are the likely consequences?

In addition, many counterfactual scenarios seem to be undeniably true. It's just unavoidable. For instance: If JFK hadn't been assassinated on November 22, 1963, LBJ would not have assumed the presidency on the same day. How can that be reasonably disputed?

ii) Furthermore, the Bible contains many hypothetical or counterfactual statements. So the Bible appeals to that human faculty.

But what makes counterfactuals true? They don't correspond to what happens in our world. So counterfactuals are standardly cashed out in terms of possible worlds. Borrowing from time-travel scenarios, we could also recast the idea in terms of alternate timelines.

5. But that pushes the question back a step: what are possible worlds? What's the ontology of possible worlds? There are different paradigms. David Lewis had a position similar to the multiverse. A different paradigm views possible worlds as abstract objects.

However, I view possible worlds as alternate plots in God's imagination. Like a screenwriter or novelist, God is able to imagine infinitely many different world histories.

6. So I think Christians have good reason to believe in a plurality of possible worlds. But that raises another question: what's the relationship between possible worlds and actual worlds? Out of all the possible worlds at God's disposal, does he pick just one to instantiate? Or did God create a multiverse?

i) I can't think of any reason why God is unable to create a multiverse. I don't know of any metaphysical impediment that prevents him from instantiating multiple alternate timelines. Of course it's impossible for one and the same timeline to combine or contain two or more alternate timelines, but if these are separated, I don't see that it's impossible for them to coexist.

ii) Assuming that God is unable to create a multiverse, is God unwilling to create a multiverse? We can't say for sure. However, it seems arbitrary to suppose God only instantiates one world history. There are so many interesting plotlines in the divine imagination. So many rich alternatives. World histories just as worthwhile as our own. So I incline to the view that God probably made a multiverse rather than a universe.

7. Here I need to evoke a distinction, drawn by Robin Collins, between a physical multiverse and a metaphysical multiverse. The point of contrast is not that one is material while the other is immaterial. Rather, "physical" in this context means a multiverse based on physics. There are competing interpretations of quantum mechanics. One solution to superposition is the many-worlds interpretation. On that view, Schrödinger's cat is both dead and alive. Each outcome is represented in a parallel universe. In the multiverse, Schrödinger's cat has nine lives! And there are Christian physicists like Don Page and Jeff Zweerink who endorse a physical multiverse.

However, I'm dubious about a physical multiverse. For one thing, but there are competing interpretations, and we don't have enough evidence to verify or falsify the many-worlds interpretation.

I also have a theological objection: A physical multiverse is rather mechanical. All physically feasible alternatives must be realized. That doesn't give God any discretion. And it generates a theodical problem since some possible worlds are irremediably evil. That's unworthy of God's wisdom and benevolence.

Instead of that, I'm partial to a metaphysical multiverse. That's independent of physics. On that model, not all possible timelines are represented. Only the better possible worlds make the cut.

8. On that view, human history on planet earth is just one slice of human history overall. Human history isn't confined to planet earth in our universe. There's a parallel universe where Adam never fell. Likewise, there are fallen worlds where redemptive history originates in China, or Japan, or North America, or South America, &c. Some of these have a plot similar to Bible history, but with different geographical points of origin. Where Eden exists in a different part of the world. Where there's a counterpart to Abraham in a different part of the world. Where the Son became Incarnate as a Chinese, Vietnamese, Aztec, East Indian, or Iroquois male, &c. The human race is scattered across the multiverse, where alternate timelines play out.

Even assuming most humans on our planet are hellbound, yet if you total the heavenbound humans in the multiverse, the cumulative tally for the saints might vastly outnumber the damned. Every people-group will be well-represented.

To use our planetary history as the final frame of reference is a cosmically provincial basis of comparison.

9. It might be objected that my position is too speculative. And this is certainly an exercise in philosophical theology. That said:

i) While it's speculative to postulate a multiverse, it's no less speculative to deny a multiverse. You can't avoid conjecture one way or the other.

ii) Christianity theism has metaphysical resources lacking in naturalism. And we shouldn't hesitate to take advantage of the extra resources at our disposal.

iii) If the universe is a tribute to God's greatness, how much more so a multiverse.

iv) Although it's speculative, it's not sheer speculation. As I said, I think Scripture already bears witness to possible worlds. And from there it's a short step to a metaphysical multiverse.

v) There is, moreover, the burden of proof. I don't even have to affirm it. It's enough that I can't rule it out. It's a reasonable conjecture. Even if I suspend judgment, it disables the theodical objection, for the theodical objection relies the ambitious assumption that human history is confined to our planet. To question that objection, I don't have to disprove the underlying assumption. Rather, it's up to the critic to prove his own assumption or disprove the multiverse scenario. The onus is on a critic to justify his operating assumptions.

vi) Moreover, this isn't just an apologetic tactic on my part. I have no good reason to think God suffer from our

limitations. When we come to a fork in the road, that's a binary choice between turning left or right. Yet that's because, at that stage, the fork in the road is a given. But it's not a given for God.

10. BTW, I don't put this forward because I think the traditional position is indefensible. But the objection to the traditional position relies on a gratuitous assumption that I just don't grant or even find plausible.

Does God hate the reprobate?

Jerry Walls says Calvinists think the divine hatred passages are clearer and Calvinists have to explain away the divine love passages he brings up.

i) As I recall, there's only one divine "hatred" passage that's a major proof-text for reprobation, and that's Mal 1:2-3 filtered through Rom 9:13.

ii) Although there are some direct proof-texts for reprobation or double predestination, there's also indirect evidence based on the relationship between doctrine. As Vos puts it,

"It is true that the Bible also teaches the principle of preterition, by way of implication, as a corollary of certain other fundamental doctrines. No more is necessary than to combine the two single truths, that all saving grace, inclusive of faith, is the supernatural gift of God, and that not all men are made recipients of this gift, to perceive immediately that the ultimate reason why some are saved and others passed by can lie in God alone. In so far every confession which adheres to these two primary facts—and

no Calvinistic confession could for a moment hesitate to do so—is also bound to imply the doctrine of preterition."

Vos gives some additional general evidence in the same article:

<http://www.biblicaltheology.org/bidp.pdf>

iii) And here's another fine article by Vos that's directly on point:

<http://www.biblicaltheology.org/sdlg.pdf>

iv) Then there's the question of how to construe emotive ascriptions for God. In general, I take these to be anthropopathisms. I think divine "hatred" for sin/sinners means divine disapprobation for sin/sinners.

v) I don't think it's reasonable that God would literally get angry. Even apart from Calvinism, if God is omniscient and omnipotent, how can he get angry about events he sees coming a mile away, which he can prevent?

Or, even if he's not omniscient (open theism), he knows that he's setting in motion a chain reaction that may have disastrous consequences. It would be self-incriminating for God to be angry about a situation he had a hand in causing.

And in Calvinism, why would God be angry about something he predestined. It's like a novelist getting angry at one of his characters. If he doesn't like the character, don't include it in the novel!

vi) I view love/hate passages as rhetorical antithetical parallelism. And I think in that context, "love" is a legal synonym for choosing while "hate" is a legal synonym for rejecting (or an antonym for choosing).

vii) I don't think these reflect divine emotion. I think it's more about divine policies.

viii) Now, it maybe that from a freewill theist standpoint, they think reprobation is tantamount to divine hatred. If God doesn't elect someone, that's a hateful way for God to treat a human being. That, however, wouldn't be interpreting Reformed theology on its own terms, but imputing connotations to Reformed usage from a frame of reference extrinsic to Calvinism and hostile to Calvinism. So that's very confused on their part.

ix) I don't think God has to hate someone to reprobate them.

x) Love is frequently defined as acting in the best interests of another. But that's a very problematic definition for freewill theism. In freewill theism, God doesn't act in the best interests of individuals. Rather, he acts for the common good, which is often at the expense of individuals.

In freewill theism, God doesn't intervene to protect individuals from harm, because, according to freewill theism, too much divine meddling would be detrimental to the common good. But even if we grant that contention for argument's sake, it means that unfortunate individuals get the short end of the stick.

Jerry tries to offset that with his theory of postmortem damage control. But that shows strains in freewill theism.

xi) Let's take the science fiction trope of ETs from a dying planet. They discover that earth has the natural resources they need to survive.

Suppose, because they're inhuman, they have no natural rapport with humans. Emotionally speaking, they have no more empathy for human suffering than a lion has for a gazelle.

It isn't evil. They aren't malevolent. They don't wish us ill. But they don't care about humans at an emotional level. They don't desire "union". They don't seek reciprocity.

However, let's say the aliens are very ethical. Even though it would be simpler for them to conquer us, colonize the planet, and exterminate humans, they believe that would be morally wrong.

Despite their overwhelming technological superiority, which gives them total leverage, they work out a compromise with humans. They will share the planet with us. And they will use their technology to improve human quality of life.

What they lack in emotional compassion they make up for in intellectual or ethical compassion.

That may not be definable as love, but it's an analogy worth exploring (perhaps).

Another comparison would be angelic love. Are angels capable of loving humans, in the emotional sense, desire for union, reciprocity? If not, they might still be like the ETs.

xii) Regarding love, freewill theists use human analogies. For instance, they're fond of the parental analogy. But that creates problems for their position.

If it lay within his power, a good human parent would intervene to prevent harm to his children. Freewill theists may say good parents have to let children make their own mistakes. But that's a facile overgeneralization. Sure, there's the specter of helicopter parents. That goes too far.

But there are other cases where a parent would be negligent not to step in. So that analogy cuts both ways. Some parents are overprotective while other parents are negligent. It isn't all-or-nothing.

xiii) In addition, human parents love their own children far more than they love the children of strangers. So parental love isn't equitable, but partial.

xiv) A freewill theist might object that I've misconstrued the analogy. God is everyone's parent. So he loves all his children.

However, even if we grant that contention for discussion purposes, it isn't that simple. As far as human analogies go, parents of growing children should be studiously impartial. Even if they have a favorite child, they should conceal their bias.

But the situation with grown children is different. Adults have adult responsibilities. Some grown children are admirable while some grown children are appalling. I don't think grown children are entitled to the same "unconditional love" as growing children. There's nothing inherently wrong with a parent having a favorite grown child if, in fact, one

grown child is caring and considerate while the other grown child is selfish and indifferent.

Of course, in Calvinism, God doesn't elect or reprobate people in reaction to their behavior. But I'm just dealing with theological analogies that freewill theists are wont to use.

xv) Then you have romantic love, which is exclusive. Even promiscuous men and women may have one person who's the love of their life. One person who holds a special place in their heart. Unrivaled affection.

In both the OT and NT, the Bible uses marital metaphors for God. Yet it doesn't use those for God's relationship with the world, but his relationship with Israel or the Church.

xvi) In Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Hosea, God casts himself in the role of a jilted lover or cuckold husband. I think that's blatantly anthropomorphic. However, freewill theists often takes those sentiments at face value. But that creates a problem for their position, because romantic love is discriminating—the antithesis of indiscriminate love.

One man's meat is another man's poison

The qualification “as much as you properly can” is needed in case one faced a situation where one could promote the flourishing of one person (say Peter) only by withholding the true flourishing of another (say John), or by losing some other good that was even greater in value. I do not believe, however, that God ever faces a situation in which he can promote the true flourishing of one person only by withholding the flourishing of another, nor do I think he is faced with a choice where he might have other goals that are inconsistent with promoting true flourishing. For the true flourishing of all persons is a right relationship with God, so given God’s almighty power and wisdom, he does not have to choose between promoting the true flourishing of Peter, say, instead of John. He can promote the true flourishing of both. Jerry Walls, Does God

Love Everyone? What's Wrong With Calvinism, 30.

Consider a counterexample:

Cain spoke to Abel his brother. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him (Gen 4:8).

And Adam knew his wife again, and she bore a son and called his name Seth, for she said, "God has appointed for me another offspring instead of Abel, for Cain killed him" (Gen 4:25).

Seth is the replacement child for Abel. If Abel hadn't been murdered, Seth wouldn't exist. Therefore, Seth flourishes at the expense of Abel.

What is more, if Abel hadn't been murdered, he'd presumably father kids of his own. But he died before he had that chance. Hence, Seth flourishes at the expense of Abel's would-be children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, &c.

This doesn't necessary mean Adam and Eve would not have had a third child unless Abel was murdered. But conception is a matter of timing. Throw off the timing, even by a few minutes, and a different child will be conceived.

We could multiple examples. Because Joseph winds up in Egypt, he marries an Egyptian and has kids by her. Had he

remained in Canaan, he'd marry a Jewess and have children by her. The flourishing of his Egyptian descendants comes at the cost of the alternate timeline.

To recap:

I do not believe, however, that God ever faces a situation in which he can promote the true flourishing of one person only by withholding the flourishing of another, nor do I think he is faced with a choice where he might have other goals that are inconsistent with promoting true flourishing. For the true flourishing of all persons is a right relationship with God, so given God's almighty power and wisdom, he does not have to choose between promoting the true flourishing of Peter, say, instead of John. He can promote the true flourishing of both.

Jerry has a bad habit of asserting whatever he needs for his theory to be true.

In freewill theism, moreover, there are sometimes insurmountable obstacles to God getting his way, for human

freedom can thwart divine preferences. Jerry admits that in other contexts.

Is God love?

I'd like to make a brief observation about the claim, much belabored by Jerry Walls, that Calvinism really has no room for a loving God. Even when Calvinists affirm God's love, that's despite the logic of Calvinism.

Part of Jerry's argument is that it's inconsistent, indeed, double-talk, for Calvinists to simultaneously affirm reprobation and God's universal love. Suppose we grant that allegation for the sake of argument.

However, Jerry acts as though, unless the Calvinist God loves everyone, Calvinism has no room for a loving God. But that's a non sequitur.

The difference is that in Arminianism, God's love is general whereas in Calvinism, God's love is particular. In Arminianism, God's love is indiscriminate and ineffectual whereas in Calvinism, God's love is discriminate and effectual. Divine love is central and integral to Calvinism. But it's God's love for the elect.

(Of course, there's also the intra-Trinitarian love, which Calvinism affirms.)

Now, that may not be Jerry's concept of divine love, he may think that's a deficient concept of divine love, but it's devious for him to act as though Calvinists can't say "God is love" without crossing their fingers.

One of Jerry's chronic problems is a failure to distinguish between an external critique and an internal critique. Although the Calvinist concept of divine love is inconsistent with the Arminian concept of divine love, it's not internally

inconsistent. Jerry can't bring himself to honestly represent the opposing position. Not only is that unethical—it's philosophically inept.

Was God sovereign before he made the world?

I'd like to make another observation about this interview with Jerry Walls:

<https://www.spreaker.com/user/veracityhill/episode-10-the-order-of-salvation?>

Here I'm expanding on a comment I ran across on Jerry's Facebook wall.

Beginning around the 62 min. mark, Jerry said God was already love before the world existed. By contrast, God wasn't exercising sovereignty from all eternity because there was no creation, no world over which he was Lord.

What that claim overlooks is that God's antemundane decision to create or not create is, in itself, an exercise in divine sovereignty. By the same token, God's antemundane selection of which world to create is, in itself, an exercise in divine sovereignty. And unless Jerry thinks there was a time when God was undecided, it was always the case (or timelessly the case) that God exercised his sovereign will by choosing to make the whorl—as well as choosing which world to make.

It's especially obtuse for Jerry to say God wasn't sovereign before creation as an objection to Calvinism when Calvinism regards predestination as a paradigm-case of divine sovereignty. Needless to say, predestination concerns God's antemundane plan for the world. Although Jerry can reject that, he can hardly say, as a matter of principle, that God was unable to exercise his sovereignty prior to creation. For that's clearly possible.

Moreover, for some theists, God's sovereignty consists in front-loading creation, so that everything unfolds accordingly. Take Leibniz's reestablished harmony, adherents of planned evolution, or the Thomism of Ed Feser:

God as primary cause is like the author of the novel. God's effects are therefore not to be sought merely in otherwise unexplained natural phenomena, any more than an author's influence extends only to unusual plot points. Just as a novelist is responsible for every aspect of the story, God is the source of all causality, including ordinary, everyday causes for which we already have good scientific descriptions.

<https://www.firstthings.com/article/2012/12/conflict-resolution>

In the same vein, William Dembski says:

"All things are created twice. There's a mental or first creation, and a physical or second creation of all things." Creation always starts with an idea and ends with

a thing. Anything achieved must first be conceived. Creation is thus a process bounded by conception at one end and realization at the other. The End of Creation (B&H, 2009), 107.

Finally, Walls made the defamatory allegation that "Calvinists are intoxicated by power" (40-41 min. mark). Of course, that's oxymoronic. To be intoxicated by power is to crave power for *yourself*, or be drunk on the power you have at your own disposal. That's the polar opposite of disclaiming your own power and confessing yourself to be at the disposal of *another*.

Serrated theodicy

Calvinism sounds bad...until you compare it to the alternatives.

On Facebook, Jerry Walls recently plugged a NYT oped attacking Calvinism: "Teaching Calvin in California".

Jerry fancies himself a Wesleyan Arminian, but just imagine teaching Charles Wesley in California. How do you think his sermon on earthquakes as divine judgment would go over in that seismically active part of the world:

<http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-129-the-cause-and-cure-of-earthquakes/>

Jerry is an Arminian propagandist first and a philosopher second. Always in that order. Jerry is a corruptor of critical discourse. A good philosopher practices critical thinking skills, and cultivates critical thinking skills in his students and listeners. Part of being a good philosopher is to mentally argue both sides of the issue so that you can defend your position in the face of the best the competition has to offer. You anticipate objections. You anticipate counterexamples. In fact, good philosophers will even improve on the arguments of the opposing position, in order to respond to the strongest possible objections to their own position.

Jerry never does that. He always gives a one-sided presentation. He picks on weak opponents. He submits to softball questions by sympathetic interviewers.

I'll be the first to admit that Calvinism has an uncomfortably severe aspect. But I don't think that's a damaging concession. The Bible often has a severe aspect. Take "offensive" passages in the OT. Or the "offensive" doctrine of hell. Or graphic and horrific imagery in the Book of Revelation.

For that matter, extrabiblical historical has an uncomfortably severe aspect. All the horrific events that happen in the world at large, on a regular basis.

It's unintelligent to assess Calvinism merely on its own terms. You need to put Calvinism in context. You need to make a comparative judgment. Comparing and contrasting Calvinism with the alternatives. I'm going to briefly review traditional religious strategies in response to the problem of evil.

I. INDIAN PHILOSOPHY

i) The law of karma is a traditional Hindu and Buddhist explanation for the problem of suffering. Why do the innocent suffer? Hinduism and Buddhism cut the knot by denying the premise. According to Hinduism and Buddhism, there is no such thing as innocent suffering. If a 5-year-old girl is run over by a drunk driver, she's being punished for something she did in a past life.

ii) In one strand of Hinduism, evil exists because good and evil exist in the divine, and every possibility must be realized. In that respect, Hinduism is like Neoplatonism, Manichean or Zoroastrian dualism, the multiverse, and the principle of plenitude.

On that view, evil is just as ultimate as good. Evil is an ineluctable aspect of bedrock reality. On that view, evil is not a declension from the way things are supposed to be. Not a temporary side-effect of something more primary.

iii) Apropos (ii), the solution to the problem of evil is twofold:

a) Cultivate detachment

b) Annihilation. The only escape is to break the vicious cycle of karmic reincarnation by passing into oblivion.

iv) Apropos (iii), detachment has different aspects:

a) In Buddhism, we suffer because we lose what we love. Everything is fleeting. The solution is renunciation of human affections. Of course, one could argue that the cure is worse than the disease. But there are no good options.

b) On a related note, both Hinduism and Buddhism have a doctrine of maya, although the interpretation varies. In general, this involves a distinction between appearance and reality. Between the divine and the world or the self and the world.

In one strand of Hinduism, what is ultimately real is the immutable, eternal, preexistent soul. The world of time and space is illusory. But since that's the world in which evil occurs, evil is illusory. You need to practice meditation to withdraw psychologically from the bewitchment of the phenomenal world.

In Buddhism, maya is a delusion that masks the void. In Hinduism, you practice mediation to realize that your real inner self is untouched by phenomenal evil. In Buddhism,

you practice meditation to realize that you have no real inner self to be touched by phenomenal evil.

These are very bleak philosophies.

II. ATHEISM

Atheism has some affinities with Buddhism. Indeed, Schopenhauer's nihilistic outlook is similar to Buddhism.

i) Technically, atheism can't have a theodicy, but it must address the problem of evil. One intractable difficulty with atheism is that if you're cheated in this life, you don't get a second chance. In a godless universe, many people suffer irredeemable loss. There are no eschatological compensations. No reversal of fortunes.

ii) In addition, there are no objective goods. We value certain things because our evolutionary conditioning has brainwashed us into believing some things are worthwhile, but when you rip away the mask, there's nothing behind the mask. Just a dumb, pitiless, amoral process—much like the Buddhist void.

III. UNIVERSALISM

On the face of it, universalism has the most appealing theodicy. But on closer examination it has some bloody jagged edges.

i) If God is going to save everybody, why put so many people through a hell on earth in the first place? It's like splashing acid in someone's face, then paying for her skin grafts and reconstructive surgery. Does universalism really

require God to stand by as Nazis perform human experimentation on Jewish children?

ii) By the same token, the price of universalism is for victims of horrendous evil to share eternity with their tormentors. Mengele and his victims will be neighbors in paradise.

There's a sense in which the purest form of punishment, pure retribution, is to be denied a second chance. You crossed a line of no return. You burned your return ticket. Despair is the truest form of just deserts. The damned have no hope. That's what makes hell hellish. If there's no injustice so heinous that it's unforgivable, then is there any ultimate justice?

IV. MOLINISM

i) Molinism attempts to harmonize freewill with determinism. Possible worlds contain moral evils caused by human agents with libertarian freedom.

If, however, God instantiates a possible world, that's a package deal. Everything that happens in the actual world is bound to happen. Even though alternative courses of action are viable options, those only happen in possible worlds that God did not instantiate. If a possible world is indeterministic, an actual world is deterministic. By instantiating that particular world history, every event must unfold accordingly and inexorably.

It's like a library of DVDs. Some DVDs are unplayable (infeasible). But of the subset of playable DVDs, God chooses which DVD to play. And the plot is predetermined. From start to finish, everything happens according to script.

Compare it to instant replay. Even if the original outcome was indeterminate, the replay is determinate. If we think of possible worlds as abstract objects, then (according to Molinism), the human agents were free, but these aren't real people. In the ensemble of possible worlds, they can do otherwise. Indeed, there are possible world where they do otherwise. But in the real world, where they are real people, with consciousness and feelings, they can't rewrite the plot. Each possible world has a single history. It can't combine two or more alternate histories from different possible worlds.

ii) In addition, human agents don't get to choose which possible world will be instantiated. Suppose there's a feasible world in which Judas is heavenbound. In that world, he doesn't betray Jesus. That would clearly be a better world for Judas to find himself within, but he gets stuck in the world where he's hellbound. He is fated to betray Jesus the moment God instantiates that particular timeline rather than some alternate timeline. Trapped in a world where he is doomed.

V. ARMINIANISM

Superficially, this seems kinder and gentler than Calvinism. But on closer examination, you will cut yourself on razor wire.

Arminianism has two basic commitments: God's love and man's freedom. These two principles tug in opposing directions. The claim is that for love to be genuine, humans must be at liberty to refrain from reciprocating God's love.

But even if, for the sake of argument, we grant that contention, it's only plausible at an individual level. Problem is, humans are social creatures who interact with fellow humans. As a result, God must respect the freedom of Nazi scientists to experiment on human guinea pigs (to take one example). Protecting the innocent from horrendous harm is less important than creating a theater in which "true love" is possible.

VI. OPEN THEISM

According to open theism, God is in a situation of diminished responsibility for evil inasmuch as God is ignorant of the long-term consequences of his creative actions. But there are problems with that theodicy:

i) If you don't know whether you're inserting innocent people into a dangerous situation, shouldn't you play it safe? When in doubt, is it not morally incumbent on you to avoid exposing people to an unforeseeable, but potentially catastrophic risk?

ii) Moreover, even if God can't foresee the outcome a year in advance or a month in advance, surely he can foresee the outcome a day in advance or an hour in advance. As events come to a head, the future becomes increasingly predictable, even if the outcome is not a dead certainty.

In addition, we don't generally think the bare possibility that something might not be harmful is an excuse to insert innocent people into what is, in all likelihood, a hazardous situation.

VII. CALVINISM

According to Calvinism, God predestines every event, including evil events. Although that's a sobering claim, an implication of that claim is that everything happens for a reason. Indeed, there's a good reason for whatever God ordains.

Especially in cases of evil, we typically demand that there better be a good reason to justify it. And that's precisely what Calvinism claims.

Compare that to the candid admission of sophisticated freewill theism:

According to the story I have told, there is generally no explanation of why this evil happened to that person...It means being the playthings of chance. It means living in a world in which innocent children die horribly, and it means something worse than that: it means living in a world in which innocent children die horribly for no reason at all. It means living in a world in which the wicked, through sheer luck, often prosper.

But whether a particular horror is connected with human choices or not, it is evident, at least in many cases, that God could have prevented the horror without sacrificing any great good or allowing some even greater horror.

No appeal to considerations in any way involving human free will or future benefits to human beings can possibly be relevant to the problem with which this case [Auschwitz] confronts.

*There are many horrors, vastly many, from which no discernible good results—and certainly no good, discernible or not, that an omnipotent being couldn't have achieved without the horror; in fact, without any suffering at all. P. van Inwagen, *The Problem of Evil* (Oxford, 2006), 89,95,97.*

Is that clearly preferable to Calvinism? What's disturbing isn't so much the idea that God predestines horrendous evils, but the fact of horrendous evils. The world has exactly the same horrendous evils regardless of your theodicy.

It's just immature, as well as deceptive, for Arminians like Walls to constantly attack Calvinism based on the disagreeable implications of Calvinism while constantly refusing to compare it with the disagreeable implications of every other theodicy. In our fallen world, there are no nice theodices. Every theodicy has serrated edges. There's no escaping that.

Orthopraxis

Years ago, John Frame wrote a provocative essay on the infighting within Calvinism:

<https://frame-poythress.org/machens-warrior-children/>

That raises the question of whether Calvinism is more prone to internecine warfare than other theological traditions, and—if so—why that's the case.

i) Calvinism is polemical theology because it was birthed in a setting of political and theological unrest. It had to fight for a seat at the table.

ii) There are factions within freewill theism, viz. Arminianism, Molinism, open theism. And of course, Protestants disagree on a wide range of issues, viz. eschatology, inerrancy, worship, the atonement, the sacraments, evolution, hell, inclusivism/exclusivism, cessationism, law and gospel, church and state, &c.

iii) At the risk of overgeneralization, some theological traditions are more concerned with orthodoxy while other theological traditions are more concerned with orthopraxy. In liturgical churches (e.g. Catholicism, Anglo-Catholicism, Lutheranism, Eastern Orthodoxy), there's an obsession on right ritual.

Now, a critic might object that Eastern Orthodoxy, to take a prominent example, is centrally concerned with orthodoxy. Take furious historical debates of the Trinity, the person of Christ, the Filioque clause.

Yet liturgical churches typically split over innovations in the liturgy. In that regard, orthopraxy is more central. Orthodoxy supplies the backstory for liturgy. The sacraments translate doctrine into practice. Since our relationship to God is mediated through church and sacrament, orthopraxy takes center stage. In a sense, orthodoxy exists for the sake of orthopraxy, because orthopraxy is the business end of Christianity. Orthodoxy is a means to an orthopractic end.

Rabbinic Judaism provides a Jewish counterpart. A Talmudic religion, centered on ethics and ritual. And Islam provides a Muslim counterpart. The fanatical obsession with sharia. In both cases, what you do is more important than what you believe.

By contrast, because Baptists and Presbyterians deemphasize church and sacraments compared to liturgical churches, doctrine takes center stage. That redraws the battle lines from orthopraxy to orthodoxy. Of course, rival Protestant traditions still haggle over the sacraments, because those function as boundary markers to distinguish rival Protestant traditions, but church and sacraments lack the centrality in those traditions which they occupy in liturgical churches because your salvation is about right belief rather than right ritual.

Lord of the Flies

1. *Lord of the Flies* is a classic novel about some civilized kids stranded on a desert island. In the absence of adult supervision, social life degenerates into savagery. The treatment is the antithesis of nostalgic novels about boys separated from civilization like Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*.

The story is fictional, but realistic. Many readers find that a plausible scenario of what would happen in that situation.

The novel has lost some of its original shock value in an age when kids the same age shoot each other on the mean streets of the hood.

Tracing the literary allusions in a fictional writer can be tricky because the creative process has both conscious and unconscious dynamics. There's what the author intends, and then there's what may subliminally inform his work. So some of the connections I suggest may be coincidental. But it makes it more interesting to read with those connections in mind (see below).

The novel is, in some measure, a retelling of paradise lost. "Lord of the Flies" (Beelzebub) is a traditional, derogatory epithet for Satan. The "beast from the water" evokes Rev 13, while the "snake-thing" evokes Gen 3, Rev 12 & 20. The "beast from the air" might evoke the outcast, downcast dragon or serpent in Rev 12. In Revelation, the Beast is a Satanic surrogate. An Antichrist figure.

In addition, you have the possession motif. The beast "in us". Idolatry, blood sacrifice, human sacrifice, and a devil's pact with Lord of the Flies (i.e. pig head).

Simon evokes St. Peter. Simon is a seer. A visionary—like St. Peter (Acts 10) The closest thing to a Christian character in the novel. And like St. Peter (Jn 21), he is martyred.

By contrast, Piggy is the rationalist. Some literary critics classify him as a secular humanist. But he's literally a near-sighted rationalist. And figuratively, his rationalism blinds him to the enveloping evil. Piggy's nickname is ironic because his alter-ego is the diabolical pig head which some of the boys worship.

As Golding explains in an interview, the boys are "innocent" in the sense that they are ignorant of their own natures. As a result, they have little resistance to evil. They eventually come to understand themselves, but that's "tragic knowledge".

The topical island is Edenic. The arrival of the boys interjects a seminal evil into this Edenic setting. The lack of external restraint results in moral freefall. However, the story also has Bacchanalian elements. Golding was a fan of Euripides. That's compatible with a Christian interpretation, inasmuch as pagan nihilism is the opposite of Christian grace.

The violence on the island is, of course, a microcosm of world war. Golding's novel was heavily influenced by his experience in WWII.

2. Freewill theists like Jerry Walls attack the "harsh" God of Calvinism, which they contrast with the loving, omnibenevolent God of freewill theism. A God who acts in the best interest of each and every human being.

Yet in reality, our world looks far more like Lord of the Flies. Humans marooned on planet earth, left to their own devices. No significant outside intervention. This is our desert island. Sure doesn't look like the kind of world that the theology of Jerry Walls et al. predicts for. Indeed, Walls is very aware of the disconnect between his utopian narrative and the dystopian reality, which is why, like John Hick, he stipulates an eschatological payoff.

The comparison is accentuated by freewill theists who subscribe to theistic evolution. In that event, there was no historic fall from an original state of rectitude. Rather, our "sins" are really animal instincts. We're direct descendants of animals that had to tough it out in sub-Saharan Africa, long ago. The law of the jungle rather than the law of God was our ordinance. That's even more like Lord of the Flies. They revert to state of nature because they really are little beasts.

3. Now, there are various ways a freewill theist might respond to the comparison:

i) He might agree. He might say libertarian freedom results in a Lord of the Flies world. In order for humans to have morally significant freedom, God can only interfere on rare occasion. But there are problems with that response:

ii) Freewill theists don't typically use Lord of the Flies as an illustration to showcase God's omnibenevolence. Jerry Walls, for one, alleges that Calvinists resorting to deceptive rhetoric to conceal the malevolent character of Calvinism. Yet if freewill theism predicts for a world like Lord of the Flies, then we could rightly accuse freewill theists like Jerry Walls of using deceptive rhetoric to conceal the malevolent character of freewill theism.

There's a generally deistic quality to that scenario. Most of the time, we're on our own. We must fend for ourselves. God doesn't protect the faithful from harm.

That's exacerbated by the fact that freewill theists like Walls are fond of depicting humans as immature kids in relation to God. In attacking Calvinism, they ask how a good parent could treat their young kids that way.

But, of course, we could say the same thing about Lord of the Flies as an allegory for freewill theism. How could a loving, omnibenevolent parent drop their kids into that survival situation. Leave them unattended. Isn't that the definition of child neglect? Is the God of freewill theism a negligent parent?

2. Conversely, a freewill theist might say the comparison is misleading. God is not detached. Consider his redemptive acts in Scripture. Consider answered prayer or modern miracles.

There are, however, problems with that response:

i) It fails to distinguish freewill theism from Calvinism. Presumably, a freewill theist doesn't suppose God answers the prayers of freewill theists at a higher rate than Calvinists (or Thomists or Augustinians). Calvinists have as much or little experience of divine intervention as freewill theists.

Likewise, Reformed theology affirms Biblical miracles and makes allowance for modern miracles, answered prayer, special providence.

ii) The freewill defense is predicated on minimal divine intervention. That's inconsistent with stressing God's

regular intercession in answer to prayer, miraculous deliverance from terrible ordeals, &c.

iii) Moreover, this involves, not just Scripture, but a theological interpretation of Scripture, and whether that interpretation is borne out in reality. What's the empirical evidence that God is omnibenevolent? What's the empirical evidence that God is acting in the best interests of each and every person? Does the state of the world correspond to that claim? Or does reality clash with that theological expectation?

iv) One problem is the tension in freewill theism between divine love and human freedom. A loving parent will step in to shield his child from harm, even if that infringes on the child's freedom.

3. A freewill theist might attempt a tu quoque argument. Is the Calvinists saying we're in a Lord of the Flies kind of world? Does he think God takes such a hands-off approach to human interactions? Where we're left to our wisdom and resources?

i) However, a difficulty with that maneuver is that even assuming that's a problem for Calvinism, drawing a parallel doesn't cease to make it a problem for freewill theism. Is freewill theism defensible on its own grounds?

ii) If, moreover, Calvinism has an admittedly "harsher" view of providence, then that scenario is more consistent with Calvinism than freewill theism.

Last plane out of Saigon

Lotharson: And what about four-point Calvinists rejecting limited atonement?

Jerry Walls: That is only because it is rather embarrassing to admit you don't really believe "God so loved the (whole) world" and gave his Son for all. But that is only a feeble attempt to mask the hard reality that the Calvinist God does not truly love all persons.

Such claims make shambles of the claim that God is love.

Jerry Walls: Calvinists are skillful at employing the rhetoric of love and most people do not really understand what Calvinists are saying. So Calvinism maintains credibility by way of misleading rhetoric about the love of God that their theology does not really support.

Jerry Walls: The idea of unconditional election to salvation and damnation is morally abhorrent, and applying it to your own children only makes it more graphic. But that is Calvinist piety at its best. You

sacrifice not only your child but also your moral intuitions in the name of worshiping a God whose “goodness” is utterly at odds with the normal meaning of that term.

<https://lotharlorraine.wordpress.com/2014/06/07/bound-to-eternally-suffer-an-interview-with-philosopher-jerry-walls/>

This is typical of what Walls has said in many books, articles, and live presentations. What's arresting about Walls is his officious self-confidence in his indubitable moral intuitions. He acts as though it's a self-evident truth that God must love everyone. To deny that God loves everyone is morally abhorrent. Unless God loves everybody, God's goodness is "utterly at odds" with the "normal" meaning of the term. Jerry presumes that, deep down, every person shares his moral intuitions. You can only disagree with Walls on pain of sacrificing your moral intuitions.

My immediate point is not to debate the factual question of whether God does or doesn't love everyone. I'm just dealing with Jerry's authoritarian appeal to his unquestioned moral intuitions. It's a kind of natural theology.

Part of the superficial appeal lies in resorting to faceless abstractions or one-sided examples. But let's put some faces on his moral intuitions:

In 1978, Singleton raped 15-year-old Mary Vincent, cut off her forearms and

left her naked in a ditch near Modesto to die.

<http://articles.latimes.com/2002/jan/01/local/me-19534>

According to Walls, to deny that God must love Lawrence Singleton violates our moral intuitions. It would be morally abhorrent for God not to love the man who raped an adolescent girl, chopped off her arms, and left her for dead in a ditch. I wonder if Mary Vincent shares his moral intuitions.

A 9-year-old girl [Jessica Lunsford] was raped, bound and buried alive, kneeling and clutching a purple stuffed dolphin.

<http://www.foxnews.com/story/2005/04/20/prosecutors-lunsford-raped-buried-alive.html>

According to Walls, unless God loves John Evander Couey, God's goodness is "utterly at odds" with the "normal" meaning of the term. If we could interview the dead 9-year-old victim whom he raped and buried alive, I wonder if she'd share his moral intuitions.

Mengele promoted medical experimentation on inmates, especially dwarfs and twins. He is said to have supervised an operation by which two

Gypsy children were sewn together to create Siamese twins; the hands of the children became badly infected where the veins had been resected. (Snyder, Louis. Encyclopedia of the Third Reich Marlowe & Co., 1997.)

http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsourc/Holocaust/auschwitz_faq_16.html

According to Walls, it would be morally abhorrent for God not to love Josef Mengele. You can only deny God's universal love for men like Mengele by sacrificing your moral intuitions. I wonder if the Gypsy twins who were the guinea pigs in Mengele's experimentation would resonant with Jerry's moral intuitions. Unfortunately, they're unavailable for comment.

Victims were reportedly skinned alive, scalped, "crowned" with barbed wire, impaled, crucified, hanged, stoned to death, tied to planks and pushed slowly into furnaces or tanks of boiling water, and rolled around naked in internally nail-studded barrels. Chekists reportedly poured water on naked prisoners in the winter-bound streets until they became

living ice statues. Others reportedly beheaded their victims by twisting their necks until their heads could be torn off. The Chinese Cheka detachments stationed in Kiev reportedly would attach an iron tube to the torso of a bound victim and insert a rat into the other end which was then closed off with wire netting.

<http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Cheka>

According to Walls, God isn't good in any recognizable sense unless he loves the men who perpetrated these atrocities. But if you were to interview the victims, would they share Jerry's moral intuitions?

It's striking how Walls arrogates to himself the right to speak on behalf of everyone else's moral intuitions. Although I've read and seen lots of his material, I don't recall Jerry ever making a systematic effort—or any effort at all—to investigate the viewpoint of people who were on the receiving end of hideous evils. He talks like a man who's lived a charmed life. A sheltered life.

Let's compare Jerry's presentation of freewill theism with another freewill theist:

If the story is true, much of the evil in the world is due to chance...It could well happen that a woman

was raped and murdered only because she yielded to a sudden impulse to pull over to the side of the road and consult a map. There may be, quite literally, no more to say than that in response to the question, "Why her?".

According to the story I have told, there is generally no explanation of why this evil happened to that person...It means being the playthings of chance. It means living in a world in which innocent children die horribly, and it means something worse than that: it means living in a world in which innocent children die horribly for no reason at all. It means living in a world in which the wicked, through sheer luck, often prosper.

But whether a particular horror is connected with human choices or not, it is evident, at least in many cases, that God could have prevented the horror without sacrificing any great good or allowing some even greater horror.

No appeal to considerations in any way involving human free will or future benefits to human beings can possibly be relevant to the problem with which this case [Auschwitz] confronts.

There are many horrors, vastly many, from which no discernible good results—and certainly no good, discernible or not, that an omnipotent being couldn't have achieved without the horror; in fact, without any suffering at all. Here is a true story. A man came upon a young woman in an isolated place. He overpowered her, chopped off her arms at the elbows with an axe, raped her, and left her to die. Somehow she managed to drag herself on the stumps of her arms to the side of the road, where she was discovered. She lived, but she experienced indescribably suffering, and although she is alive, she must live the rest of her life without arms and with the memory of what she had been forced to endure. No discernible good came of this, and it is wholly unreasonable to believe that any good could have come of it that an omnipotent being couldn't have achieved without employing the raped and mutilated woman's horrible suffering as a means to it.

If the Mutilation had not occurred, if it had been, so to speak, left out of the world, the world would be no worse than it is. (It would seem, in fact, that the

world would be significantly better if the Mutilation had been left out of it...

If the expanded freewill defense is a true story, God has made a choice about where to draw the line, the line between the actual horrors of history, the horrors that are real, and the horrors that are mere averted possibilities, might-have-beens. And the Mutilation falls on the "actual horrors of history" side of the line. And this fact shows that the line is an arbitrary one; for if he had drawn it so as to exclude the Mutilation from reality (and had excluded no other horror from reality), he would have lost no good thereby and he would have allowed no greater even. He had no reason for drawing the line where he did.

*In the bright world of good sense, this is why God did not prevent the Mutilation—insofar as there is a "why". He had to draw an arbitrary line, and he drew it. And that's all there is to be said. P. van Inwagen, *The Problem of Evil* (Oxford, 2006), 89,95,97,105,108.*

Inwagen doesn't indulge in Jerry's invidious comparisons between Calvinism and freewill theism. Inwagen doesn't

adopt the unctuous tone of moral superiority that Walls constantly resorts to.

But Inwagen's presentation puts freewill theism in a very different light than Walls. Why didn't the freewill theist God intervene to prevent Mengele from sewing the Gypsy kids together to create Siamese twins? Because God had to draw an arbitrary line, and they happen to fall on the wrong side of the line. Don't take it personally! It's just the luck of the draw!

It reminds me of when we evacuated the US embassy in Saigon. Many South Vietnamese were utterly desperate to escape. They were terrified of what awaited them when the Viet Cong took over. But there were only so many helicopters. Only so many seats.

If 9-year-old Jessica Lundsford is raped and buried alive, that's because all the seats were taken. Tough luck, kid!

The freewill theist God could have added more seats, but the number of seats is arbitrary, so the cutoff between that extra seat which would have saved Jessica Lundsford or Mary Vincent or the Gypsy twins is random. A few are rescued, but the rest of left behind—to be scalped, skinned alive, burned alive, boiled alive, buried alive, eaten alive, and so forth, for no reason at all. God had no reason for drawing the line where he did, but hey—he still loves you! He's so good, compared to that awful Calvinist God.

Although I disagree with Inwagen's theodicy, my intent is not to come down hard on his position. He can only play the hand he was dealt, and the problem of evil is a tough hand for any Christian to play. (The problem is much worse for atheists.) I'm simply drawing attention to the contrast between Jerry's rose-tinted commercial for freewill theism,

and the far starker, bleaker, franker version of Inwagen. Walls is always defaming Calvinists about our "deceptive" rhetoric, but he's hardly forthcoming in how he packages freewill theism.

Dying young

I'm posting my side of a little impromptu debate between Lydia McGrew and me:

steve said...

Thanks for your intellectual honesty. Sometimes we have to eliminate bad answers before we can explore better answers.

I'm glad I'm not in a position where I have to carry out those commands.

That said, I don't think death by divine command is worse than death by divine providence. I don't see that death by God's command presents a special theodicean problem in contrast to death by ordinary providence. Either both are morally problematic or neither is.

I think the efforts by Copan, Hess, and Matt Flannagan are shortsighted in that regard.

Same thing with more liberal theologians. If there's a problem, it's not with God's word but God's world. Even if one denies the inspiration of Scripture, that just relocates the problem to real-world atrocities, for which God remains ultimately responsible.

Conversely, if we have an adequate theodicy for real-world atrocities, why is that inapplicable to Biblical holy war?

steve said...

Why do you think the death of an infant by divine command presents a special problem, but his death by natural evil

does not? Your distinction is not self-explanatory.

Yes, my Calvinism may make a difference, but every theistic tradition (e.g. Thomism, Arminianism, Molinism, open theism) must grapple with parallel issues.

On just about every alternative, God is the ultimate cause of natural evil.

Sorry, but I'm still unclear on why you think death resulting from a divine command is problematic in a way that death resulting from a divine action is not. Take two scenarios:

i) Ed dies because God ordered Ted to kill Ed

ii) Ed dies because God made a mantrap to kill Ed

Does (i) present a special theodicean problem, but (ii) does not?

(I'm using the mantrap as a metaphor for death by some natural evil.)

Yes, you're focussed on the specific issue of babies, but you're combining two issues: who dies and how they die. My question is why the mode of death is especially problematic in one case, but not the other.

steve said...

i) I'm afraid I don't see from your explanation why the mode of death is morally germane. Your key contention is that killing a baby is wrong. So it's still the who rather than the how.

ii) Also, do you really mean that killing a baby is intrinsically wrong, or generally wrong-absent extraordinary

mitigating circumstances? What about terminating ectopic pregnancies? What about the double effect principle, viz. if the enemy uses human shields?

"In the second case, a fortiori, God has a right to permit a death by way of the natural laws which He has put in place and which He preserves."

Isn't "permission" a bit weak or euphemistic in that context? Does God merely permit the outcome of natural forces he himself put in place?

To take a comparison: Suppose a car is parked uphill with a wheel chock behind the right rear tire to prevent it from rolling down the hill. Suppose I kick the wheel chock aside, as a result of which the car rolls downhill. I didn't push the car downhill. I merely removed an impediment. Gravity did the rest.

Yet even that action on my part is more than permitting the car to roll downhill. I caused it to roll downhill.

If, moreover, I foresaw that by kicking the wheel chock aside, the car would run over a 2-year-old playing in the cul-de-sac at the bottom of the hill, I did more than permit his death. I engineered his death.

So I fail to see a morally salient difference between death by divine command and death by divine providence. Adding buffers between cause and effect doesn't avoid divine agency or divine intent.

One could imagine Rube Goldberg machines in which the effect is far removed from the cause. Yet the outcome would still be traceable to God.

(At the moment I'm discussing natural evils, not moral evils.)

steve said...

Several issues:

i) Seems to me you're taking a harder line than you did in the body of the post. There you framed the issue in terms of a prima facie conflict between two sets of divine commands. Now, however, you're saying it's intrinsically wrong to kill babies/children.

ii) If, on the one hand, Scripture unmistakably contains commands in God's name to kill babies/children—while, on the other hand, killing babies/children is intrinsically wrong, then either the God of biblical theism doesn't exist, or else he permitted Bible writers to misrepresent his true character. If the latter, this would mean that even though Scripture presents itself as a corrective to false views of deity in ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman religion, in fact the Bible cannot be used as a standard of comparison.

iii) It isn't quite clear to me whether or not you think God has the right to take the life of a baby/child. When you say that's intrinsically wrong, do you mean in reference to human agents, or do you include God in that prohibition? You've said God has a general right to take life, as well as acting in the best interests of the baby/child, but unless I missed something, there's a remaining ambiguity regarding your position on God's prerogative in taking the life of a baby/child.

iv) If you think God has the right to take the life of a baby/child, then I don't see why it would be intrinsically wrong for God to command someone to take the life of a

baby/child. That would not be a case of the human agent "playing God" by making life-and-death decisions which only God is entitled to make. Rather, the human would be divinely tasked to carry out a divine decision. Are you saying it would be illicit for God to delegate the implementation of his decision to a second party? Or is the decision itself illicit, even for God?

v) I'm studiously striving to avoid turning this thread into a debate over the freewill defense, but since you keep introducing that consideration, I have to say something about it. I mention natural evils because that would be a case of babies/children dying as an end-result of a chain of events initiated by God. God taking life through intermediate agencies, which is analogous to human agents who carry out divine commands.

Yes, there are cases in which natural evils are partly brought about by the choices/actions of free agents, but surely there are many exceptions. Take miscarriage. Although the pregnancy was partly brought about by human free agency, the miscarriage was not.

Whether a natural disaster kills humans (including babies/children) may be contingent on "where a family chooses to live in a certain year," but God could avert their death by giving them advance warning of an imminent natural disaster. That wouldn't destabilize the natural order or infringe on their freedom. Far from violating their freedom of choice, advance warning would expand their freedom of choice by giving them another, better option. More opportunities to choose from. So I don't see how invoking the freewill defense, even if we grant its key assumptions, will salvage your position.

vi) No, the double effect principle doesn't not apply in this particular case. The question, though, is whether, in principle, it is always wrong to take the life of a baby (or innocent life). If not, then that's not intrinsically wrong.

steve said...

Thanks. A few final points. I'll leave the last word to you:

i) I don't think the Fall accounts for natural evils, per se. Just human death by natural evil. Actually, natural "evils" are often natural goods. They preserve the balance of nature. I have no reason to think that's a result of the Fall. They only become "evil" in relation to us if humans happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

ii) You seem to be suggesting my response is inconsistent. Keep in mind that I was responding to you on your own terms, as you chose to frame the issue.

iii) To speak of advance warning as "interference" with "free human day-to-day decisions" strikes me as special pleading. Enabling people to make informed decisions about their future is hardly equivalent to interfering with their libertarian decision-making process. To the contrary, that enhances their freedom of opportunity. So I think there's a tension in your appeal which you are reluctant to acknowledge.

Notice I didn't use suggest God suspending the laws of nature. Freewill theists sometimes argue that we need a stable environment with predictable consequences to make free decisions. But even granting that assumption, advance warning is a different principle.

iv) Finally, many kids/babies die every year from natural causes. Death by natural causes can be more painful and prolonged than death by a sword or spear. Although you can say free choices figure in some of the deaths, I don't think it's plausible to universalize that claim.

An Arminian bedtime story

Jerry Walls

A CALVINIST BEDTIME STORY

“Imagine a parent who is able to control each and every action of his children, and furthermore, is able to do so by controlling their thoughts and inclinations. He is thus able to determine each and all actions taken by those children. He is also able to guarantee that they desire to do everything that they do, and this is exactly what he does. He puts them in a special playroom that contains not only toys but also gasoline and matches, and then gives them explicit instructions (with severe warnings) to avoid touching the gasoline and matches. Stepping out of sight, he determines that the children indeed begin to play with the matches. When the playroom is ablaze and the situation desperate, he rushes in to save them (well, some of them). He breaks through the wall, grabs three of the seven children, and carries them to safety. When the rescued children calm down, they ask about their four siblings. They want to know about the others

trapped inside, awaiting their inevitable fate. More importantly, they want to know if he can do something to rescue them as well.

“When they ask about the situation, their father tells them that this tragic occurrence had been determined by him, and indeed, that it was a smashing success—it had worked out in exact accordance with his plan. He then reminds them of his instructions and warnings, and he reminds them further that they willingly violated his commands. They should be grateful for their rescue, and they should understand that the others got what they deserved. When they begin to sob, he weeps with them; he tells them that he too has compassion on the doomed children (indeed, the compassion of the children for their siblings only dimly reflects his own). The children are puzzled by this, and one wants to know why such a compassionate father does not rescue the others (when it is clearly within his power to do so). His answer is this: this has happened so that everyone could see how smart he is (for being able to know how to do all this), how powerful he is (for being able to control everything and then effectively rescue them), how merciful he

is (for rescuing the children who broke his rules), and how just he is (for leaving the others to their fate in the burning playroom). And, he says, ‘This is the righteous thing for me to do, because it allows me to look as good as I should look.’”

From Thomas H. McCall, “We Believe in God’s Sovereign Goodness: A Rejoinder to John Piper” Trinity Journal 29NS (2008): 241-242.

It’s hard to imagine a better story for Piperian Calvinists who have a passion for their theology and want to convey its true glory to children and other neophytes in the faith.

i) To begin with, this trades on the emotional connotations of small, clueless, helpless children. That triggers our protective instincts. Yet that's hardly analogous to adults or sinners.

ii) Perhaps even more to the point, It's striking that Arminians like Walls and McCall find this persuasive when it's trivially easy to tell a parallel bedtime story by substituting Arminian assumptions.

Assuming divine foreknowledge or middle knowledge, God knowingly puts them in a special playroom that contains not only toys but also gasoline and matches. God knows that by putting them in that situation, they will set the play room on fire. God knows that by putting them in that situation,

some of them will burn to death. God could prevent that tragic outcome by not putting them in that situation in the first place. And that wouldn't violate their freewill.

Even assuming that God doesn't know the outcome, a parent is negligent for placing small children in a play room with matches and gasoline. Indeed, the legal term is "depraved indifference." If they die in a house fire as a result of those initial conditions, the parent is culpable for exposing them to such a risky situation.

Coercing God

This will be a running commentary on a lecture (“What’s Wrong with Calvinism?”) Jerry Walls gave at Houston Baptist U, available on YouTube. This has gotten lots of high-fives in Arminian circles.

Before commenting on the specifics, I’ll make a general observation. Jerry talks down to his audience. It’s like he’s teaching little kids in Sunday School. At one point he even feels the need to explain a common idiom (“bite the bullet”), as if his audience lacks a command of conversational English.

Throughout the lectures, he assumes a tone of calculated shock. There’s a steady build-up to the shocking revelations about the true character of Calvinism. For a Calvinist like me, it’s unintentionally comical to listen to him unveil Calvinism in incredulous, scandalized tones.

Jerry says the deepest issue distinguishing Calvinism from Wesleyan Arminianism is not nature of freedom. However, that’s critical to understanding the deepest issue. He quotes a phrase from the Westminster Confession: “Determining them, most freely.”

He admits this is coherent, given a compatibilist or soft determinist definition of freedom, which he proceeds to define thusly:

There is no logical inconsistency between freedom and determinism. Freedom and responsibility are compatible with total determinism.

A free act is not caused or compelled by anything external to the agent who performs it. The agent isn't forced to act against his will

It is, however, caused by something internal to the agent, namely, a psychological state of affairs such as a belief, desire or some combination of these two.

The agent performing the act could have done differently if he had wanted to. Freedom defines in counterfactual conditional terms.

The agent is determined to act given psychological states. Those states are caused by something external. But once you've got those, you act freely.

He says this is the definition of philosophically sophisticated Calvinists like John Feinberg.

i) To his credit, Jerry concedes the internal consistency of Calvinism at this juncture. I've read Arminians who don't even attempt to understand Calvinism on its own terms.

Admittedly, this is a throwaway concession on his part, for he's still going to lower the boom on Calvinism later on.

ii) That said, when you interpret a phrase from a 17C document (e.g. the WCF), you need to define the phrase in

terms of 17C theological usage. What did “freedom” mean to the Westminster Divines?

I don’t see that Jerry has investigated the historic usage of the Confession. He just gives us a generic definition of compatibilism.

iii) In addition, his definition is problematic. Compatibilism, as he defines it, is not the only deterministic theory of free agency. There’s a lot of work being done in action theory. So Jerry’s definition is simplistic and dated.

iv) Moreover, Calvinism is not committed to any particular theory of the will. It’s not so much a question of what action theory Calvinism espouses, but what action theory Calvinism opposes. Calvinism opposes any theory of the will that runs contrary to absolute predestination, meticulous providence, spiritual inability, monergistic regeneration, divine hardening, plenary verbal inspiration, and so on.

But as long as a theory of the will is consistent with various Reformed doctrines, Calvinism doesn’t select for any particular theory of the will.

He then says this definition has a “huge implication” that “can’t be overstated.” He highlights this implication by quoting a statement by Paul Helm:

If we suppose some form of compatibilism, then God could have created men and women who freely (in a sense compatible with determinism) did only what was morally right.

This, in turn, sets the stage for what Walls is pleased to brand the “Calvinist conundrum”:

- 1. God truly loves all persons.***
 - 2. Truly to love someone is to desire their well being and to promote their true flourishing as much as you can.***
 - 3. The well being and true flourishing of all persons is to be found in a right relationship with God, a saving relationship in which we love and obey him.***
 - 4. God could determine all persons freely to accept a right relationship with himself and be saved.***
 - 5. Therefore, all will be saved.***
-

Jerry admits that some Calvinists escape the conundrum by denying premise #1. They deny that God loves everyone.

Jerry says that’s consistent Calvinism. They embraced the “huge” implication “without flinching.” Mind you, he thinks that Calvinists who sidestep the conundrum achieve consistency at an exorbitant price.

Jerry quotes Arthur Pink, McGregor Wright, and John Piper as representatives of this option.

Actually, he quotes Wright as saying: "God never had the slightest intention of saving everyone."

i) That, however, isn't equivalent to denying that God loves everyone. Although that's consistent with such a denial, God might, in principle, love everyone, yet have no intention of saving everyone.

ii) Be that as it may, the quote is more problematic for Arminianism. The Arminian God never had the slightest intention of saving those he foresaw were doomed to hell if he made them. So Jerry's example circles back and bites his own position in the tail.

There are also problems with his appeal to John Piper:

i) For one thing, Piper is a well-known exponent of the "two-wills" view of God. So it's not clear that Piper denies premise #1.

ii) After quoting Piper's statement that God would be just to damn his own sons, Jerry says that "maybe Piper loves sons better than God."

Jerry says this as if it's self-evidently outrageous to imagine that a parent might love his own child more than God loves his child. But what's surprising or incongruous about that possibility?

a) To begin with, some mothers and fathers are blinded by parental love. They take a "my child right or wrong" approach. No matter what their child does to anyone else, they always side with their child. But although that may be psychologically understandable, that's not ethically admirable. They so completely identify with their own kids

that they ditch elementary moral standards where their own kids are concerned.

b) In addition, Arminianism traditionally affirms everlasting punishment. So does God love the damned less than their parents? Would parents damn their children?

Jerry says that according to Calvinism, the vast majority is destined for damnation. He doesn't cite any Reformed creed to that effect.

Having outlined consistent Calvinism, Jerry surveys inconsistent Calvinists who "waffle" on the alleged conundrum.

He singles out J. I. Packer. Packer says human beings are divinely controlled, yet morally responsible agents. Packer says that's a mystery.

Jerry attacks that position. He objects to Calvinists like Packer who "punt to mystery" under the "guise of superior piety."

Jerry distinguishes real from apparent contradictions, explicit from implicit contradictions, and offers his own definitions of mystery and paradox.

Now, I myself am one of those Calvinists who denies premise #1. So the alleged conundrum doesn't apply to me.

However, there are Calvinists who think the Bible teaches both reprobation and God's universal love or universal salvific desire. Although I don't agree with that position, if a Christian genuinely believes the Bible teaches both, then it's proper and pious for him to invoke divine mystery or paradox. They defer to the authority of Scripture, as they

understand it. That is a mark of superior piety, compared to Jerry's position.

In the same vein, Jerry attacks Packer's claim that the Gospel is "freely offered. God gives all free agency (voluntary decision-making power), so that we are answerable to him for what we do."

He considers that to be "confused." But suppose, for the sake of argument, that Packer's position is confused? Unlike John Feinberg or Paul Helm, whom Jerry previously cited as examples of "philosophically sophisticated" Calvinists, Packer is not a Reformed philosopher or philosophical theologian. Packer is a systematic theologian with a predilection for historical theology—especially the Puritans. If Packer's position is incoherent, that may simply mean he lacks the philosophical aptitude and training to formulate a logically consistent position. He has his limitations. He's better at systematic theology and pastoral theology than philosophical theology. Big deal.

Having mentioned the offer in the gospel in reference to Packer, Jerry segues into a segment on "Core Calvinism"

1. Only the elect can actually accept the offer of salvation

2. Not all are elect

3. Not all persons can actually accept the offer of salvation and be saved.

He raises the stock Arminian objection that the offer of the gospel is insincere or dishonest unless every sinner could “really” could respond or “actually” accept the offer.

He ignores standard Reformed rejoinders:

i) A bona fide offer is a true offer. Since the offer is conditional (“If you believe, you will be saved”), the veracity of the offer is not contingent on whether a would-be respondent is able to respond, but whether he would receive what the offer promises in case he responded.

ii) Assuming the classic Arminian doctrine of divine foreknowledge, God foreknows that everyone to whom the offer is made will not respond. So does that make the offer disingenuous?

iii) God doesn’t offer the gospel directly, but indirectly, through preachers and evangelists who, in the nature of the case, don’t know the disposition of the sinner.

iv) In addition, Jerry’s description of the “universal” offer is equivocal. The offer of the gospel isn’t universal in the sense of offering the gospel to all, for the gospel isn’t offered to every human being who ever lived.

Of course, Jerry subscribes to postmortem evangelism. But that’s not how the offer of the gospel is framed in the NT.

Jerry then discusses “Ambiguous Calvinism,” by which he means Calvinists who allegedly “slide back and forth between a libertarian view of human responsibility and a compatibilist view of divine sovereignty.

In that connection he quotes a statement by Calvin (Institutes, 3.24.8) about how rejecting the offer of the

gospel aggravates the guilt of the sinner. However, Jerry fails to explain how that's ambiguous.

And, in fact, we have examples in Scripture where OT prophets are told ahead of time that their warnings will fall on deaf ears. In that event, the warning is not intended to convert the sinner. The effect would be to aggravate his guilt.

Jerry then discusses Calvin's position in relation to backsliders and the "dreaded false hope." However, the notion that a professing believer can entertain false assurance of salvation is hardly unique to Calvinism. In most theological traditions it is possible for professing believer to be self-deluded.

From there, Jerry shift to "Misleading Calvinism." He says Calvinists who tell unbelievers that God loves them are dishonest. He singles out D. A. Carson, who distinguishes between different senses of divine "love":

1. Providential love, viz. rain falls on just and unjust (common grace).

2. Whosoever will, may come

3. Effective selective love towards elect.

I myself don't think it's necessary to tell unbelievers generally that God loves them. However, there's nothing dishonest about distinguishing between differing degrees of "love." We don't love strangers or enemies as much as we love our spouse, or mother, or son or daughter.

Jerry exclaims: "Isn't that the gospel, for crying out loud? Christ died for the world."

i) That objection assumes an Arminian definition of the "world." But in Johannine usage, the "world" is not synonymous with "everyone." Indeed, the "world" is often set in contrast to Christians. Exclusive rather than inclusive.

ii) Moreover, did Jesus give his life for pagans who lived and died before the advent of Christ? What does that mean, exactly?

God called Abraham out of paganism, but he left the rest of Abraham's countrymen in darkness. God made a covenant with Abraham and his posterity. Eventually that would redound to the benefit of future gentiles. But most gentiles were consigned to ignorance, idolatry, and superstition.

At one point Jerry says that if a Reformed preacher explained to the unbeliever what he really meant, if he told him that, "for all you know you may be damned for all eternity," the Calvinist resurgence would lose its popularity in two years.

But that's really an objection to everlasting punishment rather than Calvinism. Wesley believed in hell.

He then asks: "Does God love those he sends to hell unconditionally?"

i) God doesn't "unconditionally" send anyone to hell. There are no innocents in hell. Everyone there is a sinner.

ii) Speaking for myself, I don't think God loves the damned.

iii) But we could turn Jerry's question around: Does God love those he send to hell *conditionally*? Eternal punishment isn't remedial punishment. It's not for the benefit of the damned.

Jerry then attacks a position he imputes to Calvinism:

God can't do this because he wouldn't be fully glorified if he didn't damn some.

God gets more glory out of determining people to blaspheme, to commit horrendous sins, then punishing them forever.

For his nature to be wholly manifest, God must damn some. He needs eternal evil to be fully God.

But that's a straw man:

i) God doesn't "get more glory" by reprobating sinners. God doesn't need evil to be fully God.

Manifesting his nature is hardly equivalent to "getting glory" for himself or needing evil to be himself. And the manifestation is for the benefit of others, not himself. God hardly needs to manifest his nature to himself.

ii) To my knowledge, Jerry rejects annihilationism. So Jerry believes in eternal evil.

Jerry then says "Calvinists are all about power." That's just slander. Jerry is an Arminian bigot.

Jerry says that Calvinism subordinates Love to will. But that's just his jaundiced characterization. God loves the elect. God ensures their salvation. That's far more than the Arminian God does for the lost.

Jerry says "Calvinists favor imagery of God as sovereign, king."

I don't know where Jerry comes up with this stuff. Calvinists affirm all of the theological models for God in Scripture.

Jerry makes the odd comment that the first person of the Trinity is called "Father" rather than "Lord."

i) Of course, Jewish fathers were authority-figures.

ii) Does he think "Lord" is not a proper title for God the Father?

iii) Conversely, the second person of the Trinity is typically called "Lord" rather than "Father." So where does that leave Jerry's argument?

He objects to Calvinists who say "Who are you to question God?"

But, of course, Calvinists are simply repeating Paul's riposte, in Rom 9.

He then says the proper question is "How would a God of perfect love express his sovereignty?"

Well, that's a good question to turn back on Arminians. The Arminian God is far less loving than he could be. For instance, why doesn't the Arminian God give advance

warning of natural disasters? Advance warning wouldn't infringe on freewill or destabilize the natural order. Indeed, advance warning would give humans more choices.

Likewise, why does the Arminian God let the powerful abuse the weak? How is that loving to the weak?

Early in the lecture, Jerry contrasted compatibilism with the libertarian theory, which he tendentiously dubs the "intuitive" or "common sense" theory. He defines libertarian freedom thusly:

A free action is one that is not determined by prior causes or conditions. As he makes the choice, the agent has the power to choose A and the power to choose not-A, and it is up to him how he will choose.

One problem with this definition is that not all freewill theists define libertarian freedom as choosing between alternative possibilities. For instance, William Lane Craig is a prominent freewill theist who rejects that definition of libertarian freedom.

But there's a bigger problem. Towards the end of the lecture, Jerry says there are some things God can't want to do. God can't choose to love or not to love. For God, loving everyone is necessary rather than optional. Jerry also says that he could never strangle his own granddaughter.

But in that event, Jerry has conceded that God lacks libertarian freedom. Moreover, that humans like Jerry lack libertarian freedom.

The Arminian funhouse

In their recent book **GOOD GOD: THE THEISTIC FOUNDATIONS OF MORALITY (OXFORD 2011)**, David Baggett and Jerry Walls have a chapter attacking Calvinism on allegedly philosophical grounds. Jerry Walls may well be the leading Arminian philosopher of his generation. So this chapter presumably represents the best philosophical case against Calvinism from an Arminian perspective.

Some critics here might wish to suggest that Arminians face an equally big problem because God chose to instantiate this among other possible worlds, a world in which some would freely reject him, and God knew in another possible world they would have accepted him. To begin with, though, such a challenge requires something closer to middle knowledge rather than mere foreknowledge—as does the common challenge to Arminians of why God would create someone he knows will reject him and go to hell. Even

supposing such an ambitious modal picture is accurate... (244n27).

i) It wouldn't require *middle* knowledge. Rather, it would require *counterfactual* knowledge. Even Craig distinguishes between middle knowledge and counterfactual knowledge. Middle knowledge is just a particular theory of counterfactual knowledge.

ii) It's true that this isn't equivalent to foreknowledge inasmuch as foreknowledge concerns the *actual* future, not a *possible* future. What *will* be, not what *might* have been.

iii) It's unclear why the authors think this picture is "ambitious." They themselves define libertarian freedom as the freedom to do otherwise. And the only way to cash that out is by recourse to alternate possible worlds or world segments. So their model of libertarian freedom commits them to this "ambitious modal picture."

iv) So it's not clear what they are questioning. Are they questioning the existence of possible worlds, or God's knowledge thereof? Even open theists believe God knows hypothetical scenarios.

...it presumably involves people's genuinely free choices and their consequences. Just because God foreknows the content of our decisions doesn't mean he's responsible for

determining that content, nor does it preclude the ability to do otherwise...God happened to know how they'd respond, but that isn't his determining anything (244n27).

But that's a red herring. Those who level this charge against Arminianism aren't claiming that it's identical to Calvinism. The immediate question at issue isn't whether the Arminian God can *justly* damn them (granting Arminian assumptions about the preconditions of moral responsibility), but whether the Arminian God is *loving*. Whether he is acting in their best interests. Is he good to them? That's the point of the analogy. For the authors repeatedly say things like:

For God to choose to consign persons to such a fate when he could have just as easily determined them to joy and happiness is even more morally obnoxious than the behavior of the earthly dictator. God's behavior toward the non-elect, if the Calvinists are right, strikes us as a paradigmatic example of hateful behavior, not loving behavior. Those who share our judgment will agree that this leaves Calvinists saddled with Ockhamism, which alone constitutes a powerful reason to reject Calvinism (74).

So what they are suggesting is that we can, in all good conscience and intellectual integrity, characterize God's unconditional choice of some for eternal misery and reprobation as loving behavior, and this despite the fact that he could have saved them without in any way violating their freedom... this behavior they attribute to God seems about as paradigmatic of unloving behavior as anything imaginable, as we have argued already (78-79).

Yet that's the very point at which, by their own grudging admission, Arminianism is comparable to Calvinism. For if there are other possible worlds where someone who freely rejects Jesus in this world freely accepts him in another, then the Arminian God is consigning someone to eternal perdition whom he could just as easily have saved without violating his libertarian freedom.

As they themselves have framed the case against Calvinism, Arminianism falls prey to the very same indictment. No wonder they try to downplay this fatal concession by relegating it to a footnote.

The issue of *determinism* is beside the point at this juncture, for determinism is only germane to the question of whether God can *justly* damn the lost. Even if we grant that contention for the sake of argument, that won't salvage the Arminian position when the issue turns to God's *goodness*, especially divine *love*. By their own lights, the Arminian God is "morally hideous."

By the way it's been suggested by some Arminians and Molinists that hell is reserved for those who freely reject Christ in this and all possible worlds, an interesting conjecture that, if true, would entirely dispel doubts about God's goodness (244n27).

How can that conjecture be reconciled with the authors' repeated definition of freedom as the freedom to do *otherwise*? If a man has the freedom to do otherwise, then that means he's free to either accept Christ or reject Christ. In which case there's at least one possible world corresponding to each outcome. A possible world in which he freely accepts Christ, as well as another possible world in which he freely rejects Christ. That's what it means to say he could do otherwise. That alternative is embedded in a different possible world. An unexemplified timeline.

By contrast, to say he rejects Christ in every possible world is to say, by definition, that his rejection of Christ is necessary. So Arminians and Molinists who espouse this conjecture are necessitarians about the fate of the damned. That's an ironic way to attack predestination! For that's even more deterministic than predestination!

In this chapter [4] we will talk about how important it is that God's goodness is recognizable. For in order for the moral argument to provide rational reason to believe in God, God's goodness must be recognizable. Otherwise, we're using the word "good" to refer to something that isn't recognizably good, and that sort of equivocation is irrational (66).

But that's simplistic:

i) For instance, what seems bad in the short term may appear to be better or positively good in the long term. What seems evil, considered in isolation—indeed, what really is evil, considered in isolation—may contribute to a superior or compensatory good.

From our blinkered human perspective, it can be very hard to discern whether an apparent evil is actually evil or gratuitously evil. It can be very hard to discern whether an actual evil is worse than the alternative, or offset by some counterbalancing good.

ii) Likewise, God's goodness could be evidently good in many cases, but inscrutable in other cases. It's not as if God's goodness must be transparently good from start to finish for God's goodness to be evident at certain times.

Indeed, the evident instances of God's goodness give us reason to believe God is good even in situations where we

seem to be confronted with inscrutable evil.

iii) And, frankly, faith in God's goodness is a forced option. It's not as if we have a viable fallback position. The only alternative to faith in God's goodness is nihilism, futility, and despair.

In a section entitled "Philosophy as Adjudicator," the authors say:

We think of our argument as unapologetically appealing to general revelation, which means that we reject the claim that philosophy can or should be ignored...Here we need to draw an important distinction. Whereas biblical authority trumps in the realm of theological norms, there are more basic philosophical processes at play that hold logical priority in the realm of basic epistemology (67).

i) But "general revelation" is, itself, a theological category. That's a value-laden appeal which assumes the existence of a Creator God who designed the world in ways that reflect his existence and nature. So it's unclear how the authors demarcate the "realm of theological norms," where Scripture holds the "trump card," from the scope of philosophy, which they equate with general revelation.

ii) Moreover, you can't simply label your philosophical positions "general revelation." If you're going to classify your philosophical positions as falling under the rubric of general revelation, then you need to present a separate connecting argument to demonstrate the general revelatory status of your philosophical positions. You're not entitled to slap "general revelation" on your philosophical musings, as if that identification is a given.

After all, there are usually competing philosophical positions on any given issue. They can't all lay claim to general revelation. If one philosophical position is true, then a contrary position is false. So they can't both be revelatory.

iii) Put another way, just as there are putative cases of special revelation, there are putative cases of general revelation. In both cases, you need some means of validating the claim. Just as not all putative cases of special revelation are the real deal, not all putative case of general revelation are the real deal. So you can't automatically default to general revelation as your benchmark. Even if you think general revelation adjudicates special revelatory claims, what adjudicates general revelatory claims?

For example, trust in the reliability of scripture in the first place assumes trust in the experiences of those biblical writers whose written words God genuinely inspired. Without the requisite trust in those experiences, we are left

without rational conviction in the authority of the Bible. Or take the choice of the Bible as authoritative rather than, say, the Koran; this selection, to be rational, requires that we have good reasons for believing the Bible to be God's real revelation. Appeal to those considerations involves trust in reason, which involves trust in our ability to think philosophically. The Bible is to be taken as authoritative in the realm of theological truth. But before we can rationally believe such a thing, as human beings privy to general revelation and endowed with the ability to think, we must weigh arguments and draw conclusions, that is, do philosophy. Proper trust in the Bible altogether involves the process of thinking rationally (68).

i) There's some truth to this, but there are different ways of cashing that out. Different ways of modeling the relationship between general and special revelation.

The authors seem to be suggesting that the Bible has no internal evidence for its divine inspiration. And this must be attested and adjudicated by general revelation. If that's what they're claiming, then that's a highly disputable claim. They need to bolster their claim with a supporting argument. Conversely, if they admit that Scripture furnishes internal evidence for its divine inspiration, then it's not clear why they subordinate special revelation to general revelation.

ii) By the same token, the authors appear to be offering a unilinear model of how general and special revelation interpretation, where you take general revelation as your starting point, then reason from general revelation to special revelation. But if that's their position, then they need to argue for that position.

For, according to another model, there's a dialectical relationship between general and special revelation, where you can't properly understand or evaluate either one without reference to the other. To take a crude analogy, if you tear a page of text down the middle, you can make some sense of what each half says, but you have to put the two pieces back together, side by side, to make complete sense of the text. For the sentences break off in mid-sentence.

Or, to take a different illustration, it's like the relationship between an exotic tool and the operating manual. You can tell the tool was designed to do something. But however much you study the tool, you can't figure out, just by examining the tool, what it was meant to do.

Conversely, you can read the operating manual, which will explain the function of the tool. But unless you can see the

tool, and compare the tool to the description, you lack a mental picture of the tool.

The manual interprets the tool. Without the manual, the tool is inscrutable. Without the tool, the manual is meaningless.

We can't open the Bible and begin to understand it without engaging our reason, and using our critical faculties in this fashion as an interpretive tool is not to exalt the deliverances of reason above the deliverances of scripture (68).

But what if *reason* informs us that Scripture teaches Calvinism? The authors blur the distinction between the interpretive role of reason with the evaluative role of reason. But these are very different.

Before we go any further, I'd like to make a preliminary observation. In this chapter, the authors talk about making a philosophical case against Calvinism. But as we shall see, they *talk* about philosophical reasoning rather than reasoning philosophically. If you keep an eye on how they actually proceed, the authors fail to argue for their claims. Time and again, they simply declare Calvinism to be false.

To them, it's obvious that Calvinism is wrong. But that's not philosophical reasoning. For one thing, even if you think Calvinism is counterintuitive, even if you think Calvinism runs counter to common sense, philosophy often challenges

common sense; philosophy frequently questions our facile intuitions.

That's what real philosophers do. Even if a philosopher is sympathetic to common sense, he doesn't content himself by merely positing common sense. Rather, he defends common sense by scrutinizing objections to common sense and marshalling positive evidence for common sense.

By contrast, the authors repeatedly take their Arminian standards for granted. So their appeal to philosophical reasoning is a complete charade. What the reader is actually subjected to is an incredibly insular attack on Calvinism that systematically begs all the key questions.

So without further ado, allow us to present our philosophical case...On our count, there are at least five major philosophical problems with Calvinistic compatibilism. First, there is the "obligation objection." To put it simply, moral duties make little sense given compatibilism. Duties tell us what we ought to do and ought implies can. But if we are fully determined to will and to act as we do by causes outside our control, it is doubtful that there is any meaningful sense in which we can do otherwise (69).

They say that's a philosophical problem, but they fail to demonstrate, by philosophical reasoning, why that's supposed to be a problem. Where's the supporting argument? Branding something a problem, much less a "philosophical" problem, doesn't make it a problem.

Why does a duty assume the freedom to do otherwise? For instance, the authors' paradigm-case of evil, which they reiterate throughout the book, is torturing children for fun.

Does that mean that unless I'm able to torture children for fun, I have no duty not to torture little children for fun? Does that mean that unless I have a capacity to find that enjoyable, I have no duty to refrain from torturing kids?

But it seems that the biblical promise in 1 Cor 10:13—that with any temptation a Christian will encounter, a way of escape is also provided—does seem to pose a problem for Calvinists. For nobody is able to do otherwise on their view (at least among the consistent Calvinists)...It seems inconsistent to hold both that God determines all things including the sins of Christians, while also always providing a way to resist temptation, and thereby

*making it possible to resist any given sin
(69; cf. 72-73).*

i) I thought the authors told us that they were presenting a philosophical case against Calvinism rather than an exegetical case against Calvinism. So why do they suddenly try to proof-text their position from Scripture?

ii) They assume that 1 Cor 10:13 has reference to sinful temptation in general, whereas, in context, the passage has reference to grave sins like idolatry. Contrary to their Arminian interpretation, 1 Cor 10:13 is a promise that God will preserve his people from apostasy.

iii) They oversimplify the Calvinist position. In Calvinism, there's a sense in which men enjoy the freedom to do otherwise. You can do otherwise if God predestines you to do otherwise. In the actual world, God predestines you to do one thing, but there's a possible world in which God predestined you to do something else. There are hypothetical decrees in addition to the actual decree. Cf.

REFORMED THOUGHT: SELECTED WRITINGS OF WILLIAM YOUNG (REFORMATION HERITAGE BOOKS 2011), CHAP. 24.

God makes our world by actualizing one of his divinely-imagined worlds. There are other divinely-imagined worlds in which agents do something else. By decreeing this world, God isn't making us do something other than what we were going to do, if he hadn't been predestined us to do it—for there's no one thing we were going to do, absent predestination. Rather, we can do as many things as God can imagine us doing. In making this world, God selects one

of those divinely-imagined narratives to realize in time and space.

iv) In fact, Calvinism is theoretically consistent with something like a multiverse. For all we know, God has created a world ensemble where different timelines actually play out. There's nothing in Calvinism that precludes that scenario. In each parallel universe, God predestines every event. Cf. **D. PAGE, "THE SUPERB DESIGN," D. MARSHALL, ED. FAITH SEEKING UNDERSTANDING: ESSAYS IN MEMORY OF PAUL BRAND AND RALPH WINTER (WILLIAM CAREY LIBRARY 2012), CHAP. 15.**

Compare these two claims:

Christians who sin make no sense on Calvinist principles, for they can't do otherwise, yet they are said to have a "way of escape" from every temptation. But a way of escape that can't possibly be used is no real way of escape in this context (72-73).

Some sins might be culpable despite inability to do otherwise by the agent if they are the result of adequately free prior bad choices that resulted in a loss of freedom, such as a free rejection of salvation in Christ or an obstinate refusal to repent: choices

which shape character in such a way that impedes freedom or even, finally, removes freedom altogether. An analogy is a drunkard who makes bad choices that in his stupor he couldn't avoid, but his culpability resides in his freely having chosen that path of drunkenness in the first place (242-242n10).

But the second paragraph relativizes the first paragraph. The authors can't cite 1 Cor 10:13 to prooftext for the freedom to do otherwise in every situation, if—in a footnote—they scale by the universality of their initial claim with significant restrictions.

Not only do they [Calvinists] believe that sinners should be held accountable in this life, they also hold that people can be justly consigned to eternal perdition for living exactly as God determined them to live. This is so void of moral sense that it is irrational to believe. So this constitutes a second criticism of Calvinism: the culpability objection (71).

How does *asserting* that the Calvinist position is “so void of moral sense that it is irrational to believe” constitute a “philosophical” argument against Calvinism? That doesn’t bear any semblance to an argument. Rather, that simply expresses the Arminian viewpoint.

Let’s take some comparisons. Suppose I’m the police chief in a city overrun by drug cartels. The drug lords have the police force outgunned. They bribe judges, prosecutors, witnesses, and policemen. Those they can’t bribe, they assassinate. They terrorize the populace.

I lack the resources to defeat them directly. Instead, I turn them on each other. I make it look like one drug lord ordered a hit on another drug lord. I make it look like their trusted lieutenants have betrayed them. As a result, the drug cartels proceed to wage war on one another. To purge their subordinates. They decimate each other.

Everything is going according to plan. They do to themselves exactly what I intended. It was a set-up. They don’t know any better.

Is that so void of moral sense that it’s irrational to believe? Not by my lights.

Let’s take another illustration. Arminians routinely say Calvinism reduces men to robots. I think that analogy is demagogical, but let’s play along with the analogy for the sake of argument. If that’s the worst thing Arminians can say about Calvinism, and it’s true, and we can still make sense of it, then we’ve defanged Arminianism.

Let’s suppose that if predestination is true, then men are equivalent to artificially intelligent robots. We do whatever

we've been programmed to do. We can't break our programming.

Suppose I design a sociopathic robot, like Lore or the Terminators. It kills without compunction.

Suppose, after a killing spree, I destroy my robot. Is that unjust?

Even though my robot lacks the freedom to do otherwise, it's still a bad robot. A robot that perpetrates evil.

Now, an Arminian might say the robot isn't culpable or evil, for it lacks the requisite freedom to be a morally responsible agent. And suppose we grant that contention for the sake of argument.

If the robot is amoral, then I'm not wronging the robot by destroying it after it did exactly what I designed it to do. It's not blameworthy. But by the same token, it doesn't deserve to be treated any differently. It has no rights or responsibilities. It's just a clever machine.

I destroy my robot the same way I'd shoot a mad dog or a cougar that threatened my five-year-old. I'm not blaming the dog for having rabies. But that's irrelevant. The dog is vicious, dangerous. And since the dog (or cougar) is not a moral agent, innocence and guilt don't apply. It's not deserving or undeserving of whatever fate I mete out to it.

A third troubling implication of Calvinist compatibilism is that, on this view, God could have saved everyone without

violating anyone's free will. Since Calvinists are not universalists, this means that the non-elect go to hell due to God's sovereign choice alone when they could just as easily have been reconciled to God and experienced an eternity of joy rather than an eternity of pain and sadness. If this is true, there is no intelligible sense in which God loves those who are lost, nor is there any recognizable sense in which he is good to them. This is the "bad god objection" (71).

Once again, the authors offer their personal value-judgment without giving the reader any *reason* to share their disapproval. It isn't even incumbent on a Calvinist to respond, for there's no argument on the table to refute. That's not philosophical. That's anti-intellectual. They assume what they need to prove.

But let's comment on this:

i) Suppose there's no sense in which God loves the reprobate. So what? Why does the goodness of God require God to love the wicked? Wouldn't we expect a good God to hate evildoers?

Now, you might say that according to Scripture, God loves sinners. But that's not a philosophical truism.

ii) It's also fallacious to infer that you can't punish someone unless you hate them. Do we really need to point that out?

iii) In principle, there are degrees of love. It's possible to love some people more and others less. Does that make you a bad person? If so, where's the argument?

iv) Is it the authors' position that divine love is necessitated? Does God lack the libertarian freedom to withhold love?

v) How do the authors go from "God isn't good to someone" to "God isn't good" (or bad)? If I punish a child molester, that's not necessary good for the child molester. That may be positively harmful for the child molester. I don't intend it to benefit the child molester.

If you're ill-deserving, then getting your just deserts is bad for you. Does that mean I'm not good if I mete out retributive punishment?

Doesn't this objection actually subvert morality? Isn't it a good thing when the wicked receive their comeuppance? Isn't that what we'd expect a just God to do? Would it not call God's goodness into question if he declined to punish evildoers?

The fourth problem with Calvinistic compatibilism is that love relationships, by their nature and logic, are two-way relationships. God's irresistible grace,

if it necessarily culminates in reconciliation and fellowship with God, seems like a divine love potion that, once administered, creates eternal infatuation in the beloved, but not genuine love. So we call this the “love objection.” The logic of love requires a more substantial element of volition than what a Calvinistic compatibilist can allow (71).

As William Hasker writes, “All sorts of experiences and relationships acquire a special value because they involve love, trust, and affection that are freely bestowed. The love potions that appear in many fairy stories (and in the Harry Potter series) can become a trap; the one who has used the potion finds that he wants to be loved for his own sake and not because of the position, yet fears the loss of the beloved’s affection if the potion is no longer used” (242n14).

i) Seems to me that we should love God because God is intrinsically lovable. The “logic of love” ought to love whatever is properly lovable. What’s worthy of our affection and devotion.

ii) Love potions don’t only exist in fairy tales. They exist in real life, too. We call them hormones and pheromones. If we bother to think about it, we know that our reaction is

chemically conditioned. And we take delight in giving into our chemical conditioning.

Surely love is often far more spontaneous and involuntary than Hasker, Baggett, and Walls let on. Take the boy in junior high who swoons inwardly in the presence of that girl he has a crush on. He can't help himself. She just has that effect on him whenever he's around her. Indeed, that gives her a certain power over him.

That's romantic love, and I'm discussing that example because that's the example the authors use, but this is true, in different ways, for other types of love. There are people for whom we feel a natural rapport, people for whom we feel no connection, and people we find repellent. It's sometimes possible to override our feelings, to cultivate different feelings. But it defies reality to imagine that we can simply will ourselves into loving someone. Indeed, this is an area in which humans have notoriously little control over their feelings.

Fifth, Calvinistic compatibilists often emphasize that morally responsible actions must reflect one's character, or they aren't culpable reflections of who one is. Actions that don't reflect one's character seem objectionably random and uncaused. In reply, though, we might suggest that the Calvinists are inverting the process, putting a formed character

at the start of the process rather than closer to the end where it more naturally belongs. Culpable moral development as virtue ethicists construe it—with thoughts leading to actions and then to character—is simply inconsistent with the Calvinist teaching that our actions are determined by an already existing character with which we are unavoidably saddled. This is the “virtue objection” (71-72).

i) This objection isn't really an objection to predestination. On the one hand, actions could be determined by character without being predestined. On the other hand, actions could be predestined without being determined by character.

ii) The objection is simplistic, for the process is dialectical. Even young children aren't blank slates. They have inborn character traits and predispositions. Thoughts don't issue from a vacuum. Character shapes action while action reshapes character. The character you begin with may not be the character you end with. The process feeds back on itself. And this is perfectly consistent with predestination.

The second major objection to Calvinism is a recurring pattern of euphemism we find among Calvinist writers...they

typically try to evade the force of the problem by characterizing it as a mystery, paradox, antinomy, or “biblical tension” (72).

i) One problem with this indictment is that the authors fail to name their sources. *What* Calvinists are they talking about? Pastors? Systematic theologians? Church historians? Bible scholars? Philosophers?

Since they claim to be mounting a philosophical critique of Calvinism, they should focus on Reformed philosophers. Are philosophers like Paul Helm, William Young, William Davis, Greg Welty, and James Anderson guilty of resorting to “euphemisms”?

ii) In addition, the authors invoke “mystery” when it serves their purpose. For instance, “These passages are difficult, and no matter what we might say about them, we don’t dispel the mystery of them” (136).

Likewise, many libertarians toil over the issue of how God can foreknow the indeterminate choices and actions of his creatures.

iii) In addition, there’s nothing inherently “evasive” about invoking mystery. There’s eminent precedent for that among inspired Bible writers.

Another example is that Calvinists often stress that God extends to the nonelect a

genuine offer of salvation, and that they freely accept it. Again, this seems evasive and euphemistic On Calvinist principles it's only the elect who can actually receive salvation, so no offer of salvation to the nonelect is a genuine offer, because an offer is not genuine if there's no possibility that it can be accepted, and the person offering it knows there's no possibility that it can be accepted. For Calvinists to describe such an empty offer as a genuine one is worse than euphemistic. It is deeply misleading, particularly to the uninitiated, who will typically assume that the offer really could be accepted (72).

i) Notice the utter absence of a philosophical argument for this claim. The authors simply define a "genuine" offer by reference to their Arminian assumptions. Calvinism is wrong by definition—their stipulative definition. They're just talking to themselves. Writing for readers who already agree with them. There's no attempt at rational persuasion.

ii) And suppose the "uninitiated" are confused? So what? Philosophy routinely draws fine distinctions and retails in specialized definitions that are lost on the uninitiated. That's part of the educational process.

In the same vein, when Calvinists are pressed on the issue of God's love for the nonelect...they often say [that's] consistent with his holiness and his justice, and with the fact that his love for the elect is a special and deeper love... Giving them what they (indeed, all of us) deserve—hell—doesn't show lack of love. He's not failing to discharge any duty toward them, and their damnation will serve the purpose of accenting God's glory and the greatness of his grace towards the elect. Calling this "love" is surely a capital case of euphemism" (72).

See the consistent pattern? The authors open their chapter with a pretentious section in which they say they will present a philosophical case against Calvinism. In the ensuing pages, they do nothing of the kind. They chronically beg the question and pander to the prejudice of Arminian readers.

Notice, once more, that the authors never give us a single reason to share their disapproval. We're treated to a string of tendentious assertions.

When two Arminian philosophers consistently fail to argue for their position, this fosters the impression that they don't argue for it because they can't argue for it. They have nothing in reserve. There's nothing to back up their repeated assertions. Nothing more than sheer opinion.

For instance, why is the distinction between lesser love for the reprobate and greater love for the elect a "capital case of euphemism"? I happen to be a Calvinist who doesn't think God loves the reprobate. But even if I were, I see nothing obviously (or subtly) false about that distinction.

...Calvinists assign such priority to God's will that they are voluntarists of the radical variety. Indeed, we would suggest that their view amounts to Ockhamism, the idea that whatever God says goes when it comes to morality, no matter what...If God's will is the sole source of morality, and there is no rationally identifiable constraints, then we are never in a position to say of a particular command that God could never, by his nature, issue it. Indeed, the Calvinists think that it's not just possible that God could do something like

commanding the torture of children for fun... (73).

i) Here the authors descend to shameless demagoguery. What Calvinists think it's possible for God to command the torture of children for fun? Do they quote any? No. Yet they use that as a premise for the next allegation.

It tells you something about the warped mindset of some Arminians that they resort to these scurrilous accusations without any trace of impropriety.

ii) And since they keep returning this hypothetical in the course of their book, let's discuss it in relation to Arminian theism. For this illustration isn't purely hypothetical. In the real world, real children are sometimes tortured for fun. This happens in God's world. This happens on God's watch.

No, the Arminian God didn't command it, but he doesn't stop it, either. What's the vast moral difference between commanding a sadist to torture children for fun and letting a sadist torture children for fun?

If you were in the same room as a sadist, if you were watching him torture children for fun, would we view you as a good and loving guy? Or would we consider you a vile voyeur, on par with the actual perpetrator?

...in fact, he has chosen to do something no less morally inexplicable. He has chosen that countless persons will be

consigned to an eternity of utter misery as punishment for the very choices he determined them to make. This constitutes so gross a violation of our considered moral reflections that it seems rather obvious that Calvinism is in fact predicated on Ockhamism (73).

i) That's an argument from analogy minus the argument. The authors haven't given us the slightest reason to think reprobation is morally equivalent to torturing children for fun. They pile up one baseless assertion after another. On page after page the reader is treated to this harlequinade. The affectation of philosophical analysis absent philosophical analysis.

ii) Moreover, this comparison reveals their own stunted morality. How is punishing the wicked analogous to torturing children for fun? Presumably the whole point of citing children is that children are emblematic of innocence. So the attempted parallel breaks down at the critical point of comparison.

iii) Even if I had the freedom to do otherwise, that's a freedom I never exercise. Even on libertarian grounds, I can only make one decision at a time. As such, I will only make one decision at a time. So why is it morally necessary for me to have superfluity of choices I will never make?

Now Calvinists might try to evade this charge by insisting that they deny universal possibilism and in fact affirm that there are at least some things morally ruled out (73).

i) To begin with, it's not "evasive" to deny a false accusation. To my knowledge, Ockhamism or voluntarism is a fairly well-defined position. Either Calvinism fits the definition or not. The authors have no right to redefine Ockhamism or voluntarism in ad hoc fashion to smear Calvinism.

ii) To my knowledge, universal possibilism is a thesis about logic, not morality. According to universal possibilism, a la Descartes, the laws of logic are an expression of God's will rather than God's immutable nature. What does that have to do with morality of reprobation?

Even if a Calvinist makes this move, however, he's still implicated in an epistemic Ockhamism. For if our noetic faculties are too skewed to trust our own moral judgments about the injustice and moral hideousness of unconditional perdition, how could we trust them on

any other matter? Indeed, what could be more clearly wrong than that? (74).

i) Of course, that's a loaded question. For the authors still haven't given us any explanation to warrant their contention that reprobation is "morally hideous" or "morally obnoxious."

ii) Moreover, reprobation isn't equivalent to "unconditional perdition." The fact that election is unconditional doesn't make reprobation unconditional. There are no innocents in hell. Only sinners go to hell. They are punished for their iniquity. That's a necessary (albeit insufficient) condition of their perdition.

On pp74-75, the authors attribute to Calvin a position that, so far as I know, is a caricature of Calvin's actual position. Paul Helm devotes a whole chapter to expounding Calvin's position on this issue. Cf. **JOHN CALVIN'S IDEAS (OXFORD 2004), CHAP. 11**. There's no trace of Helm's painstaking exposition in the authors discussion. Are they willfully ignorant?

Keep in mind, too, that Calvin is not the last word on Calvinism. He was a theological pioneer, responding to 16C opponents.

Calvinism takes the position that, given the *kind* of God he is, whatever God wills is right. That doesn't isolate God's will as a sheer will. For God's will is characterized by God's other attributes.

Assume counterfactually for a moment that the Bible told us to do some hideous thing like yank out the claws of cats for our amusement. We would be well within our epistemic and moral rights to assume, if the Bible really taught such a thing, that it wouldn't be a book to believe (76).

i) We can toy with hypothetical examples of Scripture commanding or forbidding things it doesn't command or forbid, and thereby generate hypothetical dilemmas for the Christian. But that's a diversionary tactic. God hasn't put us in that position.

ii) In addition, I'd draw a different conclusion from the authors' hypothetical dilemma. If Scripture can't be trusted, that doesn't mean I'd trust my own moral intuitions instead. Rather, that would mean I'm at a loss to tell right from wrong.

...what fundamentally violates our reason or nonnegotiable moral intuitions, in contrast, is beyond the pale and so irrational to believe (77).

A basic problem with appealing to “nonnegotiable moral intuitions” is that, in chap. 7, the authors go toe-to-toe with other philosophers (Rauser, Morrison, Adams) who have their own set of nonnegotiable moral intuitions” at odds with theirs.

...It is not just hard to reconcile unconditional reprobation with a morally perfect God, but simply impossible. Whatever the Bible teaches about God’s sovereignty...surely we are rational, if we are capable of loving God with all of our minds, to insist that it does not entail a tenet so terrible as this (77).

So the authors retreat into this preemptive blocking maneuver. We are told, ahead of time, that Scripture is not allowed to teach reprobation.

What does that amount to in practice? Does this mean that even if the Bible seems to teach reprobation, even if that seems to be the only plausible interpretation, we must *assign* an Arminian interpretation to the offending passages? That despite what we actually find in the text, we must ascribe an Arminian gloss to the text in defiance of the text? Even though that interpretation has no grounding in the text, even though that interpretation cuts against the grain of the text, we must impute that to the text?

That tactic discredits itself. That's the last-ditch resort of desperate Arminian apologists. Special pleading doesn't get any more blatant than that. It's ironic that the authors accuse Calvinists of evasiveness, when they keep this card in their back pocket.

If the Bible did indeed teach such a doctrine, wouldn't it be more rational to believe that it's not morally reliable? (78).

Granting the authors' premise, that would be more honest than heavy-handedly reinterpreting the Bible.

Fundamental to our conviction that scripture is reliable is the trust that God, as perfectly good, would not deceive us. If God is not recognizably good, however, we are not warranted in this trust. And again, if unconditional election is true, God is not recognizably good, and the problem of evil is intractable. So Calvinism has devastating consequences for our very ability rationally to trust the teaching of scripture as a reliable

revelation. Once more, we have seen that Calvinism leaves us with insuperable philosophical difficulties, both ethical and epistemological (78).

To the contrary, we can't see what the authors never show. *Positing* insuperable ethical difficulties doesn't begin to *demonstrate* insuperable philosophical difficulties. All the authors actually do is to describe their sense of moral repugnance at Calvinism. All along, they take their Arminian perspective for granted rather than mounting an argument to justify their Arminian perspective.

So the entire exercise is viciously circular. This chapter is by, to, and for fellow Arminians. There's no effort to rationally convince a reader who isn't on board when the ship leaves dry dock. Adjectives do all the heavy lifting.

In the face of this reality, commitment to the truth of biblical revelation gives us powerful reason to reject Calvinist theology (78).

Of course that's deceptive. They make that "commitment" with fingers crossed behind their backs. They are only committed to the truth of biblical revelation as long as it doesn't commit them to unwelcome truths. In reality, it's clearly noncommittal. Hedged about with escape clauses.

Calvinists should bear in mind that their interpretation of the Bible is just that: an interpretation (78).

That's condescending. Naturally it's "just an interpretation." So is the Arminian interpretation. But they're not so modest about their own interpretation.

It should give Calvinists serious pause that the majority of Christians throughout the world and down the ages do not interpret scripture as teaching unconditional election... (78).

i) Actually, when two Arminian philosophers resort to such extreme measures to shield themselves from the possibility that the Reformed interpretation is right, this confirms my confidence in the Reformed interpretation. Why do they feel that threatened by the Reformed interpretation if it's clearly false?

Likewise, when they spend all their time emoting rather than reasoning, that, too, confirms my confidence in the Reformed interpretation.

ii) Their appeal to what the majority of Christians believe overlooks demographic factors. Christians in Roman

Catholic regions are apt to be Roman Catholic. Christians in Eastern Orthodox regions are apt to be Eastern Orthodox. Christians in Oriental Orthodox regions are apt to be Oriental Orthodox. Christians in Lutheran regions are apt to be Lutheran. Christians in Baptist regions are apt to be Baptist. Christians residing in the Anglican Communion are apt to be...well, you get the point.

iii) They also ignore Thomism and Augustinianism, both of which are major predestinarian traditions in Western theology, antedating Calvinism.

Moreover, the fact that there are viable interpretive options from which to choose that violate no sound principles of exegesis... (78).

i) So Arminians think Arminian alternatives are viable options. This is yet another viciously circular appeal. The authors have locked themselves into a funhouse with Arminian mirrors everywhere they turn.

ii) Moreover, what standard principles of exegesis does Calvinism violate?

...whereas their interpretation flies so violently in the face of some of our

clearest and deepest moral intuitions... (78).

Whose moral intuitions? The Arminian's? They keep chasing their own tail. Is this the best two philosophy profs. can do?

Calvinists are entitled to their own moral sense, but this behavior they attribute to God seems about as a paradigmatic of unloving behavior as anything imaginable, as we have argued already (70).

Except that *arguing* is the one thing they haven't begun to do. I keep waiting to hear an actual argument. They've had no dearth of opportunities. Yet no arguments were forthcoming.

Philosophy will have played a key role in adjudicating this debate and declared Calvinism (in a key aspect of its soteriology) dead in the water (79).

That's an impressive promissory note, but the authors have yet to redeem their pledge. Sprinkling their chapter with the

word “philosophy” doesn’t make it philosophical. We’ve been inundated with sophistry rather than philosophy.

It’s all part of our God-given nature and his general revelation to us, by which we can determine in the first place that the Bible is God’s special revelation to us and by which we can best interpret it in a way that accords with God’s morally perfect and recognizably good nature (80).

If general revelation is your yardstick, the world is full of savagery. To judge by his administration of the world, I don’t see how the God of Calvinism is any harsher than the God of general revelation.

But the notion that God has given us an illusory sense of freedom... (242n13).

What are the authors appealing to? I can *imagine* alternate possibilities. But then, I can imagine many unrealistic scenarios. The ability to contemplate alternate courses of action doesn’t entail their accessibility.

When I come to a fork in the road, I have no experience going both left and right. So I have no concrete evidence that I could do otherwise.

Moreover, as even an aggressively libertarian philosophy like William Hasker admits:

The experience of choosing-of seeking alternatives, weighing their desirability and finally making up one's mind-is not any different whether one is a libertarian or a determinist. For while determinists believe that there are sufficient conditions which will govern their choices, they do not know at the time when they are making a decision what those determinates are or how they will decide as a result of them. So, like everyone else, they simply have to make up their own minds! The difference between libertarian and determinist lies in the interpretation of the experience of choice, and not in the experience itself.

WILLIAM HASKER, METAPHYSICS: CONSTRUCTING A WORLD VIEW (IVP 1983), 37.

Calvinists often like to characterize libertarian freedom as incoherent, yet if God had reasons to create the world as he did, reasons that he chose to act on without having to do so, then that's a paradigmatic example of libertarian freedom (241n8).

The writers fail to explicate the sense in which Calvinists say libertarian freedom is "incoherent." Assuming that the authors are alluding to infinite regress arguments, that's inapplicable to God. If God is timeless, if God is a se, then God's choices aren't caused by prior states. But that's hardly comparable to the situation of creatures, which is what generates the regress objection.

Unless Satan or mankind's original sin could have been avoided, moreover, their sins seem ultimately attributable to God, making him the author of sin; so to preserve the holiness of God, again we have good reason to affirm the coherence of libertarian freedom (241n8).

i) The writers fail to define “author of sin.”

ii) The fall of Lucifer and the fall of man wouldn't and couldn't happen unless God made a world with that world history. Unless God made a world where that can happen and does happen. That's the theater in which it all takes place. So even on Arminian grounds, God is a collaborator in the sinner's sin.

iii) Furthermore, complicity in evil doesn't require a positive contribution. If you allow what you could prevent, that implicates you in the outcome. Your nonintervention ensures the outcome.

iv) Of course there's a sense in which sin is ultimately attributable to God. That's unavoidable, whether you're a Calvinist, Molinist, Thomist, Arminian, or open theist. It's ultimately attributable in different ways, but on each theological model, it's ultimately attributable to divine action.

v) And even if that were somehow unique to Calvinism, to say that disproves Calvinism simply begs the question.

vi) To say we must affirm the coherence of libertarian freedom to preserve God's holiness is a non sequitur. Whether or not libertarian freedom is coherent is internal to libertarian freedom. You can't make libertarian freedom coherent by extraneous appeals to God's holiness. Libertarian freedom has its own logical structure, its own inner dynamics.

An Arminian analysis of the relevant biblical texts has the further advantage of avoiding the individualist interpretation of election and predestination that, though a good fit with the contemporary assignment of primacy to individualism, stands in tension with the much more communal mentality of first-century Jews (244-245n29).

That objection is duplicitous given the authors' axiomatic commitment to libertarian freedom, which is inherently individualistic.

Impugning God

I'm going to comment on this article: **JERRY WALLS, "WHY NO CLASSICAL THEIST, LET ALONE ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN, SHOULD EVER BE A COMPATIBILIST," PHILOSOPHIA CHRISTI 13/1 (SUMMER 2011), 75-104.**

This article is better than the book Walls recently coauthored with David Baggett, for in this article, Walls at least attempts to argue for his position.

In §1 of his article, Walls appeals to the experience of choice as empirical evidence for libertarian freedom, quoting John Searle. To this I'd say several things:

i) In a footnote (#3) Walls admits that:

A compatibilist, after all, who embraced a conditional analysis of what it means to say "I could have done otherwise" ("I would have done otherwise if I had wanted to do so") might explain this experience in such a way that it would be consistent with compatibilism."

But that concession, all by itself, vitiates the argument for libertarian freedom in §1.

Brand Blanshard is a philosopher who draws the opposite conclusion from the experience of choice. He contends that introspection undermines the empirical argument for libertarian freewill. In that sense, reflective experience undercuts the prereflective impression of freewill:

The first reason is that when we are making a choice our faces are always turned toward the future, toward the consequences that one act or the other will bring us, never toward the past with its possible sources of constraint. Hence these sources are not noticed. Hence we remain unaware that we are under constraint at all. Hence we feel free from such constraint. The case is almost as simple as that. When you consider buying a new typewriter your thought is fixed on the pleasure and advantage you would gain from it, or the drain it would make on your budget. You are not delving into the causes that led to your taking pleasure in the prospect of owning a typewriter or to your having a complex about expenditure. You are too much preoccupied with the ends to which

the choice would be a means to give any attention to the causes of which your choice may be an effect. But that is no reason for thinking that if you did preoccupy yourself with these causes you would not find them at work. You may remember that Sir Francis Galton was so much impressed with this possibility that for some time he kept account in a notebook of the occasions on which he made important choices with a full measure of this feeling of freedom; then shortly after each choice he turned his eye backward in search of constraints that might have been acting on him stealthily. He found it so easy to bring such constraining factors to light that he surrendered to the determinist view (p21).

http://www.archive.org/stream/determinismfreed01c2newy/determinismfreed01c2newy_djvu.txt

iii) Psychologically speaking, deliberation, in which we contemplate alternate possibilities, is the same whether we're contemplating the past or the future. For instance, many of us, when we reach a certain age, look back over

our lives and consider what we'd do differently if we knew then what we know now. If I had it to do all over again, what would I do that I didn't do, and what would I not do that I did?

The "sense" of alternate possibilities, the experience of mentally comparing different courses of action, is the same when we contemplate our past as when we contemplate our future. But, of course, the past is accidentally necessary. The past is unalterable. Over and done with.

So even though past and future are psychologically symmetrical in that respect, they are metaphysically asymmetrical. Time's arrow only moves in one direction. Therefore, the argument from experience proves too much. The same logic would prove the possibility of time travel whenever we regret something we did or failed to do.

This carries over in §2, where Walls defends the empirical argument for experience by making statements like:

A theist who holds that God is perfectly good and that he is the ultimate designer of human nature should be much more reluctant to think that God has implanted within us the tendency to believe deeply misleading things...if our clearest, most vivid perceptions and intuitions are fundamentally misleading

where they bear on morally significant matters such as freedom and personal responsibility, that is hard to square with God's perfect goodness.

But, of course, that piggybacks on the false premise of §1.

In a footnote, Walls says in passing:

For a fascinating argument that God could create a nondeterministic world without evil, see Josh Rasmussen, "ON CREATING WORLDS WITHOUT EVIL—GIVEN DIVINE COUNTERFACTUAL KNOWLEDGE," RELIGIOUS STUDIES 40 (2004), 457-70.

nd.edu/~jrasmus1/docs/philrel/counterfactual.pdf

Yet if Rasmussen's argument is sound, this eviscerates Walls' argument against Calvinism at one stroke. No wonder he buries this in a footnote!

In §§3-4, Walls discusses manipulation arguments. He equates theological determinism with manipulation—which he describes as follows:

A person has been unknowingly determined by another agent in such a way that he will willingly perform certain particular actions. It is precisely the notion that the determinism in question is due to an intelligent agent who determines things for reasons of his own that lends the “manipulation” label to these cases. The determinism here is the specific design of a personal agent who very much takes a “hands on” approach with the persons he manipulates for his own purposes.

And he derives the following conclusion:

To whatever degree we judge the actions to be bad, we will likewise be inclined to think the manipulator of those actions is bad. We can call this the evil manipulator principle.

(EMP) A being who determines (manipulates) another being to perform evil actions is himself evil. It is evil more perverse if a being determines a

being to perform evil actions and then holds him accountable, and punishes him for those actions.

i) A basic problem with this objection is that it fails to distinguish between the potentially divergent aims of the “manipulator” and the aims of the manipulated. The manipulated may intend malevolent, short-term consequences whereas the manipulator may intend benevolent long-term consequences for the same action. Actions have delayed effects.

ii) Consider this illustration: a terrorist mastermind communicates through couriers. We don’t know where to find him, but we do know where to find one of his couriers. We drug a courier, rendering him unconscious, then implant a remote controlled bomb and tracking device. When he goes to the hideout, we detonate the bomb, killing the terrorist.

The courier didn’t know we were sending him on a suicide mission. And the courier didn’t know he’d be murdering the terrorist.

However, we ourselves didn’t murder the terrorist. What we did is just reprisal.

iii) In addition, classical Arminian theology has a very robust doctrine of divine providence. Seems to me that classical Arminianism would also fall prey to manipulation arguments.

In §5, Walls says:

Free will and its associated values radically call into question our first blush guesses about the kinds of worlds a perfectly good, omnipotent, omniscient God could, and perhaps would, create... Libertarian freedom gives us at least plausible reasons for much of the evil in our world. Not only is it the case that much of the evil is directly due to human choices but it is also worth emphasizing that natural evil is also connected in intimate ways with human choices.

i) That's a circular, insular appeal. The freewill defense is only plausible to freewill theists. Agnostics and atheists don't think the putative value of libertarian freewill exceeds the quality and quantity of evil in the world. And they find the attempt to extend the freewill defense to natural evil even more implausible. Same thing with soft and hard determinists.

ii) Walls is also ignoring the possibility, which he mentioned in footnote #18, of a nondeterministic world without evil. That alone would sink his argument.

Compatibilism strengthens the skeptics' hand in making the case that God could

have made the world in such a way that it would be free of at least much of the horrific evil that scars our world. Indeed, for a theist engaged in theodicy to affirm compatibilism is akin to a soldier inadvertently handling critical intelligence information to a determined enemy of his country that will enable that enemy to infiltrate and destroy his country's civil defense system...And this makes altogether understandable why skeptics would be completely dubious of the notion that any God could be good, let alone perfectly good, who would create a world full of misery and intense suffering when he could just as easily have made one relatively if not altogether, free of evil.

That objection fails to grasp the implications of the opposing position. Calvinists don't have a problem with that consequence. If some folks are so offended by predestination that they become atheists, their reaction is, itself, a predestined reaction. They are infidels because God intends them to be infidels. The existence of infidelity serves a purpose in God's overarching plan.

Compatibilism undercuts any substantive claim that God wants to eliminate as much evil as he can...

i) Calvinism doesn't regard the existence of evil as an accident, oversight, or inadvertent mistake. Evil plays an instrumental role in God's plan. If you eliminate all evil, you thereby eliminate certain resultant goods in the process.

For instance, Cain murdered Abel. Fratricide is evil. Because Cain murdered Abel, Abel had no children or grandchildren or great-grandchildren. Murder results in a different family tree. If you cut down a tree, it may grow back, but everything above the cut will be different. Different branches, different twigs.

You and I exist because Cain murdered his brother at the advent of human history. Our genealogy takes the place of Abel's. If Abel had survived to father children, that would produce an alternate history. The alternate history might be as good or better in some respects, but it wouldn't be good for you and me. A sinless world has a different set of people.

ii) God doesn't intend to eliminate evil. God will quarantine evil in hell, but evildoers will continue to exist-forever.

iii) Walls himself doesn't think that God eliminates as much evil as he can. Walls rejects annihilationism. So Walls believes that God sustains evil for all eternity.

Whereas libertarians face the puzzle of explaining why God allows the sort of moral evil just noted, compatibilists have the more difficult challenge of explaining why he causes or determines it to happen and in so doing, they seem to be endorsing moral consequentialism.

Why is that a more difficult challenge? Why is permitting a preventable evil less morally problematic than causing or determining it? That's a facile Arminian assumption, but why think that distinction is morally germane? Surely it's easy to multiply examples in which allowing evil is morally equivalent to causing, commanding, or determining evil.

Since no one has libertarian freedom on their view, God need not allow or permit anything he does not prefer to happen, as he may have to do on the libertarian scheme.

i) It's true that according to Calvinism, God doesn't have to permit anything he does not prefer to happen. So, on that view, God has a good reason for whatever happens. How is that a challenge for Calvinism? It's not inconsistent with Calvinism.

ii) Given libertarianism, must God permit things he'd prefer not to happen? What does that mean, exactly?

a) Does that mean the Arminian God is unable to prevent evil? Is evil inevitable in every possible world? But that would mean evil is metaphysically necessary. How is that consonant with freewill theism? If human agents are free to do otherwise, then there ought to be at least one possible world in which they freely choose good over evil. That may be a world with a different set of people. That may be a world with a smaller population. But if there's no possible combination of libertarian agents which yields a sinless world, then evil seems to be a metaphysical necessity.

b) Or does that mean the Arminian God is unable to prevent evil consistent with other priorities? All things being equal, he prefers to disallow evil-but all things considered, he prefers to allow evil because a world with evil is preferable overall to a world without evil. If so, that complicates the invidious contrast between Calvinism and Arminianism. That means the Arminian God could eliminate evil, but he values some things more highly than eliminating evil.

iii) Does the Arminian God merely permit evil rather than causing evil? How is Walls defining causation? On a counterfactual theory of causation, the Arminian God causes evil.

The problem is that permission language does not make much sense on compatibilist premises. Typically, to say

an action is permitted is [to] imply that one is not controlling the action.

i) I don't see how that's a typical definition of permission. To the contrary, permission implies sufficient control over the situation that you could prevent the outcome if you so desired.

ii) I don't have any stake in permissive language. I don't think Calvinism requires that. However, permissive language is consistent with Calvinism. You don't allow what you can't prevent. For in that case, you have no choice in the matter. Like it or not, it's bound to happen. Permission assumes the ability to preempt or prevent whatever you choose to allow. That's consistent with Reformed theism. God allows something by not prevented it, even though it lies within his power to prevent it.

It is more doubtful that the compatibilist can appeal to the doctrine of double effect for, again, God can determine people "freely" to choose exactly as he wishes.

That strikes me as fallacious. The Calvinist God can will evil because it contributes to an incommensurable good or second-order good. He doesn't will evil for its own sake. Rather, that's the necessary tradeoff to secure the counterbalancing good.

...part of the arena God has designed for the purpose of eliciting and developing moral virtues in human creatures, virtues that essentially require freedom in order to be genuine.

i) Calvinism can also incorporate soul-making virtues in its theodicy.

ii) To say that requires libertarian freedom begs the question.

iii) Conversely, it's not as if Arminians have clear title to a soul-making theodicy. On the face of it, many evils foster soul-making vices rather than soul-making virtues. Many evils destroy character rather than refine character. There's no direct correlation between evil and virtuous character building. The same evils can have opposite effects on different individuals.

In §6, Walls says:

Damnation is the worst thing that can befall a rational creature, and because of its eternal nature, it is incomparably

worse than any evil in this life, however terrible.

I think that's overstated.

i) For one thing, I have no compelling reason to think eternal punishment is the same for all the damned. It may well be milder for some than others.

ii) I can imagine suffering in this life which might be more psychologically intense or physically painful.

The endless duration of eschatological punishment is, itself, punitive. For their condition is hopeless. It will never end, never get any better.

Yet that's not "incomparably" worse than the worst thing that can befall you in this life. Rather, that's a different kind of suffering. It could be outwardly mild, but despairing because it's so utterly interminable.

To get an accurate perspective on the doctrine of judgment, we must begin by situating it within the larger Christian picture of a God who is overflowing with love and grace...whose eternal nature is love, and who has demonstrated that love most vividly in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus...The love of God as

revealed in Jesus is an expensive love as well as an expansive love.

i) Actually, that's an inaccurate perspective. God doesn't have one central attribute. All God's attributes are coequal. It's not as if divine love, mercy, and grace are primary while divine justice, holiness, and righteousness are secondary.

If it's Walls' contention that all God's moral attributes are reducible or accessory to love, then he needs to present a supporting argument. Certainly the Bible doesn't support that reductionism.

ii) Walls makes the love of God expansive by stretching it so thin that his love is indifferent and ineffectual. Indifferent because he loves everyone equally. That's less like love than diffuse, impersonal benevolence.

Ineffectual because God cannot or will not save a sinner in spite of himself.

iii) There's a reason that Walls talks about God "demonstrating" or "revealing" his love in Christ. Because the Arminian God can't actually save anyone, his love is merely hortatory and illustrative. He gives us a loving example.

God is shown to be like a shepherd who is not content with having ninety-nine sheep safely in the fold. Rather, his love

*is such that he pursues the one sheep
that is lost...*

The problem with that description, from an Arminian standpoint, is that in the parable, God doesn't merely "pursue" the lost sheep. God finds the lost sheep and brings it back.

The shepherd isn't merely seeking a stray sheep. Rather, saving the sheep depends on the shepherd rather than the sheep. The sheep is too stupid to appreciate the peril it's in. The shepherd must act on behalf of the sheep by returning the shepherd to the fold regardless of the sheep's wishes.

The Bible has numerous passages, particularly in the prophetic literature, in which God warns his people, urges them to repent, expresses frustration for their hardness of heart, and pronounces judgment on them for their persistent refusal to heed his word.

The obvious question demanding an answer here is how to make sense of these large stretches of scripture if one assumes compatibilism. There are, of course, difficult texts for both sides of this debate, but the large number of texts similar to the

one I cited seem to fly directly in the face of a compatibilist reading.

...if God has determined all things, as theological determinists claim, then he determined the Judeans of Jeremiah's day in such a way that they persisted in sin and disobedience...The notion that God is angry at sins he himself determined when he could have determined things otherwise, and then pours out wrath on those same actions is puzzling in the extreme, to say the least. Indeed, if EMP above is correct, it is perverse.

i) When it comes to exegeting Scripture, I don't think we should filter the text through philosophical categories like compatibilism. A more pertinent question is how a text like this relates to predestination.

ii) Citing more passages of the same kind doesn't really strengthen the argument. If all his prooftexts are of a kind, then we can count them as one. They invite a unified explanation.

iii) I'm struck by his hermeneutical naïveté. Walls is a philosophical sophisticate who operates at a Sunday School level when he turns to the Bible. It's downright childish.

iv) To begin with, we must make allowance for rhetorical and narrative conventions. In Scripture, God often casts himself in the role of a stock character, viz. farmer, father,

potter, shepherd, king, husband, warrior, prosecutor. The impersonation includes conventional plot motifs and plot devices. Type scenes.

This is story telling. These theological models are analogous to God in some respect, but you can't take it all at face value.

v) We also need to distinguish between propositional/illocutionary discourse about God, and performative/perlocutionary discourse about God.

vi) It's simplistic to think God has only one purpose or one audience when he addresses Israel. There's a righteous remnant within the apostate mass. There are backsliders. Likewise, punishment can lead to restoration.

One has to evaluate any particular statement within the continuous, overarching narrative of Scripture. The present in relation to the past and future. Where is God taking history? Human disobedience advances the action. That, in turn, leads to the next stage. It's a mistake to isolate a particular passage without regard to how it functions in the ongoing story or narrative strategy.

i) Walls then presents a lengthy syllogism. One problem with the syllogism is equivocation. Take his use of "free." But free means different things to libertarians and compatibilists. Indeed, there are different definitions of freedom within both libertarianism and compatibilism. Some libertarians define freedom as ultimate sourcehood, whereas others define freedom as access to alternate possibilities. Some compatibilists define freedom conditionally, while others define freedom in terms of regulative/guidance control. So libertarians and compatibilists could affirm or deny the same minor

premise(s) of Walls's syllogism, but mean different things by their affirmation or denial.

ii) Calvinism is less concerned about the compatibility of determinism and freedom than determinism (or predestination) and responsibility. The Bible teaches both predestination and man's responsibility.

By contrast, "freedom" is a term of art. There are different ways of modeling freedom.

Freedom of the right kind is considered philosophically necessary to ground responsibility. Freedom is only relevant in reference to human responsibility—especially blameworthiness.

We need to guard against recasting issues in a way that no longer maps onto Scripture. It becomes too abstract and detached from reality.

Let's take Walls's first two premises:

(11) God truly loves all persons

(12) If God truly loves all persons, then he does all he can properly do to secure their true flourishing.

i) Premise #12 is already biased, because the adjective "properly" is there to give Arminians an out. Arminians don't think God does all he can do to secure their flourishing. Otherwise, they'd be universalists. He can't secure their flourishing without their consent.

“Truly” is another weasel word. “Truly” in contrast to what? That he doesn’t love all persons, or that “love” is used equivocally?

ii) We could also reverse the argument:

(11) If God doesn’t do all he can to secure their flourishing, then God doesn’t love all persons.

(12) Ergo, God doesn’t love all persons.

a) Empirically speaking, that’s a plausible inference. Many human beings aren’t flourishing. On the face of it, it’s easy to imagine God doing more for them to enhance their condition. So, if we were to judge by experience, we’d rationally conclude that God doesn’t love everyone.

b) Arminians try to deflect this countering that God can’t secure human flourishing at the cost of violating human freedom. But that’s ambiguous.

Many human beings who aren’t flourishing would welcome divine intervention. Take the millions of street kids in India, Russia, Pakistan, and the Philippines. God could miraculously intervene to improve the quality of their lives.

c) Arminians will object that this would be too disruptive. Free agents need stability to make responsible decisions. Responsible decisions require predictable consequences.

But even if we accept that explanation for the sake of argument, it still means God is not doing everything he can on behalf of millions of individuals. He does not love each

individual as much as he can. Rather, he's sacrificing the individual good for the common good.

And, ironically, this means some individuals get a far better shake than others. It doesn't mean everyone must settle for the same lower level of treatment. At least that would be equitable. Rather, you have wild disparities, where some individuals enjoy every conceivable advantage while other individuals suffer every conceivable disadvantage. It's hard to square this with the claim that God loves everyone equally. For he doesn't begin to treat everyone equally well. Not even close.

The street kids drew the short straw. And that's not the straw they'd draw if given a choice in the matter. But that choice was taken away from them.

Theological compatibilists appear to be left then with premise (11), which does not seem to be a very attractive option to deny, since it is a basic theological truism. Indeed, the claim that God loves the whole world, all persons without exception, appears to be one of the clearest teachings of the Bible, as well as one of the most compelling components of the gospel. So understandably, compatibilists are not typically anxious to deny this claim, at least forthrightly.

i) Walls is taking Arminian exegesis for granted, but that blatantly begs the question.

ii) He's also equivocating over the meaning of "love," which is ironic for someone who alleges that Calvinists equivocate over the meaning of "love."

It's not so compelling to say God loves everyone without exception if you qualify that to mean God loves the damned as much as the saints. For in that event, his universal love is an impotent love. It doesn't save you from the worst conceivable fate. That reduces divine love to an empty gesture or idle sentiment. Waiving farewell to the lost with a tear-stained Kleenex.

By contrast, libertarians can affirm the love of God for all persons without being disingenuous, even if some persons are damned. For God extends his love to such persons in such a way that they are truly enabled to response. Indeed, it is my view that God gives all persons "optimal grace," which means they have every opportunity to accept the gospel and be saved.

In other words, Walls invents whatever he needs to massage the problem of evil. He invents optimal grace. He

invents purgatory. He invents postmortem salvation.

This reduces theology to pious fiction. This reduces theological method to creative writing. Postulate whatever you need to make it seem right to you.

It reminds me of John Hick's eschatological verification, which is conveniently inaccessible in this life. You find out the hard way if he's wrong. By then it's too late to know better.

It is, I think, most telling that theological compatibilists often make claims and engage in rhetoric that naturally lead people to conclude that God loves them and desires their salvation in ways that are surely misleading to all but those trained in the subtleties of Reformed rhetoric. They assure their hearers that "whosoever will" may come when they preach the gospel, believing that only the elect can actually come or truly want to come.

i) There's no evidence that Walls has ever read a serious analysis of the free offer in Reformed theology. For instance:

<http://www.credomag.com/2012/03/09/the-language-and-theology-of-the-free-offer/>

www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/38/38.../38-3-pp403-412_JETS.pdf

ii) Walls is alluding to Rev 22:17, in the KJV:

“And the Spirit and the bride say, Come. And let him that heareth say, Come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely.”

Although Walls accuses the Calvinist of deception, it's Walls who is being deceptive with his mangled quote. For in the full quote (which is, in turn, modeled on Isa 55:1), the phrase is clearly conditional. The invitation is addressed to those who hear, to those who thirst. And it's free to all in the sense that it's been paid for (made explicit in Isa 55:1).

You don't need to be trained in the subtleties of Reformed rhetoric to understand this. You just have to pay attention to the wording, the context, and the literary allusions.

There is, however, another option for compatibilists who are reluctant to deny God's love for all or to equivocate on the nature of love...God has other goals that are incompatible with his saving all persons...This classic line of thought begins with the

unobjectionable claim that God's purpose is fully to glorify himself. It goes on to suggest that he would not be fully glorified if all were saved, so God's saving all persons is actually incompatible with his larger goal of receiving full glory.

This notion goes back at least to Aquinas and Calvin...The basic idea here seems to be that God's full glory could not be fully displayed unless he manifested his justice, which requires sin to occur, along with fitting punishment. Some must even be eternally damned for the full force of his just wrath against sin to be displayed.

This is roughly accurate, although it's misleading to say God does this to "receive" glory. God is not the beneficiary. God has nothing to gain. Rather, the elect are the beneficiaries.

Now this is a striking claim to be sure, but we need a preliminary clarification to even begin to assess it. Is the compatibilist saying it is necessary for God to display his justice in this fashion?...Were there no sin and evil, God would never show wrath or punish

anyone. If, contrary to this, it is insisted that God must display justice by punishing evil in order fully to manifest his glory, then sin and evil must occur for God's full glory to be demonstrated. The disconcerting consequence here is that God needs evil or depends on it fully to manifest his glory. This consequence undermines not only God's goodness, but his sovereignty as well.

i) To assert that this undermines God's goodness is just another example of Walls begging the question.

ii) How does it undermine God's sovereignty? Even omnipotence can't dissolve internal relations. That's not a limitation on God. Rather, that's a limitation of any creaturely medium. For instance, even God can't change the past.

iii) It isn't absolutely necessary that God manifest his attributes. But if he intends to manifest his attributes, then it's conditionally necessary that he employ means. Walls himself says that if there were no sin or evil, God would never show wrath or punish evil. Given the goal, that's a necessary presupposition. There's no inherent necessity in the goal, but with that end in view, that commits God to corresponding means. Omnipotence can't perform a pseudotask.

iv) Some goods are second-order goods. Likewise, some goods are incommensurable goods.

To take an illustration, suppose two teenagers love the same girl. Let's call them Jake, Jim, and Jane. And Jane reciprocates their affection. But she can't marry them both.

Suppose Jane becomes engaged to Jake. But, tragically, her fiancé is killed in traffic accident before the wedding. After grieving his death, she marries Jim.

She and Jim have a happy marriage, and their kids turn out well. That's a second-order good. Those kids wouldn't exist if Jake hadn't died in the traffic accident.

This is also an incommensurable good. Suppose Jake hadn't died. Suppose she married Jake and had kids by Jake. Suppose they turned out well.

That's an alternate good. But the good of having kids by Jake is incommensurable with the good of having kids by Jim, for these involve alternate histories or forking paths. If one timeline plays out, the other does not—and vice versa.

v) The Fall is a precondition of redemption. If Adam hadn't sinned, Christ would not have come to redeem the elect. That's a second-order good.

And that involves incommensurable goods. An unfallen world is good. In some respects, an unfallen world is better than a redeemed world. Yet a redeemed world is better in other respects, for that has compensatory goods which are not and cannot be duplicated in the unfallen world.

For one thing, as I noted before, different people will be born, depending on whether or not the fall takes place.

In addition, redeemed creatures have a greater appreciation of God's justice and grace. For they have experienced his grace. And they've seen that in contrast to others, no better than themselves, who suffer God's just punishment. That's humbling.

In the first place, it is highly dubious that justice in the form of punishing sin is essential to God, rather than an entirely contingent expression of his nature.

What is essential to God is holy love, and that is what must be fully displayed for God to be revealed. Wrath as expressed in just punishment, however, is merely the form holy love takes in response to sin and evil. Were there no sin and evil, God would never show wrath or punish anyone.

i) God's justice is as much an essential attribute as God's love.

ii) If manifesting justice is a contingent expression of God's nature, so is manifesting love. If there were no sin and evil, there would be no grace and mercy.

iii) Moreover, exacting justice is essential in a way that mercy is not. Mercy is inherently discretionary rather than obligatory. Sinners deserve justice—they don't deserve mercy. So Walls has it backwards.

But even if it is granted that God needs evil fully to glorify himself (which I do not grant), the question still remains why he must punish anyone by eternal damnation. Could not God express his wrath in terrifying and striking ways, if necessary, by punishing those he has determined to sin with intense and spectacular misery for some finite duration. He could then determine them to repent in response to his punishment and glorify him by worshipping him.

i) The very fact that Scripture teaches everlasting punishment as the just deserts of the damned means a lesser punishment would be unjust.

ii) In principle, it's not strictly necessary that God send anyone to hell. Had he decreed a universal atonement, he could justly forgive everyone through the merits of Christ.

iii) It is, however, right and just that God exact retribution on the wicked. God isn't a wronging evildoer by consigning

him to hell. That's fitting punishment.

iv) Moreover, that underscores the gratuity of grace. This is something that Arminians like Walls never get. They act as though God is obligated to make salvation available to the wicked. That's a perversion of the Biblical outlook. Indeed, it's subversive. That's taking the devil's side of the argument.

Arminians like Walls fail to appreciate the gravity of sin. They act as though sin is merely misfortune.

Now at this point we face a clash of fundamental intuitions...What one side sees as necessary, or at least fitting, to manifest God's justice is seen by the other side as an outrageous perversion not even remotely recognizable as justice.

Truth is divisive. Christ is divisive. The gospel has a polarizing effect. Some people are repelled by the light (Jn 3:19-20).

So I call their bluff with a test. If I am wrong, let them openly and without equivocation declare that it is the need

to manifest God's very justice that requires, or at last makes it fitting, that he determine some, perhaps many, to resist him forever, and then punish them with eternal misery, persons he could otherwise determine to freely accept his grace and joyfully worship him forever. Let them forthrightly say God is more glorified and his character more fully manifested in determining those persons to hate both him and each other than he would be in determining those same persons to gratefully adore him and love their neighbor as themselves.

I stipulate to all that. It is good to expose the true character of evil. To let evil run its course. To let some things, some people, become as bad as possible. That way there's no mistaking the real nature of evil.

Does Calvinism cancel out the Gospel?

A brief exchange I had on Facebook

EVERETT

There is no one saved if calvinism were true. You have to be in danger of something to be saved. No one headed to heaven was ever in danger of not being in heaven. It literally cancels out the gospel.

HAYS

It's easy to reframe the issue counterfactually. They'd be in danger if they were not elect. To take a comparison, a swimmer would be in danger of drowning if there was no lifeguard on duty.

Is Calvinism Manichean?

A popular Arminian trope is to say that Calvinism is based on Augustinian theology, and Augustinian theology is colored by Augustine's residual Manichaeism.

1. It's absurd to claim that all Calvinists are getting their theology mediated by Augustine. Even if Augustine was a major stimulus for Calvin, it doesn't follow that all or most Calvinists arrive at their position by the same route. You can be a Calvinist without reading a page by Calvin or Augustine.

The Reformed tradition points people to Biblical prooftexts for Calvinism. So many (most?) Calvinists are getting their theology from the prooftexts. They find the prooftexts convincing. While an Arminian will say they misinterpret Scripture, the point is that their frame of reference isn't Augustine or Calvin but Scripture.

To take a comparison, I can use a map to drive to a national park. And I can use the map to find the trails, and the scenic destinations. But once I'm there, I can see it for myself. What I believe about the park no longer relies on the map.

Likewise, suppose I'm a park ranger, and my kids were born in a cabin for park rangers. What they know about the park isn't dependent on the route I took to become a park ranger and be assigned to that national park. Even though that's where the journey began for me, they begin at a different point.

2. In addition, the genetic fallacy cuts both ways. We could just as well say that indeterminism is a pagan idea, going

back to the role of luck, randomness, and chance in Greek philosophers like Aristotle and Epicurus. Therefore, freewill theism has a heathen pedigree.

Why I'm a Wesleyan

<https://www.patheos.com/blogs/bibleandculture/2019/07/10/why-im-a-wesleyan/>

i) Before getting to my main point, BW3 makes two claims that lie in tension with each other: we can't be more loving than God, and love must be freely given and freely received. Yet it's child's play to come up with examples in human affairs where our love isn't limited by the receptivity of the beloved. Take an autistic child who lacks the capacity to reciprocate parental love. Or a baby. Or a teenage drug addict who resents his parents' interventions. Or a senile parent who can't grasp how grown children are acting in their parent's best interests. Or a patient in a coma.

It's funny how Arminians make blanket claims about the nature of love ("freely received") as if that's self-evident. They make no effort to consider the most obvious counterexamples to their sweeping overgeneralizations.

ii) In addition, BW3 is selective about the divine attributes. He acts like God's nature is to be loving, which overrides divine justice.

Moving onto the main point, he says:

What's the relationship between faith and works? According to the Calvinistic message, we are saved by grace through faith alone, and our actions have nothing to do with it—either before or during

conversion or afterwards. Our behavior is not what it's about—it's about what we believe.

It's a strange thing to me about Calvinistic theology that they talk so much about sovereign grace, and yet at the end of the day they don't believe the grace of God can dramatically transform a person beyond conversion.

i) It's fascinating that BW3, who's 67, who's said so much over the years in objection to Calvinism, is so woefully uninformed about the position he presumes to critique. To begin with, the Reformed formulation is not that we're "saved by grace through faith alone," but that we're saved by grace alone and justified by faith alone. BW3 collapses some crucial distinctions.

ii) Saving faith includes sanctifying grace. Regeneration and sanctification are transformative facets of grace. Consider John Owen's classic treatise on the mortification of sin:

https://faculty.gordon.edu/hu/bi/ted_hildebrandt/spiritualformation/texts/owen_mortificationofsin.pdf

Or consider this summary exposition of Reformed sanctification:

(1) The soul after regeneration continues dependent upon the constant gracious operations of the Holy

Spirit, but is, through grace, able to co-operate with them.

(2) The sanctifying operations of the Spirit are supernatural, and yet effected in connection with and through the instrumentality of means: the means of sanctification being either internal, such as faith and the co-operation of the regenerated will with grace, or external, such as the word of God, sacraments, prayer, Christian fellowship, and the providential discipline of our heavenly Father.

(3) In this process the Spirit gradually completes the work of moral purification commenced in regeneration. The work has two sides: (a) the cleansing of the soul from sin and emancipation from its power, and (b) the development of the implanted principle of spiritual life and infused habits of grace, until the subject comes to the stature of perfect manhood in Christ. Its effect is spiritually and morally to transform the whole man, intellect, affections, and will, soul, and body.

(4) The work proceeds with various degrees of thoroughness during life, but is never consummated

in absolute moral perfection until the subject passes into glory.

"SANCTIFICATION," A. A. HODGE, revised by B.B. Warfield.

And a more detailed exposition:

1. IT IS A SUPERNATURAL WORK OF GOD. *Some have the mistaken notion that sanctification consists merely in the drawing out of the new life, implanted in the soul by regeneration, in a persuasive way by presenting motives to the will. But this is not true. It consists fundamentally and primarily in a divine operation in the soul, whereby the holy disposition born in regeneration is strengthened and its holy exercises are increased. It is essentially a work of God, though in so far as He employs means, man can and is expected to co-operate by the proper use of these means. Scripture clearly exhibits the supernatural character of sanctification in several ways. It describes it as a work of God, I Thess. 5:23; Heb. 13:20,21, as a fruit of the union of life with Jesus Christ, John 15:4; Gal. 2:20; 4:19, as a work that is wrought in man from within and which for that very reason cannot be a*

work of man, Eph. 3:16; Col. 1:11, and speaks of its manifestation in Christian virtues as the work of the Spirit, Gal. 5:22. It should never be represented as a merely natural process in the spiritual development of man, nor brought down to the level of a mere human achievement, as is done in a great deal of modern liberal theology.

2. IT CONSISTS OF TWO PARTS. The two parts of sanctification are represented in Scripture as:

a. The mortification of the old man, the body of sin. This Scriptural term denotes that act of God whereby the pollution and corruption of human nature that results from sin is gradually removed. It is often represented in the Bible as the crucifying of the old man, and is thus connected with the death of Christ on the cross. The old man is human nature in so far as it is controlled by sin, Rom. 6:6; Gal. 5:24. In the context of the passage of Galatians Paul contrasts the works of the flesh and the works of the Spirit, and then says: "And they who are of Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with the passions and the lusts thereof." This means that in their case the Spirit has gained predominance.

b. The quickening of the new man, created in Christ Jesus unto good works. While the former part of sanctification is negative in character, this is positive. It is that act of God whereby the holy disposition of the soul is strengthened, holy exercises are increased, and thus a new course of life engendered and promoted. The old structure of sin is gradually torn down, and a new structure of God is reared in its stead. These two parts of sanctification are not successive but contemporaneous. Thank God, the gradual erection of the new building need not wait until the old one is completely demolished. If it had to wait for that, it could never begin in this life. With the gradual dissolution of the old the new makes its appearance. It is like the airing of a house filled with pestiferous odors. As the old air is drawn out, the new rushes in. This positive side of sanctification is often called "a being raised together with Christ," Rom. 6:4,5; Col. 2:12; 3:1,2. The new life to which it leads is called "a life unto God," Rom. 6:11; Gal. 2:19.

3. IT AFFECTS THE WHOLE MAN: BODY AND SOUL; INTELLECT, AFFECTIONS AND WILL. This follows

from the nature of the case, because sanctification takes place in the inner life of man, in the heart, and this cannot be changed without changing the whole organism of man. If the inner man is changed, there is bound to be change also in the periphery of life. Moreover, Scripture clearly and explicitly teaches that it affects both body and soul, I Thess. 5:23; II Cor. 5:17; Rom. 6:12; I Cor. 6:15,20. The body comes into consideration here as the organ or instrument of the sinful soul, through which the sinful inclinations and habits and passions express themselves. The sanctification of the body takes place especially in the crisis of death and in the resurrection of the dead. Finally, it also appears from Scripture that sanctification affects all the powers or faculties of the soul: the understanding, Jer. 31:34; John 6:45; — the will, Ezek. 36:25-27; Phil. 2:13; — the passions, Gal. 5:24; — and the conscience, Tit. 1:15; Heb. 9:14.

4. IT IS A WORK OF GOD IN WHICH BELIEVERS CO-OPERATE. When it is said that man takes part in the work of sanctification, this does not mean that man is an independent agent in the work, so as to make it partly the work of God and partly the work of

man; but merely, that God effects the work in part through the instrumentality of man as a rational being, by requiring of him prayerful and intelligent co-operation with the Spirit. That man must co-operate with the Spirit of God follows: (a) from the repeated warnings against evils and temptations, which clearly imply that man must be active in avoiding the pitfalls of life, Rom. 12:9,16,17; I Cor. 6:9,10; Gal. 5:16-23; and (b) from the constant exhortations to holy living. These imply that the believer must be diligent in the employment of the means at his command for the moral and spiritual improvement of his life, Micah 6:8; John 15:2,8,16; Rom. 8:12,13; 12:1,2,17; Gal. 6:7,8,15.

Sanctification and good works are most intimately related. Just as the old life expresses itself in works of evil, so the new life, that originates in regeneration and is promoted and strengthened in sanctification, naturally manifests itself in good works. These may be called the fruits of sanctification, and as such come into consideration here. **Louis Berkhof, Systematic Theology.**

The Death Star

Brief exchange I had on Facebook:

ZACH

What's the point of "engaging" with Mormons and evangelize your beliefs when your god has already elected those who are going to heaven? No amount of influence from Christians will change who is elected and who is not, right?

HAYS

In Calvinism, God hasn't elected anyone to salvation apart from regeneration and faith, but through regeneration and faith. Election isn't isolated from other things which God foreordained as a necessary component to achieve the outcome. Your objection is like saying that if, according to the script, Luke Skywalker will escape the Death Star before it explodes, then he needn't leave the Death Star to survive. Yet the script doesn't merely predetermine that he will escape the exploding Death Star, but specifies how he will escape. He won't avoid the fatal outcome if he remains onboard.

Unplanned pregnancies

Critics of Calvinism like to bring up hard cases. That's legitimate inasmuch as Calvinism can't duck the hard cases. It is, however, self-deluded for freewill theists to imagine that their alternative exempts themselves from equally hard cases.

Let's take the case of "unplanned pregnancies". From a theological perspective, are unplanned pregnancies good or evil?

In popular parlance, I think an "unplanned pregnancy" is generally a euphemism for a pregnancy resulting from premarital sex, extramarital sex, failure to use contraception (even though the couple didn't want a child), or contraceptive failure. From the standpoint of the couple, the pregnancy was unintended and usually undesirable. The most extreme example is a child conceived in rape.

From a human perspective, such pregnancies are unintended. But are they unintended from a divine perspective? According to open theism, just about every pregnancy is unplanned from God's viewpoint since God doesn't know the future. Exceptions might be Isaac and Jesus, although it's an interesting question how the God of open theism could promise Abraham a child if God doesn't know or control what human beings will do, including sex.

However, it's hard to see how any pregnancy can be unplanned under Molinism or Arminianism, for God's actions in creation and providence are necessary causes of every particular pregnancy, and God knows the end-results of his actions in creation and providence.

From a Reformed perspective, every pregnancy is predestined. Do freewill theists think humanly unplanned pregnancies are evil? Freewill theists often charge the God of Calvinism with hypocrisy for decreeing what he forbids.

But that's morally complex. If a child is conceived in sin, the process is evil, but does that mean the product is evil? Do freewill theists think the child is tainted by the process (e.g. premarital or extramarital sex)? Presumably not. Does it impugn divine benevolence if God welcomes every child into the world? Presumably not.

Assuming that every pregnancy is a providentially planned pregnancy, even if many pregnancies are humanly unplanned, the good outcome is inextricably linked to sinful causes in however many cases. Do freewill theists regret the outcome? Open theists might.

True love can't be "forced"

1. One of the flash cards objections to Calvinism is that true love can't be "forced". Of course, even on its own terms, that's a clueless objection. If everything predestined, then God isn't "forcing" himself on anyone. Force presumes resistance. But if everything is predestined, then there can't be any tension between the plan and the execution. It isn't possible to resist predestination and providence if everything we think and do is the effect of predestination and providence. No doubt freewill theists will find that equally objectionable, but that's a different objection than "forcing" agents to love him.

2. In their rhetorically knee-jerk way, what they seem to mean by "force" is that we didn't choose to love God in return. So let's consider some comparisons:

i) In this clip, David Platt talks about adopting a young boy:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PtnGGFqpT80>

At that age, the boy didn't choose to be adopted. He never consented to be adopted. At that age, the love was one-sided. It was all from his adoptive parents.

ii) Sometimes it's a virtue to befriend someone who wants to be left alone. Suppose I'm a high school student. I notice another student who's a brooding, standoffish loner.

He has no friends, and it's a vicious cycle. He dislikes the other students, so they dislike him in return. They sense each other's antipathy. And that reinforces his social alienation.

Suppose I make an effort to cultivate him. I reach out to him. He resents my gestures of friendship. But I persist. I "force" myself on him, in hopes of wearing down his resistance. I impose on him because he clearly needs of friend. I try to gain his trust. Break through the barrier.

Maybe I won't succeed, but even if I fail, he will know that there was one person who cared about him. And maybe that will initiate a thawing process. Perhaps, a few years later, I'll bump into him, and at that point he will be more open.

iii) I'm no expert an autism, but it's impression that for severe autistics, love has to come from the parental side. Perhaps severe autistics lack the psychological makeup to reciprocate. At the very least, it takes the infinite patience of caring parents to draw them out. That's very lopsided love. They can't enter your world, so you must enter theirs—as best you can.

iv) I once saw a scene on TV of a drunken partier who climbed out the window onto the ledge of a fourth story apartment, then tried to climb onto the roof. He slipped. He avoided falling to his death by gabbing onto the rails of balconies as he went down. Although he couldn't hold on, it broke the force of the fall, so that while he landed hard, he didn't kill himself or break any bones.

But after he got up, dazed, he tried to climb back up the outside of the apartment. Having narrowly eluded death, he went right back to more insanely dangerous behavior. At that point two guys intervened to pull him down before he got too far up, and hauled him off until he dried out. They physically overpowered him for his own protection. It would be interesting if they showed him the footage, after he was sober.

Is freewill theism a pipeline for apostasy?

Here's what I mean: lots of churchgoers are indoctrinated in a theology of God's "unconditional love". By theologians and apologists. In sermons and praise songs. A lopsided emphasis on God's "unconditional love". That's treated as God's central, overriding attribute, eclipsing all other attributes. And that's often set in explicit contrast to Calvinism.

I imagine, for many churchgoers, who never read the Bible cover to cover, that when they actually read about Noah's flood, God firebombing Sodom and Gomorrah, the holy war commands and narratives, capital crimes, God sending plagues, and hellfire passages in the NT, it generates cognitive dissonance. Having been conditioned by a one-sided theology of God's "unconditional love", they shake their heads in disbelief and ask how a "loving" God can say and do the things Scripture attributes to him.

If they were exposed to a more muscular, dare I say masculine theology, if their theological diet was balanced by God's justice and holiness as well as his love and mercy, reading these passages wouldn't create the same cognitive dissonance. To what extent is freewill theism making churchgoers apostates waiting to happen? Even passages condemning homosexuality are hard to square with God's "unconditional love". Such passages seem to be so judgmental and exclusionary.

Divine frustration

In this post I'm going to defend a position I don't happen to agree with. I'm going to show how it's potentially defensible. In other words, if I subscribed to this position, then here's how I'd go about defending it.

There are Calvinists who think God has unrequited desires. God sincerely desires the salvation of the reprobate.

Not surprisingly, Arminians attack this position as inconsistent. They also use it as a wedge issue.

But in principle, there is a pretty straightforward argument which a Calvinist of this persuasion could use to demonstrate the consistency of his position.

If we accept the metaphysical assumption that only one possible world can be instantiated, then God might like to save the reprobate. But since he can only instantiate one possible world, that desire might be in conflict with another possible world which is preferable overall. All things being equal, God wishes that he could save everyone—but all things considered, a world in which some are lost may be preferable to a world in which everyone is saved. And keep in mind that we're not necessarily referring to the same set of people in each world.

If this case, God is "limited" (as it were) by what's logically compossible. Not all possibilities are compossible.

And that would be a "limitation" internal to God, inasmuch as logic is internal to God. The mind of God constitutes the laws of logic.

A Calvinist of this stripe might say God is “frustrated” with his choices. Even so, that would have a fundamentally different basis than divine frustration in freewill theism. In the latter case, God is stymied by human freedom. That’s a limitation imposed on God by outside forces. By something external to God. By the sinful or libertarian will of the creature.

So that’s not a wedge issue. It doesn’t concede a principle to freewill theism. For divine frustration would operate on two essentially different, respective principles.

I myself am sympathetic to a qualified version of the megaverse, so I don’t grant the metaphysical postulate underlying this position. And I also don’t share the hermeneutical assumptions driving this view of the well-meant offer.

If, however, we presume that only one universe can exist at a time, then this is a simple, elegant argument for a Calvinist God who can’t get everything he wants.

Does Calvinism entail that the mother of a serial killer might love her child more than God does?

(1) If I desire that my child achieve shalom and God does not desire that my child achieve shalom, then God loves my child less than I do.

(2) I desire that my child achieve shalom.

(3) If Calvinism is true then possibly God does not desire that my child is elect.

(4) If God does not desire that my child is elect then God does not desire that my child achieve shalom.

(5) Therefore, if Calvinism is true then possibly God does not desire that my child achieve shalom.

(6) Therefore, if Calvinism is true then possibly God loves my child less than I do.

(7) It is not possible that God loves my child less than I do.

(8) Therefore, Calvinism is false.

<https://randalrauser.com/2019/03/does-calvinism-entail-that-i-might-love-my-child-more-than-god-does/>

(1) If Ted Bundy's mom wants her son to go to heaven and God wants her son to go to hell, then God loves her son less than she does.

(2) Bundy's mom wants her son to go to heaven.

(3) If Calvinism is true then possibly God does not desire that her son is elect.

(4) If God does not desire that her son is elect then God does not desire that her son go to heaven.

(5) Therefore, if Calvinism is true then possibly God does not desire that her son go to heaven.

(6) Therefore, if Calvinism is true then possibly God loves her son less than I do.

(7) It is not possible that God loves a serial killer less than Mom does.

(8) Therefore, Calvinism is false.

Is damnation a process crime?

I'll comment on Craig:

<https://www.reasonablefaith.org/question-answer/P30/limited-atonement>

The question of the extent of the atonement is one that I would rather avoid, as it seems so secondary an issue when it comes to the atonement. I want to focus on the really central questions raised by the doctrine of the atonement. Nevertheless, one can't help running into this issue when one reads widely on the subject of the atonement, so I'll share here some tentative thoughts on the matter.

At face value, it seems incredible to think that Christ died only for the elect. You couldn't get a much clearer repudiation of this view than I John 2.2: "he is the expiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world." Reformed thinkers are forced into exegetical acrobatics in order to explain away the prima facie meaning of such scriptural statements.

i) Open theists would say the same thing about how Craig interprets many passages of Scripture.

ii) The "acrobatics" metaphor is such a shopworn cliché.

iii) I've discussed the usual Arminian prooftexts:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2014/06/arminian-prooftexts.html>

So what in the world would compel someone to re-interpret such passages in order to make them compatible with the view that Christ died only for the sins of the elect and not for the sins of every human being? The reason is a theological inference that forces one into such contrived exegesis. One is forced into this position by a theological argument that implies the limited extent of the atonement.

The argument is this: at the cross Christ by his death wins our actual redemption. For he satisfies the demands of God's retributive justice, which had condemned us for our sins. The demands of justice having been met, there no longer remains any punishment for our sins to be exacted. Christ did not win for us merely potential redemption; rather he secured our actual redemption at the cross. Therefore, if Christ died for all people, everyone

would be saved, which we know from Scripture to be false.

I think you'll agree that this is a pretty powerful argument. Nevertheless, it remains an inference, and if it leads to a conclusion that flies in the face of scriptural teaching, then we need to question whether this is a sound inference. Rather than embrace universalism or limited atonement—both of which seem clearly unscriptural—we need to call this theological inference into question.

It's interesting to see him concede that the Reformed position is a "pretty powerful argument".

In fact, Reformed thinkers themselves recognize this truth in distinguishing between redemption as accomplished and as applied. They will say that our redemption was accomplished at the cross but that it is applied individually when persons are regenerated and place their faith in Christ. This distinction is vital because otherwise the elect would be born redeemed! They would never be

unregenerate sinners but would be justified and saved from the instant of their conception. But Scripture teaches that we once were “children of wrath like the rest of mankind” (Ephesians 2.3), and many of us recall our pre-Christian days. But how can such a distinction make sense if Christ won our actual redemption at the cross? If I was actually redeemed in AD 30 (never mind that I didn’t exist then!), how can I not be redeemed at every moment that I do exist? The undeniable distinction between redemption accomplished and applied makes sense only if we say that Christ’s death wins our potential redemption and that that potential is actualized in individual lives through repentance and faith.

That's confused. The elect were always redeemed, as of the Crucifixion. And that applies retroactively to OT saints. But it doesn't follow that if they were always redeemed, they were always regenerated or justified. Salvation is a process with different phases. Although redemption, regeneration, and justified are linked inasmuch as anyone who was redeemed will be regenerated and justified, it doesn't follow

that these must be simultaneous—any more than the redemptive death of Christ must be simultaneous with OT saints to redeem OT saints. And, yes, you can be redeemed before you exist because you exist in God's mind and plan.

It seems to me that the questionable assumption of this argument is the presupposition that Christ's death achieves our actual redemption rather than our potential redemption. True, Christ suffered what would have been the punishment for our sins, thereby meeting the demands of God's justice. But that payment of our debt needs to be freely received by faith in order to accomplish our actual redemption. It is as if Christ has made a massive downpayment sufficient to pay for anyone's sins, which we must then appropriate in order to become a beneficiary.

I don't see any problem of "double jeopardy" here. That is a convention of our human criminal justice system in the United States which cannot be automatically applied to God's dealings with humanity. In any case, it is not as if the unrepentant person is being tried twice for the same crime. There is only one Judgement Day, and that is the only time a person is tried. If he has freely rejected

the pardon Christ offers him, there is no one else to pay for his crimes.

Isn't the view I suggest biblical? The Old Testament sacrifices availed for nothing unless they were conjoined with a contrite and repentant heart on the part of the person for whom they were offered. Similarly, Paul says, "since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood, to be received by faith" (Romans 3. 23-25). Those who are not in Christ, who do not believe, have no redemption. That is not because Christ did not die for them. Paul compares Christ to Adam, commenting, "as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one man's act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all men" (Romans 5.18). This statement does not imply universalism, since the benefits of Christ's death come only to those who have faith in him. So in Romans 6 Paul describes how the benefits of Christ's death are individually appropriated through believer's baptism, which epitomizes the conversion process: "Do you not know that all of us who have

been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life” (Romans 6.3-4). Actual redemption takes place when an individual identifies with Christ through faith.

So I think the theological inference made by advocates of limited atonement and by universalists alike is faulty because it is based on a false assumption.

i) I agree with Craig that there are limitations to the analogy with human penology. However, in his monograph defending penal substitution (**THE ATONEMENT [CAMBRIDGE 2018]**), he relies on analogies with human penology at several crucial junctures to skewer intuitive objections to penal substitution. So his position seems to be ad hoc.

ii) Craig's position reduces the grounds for damnation to a process crime. The damned are damned not for underlying sins but just for the sin of refusing to believe in Jesus. But isn't that a manufactured crime? Like prosecutors who can't indict someone for actual, original wrongdoing, so they indict him for lying about a crime he didn't commit. Although he didn't commit the crime they question him about, he lied about it, so that becomes the crime. It's a setup.

iii) I don't see that Craig quite gets to the nub of Owen's argument. Did Jesus die for your sins? Is disbelieving in Jesus a sin? Did Jesus die for *that* sin? If so, and if, like Craig, you subscribe to penal substitution, then in what sense is disbelieving in Jesus culpable? How is it just deserts to be punished for the sin of disbelief if Jesus died for all your sins, including the sin of disbelief?

iv) However, Craig's position seems to be that Jesus didn't actually die for *any* of your sins. Rather, faith actualizes the atonement for you.

Now, it's true that in Scripture there's a relationship between faith and salvation. There's a sense in which salvation is contingent on faith. But does that mean faith is what makes the atonement efficacious? How does that follow? How does faith figure in the metaphysics of the atonement? How does faith have the power to transform a potential atonement into an actual atonement? He says "It is as if Christ has made a massive downpayment sufficient to pay for anyone's sins, which we must then appropriate in order to become a beneficiary." But that's a metaphor. That's not an actual explanation. He needs to describe what literally happens. Is the atonement dependent on faith? Does faith cause the atonement to become actual in the case of a believer?

There are different kinds of dependence relations. Take a stock illustration in debates about scientific explanation: you can calculate the length of a shadow from the height of the flagpole and the angle of the sun. Conversely, you can calculate the height of the flagpole from the length of the shadow and the angle of the sun. In one respect these are equivalent. But there's an explanatory asymmetry in the

dependence relation. The sunshine and flagpole cause the shadow whereas the shadow has no causal role.

v) He defines the potential redemption in counterfactual terms—"Christ suffered what *would have been* the punishment for our sins..." (emphasis added). So Christ redeemed the damned in a possible world, but not the actual world? That fissions the atonement into redemption in possible worlds for the damned, but redemption in the actual world for the saints. So there are multiple atonements. Not one atonement for everyone, or one atonement for the elect, but rather, customized atonements. A one-to-one correspondence between an atonement and the possible or actual world in which a given sinner exists. Each individual has his own atonement, be it potential or actual, fissioned all across the real or possible worlds.

vi) Perhaps what Craig means is that Jesus died to redeem sinners on condition of faith. In that case, Jesus had no intention of redeeming unbelievers but only believers. Yet doesn't that amount to a limited atonement? And on that view, doesn't the overall number of the redeemed coincide with the elect in Calvinism?

But suppose you do think that Christ dies only for the elect. Does that imply that "most people couldn't even possibly be saved" ? I don't think so.

It's true that limited atonement doesn't prejudice the percentage of the elect in relation to humanity generally.

There are two ways in which salvation could be universally accessible. First, if we take election to be primarily corporate, then it is up to us whether we want to be part of that corporate body which is the object of Christ's redemption. Christ died only for the elect, but anyone can be part of the elect by repentant faith.

On that view, does Jesus die for specific sinners, or is the atonement a general fund that sinners can appropriate? Did Jesus die with particular sinners in view? Or is the atonement anonymous? Like throwing C-notes out an airplane. It's up to people down below to seize the opportunity and scoop up as many C-notes as they can.

Or, second, we could adopt a middle knowledge perspective...

The cure-all of Molinism.

...holding that God knew who would freely receive God's grace and be saved, and so He sent Christ to die for them

alone but not for those persons who He knew would freely reject Him. If someone who remains unrepentant were to place his faith in Christ, then God would have included him in Christ's atoning death. Thus, salvation and the benefits of Christ's death are available to everyone, even though Christ died only for some but not all persons. This would also make sense of the Reformed insistence that Christ's death has the power and worth to save everybody. Once again, we see the astonishing power of the doctrine of middle knowledge to open up unexpected options theologically. Via middle knowledge, we could, if we wanted, combine a doctrine of limited atonement with the universal availability of salvation.

If Jesus never made atonement for the impenitent, how is that consistent with the "the universal availability of salvation"?

Net result

A few comments on this:

<https://selfwire.org/article/explaining-god-evil>

Second, certain heinous evils do not have a “net” good.

On the face of it, even heinous evils can yield a net good. Events are causes of further events down the line. Everything adds up, for better or worse. In principle, that can be good overall. Whether the net effect is better rather than worse depends on whether God has orchestrated history so that countervailing goods offset evils so that on balance, the final result is better.

This is otherwise called “The theological problem of trauma.” There is no “net good” of a little girl being raped. One might contrive a philosophical situation in which one had to choose between one person being raped vs. 1,000 people being raped—in which case the single rape was the relative good.

Not a relative good but a lesser evil.

But there are two problems with this—even if this is conceived as a relative good, it still doesn't posit a net good. This argument fails to distinguish between what philosophers call the utilitarian good and the inherent good. The saving of 1,000 lives was a utilitarian good, but still failed to undo or justify the inherent evil of the one rape which the saving cost. This leads to the third problem.

i) Christians can only play the hand they were dealt. Any theodicy will be wince-inducing. But if you believe in God and evil, then that severely limits the logical options. Reality dictates the available options. If reality was kinder, we wouldn't have the problem of evil in the first place. So any theistic explanation will have a hard aspect. And an atheistic explanation is harsher.

ii) It's true that if an action is intrinsically wrong, then beneficial consequences don't convert it into something good or moral. Likewise, beneficial consequences can't justify intrinsic wrongdoing.

However, while wrongdoing can't be justified, to permit wrongdoing can sometimes be justified. There is sometimes a morally salient difference between committing evil and

not preventing evil. I might not intervene to preempt an impending evil or step in to arrest an evil in progress if the effect of my intervention is to replace one evil with other evils further down the line, or eliminate some compensatory goods.

Third, this theodicy does not solve the originaive problem of evil. Let's take the problem of having to choose between 1,000 people being raped and 1 person being raped. The argument which states that the greatest of all possible worlds necessarily includes the heinous evil of our world silently implies that God was in a Sophie's Choice scenario before he created the world. In the novel Sophie's Choice, the protagonist was sent to a Nazi concentration camp and was forced to choose between the murder of her daughter and her son. She chose her son. She can hardly be blamed for the death of her son.

The Calvinist use of this Leibnizian theodicy attempts to apply the same justification to God by implying that God was in a similar situation before his free decision to create the world. Of course, if Calvin was right, God's hand wasn't forced in any way, and his free decision to create was not in the context of a Sophie's Choice scenario. Therefore, the

question, “Why did God allow sin in the world?” remains unanswered, and the place of a successful theodicy for Christian theology remains unanswered.

i) I don't think there's a greatest possible world. There are greater good worlds, lesser good worlds—as well as worlds containing evil with no redeeming values. No single world history captures all the goods. Not all possibilities are compossible. By definition, every possible world has a different world history. Some goods inevitably depend on how a particular timeline unfolds.

ii) Likewise, second-order goods necessarily presuppose evil. You can't have one without the other.

iii) Apropos (i-ii), there are some restrictions on God's field of action. However, I don't think there's any antecedent restriction on God's ability to create more than one possible world. Perhaps God made a multiverse in which some alternate scenarios play out. That will realize a greater number of goods.

iv) Maxwell's retreat into mystery just kicks the can down the street. God can't be absolved of responsibility for evil or complicity in evil, although he can be absolved of culpability for evil.

v) As for Wolterstorff, if you indulge in high-risk behavior and your luck runs out, there's nothing inexplicable about the tragic result. That doesn't require a special explanation. His judgment is understandably clouded by grief, but his reaction is illogical.

Pecuniary atonement

Furthermore, not only is the gospel call undermined, but so is God's justice in condemning those who refuse it. Just as a non-elect sinner cannot be asked to take hold of an atonement which was not actually made for him, so he equally cannot be punished for failing to do so. How can he heap condemnation on himself for rejecting the gospel, as in John 3:18, when the gospel was never for him? Indeed, what sense is there to even speak of him "rejecting" something which was never sincerely offered him to begin with? May he not actually turn around and, without any impertinence, point out that God is manifestly dishonest to call everyone to believe a promise which is not made to everyone, and manifestly unjust to punish those who don't believe when there is nothing for them to believe in? Yet John says, to the contrary, that "whoever does not

believe God has made him a liar, because he has not believed in the testimony that God has borne concerning his Son. And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life” (1 John 5:10–12). Eric Svendsen further expands this point by bringing to bear passages which describe the additional condemnation of those who profess the faith, but later fall away. In part 1 of his dialog with James White, ‘When Does Our Union With Christ’s Death Occur?’ he asks, why are they condemned if the gospel was not for them? But Peter says that they deny the Master who bought them (2 Peter 2:1).

<http://bnonn.com/on-the-atonement-part-2/>

I'd like to make a few comments on this:

1. I'm going to skip over the objection that it's unjust or insincere for God to condemn the reprobate for refusing to believe an offer that was never extended to them in the first place, inasmuch as I recently discussed that objection:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2016/05/duty-faith.html>

Of course, Bnonn may view that response as inadequate.

2. I don't know how Bnonn is using 1 Jn 5:10-12. Is he using that as a prooftext for unlimited atonement? Is he using that to show how a faulty view of the atonement can be tantamount to calling God a liar? Is he linking the two? Does he think 1 Jn 5:10-12 proves both? If you deny unlimited atonement, in effect you make God out to be a liar?

3. I'd simply point out that in v11, the "we" stands in implicit contrast to John's opponents. In the context of 1 John, these were schismatics who separated themselves from the churches of Asia Minor which John oversaw.

They were denying that Christians have eternal life in Christ. Ironically, since Christ is the only source of eternal life, to deny that is to exclude yourself from that very source. If anything, this passage cuts against the grain of unlimited atonement. They stand in opposition to the atonement. They reject the atonement. Thus, they are not party to the atonement.

4. Regarding 2 Pet 2:1, that is, of course, a stock prooftext for unlimited atonement. So Bnonn's appeal to that passage is more straightforward. However, 4-point Calvinists reframe the passage by placing that within an overall doctrine of the atonement. The passage itself merely says they deny the Master who bought them. Consider all the things it doesn't say:

i) Christ died for them

- ii)** Christ died in their place
- iii)** Christ shed his blood for them
- iv)** Christ made atonement for them
- v)** Christ made propitiation for them
- vi)** Christ redeemed their sins
- vii)** Christ reconciled them to God

In other words, the passage says nothing about the death of Christ, or sin, or sacrifice, or blood atonement, or vicarious atonement, or penal substitution. To read this as a proof-text for unlimited atonement, you have to superimpose categories that are conspicuous by their absence from the text.

5. In fact, the passage trades on the metaphor of master/slave relations. Even that is very compressed. It could depict transfer of ownership. On that view, they remain slaves, but they have a new master. Or it could depict manumission: a benefactor buys their freedom. On that view, they were no longer slaves, but freemen.

No doubt the passage indicates that Jesus did *something* for them. But it doesn't use atonement language or sacrificial language. It doesn't use any religious terminology. Rather, it uses a secular metaphor.

To take a close comparison, Yahweh redeemed Israel from Egyptian bondage. An act of divine manumission. That, however, wasn't the same thing as atoning for their sins. The Mosaic cultus had atonement ceremonies. But that's different from the Exodus.

In that respect you can have three different classes of people:

i) The unredeemed

ii) The soterically redeemed

iii) The unsoterically redeemed

On the one hand, you have people who are outside the pale of special grace. On the other hand, you have people who due to their association with Christianity, have enjoyed some benefits or privileges which, however, fall short of the elect. This is like the OT distinction between pagans, nominal Jews, and pious Jews.

6. Finally, even if 2 Pet 2:1 or 1 Jn 5:10-12 indicated unlimited atonement, that falls short of what Bnonn needs, because he has a very precise model of the atonement. He distinguishes between pecuniary atonement (e.g. John Owen), and judicial atonement. But is there any proof-text for unlimited atonement which specifies or implies that Jesus died for everyone or redeemed everyone in the sense of judicial atonement—in contradistinction to pecuniary atonement?

Duty-faith

This is a follow-up to my previous post:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2016/05/christ-died-for-sinners.html>

To my knowledge, this is one objection that 4-point Calvinists (more precisely, Amyraldism) raise to limited atonement: Sinners, including the reprobate, have a duty to believe the gospel. Unless they had a duty to believe it, their failure to believe the gospel would be blameless. But if Christ never made atonement for the reprobate, how can they be obliged to believe in something they were never party to?

That's my own formulation of the argument. Assuming that's accurate, let's assess the argument:

1. As often bears repeating in these discussions, the offer of the gospel is a conditional offer: If you repent and believe in Jesus, you will be saved.

So long as that remains true, the reprobate have a duty to believe it—because it's true. To disbelieve it is to treat it as a false promise. But it's culpable to say God's promise is false—if, in fact, his promise is true.

According to 5-point Calvinism, it is always the case that whoever satisfies the terms of the gospel offer will be saved.

If Christ didn't make atonement for the reprobate, that does nothing to change the veracity of the promise. According to

5-point Calvinism, Christ made atonement for everyone who satisfies the terms of the gospel offer.

So limited atonement doesn't generate any inconsistency regarding duty faith.

2. However, a 4-point Calvinist might object that the conditional formula is deceptively simple: If you believe, you will be saved.

Believe in what? That's a fair question. The 4-point Calvinist fills this out as: Believe that Christ died to save me (or something like that).

But there are problems with that:

i) Prooftexts for the gospel offer don't actually unpack the promise in those terms. A 4-point Calvinist may think that's implicit in the promise, yet that's the very question at issue.

ii) A 5-point Calvinist can fill it out as: To believe in Christ is to believe that there's no salvation apart from Christ, that Christ alone is the only hope of salvation. If you throw yourself on the mercy of Christ, you will be saved.

iii) We might define it in reverse: not to believe in Christ is to presume that you don't need to be saved, or you don't need Christ to save you.

And that definition is borne out by the enemies of the Christian faith throughout the NT. Jewish opponents of Jesus, as well as heretics.

iv) Furthermore, the 4-point formula is deceptively simple, for the 4-point Calvinist believes you can't be saved unless you are one of the elect. Therefore, if he were to build that

qualification into this conditional formula, if he made that explicit, it would read: If you are one of the elect, and you believe in Christ, you will be saved.

But since 4-point Calvinists affirm limited election, how can a person trust a promise that's predicated on a condition he may not fulfill? Election is an additional ground. Another *sine qua non* of salvation.

4. Even though that's all that we really need to say, for the sake of completeness, let's consider some other permutations of this issue.

Do 4-point Calvinists think everyone has a duty to believe the gospel? What about people who died before the atonement? What about people who lived and died outside the pale of the gospel? Are they culpable for failing to believe a gospel they never had a chance to hear? Are they culpable for failing to believe in the atonement before it took place? In principle, a 4-point Calvinist could answer that in either, or both, of two different ways:

i) No, people in general are not obligated to believe the gospel. Not believing the gospel is only blameworthy if you heard it, but disbelieve it. Or, perhaps, not believing the gospel is culpable if you failed to take advantage of opportunities to hear it.

If so, that's a significant concession. Duty-faith is not a universal duty. God can justly condemn sinners apart from failure to believe the gospel.

But in that event, universal atonement is hardly a necessary condition for divine condemnation. So a 5-point Calvinist could agree with the negative answer of the 4-point Calvinist, and redeploy that answer to defend the

consistency of limited atonement with God's judgment of the reprobate.

ii) Yes, everyone is obligated to believe the gospel, although in some cases that's a counterfactual duty. If God had given that person the opportunity to hear the gospel, then he'd be obligated to believe it, and blameworthy for failing to do so.

But in that event, a 5-point Calvinist can resort to a counterfactual defense of limited atonement. If, in a possible world, the same person believes the gospel who was reprobate in this world, Christ would have died for him in that alternate scenario. In this world he is reprobate, but in that possible world, he's elect (and redeemed). If, in an alternate timeline, he were to believe the gospel, then Christ atoned for him in that alternate timeline.

5. Finally, we can be obliged to believe things we're not party to:

i) For instance, suppose a judge hears a case about breach of contract. The judge isn't party to the contract. Rather, the plaintiff and the defendant are the contractual parties. Yet the judge is obligated to believe certain truths about the contract. It's his duty to rule on the law and the facts of the case.

ii) Suppose a Martian heard St. John preaching the gospel. Jesus didn't die to make atonement for Martians. Suppose Martians are sinless.

So the terms of the gospel are irrelevant to a Martian. The offer of the gospel is not a promise to Martians.

Even so, our hypothetical Martian is still obliged to believe certain things about the gospel. If the gospel is true, then he has a duty to believe it's true.

iii) Likewise, suppose I'm reprobate. Suppose Jesus didn't make atonement for me.

Yet there can still be truths regarding the gospel that I'm obligated to believe. It's true that no one can be saved apart from the atonement. It is my duty to believe that, even if I'm excluded from the atonement. I can have an obligation to believe certain truths concerning the redemptive death of Christ regardless of whether he died to redeem me. Those are two distinct issues.

6. Now, a 4-point Calvinist might complain that a 5-point Calvinist has to introduce finespun qualifications to make limited atonement consistent with the universal offer—qualifications that are unnecessary for a 4-point Calvinist. These are gratuitous complications, made necessary by commitment to limited atonement.

However, 4-point Calvinism has its own complications. It must qualify its position to make it consistent with the fact that the offer of the gospel is not universal in time and space. In what, sense, then, is there a duty to believe it? In what sense is that a precondition for divine judgment? Likewise, the 4-point Calvinist must qualify his position to make it consistent with limited election.

Therefore, both positions have complications. Indeed, 4-point Calvinism has some complications that 5-point Calvinism avoids. The distinctives of each position give rise to corresponding caveats.

Christ died for sinners

In 5-point Calvinism, is limited atonement and/or limited election in tension with the universal offer of the gospel?

i) God doesn't directly offer the gospel to every individual, or directly command every individual to believe the gospel.

In that respect, the offer of the gospel parallels special revelation. It might be more efficient if God privately revealed himself to every individual, but instead, God resorts to a public revelation. A mass medium.

One reason, perhaps, is that humans are social creatures, so having Scripture as a common reference point is a unifying principle.

Be that as it may, the offer of the gospel is like a recipe. If you follow the instructions, this will be the result. A recipe doesn't order anyone in particular to use that recipe.

ii) In nature, there's a principle of redundancy. For instance, a maple tree produces far more seeds (or maple copters) than will every take root and become trees in their own right. But the redundancy is purposeful. If enough maple trees produce enough airborne seeds, that greatly raises the odds that some of them will take root and produce trees in their own right.

Likewise, many animals produce multiple offspring, only a few of which survive to maturity. But in order to at least achieve a replacement rate, it's necessary to produce offspring in excess of the replacement rate, to offset the loss of the offspring that are eaten by predators before they reach sexual maturity and repeat the reproductive cycle. By

the same token, multiple sperm raise the odds that one will fertilize the ovum.

Humans imitate this principle. For instance, absent vaccination, some people will contract a serious communicable disease and some won't. Since we don't know which is which, we resort to mass vaccination to ensure, as best we can, that everyone who would be susceptible is covered. We vaccinate everyone, not because everyone needs it, but to make reasonably certain that we get the ones who do need it. It isn't necessary for everyone, but it's necessary to include more people in order to cover the subset that really need it.

Likewise, the military might resort to more extensive bombing strikes to raise the odds of hitting the targets. Or resort to bombs with higher yield to achieve the same end. It gives you a margin of error.

By analogy, the universal offer of the gospel will be heard by elect and reprobate alike. That's the nature of a mass medium of communication. That doesn't mean it's intended for all. Rather, that's a way of reaching the intended subset. Given that humans are social creatures, unless God privately discloses the gospel to the elect, the only alternative is a general message.

iii) Let's consider a more subtle illustration. Suppose one country invades another country. Some of the natives form an underground resistance movement. They are planning a counterattack to oust the occupation force. But it will take a while for them to get all their ducks in a row.

When they are ready to launch the counterattack, they have sympathizers in the news media do a public service announcement. This will seem to be a perfectly innocuous

message. But will contain some code phrases that members of the resistance movement will recognize. That will be the signal to come out of hiding and strike back.

The enemy will hear the same announcement, but it won't detect the coded message embedded in the announcement. The enemy isn't privy to the code phrases.

The message has to be broadcast nationwide to reach all the far-flung resistance cells. Everyone will hear the same message, but everyone won't register the ulterior significance of the message.

iv) Perhaps a 4-point Calvinist would say this is parallel to the relationship between unlimited atonement and limited election. Christ dies for everyone to cover the elect.

Whether you think that makes sense depends on your view of what the atonement targets. Does it cover sin? Sins? Or sinners? Does the death of Christ make atonement for some abstraction we call sin? Does it make atonement for sins, as distinct from the agents who committed them? Or does it make atonement for elect sinners? For their guilt?

I don't deny that Scripture sometimes speaks of making atonement for "sin" or "sins", but I think that's shorthand for sinners. I doubt Scripture intends to treat sin as an aggregate substance in abstraction from the particular agents who commit particular sins. Sin is personal.

If Christ died for elect sinners, then it isn't necessary for the scope of the atonement to exceed the elect in order to cover the elect. If, moreover, Christ dies for the damned, then the atonement doesn't entail the salvation of anyone in particular. That greatly weakens the link between atonement and salvation.

Predestination and prayer

A stock objection to Calvinism is that predestination makes prayer pointless. Ironically, there's a parallel objection based on the providential inutility of foreknowledge. So classical freewill theists are on the hook for an analogous objection.

But back to Calvinism. Let's take a comparison: a movie has plot. But the fact that it's scripted doesn't mean it makes no difference what the actors/characters do. Rather, the plot unfolds in a certain way because of what the actors/characters do, which in turn depends on the script. They follow the script. The plot doesn't play out in spite of what the actors/characters do, but rather, actors/characters have an instrumental role by enacting the script.

Is original sin unjust

One objection to Calvinism is that original sin is unjust. It is unjust to punish the innocent. To punish someone for something they didn't do.

That's hardly unique to Calvinism. That's standard Latin theology. Traditional Catholic theology. Classical Arminianism. The historic rationale for infant baptism is to remove the stain of original sin. (Not my own position.)

I'd add that in Genesis, the primary punishment was losing access to the tree of life. But it's not as if that's something Adam's posterity was entitled to.

But let's discuss the objection head-on. All things being equal, it's a miscarriage of justice to punish someone for something they didn't do. But are there exceptions?

Suppose I'm a juror. The defendant is a professional hitman. He's been indicted on a charge of capital murder. The prosecution makes a convincing case, so the jury, myself included, convict him, and he's executed.

But after his execution, an investigative reporter does a story showing that he was innocent. The cops planted incriminating evidence.

Do I feel guilty? No. There's no doubt that he murdered many people. While it's ironic that he was falsely accused and punished, that makes up for all the times he got away with it. Indeed, it's less that he deserves.

In what sense was he innocent? He was innocent of this particular crime, but he was guilty of this kind of crime. So

even though he was punished for what someone else did, he was guilty of doing the same kind of thing on multiple occasions. This conviction takes the place of all the other times he eluded justice. So there's a kind of moral transference.

To approach it from a different angle: after they lost the war, the top Nazis committed suicide. I don't know the specific motivation. Perhaps they were terrified of what would happen if the Russians got hold of them.

But suppose they didn't commit suicide. Suppose they were put on trial. Is it necessary to convict them of murdering any particular Jew? If it's demonstrable that they were generally guilty of murdering Jews, is it morally necessary to prove that they murdered a particular Jew?

I'm not saying these illustrations automatically vindicate the justice of original sin. But I'm provided counterexamples to show that there's nothing wrong in principle with punishing someone for what someone else did.

Boilerplate anti-Calvinism

Justin Brierley recently published this article:

<https://www.premierchristianity.com/Past-Issues/2018/November-2018/Why-both-atheists-and-Christians-need-to-believe-in-free-will>

I'm not sure if this is worth commenting on because it's such well-trodden ground. Justin is a great guy who's doing great work for the kingdom. Given that Christianity is nearly in eclipse in England, Justin's work at Unbelievable represents a necessary and commendable Christian insurgent movement.

I'll comment on his article because he commands a wide hearing. That said, I wonder who's the target audience. Is this supposed to change minds? On the one hand, there are readers who will nod their head because they're already on that side. So they come out of it the way they went into it. On the other hand, informed Calvinists will experience déjà vu. Many Calvinists have prepared answers. So what's the point of his article?

According to many Calvinist theologians, the Bible also testifies to God's total and meticulous control of every aspect of life. Whatever influence humans think they may have over their destinies, in reality

God is the one who has planned it all out from the beginning.

Correct. However, the alternative to Calvinism is not that we control our own destinies. Rather, our destinies are still determined by factors beyond our control, like social conditioning, luck, random opportunities.

This perspective amounts to a 'deterministic' view of reality.

To be more precise, it amounts to a 'predeterministic' view of mundane reality.

The world is the way it is and could be none other, because God has predetermined every atom and every thought of every heart.

That's inaccurate. *Given* predestination, the world is the way it is and could be none other, but the world could be different if God willed a different outcome. So it's not necessitated.

In such a universe, human free will is an illusion.

It renders certain concepts of freewill illusory. What does Justin mean by freewill? In the same article he approvingly quotes Keith Ward's statement that:

The subject self which I've got is the soul. In Christian terms it is also an agent self, so it decides between courses of action. So, it is not determined by its past behavior...there are tipping points and when people are put in crisis situations they can act out of character.

Is that Justin's concept of freewill? If so:

i) Calvinism isn't committed to the view that courses of action are determined by the agent's past behavior. Their courses of action aren't determined by the past history of the world, leading up to the moment of decision, but by God's antemundane plan for the world. Likewise, regeneration produces a change that's discontinuous with the agent's past behavior.

ii) By freewill, does Justin mean our beliefs, choices, and actions are random? Is it like rolling dice where each throw is causally disconnected from the previous throw? If you roll the dice 1000 times, each time is like the first time?

If Justin thinks our choices are uncaused and random, then it's just a matter of chance that Justin isn't a psychopathic killer. And he could turn on a dime.

To others it looks like the work of a puppet master...That we are neither subject to a puppet-master God nor a puppet-master universe matters a great deal....if God has pre-contrived our every desire so that we had no other option but to love our wife, love our children and to love him, then we are acting as little more than robots.

Whenever freewill theists reach for these simplistic, shopworn metaphors, that's an indication that they are incapable of having a philosophically serious discussion of the issues.

Calvinistic Christians have more in common with many atheists than they may realize....Atheist determinism springs from a 'materialist' worldview. All that exists is the 'material' stuff of the universe. Everything about us and the world we live in can ultimately be explained by the physics of atoms, electrons, quarks and neutrons, interacting according to the predictable regularity of natural laws. But, in such a universe, the idea that we have any measure of free will evaporates. Every aspect

of our existence was predestined by a cosmos blindly following the laws of cause and effect.

Most atheists I know pride themselves on the use of reason and evidence in their arguments against God. But, in a purely naturalistic worldview, all that's really happening at a fundamental level is a variety of atoms bumping into other atoms, triggering electrochemical responses in the brain. What's more, because the universe runs on the deterministic principle of cause and effect, all of those collisions were predetermined in the distant past. You and your beliefs are the product of a long chain of inevitable physical events.

So atheists have a major problem. If our thoughts are the product of a predetermined, non-rational process, then why should we trust the reasoning that brought us to believe in that very process?

But the comparison is vitiated by fatal equivocation inasmuch as predestination is the opposite of "blind" determinism. There's a fundamental difference between intelligent and unintelligent determinants. An electronic calculator is deterministic: programmed to give the right answers to math problems. But there's nothing irrational about the process or the end-product.

***Love is only truly love when freely given
and freely received.***

What about men who fall hopelessly in love with women who don't feel the same way—or women who fall hopelessly in love with men who don't feel the same way? That's the backbone of countless plays, poems, novels, movies, and TV dramas. It's funny how freewill theists talk in such abstract terms about true love, when the reality of human experience is manifestly counter to their armchair stipulations.

Can the person who commits a heinous offence be judged guilty of a crime if they were bound to act in such a way by the divine decree of God? Indeed, it could be argued that God himself is more culpable than they are. Equally, how can those God has predestined to hell be considered guilty of rejecting him, if they had no option to choose him?

That's a legitimate issue. Unfortunately, Justin merely recycles boilerplate objections to predestination. He does nothing to advance the argument. He makes no effort to engage the counterarguments. For instance, he's aware of Guillaume Bignon monograph, which presents a systematic philosophical refutation of stock objections to absolute

predestination and meticulous providence. Cf. **EXCUSING SINNERS AND BLAMING GOD: A CALVINIST ASSESSMENT OF DETERMINISM, MORAL RESPONSIBILITY, AND DIVINE INVOLVEMENT IN EVIL.**

Calvinism and Arminianism compared

I'll comment on a post by Roger Olson:

<https://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2018/11/calvinism-and-arminianism-compared-by-roger-e-olson/>

What is Calvinism? A) Belief that God foreordains and renders certain everything that happens without any exceptions; everything that happens in creation is designed, ordained and rendered certain by God; B) Belief that God alone decides, unconditionally, who will be saved, that Christ died only for them ("the elect"), and God saves them without any cooperation on their part ("irresistible grace"). "A" is called "meticulous providence," "B" is called "double predestination."

That's largely true but misleading:

i) To my knowledge, "irresistible grace" is a synonym for monergistic regeneration. There's no cooperation in regeneration.

That doesn't mean Calvinism takes the position that "God saves them without any cooperation on their part" across the board. For instance, Calvinism regards sanctification has a having a cooperative dimension. It would be more accurate to say Calvinism denies that their cooperation is independent of God's grace.

ii) Olson has a formulaic characterization of Calvinism: "designed, " rendered certain". The problem is not with those descriptors but the implied contrast with Arminianism. But there's an obvious sense in which those descriptors apply to Arminianism as well (see below).

**There are some varieties of Calvinism that deviate slightly from above, but above is classical, historical, evangelical Calvinism as taught by Calvin, Jonathan Edwards, Charles Hodge, R. C. Sproul, John Piper and all other classical, historical, evangelical Calvinists.*

Notice that Olson typically ignores Reformed philosophers like Paul Helm, Greg Welty, Paul Manata, Guillaume Bignon, James Gibson, and James Anderson. He doesn't test his position against the most challenging opponents.

What is Arminianism? A) Belief that God limits himself to give human beings free will to go against his perfect will so that

God did not design or ordain sin and evil (or their consequences such as innocent suffering); B) Belief that, although sinners cannot achieve salvation on their own, without “prevenient grace” (enabling grace), God makes salvation possible for all through Jesus Christ and offers free salvation to all through the gospel. “A” is called “limited providence,” “B” is called “predestination by foreknowledge.”

i) How did the Arminian God not "design" sin if he created a world in full knowledge of the outcome? That wasn't an unforeseen development. So he took that into consideration—in which case it wasn't an unplanned event. Didn't the Arminian God intend the foreseen consequences of his own actions?

ii) When does God offer salvation to all through the gospel? Not in this life. Is postmortem evangelism classical, historical Arminianism?

**As with Calvinism there are varieties of Arminianism that deviate slightly from above, but above is classical, historical, evangelical Arminianism as taught by*

Arminius, John Wesley, Charles Finney, C. S. Lewis, and Dallas Willard and all other classical, historical, evangelical Arminians.

I thought Finney was Pelagian, Willard was an open theist, while Lewis espoused Purgatory. Is that classical, historical, evangelical Arminianism?

The underlying issues are not free will or predestination; both Calvinists and Arminians say they believe in both. (But they interpret them differently.) The underlying issue one has to consider is the character of God. The Arminian emphasizes God's love; the Calvinist emphasizes God's power.

i) What a gross caricature! According to Calvinism, salvation and judgment display all of God's attributes.

ii) Moreover, there's different kinds of love. The Arminian emphasizes indiscriminate, ineffectual love while the Calvinist emphasizes exclusive, effectual love.

According to Arminianism (as espoused and explained for example by John Wesley), double

predestination and meticulous providence make God morally monstrous and not good in any meaningful sense of the word. Why?

According to Calvinism, salvation is completely produced by God from beginning to end with no free cooperation on the part of the sinner being saved. God decides to save some unconditionally and damn others when he could save them because grace is irresistible. Christ died only for the elect—those God decreed to save. Both the saved and the damned have no “say” in their eternal destiny (heaven or hell). Of course, they both feel as if they are making free decisions, but from God’s perspective everything, including sin, is part of God’s plan and purpose—including hell. Calvinist Theodore Beza (Calvin’s successor in Geneva): “Those who find themselves suffering in the flames of hell for eternity can at least take comfort in the fact that they are there for the greater glory of God.” Hell is necessary for God’s full self-glorification because God’s self-glorification (God’s purpose in creation) requires that all of his attributes be manifested. One of God’s attributes is justice and wrath, including hell, is necessary for

the full manifestation of God's justice. (Arminians argue that the cross on which Jesus died was a sufficient display of God's justice and wrath.)

i) As I've often pointed out, to say the Calvinist God could save "everyone" is equivocal. A possible world in which God saves everyone has a different world history than a possible world in which God saves some and damns others. It's not the same group of people in both worlds because regeneration and sanctification impact the choices people make, which impacts how the future turns out. And that has a snowball effect the earlier in the process that begins. Changing a few variables in the past generates greater changes in the future. Some people who are saved in a world where some other people are damned wouldn't even exist in a world where everyone is saved. So they'd miss out.

ii) Rom 9:22-23 say one purpose of salvation and judgment is to manifest God's justice and wrath.

iii) God's "self-glorification" is ambiguous. That's not for God's personal benefit, since he has nothing to gain, but for the benefit of the saints.

iv) Notice that Olson never gets around to explaining how his (flawed) description of Calvinism makes God "morally monstrous". Does Olson think God has an obligation to save the wicked? This isn't like rescuing a drowning swimmer.

v) According to classical (simple foreknowledge) Arminianism, if the world God foresaw contains hellbound sinners, and God makes the world he foresaw, then it's too

late for hellbound sinners to change their eternal destiny. By making the world he foresaw, God locks in that world history. Having acted on what he foresaw by making that foreseen world, it can't be any different.

vi) According to Molinism, although there may be two possible worlds in which the same individual is saved or damned, the individual has no say in which world God instantiates. The individual is never given that choice. God doesn't consult him on whether he'd rather exist in a world where he goes to heaven rather than hell. Rather, he's stuck with God's choice-for better or worse.

Arminians believe God genuinely wants all people to be saved and does everything possible to bring that about—without taking away free will. The gospel (the Holy Spirit through the gospel) frees the sinner's will from bondage to sin and makes it possible for him or her to respond with repentance and faith.

But everyone doesn't hear the gospel in this life. Moreover, some people have much greater spiritual advantages than others in this life. Two people who hear the gospel aren't equally receptive depending on their social conditioning. So unless Olson makes postmortem evangelism a necessary component of freewill theism, his claim makes no sense.

Arminians make a distinction between two wills of God: “antecedent” and “consequent.” God’s antecedent will is what God wishes were the case; God’s consequent will is what God permits to be the case. Sin has no place in God’s antecedent will; neither does hell. These exist only because of human persons’ free (not foreordained) rebellion against God and refusal of God’s mercy.

Doesn't that artificially compartmentalized God's omniscience? If God has foreknowledge and counterfactual knowledge, then he knows all along what will happen in case he makes the world, and he knows all along whom he will consign to hell. How can God not intend the consequences of his own choices and actions? Although he's not the only agent, his choices and actions create the necessary initial conditions for what unfolds.

According to Calvinism (as espoused and explained for example by Jonathan Edwards), the Arminian view of salvation makes the human person’s free decision to accept God’s grace by means of repentance and faith the decisive factor in his or her salvation and therefore

makes salvation less than a free gift; it becomes partly a “work of man.” This contradicts (they argue) many passages of Scripture including, of course, Ephesians 2:8-9.

Is that just a Calvinistic view of Arminianism? Is it not true from an Arminian viewpoint that "the human person's free decision to accept God's grace by means of repentance and faith the decisive factor in his or her salvation"?

Calvinists believe God wishes it could be true that God saves everyone, but for his own good reasons knows it is not possible—if his main purpose in creation is to be fulfilled (viz., his own self-glorification by means of the manifestation of all his attributes including justice).

Is it definitional to Calvinism that "God wishes it could be true that God saves everyone"?

Calvinists make a distinction between two wills of God: “decretive” and “permissive.” (They also distinguish

between God's "decretive will" and God's "prescriptive will," but that is not directly pertinent here.) God's decretive will is all-determining; it decides and then God renders certain all that happens without exception for his glory. However, God does not cause anyone to sin or do evil; God renders these certain. There are two or three different Calvinist explanations of how God renders sin and evil certain without being guilty of them.

i) That's not really two different "wills". That's a verbal distinction based on using the same word twice. An unfortunate linguistic tradition. But to put it more accurately, they make a distinction between predestination and God's commands or prohibitions.

ii) Actually, there is a sense in which the Calvinist God causes sin, but there's a sense in which the Arminian God causes sin. As one philosopher (David Lewis) put it:

“We think of a cause as something that makes a difference, and the difference it makes must be a difference from what would have happened without it. Had it been absent, its effects — some of them,

at least, and usually all — would have been absent as well.”

On that definition, God causes sin and evil, although he's not the only cause. That's applicable to Calvinism and freewill theism alike.

Arminians argue that Calvinism, with its all-determining decretive will of God, cannot escape making God the author of sin and evil.

I rarely see Arminians define "author of sin and evil". They use that as an intellectual shortcut. A substitute for an actual argument.

Calvinists argue that Arminianism, with its emphasis on the necessity of human free acceptance of God's grace (free meaning able to do otherwise) makes salvation something other than a sheer gift and ultimately falls into works righteousness.

A better characterization is that Calvinists affirm salvation by grace alone while Arminians deny salvation by grace

alone. In freewill theism, salvation is a combination of God's grace and the sinner's independent consent.

Arminian synergism emphasizes that God's grace is the effectual cause of salvation while the person's faith is its instrumental cause.

Since, according to Arminianism, saving grace is resistible, how is that effectual rather than ineffectual?

According to Calvinism, evil, including sin, is efficaciously permitted by God (meaning his permission renders it certain) for a good purpose—his own glory in redeeming his elect people from sin and evil and his own glory in punishing the wicked (showing forth his justice and power).

According to Arminianism, evil, including sin, is non-efaciously permitted by God (meaning his permission does not render it certain) for a good purpose—his desire to have a relationship with human beings created in his own image and likeness that is not coerced but is free. God grants (self-limitation) human beings the ability to resist his will. God is sovereign over his own sovereignty;

he can remain sovereign and permit sin and evil which are not his antecedent will.

That's Olson's stock formulation, which he repeats ad nauseam. It never occurs to him that merely allowing something to happen can (and often does) ensure the outcome. Some outcomes are inevitable unless an agent intervenes to prevent it or deflect it. If I'm standing next to someone who jumps off a skyscraper, then once he makes the jump, his fate is sealed. If I tackle him before he makes the jump, I prevent his suicide. But if I do nothing, my inaction renders the fatal outcome certain. At that point the trajectory is irreversible.

There are many situations where an outcome is initially indeterminate; up to a point it could veer off in more than one direction, depending on other factors, but then it crosses a point of no return. I can take the onramp or bypass the onramp. But if I take the onramp, I'm committed. I'm no longer in the same indeterminate position I was approaching the onramp. Making one choice excludes another choice. It's too late to change my mind.

Calvinists respond that if God foreknew that some of his human creatures would reject and disobey him and created them anyway, he is just as responsible for their sin as if he foreordained it and rendered it certain. Arminians respond that God's foreknowledge does not cause sin and

evil but only “corresponds” with it. God foreknows because it will happen; his foreknowing does not render it certain.

i) Many philosophers argue that foreknowledge does ensure the outcome.

ii) It's true that God is responsible for the consequences of his own actions. But in my experience, the argument goes like this: if God foreknew that some humans would reject and disobey him and created them anyway, then he wasn't acting in their best interests. If he made them in full knowledge that by doing so, they'd be damned, he failed to treat them lovingly.

Dark theology

Many professing Christians reject Calvinism because it has some sharp edges. And I agree with them that that makes Calvinism somewhat disturbing. However, that mirrors the kind of world we live in. *Reality* is disturbing. If the world is harsh, then that is, in some measure, a reflection of the God who made it. You can't logically say the world is harsh without saying God is harsh.

Freewill theism is just as harsh as Calvinism. The difference is that freewill theism tries to camouflage the sharp edges. But even if you think God merely *permits* terrible things to happen for a morally sufficient reason, the fact that he allows things he could prevent tells you something about his character and priorities. A softer God would step in. The difference between Calvinism and freewill theism is illusory in that regard. Freewill theism drives a wedge between theology and reality, faith and experience. It projects a soft God onto a hard world.

Having said all that, it's important not to exaggerate the sharp edges. What's most striking about life in a fallen world is the stark contrast between good and evil, beauty and ugliness. It's very two-sided. As such, it's simplistic to say God is harsh. But there's an undeniable element of severity to God's administration of the world. Many readers of the OT are taken aback by Yahweh's severity. Again, that's one-sided. Yahweh is often gracious, merciful, long-suffering. That's the other side.

I have a darker theology than I used to—not because I'm a Calvinist, but because the longer you live the more you experience, and it gets darker. In a way, that contrast

makes the light brighter by comparison. The chiaroscuro of weal and woe, blessing and bane.

Does Calvinism commit the No True Scotsman fallacy?

The question at issue is whether somebody can believe in Christianity even though they have no experience of God's saving grace in their lives. Put another way, is Calvinism guilty of the No True Scotsman fallacy by saying they were never saved in the first place? Is that a position you'd only take because your theology requires it?

Suppose we broach the question sociologically. Is this a special case of a general phenomenon regarding the sociology of belief?

I think it's irrefutable that many beliefs held by many people are the product of social conditioning. Because we're social creatures, our beliefs tend to align with the beliefs of our peer group. People raised as Muslims, Baptists, Catholics, Hindus, Lutherans, Buddhists, Democrats, atheists, &c., are far more likely to be...Muslims, Baptists, Catholics, Hindus, Lutherans, Buddhists, Democrats, atheists, &c.

That general correlation applies to religious and nonreligious beliefs alike. That also explains why many people who go to college change their beliefs. When they change their peer group, they change their beliefs to align with their new peer group.

Given that demonstrable social dynamic, somebody can believe in Christianity due to social conditioning and not because they've had any experience of saving grace. That's a very thin belief, which is why they can lose it so easily.

If that's the source of their faith, and they lose their faith, then they were never saved in the first place. That's not unique to Reformed theology. That's not an ad hoc explanation to save appearances. Rather, that applies to the particular case of Reformed theology a very general, well-documented phenomenon regarding the sociology of belief-formation.

You could debate if all apostates fit that profile, but for now I'm addressing the question of whether, in principle, it is special pleading for Calvinism to say an apostate was never saved in the first place. I've presented a very broad counterexample to that allegation.

Domestic violence and Calvinism

This article:

Jankowski, P. J., Sandage, S. J., Cornell, M. W., Bissonette, C., Johnson, A. J., Crabtree, S. A., & Jensen, M. L. (2018, March 22). **RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE**

MYTHS. PSYCHOLOGY OF RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY. Advance online publication.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/rel0000154>

makes the following claim:

We examined select tradition-specific religious beliefs (i.e., beliefs, informed by and consistent with the Calvinist tradition within Christianity) and beliefs about hierarchical relating, complementarian gender ideology, and specialness and certainty, and their association with DVMA [Domestic violence myth acceptance]. Findings suggested that DVMs are defined by nonacceptance of out-group members, hierarchical relationships, and gender inequality. Furthermore, given construct validation evidence for the DVMA scale,

the scale may be used as a measure of the extent to which an individual holds stereotypes and prejudicial attitudes that blame the female victims of male perpetrated family violence. As such, the DVMA scale may be used to assess intolerant beliefs, which could then permit practitioners to tailor prevention and intervention strategies to target specific religious beliefs that support violence myth adherence.

It was plugged by Arminian Scot McKnight and SEA:

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/jesuscreed/2018/04/02/calvinism-and-domestic-violence/>

<http://evangelicalarminians.org/ff180406/>

Unless they actually read the article rather than the abstract, it says something about their ethics that McKnight and SEA promote an article without knowing the arguments used in the body of the article to support the defamatory conclusion. Let's examine the article:

Participants were 238 students from an evangelical Protestant seminary with

campuses in the midwestern and western United States. Though evangelical Protestant in affiliation, the context can be described as ecumenical (Williamson & Sandage, 2009) with faculty and students representing diverse theological beliefs. In fact, a prior study that utilized a person-centered approach to data analysis on an independent sample of students at this seminary found that participants endorsed complex combinations of Calvinist and complementarian gender beliefs (Sandage, Jankowski, Crabtree, & Schweer, 2017). We considered this diversity conducive to detecting significant associations among constructs, using a variable-centered analytic approach with our sample. They ranged in age from 22 to 62 years (M 34.06; SD 9.33). The sample was 41.6% female, and participants identified as 80.7% White, 13.4% Asian, 2.9% Black/African American, 5.0% Hispanic/Latino, 2.5% American-

Indian/Alaskan Native (note that response options allowed participants to identify more than one ethnicity). The majority of participants (81.9%) identified current Protestant religious affiliation (e.g., 19.7% Baptist, 14.7% nondenominational, 7.1% Pentecostal/Charismatic, 5.5% Evangelical Free Church, 5.0% Presbyterian, 5.0% Lutheran, 4.6% Christian Missionary Alliance). Another 2.5% claimed no affiliation and 15.1% provided no response. It may be that the 15.1% corresponded to a “nothing in particular” group of religious adherents, estimated to represent 15.8% of the U.S. population (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2015). Approximately half of the participants were enrolled in ministry training programs (58%; master’s level degree in divinity [39.1%], ministry practice [5.0%], family ministry [3.8%], doctorate in ministry [10.1%]) and another 23.1% were enrolled in master’s

degree programs in marriage and family therapy/counseling.

How in the world is that supposed to be a representative sample of Calvinists? If you want to survey the views of Calvinists, shouldn't the sample group single out Calvinists?

The article frequently refers to a "rape myth" without defining the label. And I don't find an explicit definition of "Domestic violence myth acceptance". However, the general idea seems to be a variation on:

interpersonal violence myths (i.e., beliefs that function to rationalize, justify, and/or perpetuate men's violence against women

of which DVMA seems to be a specific variety, viz.

stereotypes and prejudicial attitudes that blame the female victims of male perpetrated family violence

stereotypes and prejudicial beliefs about family violence, with emphasis on attributing responsibility for the violence to the female victim.

So the allegation is apparently that Reformed theology conditions or predisposes Calvinists to "blame the female victims of male perpetrated family violence". It's hard to pin down the thesis of the authors because their wording is so elliptical.

Interpersonal violence myths (IPVMs) are conceptually grounded in the historical feminist-informed paradigm of unidirectional heterosexual violence characterized by male dominance, control and perpetration.

Notice the ideological slant that's driving the analysis. Why do Arminians like McKnight and SEA think that's a good paradigm?

authoritarianism, social dominance, nonegalitarian attitudes toward women

i) Of course, feminism is characterized by authoritarianism and social dominance. The elevation of women in positions of power over men. Predictably, women in positions of authority sometimes abuse their authority, viz. Kathleen Sebelius, Loretta Lynch, Rose Bird, Elena Kagan, Annise Parker, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Sonia Sotomayor. Consider institutional oppression against boys in public education, fueled by feminism (e.g. Christian Hoff Sommers).

Whenever one individual or class has power over another, there's the potential for oppression or abuse.

ii) You have dominance hierarchies and high rates of domestic abuse in gay and lesbian affairs.

Higher externally regulated religiousness demonstrated an association with increased acts of physical and psychological violence by adult males... Higginbotham, Ketring, Hibbert, Wright, and Guarino (2007) found that increased personal religiousness (i.e., church attendance, importance of religion) was associated with increased perpetration of violence.

Notice that the allegation isn't confined to Calvinism, but organized religion and church attendance generally. Once again, did McKnight and SEA actually read the article?

given that certain Christian religious beliefs have been implicated as supportive of IPVMs (Edwards et al., 2011), including beliefs historically emphasized within evangelical

Protestant theology (e.g., “female submission and male headship”)...

Once more, observe how the alleged link between IPVMs and religion isn't confined to Calvinism, but traditional generic evangelical theology.

The tradition-specific religious beliefs we examined are derived from a Christian theological tradition started by French, Protestant reformer John Calvin (1509–1564; i.e., Calvinism) that emphasizes the total depravity of humans and the unconditional election by God of some people to be saved. Calvinism seems to represent a deterministic theological system that tends to deny human agency in favor of God’s causal sovereignty over all events.

The requires some qualifications:

i) Calvinism only denies human agency from the standpoint of freewill theism. But determinism is philosophically consistent with human agency defined by compatibilism.

ii) In Calvinism, total depravity is moderated by common grace, regeneration, and sanctification.

Calvinism also tends to emphasize hierarchy in divine-human relating, which corresponds to contemporary Calvinist belief in the “ordering of the social relationships and organizations of society” (Vanderwoerd, 2015, p. 136).

i) A "hierarchy in divine-human relating" is hardly distinctive to Calvinism. In Lutheranism or freewill theism, God and his creatures aren't peers. There's a fundamental asymmetry between the Creator and the creature. The inequality between God and man is intrinsic to the nature of God and man, respectively.

Just read some traditional hymnals, from different denominations, and notice how pervasive "the hierarchy in divine-human relating". That's standard Christian piety. Are the authors of the article so provincial and hidebound that they don't know that?

ii) A divine-human hierarchy does not imply a corresponding man-women hierarchy. That's a complete non-sequitur. Complementarianism can simply be grounded in the distinctive nature of men and women. That doesn't mirror the relationship between God and man.

There appears to be increased and/or renewed interest in Calvinist theology within the United States, and some have described this renewed interest as a neo-Calvinist movement (Hansen, 2008; Horton, 2010; Oppenheimer, 2014; Vanderwoerd, 2015; Vermurlen, 2016).

That may well be.

In addition, these scholars have argued that the contemporary Calvinist movement (or new Calvinism) “has had a significant impact on North American Christianity” (Vanderwoerd, 2015, p. 175; see also, Oppenheimer, 2014), including within evangelical Protestantism (Vermurlen, 2016). They have suggested this influence is particularly evident in the surge of conservative stances on social issues within the U.S. Gender complementarianism appears to be a core tenet of neo-Calvinism, along with beliefs about hierarchical social relations

*and Sovereign agency/control
(Vermurlen, 2016).*

At best, that's a half truth. A divine/human hierarchy does not entail male/female hierarchical counterpart.

Calvin's (1856/ 1948) ideas about gender complementarianism (e.g., "woman was created afterwards . . . to render obedience to [the man] . . . God did not create two chiefs of equal power"; p. 69) while rooted in his 16th century culture seemed to focus more on women's subordination than Martin Luther (1483-1546), another major Protestant reformer (Arts, 2013).

Calvin's position is hardly distinctive to Calvin. Consider John Wesley's interpretation of 2 Tim 2:

2:9 With sobriety - Which, in St. Paul's sense, is the virtue which governs our whole life according to true wisdom. Not with curled hair, not with gold - Worn by way of ornament. Not with pearls -

Jewels of any kind: a part is put for the whole. Not with costly raiment - These four are expressly forbidden by name to all women (here is no exception) professing godliness, and no art of man can reconcile with the Christian profession the wilful violation of an express command.2:12To usurp authority over the man - By public teaching.2:13First - So that woman was originally the inferior.2:14And Adam was not deceived - The serpent deceived Eve: Eve did not deceive Adam, but persuaded him. "Thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife," Genesis 3:17 . The preceding verse showed why a woman should not "usurp authority over the man." this shows why she ought not "to teach." She is more easily deceived, and more easily deceives. The woman being deceived transgressed - "The serpent deceived" her, Genesis 3:13 , and she transgressed.2:15Yet she - That is, women in general, who were all involved with Eve in the sentence pronounced,

Genesis 3:16 .Shall be saved in childbearing - Carried safe through the pain and danger which that sentence entails upon them for the transgression; yea, and finally saved, if they continue in loving faith and holy wisdom.

Conversely, consider the classic statement by Puritan (Calvinist) Matthew Henry:

That the woman was made of a rib out of the side of Adam; not made out of his head to rule over him, nor out of his feet to be trampled upon by him, but out of his side to be equal with him, under his arm to be protected, and near his heart to be beloved.

The authors then say:

Calvin's influence on gender complementarian ideas persist into the present...

Yet the authors present no evidence that Calvin's position in that regard is a major influence on contemporary Calvinists. Did they even bother to ask their Reformed respondents the source of their complementarianism? How many of the respondents have read even read Calvin's commentary on the Pastorals?

You can be a Calvinist without reading a word of Calvin. He founded a theological tradition, spawning many distinguished Reformed theologians. In addition, layman often get their theology from popularizers like Pink, MacArthur, Horton, Sproul, Spurgeon, Boettner, and Lloyd-Jones—or creedal statements like the Westminster Confession and the Westminster Shorter Catechism.

In addition, it's important to distinguish between the views of religious elites and the rank-and-file.

...and there is also anecdotal evidence that neo-Calvinist beliefs might be associated with domestic violence myth adherence, given statements made by proponents of the movement. For example, John Piper, a leading contemporary neo-Calvinist author and pastor, rearticulates Calvin's explicit counsel and suggests that women should endure violence from their husbands (at least temporarily) unless it is life threatening (though it is not clear who

should assess the degree of danger; see Eaandfaith, 2009; Piper, 2012).

i) It's fallacious to use anecdotal evidence to justify generalizations.

ii) Why assume that there's any relationship between Piper's Calvinism and his complementarianism? He came of age in the Deep South when traditional gender roles were taken for granted. The origin of his complementarianism may well be the old Southern chivalric code.

iii) In addition, his position on battered wives doesn't necessarily have anything to do with complementarianism—much less Calvinism. Traditional Protestant theology acknowledges just two biblical grounds for divorce: adultery (Mt 5:32; 19:9) and desertion (1 Cor 7:15). If you think those are only two permissible grounds for divorce, then that severely limits the options a pastor can offer a battered wife. That's not based on complementarianism, but a traditional interpretation regarding the licit grounds for divorce.

I myself take a more flexible position. I doubt Jesus intended to address every conceivable situation in his statement. He wasn't asked a question about a wife who unwittingly marries a serial killer or an active homosexual. There are lots of circumstances which his statement doesn't attempt to cover.

Moreover, Scripture classifies marriage as a covenant, but parties to a covenant can be in breach of covenant, which may void the covenant.

Calvinistic beliefs. We used 6 items from the Calvinist-Arminian Beliefs Scale (CABS; Sorenson, 1981) that assess a particular strand of Christian religious belief, that of Calvinistic beliefs about Divine-human relating. Sample Calvinism items were “Christ’s redeeming work was intended to save the elect only” and “God eternally perseveres in His faithfulness with those whom He has chosen” (with items rated 1 [disagree strongly] to 6 [agree strongly]). Higher scores reflected greater adherence to Calvinism. Construct validity evidence was previously observed through predicted associations with convergent and divergent constructs (Sorenson, 1981). In the current study, the Cronbach’s alpha for the six items was .82.

And what's the logical connection between that and domestic violence? There isn't any.

Consider charges of sexual harassment at atheist conferences, perpetrated by male "feminists".

Existential defensiveness. We assessed the extent to which participants repress existential anxiety through belief in God's control, special protection and provision using the 22-item self-report Defensive Theology Scale (DTS; Beck, 2004, 2006). The DTS has demonstrated internal consistency and evidence of construct validation (Beck, 2006). Sample items included "God has a very specific plan for my life that I must search for and find," and "When making a choice or tough decision, God gives me clear answers and directions." Items were rated from 1 (disagree strongly) to 7 (agree strongly). Higher scores represented more belief in God's control, special protection and provision. Cronbach's alpha for the DTS in this study was .88.

i) Although Calvinism does affirm that "God has a very specific plan for one's life," that's true for elect and reprobate alike. Moreover, it doesn't follow that "I must search for and find [that plan]". Doing God's will, in the

decretive sense, doesn't presume one must be privy to God's "very specific plan" for one's life.

Again, Calvinism doesn't teach that "When making a choice or tough decision, God gives me clear answers and directions."

These sample items have at least as much in common with charismatics, many of whom are freewill theists.

One methodological error is the failure of the authors to distinguish between Calvinism and the folk theology of lay Calvinists, which may be unrelated to Reformed theology. There's a difference between Reformed theology and the adventitious beliefs of lay Calvinists.

ii) In addition, what's the logical connection between "existential defensiveness" and domestic violence. There isn't any.

Relational hierarchy expectations. We used the 8-item self-report Interpersonal Hierarchy Expectation Scale (IHES; Mast, 2005) to assess the degree to which persons expect "dominance hierarchies to be present or to form in interpersonal interactions or relationships" (p. 287; sample item: "Every group needs to have someone with extra power or authority to be sure things get done properly," with items rated 1 [disagree strongly] to

6 [agree strongly]). Evidence supporting reliability and construct validity for the IHES has been observed (Mast, 2005). Cronbach's alpha for the IHES in the current study was .74.

- i)** Once again, how does that select for Calvinists?
- ii)** Presumably, the authors of the article all subscribe to human evolution. But in that event, the source of dominance hierarchies isn't religion but ancestral instinctual primate behavior.

Complementarian beliefs. We used the 10 items comprising the complementarian subscale from the Egalitarian-Complementarian Scale (ECS; Colaner & Warner, 2005; Colaner & Giles, 2008) to assess select Christian beliefs about gender in marital relationships. A sample item is "Marriage should be a relationship of leader (husband) and follower (wife)" (rated from 1 [always true] to 7 [never true]). Higher scores reflect greater belief in complementarianism. Evidence

supporting construct validity was found in theoretically predicted associations between subscales and measures of career and mothering aspirations (Colaner & Warner, 2005; Colaner & Giles, 2008). Cronbach's alpha for the complementarian subscale in this study was .89.

Historically, complementarianism has been the default position of most denominations and Christian traditions. And as of now, aren't most Confessional Lutherans complementarians? Likewise, many evangelical Baptists who reject Calvinism espouse complementarianism.

Social justice advocacy. We measured commitment to social justice advocacy using a 3-item scale adapted from the Faith Maturity Scale (FMS; Benson, Donahue, & Erickson, 1993): (1) "I care a great deal about reducing poverty in the United States and throughout the world," (2) "I speak out for equality for women," and (3) "I speak out for equality for people of color." Items were endorsed on a scale from 1 (never true) to 7

(always true), with higher scores representing greater social justice advocacy. The three items had an internal consistency of .81.

i) Are they using "social justice advocacy" as a euphemism for the LGBT agenda, Black Lives Matter, distributive justice (Rawls), intersectionality, &c.? If so, it's true that many Calvinists reject that because they're politically conservative, but that's true for Christian conservatives generally—as well as libertarians.

ii) In general, conservatives believe in equality of opportunity rather than equality of outcome.

iii) Furthermore, modern-day Calvinism has competing political philosophies, viz. Kuyper, Two-Kingdoms.

In addition, we observed a significant positive association between the latent construct of Calvinist beliefs and the latent construct of hierarchical relationality, which suggests that belief in Divine-human hierarchical relating corresponds to expectations of hierarchical relating in interpersonal relationships...

Complementarianism isn't fundamentally hierarchical. Rather, it's based on the principle that while men and women can do many of the same things equally well, men and women normally have physical and psychological differences which equip men to do some things better than women and women to do some things better than men. So there's a partial division of labor. That will manifest itself at the leadership level, but it's not a prescription for universal male dominance.

...and belief in the specialness of one's in-group identity. The construct of existential defensiveness is oriented toward epistemological certainty, and existential defensiveness has demonstrated a negative association with quest religious motivation (i.e., openness, exploration; Beck, 2006). Beck (2006) also found that those scoring high in existential defensiveness showed bias against out-group religious persons. Thus, belief in the specialness of one's relation to God appears to foster exclusion toward out-group members (i.e., separation of the "not I" from the "I;" see Volf, 1996). The significant positive association between Calvinist

beliefs and hierarchical relationality also supports the idea that particular Christian beliefs about Divine-human relating (e.g., beliefs in unconditional election and predestination of certain individuals for eternal life)...

- i)** To begin with, the distinction between elect and reprobate is essentially invisible.
- ii)** Calvinism stressed God's demerited grace. "There but for the grace of God go I".
- iii)** How does what the authors describe distinguish Calvinism in particular from Christian exclusivism in general?
- iv)** Domestic violence involves members of the in-group, not the in-group in relation to the out-group. Family members are members of the in-group. So the in-group/out-group dichotomy is completely irrelevant to the issue at hand.
- v)** By the "out-group", do the authors have in mind homosexuals, transgendered, illegal immigrants, Muslim immigrants? If so, they're using this article as a pretext to propagandize for the social agenda of secular progressives.

Within this framework, individuals may relate to God as a way to self-soothe

affective states, and the regulation of interpersonal togetherness and separateness impulses manifests as a dialectic between dwelling and seeking. Intra- and interpersonal self-regulatory aspects intersect with attachment theory in the form of safe haven (i.e., dwelling; that is, increasing perceived closeness with God during time of distress) and secure base functions (i.e., seeking; that is, exploration during times of nondistress; inter-personally distancing in order to question and experiment with change from a position of felt security).

So much psychobabble.

The emerging religious leader can be encouraged to target specific religious beliefs that may undergird the intolerance displayed by IPVVM adherence in oneself and others. Current violence prevention and intervention strategies already work toward changing individuals' belief in specific IPVVMs

(Aosved & Long, 2006; Edwards et al., 2011), and it seems that there may be added benefit to also encouraging the critical reflection and exploration of the religious beliefs tied to IPV adherence...Challenging religious beliefs introduces uncertainty, and those religious beliefs may function to reduce anxiety for the individual. Not only are religious beliefs deeply held aspects of identity that meet basic personal needs, religious beliefs are tied to community level supports and practices (Edwards et al., 2011). Hence, self-of-the-practitioner training and violence prevention and intervention efforts may need to move beyond the individual level and involve a coordinated community level response in order to be effective (Nason-Clark et al., 2009).

Observe how that lays the groundwork for gov't intervention. They claim that certain religious beliefs foster domestic violence. That easily becomes an excuse for gov't to move in to crack down on this alleged threat to public safety.

The whole article is an exercise in innuendo rather than logical or empirical reasoning. A smear job. They never produce any actual evidence that Calvinists "blame the female victims of male perpetrated family violence."

Not very reassuring

I'll comment on this:

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2018/03/calvinism-and-assurance-of-salvation-or-not/>

A bit of background for those not already steeped in the Calvinism-Arminianism debate. Calvinists have often claimed that only their theology provides true assurance of salvation—because, in that theology, God does everything in our salvation. We contribute nothing and don't even cooperate with God's grace. So, many Calvinist have claimed that insofar as free will plays any role in salvation (Arminianism), assurance of salvation is undermined.

Really? What about this:

(1) The soul after regeneration continues dependent upon the constant gracious operations of the Holy Spirit, but is, through grace, able to cooperate with them.

(2) The sanctifying operations of the Spirit are supernatural, and yet effected in connection with and through the instrumentality of means: the means of sanctification being either internal, such as faith and the cooperation of the regenerated will with grace, or external, such as the word of God, sacraments, prayer, Christian fellowship, and the providential discipline of our heavenly Father. "Sanctification", "A. A. Hodge and revised by B.B. Warfield."

In Calvinism, the elect don't cooperate in the libertarian sense, yet they are agents rather than passive spectators.

"In Calvinism, when someone moves from professing faith in Christ and being a Christian worker to cynicism about the Bible and the God revealed there (specific examples come to mind) we would say they have become apostate.

In response to the assurance question with an apostate believer, most Calvinists say they were never saved to begin with. They were deceived on that point (usually accompanied with a citation

from James 2:19). This seems to be their least problematic response to that circumstance.

However, it also creates a bigger issue for them. They are saying it is quite possible in Calvinism to live for years believing you have saving faith, professing Christ, and being affirmed as an evangelical believer in Christ (or even a Christian worker/leader) while being unsaved and completely deceived. Logically, therefore, no one could be assured they are not currently living in a deceived state unless or until they died still professing faith. That is no assurance for the living, walking believer and would violate 1 John 5:13 and other passages that speak to our ability to have confidence now.

According to Arminianism, it's quite possible for churchgoers to live for years believing they are heavenbound, while being unsaved and self-deceived. Much of the evangelistic ministry of John and Charles Wesley was directed at spiritually complacent churchgoers who suffered from a false confidence about their state of grace. Indeed, John and Charles thought they themselves suffered from the false assurance of dead formalism until their own awakening.

By contrast, if people truly have both a choice in, and a choice out (I don't believe that people apostate due moral sinning [sic]-2 Timothy 2:13, but rather due to failure to remain in their faith-Colossians 1:21-23), then they would always have confidence and assurance of where they stood with Christ. If I am depending on Christ alone, then I have confidence that Jesus will embrace me. If I have changed my mind and "moved past" that belief, I have rejected Christ as my savior and would know that I have no assurance if it turns out that Jesus is actually the only way to God. This is ultimate assurance. I would never be confused.

Thus, Calvinism leads to no assurance in this life until the moment of death, while a view that affirms free will imparts complete assurance through every stage of the human condition."

i) But according to Arminianism, you can only enjoy the assurance of salvation from one day to the next. For you may drop out of the race before you cross the finish line.

ii) In Arminianism, you're not depending on Christ alone. You rely on your willpower.

iii) Likewise, there's no confusion in Calvinism, for if you change your mind, if you subsequently recant the Christian

faith, then you don't continue to believe that you're to be saved if it turns out that faith in Christ is a sine qua non for salvation.

iv) In Calvinism, the elect and reprobate, regenerate and unregenerate, don't have the same spiritual experience, so just because a nominal Christian might be self-deluded doesn't mean a born-again Christian is in the same epistemic situation. To the contrary, a born-again Christian enjoys the witness of the Spirit.

In Calvinism, some born-again Christians lack the assurance of salvation, not because they lack the relevant experience, but due to emotional, intellectual, and theological impediments. It's not a matter of layering assurance onto saving faith, but scraping layers away that impede the spontaneous sense of assurance.

v) Finally, an oldie but goodie:

<http://www.proginosko.com/2009/12/calvinism-assurance-and-inerrancy/>

Jumping from a skyscraper

Apostate Dale Tuggy recently conducted a two-part interview with Reformed philosopher Guillaume Bignon.

<http://trinities.org/blog/podcast-216-bignons-defense-of-calvinism-part-1/>

<http://trinities.org/blog/podcast-217-bignons-defense-of-calvinism-part-2/>

In part 2, Tuggy raised some objections to Bignon's position. That's fine. Calvinism is fair game. Bignon fielded the objections with great aplomb. But I'll comment on Dale's objections as well.

1. There's a subtext to Dale's appeal to common sense/intuition and defense of question-begging. Dale is a militant unitarian, and he uses the same tactics in his attack on the Incarnation and the Trinity.

2. In addition, when Dale appeals to libertarian freedom, he takes that to the logical extreme of open theism.

Christians who might be sympathetic to Dale's attack on Calvinism may not realize that his antipathy towards Calvinism is based on the same assumptions that drive his attack on Trinitarian, Incarnational theology—as well as his denial of divine foreknowledge.

3. There are different ways of defining libertarian freedom. Dale defines it in terms of access to alternate possibilities ("multiple available options). Others define it in terms of ultimate sourcehood. When Dale appeals to common sense

and intuition, which definition does intuition/common sense (allegedly) single out?

4. Dr. Bignon explains how many objections to Calvinism (or theological determinism) beg the question. Dale grants that, but defends begging the question. That, however, is a startlingly anti-intellectual move for a philosophy prof. to make. Surely he doesn't wish to say, as a matter of general principle, that it's philosophically legitimate to beg the question.

Borrowing a page from Plantinga, he claims that certain beliefs are properly basic. And there's nothing wrong with that. However, if you're going to classify a particular belief as properly basic, then you need to provide an argument for why it merits that status. Although a person can be justified in holding a particular belief even though he can't give a good reason for his belief, a justification is still required to legitimate the classification. It may not be incumbent for the man on the street to do that, but in principle, it is necessary to demonstrate that a candidate for proper basicity merits that status. If there's an unrestricted prerogative to stipulate that any given belief is properly basic, then that opens the floodgates to a deluge of irrational, unaccountable beliefs.

5. Tuggy cites Deut 30 as a prooftext for libertarian freedom. I've discussed that appeal elsewhere:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2017/05/but-to-this-day-yahweh-hasnt-given-you.html>

6. A problem with facile appeal to intuition or common sense is that these usually involve particular kinds of examples. And a Reformed philosopher will agree that lacking certain kinds of freedom may obviate moral

responsibility. The problem is overgeneralizing from plausible examples to implausible examples.

7. Dale appeals to feelings of regret or guilt, which he says presuppose two-way freedom. Say, kicking the dog after coming home from a frustrating day of work. yet Tuggy says if the employ had just had a beer or gone for a walk before coming home, he might not kick the dog. But by that logic, the outcome would be different because the antecedent conditions were different. Yet two-way freedom is typically defined as the ability to do the same thing given the same antecedent conditions. The future can fork off in different directions given the same past.

Moreover, that means that if the employee was in a better mood, he wouldn't kick the dog. Yet in that case it's not two-way freedom, but dependent on the mood he's in at the moment.

So Dale's example is counterproductive. The action wasn't avoidable given the same prior conditions.

8. Dale asks how determinism is consistent with the outcome hinging on the decisions you make. But that confuses determinism with que sera sera fatalism. In theological determinism, the decisions an agent makes do affect the outcome.

9. Another problem with Dale's appeal is that his argument either proves too much or too little. Take a man who in a fit of depression jumps off a skyscraper, but on the way down he has second thoughts and regrets his rash act. But at that point it's too late for him to turn back the clock. He's doomed.

How does the postulate of libertarian freedom ground the moral responsibility of his action? He doesn't know in advance will it be like to attempt suicide. He can only find out by experience. But if that turns out to be a terrible mistake, he doesn't get a second chance to benefit from his experience. It wasn't a dress rehearsal. No second takes. The first take is the only take. But how does that qualify as informed consent? You can't know before you do it what it will be like to do it. But once you do it, you're stuck with that choice.

Or take a teenage sniper who in a fit of rage murders his classmates. After he has time to cool off, he bitterly regrets his impulsive action. Viewing the action in retrospect gives him a radically different perspective. If he knew then what he knows now, he wouldn't commit that heinous act. He'd give anything to go back a day and refrain from committing that heinous act. But it's too late.

How does libertarian freedom suffice? Regret requires having the benefit of hindsight, but that's not something you can have ahead of time. So that's an intractable dilemma for any position that grounds moral responsibility in libertarian freedom. It generates vain regrets. Because there's still determinism in play: the accidental necessity of the past. Once the deed is done, that's unalterable. So many human decisions are shortsighted. We don't have the opportunity to test more than one option at a time. We don't have the chance to compare them in reality. The agent regrets not having the opportunity to go back in time and make the right decision the second time around.

10. Dale also gets into the problem of evil, and whether God has the right to do some things that would be immoral if a human agent did them. Are some actions intrinsically wrong?

i) I agree that some actions are intrinsically wrong, but that's inseparable from the existence of God. It's not the case that some actions are wrong both in worlds where God exists and worlds where God is nonexistent.

ii) Sometimes parents put an older sibling in charge of a younger sibling. The older sibling then begins to boss the younger sibling around, as if the older sibling is the parent. Younger siblings resent that because they don't think a brother or sister has the same authority as a parent. I just use that example to illustrate the "intuition" that sometimes it does make a difference who's giving the orders.

Is determinism unlivable?

I think that you've successfully identified a problem with determinism in general, Leif, of which Calvinism is but a specific instance, given the Calvinist's view that God determines everything that happens.

A determinist cannot live consistently as though everything he thinks and does is causally determined—especially his choice to believe that determinism is true! Thinking that you're determined to believe that everything you believe is determined produces a kind of vertigo. Nobody can live as though all that he thinks and does is determined by causes outside himself. Even determinists recognize that we have to act "as if" we had free will and so weigh our options and decide on what course of action to take, even though at the end of the day we are determined to take the choices we do. Determinism is thus an unliveable view.

This presents a real problem not just for the Calvinist, but for the naturalist. For insofar as

naturalism implies that all our thoughts and actions are determined by natural causes outside ourselves, free will is an illusion. But we cannot escape this illusion and so must go on making choices as though we had free will, even though we don't. Naturalism is thus an unliveable worldview.

<https://www.reasonablefaith.org/writings/question-answer/calvinism-and-the-unliveability-of-determinism>

i) It's hard to find much of an argument here. Even if libertarian freedom were true, some aspects of human experience are undoubtedly deterministic. For instance, when Craig hit adolescence, he found himself attracted to females. That's naturally caused by hormones. Is it unlivable to be casually determined to find women physically appealing? Empirical evidence would seem to suggest that men have found that pretty easy to live with!

ii) Or consider the role of habit in human behavior. We train our minds to remember certain tasks so that we don't have to consciously think about them. Like learning a foreign language, learning to play a musical instrument, learning to sightread music, learning to play a sport, learning the route from one place to another, learning to read a text. Much of this operates at a subliminal level. We've programmed our minds to do certain things automatically.

Now, if we had to stop and think about what we were doing, about how to do it, that might have a paralyzing effect—but of course, that defeats the purpose of forming mental habits! The whole point is to delegate that to the

unconscious part of your mind so that you don't have to consciously execute every step in the process.

Is that kind of mental self-programming unlivable? Hardly. To the contrary, it would be unlivable if we couldn't free up our conscious attention span. It works because we don't have to be aware of it.

iii) How does Craig's argument actually disprove determinism? If determinism is true, then agents do in fact live consistently with that reality. They have no alternative. If determinism is true, then what they feel about it has no impact on the reality of their determinism. Their actions will be determined whether they know it or not.

If my beliefs and actions are determined, this doesn't imply that I know what the determinants are. I just make up my mind based on the conscious and subconscious factors that feed into belief-formation and decision-making.

If I knew ahead of time what I was determined to do, then that would introduce a countersuggestive dynamic. But a determined agent doesn't know in advance what he's been determined to do, so abstract belief in determinism has no particular impact on the outcome. And to the extent that belief in determinism affects the outcome, that in itself is just another determinant in the outcome.

iv) The fact that we consider alternate courses of action doesn't mean those are all viable options. After all, we can imagine many unrealistic courses of action. And their impossibility may not be apparent, if we don't act on them. In some cases their impossibility becomes apparent when we attempt to act on our choice. It turns out our choice was shortsighted and oversimplified the variables. In reality, there were many impenetrable barriers in the way of

realizing our chosen pathway. Surely that's a commonplace of human experience. Has Craig never found his plans frustrated by uncooperative factors beyond his control?

Rebelling against God's plan

Many preachers and pop apologists have an understanding of divine providence that goes something like this: Gen 2 was God's original plan. Then Gen 3 happened. Human agents and fallen angels rebelled against God's plan. So God came up with the plan of salvation.

To take an illustration, suppose I plan a road trip. It's a long trip. I want to see some historic towns and scenic landscapes. I book motel reservations. I plan how many miles to drive each day, to make it to the next motel. The route is chosen according to the motels and sights I want to see.

But once I'm on the road, there's a snowstorm that derails my plans. It shuts down the interstate. So I detour around the storm by going into another state above or below the storm. Unfortunately, this means I miss some of the attractions along the route.

That's an analogy for open theism. On that view, God doesn't have a master plan. Rather, he has a set of contingency plans up his sleeve. He doesn't know which ones will come in handy. He's flying blind—just like the rest of us!

Yet most preachers and pop apologists believe in divine foreknowledge and counterfactual knowledge. But in that event, it makes no sense to say God scrapped his original plan.

Suppose, when I'm making plans for my sight-seeing trip, I have advance knowledge of the snowstorm. In that case, I

don't adjust my original plan. Rather, I'd take that into consideration from the outset.

I'd plan my trip to begin sooner or later to get past the snowstorm. If I knew all along about the snowstorm, I wouldn't first draw up a plan that failed to take that into account, then adjust my plan to take that into account. I wouldn't make travel plans in the first place that didn't incorporate that advance knowledge into the itinerary.

It makes no sense of Christians like this to say creatures rebelled against God's plan. What plan were they rebelling against? His original plan? But if their rebellion was foreseen, then they wouldn't be rebelling against *that* plan, as if God implemented a plan that failed to anticipate their rebellion, then had to modify his plan after the fact. Rather, their rebellion would figure in his plan all along.

Freewill theists get themselves into this quandary because they are loathe to say God planned the fall. That's virtually supralapsarian! But unless they're open theists, belief in divine foreknowledge and counterfactual knowledge logically commits them to affirm that God planned every evil event that actually transpires. They may not mean that in the way a Thomist or Calvinist means it, but they cannot consistently treat evil events as unplanned events from God's perspective. The original plan is exactly what happens. Even in freewill theism (exempting open theism), there is no plan B. It was plan A all along.

Causing evil

A stock objection to Calvinism goes something like this: it is evil to cause evil. But the God of Calvinism causes evil (or determines evil, which amounts to the same thing). Indeed, the God of Calvinism causes human agents to commit evil. Yet making someone else do evil is at least as bad if not worse than doing it yourself.

Let's examine that objection. Take the ticking timebomb scenario. Many people think torturing a terrorist to find out where the bomb is hidden, to save innocent lives, is immoral.

Why is that immoral? Presumably, they think torture is wrong because they think excruciating pain is evil. If so, then it's evil to cause excruciating pain.

If they don't think excruciating pain is evil, then it's unclear why they think torture is wrong. They might not think that's the only reason torture is wrong. They might think torture is wrong in part because coercion is wrong. But presumably they think the evil of excruciating pain is a necessary condition of what makes torture wrong, in cases where torture utilizes pain. Indeed, pain is coercive. The two are inseparable in that scenario.

The justification for torturing the terrorist is to save innocent lives. But since they regard torture as intrinsically wrong, the goal, however noble, can't justify that expedient. So goes the argument.

But let's vary the illustration. Take a field medic during the Civil War who operates without anesthetic, because none is available. If excruciating pain is evil, then it's evil for the

medic to inflict excruciating pain on his patients. Yet most of us think his action is justified. He must amputate the arms and legs of gunshot victims to prevent the greater evil of death by gangrene. Yet in that event, there are situations in which causing evil isn't evil.

In addition, suppose there's a patient he's loathe to save. It may be the enemy. But the field commander orders him to operate on that patient because the field commander wants to pump the enemy soldier for information. He may force the unwilling medic to operate at gunpoint if need be.

That would mean he's causing an agent to commit evil, assuming that pain is evil. If, on the other hand, we grant that it's not inherently evil to cause the evil of inflicting pain, then it's not evil to cause an agent to cause evil, in that respect. At least, that seems to break the chain of inference.

Although that's a hypothetical comparison, it has a real-world counterpart. We experience physical pain because God designed the human body to have that sensitivity. But if excruciating pain is evil, then that means God causes evil by designing and making bodies with sensitivity.

Let's consider some objections to my argument:

i) Pain isn't good or bad in itself. Rather, it's context-dependent. For instance, pain can be a warning sign to avert or avoid greater harm. The painful sensation of burning deters us from taking chances with fire. Temporary pain protects us from greater harm.

One potential problem with that reply is that it makes it harder to oppose torture in the ticking timebomb scenario. In both cases, you have an ends-means justification. If the

deterrent value of pain to avoid death or serious injury by fire justifies pain, then why not torturing a terrorist to save innocent lives? Both utilize temporary pain. Both justify harm for a greater good.

ii) We absolve the field medic because he lacked access to anesthetics. But the analogy breaks down in application to God, who doesn't suffer from analogous limitations.

Up to a point that's true, but I'm testing the principle. The objection makes blanket statement: it is evil to cause evil. Or it is evil to cause another agent to cause evil.

If, however, there are exceptions, then that isn't wrong in principle. It depends on the situation. If something is intrinsically wrong, that precludes exceptions. But if in fact it's permissible in some cases, then the objection can't be a special case of a universal principle.

God's "secret" will

It is the secret will which really embodies what God wants to have happen in the universe. If one knew that God's revealed will conflicted with His secret will, wouldn't it be better to obey the more fundamental will which actually expressed the divine sovereignty?
Katherin A. Rogers, "Does God Cause Sin?: Anselm of Canterbury Versus Jonathan Edwards on Human Freedom and Divine Sovereignty," Faith and Philosophy 20/3 (2003), 375.

i) Freewill theists act as though a "secret" divine will has sinister connotations. Yet that's hardly exclusive to Calvinism. In the varieties of freewill theism, God has a secret will inasmuch as he has countless specific intentions that he never discloses to humans.

ii) It's not a choice between obedience to his secret will or obedience to his revealed will, for it's impossible to disobey God's secret will (i.e. what God has predestined). It's not like an agent can obey God's secret will rather than his revealed will—as *if the alternative* is to obey his revealed will rather than his secret will. Whether or not he obeys God's revealed will, he is bound to obey God's secret will.

iii) If someone disobeys God's revealed will, that's because God "secretly" willed them to disobey his revealed will. Although obedience to God's secret will often conflicts with obedience to God's revealed will, obedience or disobedience to God's revealed will never conflicts with God's secret will, in any particular case. For there are many situations in which God's plan is realized through disobedience to his revealed will. Conversely, there are many situations in which God's plan is realized through obedience to his revealed will. Both obedience and disobedience to his revealed will are instrumental to the furtherance his eternal plan. Obedience and disobedience have different results. God intends the respective results in each case, as they drive the plot to its appointed ends. So her objection is a false dichotomy.

iv) We're not dealing with two different wills. That's just a confusing linguistic convention. The distinction, or contrast, is between what God has predestined and what God has commanded or forbidden.

Determined to Believe?

I'm going to comment on **DETERMINED TO BELIEVE (MONARCH BOOKS 2017)** by John Lennox. I'm of two minds about responding to this book. He's just recycling staple objections to Calvinism, so his book doesn't constitute a new challenge to Calvinism. On the other hand, he's a very prominent Christian apologist, so his book may be influential.

1. Before discussing the specifics, I'll make a few preliminary observations. It's striking that in the acknowledgments, he doesn't mention any Reformed philosophers or theologians. That's a serious omission. He could have avoided many missteps by running a draft copy by some astute Reformed thinkers like Paul Helm, Hugh McCann, John Frame, Jeremy Pierce, James Anderson, Bill Davis, Greg Welty, Paul Manata, Guillaume Bignon, &c. Likewise, he rarely interacts with Reformed commentators and Bible scholars of note.

As a result, his critique of Calvinism fails to anticipate and engage the responses. Philosophers often solicit feedback from representatives of the opposing side. They then attempt to incorporate those criticisms into their position, sometimes reformulating their original position to protect against those objections. But for whatever reason, Lennox failed to take advantage of that opportunity, and his critique suffers accordingly.

2. He fails to distinguish between popularizers and high-level thinkers. But you need to choose your target. There's a place for attacking popularizers. But if you wish to disprove a belief-system, you should direct your fire at the

most capable exponents. His critique would be more effective if he was more discriminating in his targets. Oftentimes, he picks on soft targets. That's not his intention, but it dilutes the force of his objections.

3. Although he mentions some advanced resources on the freewill debate (**TIMPE, FREEWILL IN PHILOSOPHICAL THEOLOGY; TIMPE, FREEWILL: SOURCEHOOD AND ITS ALTERNATIVES; THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF FREE WILL**), he raises the usual schoolboy objections to "determinism". He shows no awareness of philosophical answers to the objections he poses. In principle, he could disagree with the answers, but the problem is that he doesn't even acknowledge the fact that his objections have been addressed, and show how the answers are deficient.

4. I'll mostly ignore the exegetical section of his book because it fails to break any new ground. I and others have been over that ground. I will make one observation: he has a section on "foreknowledge" where he quotes some NT passages using *proginosko*, in English translation. He just assumes that the Greek compound word means what the prefix plus root word literally mean, in combination. It doesn't even occur to him that compound words often have an idiomatic meaning (i.e. to choose beforehand).

5. I like Lennox. I've read some of his books and watched some of his debates. He comes across as a warm, sweet, humble, kindly, loving and lovable Christian gentleman. In addition, he's done some great work defending the Christian faith. There's much to admire.

Most humans rank freedom among the highest of ideals. Freedom, we feel, is every human being's birthright; none has the right to deprive us of it against our will (except, of course, in cases of proven criminality). Even to attempt to remove someone's freedom is regarded as a crime against the essential dignity of what it means to be human (22).

i) He's referring to political freedom, which is categorically different than the compatibilist/incompatibilist debate. At best, it would be analogous to coercion, but theological determinism isn't coercive.

ii) I wonder if his position on freedom is influenced by the fact that Lennox is a Northern Irishman, with its tragic political history.

iii) The relationship between God and creatures is fundamentally different from political freedom. Mundane existence is radically contingent. Creatures are entirely dependent on God for their existence. God is the only necessary being. Only God is autonomous. One might as well complain about a baby's absolute dependence on its parents for survival.

The "liberty of indifference" (libertarian freedom) is the freedom to have done

otherwise than in actual fact we chose to do on any occasion in the past. Faced with a choice between two courses of action in the future, liberty of indifference would imply that the choice is completely open. I can choose either course of action indifferently; and having chosen one course of action, I can, on looking back, know that I could equally well have freely chosen the other course. I can choose, or could have chosen, to do X or not -X. In this book when I use the term "free will" I shall understand it in this sense (24-25).

i) Many contemporary philosophers who espouse libertarian freedom deny that human agents have that stark, at-any-moment freedom to do otherwise, where our decisions are discontinuous with our own past history and personal character. They realize that's psychologically unrealistic. Humans are very biased. We don't consider the options from an impartial standpoint.

ii) Speaking for myself, when I look back on my decisions, I don't sense that I could equally well have chosen another course of action. Given what I was thinking at the time, my mental state, the mood I was in, subliminal factors, my predisposition, the perceived options, and the information I had at the time, I'd make the same decision for the same

reasons I made it the first time around. I'm not saying that settles the issue, but if Lennox is appealing to experience and introspection, I don't view the process by which I made choices the way he does.

To be a moral creature, one first of all needs moral awareness...[a dog] has no concept of morality and never will have... If a computer is involved in the design of land-mines which ultimately cause the maiming or death of thousands of children, it makes no sense to accuse it of morally reprehensible behavior. It had no free will or choice. It did what it was programmed to do. It is not a moral being and so is not responsible for its actions (26-27).

i) Lennox changes the subject in midstream, so his conclusion fails to follow from what he said before, even if you agree with what he said before. He begins by discussing moral awareness, then he suddenly switches to computers having no free will or choice, but doing whatever it was programmed to do. But those are two separate issues. To say that a choice isn't blameworthy due to lack of moral awareness, and to say a choice isn't blameworthy due to lack of free will (i.e. it was programmed), are two very different claims with different justifications.

ii) The comparison with computers begs the question. Computers are inculpable because they lack consciousness. But consider science fiction scenarios regarding artificially intelligent computers and robots. Are they moral agents? That parallels the compatibilist/incompatibilist debate. And that comparison can't resolve the debate, because it simply relocates the same issues. At that point computers are so similar to humans that there's no longer a relevant point of contrast in this regard, so we're right back to the same issues.

[Quoting Sartre] we need try to only persuade him that the beloved's passion is the result of a psychological determinism (29).

There's a powerfully deterministic component to sexual passion. Hormones, baby!

The underlying assumption behind many denials of free will is naturalism, or even materialism. The presupposition here is that only the natural or material world exists. There is no supernature, no top-down causation, no break in the causal chain linking every phenomenon to the basic stuff of the universe...C. S. Lewis has argued that human rationality itself,

which is intimately involved in what we determine to do or not to do, is part of supernature (42-43).

That fails to distinguish between blind physical determinism and choices or actions determined by rational background factors.

This passage [Gen 2:17] is crucial for understanding what Scripture itself means by God's sovereignty. It is clearly to be understood not in terms of absolute control over human behavior but as a much more glorious thing: the devolving of real power to creatures made in God's image, so that they are not mere programmed automata but moral beings with genuine freedom—creatures with the capacity to say yes or no to God, to love him or reject him (45).

i) In Calvinism, humans are real agents.

ii) In Calvinism, humans have the capacity to disobey divine commands and prohibitions. But that ability is entirely consistent with predestination. Indeed, from a

Reformed standpoint, Adam and Eve were predestined to disobey the prohibition.

Of course, the world "sovereignty" (which does not, incidentally, appear in the Genesis narrative) could be understood to mean absolute control in every detail of life and, as we shall see, is taken to mean that by some theists. But this smacks of despotism and totalitarian dictatorship... (45-46).

i) And Christopher Hitchens says he was an atheist because he couldn't stand the specter of the "celestial dictatorship". This is prejudicial rhetoric rather than a serious argument.

ii) It's arguable that the Creator would be derelict unless he exerts absolute control in every detail of life. He's responsible for making creatures, for what they do to each other or to themselves. Suppose a video gamer designed a game with artificially intelligent characters, then, having set up the initial conditions, let it carry on by itself, allowing utter mayhem to ensue. Doesn't he have some obligation to the well-being of the intelligent virtual characters he made, to protect them from gratuitous harm? He put them in that hazardous situation. He can just walk away, leaving them trapped in that situation.

[Quoting Tozer] the eternal decree decided not which choice the man should make but that he should be free to make it (46).

That's vacuous. What's the difference between an indecisive and no decree at all?

[Quoting Plantinga] no antecedent conditions and/or causal laws determine that he will perform the action, or that he won't. It is within his power, at the time in question, to take or perform the action and within his power to refrain from it (46-47).

If true, doesn't this mean all our decisions are arbitrary? If every decision could just as well be other than was, isn't what we choose a coin flip?

[Quoting Plantinga] he can't give these creatures the freedom to perform evil and at the same time prevent them from doing so (47).

Isn't that overstated, even on libertarian grounds? What if we devise the technology to annihilate the human race. Must God respect the ability of one human being to doom the entire human race? Surely, even on libertarian grounds, God can and, indeed, ought to prevent human agents from committing evil on *some* occasions to keep conditions viable. To prevent a few human agents from aggregating all the power, which they use to oppress everyone else. Would it be wrong for God to occasionally reset the state of play so that a few humans who've consolidated power can't seal the fate for everyone else?

God's guidance is never purely and simply the kind of micromanagement that leaves the individual with no choice. The biblical narrative demonstrates this again and again. Abraham is an interesting case in point. God appeared to him at intervals and explicitly told him what he should do—leave Ur, for example. Yet in between such intervals there was often no specific guidance given him. He had to decide what to do—and he sometimes made the wrong decision. If God had instructed him at every turn what he should do, then his humanity would have been compromised... (53).

i) "Micromanagement" is a pejorative term. But is that inherently bad? Suppose a woman is killed by a drunk driver. She's the only child and caregiver for her elderly mother. Now her mother will die a lonely, neglected old woman in a nursing home. A little "micromanagement" could easily prevent that. Timing is everything. If the drunk driver left the tavern a minute sooner or a minute later, the daughter would still be alive. She was in the wrong place at the wrong time. A few seconds difference either way would change the outcome for the better.

ii) Divine guidance can be providential as well as verbal, like a hedge maze. Consider the manifestly providential orchestration of circumstances that led Abraham's servant to Isaac's future wife (Gen 24). Or the almost fatalistic way that Joseph's dream is eventually realized (Gen 37-50).

[Quoting Warfield] All things without exception, indeed, are disposed by Him, and His will is the ultimate account of all that occurs...It is He that...creates the very thoughts and intents of the soul (54).

That's an accurate, representative statement.

[Quoting Helm] Not only is every atom and molecule, every thought and desire kept in being by

God, but every twist and turn of each of these is under the direct control of God (54).

What Helm and Sproul seem not to appreciate is that, if God takes over and "directly controls" the molecules in my arm—for instance, as it swings to hit you—then my responsibility has gone and I cease to be fully human (55).

i) I do think "*direct* control" is misleading. For one thing, the adjective is superfluous. Indirect control is just as controlling as direct control. The key concept is divine control, and not the degree of immediacy.

ii) Mainstream Calvinism takes the position that God generally achieves his aims through the medium of ordinary providence.

iii) Apropos (i-ii), Calvinism does not imply that God takes direct control of the steering wheel, wresting that from the human driver. That's a very crude paradigm.

[Quoting Bentley Hart] There comes a point when an explanation becomes so comprehensive that it ceases to explain anything at all because it has become a mere tautology. In the case of pure determinism this is always so. To assure

that every finite contingency is solely and unambiguously the effect of a single will working all things—without any deeper mystery of created freedom—is to assert nothing but that the world is what it is, for any meaningful distinction between the will of God and the simple totality of cosmic eventuality has collapsed...Such a God at the end of the day is nothing but will and so nothing but an infinite brute event; and the only adoration that such a God can give is an almost perfect coincidence of faith and nihilism (59).

i) Hart is a fine prose stylist, but that camouflages the lack of logic. If you carefully analyze his statements, what do they really mean? Do they mean anything? To say that everything happens according to God's will does not imply that God is nothing but will. In Calvinism, God's will is not a sheer will, but a will that's informed and characterized by all God's other attributes.

ii) It simply means everything happens for a reason. That's hardly nihilistic. To take a comparison, a screenwriter or novelist is responsible for the entire plot, from start to finish. But does that make the plot a "brute event"? What if there was no plot, so that characters acted utterly randomly? Jarring, inexplicable choices. No continuity. No dramatic logic. Wouldn't that be a brute fact?

iii) Here's an example of Hart's alternative. His theodicy–or antitheodicy:

Christian thought has traditionally, of necessity, defined evil as a privation of the good, possessing no essence or nature of its own, a purely parasitic corruption of reality; hence it can have no positive role to play in God's determination of Himself or purpose for His creatures (even if by economy God can bring good from evil); it can in no way supply any imagined deficiency in God's or creation's goodness. Being infinitely sufficient in Himself, God had no need of a passage through sin and death to manifest His glory in His creatures or to join them perfectly to Himself.

<https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2008/05/tsunami-and-theodicy>

i) He wrote that in the aftermath of the Christmas tsunami (2004). But in what sense are natural evils and natural disasters like earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, tsunamis,

and volcanic eruptions a "privation of the good, possessing no essence or nature of its own"? That's just empty, nonsensical verbiage.

ii) By what logic does it follow that if God is sufficient in himself, he has "no need of a passage through sin and death to manifest His glory"? That's rhetorically impressive, but how does the conclusion follow from the premise? There's such a thing as second-order goods. A nested relationship in which the outcome is internally related to prior conditions. Even an omnipotent God can't produce some outcomes directly.

Likewise, when dealing with creatures, he must relate to us on our own level. That's not a question of divine limitations, but human limitations.

It is one thing to believe, as part of essential Christianity, that we live in a world in which nothing happens without God's permission and even foreknowledge. But it is entirely another thing to go way beyond that, and to believe that all that happens, including evil, is meticulously planned and its occurrence made certain by God, independent of any other considerations. It is hard to imagine that anyone could believe that such extreme deterministic ideas are even remotely Christian. They

seem infinitely far away from describing the God of love revealed to us in Jesus Christ—or the God who condemns and says that we should avoid evil. Yet how can one condemn anything God has predetermined ought to occur? Thus, as we have seen, this kind of determinism abolishes the very concept of evil (61).

i) I don't know what Lennox means by "independent of any other considerations". What is that referring to?

ii) But if, as Lennox affirms, God has exhaustive foreknowledge, then in what sense is the future unplanned? If God knows what will happen in case he makes the world, and he makes the world in full knowledge of every future eventuality, then how can that not be part of God's plan?

iii) Likewise, if God foreknows the end-result of his creative actions, then how can the end-result be indeterminate once he acts on his foreknowledge? At that juncture it's too late to change what he foresaw. Even if (ex hypothesi) the outcome was open-ended beforehand, once he takes a creative action in light of that outcome, with that outcome in view, the plot is now inexorable. That's true even if other agents independently contribute to the future.

iv) Why does the God of Lennox set in motion a scenario that he condemns? The God of Lennox is a necessary cause of the outcome he condemns.

v) Here we confront competing intuitions. Some people find the idea that God has planned everything, "including evil", appalling. My intuition is the opposite. It's evil in particular, more than anything else, that demands a rationale. We don't think good things require a special explanation. Good things are good in their own right. They don't need any justification above and beyond their own goodness.

By contrast, it's evil things that cry out for some justification on God's part. Evil events especially should only happen for a good reason, to serve a worthwhile purpose that compensates for the evil.

Concerned parents ask how they should respond to their son who says to them: "I am not going to bother with God since your church teaches me that if I am going to be saved I will be saved, and I can do nothing about it in either direction. so there is clearly absolutely no point in being concerned about it;" or the daughter who confronts them with "I cannot believe in your God any more. How can I believe in a God who fixed my eternal destiny before I was born so that I can do nothing about it? How can I believe in a God who is actively involved in evil? Surely this is not only unfair but

also immoral? Such a God, if he exists at all, is obviously neither loving nor good." I agree (63).

i) Does Lennox not know the difference between predestination and fatalism? It's not a difficult distinction to grasp. For instance:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2017/05/is-calvinism-synonymous-with-fatalism.html>

ii) Of course God makes decisions about his creatures before they came into being. Since they don't exist at that preliminary stage, even the decision to make them in the first place must be before they came into being.

iii) What precisely is the objection? Should God be in the dark when he makes human agents? Just make them, then see what happens to them, for good or ill? Make a rational, vulnerable agent, then wait to find out how it all turns out—for better or worse?

iv) "Actively involved in evil" compared to what? A God who stands idly by while atrocities are committed?

The moral argument is surely entirely sufficient to invalidate theories of divine determinism (63).

i) Asserting that's the case is entirely *insufficient* to invalidate divine determinism. Lennox never gets around to

arguing for his moral impressions. He just takes it for granted that Calvinism has unacceptable consequences. He doesn't explain what makes them unacceptable. He states a consequence, expresses dismay, and that's that. He constantly assumes what he needs to prove, because he fails to give the reader a reason to agree with his reaction. It's just emotional from start to finish.

ii) I admit that the existence of evil makes predestination harder to stomach. If our world was devoid of evil, then the doctrine of predestination wouldn't make me wince.

But have I just made a concession that's damaging to Calvinism? No, because the existence of evil makes every alternative harder to stomach, viz. Arminianism, Molinism, open theism, Lutheranism, universalism—even atheism.

It's a general problem rather than a problem unique to predestinarian theology. The existence of evil makes it harder to believe in divine benevolence. Makes it harder to believe that God really cares about what happens to us. Every theological tradition, if honest, will balk in the face of evil. But that's the hand we were dealt. It's too late to demand a new deck. That's what we've got to work with. And atheism is incomparably worse.

Lennox's objection to Calvinism suffers from artificial one-sidedness. Moreover, he's less than forthcoming in this book—at least from what I read thus far. For on many other occasions, when challenged, he will confess that he doesn't have a direct solution to the problem of evil. So even on his own grounds, he has no adequate theodicy in the face of evil. He's surely conversant with the strategies by which freewill theists field the problem of evil, yet it leaves him fundamentally dissatisfied. So why does he act as though

the problem of evil is disqualifying for Calvinism, but not for freewill theism?

It is even held by some that the solution lies in the fact that God has two wills: one is secret, and it is to save only those people he has unconditionally elected to salvation; and the other is revealed, and it is that he wills that all people be saved (63).

I don't think God's revealed will is that he wills universal salvation.

A further attempt to avoid the issue is to say that everything, including evil, is directly caused by God for the greater good...This view is a version of utilitarianism (64).

i) Calvinism doesn't imply that everything is directly caused by God. In mainstream Calvinism, most events result from second causes—including evil.

ii) A greater good defense is not utilitarian. It would only be utilitarian if it took the position that the end justifies any means whatsoever.

iii) Freewill theists also deploy a greater good defense.

It is undeniable that we are taught in the NT that God does permit his people to suffer in order to learn of his grace. Paul was a case in point. But the use of that argument to say God was the direct cause of the horrific abuse or murder of a child, as in Dostoyevsky's story and so often in real life, goes far beyond this biblical teaching and, from a moral perspective, is utterly reprehensible (64).

i) I don't know why where he got the idea that according to Calvinism, God is the direct cause of every event. That's inaccurate.

ii) Notice how he changes the subject in midstream. He begins by saying God permits his people to suffer in order to learn his grace, but suddenly shifts to child abuse or child murder. But he can't very well say that God permits the abuse or murder of children in order that the victims learn of his grace. So where does that leave his objection? How does that salvage his own position?

having stated that God causes everything down to the movement of the last atom and every human thought,

proceed to contradict themselves by turning round and maintaining that, even so, evil is not directly caused by God. Rather, he only permits it (64-65).

Once again, Calvinism doesn't state that God is the direct cause of everything. God is the ultimate cause of everything, but that holds true for varieties of freewill theism as well.

[repentance] carries with it the implicit recognition that I had (libertarian) freedom to do otherwise (66).

That's an assertion in search of an argument. Where's the supporting argument?

[Quoting Clark] "I wish very frankly and pointedly to assert that if a man gets drunk and shoots his family, it was the will of God that he should do so..." yet Clark maintains that God is not responsible for sin even though he decrees it (66).

i) I do think God is responsible for sin. He's not solely responsible, and he's not culpable, but he shares responsibility for whatever happens in his world.

ii) Clark has a rather idiosyncratic position. As I recall, he defines responsibility in hierarchical terms. You can only be responsible if you're answerable to a superior. But in that sense, God is unaccountable, since there's no one above him, only below him.

iii) There's a sense in which it's true that "if a man gets drunk and shoots his family, it was the will of God that he should do so," but that bald statement needs to be qualified. God never wills evil for the sake of evil, but for some countervailing good.

[Quoting Bentley Hart] But when any meaningful distinction 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 experience, it becomes impossible to imagine that what God wills might not be immediately convertible with what occurs in time... (67).

i) I myself avoid permissive language, but it's not nonsensical. God permits evil in the sense that he was able but unwilling to prevent it.

ii) Hart is confounding predestination with causality. But by itself, God's plan doesn't make anything happen. It must be executed—through creation, providence, and miracle. God's plan determines whatever will happen. Ensures the outcome. Everything happens according to plan. But predestination doesn't cause the outcome, unless we define causality according to the counterfactual theory of causation. And on that definition, the God of freewill theism is the ultimate cause of everything, too.

[Quoting Piper] God is more glorious for having conceived and created and governed a world like this with all its evil (68).

I'm not sure what to make of that one-sentence statement. I don't know the context.

As it stands, I deny that God is more glorious for having conceived, created, and governed any particular world in contrast to alternate scenarios. God is just as glorious in every possible world. God's glory is a fixed, intrinsic attribute rather than a contingent relation. The degree of divine glory isn't variable from one possible world to the next. God's glory isn't conditional on the world. Creation doesn't augment God's glory.

Perhaps, though, Piper simply means a redeemed world reveals aspects of God's greatness that a sinless world does not.

If evil ultimately occurs necessarily according to the inexorable decree of God, how could sin have any meaning? The deist Voltaire's trenchant exposure of the moral shock elicited by such a theodicy comes to mind. It is to be found in the poem he wrote after the horrific earthquake in Lisbon in 1755 that killed and estimated 60,000 people (68).

i) How could sin have any meaning if our choices are uncaused?

ii) Sin has meaning because everything happens for a purpose. How can sin have any meaning in a world with gratuitous evil? How can sin be meaningful in a world where our choices and actions are a matter of chance? Where, every time you roll the same dice, you may get a different combination?

iii) Once more, Lennox is changing the subject in midstream. He begins with sin, but abruptly switches over to natural evil. Yet even if (ex hypothesi) God can be insulated from complicity in moral evil, how can God be insulated from complicity in natural evil? A natural disaster

is a product of physical determinism. A chain of causes. And God is the ultimate cause of natural forces and processes.

God's direct causation of evil is probably the most seriously implication of theistic determinism (68).

Why is Lennox stuck on that falsehood?

Some theological determinists accuse people like me, who engage in discussion and debate with atheists and agnostics, of wasting our time. "There is no point using argument to defend the Christian faith," they say. "After all, people who are not believers in God are 'dead in trespasses and sins' and so they can no more respond to your arguments than a dead dog could respond to a command to get up. In any case, unless God has chosen them for salvation, they will never respond, no matter what you do" (69).

Which theological determinists say that? Can he quote any Reformed philosopher or theologian of distinction who says that? Or is this just uninformed laymen?

Even if the reprobate are impervious to apologetics, it wasn't for their benefit, but for the benefit of the elect.

The result is that, instead of questioning the paradigm, theories and evil observations are trimmed to fit it (81).

That is, indeed, a danger, but every theological tradition should be alert to that danger. Freewill theism is no exception.

Is God's foreknowledge causative (108).

Calvinism doesn't view foreknowledge as causative.

The idea that, because God knows about an event beforehand it must be predetermined, may rest on the assumption that God's relationship with time is the same as ours; that he sits, as we do, on a timeline that stretches from the past to the future. However...it could be, for instance, that God knew

beforehand that I would trust Christ simply because he sees it in an eternal perspective, so that the issue of causation does not even arise (109).

That's a traditional, but dubious explanation. For instance:

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/free-will-foreknowledge/#BoetSolu>

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/providence-divine/#GodKnoFut>

The usual argument, which is by no means unique to Calvinism, is that foreknowledge is impossible if the future could go either way. One proposed solution is Ockhamism, but that's highly controversial since it seems to commit the proponent to retrocausation and denying the accidental necessity of the past, which is asymmetrical with the future.

This statement [Mt 11:20-24] makes it clear that our Lord knew not only what did happen in Tyre and Sidon in his day, and in Sodom centuries before, but what would have happened had they been presented with different evidence.

In Calvinism, God has counterfactual knowledge as well as foreknowledge. God knows what happens in every possible

world because God is the source of every possible world. Each possible world is a reflection of God's infinite imagination.

Thomas McCall gives an argument based on the love of God in order to highlight the problem with determinism here:

- 1. God truly loves all persons.*
 - 2. Truly to love someone is to desire her well-being and to promote her flourishing as much as you can.*
 - 3. The true well-being and flourishing of all persons is to be found in a right relationship with God, a saving relationship in which we accept the invitation of the gospel and come to love him and obey him.*
 - 4. God could determine all persons freely to accept the invitation of the gospel and come to a right relationships and be saved.*
 - 5. Therefore all persons will be saved (124).*
-

i) Calvinism isn't committed to (1).

ii) The God of freewill theism doesn't promote the flourishing of every person as much as he can. The world is

not an even playing field.

iii) The God of Lennox foreknows that by creating some people, he consigns them to damnation. That's not acting in their best interests.

iv) The Calvinist God can save everyone in a particular world. However, some people, who are heavenbound in a world where other people are hellbound, won't exist in a world where everyone is heavenbound. Therefore, a world in which God saves everyone is not the same world as the world in which only some people are saved—including people who can only be saved in a world where everyone won't be saved.

Lennox polemics

This is a sequel to my initial post on John Lennox's new book:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2017/12/determined-to-believe.html>

In the first installment I focussed on general ideas and largely ignored his exegetical arguments. That's in part because I've been over this ground before. For instance:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2014/06/arminian-prooftexts.html>

However, in this post I'd like to sample some of his exegetical arguments.

It is a serious matter to deny the plain teaching of Scripture in the interests of maintaining a theological paradigm, or to try to get round it by special pleading... (179).

Using our God-given moral judgment is very important. For instance, the most elementary moral logic surely tell us that, if someone is going to be condemned because they personally failed to do something (in this case, to believe), then they must have been capable of doing it in the first place.

Otherwise no guilt could attach to their action, and their condemnation would be unjust (145).

So which is it? Do we defer to the "plain teaching of Scripture," or does our moral judgment override the "plain teaching of Scripture"?

Some take recourse in the exotic notion that God has two wills: his: his so-called "prescriptive will", by which he says to Adam that he should not eat; and his "decretive will", by which he has determined that Adam should eat the fruit. However, the second makes the first completely disingenuous and unreal, and negates any form of true freedom. And with freedom goes responsibility (157).

i) One issue is semantic. If the same word has more than one meaning, then it's easy to generate verbal contradictions. But that doesn't mean the underlying concepts are contradictory. It's just a linguistic convention that the word "will" is used in different ways, with distinguishing adjectives. yet there's no reason we must denote both by the same noun. We can just distinguish between what God predestines and what he commands or forbids. That avoids a facile verbal contradiction.

ii) Is this an exotic notion? Consider Exod 7:2-5, where God intends for Pharaoh to disobey his command. There's God's public command, and then there's God's ulterior design, in which disobedience to the command is instrumental to God's ultimate goal. Another classic example is God commanding Abraham to sacrifice Isaac.

The list of Scriptures in which the Greek terms related to predestination occur is short and the topics are few...In light of this it seems well-nigh incredible that the doctrine of predestination has been extrapolated to become an all-encompassing divine determinism that know no bounds (112).

That commits the word=concept fallacy, as if a concept is only present when a word denoting the concept is present. But the exegetical basis for "divine determinism" is far broader than a few verbal data-points. For instance:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2014/07/annotated-prooftexts.html>

In other words, the passage [Eph 1:4] is not concerned to tell us how they first came to hope in Christ but what God intended for those who are in Christ. It is

noticeable that when some authors quote the above passage in Ephesians they tend to omit the words in him (118).

i) The passage can't be about those who are already, actually in Christ since they didn't even exist at that stage. That's the point of saying God's choice was made before he made the world. So this is referring to God's antemundane plan for the world.

ii) They are chosen in Christ because election is coordinated with redemption. Christ is their Redeemer. Salvation is mediated through the atonement of Christ on their behalf. That's entirely consistent with Calvinism. Indeed, that's required by Calvinism. Christ died to save the elect.

On pp157-158, Lennox misunderstands a passage he quotes. When it says Adam wasn't acting "under external compulsion or determination", that's explicitly defined in the next sentence: "There was no necessity arising from his physical condition, nor from his moral nature, nor from the nature of his environment, why he should sin."

There was external "determination" in the sense of predestination, but that's not the kind of determination the denial was referring to. Moreover, predestination isn't coercive.

The deterministic idea held by some, that Adam's sin was caused by God's decree, and therefore Adam could not have done

otherwise, is grotesque. Morality would thereby be emptied of all coherent meaning, and the problem of evil would cease to exist (because we could simply blame God for everything). We have seen that Calvin calls his deterministic view "horrible," but if his view were true, a moral concept would have no meaning (161).

i) As a linguist, Lennox ought to be sensitive to the fact that cognate words in Latin, French, and English don't necessarily have the same denotations or connotations.

ii) Notice that Lennox doesn't provide a reason to justify his claim. He simply informs the reader that determinism has this baleful consequence, but there's no supporting argument.

Yet he references some high-level works on the freewill debate. If he actually read them, he'd be aware of the fact that his facile objections are philosophically jejune. He doesn't even attempt to engage the arguments some philosophers advance for determinism/compatibilism or raise in objection to libertarian freedom.

The objector [Rom 9:19] raises the moral problem: if God's will irresistible, there is no reason for God to judge that anything is wrong.

There are only two possible logical responses to this. Either the premise (God's will is irresistible) is correct, and the deduction (God has no right to find fault) is false; or the premise is incorrect and so the argument collapses. Scripture gives adequate support for the latter. Our Lord once wept over Jerusalem [Mt 23:37]. Here it is the will of the Lord to gather the people under his protection, but they resisted his will, and the resistance was not broken by an arbitrary display of power.

The climax of Stephen's speech [Acts 7:51-54] to the Sanhedrin at Jerusalem demonstrates that resistance to God has been a sad characteristic of the people of Israel throughout their history. Once again, their resistance was not overcome by irresistible force. It was allowed to stand, and Stephen was murdered.

Therefore we must read the story of Pharaoh in such a way as to challenge the objector's deduction that God's will is irresistible (258-59).

Several problems:

i) He's not construing Paul's argument on its own terms. His interpretation doesn't arise from the flow of argument in

Romans. Instead, Lennox appeals to two extraneous passages that have nothing to do with Romans. Not only do they fall outside the scope of Romans, but they fall outside the scope of the Pauline corpus. Yet it's hermeneutically illicit to (re-)interpret Paul's statement by appeal to something which has no reference to Paul's statement. Instead of showing how his interpretation derives from the inner logic of Paul's argument, Lennox interjects something irrelevant to Paul's argument. Something that disrupts the continuity of Paul's argument.

ii) When Stephen talks about resisting God's will, what does he mean? In context, refers to hostile reception to God's prophets. Disobedience to God's word. That, however, is entirely consonant with Calvinism. To say sinners have the ability to resist God's *word* is very different from the claim that they have the ability to resist God's *will* (in the decretive sense).

iii) Mt 23:37 raises a number of complex issues. Since Jesus was human as well as divine, he has natural human empathy.

iv) Should we always take divine statements at face value? Consider paradigm examples where Abraham and Moses intercede for others. On the face of it, they talk God out of doing what he originally intended. Yet Lennox affirms divine foreknowledge and counterfactual knowledge. So in what sense can God change his mind? Not due to new information.

v) Scripture sometimes depicts God in all-too human terms. Unless you're a Mormon or open theist, you must make allowance for anthropomorphic representations. Otherwise, Yahweh is hard to distinguish from the mercurial, short-

sighted gods of Greco-Roman and ancient Near Eastern mythology.

vi) We need to distinguish between performative language, which is designed to elicit a reaction—and constative language, which is designed to convey propositional information.

vii) In the Synoptic parallel (Lk 19:41-44), Jesus uses the divine passive ("hidden from your sight") to indicate that God spiritually blinded them.

viii) Once again, Lennox thinks God has complete foreknowledge and counterfactual knowledge. But in that event, why does his God so often back himself into a corner? He's like a chess player who makes a losing move. At the time, he didn't realize it will lead to checkmate.

Lennox believes that God often intervenes in OT history, and God knows the long-range effect of his interventions. So why, according to Lennox, does God so often find himself in a bind? Shouldn't a God who's equipped with foreknowledge and counterfactual knowledge be able to avoid that train wreck by acting in ways that trigger a different chain reaction? In open theism, divine dilemmas are generated by God's lack of distance vision. By the time things come to a head, it's too late to forestall it by diverting traffic up the road. Lennox's God is very much like humans who must improvise on the fly because they didn't see it coming.

If God's will is irresistible and human behavior is determined, then, logically, any apparent resistance cannot be real

since that too is predetermined. If it is impossible to resist his will, then it is pointless to ask questions such as: is God unjust? But the expected answer to this question is no. God's will can be resisted, as we have already pointed out in connection with Christ's weeping over Jerusalem (266).

i) To begin with, that's not an exegetical argument but a personal appeal to his sense of fairplay. Not based on what the text says or implies, but a reader's preconceived notion of justice.

ii) He conflates two different questions. The answer is "no" to what question? "No" to "Is God unjust?" rather than "no" to "Is his will resistible?"

Moral logic and common sense demand that, if no one is responsible for accepting the Gospel, then no one is responsible for rejecting it (277).

i) That overlooks the asymmetry between justice and grace. We're not responsible for accepting the Gospel in the sense that acceptance is due to God's grace rather than our natural receptivity. Believing the Gospel is not an independent contribution we make, but the efficacious

outcome of God's grace. It is God's prior action rather than our resultant reaction that's decisive. By contrast, rejecting the Gospel is deservedly culpable. Now, Lennox denies that theological paradigm, but there's nothing illogical about it.

ii) In addition, justice is getting what you deserve whereas mercy is getting better than what you deserve, in spite of what you deserve. That's the Gospel in a nutshell.

God's crystal ball

In my personal encounters, freewill theists are so conditioned to the notion that Calvinism is deterministic while freewill theism is the antithesis of determinism that they're incredulous when I point out that freewill theism is deterministic too, just in a different way.

Say the God of freewill theism gazes into his crystal ball. He seems the future. To be precise, he sees what will happen if he creates the hypothetical world, as shown in the crystal ball.

Now, there's a philosophical argument that foreknowledge alone makes the future unalterable. I think that's correct. But that's not my argument here.

The point, rather, is that if God goes ahead and makes the world he sees in his crystal ball, then at that stage it's too late in the game for the future to be other than what he saw in his crystal ball. Once he creates the initial conditions which eventuate in that foreseen outcome, the outcome is fixed.

To take a comparison, suppose I'm scheduled to drive a friend to the airport tomorrow. That night I have a dream. I dream that I drove my friend to the airport. Along the way, I see an accident at a landmark. I'm unable to find parking space on the first two floors of the garage. The first opening I find is on the third floor, C137, between a yellow Karmann Ghia and a red Alpha Romeo. As we approach the terminal, I see airport security speaking to an agitated man. As we walk through the concourse, I see a beautiful woman stride past me.

I accompany my friend to the gate. After he boards the plane, I catch up on some email and text messages before leaving. I glance up and see the plane explode in midair, killing all aboard.

Then I wake up. I pick up my friend at his house and commence our ride to the airport. But everything begins to repeat itself, just like the dream.

Suppose I have libertarian freewill. This story has two possible endings. On the one hand, I might choose to do nothing different than what I did in the dream. Although I find the resemblance to the dream spooky, I chalk it up to coincidence. It was just a dream. As a result, my friend dies in the conflagration.

On the other hand, when we arrive at the gate, after everything up to that point happened just like I saw in my dream, I tell my friend about my dream and warn him not to board the plane. He shrugs it off. So I tear his boarding pass into pieces, causing him to miss his flight.

My friend is furious and yells at me. Airport security intervenes. At that moment the plane explodes just after takeoff. The security guards leave, having more urgent matter to attend to than our little fracas. My friend is dumbfounded.

Now, up to a critical point, I could "change" the future. It could still go either way. If, however, my friend boards the plane and the plane takes off, then it's too late for me to change the outcome. I can't save him. He crossed a line of no return. My failure to intervene before that juncture renders the foreseen future unalterable thereafter.

"A God who accepts there are rapists in his universe"

He'd much rather have a God who sovereignly decrees a person be raped, than have a God who accepts there are rapists in his universe.

<http://evangelicalarminians.org/ff171201/>

That comparison is supposed to make Arminianism look good in contrast to Calvinism.

Suppose the alternatives were between an Arminian world in which God *doesn't* allow rapists into his universe and a Calvinistic world in which "God sovereignly decrees a person be raped". If that was the choice, then Arminianism would certainly be more *prima facie* appealing than Calvinism.

But when it comes to the *fact* of evil, Arminians are in the same boat as Calvinists.

A God who "accepts" there are rapists in his universe. How euphemistic. The Arminian God has an open border policy on rapists?

In law enforcement, we tolerate a certain level of criminality because we lack the resources to prevent every crime. The best we can do is to keep crime at manageable levels. Keep crime from spiraling out of control. But the Arminian God doesn't suffer from the same limitations.

It's easy for the Arminian God to accept that there are rapists in his universe since the Arminian God will never be a raped. It's a whole lot easier to accept a hazardous situation from a position of safety. When you yourself are invulnerable. But that's sorry consolation to the rape victim. Evils that would be intolerable if they threatened me or my family are not as urgent when we're out of harm's way. And yet it's often virtuous to endanger yourself to save others.

I'm struck by moral smugness of the SEA contributor, as if his alternative is *obviously* superior.

Taboo Calvinism

Most Calvinists I have ever read or heard or spoken to will insist that God is not the author of sin and evil. But can they, real Calvinists, say that with logic on their side? Or, when they say that, from within their own theological system, are they simply sacrificing logic entirely?

Calvin, Edwards, Sproul and Piper, just to name a few leading Calvinist theologians, affirmed that God foreordained the fall of Adam and Eve and thereby all of its consequences. According to one of them, put very bluntly but helpfully, God “designed, ordained, and governs” everything that happens without exception—including sin and its consequences (evil decisions and actions by fallen people).

The question that should automatically arise, then, is how does this avoid making God the author of sin and evil? I don’t think it can—from within the common Calvinist system of God’s sovereignty, providence and predestination of all things.

When asked to explain, to relieve the apparent contradiction, most Calvinists appeal to “secondary causes.” God renders sin and evil certain only through secondary causes. Two come to mind: Satan and fallen human beings. But we cannot avoid going “back” in our thoughts to how Satan came to be evil and how Adam and Eve fell into sin when they had fellowship with God—given that God “designed, ordained, and governed” (and rendered certain) even their evil decisions and deeds.

If Satan (Lucifer) and Adam and Eve fell into sin and evil because God foreordained it and rendered it certain, how is it possible to “get God off the hook?” It isn’t. In every intelligible sense, this view of God and evil traces evil back to God’s intentions.

Ah! Some Calvinists will say: God is not guilty because his intentions in foreordaining and rendering sin and evil and all their consequences certain are good. Satan’s and Adam’s and Eve’s (and ours) are not good. But that’s not the point here. (I could argue that one into the ground also, but I’ll leave that for another time.) Back to the point: It is simply illogical to say that God is not the

author of evil insofar as one also believes God “designed, ordained” and rendered it certain—even if through secondary causes and with good intentions.

Two points here. First, in my experience, most young, impressionable evangelical Calvinists have not thought this through. As soon as it is pointed out to them (viz., that logically Calvinism makes God the author of sin and evil no matter what their favorite Calvinist pastor or theologian says) they either say 1) Oh, I hadn’t thought that, or 2) Whatever God does is good just because God does it. The latter is what their Calvinist mentors should say, but usually don’t because it doesn’t answer how God is not the author of sin and evil and it makes God morally ambiguous.

Occasionally a Calvinist theologian, pastor, teacher, writer, will bite the bullet and admit that, from within the Calvinist system, as explicated by Calvin, Edwards, Sproul, and Piper, God is the author of sin and evil. Then, suddenly, he is harshly criticized for falling into heresy.

Logic matters—in every theological system and even in the pulpits. If Calvinists want to avoid logical contradiction they need to “back up” and re-think their whole explanation of God’s meticulous sovereignty in which God designs, ordains and renders certain everything that happens without exception or else admit that they do believe (whether consciously or hidden even from themselves) that God is the author of sin and evil.

(Footnote: I do not consider anyone a consistent, true Calvinist who does not believe God foreordained the fall of humanity and rendered it certain. Here, in this essay, I am addressing only those true, consistent Calvinists who, together with Calvin, believe God foreordained the fall of humanity and everything else and rendered everything certain according to a divine plan. There are all kinds of people who call themselves “Calvinists” who I do not consider “real Calvinists” and there are all kinds of people who call themselves “Arminians” who I do not consider “real Arminians.”)

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2017/10/comes-calvinism-logic-can-lead-heresy/>

1. Not surprisingly, his article was mechanically plugged by SEA. It's striking how many freewill theists are absolutely obsessed with this formulation. The question represents a taboo. An irrational, superstitious line in the sand. It serves the same polemical function as liberal questions like: do you believe in "marriage equality", global warming, transgenderism, evolution? The purpose of these questions is to pigeon-hole people. These are litmus test questions. If they give the "wrong" answer, then the questioner feels justified in dismissing their viewpoint without argument. Their denial is treated as beyond the pale. It is unacceptable to even debate that question. The position is summarily classified as out of bounds.

2. Why do freewill theists act as if casting the issue in terms of a particular metaphor ("authorship") is a good way to frame the question? Why has that formulation acquired canonical status in freewill theism?

3. An obvious problem with a metaphorical question is that the scope of the metaphor needs to be defined. What do they mean by "author" of sin and evil? Can they offer a literal synonym or explanation?

For instance, freewill theists act as if it's duplicitous for Calvin, the Synod of Dort, and the Westminster Confession to deny that God is the "author" of sin. But in my experience, they never bother to investigate what that phrase meant in historical theological usage. It doesn't even occur to them to ask whether their 21C definition corresponds to 16-17C usage.

4. I have a policy of not answering ambush questions. There's no right answer to the wrong question. I reserve the right to reformulate trick questions, loaded questions.

5. When pressed, they sometimes define authorship of sin in terms of causing sin, determining sin, or causally determining sin. In my experience, "causal determination" has become another stock phrase in freewill theist polemics. But what's the difference between causing x, determining x, and causally determining x? Have they bothered to distinguish those concepts, or is "causal determinism" just another reflexive rote formula?

6. Here's one way to field the question: if Calvinism makes God the author of sin, then so does Thomism, Arminianism, Molinism, Lutheranism, open theism, Deism, &c. What theistic position doesn't make God the author of sin?

Here's a standard philosophical definition, by David Lewis:

We think of a cause as something that makes a difference, and the difference it makes must be a difference from what would have happened without it. Had it been absent, its effects — some of them, at least, and usually all — would have been absent as well.

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/causation-counterfactual/#CouCauDep>

On that definition of "authorship," freewill theism makes God the author of sin and evil.

7. What about "determinism? Here's one definition:

Determinism is the philosophical idea that every event or state of affairs, including every human decision and action, is the inevitable and necessary consequence of antecedent states of affairs.

<http://www.informationphilosopher.com/freedom/determinism.html>

Is Calvinism deterministic in that sense? That's still ambiguous:

i) If by "antecedent states" is meant a casual chain of events, then Calvinism does not entail determinism. For instance, God has predestined every miracle, but a miracle, in the classical sense (in distinction to a coincidence miracle) is not the inevitable and necessary consequence of antecedent states. Indeed, miracles, in the classical sense, are causally discontinuous with the past. Miracles are the effect of a cause that falls outside the ordinary course of nature. Indeed, the same reference work goes on to say:

More strictly, determinism should be distinguished from pre-determinism, the idea that the entire past (as well as the future) was determined at the origin of the universe.

Nor should determinism be confused with determination, the idea that events (including human actions) can be adequately determined by immediately prior events (such as an agent's reasons, motives, desires), without being pre-determined back to before the agent's birth or even back to the origin of the universe.

Yet Calvinism is about predeterminism (i.e. predestination, foreordination, election, reprobation) rather than determinism, per se. In principle, an outcome can be determinate without being predeterminate. An agent may effect an outcome without any premeditation or forethought. An unplanned event can still be determinate.

ii) If by "antecedent states" is meant the decree, then it's true that every event or state of affairs, including every human decision and action, is the inevitable and necessary consequence of the decree.

iii) That, however, doesn't mean the decree is necessary. If by "antecedent state" is mean God's prevolitional contemplation, then the decree is a contingent rather than necessary truth. God's nature is logically or conceptually independent of the decree inasmuch as God was at liberty to decree a different outcome, had he so desired. Although the decree necessitates subsequent states, no antecedent state necessitates the decree.

iv) Conversely, the God of freewill theism determines the future. There are different ways that can be the case. If God instantiates a possible world, then he thereby determines

that particular world history. That's what possible worlds are: alternate world histories. Once God instantiates a possible world, everything falls like dominoes according to the history of that particular world.

If God foreknew the historical consequences of making our world, yet he goes right ahead and does it, then the outcome must exactly match the foreseen consequences of his creative fiat.

Likewise, an agent can ensure an outcome through inaction. Take the case of a baby carriage rolling down a hill unless I intervene to stop it. If I refrain from preventing that outcome, my nonintervention renders the outcome certain. In that sense, doing nothing can be deterministic. Just let nature take its course.

8. Olson seems to implicitly define "authorship" of sin and evil to mean God "designed, ordained and rendered it certain". But how does that stand in contrast to freewill theism?

i) How does Olson distinguish "ordain" from "render certain"? And I've already explained how an agent can render an outcome certain through nonintervention. But does that ipso facto exonerate an agent? If I simply let a baby carriage, with the baby inside, roll down the hill into a busy intersection, does that "let me off the hook"? My refusal to get involved ensured the tragic outcome.

ii) But suppose it wasn't a sure thing that the baby would die at the bottom of the hill, when his carriage was run over by a car. Suppose it was only probable. Does that let the bystander off the hook, for refusing to get involved?

iii) What does Olson mean by "designed"? It's true that according to Calvinism, every event happens by design. But how does that stand in contrast to freewill theism? If God knows the future, if God knows the historical consequences of making the world, then didn't God intend the consequences of his own creative fiat? If God saw it coming, if he made the world, then those can't be unplanned events. In every intelligible sense, this view of God and evil (e.g. Molinism; simple foreknowledge) traces evil back to God's intentions.

iv) Even in open theism, God knows that he may be risking the well-being of his rational creatures. God knows that he may well be putting them in harm's way. We generally consider it culpable to endanger the mental health, physical health, or lives of human beings. So even if the open theist God didn't plan it, that is not ipso facto exculpatory.

9. If freewill theists can define "authorship" of sin and evil, why are they so fanatically attached to that particular formulation? Why not use synonyms that are less opaque?

i) Typically, freewill theists define causation or determinism in a way that automatically includes Calvinism while automatically excluding their brand of freewill theism. But that's a textbook example of a tendentious definition. A stipulative definition that's custom-made to preemptively exempt your own position from what you find objectionable in the opposing position. Classic special pleading. The game is rigged for the Calvinist to lose.

ii) If a polemicist for freewill theism were to stop hiding behind "author of sin" and reformulate the question in more prosaic, explicit terms, like "Does Calvinism make God cause or determine sin and evil in a way that freewill theism doesn't make God cause or determine sin?", then the

question would lose most of its sting. It would reduce to the tautology that in Calvinism, God has a different relationship to sin and evil than in varieties of freewill theism. But it goes without saying that Calvinism is different than freewill theism. So that observation is rather insipid.

iii) Moreover, to say that Calvinism makes God cause or determine sin and evil in a way that freewill theism does not isn't equivalent to saying freewill theism does make God cause or determine sin and evil. Just that in freewill theism, God causes or determines sin and evil in a different way than Calvinism. But once we drop the polemical slogans and begin to explicate the underlying concepts, that greatly complicates the comparison. The facile rhetorical advantage that freewill theism enjoys is suddenly exposed as verbal sleight-of-hand.

10. Furthermore, the question is an exercise in misdirection. The reason Calvinists believe that God predestined sin and evil is, in the first instance, because they believe that's a revealed truth, and they believe divine revelation (i.e. Scripture). A more honest question would be whether the Bible makes God the "author" of sin and evil. You can't just discredit Calvinism by attacking the perceived consequences of Calvinism. For that's secondary to the primary question of whether Calvinism mirrors God's self-revelation in Scripture. The deeper question is whether you can discredit Calvinism without discrediting biblical theism—if both positions have the same ("unacceptable") consequences.

11. And that isn't just hypothetical. Olson has an aversion to OT theism. There's a contradiction in his own position. He wants to say that Jesus is his standard of comparison, but the very same Jesus reportedly venerates OT theism. Yet Olson refuses to affirm that God issued the "abhorrent

commands" in the "texts of terror". For Olson, logic only matters when attacking Calvinism. When defending freewill theism, he takes refuge in obfuscation.

Another example is natural evil. He's outraged when Calvinists like Piper attribute natural disasters to God, yet Olson fails to explain how the God of freewill theism can avoid complicity in natural evil. Olson can't honestly appeal to the buffer of second causes to insulate God from natural evil, in part because he's contemptuous of that appeal when Calvin invokes it, and in part because God is the ultimate cause of most natural evils, even in freewill theism. Most natural disasters are the result of physical determinism. God created the natural processes that inevitably produce natural disasters, barring divine intervention. We can't avoid going "back" in our thoughts to how God set up the initial conditions.

12. Notice that Olson cites Calvin, Edwards, Sproul and Piper. But Sproul and Piper are popularizers, while Edwards was an 18C theologian and Calvin was a 16C theologian. If you're going to raise philosophical objections to Calvinism—and theodicy is an issue in philosophical theology—you should have the integrity to target the most astute and advanced representatives of the opposing position. Olson, like Walls, has a really bad habit of attacking soft targets rather than engaging the best contemporary Reformed philosophers.

Reprobation and hardening

I responded to someone on Facebook on the topic of reprobation:

i) The "election" of Israel refers to God's choice of ethnic Israel for his redemptive purposes. That doesn't mean "election" in the sense of election to salvation.

Mind you, a percentage of Jews were/are elected for salvation, but that's a different principle. Use of the same term to denote different concepts fosters confusion, but that's a semantic issue.

ii) People can know the truth without believing it. Likewise, people can believe in the true, then cease to believe. That's not the same thing as losing salvation.

iii) Hardening is not synonymous with reprobation. Reprobation is a timeless decision by God. Hardening happens in time. Although God may harden the reprobate, hardening serves more than one purpose. Hardening can be temporary.

iv) Keep in mind that Paul isn't necessarily or even probably talking about the same group of people. Due to human mortality, there's a constant rate of turnover every few generations.

i) God chooses individuals or collectives for different reasons. Take God's choice of Judas compared to God's choice of Paul.

We need to distinguish how the term "election" is used in systematic theology or Reformed dogmatics from Biblical

usage. They overlap but they don't coincide.

Likewise, we need to examine different functions that are served by God choosing X. That's not something to be determined by the meaning of a particular word-group.

ii) In Calvinism, one can't come to saving faith apart from monergistic regeneration. It is, however, possible to believe theological truths apart from divine grace. You have professing Christians who believe their theological tradition simply due to social conditioning. Take the cliché of the young man raised in a fideistic, "Fundamentalist" church who loses his faith when he goes to college, and is suddenly exposed to hitherto unsuspected objections to Christianity.

iii) Take the paradigm-case of Pharaoh. God didn't harden of Pharaoh to keep him from exercising saving faith, if that's what you mean. Rather, the purpose was to make him fanatically stubborn, so that he didn't exercise prudence.

Can you explain why hardening the reprobate would be necessary if they are depraved? Is that not like making a dead man more dead, or the deaf more deaf?... but He has to harden those that would believe and be obedient if He didn't.

1. Hardening is used in a variety of contexts. We'd really need to examine them on a case-by-case basis. Most pertinent to our discussion are passages where hardening

has, or may have, soteriological significance for groups or individuals (e.g. Mk 4:12; Jn 12:39-40; Rom 9:18; 11:7,25; Eph 4:18).

2. "Hardening" is a metaphor, so there's the question of what the metaphor stands for. In addition, it's roughly interchangeable with other related metaphors in Scripture, viz. "darkened," spiritual "blindness," "deafness," "stiff-necked," and "dead" in sin.

In context, it can be used for resistance to spiritual truth—among other things.

3. In Reformed theology, there are basically two reasons why some people can't exercise saving faith:

i) In the case of the reprobate, they've been predestined not to exercise saving faith, and no one can act contrary to whatever has been predestined.

ii) In the case of the reprobate and/or unregenerate, they are psychologically ill-disposed to accept the Gospel. They suffer from "spiritual inability". And that, in turn, is grounded in original sin.

This isn't unique to Calvinism. Any non-Pelagian tradition says divine grace is necessary to make sinners receptive or responsive to the Gospel. The difference is that in freewill theism, every sinner has prevenient grace (or the equivalent) whereas in predestinarian traditions like Augustinianism, Thomism, Jansenism, and Calvinism, that's confined to the elect.

4. Apropos 3(i), predestination or reprobation, all by itself, doesn't cause anything. It's a divine plan. It must be implemented. And that usually take the form of ordinary

providence. So there are various means by which God may cause the reprobate to be unreceptive to the Gospel.

5. Apropos (2), these varied picturesque metaphors may well be alternate representations of the same basic principle. Bible writers tend to use them interchangeably, or bunch two or more together for emphasis.

So I wouldn't assume that hardening is necessarily something over and above "dead in sin", but a different related metaphor.

Likewise, these metaphors can represent various providential factors by which God executes his timeless intentions in time and space.

6. BTW, if you think hardening is inconsistent with Reformed theology, the same could be said for freewill theism. Why would God block people from exercising saving faith in Christ when, according to freewill theism, God wants everybody to be saved and has made universal provision for their salvation?

7. In the Gospels, resistance to Christ takes more than one form. You have the Sabbath controversies. However, that falls outside the purview of spiritual inability. That's about how to interpret and apply the Mosaic law—as well as the finality (or not) of the Mosaic law.

In addition, there's resistance in the face of the miracles and exorcisms of Christ. Although these are signs of his divine mission, a hostile reaction to miraculous signs isn't necessarily the same thing as spiritual inability. For instance, modern-day cessationists are often implacably antagonistic to evidence for contemporary charismatic

miracles. That doesn't mean they're unregenerate or reprobate.

8. Finally, the tension you perceive in Reformed theology has precedent in Scripture. On the one hand, John's Gospel says no one can have saving faith in Christ apart from divine enablement (e.g. Jn 6:44,65). On the other hand, the same Gospel describes divine hardening (Jn 12:39-40).

Now, by your logic, that's superfluous. If grace is necessary for sinners to believe, all God needs to do to ensure that some people won't believe is to withhold grace. So why harden them in addition to that underlying condition? Just leave them in their default condition.

However, these may simply be different ways of expressing the same idea. One representation is more passive (i.e. their default condition, absent divine intervention) while the other is more active ("hardening").

But that doesn't necessarily mean these reflect different types of divine action. Rather, these may well be varied ways of depicting the same dynamic.

But to this day Yahweh hasn't given you a heart to understand or eyes to see or ears to hear.

I recently debated a Molinist on Facebook. Here's part of the exchange:

*Toward the end of the book of Deuteronomy, God is speaking through Moses to every individual of Israel, and he says that the commandment is *not* too difficult for them to observe. They have a choice between alternatives, or else these passages are in error. It is impossible for God to lie, so those who want to affirm causal determinism would have to deny inerrancy to maintain their theology in light of these passages. Deut 29:4,10-15; 30:11-20.*

i) You need to get beyond buzzwords like "causally determine" and define your nomenclature. How do you define causation? Do you employ a philosophical definition. How do you define determinism?

ii) Your appeal to Deuteronomy is counterproductive to your thesis. In Deut 29:4, the text explicitly denies that the Israelites have the psychological aptitude to obey God. They are hard-hearted, spiritually deaf and blind. That's because,

according to the text, God hasn't opened their hearts and eyes and ears. Their motivation to keep God's law depends on a spiritual condition that God hasn't granted them.

iii) Deut 30:11-14 refers, not to the ability to keep God's law, but the accessibility and intelligibility of God's law.

In order for God's words to each individual Israelite in Deuteronomy 30:11-20 to be true, then God must provide grace for them to be able to do it. Otherwise, either God is lying or inerrancy is false with regard to this text.

You're beginning with a preconceived notion, then using that as the yardstick. However, as I explained, the text doesn't say that God granted the Israelites enabling grace to keep his law. Indeed, the text says exactly the opposite! "But to this day Yahweh has not given you a heart to understand or eyes to see or ears to hear."

So your chosen prooftext doesn't illustrate your claim. To the contrary, it states the very thing you deny.

You impugn God's word because it doesn't jive with your preconceived notion of what God ought to do.

Certainly the text refers to the accessibility and intelligibility of God's law. But, I find it utterly implausible in

the context for this passage not to also refer to the choice to keep God's law. There is no other way the Israelites could have understood God's words in this passage other than that they each actually can choose to obey the commandment. The very reason why God argues so forcefully through Moses that they can understand the commandment is to add to fact that each Israelite can also choose to obey it. No one in the audience can be excused for disobeying by claiming that they didn't understand.

You're not deriving your conclusion from the text. You haven't shown where the text itself says that or implies that.

Rather, your conclusion is based on your assumption, extrinsic to the text, that it must include ability to comply. You merely stipulate that the Israelites must view matters the same way you do. That's not exegesis.

Deuteronomy lays out consequences for obedience and disobedience. If you do A, then B will happen—but if you do C, then D will happen.

People can understand that without having the slightest inclination to act accordingly.

Actually, you are reading too much into Deut. 29:4. This verse does not mean that in that moment God is not giving the Israelites a heart to understand. Instead, the portion translated as "to this day" in Deut. 29:4 means the same as "until this day".

Minimally, that involves a contrast between past and present. By "present," I mean at the time Moses is addressing Israel. That's at the end of the 40-year sojourn in the wilderness. Israel is about to embark on the conquest of the promised land.

So that stands in contrast to the last 40 years or so. Indeed, it could include the chilly reception which the Israelites gave to Moses when he returned to Egypt to deliver them.

So, according to that temporal marker, God hadn't granted them a heart and eyes and ears to comply for the last 40 years, in the wilderness.

And, of course, God didn't originally give them the law on the eve of their entrance into the promised land. Rather, God gave them the law on their entrance to the Sinai desert, 40 years before. So, for the past 40 years, they've

been lacking the divine enablement necessary to keep his law.

Yet according to you, that would either make God a liar or falsify Deuteronomy. So even if we concede, for the sake of argument, that moving forward, God will now grant them the grace they need to keep his law, that stands in contrast to God withholding such grace for the prior 40 years or so. Therefore, even if we accept your chronological distinction, for discussion purposes, it doesn't salvage your case. Rather, it simply relocates the problem, as you define the problem.

Furthermore, the Deut 29:4 doesn't promise that God will open their hearts and eyes and ears in the future. It doesn't speak to that issue one way or the other.

But, of course, the OT doesn't end with Deuteronomy. Is Israel more faithful in Joshua, Judges, Kings, Chronicles, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, &c.?

Isn't Israel at least a faithless in the promised land as was the case in the wilderness? But if, according to you, Deut 29-30 marks a turning point, why is there no appreciable difference? Why is Israel just as bad or worse during the Conquest and occupation?

Obviously, God is 'today' giving the Israelites hearts to understand as he says in Deut. 30:11-14.

That can't be obvious when Deut 3:11-14 doesn't actually say that.

Not at all. It seems obvious from the text that God means the Israelites can in fact comply and do what is commanded. Otherwise, how do you interpret the following verse?

That's fleshed out in the intervening verses. The law is not a secret law code. The law is not inscrutable. Rather, the law is available and comprehensible.

So they have the *intellectual* ability to keep the law, but that doesn't mean they have a *heart* to keep it.

They are explicitly told to choose life...

They are told where their duty lies. They are told the divergent consequences of obedience and disobedience.

But, you claim that God intends to [for?] them to understand that that they cannot possibly choose life.

No, I never claimed that God intends to communicate or intends for them to understand that they can't possibly choose life. Rather, I've said your prooftexts don't imply what you claim for them. And, indeed, Deut 29:4 says that

right up until the present day, God withheld the enablement to do so.

Incidentally, it's not an all-or-nothing proposition. It's not as if God must deal with Israel as an undifferentiated collective. God can open the hearts and eyes and ears of *some* Israelites. It's not as though the only options are for God to either open no one's heart or open everyone's heart.

God, evil, and illusion

The argument from evil is usually cast in terms of an allegedly inconsistent tetrad:

i) God is omnipotent

ii) God is omniscient

iii) God is benevolent

iv) Evil exists

One solution is to deny a horn of the proposed dilemma. Some freewill theists tweak (i) by stressing God's self-imposed limitations. But there's not much mileage to be had in tweaking (i). Even if God doesn't exercise his omnipotence, he's capable of stopping or preventing evil. Moreover, even if one denies (i), that hardly refutes the argument. As John Piper noted, in response to Rabbi Kushner:

God does not need to be “all-powerful” to keep people from being hurt in the collapse of a bridge. He doesn’t even need to be as powerful as a man. He only needs to show up and use a little bit of his power (say, on the level of Spiderman, or Jason Bourne)—he did create the universe, the Rabbi concedes—and (for example) cause some tremor a

half-hour early to cause the workers to leave the bridge, and the traffic to be halted. This intervention would be something less spectacular than a world-wide flood, or a burning bush, or plague of frogs, or a divided Red Sea, or manna in the wilderness, or the walls of a city falling down—just a little tremor to get everybody off the bridge before it fell.

<http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/response-to-rabbi-kushner>

Roger Olson was outraged by Piper's response, but he didn't attempt to directly rebut Piper's observation, which is irrefutable.

Some freewill theists deny or minimize (ii). But that's unsuccessful. Even if (ex hypothesi) God doesn't know the future, a moral agent needn't be 100% certain about a ripening outcome to see what's highly likely to transpire unless he intervenes. Suppose a mother loses control of her baby stroller, which goes careening down the hill, heading straight into a busy intersection. A pedestrian halfway up the hill is in a position to intercept the stroller just in time. All he has to do to ensure a tragic outcome is to do nothing. Inaction, in combination with gravity, terrain, wheels, &c., guarantees the outcome.

The hypothetical pedestrian didn't create the situation. Didn't cause the mother to lose control. Didn't put the baby

in danger. He's far less responsible than the God of freewill theism (be it Molinism, open theism, or simple foreknowledge Arminianism). Yet the pedestrian's nonintervention is culpable.

Or suppose the tragic outcome isn't a dead certainty if he fails to intercept the stroller. Suppose there's only a 40% chance the baby will die in a collision. But even so, we'd consider the pedestrian to be blameworthy.

Or a Christian could challenge how the atheist defines (iii). What if God is not benevolent in the way we wish or hope? Isn't Yahweh pretty hard-nosed? And the harsh events we read about in Bible history are no different in kind than the harsh events we read about in the newspaper or secular history books. So why not adjust your view of God's goodness to the Bible and reality?

Finally, a person can deny (iv). And that isn't just hypothetical. Take Mary Baker Eddy or John McTaggart—as well as strands of Hindu and Buddhist philosophy that say the sensible world is Maya (illusory or delusive).

Freewill theists tend to operate with a priori notions of what God must be like. This comes out clearly when attacking Calvinism. So they may appeal to perfect being theology (as they construe it) to preemptively discount Reformed theism.

On a related note, John Wesley famously said that whatever the Bible means, it can't be *that!*—in reference to Calvinism (specifically, reprobation). Roger Olson takes the position that Reformed theism *can't* be true because it would make God untrustworthy.

Some freewill theists (e.g. Randal Rauser) take the next step by denying that God did some of the things attributed

to him in the Bible, viz. "abhorrent" commands, like the command to sacrifice Isaac or the command to execute the Canaanites. Once again, this conflicts with their preconception of God's goodness.

The pattern here is to begin with a preconceived notion of what kind of evil is permissible in a world made by a benevolent God. But the dilemma for the freewill theist is that given the existence of horrific evil, that limits their explanatory options.

Considering their scruples, if evil didn't exist, it's hard to envision their conceding that a benevolent God would allow such evil to exist. If evil didn't exist, don't you imagine they'd rail against a philosophical theologian who proposed the possibility of God making a world in which atrocities like the Holocaust, child murder, &c., happen? Wouldn't they accuse the philosophical theologian of blasphemy for even entertaining that impious speculation?

But the existence of evil forces their hand. So they struggle, because it stands in deep-seated tension with their moral intuitions regarding what ought to be the case, given their expectations regarding what a benevolent God should disallow. If they had their druthers, if they were coming to this issue from scratch, in a world devoid of evil, certain evils would be incompatible with the only kind of God that can exist—from their viewpoint. As it is, they are stymied by the horrific and apparently gratuitous evils in the real world. And it makes them resort to hairsplitting distinctions when attacking Calvinism while exempting their own position.

Considering the way in which many freewill theists lay down a priori strictures regarding what a benevolent God would or wouldn't do, it would be more consistent for them to go

whole hog with thinkers who say evil is illusory. That really does let God off the hook.

In fact, idealism is making something of a comeback in Christian philosophical circles. For instance, Robert Adams, "IDEALISM VINDICATED," Peter van Inwagen & Dean Zimmerman, eds. **PERSONS: HUMAN AND DIVINE**. (Oxford, (2007), 35-54; J. Farris, S. Hamilton, & J. Spiegel, eds. **IDEALISM AND CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY: IDEALISM AND CHRISTIANITY • VOLUME 1** (Bloomsbury, 2016); S. Cowan & J. Spiegel, eds. **IDEALISM AND CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHY: IDEALISM AND CHRISTIANITY • VOLUME 2** (Bloomsbury, 2016).

Mind you, I find that wholly implausible. But given their theological priorities and moral presuppositions, if they were really serious, the most consistent theodicy for freewill theism is to reclassify evil as a massive illusion. That way they don't have to squirm over God allowing horrors which would be culpable for a human agent in his position.

Gregory Boyd on Calvinism

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JASX8g6sWkw>

Boyd covers a lot of ground in 10 minutes. These aren't necessarily verbatim quotes, but paraphrasing the gist of what he said.

1. "The majority were predestined to hell."

Calvinism has no official position on what percentage of humanity is hellbound. For instance, Warfield thought the majority will be saved.

2. "The Calvinist God is duplicitous"

It isn't clear to me how much of this is from John Wesley and how much is Boyd's.

Consider the analogy of a novelist, director, or video gamer who creates a villain. It isn't duplicitous for him to create evil characters, because he also creates good guys to defeat the bad guys. There are countless novels, movies, and TV dramas on that theme. Does that makes the novelist or director guilty of duplicity?

3. "God says he loves everybody but then damns the majority to go to hell."

Boyd is imputing a freewill theist assumption ("God loves everyone") to Calvinism, then positing a contradiction. But that's due to confusing his own position with the opposing position.

4. "God tells us to love everybody, but he doesn't. Makes God hypocritical. Doesn't practice what he's preaching."

i) There's nothing intrinsically hypocritical about commanding something contrary to what you yourself do. If I drink beer, but don't allow my 5-year-old to drink beer, is that hypocritical?

ii) God commands Christians to love our enemies, and God loves his enemies. Calvinists can and do affirm Rom 5:6-10). Although God doesn't love all his enemies, he loves some of his enemies.

I'd add that it isn't possible for Christians to be equally loving to everyone. You can't be equally loving to school children and a schoolyard sniper or suicide bomber.

iii) That said, there are two fundamental asymmetries to take into account. To begin with, Christians are supposed to show mercy to others because we were shown mercy (Cf. Mt 18:21-35). But it hardly follows that God is supposed to show mercy to others because he was shown mercy. So the rationale for why Christians are commanded to love sinners has no parallel in the case of God.

iv) In addition, God is the eschatological judge. So he has a different role to play. "Vengeance is mine, I will replay" (Rom 12:19). That stands in contrast to Christian duties.

5. "God commands us to resist sin but predestines sinners to sin."

In Calvinism, God doesn't only predestine sinners to sin. God also predestines some sinners some of the time to successfully resist sin.

6. "God says he hates evil but predestines evil"

That's simple-minded. God can hate evil in its own right, but predestine evil as a means of achieving particular goods that can't be realized apart from evil.

7. "He predestines the evil we're supposed to fight".

Once again, that's like a novelist who scripts an evil scenario, then scripts the heroes to defeat it. There's nothing inconsistent about that.

8. "Freewill is true because God gives choices"

i) What does Boyd mean by libertarian freedom? Does he mean are choices are uncaused? If so, then our choices are just a roll of the dice. Each time you roll the dice you may get a different random outcome. You don't even get to take your chances; rather, chance takes you.

ii) Determinism is consistent with choice. Determinism is consistent with deliberation.

iii) Deuteronomy is conditional. It describes consequences for alternate courses of action. That's perfectly consonant with determinism (or predeterminism). If you do A, B will happen—but if you C, D will happen.

9. "Humans can thwart God's will-Lk 7:30"

That fails to distinguish different senses of God's "will". In context, Lk 7:30 is referring to obligations. They disdained John the Baptist's prophetic call to repentance. But shirking our duties doesn't imply that we can thwart God's will in the sense of God's plan for the world. In context, this has reference to a prophetic message.

10. "In the Bible God wants everyone to be saved-2 Pet 3:9"

As Richard Bauckham documents in his commentary, Peter is using stock language drawn from the OT regarding God's patience for the Jews. That stood in contrast to the larger

world of the ancient Near East. By analogy, Peter is referring to God's patience for Christians.

11. "God loves everyone-1 Jn 2:2"

If Boyd thinks cosmos is a synonym for "everybody." But is that consistent with Johannine usage?

i) If so, then 1 Jn 2:15 ("**Do not love the world or the things in the world**") forbids Christians from loving everyone?

ii) What about "**The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify about it that its works are evil**" (Jn 7:7).

If you think cosmos is synonymous with everybody, then that includes Christians, in which case, according to Jn 7:7, Christians hate Jesus.

iii) What about "**even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you**" (Jn 14:17).

But if cosmos means everyone, then no one believes in Jesus. No one receives the Spirit. Yet that contradicts the second sentence.

iv) "Jesus answered him, 'I have spoken openly to the world'" (Jn 18:20).

Did Jesus speak to every human being during his 2-3 year public ministry?

v) "I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world" (Jn 17:9).

But if cosmos means everybody, then Jesus is praying for everyone and not praying for everyone, which is contradictory.

vi) What about 1 Jn 5:19 ("We know that we are from God, and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one"), where the first clause, which refers to Christians, stands in contrast to the second clause, where the "whole world," lies in the power of the Devil? But that can't be synonymous with everyone, since Christians are excluded from that comparison.

12. "We break God's heart"

That reflects Boyd's open theist hermeneutic, where he refuses to make allowance for anthropopathic expressions.

13. "God loves everybody"

What's so great about universal ineffectual love? What's the practical difference between that and God not loving everyone? According to Boyd, the damned would be damned whether or not God loved them.

14. "We're not puppets"

That simply begs the question against determinism, using a simplistic, tendentious metaphor.

15. "God desires a real relationship"

To take a comparison, do pet dogs choose to love their owners? Do they have a "real relationship" with their owners?

16. "Go doesn't force you to choose him"

That's either incompetent or demagogical. If God causes the human response, there's no force. Force implies resistance.

17. "Tragedies aren't God's will"

How is it supposed to be better to say tragedies happen for no good reason?

18. "God didn't predestine natural humanitarian disasters"

But the open theist God could prevent those humanitarian catastrophes. Just give people advance warning.

19. "God didn't predestine the Holocaust, kidnapped children, suicide bombers"

But the open theist God could step in to prevent or stop those evils.

20. "For God's glory"

In Calvinism, God doesn't do anything for his own glory in the sense of amassing glory for himself. God has nothing to gain. It's all for the benefit of the elect.

21. "God doesn't cause evil"

According to a standard philosophical definition of causation, the open theist God *does* cause evil. Divine nonintervention ensures the evil outcome. Inaction can cause something just as surely as action.

"I'm sure glad that isn't me!"

An exchange I had with an Arminian on Facebook:

"I can't imagine being in heaven peering down at those condemned to eternal damnation and thinking, 'I'm sure glad that isn't me,' like the pharisee in the parable of the tax collector."

Suppose a person misses their flight due to a traffic jam. The plane they were scheduled to fly on crashes shortly after takeoff, killing everyone on board.

Is it Pharisaical to say, "I'm sure glad I wasn't on that plane"? You can express gratitude that you avoided that fate without gloating over the fate of the passengers. Those are two separate issues.

"Yah, people here in this life would likely say 'I'm sure glad I wasn't on that plane,' human nature and all, but you cannot compare what a fallen human in this life would feel to what a fully sanctified soul in heaven in union with Christ would feel."

To begin with, I'd avoid putting words in the mouth of Jesus. I think it best to let Jesus speak for himself than presume to turn him into our mouthpiece.

In addition, you seem to think it's unholy for a person to be grateful that they didn't die because they missed their flight. By that logic, they shouldn't thank God that they are still alive. When, exactly, should a person thank God? If you're a cancer survivor, but someone else dies of cancer, it would be unsanctified to thank God that you didn't die of cancer? Given that every time something good happens to you, something bad happens to someone else, when is there ever a time, on your view, to thank God? Do you pray before you eat dinner? What about all the starving people around the world. Is it unholy for you to be grateful that you're not starving to death?

What does sacrificial love have to do with it? It's not as if the person in my hypothetical was in a position to take the place of another passenger on the plane. He didn't know the plane was going to crash.

Are you living under a bridge while paying rent so that other people can live in your home?

Let's take a different comparison. Suppose a mother drops her child off at elementary school. Midmorning she receives a frantic phone call from a neighbor to switch on the TV. There's live news of a sniper at the elementary school. Preliminary reports of children shot. But police are withholding names of the victims.

If, after agonizing hours of not knowing, she finds out that her child was not one of victims, is it wrong for her to be overjoyed that her own child wasn't killed? She can be

happy about her own child, and grief-stricken about the other children at the same time, can't she?

Some Lives Matter

A recent Arminian meme, riffing off of Black Lives Matter, is to say that according to Calvinism, Some Lives Matter, based on reprobation and limited atonement. It's a cutesy applause line for T-shirts.

One problem with the invidious slogan is that you have socially conservative freewill theists who believe in the right of self-defense. So they think, when push comes to shove, that some lives matter more than others.

But here's another issue. Years ago I saw a medical show in about a teenager who suffered a concussion during a baseball game. A flying ball struck him in the head and knocked him out. He was rushed to the ER. Testing revealed a skull fracture. Doctors found that puzzling because the impact of a baseball shouldn't fracture a normal skull. Additional testing revealed the fact that he had osteoporosis. Doctors found that even more puzzling. How can a teenager suffer from osteoporosis? Additional testing revealed the fact that he had acute kidney disease. His osteoporosis was a side-effect of that underlying medical condition. So he needed a kidney transplant. His father volunteered to donate a kidney. Testing determined that his father was a compatible donor.

People die from renal failure because there aren't enough kidney donors. Yet freewill theist supposedly love everyone. So why don't they line up to donate a kidney? Evidently, they don't love their neighbor as themselves. Rather, they love themselves more than their neighbor. Even if they love everyone (which is pretty implausible), they don't love everyone equally.

I'm no expert, but to my knowledge, kidney donation isn't risk-free. Although you can survive on one kidney, I think that puts you at high risk of renal failure, because just one kidney is having to do the work of two. And if your remaining kidney fails, you don't have a back up, because you donated your spare kidney.

For that reason alone, it's not surprising that most folks, including freewill theists who brag about universal love, don't go around donating their kidneys to perfect strangers.

However, it's natural to make an exception for your best friend or close family. Indeed, it's expected that you will do things for loved ones that you won't do for a passing acquaintance or perfect stranger. You don't take the same risks for everyone.

In my true story, the father donated a kidney to his ailing son. That's predictable. And, of course, his son was very grateful. It strengthened their bond.

But suppose his father told his son, "That's nothing special. I'd do the same thing for anyone. You just happened to be first in line."

First of all, there's the question of whether you have an obligation to reserve a kidney for a friend or family member, rather than giving it away to strangers. Do you have a higher obligation to loved ones? Do they have a prior claim on you?

But even assuming it's admirable that the father would do that for everyone, the value of the gift loses something significant in that event. After all, his son has a right to believe that this isn't something Dad would do for anyone.

Rather, he does it for his son because his son is special to him. Indeed, uniquely special.

There are situations in human relationships where we want to hear: "I did it for *you* because *you* have a special place in my heart. If it was anyone else, I wouldn't do it!"

And that's appropriate. That's the essence of friendship and familial love. Although it's good to care about most people, it's not a human virtue to care about everyone equally. Indeed, that's inhuman. Love is typically selective.

Now, I'm not suggesting that this proves Calvinism. There are important disanalogies between God and human social dynamics. The point, though, is that there's nothing inherently wrong with favoritism. Freewill theists practice favoritism all the time. Like everyone else, they are partial to friends and family. They don't treat their loved ones as interchangeable with everyone else.

Yet their argument for God's universal love is based on human analogies. But when they are forced to say divine ideal love is different from human ideal love, that vitiates their facile comparisons.

Selective intuition

In addition to Jerry Walls, I recently responded to another commenter on his blog. To quote myself:

Although the Holocaust is a cliché, it's a convenient example of a paradigm-evil. But I could easily use a different example. Take a refugee camp for Cambodians. What if Jerry tells that God would not be good unless he loves the Khmer Rouge?

My point is not that this necessarily disproves the universality of God's love. My point, rather, is that Jerry's facile appeal to "fundamental moral intuitions" is context-dependent and person-variable. What seems to be morally intuitive often turns on the particular example we use to illustrate the claim. Change the audience, change the illustration, you may get a radically different reaction.

Jerry himself presumes to speak on behalf of others when he appeals to moral intuition. He acts as though everyone naturally shares his intuition, and it's only prior commitment to Calvinism (why not Thomism?) that forces some people to deny what in their hear of hearts they know to be true. But that's trivially easy to counterexample.

"Let Jerry explain to Orthodox Jews that he believes God did not want the Nazis to do what they did because He loves all people and does not want the Nazis to do evil or their victims to suffer evil."

And let Jerry explain to Orthodox Jews why the Arminian God did so much less than Dietrich Bonhoeffer to stop the Nazis.

"Let Steve Hays then explain to them that God willed that the Nazis should be evil and go to hell, and that they should do to Jews the evil things that they did, and that God also willed those Jews who did not believe in Jesus to go to hell after enduring hell on earth from the Nazis."

i) There are no nice theodicies. The problem of evil isn't, in the first instance, with any particular theodicy of evil, but with the fact of evil.

ii) It's not willing evil for its own sake, as an end in itself. Rather, willing evil to achieve certain second-order goods. Goods unobtainable apart from evil. In a fallen world, just about everyone exists as a direct or indirect result of evil. Remove the evil and you remove everyone whose existence is the side-effect or end-result of some evil or evils in the past. In a sinless world, other people would take their place. So there are tradeoffs.

iii) Your final objection is not to Calvinism in particular, but Christian exclusivism in general.

iv) There's an asymmetry between my position and Jerry's. Unlike Jerry's glib, selective appeal to "fundamental moral

intuitions," I haven't predicated my own position on allegedly universal moral intuitions. Therefore, the fact that Jewish listeners might take umbrage at my theological alternative doesn't turn the tables on my own position.

v) We walk a tightrope when we present a theodicy. On the one hand, some theologians like Cornelius Berkouwer and David Bentley Hart find the very notion of a theodicy blasphemous. For them, any justification for the existence of evil makes evil justifiable. There's no evil, however horrendous, that can't be excused. It can't be as bad as it seems. They think that sanctifies evil.

Mind you, the implication of their position renders the occurrence of evil inherently inexcusable. God had no justification for what happened. But the logic of that position is to either deny God's existence or God's goodness. So that's clearly unacceptable from a Christian standpoint. It's a question of locating ourselves on the right side of the knife edge when we formulate a theodicy.

vi) Keep in mind that, in some measure, the complaint cuts both ways. Maimonides thought Christians were heretics and idolaters (due to their belief in the Trinity, divine Incarnation, and deity of Christ). Those are damnable sins. Just as you have Christian exclusivism, you can have Jewish exclusivism.

vi) Although it may offend some listeners to say that everything happens for a reason, the alternative is to say that some things, especially the very worst things, happen for no good reason whatsoever.

Yet that makes the suffering and death of victims meaningless. But if they think about it, how is that any consolation to the survivors?

People are often conflicted about evil. It may seem pointless, yet they want to know why it happened. Well, it can't be both. Either it has some ultimate purpose or not.

Is God love?

I'd like to make a brief observation about the claim, much belabored by Jerry Walls, that Calvinism really has no room for a loving God. Even when Calvinists affirm God's love, that's despite the logic of Calvinism.

Part of Jerry's argument is that it's inconsistent, indeed, double-talk, for Calvinists to simultaneously affirm reprobation and God's universal love. Suppose we grant that allegation for the sake of argument.

However, Jerry acts as though, unless the Calvinist God loves everyone, Calvinism has no room for a loving God. But that's a non sequitur.

The difference is that in Arminianism, God's love is general whereas in Calvinism, God's love is particular. In Arminianism, God's love is indiscriminate and ineffectual whereas in Calvinism, God's love is discriminate and effectual. Divine love is central and integral to Calvinism. But it's God's love for the elect.

(Of course, there's also the intra-Trinitarian love, which Calvinism affirms.)

Now, that may not be Jerry's concept of divine love, he may think that's a deficient concept of divine love, but it's devious for him to act as though Calvinists can't say "God is love" without crossing their fingers.

One of Jerry's chronic problems is a failure to distinguish between an external critique and an internal critique. Although the Calvinist concept of divine love is inconsistent with the Arminian concept of divine love, it's not internally

inconsistent. Jerry can't bring himself to honestly represent the opposing position. Not only is that unethical—it's philosophically inept.

For the love of God

Under what conditions and in what context can one justifiably expect a Christian theologian to discuss these texts? If, as a universalist, I should try to construct an exhaustive biblical case for a doctrine of universal reconciliation, one could justifiably expect that I would give at least some account of Matthew 25:46 and 2 Thessalonians 1:9; and similarly, given that Calvin tried to present an exhaustive biblical case for his understanding of limited election, we can justifiably complain that he did not even mention 1 John 4:8 and 16 in that context.

<https://www.facebook.com/notes/tom-talbott-sr/a-case-of-theological-obfuscation/1495732387123488>

A basic problem with Talbott's comparison is this: What theological alternatives stood in contrast to Calvin's position at that time and place? Arminianism didn't exist. Although the Eastern Orthodox might give an "Arminian" interpretation to 1 Jn 4:8,16, that's not the framework within which Calvin and his theological opponents operated.

He was a Western European Christian writing to, for, and against other Western European Christians.

To my knowledge, the primary theological alternatives in the church of Rome—which was Calvin's primary foil—were Thomism and Augustinianism. But there's no reason to think a Thomist or Augustinian would offer a significantly different interpretation of 1 Jn 4:8,16 than Calvin. For instance, here's how Aquinas glosses God's love for the "world" in Jn 3:16:

from the condition of the one who is loved, because it is man, a bodily creature of the world, i.e., existing in sin: “God shows his love for us, because while we were still his enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son” (Rom 5:8). Thus he says, the world.

<http://dhspriority.org/thomas/John3.htm>

But that's consistent with limited atonement.

It's my impression that Luther and Calvin co-opted Augustinianism to such an extent that it delegitimated the Augustinian tradition as a viable option in Catholicism. Prior to the Reformation, that had been a major, honorable option. But when the post-Reformed Jansenists tried to go that route, it was too late. Catholicism had narrowed in reaction to the Protestant Reformation.

Love and goodness

I'd like to make yet another observation about the recent interview with Jerry Walls:

<https://www.spreaker.com/user/veracityhill/episode-10-the-order-of-salvation?>

Observe how Jerry slides back and forth between God's goodness and God's universal love as synonymous concepts. For instance, he says:

Is God perfectly good? Is God perfectly loving? So the issue is, is this compatible with the goodness of God, the love of God? And Calvinists simply have no intelligible way of making sense of how God loves everybody (34-36 min. mark).

Notice how that interjects a systematic equivocation into his argument. For him, to deny God's universal love is equivalent to denying God's goodness. Hence, if Calvinists have no intelligible way to make sense of how God loves everyone, they have no intelligible way to make sense of God's goodness.

But the problem with casting his argument in those terms is that it confounds an internal critique of Calvinism with an external critique of Calvinism. From what I can tell, Jerry is attempting to show that Calvinism is inconsistent. Reformed theology can't consistently affirm the universal love of God.

When, however, Jerry treats universal love and goodness as interchangeable or mutually inclusive, he is tacitly switching from an internal critique to an external critique. According to Jerry's theological frame of reference, universal love and goodness are synonymous or inseparable. But it doesn't follow that they are equivalent or mutually inclusive in Calvinism.

Hence, this would not be an inconsistency that's internal to Calvinism, but an inconsistency between Calvinism and Jerry's brand of freewill theism. Jerry is manufacturing a point of tension in Calvinism by imputing to Calvinism an assumption that's not a Reformed assumption, but rather an assumption imported from Jerry's theological frame of reference.

Suppose, for the sake of argument, that Calvinism has no intelligible way to affirm God's universal love. That, however, wouldn't begin to demonstrate that a denial of God's universal love entails a corresponding denial of God's goodness on Calvinist grounds. Rather, Jerry is implicitly judging Calvinism by his own theological yardstick at this juncture.

Presumably, Jerry commits this blunder because, for him, equating divine goodness with universal love is so engrained that he can't separate the two in his own thinking. When, however, a philosopher evaluates an opposing viewpoint, it's incumbent on the philosopher to practice critical detachment. He must be able to grasp and describe the opposing viewpoint on its own terms before he's in a position to evaluate it. It's a two-step process. First you expound the opposing viewpoint, then you assess the opposing viewpoint.

There's nothing inherently wrong with judging the other side by your own standards—although, if you take that approach, you assume a burden of proof to justify your standard of comparison. But you can't allow your own viewpoint to infect your interpretation of the opposing viewpoint. Interpretation and evaluation are distinct steps. And if you attempt to mount an internal critique of the opposing viewpoint, if your aim is to expose a point of internal tension in the opposing viewpoint, you must at all cost avoid smuggling your own normative assumptions into the exposition. Otherwise, you see your own face at the bottom of the well. This is typical of Jerry's slipshod analysis when it comes to Calvinism. He conflates his normative assumptions with the preliminary step of exposition, which results in begging the question.

God and football

<https://www.spreaker.com/user/veracityhill/episode-10-the-order-of-salvation?>

Around the 60 min. mark, Jerry Walls labors to muster a biblical defense for his claim that God loves everyone.

He then argues that God is essentially loving because God is a Trinity, and the members of the Trinity love each other.

Several problems:

- i)** Calvinists don't deny that love is an essential divine attribute. So why does Jerry imagine that's a fatal concession to Arminian theology?
- ii)** By the same token, omnipotence is an essential divine attribute. That, however, doesn't mean God does everything he's capable of doing.
- iii)** God isn't human. Therefore, to infer that if the persons of the Trinity love each other, it follows that God loves every human being is clearly fallacious. God's essential self-love doesn't entail God's love for something (or someone) other than God himself.

Notice, I'm not saying God cannot or does not love anything or anyone other than himself. I'm simply pointing out that Jerry's inference is invalid. He's jumping categories from intra-Trinitarian love to love for creation. But even if God loves creation, that doesn't follow as a logical implication from God's intra-Trinitarian love, for God and creation are categorically distinct.

To take a comparison, suppose you have an intelligent alien species. Suppose they necessarily love members of their own species. It doesn't follow from this that they will love members of every other species, or any species other than their own. They may love all and only members of their own species. They love their own kind. Intra-species love doesn't imply extra-species love.

iv) He also has a bad habit of repeating bad arguments he's been corrected on. Take his objection that according to Calvinism, we can be more loving than God is. He just acts as though that's self-evidently false or reprehensible. But is it? Is Jerry stipulating a general proposition about God? What's wrong with saying we can love some things more than God does? If I love football, does that mean God must love football even more than I do?

v) He says if Calvinists would forthrightly admit that God doesn't love everyone, Calvinism would be undermined and discredited fairly shortly. What's his evidence for that claim?

If you conducted an opinion poll asking whether God must love Charles Manson, would every respondent share Jerry's outlook? Would most respondents share Jerry's outlook? Would the mother of Sharon Tate share Jerry's outlook?

I'm not saying God can't love a psychopathic killer. I'm just remarking on Jerry's unquestioned intuition. He acts as though it's self-evident that if you deny that God loves everyone, most people would find that discreditable. But that's like opinion polls where the answer depends on the specificity of the question. If you ask people whether God loves everyone, maybe most people would say yes.

If, however, you get specific, if you plug in particular names, you may well get different answers. Lots of people might

say God loves the Dalai Lama or Mother Teresa. But if you were to ask whether God loves Charles Manson, Ted Bundy, Josef Mengele et al., you might get a very different answer.

Jerry's mental world exists in a bubble. He's used to talking to like-minded people. It's like the famous quote attributed to Pauline Kael: "I can't believe Nixon won. I don't know anyone who voted for him."

Loving evil people

On Facebook (early June), Jerry Walls said:

Does everyone realize that if Calvinists would just forthrightly, consistently affirm that God loves EVERYONE, (which I think most know in their hearts), that He does not need eternal hell to be fully glorified (if any are lost forever, it because they have freely, persistently rejected God's love), that it could save us all a lot of arguments?

For Jerry, it's just inconceivable that Calvinists don't really believe God loves everyone. In their hearts, they know that God must love everyone, but their theological overlay forces them to deny what deep down know to be true.

It's unclear to me why he treats that claim as indubitable. One reason he gives is that God is that love is an essential divine attribute. And Calvinists agree.

But Jerry acts as though that makes God a love machine. If love is essential to God, then God automatically loves everyone.

But surely that inference is too strong. By that logic, God must love evil.

According to Walls, God would not be good unless he loved Josef Mengele. Why does Jerry think that's self-evidently true?

(To be clear, that's my example, not Jerry's. But it follows from his belief that God loves absolutely everyone.)

Notice, I'm not necessarily saying God *can't* love Josef Mengele. But why does Jerry insist that God *must* love Josef Mengele? What makes it antithetical to divine goodness if God didn't love Josef Mengele?

That's not a universal moral intuition, is it? Is it intuitively obvious to most folks that God wouldn't be good unless he loved Josef Mengele? Is it intuitively obvious to most theists that God wouldn't be good unless he loved Josef Mengele? Supposed you were to poll orthodox Jews?

I'm not discussing garden-variety sinners, but moral monsters. Psychopaths. People with no conscience.

One argument might be that, according to the Bible, no one is too evil for God to save. Let's consider that.

First of all, if God doesn't intend to save somebody, he may let them become more evil than if he intended to save them. The reason some people are so evil is because God had no intention of saving them. So he allows them to sink into depths of depravity.

From a Calvinist perspective, God's love is transformative. If God loves a deeply evil person, his love is a means of transforming an evil person into a good person. It's not just a divine attitude, but a divine action: irresistible grace.

Freewill theists might also wish to say that God's love is transformative, but that's qualified. For them, God loves people who will never be transformed by his love.

There is a difference between saying I will love an evil person in order to redeem him, and saying I will love an evil person despite his evil, irrespective of whether he will ever change. Those are not morally equivalent.

Is it intuitively obvious that a good person will love an evil person? Even if we think it's commendable to love an evil person in case we know that by loving them they will be transformed into a good person, is it self-evident that a good person will love an evil person for love's sake, even though he knows that his love will have no effect on the evil person?

Isn't there a prima facie tension between goodness and loving someone who embodies evil? If anything, doesn't our reflexive moral intuition find it wrong to love someone who embodies evil, absent some overriding consideration? Isn't there something evil about empathizing with evil people? Take women who become pen pals with convicted serial killers. They fall in love with them and marry them. Or take Charles Manson's groupies. Isn't there something morally twisted about that?

Let's take another example: A feature of friendship is that to be one person's friend sometimes means you can't be another person's friend. You can't be friends to both of them. You have to choose. There's an element of loyalty in friendship. Sometimes you have to take sides.

Suppose you befriended Sharon Tate's mother. Suppose, at a later date, you tell her that you befriended Charles Manson. Surely she'd find that intolerable. If you love the man who murdered her daughter, then you can't be friends with her mother. From her perspective, for you to even be sympathetic to Manson would be unconscionable.

Now, Jerry might counter that my objections are subchristian. The Gospel teaches us to love our enemies. We must overcome our instinctive revulsion to certain people.

That, however, wreaks havoc with Jerry's overall position. That's not morally intuitive, but morally counterintuitive. Yet in the book he coauthored with David Baggett (**GOOD GOD: THE THEISTIC FOUNDATIONS OF MORALITY**), Jerry says divine goodness must be analogous to human goodness to be recognizably good. Otherwise, "good" is equivocal, if it has one sense for God, and a divergent sense for man. That's essential to their case against Calvinism.

If, however, Jerry is going to say that we ought to love everyone because God loves everyone; if he's going to say that we must learn to emulate God's universal love, despite our natural inclination to be discriminatory, despite our natural inclination to hate someone like Charles Manson or Josef Mengele, then Jerry is conceding that divine goodness is unrecognizable. Divine goodness is radically disanalogous to our moral intuitions. God's universal love violates our intuitions. We must suppress our moral intuitions in order to bring our sensibilities in line with God.

Demonstrative love

Freewill theists say the God of Calvinism is less loving than the God of freewill theism. They say God loves everyone, whereas (some) Calvinists say God only loves the elect. They say Calvinists redefine "love" to make it conform to Reformed theism.

In addition, they often make human good a standard of comparison for divine good. For God to be recognizably good, he must behave in ways analogous to what we consider to be virtuous human behavior. Specifically, they often use the parental analogy: a good God will treat all people the same way a good father will treat his children.

Let's play along with those assumptions for the sake of argument. What does it mean to be loving? What does it mean to be *recognizably* loving? Consider two illustrations:

Suppose a man fathers a son by a mistress. He provides generous child support payments. If his son has special medical needs, he foots the bill.

However, the father avoids direct contact with his son. His son has never met his father. This despite the fact that they live in the same town.

Would we consider the man to be a loving father? Surely there's more to being a good father than providing for the physical needs of your kids. The son needs to spend time with his father. Do things together. Talk. Hug. Parental love requires *demonstrative* love, not hands-off childrearing.

Suppose an elderly parent becomes too enfeebled in mind and/or body to care for herself. She has an affluent grown

son who pays for a live-in caregiver. Or maybe he pays two or three caregivers to be there on rotating shifts. So his mother is never alone.

He has hidden cameras in her house to monitor the treatment she receives. To make sure she's not neglected or abused. When she's hospitalized, he receives regular updates on her medical status.

But he never visits his elderly mother—even though they live the same town. He never calls her on the phone.

Would we consider him to be a loving son? Surely it's not enough for him to provide for his elderly mother behind-the-scenes. She needs to see that he loves her. She's at a time of life when it's easy to feel unloved and unwanted. Does anyone love her just for her? Will people still love her when she can no longer do anything for them, but everything must be done for her? She's at an emotionally vulnerable time of life when, more than ever, she needs reassurance. She needs to see her son. Hear him talk to her. Hold her hand.

Suppose we grant the freewill theist interpretation of John 3:16. Problem is, many unbelievers have never even heard of that verse. They don't experience God's love as God's love. Even if good things happen to them, there's nothing that recognizably connects that to God. They have no tangible evidence that God loves *them*. John 3:16 is just an abstraction.

They feel that they are on their own. They have no experience of God's *demonstrative* love. Even if God is working behind the scenes to provide for them, that's undetectable. They can't sense God's love.

Moreover, my two illustrations are pretty idealistic. What about, say, the plight of street kids in the Third World?

In my observation, freewill theists like Jerry Walls and Roger Olson are sociopathic in the sense that they have no real empathy. They talk about God's love in the abstract. They presume to speak on behalf of everyone. But they don't project themselves into the experience of many lost souls. They don't speak from the viewpoint of the lost. *Freewill theists* may say God loves everybody, but everybody hasn't heard *God* telling them that. As far as they can discern, God, if there is a God, is an absentee father.

A freewill theist can, of course, "redefine" love in a more detached, providential sense, but that falls well short of the human exemplars they bring forward when contrasting Calvinism with freewill theism.

Treating people as means

I'll respond to a statement by a commenter on my blog:

A related objection that you (and others) might want to respond to is the claim that Christianity (and especially Calvinism) is evil because its God accepts the principle that "the ends justify the means" and that therefore the Christian God apparently practices a consequentialist morality. Finally, it seems to me that as Calvinists we can't evade the conclusion that God purposes to ultimately bless the elect at the expense of the non-elect/reprobate... How can we Calvinists respond to the charge made by atheists and Arminians (et al.) that that's immoral for God to do that?

i) Since many atheists subscribe to consequentialism, it's hard to see how an atheist is in any position to say Calvinism is evil because it (allegedly) operates with a consequentialist ethic. Consequentialism is compatible with atheism. Those are not opposing positions. Peter Singer is a secular consequentialist. Indeed, the most influential

secular bioethicist of his generation. Even if an atheist rejects consequentialism, that's independent of atheism. So that goes to an intramural debate within atheism.

ii) Consider some standard definitions of consequentialism:

Consequentialism is the view that morality is all about producing the right kinds of overall consequences [IEP].

Whether an act is morally right depends only on consequences (as opposed to the circumstances or the intrinsic nature of the act or anything that happens before the act) [SEP].

A critic has to show that according to Calvinism, God's actions are *solely* justified by the consequences. The fact that Calvinism has a teleological component doesn't make that the *only* consideration in Reformed theodicy.

iii) The onus is on the critic to defend Kantian deontologism. We can reject the proposition that the end *always* justifies the means without taking the polar opposite position that the end *never* justifies the means. That's a false dichotomy. Surely we can stake out a mediating position between those two extremes, viz. *some* ends justify *some* means.

For instance, suppose I'm morbidly obese. That's detrimental to my health, so I go on a diet. Doesn't the goal

of lowering the risk to my health justify dieting as a means to that end?

iv) Perhaps, though, a critic will say he's not objecting to the principle in general, but to the specific case of using *people* as means rather than ends. But even on that restriction, is there something inherently wrong with using people as means? If I break my ankle skateboarding and go to the doctor for medical treatment, my aim is to repair the damage and receive painkillers, and I'm using the physician as a means to that end. But surely that's not immoral. So the critic will have to present a much narrower objection.

v) Perhaps his objection is that we should refrain from using people *merely* as means. Or we shouldn't use people without their consent.

If so, why should I accept that claim? For instance, even if (ex hypothesi) it's wrong to use innocent people as a means to an end, what about evil people? What if, by their evil, they have forfeited their prima facie immunity from harm? For instance, suppose a terror master uses couriers to send and receive messages. Suppose, unbeknownst to the courier, a counterterrorist organization plants a remote-control bomb on the courier so that when he visits the terror master, the bomb is detonated, killing the terrorist and thereby saving hundreds or thousands of innocent lives. That's using the courier as a means to an end, but so what? The courier is culpable for working with the notorious terrorist.

Likewise, what if a country is dominated by two drug cartels. The authorities lack the wherewithal to defeat the cartels directly. Instead, they stage a hit on one cartel to make it look like it was attacked by the other cartel. That foments a war between the two cartels. They destroy each

other. Although that's a ruthless tactic, since both cartels are evil, what's wrong with using them against each other to destroy each other?

vi) Finally, freewill theists like Jerry Walls and William Lane Craig resort to an end-justifies-the-means theodicy, in which God creates a minority of hellbound humans as a means of producing a majority of heavenbound humans. The salvation of the many comes on the backs of the damned. So they're in no position to attack Calvinism for utilizing a principle which they themselves utilize:

Indeed, God did not have to create and in doing so he clearly thought it was “worth it.” So if my view entails that God did not do all he could have done to prevent the damnation of the lost simply because he did not refrain from creating at all, I plead guilty...Given that God does not control the counterfactuals of freedom, perhaps there are no actualizable worlds in which he can save all free persons. Indeed, if part of our freedom includes the freedom to choose whom to marry, and with whom to procreate, perhaps we play a significant role in determining which persons will be born, and thus which persons God can actualize. In that

case, God actualizes the world in which he can save many people while minimizing the number of the damned. Perhaps God was faced with the choice between this sort of world and none at all, and he judged it “worth it” to create. I think this is not merely possible, but plausible.

<http://evangelicalarminians.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Walls.-Pharoaohs-Magicians.-Response-to-Cowan-and-Welty.pdf>

Moreover, it is far from obvious that God's being all-loving compels Him to prefer a world in which no one goes to hell over a world in which some people do. Suppose that God could create a world in which everyone is freely saved, but there is only one problem: all such worlds have only one person in them! Does God's being all-loving compel Him to prefer one of these underpopulated worlds over a world in which multitudes are saved, even though some people

freely go to hell? I don't think so. God's being all-loving implies that in any world He creates He desires and strives for the salvation of every person in that world. But people who would freely reject God's every effort to save them shouldn't be allowed to have some sort of veto power over what worlds God is free to create. Why should the joy and the blessedness of those who would freely accept God's salvation be precluded because of those who would stubbornly and freely reject it? It seems to me that God's being all-loving would at the very most require Him to create a world having an optimal balance between saved and lost, a world where as many as possible freely accept salvation and as few as possible freely reject it.

Read more: <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/can-a-loving-god-send-people-to-hell-the-craig-bradley-debate#ixzz4FXAqTPTD>

The whole world

I'll comment on this answer by Craig:

<http://www.reasonablefaith.org/limited-atonement>

At face value, it seems incredible to think that Christ died only for the elect. You couldn't get a much clearer repudiation of this view than I John 2.2: "he is the expiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world." Reformed thinkers are forced into exegetical acrobatics in order to explain away the prima facie meaning of such scriptural statements.

So what in the world would compel someone to re-interpret such passages in order to make them compatible with the view that Christ died only for the sins of the elect and not for the sins of every human being? The reason is a theological inference that forces one into such contrived exegesis. One is forced into this position by a theological argument that implies the limited extent of the atonement.

i) Evidently, Craig takes "the world"—or perhaps "the whole world"—to mean "every human being". Well, let's compare

that to another statement in 1 John which uses the same compound phrase:

We know that we are from God, and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one (1 Jn 5:19).

If "the whole world" means "every human being", then it must mean the same thing in both verses. Yet it can't mean that in 5:19, for in 5:19, the second clause stands in contrast to the first clause. The first clause refers to Christians, in apposition and opposition to "the whole world". John doesn't think every human being is in the Devil's thrall, for he exempts Christians. Therefore, the scope of "the whole world" must be narrower than "every human being". Craig needs to be consistent. As one commentator observes:

John here returns to the duality between the world and God's children that is so characteristic of his thinking. The inclusive "we" refers to those who have been born of God and therefore are no longer of the world, a world that lies under the power of the evil one, the devil. The reason the devil cannot "touch" or take hold of one of God's children is that they are no longer within the realm of his power. K. Jobes, 1, 2, & 3 John (Zondervan, 2014), 238.

ii) Craig's response reflects the power of subliminal conditioning. John doesn't actually say the "world". John didn't write in English. Rather, that's simply a traditional English translation of kosmos. When translators render a text from one language to another, they attempt to find synonyms in the receptor language that correspond to the donor language. Sometimes that's straightforward. However, words in the donor language may have a different semantic range than words in the receptor language. So

translators must sometimes settle for words with an overlapping semantic range. Even so, a word in the donor language may have different connotations than a word in the receptor language.

In addition, a writer may have his own idiolect. As standard works in Greek lexicography document, John often uses kosmos with a pejorative connotation.

In fact, Reformed thinkers themselves recognize this truth in distinguishing between redemption as accomplished and as applied. They will say that our redemption was accomplished at the cross but that it is applied individually when persons are regenerated and place their faith in Christ. This distinction is vital because otherwise the elect would be born redeemed! They would never be unregenerate sinners but would be justified and saved from the instant of their conception. But Scripture teaches that we once were “children of wrath like the rest of mankind” (Ephesians 2.3), and many of us recall our pre-Christian days. But how can such a distinction make sense if Christ won our actual

redemption at the cross? If I was actually redeemed in AD 30 (never mind that I didn't exist then!), how can I not be redeemed at every moment that I do exist? The undeniable distinction between redemption accomplished and applied makes sense only if we say that Christ's death wins our potential redemption and that that potential is actualized in individual lives through repentance and faith.

That's confused:

- i)** In Reformed theology, the elect are, indeed, born redeemed. But although they are actually redeemed from the moment of conception—the full benefits of redemption don't accrue all at once. For instance, they aren't glorified at the moment of conception. There are stages in the application of the atonement. Craig's argument is fallacious.
- ii)** In addition, Craig doesn't bother to explain how faith actualizes a potential redemption.

I don't see any problem of "double jeopardy" here. That is a convention of our human criminal justice system in the United States which cannot be

automatically applied to God's dealings with humanity.

It's as if Craig is ignorant concerning the history of the argument. It goes back to John Owen, a 17C English Puritan. So, no, I don't think Owen was influenced by the American jurisprudential system!

In any case, it is not as if the unrepentant person is being tried twice for the same crime. There is only one Judgement Day, and that is the only time a person is tried. If he has freely rejected the pardon Christ offers him, there is no one else to pay for his crimes.

That doesn't begin to engage the argument. Again, it's as if Craig is dependent on a truncated, secondhand version of the argument. The dilemma is how God can justly punish impenitence or unbelief if Christ made atonement for every sinner, or every sin, or the guilt of every sin. In that event, what are the just grounds for condemning an unbeliever? Is unbelief culpable? Is impenitence culpable? But if Jesus paid the price for your sin, then unbelief and impenitence are covered.

Isn't the view I suggest biblical? The Old Testament sacrifices availed for nothing

unless they were conjoined with a contrite and repentant heart on the part of the person for whom they were offered.

That's terribly confused. The OT sacrifices were merely emblematic placeholders. They didn't lay the basis for a sinner's forgiveness. Animal sacrifice didn't really contribute anything to a sinner's forgiveness. They never had a latent power to remit the guilt of sin in combination with a contrite heart.

But suppose you do think that Christ dies only for the elect. Does that imply that “most people couldn't even possibly be saved”? I don't think so. There are two ways in which salvation could be universally accessible. First, if we take election to be primarily corporate, then it is up to us whether we want to be part of that corporate body which is the object of Christ's redemption. Christ died only for the elect, but anyone can be part of the elect by repentant faith.

If election is after the fact, what difference does it make to the outcome?

Or, second, we could adopt a middle knowledge perspective, holding that God knew who would freely receive God's grace and be saved, and so He sent Christ to die for them alone but not for those persons who He knew would freely reject Him.

That depends, in part, on how you define grace. What if grace is, in part, like a psychotropic drug that restores sanity to a mental patient? The patient is in no condition to accept or reject it. Unless and until a person is in a right state of mind, he lacks the mental competence to rationally consider a proposal.

If someone who remains unrepentant were to place his faith in Christ, then God would have included him in Christ's atoning death.

That counterfactual scenario is true in Calvinism.

Once again, we see the astonishing power of the doctrine of middle

knowledge to open up unexpected options theologically.

There's nothing astonishing about the ability to toy with hypothetical scenarios.

Nonnegotiable moral intuitions

On Facebook, a commenter (Steven Nemeş) attempted to respond to my post on "Last plane out of Saigon":

The belief that God is love is not a piece of a priori theologizing, but revealed through the self-sacrifice of Jesus on behalf of all (1 Jn 2:2, 4:7-10). Steve ignores that you based your contention with Calvinism on the biblical affirmation that God is love, not your a priori moral intuitions.

It becomes (subjectively) morally abhorrent once your intuitions have been informed by the revelation of God in Christ. 1 John 4:7-10 comes first, then the intuitions.

That's not how Walls defines intuition. Nemes is substituting his own moral epistemology for Jerry's. Evidently, Nemes never read **GOOD GOD**, by Jerry Walls and Dave Baggett. Here's some of what they say:

We think of our argument as unapologetically appealing to general revelation... (67).

Whereas biblical authority trumps in the realm of theological norms, there are more basic

philosophical processes at play that hold logical priority in the realm of basic epistemology (67).

The Bible is taken as authoritative in the realm of theological truth. But before we can rationally believe such a thing, as human beings privy to general revelation and endowed with the ability to think, we must weigh arguments and draw conclusions, that is, do philosophy (68).

At a minimum, for example, scripture must be understood in a way that's consistent and coherent, not just internally, but also with what we know outside of scripture (76).

What violates our reason or nonnegotiable moral intuitions in contrast, is beyond the pale and so irrational to believe (77).

If the Bible did indeed teach such a doctrine [i.e. "unconditional reprobation"], wouldn't it be more rational to believe that it's not morally reliable? (78)?

So we see Jerry Walls appealing to "nonnegotiable moral intuitions". He says they derive from general revelation, not Scripture or the atonement.

For Walls, a sine qua non of divine goodness is that God loves everyone. That's grounded in his moral epistemology. He deploys his (allegedly) intuitive preconception of what constitutes divine goodness as a standard of comparison to assess revelatory claimants. So his moral intuitions are independent of Scripture and ultimately superior to Scripture in that regard. A priori moral intuitions that are separable from Scripture.

And he's run this kind of argument in the past to try to prove that God doesn't have to love everyone.

No, I've just said you can't appeal to *conflicting* intuitions to prove that God has to love everyone, when there's clearly no intuitive consensus to that effect. I don't use it to prove that God doesn't love everyone. Rather, I use that to show that the appeal doesn't point in one particular direction.

It hardly negates the point to refer to some cases of bad sinners!

It certainly negates the facile appeal to moral intuition if, in fact, many people's moral intuition balks at the notion that God is required to love these perpetrators.

A basic question this raises is what counts as evidence for the general revelatory status of his belief about God's universal love. How does Jerry know that's a moral

intuition? Two potential lines of evidence suggest themselves:

i) If moral intuitions must derive from general revelation, you can establish that these are intuitive by process of elimination in case you are able to exclude other possible sources for the belief.

I've never seen Jerry even attempt to do that. Maybe I just missed it.

And obvious problem with that line of evidence is that, to my knowledge, the only people who believe God is required to love everyone are people in certain Christian theological traditions. But that's hardly a promising avenue to prove these derive from general revelation. To the contrary, that strongly suggests the belief is the product of indoctrination rather than intuition.

ii) Another possibility is consensus. If it can be shown that this belief is a cultural universal, that would be prima facie evidence that it derives from general revelation.

But to my knowledge, it isn't remotely the case that most people at most times and places believe such a thing. For instance, surely that's not something most pre-Christian pagans believe.

Indeed, there are Christians who say Christ's command to love our enemies is "revolutionary"! And, of course, if you can love your enemy, you can love anyone.

They think his command was a radical, novel idea to most people in the ancient world. But in that event, universal love is counterintuitive. It cuts against the grain of human nature, whether in reference to the notion of universal

divine love or universal human love which mirrors the former.

iii) In theory, Jerry might postulate that due to the "noetic effects of sin," this intuition has been suppressed or eradicated in many cases. However, while that might be able to show how the lack of evidence is consistent with claim, there's no justification for the postulate unless we already have evidence that such an intuition exists! Jerry still needs to furnish some positive evidence that belief in God's universal love is a moral intuition, grounded in general revelation.

The second problem is that he always, always conveniently fails to mention his own conviction that those evils took place because a logically and causally prior decision on God's part that they occur, for some reason only he knows and from which not everyone will ultimately benefit—and yet somehow this will not morally objectionable to everyone with properly functioning moral faculties who hears it. It's always the same spiel.

i) That's either ignorant or dishonest. I often discuss ethical objections to predestination. So is Nemes intentionally misrepresenting me? Or is he uninformed?

ii) At the same time, I notice the Arminian tactic of deflecting any criticism of Arminianism by changing the subject. Let's rehash stock objections to Calvinism! But that's a backdoor admission that they can't directly defend Arminianism.

Is reprobation unjust?

A stock objection to reprobation is that reprobation is unjust. Typically, no actual argument is given for the injustice of reprobation. Rather, a critic defines or describes his understanding of reprobation, then declares it to be unjust. So there's really nothing to respond to.

That said, let's consider a comparison. Suppose, on his daily walk, my dad sees a red Ferrari in a parking lot with the keys in the ignition. He always wanted a red Ferrari, so he seizes the moment and steals the car. He then takes it to a chop shop to change the license plates and vehicle registration. A little money under the table goes far.

In the course of time he wills the car to me. When he dies I inherit a classic Ferrari.

But one day the son of the original owner (who has since passed away) spots the car in my driveway. He pops the hood and confirms the serial number matches his late father's car. He then has the police repossess the car.

It is unjust that I lost the Ferrari? No. It was stolen property. I had no claim on it in the first place. Because it didn't belong to my dad, he had no right to give it to me.

There is, though, a sense in which it's arbitrary for the other son to claim the car. He didn't pay for the car. His father did. It was simply a gift. Something he inherited. He didn't buy it. He didn't earn it.

The deprivation of something we were never entitled to is no injustice. To be deprived of election is not unjust. Conversely, the elect did nothing to merit election.

"A demonstration against Calvinism"

I'll comment on two posts, beginning with this:

<http://tyndalephilosophy.com/2013/04/25/a-demonstration-against-calvinism-2/>

It is part of the essence of Calvinism that there are two distinct groups of individuals in God's overall economy: the elect and the non-elect. The elect are the grateful recipients of God's irresistible, unmerited grace and are thereby saved. The non-elect, by sad contrast, receive no such grace; they are passed over. Consequently, they are damned for all eternity.¹ Now even Calvinists admit that this scenario makes it at least appear that God is being unjust or unfair. After all, why not just give irresistible grace to both groups? What we want to argue is that the appearance here is the reality. To flesh out the supporting argument, let's begin by considering this penetrating (revealed) insight into the nature of justice—

Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly (Leviticus 19:15).

Notice how Moses—not exactly a novice in legal matters—contrasts perverting justice with judging fairly. You pervert justice (i.e., act unjustly) when you fail to judge fairly. Fair enough. Why then is it unfair and a perversion of justice to show partiality to the poor and favoritism to the great? The answer, quite plainly, is that the properties of being poor and being great are entirely irrelevant so far as judging between individuals (say, in moral or legal contexts) is concerned. An individual's socio-economic status isn't in itself relevant to a moral or legal assessment of his person or situation.

That oversimplifies the comparison. The context of the Levitical verse concerns a plaintiff who's been wronged by another party. He is therefore entitled to a legal remedy. His poverty is irrelevant to the moral demand.

Two parties are entitled to equal treatment if they have equal claims. For the comparison to work, Davis needs to demonstrate that the elect and reprobate have equal claims on God. He hasn't offered a preliminary argument for that key assumption. Indeed, he hasn't even shown that both parties have any claim on God.

The elect and reprobate are, in the first instance, merely divine ideas. If God instantiates his idea, then they become real people, but by the same token, they become real sinners. They are instantiated as sinners.

But there is a further, truly fatal difficulty. The Calvinist proponent of (3) faces the following dilemma. Either God has a basis for his differential treatment of the elect and non-elect or he doesn't. If there is no basis, then God's decision to award irresistible grace to the one but not the other of these groups is wholly arbitrary; in which case God is a reckless, unprincipled decision-maker—a conclusion which is at once both manifestly unfair (to the non-elect) and theologically appalling. If you don't think it's appalling, just ask yourself how you'd like it if your professor used a similar method to grade your term paper. Without a doubt, this horn of the dilemma is squarely on the broad road leading to destruction. Well, let's suppose instead that God does have a basis for his differential treatment of these groups. Then according to the Leviticus Principle, it must be contextually relevant. Now the context for giving or withholding irresistible

grace is spiritual or salvific. Therefore, according to LP2, it will be just or fair for God to favor the elect over the non-elect only if God's basis for doing so is a spiritually relevant one. By hypothesis, however, there is absolutely no spiritually relevant difference between the elect and the non-elect: they are all dead in their sins; they are all incapable of recommending themselves to God. On this horn of the dilemma, then, God has favored the elect but on a purely context irrelevant basis.

Different people in different combinations result in different world histories. So God may elect some and reprobate others because he prefers one timeline over an alternate timeline. That's not an arbitrary distinction. Moving along:

<http://tyndalephilosophy.com/2015/05/22/on-carters-calvinism/>

In any event, the important thing to see in all this is that a person can be held accountable for her refrainings when they are sufficient for (foreseen) bad states of affairs—states of affairs that

could have been prevented by refraining from refraining (i.e., by doing something). One thinks here of the Levite's response to the man beaten, robbed, and left for dead on the road to Jericho (cf. Luke 10:30-37). The application to Calvin's deity, who passes by the terrible plight of the non-elect, is patent.

- i)** It's true that omission can be culpable. That assumes the party in question has a particular claim on us.
- ii)** By analogy, the Arminian or Molinist God is culpable when he refrains from preventing foreseeable evil.

Is Calvinism pantheistic?

Although I posted two discussions of this, I didn't comment on it myself:

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/jesuscreed/2015/12/30/calvinism-and-pantheism-and-the-good-wesley-walker/>

One preliminary remark I'd make is how unethical Arminians typically are when they attempt to critique Calvinism. Their animus towards Calvinism often disarms their critical judgment. Due to confirmation bias, they are suckers for any bad objection to Calvinism. They don't pause to consider if that's an accurate representation of Calvinism. They don't stop to consider if the objection is logical. Because this is what they want to hear, because they are predisposed to believe the worst about Calvinism, they nod their head in agreement. So McKnight unquestioningly hosts this hatchet job by Walker, which, predictably, is plugged by SEA.

“To say that God’s goodness may be different in kind from man’s goodness, what is it but saying, with a slight change of phraseology, that God may possibly not be good?” asked philosopher John Stuart Mill.

God's goodness can be different in one respect, but analogous in another respect. For instance, God's goodness can be the exemplar of man's goodness, but man's

goodness is never the exemplar of God's goodness. So there's that fundamental asymmetry.

Unfortunately, this redefinition of God's nature occurs as the logical consequence of Calvinistic theology. The case can be made quite clear from comparing Calvinism with pantheism.

Before detailing these points of connection, it is important to define the terms. Calvinism refers to Christian theological movements which seeks to emphasize the concept of "sovereignty," thereby reducing God to what Eastern Orthodox theologian and philosopher David Bentley Hart calls, "a pure exertion of will."

Consider Hart's alternative:

<http://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2010/01/tsunami-and-theodicy>

Hart has no theodicy. He labors to make a virtue of having no solution to the problem of evil.

Pantheism is the belief that the entire universe is an expression of God.

An accurate definition of pantheism is a key assumption of Walker's argument. But where does Walker come up with this definition? It seems to be a definition he invented to attack Calvinism.

I suppose you could say that according to pantheism, the entire universe is an expression of God. That's because, according to pantheism, God and the universe are identical (or at least overlap).

However, the converse doesn't follow. If the entire universe is an expression of God, that doesn't entail pantheism. For one thing, "expression" is vague. That suggests intention rather than constitution.

Consider some standard definitions of pantheism:

At its most general, pantheism may be understood positively as the view that God is identical with the cosmos, the view that there exists nothing which is outside of God, or else negatively as the rejection of any view that considers God as distinct from the universe.

We might understand God as proper part of nature, we might take nature as a proper part of God, we might regard the two domains as partially overlapping, or else we might hold that they are strictly identical.

For Spinoza the claim that God is the same as the cosmos is spelled out as the thesis that there exists one and only one particular substance which he refers to as 'God or nature'; the individual thing referred to as 'God' is one and the same object as the complex unit referred to as 'nature' or 'the cosmos.' On such a scheme the finite things of the world are thought of as something like parts of the one great substance, although the terminology of parts is somewhat problematic. Parts are relatively autonomous from the whole and from each other, and Spinoza's preferred terminology of modes, which are to be understood as more like properties, is chosen to rectify this.

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/pantheism/>

Notice that these are quite different from Walker's definition. Does Walker's argument still go through on a standard definition?

I am not the first to associate Calvinism and pantheism. Jonathan Edwards, preacher of the deterministic sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," was accused of being a pantheist.

Yes, it's true that Edwards may have been a pantheist. But Walker fails to explain why that's the case. Is that because Walker doesn't know?

i) If Edwards was a pantheist, that's not because he was a Calvinist, but because he was an ontological idealist. You could just as well say that Berkeley was a pantheist, but that doesn't make him a Calvinist.

ii) In addition, some pantheists are physicalists rather than idealists. Furthermore, many pantheists deny the existence of a personal God. But both are antithetical to Calvinism, which affirms dualism and a personal God.

iii) In mainstream Calvinism, The creation is categorically different than God. God objectifies his idea of creation in time and space. God himself is not temporal or spatial. God is a se, the creation is contingent. In addition, you have a doctrine of second causes.

Humans have minds. Every human has his own first-person viewpoint. That's not equivalent to God's first-person viewpoint, or God's third-person viewpoint of humans. These are irreducible perspectives.

Why is Walker so sloppy? Is he just ignorant? Does he lack the competence to draw elementary distinctions?

Many critics, Christian and non-Christian, have launched attacks on Calvinistic modes of theology using similar lines of thought, including one of the

*foundational theologians of the
Unitarian Universalist movement,
William Ellery Channing.*

Is that supposed to be an argument from authority? How does the opinion of a manifest heretic like Channing carry any weight just because he said it?

In a Calvinistic worldview, everything is as God wills it to be. For the sake of consistency, those with Reformed positions have to believe the world exists the way it does because God wills it to bring himself as much glory as possible. Therefore, in this system, the definition of “good” is relegated to whatever is because whatever is somehow brings glory to God.

This is another key assumption of Walker's argument. And it's confused. Even an Arminian theologian like Randal Rauser appreciates the nature of the popular misrepresentation. Here's his corrective:

To begin with, the phrase “for the sake of one’s glory” is deeply misleading here. After all, it

conveys the sense of a person perversely seeking to gratify themselves through the suffering of others. Frankly, this is a caricature if not a rank perversion of the Reformed position. Certainly it is a caricature of the Reformed position that I've adumbrated several times in the discussion threads precipitated by my initial argument.

The point of God's issuing decrees of election and reprobation is not to glorify God for God's sake but rather for the cumulative benefit of creation. Any Reformed theologian will tell you that God exists a se and his glory is infinite independent of creation. His glory is already infinite and cannot be increased. What can be increased, however, is the creature's grasp of God's glory. And since God is perfect, he always acts to maximize the creature's grasp of his glory, not for his own benefit but rather for that of the creature.

<http://randalrauser.com/2015/09/calvinism-is-perfectly-coherent-in-which-i-continue-defending-a-view-i-reject/>

Back to Walker:

In a similar manner, the Calvinist cannot say disease or natural disasters are objectively bad because they are an expression of God's will, designed to bring him the most glory possible.

That's simplistic. The same thing can both be bad in itself, but be a source of good. Murder is bad. Taking innocent life is bad. But that can result in good. Because their child was murdered, parents may have another child to take its place. That's a second-order good. A good that would not obtain apart from the prior evil.

This problem is exemplified in Calvin's own writing. While he attempts to shield God from any moral culpability for sin and evil, he also admits, "What Satan does, Scripture affirms to be from another point of view the work of God." Works and events which seem antithetical to God's commands and nature are automatically grafted into his will.

Yes, Calvin struggles with this issue. That's because Calvin is faithful to Scripture. He honors whatever God reveals in Scripture, even if he finds that perplexing.

In fact, Calvinism's framework bears a striking semblance to the yin and yang. This Chinese symbol is meant to show that everything is interdependent and complimentary [sic.]

Walker now indulges in full-blown parallelomania.

This concept is "Christianized" by Edwards when he argued, "There would be no manifestation of God's grace or true goodness, if there was no sin to be pardoned, no misery to be saved from." Both extremes are necessary for God to receive his due glory.

The contrast theodicy is not a Reformed distinctive.

The alternative to this problem created by these worldviews is to recognize evil as the logical consequence of sin. It is entirely separate from God on an ontological level. The opportunity to sin

is a necessary condition for a meaningful relationship grounded in mutual love. The responsibility for sin lies with one who committed it and the consequences of sin are separation from God.

Notice that Walker is committed to the necessity of evil, as a necessary condition and necessary consequence of libertarian freedom. Yet he rejects the conditional teleological necessity of evil in a Reformed theodicy.

The reprobate are in a sense “good” because their condemnation is a prerequisite to the demonstration of God’s grace.

Once again, that's simplistic. Consider the Joker in Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight*. The Joker is a classic foil character. The villain exists to establish a point of contrast between good and evil. That doesn't make the villain good, even though the director uses his villainy to illustrate moral heroism in the face of evil.

Does God permit evil?

1. Calvinists often say God "permits" evil. Some Arminians say it's misleading or meaningless to speak of divinely determinate events as divinely permitted events.

2. To begin with, the usage varies with the Calvinist. Paul Helm uses permissive language. He's defined and defended what he means by that. Here's one example:

http://paulhelmsdeep.blogspot.com/2008/02/evil-love-and-silence_01.html

Scroll down to the "willing permission" section.

Calvin himself was ambivalent about permissive language. Calvin made the elementary observation that you can't drive a wedge between what God wills and what God permits. Divine permission is either willing or unwilling. If unwilling, it would be coercive rather than permissive. But if permission is willing, then God wills to permit evil. Yet in that event, what's the big difference between willing evil and permitting evil? If he wills to permit evil, then he wills evil. To will to permit it is to will it. The circumlocution doesn't eliminate divine volition in the matter. At best, permission indicates God's grudging attitude towards the relative necessity of evil.

And notice that this applies to freewill theism, not just Calvinism.

3. Let's compare two questions:

i) Why does God permit evil?

ii) Why doesn't God prevent evil?

These are equivalent questions. They convey the same idea. The only difference is that the first formulation is positive while the second formulation is negative.

4. Moreover, this is consistent with predestination since God could prevent evil by not foreordaining evil. Therefore, it's not contradictory for a Calvinist to say God permits evil.

5. I myself have no particular attachment to permissive language. However, in discussing the problem of evil, I often frame the question in terms of why God permits evil.

An Arminian like Jerry Walls, who assumes the worst about the Calvinist motives, might suspect that I use permissive language to conceal the true nature of Calvinism. If I were more forthcoming, I'd come clean and phrase the question, "Why does God predestine evil?" The fact that I avoid that either means I'm lowballing Calvinism or that I'm conflicted.

But as I just demonstrated, that language is consonant with Calvinism.

Moreover, I've often defended the claim that God predestines evil. I'm not running away from that fact.

6. I generally use permissive language for two other reasons:

i) It's the stereotypical way in which the problem of evil is framed. And since that's consistent with Reformed theology, there's no overriding reason to depart from that formulation.

ii) But more importantly, I don't usually phrase the question "Why does God *predestine* evil" because that has the wrong *emphasis*.

That formulation suggests the question at issue isn't so much about God and evil, but about predestination. Why does God predestine evil, in contrast to evil coming about some other way.

But although that's worth discussing in its own right, the problem of evil centers on the divine rationale for the existence of evil in God's universe. Given that God could prevent evil, why doesn't he? What possible reason could he have not to prevent it?

That's why I generally use permissive language in framing the issue. To phrase the question in terms of predestination would distract attention away from that central concern.

Moreover, once we discuss the purpose that evil serves in God's world, that can naturally segue into a discussion of predestination. But doing that in reverse is less logical.

Is it evil to cause evil

Is it evil to cause evil? That seems transferable. But is it a reliable inference?

This crops up in debates over Calvinism. Mind you, there are various respects in which the God of freewill theism causes evil.

Now, there are certainly situations in which causing evil is evil. Indeed, that may well be typical. I'm just discussing whether, as a matter of principle, it is evil to cause evil.

Suppose torrential rain causes a damed river to become swollen. That accelerates the downstream current. There's a much greater volume of water, moving much faster, resulting in tremendous kinetic energy pounding the dam. The dam operator has a choice: he can release some water to relieve the strain on the dam. If he does so, that will flood riverside towns downstream, causing major damage. That's an evil. That causes an evil state of affairs.

Or he can let the water build up behind the dam. The cumulative force will make the dam lose structure integrity and collapse, causing an avalanche or wall of fast-moving water to wipe the downstream towns off the map. That's a greater evil.

Is it evil for him to cause the lesser evil, by releasing some water to diminish pressure on the dam?

Someone might object that God isn't subject to the same constraints as the dam operator. But even if that's the case, the point of the example is to illustrate a point of principle: it is not necessarily evil to cause evil.

Moreover, even an omnipotent God is under a self-imposed constraint if he uses a natural process to produce a desired result.

Hard truths

1. Recently, the Society of Evangelical Arminians erupted with several indignant, faux incredulous posts regarding the following statement:

God . . . brings about all things in accordance with his will. In other words, it isn't just that God manages to turn the evil aspects of our world to good for those who love him; it is rather that he himself brings about these evil aspects for his glory (see Ex. 9:13-16; John 9:3) and his people's good (see Heb. 12:3-11; James 1:2-4). This includes—as incredible and as unacceptable as it may currently seem—God's having even brought about the Nazis' brutality at Birkenau and Auschwitz as well as the terrible killings of Dennis Rader and even the sexual abuse of a young child . . .

— MARK R. TALBOT, “ALL THE GOOD THAT IS OURS IN CHRIST': SEEING GOD'S GRACIOUS HAND IN THE HURTS OTHERS DO TO US,” IN JOHN PIPER AND JUSTIN TAYLOR (EDS.),

SUFFERING AND THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD (WHEATON: CROSSWAY, 2006), 31-77 (quote from p. 42).

SEA also linked to this statement by Piper:

He works all things according to the counsel of his will. This extends to the details of all existence. Matthew 10:29, "Not one sparrow falls to the ground apart from our Father in heaven." Proverbs 16:33, "The lot, the dice, are cast in the lap and every decision is from the Lord." In Reno, Las Vegas, Atlantic City, every dice rolled God decides what turns up.

And SEA linked to a post by Leighton Flowers with the incendiary title "Does God Bring About the Abuse of Children for His Own Glory?"

There's a lot to sort out.

2. SEA acts as if it discovered the smoking gun of Calvinism. I understand how this would be shocking or scandalous to uniformed Christians. But there's nothing new or surprising here. Calvinism doesn't conceal the fact that God has predestined everything that happens.

In addition, I understand how this would be shocking to Christians who never read the Bible cover to cover. Yet Scripture frequently attributes the deeds of wicked men to God operating behind-the-scenes.

That's a hard truth. But, then, there are many things in Scripture that make me swallow hard. There are many things in the world that make me swallow hard.

3. The statement that God brings about something "for his own glory" is misleading without further explanation. In Calvinism, God doesn't act for his own sake, but for the sake of the elect. God *cannot* benefit from what he brings about, for God is sufficient in himself, apart from his creation.

4. Calvinism didn't create the problem of evil; rather, the problem of evil is created by the *fact* of evil. The problem of evil is generated by the conjunction of two propositions:

i) God exists

ii) Divinely preventable evil exists

To the extent that that's a theological problem, the challenge is hardly unique to Calvinism. It's a challenge for Molinism, Arminianism, universalism, Lutheranism, Thomism, Mormonism, Deism, open theism, &c. If Calvinism didn't exist, the problem of evil would still exist.

Indeed, it's challenging for atheism. Atheism solves the problem by denying one of the two propositions, but that's a costly solution. It solves the problem of evil by making human life worthless. A tad self-defeating. Like an exterminator who eliminates a roach infestation by burning down the house with the homeowner inside. Effective, but a wee bit counterproductive.

5. In addition, the Reformed position sounds shocking or scandalous to Christian ears that haven't bothered to think through the alternatives. You can't just assess the Reformed position in a vacuum. You need to consider that in relation to proposed alternatives.

In freewill theism, God allows a pedophile to abuse children because there's something more important to God than preventing child abuse. Well, stop and think about *that* for a while. Let it sink in. After all the outrage directed at Calvinism, what could be *more* important than preventing child abuse? Yet a freewill theist is forced to admit that preventing child abuse is not a divine priority. After all, God could put a stop to that.

In God's rating system, the prevention of child abuse is not God's paramount concern. A freewill theist must say that in God's estimation, there's something more valuable than preventing child molestation. Some other good that's better than the prevention of child abuse.

So why isn't *that* shocking to freewill theists? Why isn't *that* outrageous? Yet the freewill theist is committed to that proposition.

Suppose a teacher at a Christian school was accused of child molestation. Suppose, when interviewed, the principal said he knew the teacher was a convicted pedophile. He knew that hiring him was a risk. But he hired him anyway because some things are more important than preventing child abuse.

You can just imagine the incensed reaction. But isn't the freewill theists forced to say the same thing about God?

6. To say everything event is predestined is to say that everything happens for a reason. Good things happen for a good reason, but even bad things happen for a good reason. Indeed, *especially* in the case of evil, we usually think an agent had better have a good reason for allowing (or causing) that to happen. If there's a *prima facie*

obligation to prevent evil, then allowing (or causing) evil requires a special justification.

Conversely, to say that God allows horrendous evils to occur for no purpose whatsoever is hardly exculpatory. "I just let it happen. Don't ask me why. There *is* no why."

7. Not surprisingly, freewill theists usually turn to some version of the freewill defense. For instance, they claim libertarian freedom is a prerequisite of moral responsibility. But is that an adequate response?

i) To begin with, one development in freewill theism is restrictivism. On Facebook, Alan Rhoda recently said that he and many libertarians espouse restrictivism. Take some examples:

Restrictivism is the claim that we have "precious little free will" insofar as there are "few occasions in life on which—at least after a little reflection and perhaps some investigation into facts—it isn't absolutely clear what to do." Kevin Timpe, Free Will in Philosophical Theology (Bloomsbury 2014), 24.

Restrictivism is the view that we are rarely (directly) free, only sometimes, in somewhat unusual circumstances, so our choices and subsequent actions meet the conditions for direct metaphysical freedom. A libertarian restrictionism holds that it is a feature of directly free choices and

actions that they were underdetermined by prior events or states of affairs. Daniel Cohen & Nick Trakakis, eds. Essays on Free Will and Moral Responsibility (Cambridge Scholars Publishing 2008), 129.

[Van Inwagen] appeals to similar resources in an argument for restrictionism, the view that...rarely, if ever, is anyone able to do otherwise than in fact he does." Joseph Keim Campbell, Free Will (John Wiley & Sons 2013), 52.

But in that event, even many freewill theists no longer think libertarian freedom is a necessary condition of moral responsibility. So that's not a given.

ii) But suppose, for the sake of argument, that we grant this contention. How would God stepping in to prevent a pedophile from molesting a child nullify moral responsibility? After all, divine intervention didn't override the pedophile's intention to molest a child. It didn't override his plan to molest a child. It didn't override his initial efforts to act on that plan. Rather, it's a last minute intervention that prevents him from executing his plan.

So the pedophile is still culpable for his malicious intentions and designs and abortive actions. The fact that he was thwarted at the last minute hardly absolves him of guilt.

iii) But suppose, for the sake of argument, we grant that divine intervention nullifies his moral responsibility. So

what? The problem here is that the freewill theist is attempting to justify God's inaction by making divine respect for moral responsibility a universal principle that supersedes any conflicting duty. But why should we grant the universality of that principle?

Suppose we concede, for discussion purposes, that all things being equal, God should not infringe on our moral responsibility. Suppose, in many situations, that outranks other considerations. But if it's a choice between protecting a child and respecting moral responsibility, what makes moral responsibility a higher priority in *that* situation? In other words, unabridged moral responsibility might be good in general, but does that make it a greater good in every situation, to which any conflicting obligation must defer?

8. Consider another principle: For love to be genuine, the agent must either be the ultimate source of his love and/or be free to withhold his love. But is that an adequate response?

i) For starters, isn't that empirically implausible? As a matter of human experience, is that a condition of genuine love? For instance, isn't parental love basically instinctive and irrepressible? Sure, there are terrible exceptions, but I'm countering a universal claim.

Or take friendship. In my observation, when two or more people have to spend lots of time together, they either end up liking one another or disliking one another. Each person has a predisposition to either click with someone else or find them aggravating to be around. We may choose our friends, but we didn't choose what made them likable to us in the first place.

ii) But suppose, for the sake of argument, that we grant the contention. If God steps in to prevent a pedophile from molesting a child, how does that infringe on the pedophile's freedom to love God? If a pedophile is allowed to molest children, doesn't that behavior make him morally hardened? Habitual evil reduces his ability to freely love God. Divine intervention would help to preserve the agent's ability to love God.

iii) But suppose, for discussion purposes, we concede the contention. So what? Suppose repeated divine intervention somehow infringes on the pedophile's ability to freely love God. Why should that take precedence over the safety of an innocent child?

Even if, as a general principle, it is good for agents to be at liberty to freely love God, how does that override all other goods, including the good of the child? Why should the wellbeing of the child take a backseat to the wellbeing of the molester?

Suppose, all things being equal, God should not abridge the spontaneity of love. But as a universal principle, that loses plausibility precisely in cases like child abuse.

9. Freewill theist William Alston said:

A perfectly good God would not wholly sacrifice the welfare of one of His intelligent creatures simply in order to achieve a good for others, or for Himself. This would be incompatible with His concern for the welfare of each of His

creatures. "The inductive argument from evil and the human cognitive condition," D. Howard-Snyder, ed., The Evidential Argument from Evil (Indiana U. Press, 1996), 111.

Seems to me that captures a fundamental principle and a priori intuition of freewill theists. Problem is, their a priori proscription collides with a posteriori reality. So freewill theists are forced to qualify their principles and intuitions in the harsh, unyielding glare of various kinds of evils that actually transpire.

It becomes, in part, a question of theological method. Do we begin with the kinds of evils that actually take place, and reason back from that to inform our theological parameters? Or do we begin with a set of stimulative theological expectations, then adapt that as best we can to the kind of world in which we find ourselves?

The Terminator

A stock objection to Calvinism is that it would be unjust (or "monstrous") for God to condemn evildoers whom he predestined to commit evil in the first place. They were never a chance to do otherwise.

Let's assume, for the sake of argument, that determinism (or predeterminism) is incompatible with moral responsibility. Now let's recast the argument by making a comparison.

In the *Terminator* franchise, a Terminator is a robotic assassin. An artificially intelligent android that's programmed to kill a particular individual.

(For some reason they are called cyborgs, but from what I can tell, they don't have any human parts. They merely have a human appearance.)

Terminators are like glorified cruise missiles or smart bombs. They don't necessarily need full-blown consciousness. They just need enough (artificial) intelligence to identify the target, ascertain information on the ground, and adapt to varied situations.

They don't need "consciousness" in the sense of the internal dimension, viz. first-person viewpoint. They don't need to know "what it's like to be me."

But since this is all hypothetical, we could endow them with consciousness. That's surplus.

Terminators are fearful in two respects:

i) They have superhuman strength. They are tireless, relentless, and resourceful. Virtually unstoppable. Humans on the run have to sleep. They don't. Even if you get a head start, they will catch up.

ii) But, if anything, they are even more fearful in another respect: they are utterly pitiless. They're because they are inhuman. Machines. As such, they are incapable of feeling compassion for another human being. They can't project themselves into our mindset. They don't know what it feels like to be human. You can't appeal to their empathy. There's no hook.

Now, suppose a Terminator is programmed to kill a child, to preempt what he will become. To change the future.

And to make sure they kill the child, they allow themselves a margin of error by planning to wipe out an entire classroom full of second-graders.

According to the hypothetical under consideration, the Terminator is amoral. Because its actions are programmed, it isn't blameworthy.

But even if we grant that for the sake of argument, it would be morally imperative to stop the Terminator by any means necessary. Destroy the Terminator before it kills innocent children.

That's despite the fact (ex hypothesi) that the Terminator isn't a morally responsible agent. Even though it's not culpable, it has no right to endanger the kids.

Neutralizing the Terminator isn't punitive. Rather, it's protecting the innocent.

BTW, this isn't just hypothetical. There are some real-world analogues. For instance, people on a psychotic drug-high can be dangerous.

Someone might say that, given a choice, it would be preferable to reprogram the Terminator rather than destroy it. Perhaps so.

However, we don't owe it to the Terminator. A Terminator can, indeed, be reprogrammed. It can be programmed to be a nanny, gardner, chef, quarterback, ballet instructor, or violinist. It can be programed to be masculine or feminine.

That's because a Terminator is a blank slate. It has raw intelligence. It has great potential. But it has no innate personality or character traits. Its memory is wiped after each mission.

It isn't *supposed* to be any particular way. Its identity is essentially indefinite. Whatever the programmer wants it to be.

So it wouldn't be wrong to destroy it rather than reprogram it. You wouldn't be wronging the Terminator. It's not as though it deserves better treatment. For its character is supplied by the programmer.

Is it murder?

i) A crucial principle in Arminian theodicy is the distinction between allowing evil and causing, ensuring, and or determining evil. (I'm using "Arminian" as shorthand for freewill theism.)

Mind you, that's a false dichotomy. Passively allowing an event to occur is often a way of ensuring its occurrence. Likewise, on a standard philosophical definition, allowing an event to happen is a way of causing it to happen. Your inaction or nonintervention makes the difference.

However, let's drop that for now and consider the issue from another angle. I'm going to adapt an illustration from William James.

ii) Suppose, during Spring break, I go hiking with a classmate. He's not my friend or enemy. We're not close. But we're both athletic, we both like hiking, and there are certain advantages to hiking with a companion, so I take him along.

The trail is often steep and treacherous, with loose gravel. Suppose he loses his footing and slides over the ledge of a precipitous drop. He manages to grab onto a shrub, which he's clinging to for dear life. I can see the fear in his eyes.

I throw him a rope, which he grabs. But the backpack weighs him down. He lacks the strength to pull himself straight up. Moreover, his weight keeps the rope pressed against the rocky surface. He can't get his hands around the rope to climb all the way—even if he could get to that point.

By contrast, I have the strength and leverage to pull him to safety. But at the last minute I change my mind. I let go, and watch him plunge to his death.

Maybe I find it exhilarating to have the power of life and death over another human being. His life is literally in my hands.

Or maybe I'm an atheist. I'm indifferent to morality. I'm indifferent to human life. I just don't care what happens to him. There's no malice. In the long run we're all dead. Life is fortuitous. It has no ultimate significance. I shrug it off.

Or maybe, if you ask me why I let go of the rope, I couldn't tell you. I don't know why I did it. It was a snap judgment. I may have had some subliminal impulse. Had I been confronted with the same decision a day later, I might have saved him.

iii) In any case, did I commit murder? It wasn't premeditated murder. I didn't plan on that when I invited him to join me. I didn't intend to stage a fatal accident. It's just something I did on the spur of the moment.

Moreover, I didn't create the life-threatening situation. I didn't make him slip and slide. I didn't push him over the ledge. That happened all by itself. A combination of the terrain and something he did. A misstep. Whatever.

I did nothing to endanger him, beyond inviting him to hike with me. He accepted the invitation. And I took the same risk. Neither one of us went hiking with the expectation that one or both of us would die. There was a calculated risk.

I just let nature take its course. Gravity won!

Yet I expect most people, including most freewill theists, would say I committed murder (or the moral equivalent) by letting him fall to his death when I could save him with no risk to myself. And even if it wasn't murder, it was blameworthy. Indeed, reprehensible. So how does the facile Arminian distinction exonerate God?

iv) Roger Olson grudgingly admits that there are situations in which allowing evil is culpable, but he says there are other situations in which allowing evil is inculpable. Problem is, he just leaves it at that. But if he presumes to attack the morality of Reformed theism, then he shoulders a burden of proof to show how the situations in which God permits evil are the kinds of situations where allowing that to happen is blameless. What's the relevant difference?

He can't just stipulate that, in each and every case, those must be the right kinds of situations. That would be special pleading. That would be exempting his own position from the same scrutiny to which he subjects Calvinism. That would be asserting that, by definition, the only evils that God permits are just the very kinds of evils which God is blameless to permit. But if that's a legitimate maneuver, then a Calvinist is entitled to make a comparable maneuver.

Can every gift be returned or refused?

Roger Olson

Every gift can be refused or discarded. That's not the same as "strings attached."

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2015/05/arminian-doctrine-of-justification-again-disputed/#comment-2051396300>

i) What if an accident victim is wheeled into the ER with severe internal injuries. He needs a liver transplant. But he's unconscious. He can't consent to the procedure. His wife signs the consent form on his behalf.

When he wakes up after surgery, can he still refuse or discard the donated liver? Will he cut it out?

ii) This also suffers from a particular image of what constitutes a "gift," like a Christmas present you can return to the store.

Even then, stores refuse to refund a *used* gift.

But in Calvinism, saving grace isn't that kind of gift. Saving grace is like a cure for mental illness. Something that's internalized. It changes you. Becomes a part of who you are. Restores your mental health.

It's too late to refuse. And you can no more discard it than you can discard yourself.

Of course, Olson rejects the Reformed doctrine of grace. My immediate point is that his objection is meaningless in

reference to Calvinism.

Vicarious responsibility

i) One of the stock objections to Calvinism is original sin—especially the imputation of Adam's sin. How is it fair for us to be held responsible for the actions of another? We weren't party to his actions. We didn't consent to his actions.

Strictly speaking, this isn't a problem for Calvinism. Assuming, for argument's sake, that it's problematic, this is a problem for Scripture. It's only a problem for Calvinism inasmuch as Calvinism is one of the few remaining live theological traditions that still takes seriously what Scripture says about original sin. So this is less about Calvinism than the inspiration and authority of Scripture.

ii) That said, let's consider the objection on its own terms. For ease of reference, let's call this the principle of vicarious responsibility

Certainly there are many situations, or kinds of situations, where vicarious responsibility would be unjust. In fact, the Bible itself regards vicarious responsibility as unjust in some situations (e.g. Deut 24:16).

iii) But is that a universal principle? Let's consider a hypothetical case. A wife has a child by another man in the course of an illicit affair. There is, however, no immediate reason for her husband to suspect that the child isn't his.

10 years later, the boy falls ill and undergoes some tests which incidentally disclose the fact that the boy isn't the husband's biological child.

The wife, realizing that her husband will never view her the same way, leaves her husband for the man she truly loves. And she leaves her son behind in the care and custody of her ex-husband. She never wanted the child.

Although this is hypothetical, there are real-life examples that correspond to this type of situation.

What are the responsibilities of the husband in this situation? One option is leave the boy with his biological mother and father. Drive the boy to wherever they are living, and hand him off to them.

Surely, though, it's too late for that. For 10 years, the husband has been the only father the boy has known. His biological father doesn't know him or care about him. And his mother doesn't care about him.

So the boy needs the husband to continue to be a father to him. It would be detrimental to his psychological development to rip him out of that relationship and thrust him into the hands of two uncaring adults.

Here's a case where an individual becomes responsible for the consequences of someone else's misdeed. And this is despite the fact that the individual was wronged.

We could cite analogous examples. Take a foundling. A desperate mother places her newborn on the doorstep of a well-to-do family, hoping they will care for the child. That shouldn't be their responsibility. But now that it's been thrust upon them, it is their duty to rise to the challenge.

As such, I don't think vicarious responsibility is unjust in principle. It's easy enough to come up with counterexample in which it seems to be a moral obligation.

Of course, these examples appeal to intuition. Some people might reject the intuition. However, that cuts both ways. For the objection to original sin is intuitive too.

High-risk parenting

Apostate Dale Tuggy recently interviewed Oliver Crisp on *Deviant Calvinism*. Towards the end of the interview, Tuggy alluded to a thought-experiment by open theist William Hasker. Tuggy recast this in terms of a magic potion or love pill.

I will quote and then comment on Hasker's hypothetical:

Imagine yourself, then, as a prospective parent shortly before the birth of your first child. And suppose that someone has offered you the following choice. On the one hand, the child will be one that, without any effort on your part, will always and automatically do and be exactly what you want it to do and be, no more and no less. The child will have no feeling of being constrained or controlled; nevertheless, it will spontaneously carry out your wishes on any and every occasion. Or, on the other hand, you can choose to have a child in the normal fashion, a child that is fully capable of having a will of its own and of resisting your wishes for it, and even of acting against its own best interest. You will have to invest a great deal of effort in the child's education, with good hopes to

be sure, but without any advance guarantee of success. And there is the risk, indeed the near-certainty, that the child will inflict on your considerable pain and suffering, as you strive to help the child become all that he or she can be and ought to be. Which would you choose?

It is my hope that many readers—perhaps even a strong majority—will agree with me in saying that it is far better to accept the challenge of parenting a child with a will of its own, even at the price of pain and possible heartbreak, than to opt for an arrangement in which the child's choices will all really be my choices made for it, its life a pale reflection of mine lived through the child.

Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Religion, M. Peterson & R. VanArragon, eds. (Blackwell 2004), 222-23.

i) To a great extent, the intuitive appeal of that illustration depends on how we cash out the dire alternative. To say "possible heartbreak" or "acting against its own best interests" is very vague. A safe abstraction.

What if you knew that by not administering the love potion, your daughter would grow up to be a hopeless drug addict? Or that your teenage son would shoot another teenager in the head, causing irreparable brain damage and disability.

Not only is there your own heartbreak, but the other set of heartbroken parents—based on what *your* son did to *their* son.

Likewise, if you foreknew that by conceiving a child at that particular moment, your child would become a hopeless drug addict, would you contracept on that occasion? If you foreknew that this is how your son was going to turn out, by ravaging the future of someone else's son, would you even conceive him in the first place?

ii) Admittedly, Hasker is an open theist. He doesn't believe God knows the future. That, however, complicates the hypothetical. It's not a straightforward comparison between two different outcomes, because in one (crucial) case the outcome is unknown. You can't make a risk assessment. Maybe it will turn out for the best, but maybe it will turn out for the worst. If, with the benefit of hindsight, you could do it all over again, would you? Clearly that depends on how the scenario plays out.

Parents assume the risk because they don't know how things will work out. For them, it's a choice between parenting or not parenting. If, however, they could foresee the catastrophic consequences of having that particular child, I expect most of them would opt out. So Hasker's hypothetical is misleading.

iii) Another problem with the comparison, which Crisp touches upon, is the radical disanalogy between the Creator/creature relation and the human parent/child relation. The latter distinction is relative and temporary. Human children are supposed to become their parents' equal. Grow up. Become adults. Become physically and psychologically independent of their parents. Human children are, in a significant sense, expected to outgrow

their parents. That's a necessary part of the maturation process.

I agree with Hasker that your (grown) child's choices shouldn't really be the choices you made for him. His life shouldn't be a pale reflection of yours lived through him. But that's in large part because a parent's plan for his child's life isn't ipso facto superior to a grown child's plan for his own life. Parents aren't necessarily or even probably wiser than grown children. Their priorities may be askew. At that point we're comparing adults to adults. In both cases, these are short-sighted creatures.

That's completely different from Calvinism, where God's plan for your life is for the best. Infallibly wise and good.

Admittedly, God doesn't act in the best interests of the reprobate. But in freewill theism (or open theism in particular), a free agent may make the same disastrous choices as the reprobate.

iv) The theological analogue would be paganism, viz. Apollo the son of Zeus and Leto. Gods begetting gods.

Mind you, it might be prudent for mother and father gods to give their kids a love pill. That forestalls the danger of their grown children deposing them! No battle of the Titans!

Robotic inferno

On Facebook, Jerry Walls recently said:

To me it is as clear as any moral intuition I have that not even a good God, let alone a perfectly good God, could determine people to sin and then consign them to eternal misery for their sin.

Let's compare that to another Arminian intuition: Calvinism reduces humans to robots.

Let's grant both these "intuitions" for the sake of argument. Now let's combine them:

To me it is as clear as any moral intuition I have that not even a good God, let alone a perfectly good God, could determine robots to sin and then consign them to eternal misery for their sin.

Problem is, it's hard to see how these two claims mesh. Presumably, Arminians think robots lack one or more essential human properties. Robots aren't real people. To be real people, they must have moral agency. And moral agency requires libertarian freedom. To be real people, they must be free to choose or to withhold love. In fact, according to Arminians, only free agents can truly sin.

But if robots aren't real people, then what's so bad about determining them to do wrong, then consigning them to

everlasting hell for wrongdoing?

What they did was objectively wrong, but it wasn't subjectively wrong, for they lack that subjective dimension. That first-person perspective.

If a robot isn't a real person, you can't wrong a robot. It's just a machine. At best, a deluded machine. It may suppose it's human, because it's been programmed to think that, but because it isn't human, it can never know what it's like—really like—to be human. It lacks human experience from the inside out.

Banking on conjectures

A few more comments on this:

<https://ochuk.wordpress.com/2008/03/27/why-i-am-not-a-calvinist/>

Shortly after this I reassessed my belief in Calvinism and let it corrode under the sweet promises of Scripture: that eternal life is given to all those who believe in the Son of God—Jesus Christ.

i) Come again? Calvinism affirms that eternal life is given to all those who believe in Christ.

ii) Perhaps he means that according to Calvinism, some people who initially believe in Christ subsequently lose their faith. But, if so, the same holds true for freewill theism (Molinism, Arminianism, open theism).

After intense study of all these matters I came to doubt many of the core beliefs of the faith. I did not express my doubts to many people, though I often confessed to others that I was struggling with a

*terrifying fear of death and did not know
I was saved.*

On the face of it, his logic is backwards. If, say, you came to doubt many of the core beliefs of the faith, it would then make sense to doubt your salvation. For at that point you doubt the very framework of sin, salvation, and a Savior. If, say, you came to doubt the veracity of the Gospels, then it would make sense to doubt your own salvation inasmuch as you now doubted the larger story in which that's embedded. If you doubt Christian soteriology, you will naturally doubt your own salvation. What is there to be saved from?

But why would doubting his salvation cause him to doubt the Christian faith? How does the loss of assurance in his salvation lead to doubting the historicity of the Gospels, the Resurrection, &c.?

It seemed to me that the only way I could know I was saved was by knowing the status of my eternal election. Was I chosen by God for salvation or was I eternally damned before I had done anything good or bad? To be sure, the Calvinist theologian in me had responses to this question, yet none of them sufficed...my Calvinistic theology presented my needs for assurance with an epistemological problem: in order to have assurance I needed to know the status of my election, something that by definition is secret and cannot be known.

This objection was articulated in an article by William Lane Craig entitled “Lest Anyone Should Fall”: A Middle Knowledge Perspective on Perseverance and Apostolic Warnings where he essentially argues that the “means of salvation view” is actually more coherent in a “middle knowledge” perspective. Middle knowledge is the view of God’s knowledge that contains what his creatures would freely do in any given circumstances (or “possible world”) before he creates the world. This contrasts with the Calvinist perspective in that it allows for libertarian free will, which is a view of freedom that is incompatible with causal determinism.

That's like grounding the assurance of salvation in Monadology. There's absolutely no evidence that Molinism is true. There's no empirical evidence, revelatory evidence, or philosophical evidence.

It's like saying: Planet earth is dying. We need to colonize another planet to survive. An astronomer has postulated a Class M planet in a particular solar system in the Milky Way. We only have the technological wherewithal to make one trip. So let's go there.

Mind you, there's no empirical evidence that a Class M planet exists in that location. But given the size of the Milky

Way, it's *possible* that the astronomer's postulate is true.
We might get very lucky.

Lest anyone should fall

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<https://ochuk.wordpress.com/2008/03/27/why-i-am-not-a-calvinist/>

That's illogical:

i) Calvinist Christians can know they are saved in the same way that Arminian Christians can know they are saved: by believing the Gospel.

If it be objected that a professing Christian can be self-deluded, that's possible for Calvinists and Arminians alike.

ii) In addition, it's demonstrably false that God's secret decree is by definition unknowable. For instance, past events are part of God's secret decree, but once they eventuate they are knowable.

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guarding against it via God's middle knowledge, which Calvinism cannot.

And what does Craig say:

The Molinist who holds to the perseverance of the saints may regard (4) and (4') as false because, in counterdistinction to the Congruist, he holds that there are realizable worlds in which believers do reject God's grace and apostasize. That is to say, such worlds are not merely logically possible, but are feasible for God. But the Molinist who holds to perseverance will simply add that God would not decree to actualize any of these worlds, or even more modestly, that God did not in fact decree to actualize such a world. In the world He chose to actualize, believers always persevere in the faith. Perhaps the warnings in Scripture are the means by which God weakly actualizes their perseverance. That is to say, in the moment logically prior to creation, God via His middle knowledge knew who would freely receive Christ as Savior and what sorts of warnings against apostasy would be extrinsically efficacious in keeping them from falling away. Therefore, He decreed to create only those persons

to be saved who He knew would freely respond to His warnings and thus persevere, and He simultaneously decreed to provide such warnings. On this account the believer will certainly persevere and yet he does so freely, taking seriously the warnings God has given him.

Of course, Molinism does not imply the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. The defender of middle knowledge could hold that logically prior to creation God knew that there were no worlds feasible for Him in which all believers persevere or that, if there were, such worlds had overriding deficiencies in other respects. Therefore, the warnings of Scripture do not guarantee the perseverance of believers, for believers can and do ignore them.

<http://www.leaderu.com/offices/billcraig/docs/lest.html>

To play along with Adam's objection, this generates a parallel epistemological problem for assurance: in order to have assurance he needs to know his modal status. Is the actual world in which he exists one of the possible worlds in which he'd persevere—in contrast to other possible worlds in which he'd lose his salvation?? Which possible world did God instantiate? One in which he finishes the race or one in which he drops out of the race before the finish line?

How Calvinists do it

I don't know how Calvinists do it. Like many bloggers [Justin Taylor posted an obituary of Steve Jobs](#). Unlike many bloggers, he receives comments. Not three comments in, the post got this one:

I am saddened by Jobs' passing. My prayers are with his family and friends. I don't mean for this to be insensitive, but why would those who believe in the concept of God's sovereign saving grace have any "hope" one way or the other that Jobs found rest in it? Wouldn't they just want God to carry out His salvific desires in whatever way HE sees fit?

"Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor?"

if God decided to NOT impart Jobs with His sovereign saving grace (he didn't appear outwardly a believer), this only magnifies the grace that the elect receive: "that He might make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy, which He had prepared beforehand for glory."

<https://ochuk.wordpress.com/2011/10/07/hell-calvinism-and-steve-jobs/>

i) One thing I notice about philosophically-inclined critics of Calvinism like Jerry Walls and Adam Omelianchuk is how often they pick on Calvinists who are not philosophically-inclined. Instead of taking on theological opponents in their own weight class, they go after easy marks.

ii) The comment he quotes was apparently made by a freewill theist (or possibly an atheist sockpuppet) who used

the obituary as a pretext to attack Calvinism. But the comment regurgitates the usual uncomprehending objections to Calvinism. And you'd think somebody like Adam, who ought to be philosophically sophisticated, would discern that.

iii) At one level, there's not even a *prima facie* tension between a predestined outcome and hoping for a particular outcome, for if predestination is true, then we were predestined to hope for that particular outcome—whether or not what we hope for comes true. God foreordains our future-oriented hopes as well as the future itself.

iv) Then we have the hackneyed confusion between fatalism and predestination. But in Calvinism, the actions of human agents (e.g. prayer, evangelism) is one way in which God carries out his salvific desires.

v) Let's take a comparison. Suppose your daughter attends a small private college. You receive a frantic phone call to turn on the news. A breathless reporter says a gunman reportedly killed a number of students at the school, before he himself was shot and killed. Police are withholding the names of the victims until they ID them and notify next-of-kin.

Should you pray that your daughter was not one of the victims? But at that point, the event is past. Either he shot her to death or he didn't. Prayer can't change the past.

The accidental necessity of the past is analogous to the fixity of the future (given predestination). And many freewill theists grant the accidental necessity of the past.

In both cases, you can't change the outcome. That, however, doesn't mean you can't affect the outcome.

Answered prayer is a factor in historical causation. Prayer is one of God's appointed means to further his appointed ends. Absent answered prayer, history would turn out differently. That applies to retroactive prayer as well as hopes and prayers about a predestined future.

So, yes, Adam, that's how Calvinists do it. On the face of it I don't see even an apparent point of tension.

Did God will sin?

There are some scrupulous Christians who think the very effort to develop a theodicy is unseemly or even blasphemous. To justify the existence of sin makes evil disguised good. And it makes God complicit in sin. By the same token, freewill theists wax indignant when Calvinists say there's a qualified sense in which God willed sin.

Now imagine if Adam never fell. Imagine if Lucifer never fell. Imagine having a scholastic debate about whether God would allow evil into our morally pristine, unfallen world. The same people who revile theodicies, the same people who revile Calvinism, would consider it unthinkable, indeed sacrilegious, to suppose a holy God would ever permit evil to exist. God is too pure to allow impurity to sully his world. They'd carry on like Abdiel lecturing Lucifer in **PARADISE LOST**. We'd be regaled with inspiring speeches.

But, of course, that train already left the station. So freewill theists can't fall back on a priori arguments about how a holy God would never let evil happen. For we confront the a posteriori reality of evil everyday.

Hence, every Christian philosopher and theologian must begin with that unsavory starting-point. Every Christian philosopher and theologian must take that as a given. We commence with the factuality of evil, and work back from there. Indeed, evil is a presupposition of Christianity. Like it or not, you can't avoid saying that, in some sense, God willed sin. It's too late in the game to shout "Sacrilege!" "Blasphemy!" The very existence of moral evil means God has taken certain theological options off the table. We must

deal with what's left. Seek the wisdom in what is-or will be.
Not what might have been.

Freedom and stability

All these Christian thinkers argue that free will requires an environment of natural laws, predictability, risk and ability to do evil. In other words, even God cannot create a world that includes genuine moral free will and responsibility and constantly interfere to stop gratuitous evils from occurring.

Read more:

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2015/01/is-there-a-difference-between-permitting-evil-and-doing-evil/#ixzz3OuduGbsA>

Although I commented on this statement yesterday, in connection with his general post, this is worth discussing in its own right. It merits an expanded analysis.

This is sometimes called a natural-law theodicy or stable environment theodicy. C. S. Lewis (in *The Problem of Pain*) helped to popularize it. Here's one formulation:

A final important theodicy involves the following ideas: first, it is important that events in the world take place in a regular way, since otherwise effective

action would be impossible; secondly, events will exhibit regular patterns only if they are governed by natural laws; thirdly, if events are governed by natural laws, the operation of those laws will give rise to events that harm individuals; so, fourthly, God's allowing natural evils is justified because the existence of natural evils is entailed by natural laws, and a world without natural laws would be a much worse world.

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/evil/#NeeForNatLaw>

And this, in part, is how Lewis put it:

But if matter is to serve as a neutral field it must have a fixed nature of its own. If a "world" or material system had only a single inhabitant it might conform at every moment to his wishes "trees for his sake would crowd into a shade". But if you were introduced into a world which thus varied at my every whim, you would be quite unable to act in it and would thus lose the exercise of your free will.

If fire comforts that body at a certain distance, it will destroy it when the distance is reduced. Hence, even in a perfect world, the necessity for those danger signals which the pain-fibres in our nerves are apparently designed to transmit.

If a man travelling in one direction is having a journey down hill, a man going in the opposite direction must be going up hill. If even a pebble lies where I want it to lie, it cannot, except by a coincidence, be where you want it to lie. And this is very far from being an evil: on the contrary, it furnishes occasion for all those acts of courtesy, respect, and unselfishness by which love and good humour and modesty express themselves. But it certainly leaves the way open to a great evil, that of competition and hostility. And if souls are free, they cannot be prevented from dealing with the problem by competition instead of by courtesy...The permanent nature of wood which enables us to use it as a beam also enables us to use it for hitting our neighbour on the head.

We can, perhaps, conceive of a world in which God corrected the results of this abuse of free-will by His creatures at every moment: so that a wooden beam

became soft as grass when it was used as a weapon, and the air refused to obey me if I attempted to set up in it the sound waves that carry lies or insults. But such a world would be one in which wrong actions were impossible, and in which, therefore, freedom of the will would be void.

Up to a point, this theodicy has some merit, but it's quite inadequate as a stand-alone theodicy:

i) It doesn't select for freewill theism. For instance, Calvinism refers to this as ordinary providence. It includes second causes. So Calvinism can also invoke the value of "natural laws" as part of a Reformed theodicy. For instance, Calvinists are fond of quoting:

While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease (Gen 8:22; cf. Jer 31:35).

ii) Moreover, the argument either proves too much or too little. Carried to a logical extreme, this is an argument for deism. It precludes the destabilizing principle of miracles or petitionary prayer. For once you leave the door ajar for miracles or answered prayer, that interjects a degree of unpredictability into the outcome.

For instance, when a natural disaster is predicted (e.g. hurricanes, tornadoes), Christians pray that God will avert the disaster. But by Olson's logic, it's misguided for Christians to pray in that situation. Natural evils are an

essential part of a stable environment, which is—in turn—a precondition of freedom and responsibility.

iii) That's aggravated by the fact that petitionary prayer is, itself, highly unpredictable. Sometimes God grants your request, and sometimes he doesn't. You never know ahead of time if he will answer your prayer. And if you did know in advance that your prayer would go unanswered, you wouldn't bother asking in the first place.

In that respect, it's hard to plan for the future based on prayer. Yet prayer is a fixture of the Christian life.

iii) There's an ironic, fundamental tension between the appeal to libertarian freedom and the appeal to the stability of our environment. On the one hand, the freewill theist needs a stable environment to form the backdrop for his choices. To make meaningful decisions, his decisions must have predictable consequences.

On the other hand, the fact that his decisions are indeterminate destabilizes the very environment which forms the backdrop for his choices. Unpredictable choices have unpredictable consequences. There's a circular or dialectical relationship between our choices and our environment. The environment acts on the agent and the agent acts on the environment. By acting on his environment, he changes his environment—which, in turn—affects how the environment acts on him. A mutual alteration.

To the extent that the choices of libertarian agents create the future, indeterminate choices make the future unpredictable. We step into the future we made, by our collective decisions.

That's aggravated by the fact that our environment includes our social environment—and not merely our natural or physical environment. We make choices in large part based on our ability to predict how other people will react to our choices. Our free choices interact with the sometimes countervailing free choices of other free agents, in a vast nexus where the consequences of one agent's choice can neutralize the consequences of another agent's choice. Of course, that raises the question of how people can be so predictable if the outcome is truly open-ended.

Risk assessment is a common feature of decision-making. A cost/benefit analysis. But libertarian freedom introduces unforeseeable consequences, due to the destructive wave interference of competing free agents.

So the freewill theist is caught in a dilemma. If you demand a stable environment, that undercuts the ability to manipulate the environment. If you demand freedom to manipulate the environment, that undercuts a stable environment. The more freedom, the more fluid the environment. These principles tug in opposing directions.

iv) Consider attempted suicide. Some people deliberately overdose on drugs, then regret their rash act. They seek last-minute medical intervention. That makes the consequences of attempted suicide less predictable. By Olson's logic, a world which includes genuine freedom and responsibilities disallows second thoughts about attempted suicide. Once you overdose, no attempt should be made to save your life, for that trivializes the finality of our choices, without which we cannot make meaningful choices in the first place. Examples could be multiplied.

Making the world safe for murder

I'm going to comment on two posts:

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2015/01/a-problem-in-theology-distinctions-without-differences/>

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2015/01/is-there-a-difference-between-permitting-evil-and-doing-evil/>

I'll begin by repeating a distinction I drew in a previous post:

1) I have a one-year-old child. I hold him underwater in the bathtub until he drowns.

2) I'm sitting on my chaise lounge in my backyard patio. I watch my one-year-old child fall into the swimming pool. I know he can't swim. I sit there sipping lemonade while he drowns.

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2014/06/sins-of-omission.html>

Back to Olson:

Mine remains that in the case of God and the human fall into sin there is a clear difference between God "doing it" (causing it directly or indirectly such that he wanted it to happen and rendered it certain) and "permitting it." (By the way

I've explained this distinction-with-a-real-difference here several times before.

i) There's more to the problem of evil than the Fall (which Olson doesn't believe in anyway). There's the vast range of moral and natural evils.

ii) According to classical Arminian providence, God is surely the *indirect* cause of many evils. God is not the sole cause, but he is a necessary cause.

And the same holds true for open theism. At best, open theism illustrates the law of unintended consequences. Yet that can also be culpable, viz. criminal negligence, depraved indifference.

iii) Doing *nothing* is a perfect way of rendering many outcomes certain. If a baby stroller accidentally rolls down the hill, it is inevitable that it will run into a busy intersection unless I step in to prevent it. In many cases, inaction guarantees the outcome.

When Calvinists (or other divine determinists) claim there is no real difference between God doing evil and permitting evil they are usually objecting to free will theists' (e.g., Arminians') claim that for God to design, ordain, render certain, and govern sin and evil makes God monstrous. The Calvinists

making this argument against free will theism say that if God is omnipotent and could stop evil from happening but doesn't he is just as culpable, if at all, as if he designed, ordained, rendered certain and governed evil.

i) Olson is very fond of that "render certain" formula. Evidently, he's never considered what that means. It doesn't occur to him that in Arminian providence, God ensures many evils.

Let's go back to my example: unless the father fishes his young son out of the swimming pool, his inaction ensures that his son will drown.

In many cases, there's nothing an agent needs to do to render the outcome certain. Rather, some outcomes are inevitable unless an agent intervenes.

Nonintervention renders the outcome certain by allowing nature to take its course. Absent divine action to the contrary, the outcome is inevitable.

Therefore, Olson deceives himself by imagining that he's drawn a distinction between Calvinism and Arminianism at this juncture.

ii) What about "design." Once again, let's go back to my example. If the toddler drowns, that wasn't by design. The father didn't plan that outcome.

But how is that distinction exculpatory? Once he sees the toddler fall into the swimming pool, if he let's him drown, that's culpable—even if it wasn't by design.

Suppose that in Arminianism, moral evils don't happen by God's design. But that doesn't ipso facto exonerate the Arminian God.

All one has to do to turn aside the sweeping claim that this is a distinction without a difference is demonstrate that everyone, including the objector himself or herself, knows this to be a difference in at least one case. In other words, if there is even one instance in which everyone, including the objector, must admit that there is a real difference between “doing evil” and “permitting evil,” then the claim that this is a distinction without a difference must fail.

That's a confused way to frame the issue. The question at issue isn't whether allowing harm is sometimes exculpatory, but whether allowing harm (in contrast to doing, causing, ensuring, intending) harm is ipso facto exculpatory.

Sometimes permitting evil is culpable. So he can't just resort to that bare distinction.

Since it can either be evil or not be evil to permit evil, a theodicy has to do more than appeal to permission *in general* to exonerate the God of freewill theism. It must provide specific reasons why permission would be inculpatory in that particular kind of situation.

But, of course, everyone does know that there is a difference between “doing evil” and “permitting evil.” In the one case, “doing evil,” the evil is actually, physically acted out by the doer whereas in the other case, “permitting evil,” the evil is not actually, physically acted out by the permitter. This is why, to the best of my knowledge, no law exists in any civilized society that equates the doing of a crime with the permitting of a crime. True, some societies have criminalized certain behaviors that include permitting a crime without doing it. But the mere permission is never actually equated with the actual doing and that because of two factors: 1) different intentionality, and 2) different physical involvement.

And, of course, everyone can think of instances in which there is a real moral distinction-with-a-difference between permitting an evil to occur and actually doing the evil (or causing it).

One does not have to think hard to come up with numerous examples in which a person with the power to stop an evil but does not stop it is doing something entirely different from the actual doing of the evil.

An obvious problem with that appeal is that even in cases where permitting evil is exculpatory, that typically involves human agents with limited options. But an omnipotent, omniscient agent has resources they don't. What's exculpatory for them isn't ipso facto exculpatory for him, given the range of options at his disposal. The more powerful the agent, the less excuse he has to permit some things. He can prevent things we can't.

*A similar, more popularly written, explication may be found in Gregory Boyd's *Is God to Blame?**

It's my understanding that Boyd has a view of cosmic spiritual warfare in which God and the good guys eventually get the upper hand. We win.

But according to open theism, isn't the future always indeterminate? There will never be a future time beyond which the future is settled once and for all time. However far into the future we go, it will remain indeterminate.

That means the status quo ante is inherently unstable. There is no final settlement. It's like political maps in which

boundaries are continuously drawn and redrawn over the centuries depending on which side won or lost the last border war.

If the future is perpetually indeterminate, then there are no decisive victories and defeats. Even if God annihilated the Devil, there could be another angelic rebellion.

All these Christian thinkers argue that free will requires an environment of natural laws, predictability, risk and ability to do evil. In other words, even God cannot create a world that includes genuine moral free will and responsibility and constantly interfere to stop gratuitous evils from occurring.

i) To begin with, there's an obvious tension between his appeal to libertarian freedom and natural laws. An appeal to natural laws is deterministic. The uniformity of nature. Physical determinism.

But if human agents enjoy the libertarian freedom to do otherwise, then isn't the outcome unpredictable? Isn't the outcome indeterminate?

Perhaps Olson would distinguish between human agency and our natural environment. But since their environment acts on agents and agents act on their environment, that can't be neatly compartmentalized.

ii) By Olson's logic, petitionary prayer has no place in freewill theism. To begin with, Christians sometimes pray that God will prevent nature from taking its course. But to the extent that God answers their prayers, that infers with natural laws. That destabilizes our environment. Makes the outcome unpredictable.

And that's aggravated by unanswered prayer. You never know ahead of time which prayers God will answer.

iii) By Olson's logic, we should close Emergency Rooms. Take murder. In the past it was easier to kill somebody. But due to those pesky, meddlesome trauma physicians, some gunshot victims (to take one example) who would otherwise die, absent medical intervention, survive.

That makes attempted murder far more unpredictable than it used to be. You now assume the risk of murdering someone without the assurance of success. Genuine moral freewill requires a world in which attempted murder has predictable consequences.

iv) Apropos (iii), we should fire all the criminologists. In the past, it was easier to get away with premeditated murder. Wipe your fingerprints off the doorknob. Dispose of the murder weapon.

But due to forensic science, it's much harder than it used to be to avoid leaving trace evidence behind at the scene of the crime. That makes premeditated murder far more unpredictable. You now assume the risk of murdering someone without the assurance that your involvement will go unnoticed. Genuine moral freewill requires a world in which it is safe to commit premeditated murder without fear of detection.

v) By parity of argument, it is wrong to post lifeguards at some beaches and swimming pool some of the time, for that makes the decision to swim or surf rest on the unpredictable variable of whether or not there's a life guard on duty. That affects the risk assessment. Genuine moral freedom requires a world in which there are no lifeguards at beaches or swimming pools.

The ability to do great good includes the ability to do great evil.

Does that logic apply to God?

Does that mean the saints in heaven retain the same libertarian ability to do great evil?

Arminianism does not include any particular view of "natural evils." Some Arminians would say SOME are from God; others would argue that innocent suffering is NEVER God's antecedent will and that God always only reluctantly permits it because to always "step in" and stop it would change the nature of free will in this world (Peterson's view). Personally, I do not think we can always know and must remain uncertain of anything but that God can bring good

out of any natural evil. Arminianism ONLY claims that God NEVER wills moral evils antecedently (e.g., Adam and Eve's fall into sin) but reluctantly permits them (consequent will).

Notice that Olson doesn't bother to explain how the distinction between God's antecedent will and his consequent will is morally germane. What makes that exculpatory?

The upshot is he appeals to reason (as he sees it) when attacking Calvinism, but he appeals to mystery when defending Arminianism.

Calvinism and Cartesian demons

David Houston Maul, I know I'm a bit late to the party but I'd like to know what you think of this argument: Suppose you thought a Cartesian demon exists who is bent on deceiving you. If you believed such a being existed then you would have an undercutting defeater for a large subset of your beliefs. Now, suppose you're a Calvinist who believes that God sometimes (unculpably) deceives people by determining them to believe that they are elect. In a way analogous to the Cartesian demon scenario, it seems that you would then have an undercutting defeater for your belief that you are elect. You know that he doesn't always do this so it may not be enough to completely defeat your belief but I think it makes your belief less warranted.

<https://www.facebook.com/JerryLWalls/posts/10153005501305676?pnref=story>

The situation is getting desperate when Arminians resort to Cartesian demons to defeat Calvinism.

i) To begin with, once you let the Cartesian demon out of the cage, it will bedevil every belief-system. It isn't partial to Calvinism. It's a universally delusive imp. No getting it back into the cage once it's released. How is Arminianism immune?

You can't just sic the Cartesian demon on Calvinism. The Cartesian demon is a wild animal. It hasn't been to obedience school. It doesn't follow orders.

It's like letting a tiger out of the cage, pointing to your enemy, and saying, "Attack!" Well, the tiger stares at you and sees you as a menu item, too. The Cartesian demon is omnivorous. All-devouring. It won't stop with Calvinism.

ii) If you can't help but be deceived, then aren't your justified in maintaining delusive beliefs? To take a comparison:

The first objection to reliabilism, lodged by several different authors, is the evil-demon counterexample (Cohen, 1984; Pollock, 1984; Feldman, 1985; Foley, 1985). In a possible world inhabited by an evil demon (or permute this, if you wish, into a brain-in-a-vat case), the demon creates non-veridical perceptions

of physical objects in people's minds. All of their perceptual beliefs, which are stipulated to be qualitatively identical to ours, are therefore false. Hence, perceptual belief-forming processes in that world are unreliable. Nonetheless, since their perceptual experiences – and hence evidence – are identical to ours, and we surely have justified perceptual beliefs, the beliefs of the people in the demon world must also be justified. So reliabilism gets the case wrong. The intended moral of the example is that reliability isn't necessary for justification; a justified belief can be caused by a process that is unreliable (in the subject's world).

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/reliabilism/#ProForEarProRel>

Burnt to a Crisp

I'm going to comment on an interview with Oliver Crisp:

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2014/september-web-only/softer-face-of-calvinism.html>

There are many tensions in his interview, but one in particular is the tension between ecumenism and the progress of dogma. The progress of dogma is divisive and sectarian rather than ecumenical. The progress of dogma generates increasing theological divergence rather than convergence over time.

The less people are required to agree about, the more they agree. It's easy to agree with the uninterpreted statements in the Apostles' creed. That conceals a lot of latent disagreement. It's easy to agree with the Nicene Creed, because it only covers a few topics.

The Westminster Confession is more sectarian because it covers far more ground. The more theological questions you presume to answer, the more room for disagreement that creates or exposes.

The progress of dogma begins with many open questions in theology. Over the centuries, more questions are given official answers. There are ever fewer open questions. People takes sides. That's moving apart.

The catholic creeds of the first few centuries of the church are a secondary tier of norm that witnesses to Scripture.

Then we have confessions that represent particular church bodies, like the 39 Articles of Anglicanism—which are very Reformed, I might add—and the Westminster Confession for Presbyterians. Confessions are a third tier of witness, norms that stand under Scripture and the catholic creeds.

I understand that that ranking system is appealing to an ecumenist. But if we're truth-seekers, why would the earliest creeds, the most theologically underdeveloped creeds, outrank later, more theologically reflective creeds?

Or one might end up cherry-picking some things and not others.

What about a different agricultural metaphor? Winnowing the wheat from the chaff?

No one theologian, however important, can trump the voice of the church expressed in the creeds or confessions.

Are creeds or confessions "the voice of the church"? Creeds and confessions are formulated by a handful of bishops or

theologians. They can be *appropriated* by "the church." Christians can embrace them. But they don't *start out* as "the voice of the church." They must earn that right. They must be true. A creed can speak on my behalf if it's true.

But in that respect, a theologian trump a creed. It just depends on who is right.

There's no *tradition* of universalism in Calvinism. No universalism in Reformed confessions. Heck, no Reformed theologians of any note who espouse universalism.

Perhaps that's why he tries to classify Barth as a Reformed theologian. To use Barth's implicit universalism as a foothold. But that's circular. That begs the question of whether Barth is Reformed.

And tradition aside, reprobation goes to the deep structure of Reformed theology. It's not just a historical accident—like some inherited doctrines.

Although universal unconditional election is theoretically possible, reprobation concretely demonstrates the unconditionality of election. God doesn't have to save everyone, and he proves it directly by not in fact saving everyone.

Moreover, this isn't just a question of different possible ways to combine different ideas. There are factual constraints on Calvinism. Calvinism is guided by its understanding of revealed truth.

Does he mean universalism is compatible with Calvinism because Calvinism has the internal resources to pull it off? If predestination is true, then God can *predestine* everyone

to be saved? (Which would require other adjustments, like universal atonement.)

If so, how does that fit into his *libertarian* Calvinism?

Finally, yes, all things being equal, God could save everyone. But what if, all things considered, God has objectives which conflict with universal salvation?

It's not just a matter of extending the scope of election, while leaving everything else intact. There are tradeoffs.

For that matter, why would God predestine the Fall in the first place if he intended to save everyone?

Two 19th-century Reformed theologians come to mind. The first is William Cunningham, who was a professor at the University of Edinburgh and one of the founding fathers of the Free Church of Scotland. He wrote an important essay on this topic, arguing that the Westminster Confession neither requires nor denies “philosophical determinism,” as he called it. He believed the Confession is conceptually porous on the matter and doesn’t commit its adherents to determinism, though it doesn’t exclude it either.

He's wrong about that. Cunningham was distinguishing between spiritual inability due to original sin, and Edwardian necessitarianism. Edwards isn't just a divine determinist. Arguably, he's a divine necessitarian.

It isn't just a question of whether humans could do otherwise, but whether God could do otherwise. I think this is related to his appeal to the principle of sufficient reason which he deployed against Arminians. God *must* have a sufficient reason for what he does. And that means God can't do otherwise. Alternate possibilities aren't live possibilities—even for God.

You have that tension in Leibniz, as well as Aquinas. Cunningham is noncommittal on metaphysical necessity. That's a very strong version of determinism.

One question is what is he opposing? William Hamilton is one of his foils, whom he quotes:

That man has no will, agency, moral personality of his own, God being the only real agent in every apparent act of His creatures...that the theological scheme of the absolute decrees implies fatalism, pantheism, the negation of a moral governor, as of a moral world (471).

Clearly, to reject that is not to endorse either libertarian freewill or merely partial predestination (pace Crisp).

Cunningham then defines his terms:

The advocates of this doctrine [philosophical necessity] maintain that there is an invariable and necessary connection between men's motives and their volitions, - between objects of desire and pursuit as seen and apprehended by them and all their acts of volition or choice; or that our volitions and choices are invariably determined by the last practical judgment of the understanding. The invariable and necessary influence of motives in determining volitions, - and a liberty of indifference, combined with a self-determining power in the will itself, - are thus the opposite positions of the contending parties on this question. The dispute manifestly turns wholly upon a question as to what is the law which regulates those mental processes that

result in, or constitute, volitions or choices (484).

Throughout the essays he refers to a "system of necessity" or psychological "laws." He associates philosophical necessity with a regime of psychological laws.

It's an interesting question where that framework comes from. Does that involve a parallel between physics and psychology? Does that involve an extension of Newtonian physics to psychology? Just as there are laws of nature, there are laws of the mind?

On that model, philosophical necessity suggests that God determines human choices through the mediation of psychological laws. I'm not sure what that's supposed to mean, but in any event, the logical alternative to that framework isn't libertarian freedom. It's not as if "psychological laws" are the only way God could determine human choices.

Cunningham says:

Predestination implies that the end or result is certain, and that adequate provision has been made for bringing it about. But it does not indicate anything as to what must be the nature of this provision in regard to the different classes of events which are taking place

under God's government, including the volitions of rational and responsible beings (509).

Here he distinguishes between what God predetermines and how he brings it about. He's noncommittal on the mode of execution, but not on the scope or inevitability of predestination.

It [the will] is not emancipated from the influence of God's decrees foreordaining whatever comes to pass. It is not placed beyond the control of His providence, - whereby in the execution of His decrees He ever rules and governs all His creatures and all their actions. It is not set free from the operation of those general laws which God has impressed upon man's mental constitution, for directing the exercise of his faculties and regulating his mental processes. But it is set free from the dominion of depravity; and thereby it is exempted from the necessity of willing only what is evil... (521).

Here Cunningham affirms the universality of predestination. Everything is foreordained. Everything comes to pass by God's providence.

The closest thing Cunningham says which might give Crisp is "wiggle room" is:

The doctrine of necessity, when once established, leads by strict logical sequence to predestination, unless men take refuge in atheism. But it does not seem to follow e converso, that the doctrine of predestination leads necessarily to the doctrine of necessity; as men may hold, that God could certainly execute His decrees and infallibly accomplish His purposes in and by the volitions of men, even though he had not impressed upon their mental constitution the law of necessity, as that by which its processes are regulated and its volitions determined (513).

But that doesn't reject divine determinism. Rather, it's noncommittal on a model of divine determinism based on "law-like" mechanism.

He does say, two pages earlier, that:

...we think, unwarranted and presumptuous to assert, that even a self-determining power in the will would place it beyond the sphere of the divine control, - would prevent [God]...from superintending and directing all its movements according to the counsel of His own will (511).

Although taken by itself, a "self-determining power of the will" suggests autonomy, he couches that as a hypothetical position, and even so, he states that in the context of God's ability, even in that hypothetical situation, to control the outcome.

Cunningham distinguishes lack of freedom due to original sin from lack of freedom due to psychological laws. Although he discusses Edwards, one limitation of his analysis is that his interpretation of Edwardian philosophical necessity doesn't consider another definition of philosophical necessity: the principle of sufficient reason.

However, I don't think commitment to the PSR commits one to metaphysical necessity. At most, God must choose the best provided that there's one best thing to choose. But that seems equivocal. Since not all possible goods are compossible, some possible goods must be sacrificed to achieve other possible goods. In that event it's not clear that there is one best choice. The distinctive goods of one

possible world are gained at the loss of other distinctive goods. So God is never confronted with a forced option.

Back to Crisp:

On one hand, I am concerned about ecumenical theology and the place of Reformed theology relative to other communions within Christianity. But I am also trying to show there is a significant breadth to the Reformed tradition that is often overlooked, that there is more wiggle room than is often perceived.

Ecumenists are such silly people. Every generation has ecumenists. They fail, just like the previous generation.

That's because ecumenical dialogue consists of ecumenists dialoguing with fellow ecumenists. It's circular from start to finish.

Ecumenists don't really *come* to agreement. Rather, they wouldn't be ecumenists in the first place unless they were noncommittal on some doctrines. Those are the bargaining chips. That's what they are prepared to give away. Those were *always* negotiable. Their commitment to ecumenism precommits them to find areas of agreement. Their agreement was a foregone conclusion. So they end where they began. There's no real *progress* (even if that was a good thing).

Ecumenists remind me of women who knowingly marry philanderers. They think to themselves, "But *this* time it will be different. He won't cheat on *me*, because he truly loves me. I'm *special*. Why, he looked in my eyes and told me that never met anyone like me." Yeah...which is something he says to every woman.

Take, for example, the Book of Confessions of the PCUSA, my own denomination.

Well, I'd say he just tipped his hand.

Random mercy

Findo It seems an odd sort of justice which makes it monstrous to give what is deserved.

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2014/07/arminianism-faq-1-everything-you-always-wanted-to-know/#comment-1486096392>

Roger Olson So what you would think of a judge who, faced with a group of men deserving condemnation and liable to execution, randomly chose some to pardon, leaving the others to their deserved fate? Not monstrous?

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2014/07/arminianism-faq-1-everything-you-always-wanted-to-know/#comment-1489701273>

Olson is posing a rhetorical question. Obviously, he thinks it would be "monstrous" to randomly pardon some while leaving the others to their deserved fate.

i) Since he considers that scenario to be "monstrous," what's his non-monstrous alternative? The way he frames the issue stands in implicit contrast to whatever he deems to be the acceptable alternative.

ii) On the face of it, the key consideration seems to be the "randomness" of the selection process. Presumably, he doesn't think it's inherently monstrous to pardon some people but punish others. Rather, that's only monstrous in cases where you do so at *random*.

"Random" stands in contrast to what? Well, his hypothetical is an allegory for unconditional election, which he considers "arbitrary." The alternative is conditional election, where God chooses whom to save or damn based on what he sees (or foresees) in them.

So, by parity of argument, the non-monstrous alternative to randomly pardoning some but punishing others is to pardon or punish based on what the judge sees in them. So how does that apply to his hypothetical? Since his hypothetical stipulates that the men in question "deserve condemnation," are "liable to execution," which is their "deserved fate," then, presumably, it would be "monstrous" to pardon *any* of them.

iii) That raises an interesting question. Since his hypothetical is an allegory for unconditional election, doesn't his position commit him to the belief that *conditional* election is just as monstrous as *unconditional* election? After all, if everyone is a sinner who deserves condemnation, yet God pardons some while leaving others to their equally deserved fate, isn't that "monstrous" on Olson's own grounds? If God sees (or foresees) the same thing in everyone, because everyone deserves condemnation, then by Olson's logic, God is monstrous *unless he damns everyone*.

iv) Perhaps Olson will say God foresaw that some would accept the Gospel while others reject the Gospel. So that's the difference.

But that's not a difference in terms of who is *deserving* of condemnation. Acceptance doesn't make them innocent. So how does that difference salvage Olson's argument (assuming that's his argument)?

v) Keep in mind, too, that Arminianism is not committed to penal substitution. Penal substitution is not an Arminian essential. So Olson can't say conditional election is not monstrous because Christ paid the penalty for the sins of future believers. For that would make the moral licitness of Arminian election contingent on a theory of the atonement which many Arminians past and present (e.g. Grotius, Miley, Grider, Green, Rauser) reject.

vi) Olson evidently takes the position that it would be better to punish ten guilty men than show mercy to nine out of ten, or show mercy to one out of ten.

But in that event, isn't the very concept of mercy "monstrous"? If mercy pardons someone *in spite* of their guilt, how is that different from an unconditional pardon?

If pardon and punishment ought to be conditioned on what the judge sees in the accused, and if the defendant is worthy of condemnation, then by Olson's logic, isn't mercy intrinsically monstrous? By definition, mercy treats people better than they deserve. Does Olson think the Biblical concept of mercy is "monstrous"?

vii) Why does Olson think that if a judge, faced with a group of men deserving condemnation and liable to execution, randomly chose some to pardon, leaving the others to their deserved fate, that would be monstrous?

Does he think randomness per se is unjust or unfair because it treats people unequally? Inequitable treatment is unjust or unfair if the parties in question are alike (i.e. worthy of condemnation)?

If that's his intuition, I'd simply note that randomness often has the polar opposite function. In human affairs, we use

randomizing devices, not because randomness is unfair, but because randomizing the outcome makes the situation fairer.

There are situations where the order in which something happens will confer a competitive advantage on one side or the other. Who goes first, who goes second, who goes last, can be advantageous or disadvantageous. Who gets the first pick. Who gets the last pick. Which debater makes the final closing statement. Who plays defense, who plays offense.

Neither side as a right to go first, second, or last. One team isn't more deserving than another. Yet *someone* has to go first, second, or last, and order in which that happens will confer an unfair advantage or disadvantage on the respective teams.

One traditional way of resolving the unfairness is a coin toss. Flipping a coin is a randomizing device which equalizes the chance of going first, second, or last. That's a way of making an unfair situation more fair. A blind, unbiased procedure. Although the outcome will confer a subsequent advantage on one side, neither side has an antecedent advantage on how the coin will land (heads or tails).

Likewise, a stacked deck is unfair precisely because it *isn't* random. That's why the deck should be shuffled and reshuffled. The sequence of the cards is *supposed* to be "arbitrary." That's why you should replace an old deck with a new deck (since old, creased, or dog-eared cards are equivalent to marked cards). Same thing with loaded dice.

It's the randomness in games of chance that makes them fair. Everyone has the same odds of winning or losing.

Another example is the waiting list for organs. There are not enough donated organs to go around. So it has to be rationed. There are, of course, criteria. Some candidates are more suitable than others. Some candidates are more urgent than others. That can bump you up the list.

But you're bound to have situations with equally qualified patients. Yet one gets lucky, and the other gets unlucky. Even in life and death situations, an element of randomness is sometimes the fairest solution.

Olson acts as if randomness is the antithesis of fairness, yet in many situations, we use randomizing devices to make it fair.

I'm not saying unconditional election is random. But even if (ex hypothesi) it were random, that, of itself, isn't "monstrous" or unfair. For randomness, of itself, isn't "monstrous" or unfair. At best, Olson would need to explain how randomness is "monstrous" under those particular circumstances.

viii) Apropos (vii), "random" is often treated as synonym for "aimless," "purposeless," "fortuitous," "unplanned," "undirected," "unpremeditated," "indiscriminate," "hit-and-miss," &c.

Clearly, though, unconditional election isn't indiscriminate or hit-and-miss. To the contrary, Arminians complain that unconditional election is too *discriminatory!*

Likewise, unconditional election isn't unplanned, undirected, &c. To the contrary, this is God's antemundane plan for the some humans—in contrast to his equally premeditated design for the reprobate.

ix) In addition, the popular connotations of randomness fail to distinguish between a process and the *function* of a process. Let's go back to randomizing devices like flipping a coin or shuffling a deck. That's both a purposeful process and a random process. And that's not a contradiction in terms. Although the process itself is random, the process serves a purpose. There's a purpose behind the process. A coin toss is random, but it's not pointless. It's a means to an end. A method of conflict resolution.

Because the method is random, that makes it unbiased.
Fair.

x) In principle, one could show mercy "at random" to underscore the fact that no one deserves it. If nobody has a claim on your mercy, then picking recipients at random makes that very point. It could just as well have been someone else. Grace is truly gratuitous.

I'm not saying unconditional election is random. Rather, I'm saying that even if (ex hypothesi) unconditional election were random, that wouldn't be pointless or unjust.

"How does God decide?"

Roger Olson

Your assertion does not answer the question. "According to his will" doesn't say HOW God chooses certain individuals. It leaves arbitrariness lingering over the doctrine of unconditional election. Try again. If God's selection of certain individuals is absolutely unconditional, as traditional Calvinism claims, then HOW does God decide "this one, not that one?" What criteria does he use? Once you say the selection is absolutely unconditional, that it has nothing to do with anything God "sees" in the individuals he selects, arbitrariness is already included in that assertion. There is no logical alternative.

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2014/07/arminianism-faq-1-everything-you-always-wanted-to-know/#comment-1487985588>

In this post I'm going to expand on something I said in my previous post:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2014/07/despicable-calvinists.html>

i) It isn't clear how Olson arrives at his definition. He seems to begin with the adjective ("unconditional"), then based on a dictionary definition of the adjective, concludes that "unconditional election" is synonymous with arbitrary election.

If so, that's an inept way to define theological terms. The meaning of unconditional election is derived, in no small part, from what it stands in contrast to. In terms of historical theology, it stands in contrast to Arminianism, Molinism, and Roman Catholicism. Let's take a few brief definitions:

Although God knows whatsoever may or can come to pass upon all supposed conditions, yet hath he not decreed anything because he foresaw it as future, or as that which would come to pass upon such conditions (WCF 3:2).

Election does not in any way depend on the foreseen faith or good works of man, as the Arminians teach, but exclusively on the sovereign good pleasure of God, who is also the originator of faith and good works (Berkhof, Systematic Theology, 115).

There is no previously merit or condition in the creature, either present or foreseen, which

determines the divine choice (Roger Nicole, Standing Forth, 430).

So election to salvation is not based on anything we do. It is entirely gracious (John Frame, The Doctrine of God, 328).

So unconditional election is meant to exclude certain considerations, like merit (Roman Catholicism), foreseen faith (classical Arminianism), or the counterfactuals of creaturely freedom (Molinism) as the basis of election. "Unconditional election" is "unconditional" in reference to specific positions to the contrary.

This doesn't mean election is unconditional in the sense of being random, haphazard, or fortuitous. God can have a reason for why some individuals are elect and others reprobate.

ii) Another problem is the misleading way Olson frames the issue. There's the specter of preexistence, as if these people came on the scene, and God must decide, after the fact, what to do with them. As if God is confronted with a bunch of people, to whom he subsequently assigns a destiny, for good or ill.

But, of course, that's not a Calvinistic way of framing the issue. That seems to reflect Olson's subconsciously Arminian framework, where there are foreseen persons. Persons whose foreseeable existence is independent of God.

From a Calvinist standpoint, Olson's question is like asking a novelist if he chose a character based on what he saw in the

character. But that's backwards. For the character is the product of his own imagination. What he saw in the character is what he saw in his own imagination. The character has no individuality apart from the conception of the novelist.

We're talking about God's idea of individuals. God's prior concept is the source of the individual. The individual has whatever personality, or life-experience that God mentally supplies for him.

Election isn't contingent on what the individual is like, for what he's like is contingent on God's defining idea of what's he's like. The Reformed position is more radical than Olson appreciates. A creaturely mode of existence is entirely derivative. God "sees" in us what he puts in us—like a painter sees in a painting what he sees in his own mind and transfers to the canvass.

Although election isn't conditioned on what God sees or foresees in the individual, that doesn't mean God has no reason for electing some and reprobating others—just as a novelist has a reason for making some characters heroes or heroines while making other characters villains.

History is like a story in time and space. A concrete narrative. It's populated by individuals whose actions advance the plot. God's "criterion" for who's elect and reprobate is their contribution to the story. Human agents figure in historical causation. If God made Abraham reprobate rather than elect, that would change the course of world events. If Pilate was elect rather than reprobate, that would change the course of world events. God has a preferred timeline. What happens is based in part on what people are like, what they do, and that's based on the kinds of people God chooses to populate history.

How does a novelist decide what characters to put in his story? That depends on the story he wants to tell. Plot and characters fit together. Change a character and you change the plot. You have a different outcome. By the same token, that's why God elects one individual but reprobates another.

Despicable Calvinists

Arminianism is becoming more polarized and radicalized in relation to Calvinism. Calvinism itself hasn't changed that much. It's undergone some refinements. But because Arminianism was always a reactionary movement, it's not surprising that it's become more self-aware of its core values and consistent with those values. Hence, developments like Purgatory, postmortem salvation, and open theism, as well as the amissibility of salvation.

Proponents like Jerry Walls and Roger Olson have become so antagonistic towards Calvinism that they are often incapable of representing the most sophisticated version of Calvinism or considering counterexamples to their own position.

Roger Olson

I wouldn't go quite that far. But I think some Calvinists' views of God are similar to some Muslims' views of God. The common element is nominalism/voluntarism--the belief that God has no eternal, unchanging moral character that governs his actions but that God is absolutely free to do whatever he decides to do unfettered by any moral character. The result of that, of course, is the possibility (!) that God could change his mind and

decide NOT to keep his promises. Such a God is, IMHO, cannot be trusted but only feared.

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2014/07/arminianism-faq-2-everything-you-always-wanted-to-know/#comment-1476302276>

i) One of Olson's tactics is his frequent allusion to nameless Calvinists who supposedly espouse what he alleges. No names or quotes.

ii) Olson leaves it unclear whether he's evaluating Calvinism on external or internal grounds. When he says "God has no eternal, unchanging moral character that governs his actions but that God is absolutely free to do whatever he decides to do unfettered by any moral character," is that based on Arminian standards or Reformed standards?

iii) He doesn't quote any Reformed creeds or major Reformed theologians who say that "God has no eternal, unchanging moral character that governs his actions but that God is absolutely free to do whatever he decides to do unfettered by any moral character." And he doesn't attempt to demonstrate how that's an implication of Calvinism. So this is just a tendentious, defamatory accusation with nothing to back it up.

iv) The claim that Reformed theism is voluntaristic is part of his routine.

Roger Olson

Yes, most Calvinists deny, when pushed, that their view of God is voluntarist (i.e., that God has no eternal, unchanging moral character that governs his will). However, whenever I ask how God is loving and just in foreordaining some portion of human beings created in his own image and likeness and allegedly loved (in some sense) by him to eternal hell and consigns them there when he could save them (because salvation is unconditional except for the conditions God himself provides) they always fall back on "God is God and can do with creatures whatever pleases him." That removes God's character from anything knowable as moral and implies nominalism/voluntarism. I don't think most Calvinists understand this, but they have to do it when pressed to explain God's character. They won't say "He doesn't have one," but what they do say amounts to that.

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2014/07/arminianism-faq-2-everything-you-always-wanted-to-know/#comment-1478690246>

i) Once again, his conveniently anonymous reference to Calvinists who supposedly say this. His self-serving summary of what they allegedly say. What Calvinists is he asking? Is he asking Greg Welty? James Anderson? Jeremy

Pierce? Paul Helm? Bill Davis? John Frame? Or is it like those "man-on-the-street" interviews?

ii) Notice the question-begging way he frames the issue. It's a loaded question: "how God is loving and just in foreordaining some portion of human beings created in his own image and likeness and allegedly loved (in some sense) by him to eternal hell and consigns them there when he could save them?"

Notice how his question implicitly takes for granted the very issue in dispute: that it's unjust. The question places the onus on the Calvinist to explain how that's just and loving, as if it's obviously unjust or unloving, and it's up to the Calvinist to overcome that crushing presumption.

Olson is shirking his own intellectual duties. He shoulders the burden of proof in showing why he thinks that is unloving or unjust. He's not entitled to posit the prima facie injustice of Calvinism, then demand that a Calvinist disprove his stipulation.

iii) Notice how he bundles two questions in one: Is it loving? Is it unjust? These are distinct questions. How is it indicative of the fact that "God has no eternal, unchanging moral character that governs his actions but that God is absolutely free to do whatever he decides to do unfettered by any moral character" if God redeems some evildoers but punishes others? How is that unjust? And even if it's unloving, so what?

iv) Notice how he conflates unconditional salvation with damnation. Yet damnation is not unconditional. Only the wicked are damned.

Roger Olson

That God does this for some and not for others when he could do it for all (because it is not based on anything he sees in anyone) is a mystery with which I cannot live. It makes God monstrous.

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2014/07/arminianism-faq-1-everything-you-always-wanted-to-know/#comment-1480376975>

What Olson presumes to call "monstrous" is precisely how the NT describes the saving grace of God. According to the NT, God doesn't save individuals based on anything he sees in them.

Roger Olson

Of course they wouldn't say that, but what's the alternative to it? Election is unconditional. How can God or anyone select individuals out of a group "unconditionally" but not arbitrarily? No Calvinist has ever explained that to me.

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2014/07/arminianism-faq-1-everything-you-always-wanted-to-know/#comment-1484199693>

i) So for Olson, "arbitrary" is a synonym for "unconditional." Election is "arbitrary" unless it's based on something he sees in the elect.

Yet humans are wicked. What God sees in us is evil.

ii) And, once again, we're treated to his stock allusion to unnamed Calvinists.

Roger Olson

Ah, but for Calvinists to become like the God their theory projects, they would be despicable people, moral monsters--going around rescuing some people and leaving others whom they could rescue in their horrible situations--arbitrarily. Thank God few Calvinists are like the God they claim to believe in.

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2014/07/arminianism-faq-1-everything-you-always-wanted-to-know/#comment-1469354817>

Notice how Olson acts as though it's self-evidently true that Calvinists would be "despicable people, moral monsters--going around rescuing some people and leaving others whom they could rescue in their horrible situations--arbitrarily."

But doesn't that depend on the kind of people in need of rescuing? Is there a standing obligation to rescue someone

no matter how evil he is? There's a fundamental difference between rescuing someone in spite of his evil and acting as if there's a moral obligation to rescue him if you can.

Olson bandies the phrase "moral monsters." Does he think we are duty-bound to rescue moral monsters? What's wrong with letting a moral monster die? If a moral monster finds himself in a "horrible situation," isn't that poetic justice? How does Olson become so morally twisted that he lacks that elementary moral discrimination?

Roger Olson

No, it is not an explanation. It is simply an appeal to "God's will." It doesn't say anything about HOW God selects individuals for election to salvation. Strangely, Calvinists think this answer answers the question; it doesn't even begin to. As for God being just in condemning some to hell while arbitrarily selecting others for salvation--that's a very strange kind of justice that makes God monstrous. In fact, it isn't justice at all.

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2014/07/arminianism-faq-1-everything-you-always-wanted-to-know/#comment-1486069637>

Once more, Olson contents himself with these dictatorial assertions, as if that's indisputable. How is it "unjust" or "monstrous" to condemn some evildoers to hell? How is it

unjust to redeem other evildoers through the atonement of Christ? Where is his argument?

i) Let's consider the charge of "arbitrariness" from another angle. Unconditional election isn't "arbitrary" in the sense of God flipping a coin. Olson seems to operate with a mental picture of election and reprobation where you have a line of captives in single file. There's a guard who directs some people to the right and others to the left. Some people go free while others go to the firing squad. The choice is random.

But in Calvinism, both elect and reprobate are sinners. If election were conditional (based on what God sees in us), no one would be saved, for we are evil absent God's justification and sanctification.

ii) To say election is unconditional doesn't mean God has no reason for whom he elects or reprobates. If God reprobated Abraham, that would change world history. If God elected Pilate, that would change world history. If God reprobated Paul, that would change world history.

One reason God elects some people and reprobates others is because God has a particular plan for the world. It's like a novel with a plot and characters. The characters drive the plot. If you had different characters, that would change the plot. If the novelist wants the story to go one way, he creates characters who move events in that direction.

Abraham has a role to play in God's story: a role that requires Abraham to be saved. Paul has a role to play: a role that requires Paul to be saved.

Pilate has a role to play: a role that requires Pilate to be unsaved. If Pilate had been a God-fearer, he would have

acquitted Jesus. But then, the plan of salvation would come to a screeching halt. The crucifixion had to be authorized by a Roman official. So Pilate's reprobation serves a purpose.

God doesn't reprobate Pilate because of something he sees in Pilate. Rather, Pilate is a reprobate character. God created a villain to play the part of a villain. Reprobation is a character trait, just as saving Paul or saving Abraham is part of the package. They have a mission in God's plan which requires them to be saved.

It's analogous to the organic theory of inspiration, where God providentially creates individuals with just the right personality, aptitude, education, and experience to become apostles, prophets, and/or Bible writers. God isn't picking some people for salvation and others for damnation at random.

Moreover, it's not as if humans preexist in a neutral state (like Schrödinger's cat) before God either elects or reprobates them. Rather, God conceives of them with a particular destiny in mind.

God is not a casting director, talent scout, or army recruiter who's on the lookout for what's needed. Rather, God creates the means as well as the ends.

Roger Olson

This is a debate even among Calvinists--whether sanctification includes an element of synergism. Some Calvinists who are adamant about monergism in justification-regeneration allow an

element of cooperation between the human will and God's grace in sanctification. Other Calvinists see that as a betrayal of the sovereignty of grace. As an Arminian I don't have that problem because, for me, it's synergism from beginning of salvation to its end. God provides all the ability (Philippians 2:13) but we decide to use it (2:12).

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2014/07/arminianism-faq-2-everything-you-always-wanted-to-know/#comment-1476297087>

That's confused. "Cooperation" doesn't mean the same thing in Calvinism and freewill theism. In freewill theism, cooperation introduces an element of contingency or uncertainty into the outcome. It's a free variable that's not under God's control.

In Calvinism, by contrast, how much we cooperate with God is up to God. He controls the degree of cooperation. Sanctification can be deterministic without being monergistic.

Microcosm? Justice Blackmun and theology

Internet Arminians wear tinged bifocals. They see themselves through rose-tinted glasses while they view Calvinists through jaundice-tinted glasses. For instance:

Jerry Walls

July 3 at 3:05pm • Edited •

MICROCOSM? WESLEY AND EDWARDS: FREEDOM AND THEOLOGY

As we approach July 4 where we celebrate freedom, I have been pondering this historical tidbit. John Wesley and Jonathan Edwards were contemporaries who lived at a time when many Christians accepted slavery. Wesley, however, was an outspoken critic of the practice, and his last letter was to Wilberforce, encouraging him in his fight to end it. Edwards, by contrast, owned a slave. Of course, we cannot read too much into this and I am sure both opponents of slavery as well as supporters can be cited on both sides of this theological divide. Still, I wonder if it is suggestive.

<https://www.facebook.com/JerryLWalls/posts/10152638892065676>

On paper, Walls is a philosopher. And a basic feature of philosophical reasoning is to test your hunches by considering counterexamples. But where Calvinism is concerned, Walls is a demagogue first and a philosopher last. Since he insinuates a link between Calvinism and slavery, let's consider some links between Arminianism and slavery (or analogous evils):

The Methodists split over slavery:

<http://www.umc.org/who-we-are/the-slavery-question-and-civil-war>

And here's Frederick Douglas on Methodists of his acquaintance:

<http://gbgm-umc.org/umw/bible/douglass.stm#Maryland>

Conversely, John Newton was a Reformed pastor and abolitionist.

Finally, the architect of Roe v. Wade was a devout Methodist:

http://archives.umc.org/umns/news_archive1999.asp?ptid=&story=%7B002726AD-BE49-4FDF-9AB4-FA5444666FE9%7D&mid=3368

Same denomination as Ben Witherington and Jerry Walls. I guess Blackmun is a microcosm of Wesleyan Arminianism.

Arminian eugenics

Roger Olson

You leave out that the Calvinism I am arguing against claims that this whole world and everything in it was designed, ordained and is governed by God. If God is perfectly good in any sense meaningful to us and exercises that kind of providential control, then, yes, he would have to create the best possible world. To say otherwise is to slide into nominalism and voluntarism--that God is only freely good. I think that is what most Calvinists believe (without being fully aware of it).

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2014/06/is-this-the-best-of-all-possible-worlds-what-i-would-think-if-i-were-a-calvinist/#comment-1443691864>

Problem is: Olson never gives us a reason to accept his claim. Even assuming that there's a best possible world (which I deny), why is God "only freely good" if he made a world that falls short of the best possible world?

We'd only "slide into voluntarism" if we said God made an irremediably evil world. Olson fails to distinguish between good and evil, on the one hand, and good, better, or best, on the other hand. A good God can't make an irremediably

evil world. But what prevents a good God from making a good world, although he could make an even better world?

Olson has a eugenic outlook. Take natural evils. For instance, is a world without Down Syndrome better than a world with Down Syndrome? Suppose we figure out how to eliminate Down Syndrome. In so doing we preemptively eliminate people with Down Syndrome. They are no longer allowed to begin to exist.

Is that an improvement? Improvement for whom? You might say someone with Down Syndrome would be better off without Down Syndrome—but would he be the same person? Or is something lost in the process? Not just losing the syndrome, but losing the personality. Losing character traits associated with the syndrome.

From what I've read, people with Down Syndrome can be exceptionally loving and caring. More so than many "normal" people. A world with Down Syndrome has virtues, has a quality of goodness, that's absent in a world without Down Syndrome.

Even if the less-than-the-best possible world is less good overall than the best possible world, the less-than-the-best possible world may include a better good than the best possible world, which achieves its best status by evening out the disparities to secure a smooth, uniform consistency of goodness.

Is the best possible world a world devoid of evils? Or is the best possible world a world in which evils are offset by second-order goods? Goods unobtainable apart from evil?

Leibniz and Arminius

Again, finally, if I cannot accept that this is the best of all possible worlds, and with it the belief that even the Holocaust was “for the best,” then I cannot logically accept that God plans, ordains and governs everything in the sense that Calvin clearly meant it as did Edwards and as do most spokesmen for “the new Calvinism” today.

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2014/06/is-this-the-best-of-all-possible-worlds-what-i-would-think-if-i-were-a-calvinist/>

Olson seems to be making a general point, and not just an objection to Calvinism in particular. He seems to be saying that a world containing the Holocaust can't be the best possible world.

Now, although his post is targeting Calvinism, his principle raises corresponding questions about Arminianism. From an Arminian standpoint, does he believe this world is the best possible world? He seems to think the existence of the Holocaust renders that contention absurd.

But if there are better possible worlds, then why didn't the Arminian God make one of the better possible worlds,

instead of our world, which is worse, or maybe even one of the worst?

Will he say that God was constrained by human freewill? Even if he thinks human freedom limits the kind of world God can make, then isn't he committed to the proposition that this is the best world God could make? Of the available worlds, ranging from best to worst, there was no better world God could make given the constraints imposed on God's field of action by human freewill.

At the very least, then, Olson has to say a world containing the Holocaust is the best practically possible world.

By best possible world, does he mean what's logically possible or actually possible? Keep in mind that as a critic of Molinism, Olson can't avail himself of the possible/feasible distinction.

God and Auschwitz

I'm going to comment on a new post by Roger Olson:

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2014/06/is-this-the-best-of-all-possible-worlds-what-i-would-think-if-i-were-a-calvinist/>

Most Calvinists I know believe in meticulous providence.

Agreed.

Recently I posted an essay here in which I talked about my penchant for seeing the logical outcome of everything.

His penchant fails him whenever it comes to seeing the logical outcome of Arminianism.

We should not believe in ideas whose good and necessary consequences are unbelievable or objectionable (to ourselves). In other words, if idea A leads inexorably, by dint of logic, to idea B and idea B is something I do not believe in, I ought not to believe in A either.

What about revealed truths? If God discloses something to us whose good and necessary consequences are objectionable to us, does that mean we should reject revealed truth? If it leads to something we don't believe in, then we should realign our beliefs to match reality.

However, the point I want to make here is that I believe divine determinism and meticulous providence, idea "A" that God plans, ordains and governs everything without exception, leads inexorably by dint of logic to idea "B" which is that this is the best of all possible worlds.

Saying it leads to that logical outcome doesn't begin to show that it leads to that logical outcome. Where is the logical argument for his conclusion?

The one and only issue I'm raising here is whether a God who is perfectly good, omnipotent, and all-determining would plan, ordain and govern anything less or other than the best possible world. I cannot imagine that he would.

i) To say he cannot "imagine" that is not a logical argument.

ii) He seems to be suggesting that if God is good, then there must be parity between the goodness of God and the goodness of the world. The world must be as good as God. But no creature can be as good (i.e. excellent) as God.

One problem may be an equivocation on the meaning of "goodness." Does he mean moral good or excellence?

If this world is the best world on the way to the best of all possible worlds, then it is, for now, in the interim, the best possible world.

That's simplistic. The best means to an end doesn't make the means good in itself. Take amputation to prevent death by gangrene.

I simply don't understand why people who believe God plans, ordains and governs everything don't also believe that this is the best of all possible worlds. I think they should.

One reason I don't believe it is that Olson has yet to give a supporting argument for his key contention. In his post, he never gets around to making a logical case for why, given

Calvinism, this world must be the best possible world. He keeps asserting what he needs to prove.

I can only attribute that they often don't to either 1) lack of logic in their thinking, or 2) fear of having to explain how this is the best of all possible worlds in light of the Holocaust and events like it.

It's amusing to see the gaping chasm between Olson's intellectual pride and his intellectual performance. He makes self-congratulatory claims about his logical acumen, and makes demeaning comments about his Calvinist opponents, yet he fails to demonstrate his operating assumption.

I agree with the theologian who said that no theology is worthy of belief that cannot be stated at the gates of Auschwitz.

It takes real guts to say that God planned, ordained and governed the Holocaust. I admire and respect those Calvinists (and other divine determinists) who do it—for their logical rigor and courage.

Yes, God "planned, ordained, and governed" the Holocaust, just as he "planned, ordained, and governed" the Flood, the

destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the Babylonian Exile, and the Fall of Jerusalem (70 AD).

The problem that immediately jumps up is that if this is the best of all possible worlds then nothing can really be irreducibly evil. If this is the best of all possible worlds then I must say even of the Holocaust “It is a necessary part of the greater good.” Then I cannot consider it truly evil. I would have to redefine “evil” far away from what I and most people mean by that term.

i) You simply distinguish between whether something is good in itself and whether it can have beneficial consequences down the line. For instance, it isn't good to be congenitally blind, but in this case, that had good results:

As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. 2 And his disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” 3 Jesus answered, “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him” (Jn 9:1-3).

Likewise, the death of Lazarus wasn't good in itself, but it was a source of good:

But when Jesus heard it he said, “This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it” (Jn 11:4).

ii) Since Olson has failed to discharge his burden of proof, there's nothing more I really need to say. It's not incumbent on me to refute a nonexistent argument. But let's examine his illustration:

Why did the Arminian God allow the Holocaust? After all, the Arminian God had the power to prevent it. So isn't the Arminian committed to saying God allowed the Holocaust for the best? Presumably, an Arminian will justify God's nonintervention on the grounds that it would be even worse for God to prevent the Holocaust than to allow the Holocaust. Had it been better for God to intervene, but he failed to do so, then in what sense is the Arminian God "perfectly good"?

So how does Olson escape the logic of his own framework?

iii) Olson is assuming there's a best possible world for the Calvinist God to predestine. But why should we assume such a thing? Take the Holocaust. Is an alternate world in which the Holocaust never happened better than our world? Better in what respect? Better in *every* respect?

To begin with, a world in which the Holocaust never happened would have a different past and different future. The historical conditions leading up to the Holocaust

wouldn't exist. And the historical consequences of the Holocaust wouldn't exist.

But, among other things, that requires the elimination many people from the past, and replacing them with a different set of people. Likewise, that requires the elimination of all the people who were born as a result of the Holocaust. In a way, that would be a different kind of Holocaust.

Would that be better for the people who never existed in this alternate world? What if some of them were heavenbound? By creating the alternate world, God deprives them of that incomparable blessing.

Some goods result from a world where the Holocaust occurred which would never result absent the Holocaust. So a world in which the Holocaust occurred is better in some respects, but worse than others. Better for some people but worse for others.

There are even Jews—many Jews—who benefit from the Holocaust. There are Jews who are born as a result of the Holocaust who would never exist apart from that horrific event. For instance, some Holocaust survivors married people they would never have occasion to meet in a world without the dislocations of the Holocaust.

Disfellowshipping Calvinists as damnable heretics

I'm going to comment on this post:

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2014/05/do-arminians-and-calvinists-worship-the-same-god/>

Then you and I are different. I begin with Jesus. If God turns out to be radically different than Jesus, then he is not the God I worship. In that case, God would have been deceiving me through his self-revelation in Jesus Christ.

But Olson doesn't begin with Jesus. For instance, Jesus often began with the OT. But Olson doesn't begin with the OT. So Olson doesn't begin where Jesus began, in which case Olson doesn't begin with Jesus.

Likewise, Jesus reaffirmed OT theism. But Olson repudiates OT theism. Olson refuses to believe that Yahweh said and did certain things which the OT attributes to him. So Olson doesn't believe in Yahweh. Yet, according to NT Christology, Jesus is Yahweh. When Olson disbelieves in Yahweh, he disbelieves in Jesus.

Olson begins with his preconception of what is good. That's what he really believes in. His preconceived notion of goodness is what selects for his brand of theism.

I have said that if it were revealed to me in a way I could not doubt that the God of consistent, five point Calvinism is the one true God over all, the maker of heaven and earth, I would not worship him because I would not think him worthy of worship.

I don't have any problems with that statement inasmuch as it tells you a lot about Olson, but nothing about God.

Because I have openly admitted here that consistent Calvinism turns God into a monster and makes it difficult to tell the difference between God and the devil, some have assumed I believe the answer must be no. However, I have never said that Arminians and Calvinists worship different Gods.

Why not? Isn't our concept of God the object of worship? Worship is mediated by our concept of God. We worship our idea of God. What we think God is like.

Perhaps they just see that he is courageous enough to say publicly what they must really believe in some corner of their minds--even if with most of their minds they deny it.

This is a malicious, conspiratorial narrative that Arminians like Walls and Olson are promoting. It's like liberals who say conservatives are really racists, even if they deny it.

Arminians define "author of sin," then accuse Calvinists of dishonesty when we refuse to grant that God is the author of sin on their loaded definition. It's like liberals who accuse Christians of being "bigots" and "homophobic" if we oppose sodomy or lesbianism. They equate opposition to homosexuality with "hating" homosexuals.

Well, sure, if you allow *them* to define the terms.

You completely miss the point. When Calvinists say God permits sin and evil they mean "efficacious permission" (God withdraws the grace the creature would need not to sin so that he certainly sins) and based on God's intentional design and ordination...i.e., that sin and evil are planned and willed and rendered certain by God. That is why I object to their using

the language of "permission" with regard to God and sin/evil. It's misleading.

i) I'm not big on "permissive" language. However, as I've explained in the past, there's nothing misleading about a Calvinist invoking divine permission. If an agent has the wherewithal to prevent something from happening, but refrains from preventing it, then he permitted it. He allowed it to happen because he was in a position to disallow it.

ii) Olson defines "God's intentional design and ordination of sin and evil" with three descriptors: planned, willed, rendered certain.

Presumably, that's how he distinguishes Reformed permission from Arminian permission. I take it that he defines "intentional design" in terms of "planning" and "willing" while he defines ordination in terms of "ensuring."

Let's consider these descriptors:

iii) Take Arminians who affirm divine foreknowledge. How did the Arminian God not plan or will the foreseeable consequences of his own actions? If he knew in advance that by making the world, humans would fall into sin, how did he not will that outcome? Likewise, if he saw it coming, as a result of his creative fiat, how could that still be an unplanned consequence of his actions? Keep in mind, too, that according to Arminian concurrence, God enables the sinner to sin.

So, on Olson's own definition, the Arminian God "intentionally designs" sin and evil.

iv) What does it take to render an outcome certain? Consider a few examples:

a) Suppose I see a little boy playing on the RR tracks, oblivious to the oncoming train. There's just time enough for me to rescue the boy. If I don't intervene, it's inevitable that the boy will be killed by the speeding train. My inaction renders certain his demise.

Notice that under this scenario, I didn't create the situation. I didn't cause the circumstances leading up to this life-threatening situation. I'm not responsible for the situation. But if I don't act, I ensure the boy's demise. At that point, I am responsible for the boy's demise.

b) Suppose I put a cobra in a nursery. Suppose the cobra bites the baby in the crib. The baby dies.

I'm directly responsible, and culpable, for the baby's death.

c) Suppose a cobra creeps into the nursery. Suppose I find the cobra in the nursery. Suppose I don't kill the cobra. I leave it there. As a result, the cobra bites the baby.

I didn't put the cobra in the nursery. I didn't make the cobra bite the baby.

Yet my action ensured the baby's death by snakebite.

In Arminian providence, there are countless sins and evils which God renders certain by divine nonintervention. For many sins and evils are certain to happen unless God steps in. Many outcomes are certain to occur if events are allowed

to take their course unimpeded. Once a certain chain of events is set in motion, doing nothing will make it happen. Nothing further needs to be done to guarantee the outcome.

v) But even if the outcome is not a dead certainty, so what? Suppose I let the child be run over by the train. I excuse my negligence on the grounds that, for all I know, it was possible for the child to jump off the RR tracks at the last moment. Suppose I let the child be bitten by the cobra. I excuse my negligence on the grounds that it wasn't a sure thing that the cobra would bite the child. Would those excuses be exculpatory?

What makes God worthy of worship is God's perfect goodness combined with his greatness. God must be both great and good to be worthy of worship. Garden variety Calvinists do believe God is good as well as great.

A few have stepped out of the pack and have said that God is the creator of sin and evil. I think they are more logically consistent than their fathers who are garden variety Calvinists.

How does Olson define "creator" of sin and evil? If, in Arminian theology, God creates the initial conditions which eventuate in sin and evil, isn't he the creator of sin and evil? He may not be the sole creator, but he's a co-creator. Olson can introduce buffers, but so can the Calvinist.

Of course, even they affirm God's goodness but only by believing that God is freely good and that whatever God does is automatically good just because he is God.

i) Olson fails to demonstrate that voluntarism is a logical implication of Calvinism.

ii) Notice that Olson is imputing one horn of the Euthyphro dilemma to Calvinism. Does that mean Arminianism is hooked on the other horn of the Euthyphro dilemma?

Or, in some cases, they defend their belief in God's goodness by appeal to a "greater good" that justifies God creating sin and evil. In that case, of course, sin and evil aren't all that bad.

Isn't the freewill defense a greater good defense? Freewill theists defend their belief in God's goodness by appealing to the greater good of freewill. The evil consequences of freewill are offset by the superior benefits of freewill. A world with sinful free agents is better than a world with sinless agents who lack libertarian freedom. So by Olson's logic, sin and evil aren't all that bad given the freewill defense.

The “crunch” comes with the question of whether God “designs, ordains and governs” sin and evil and everything else we consider awful, bad, horrendous, etc. —such as childhood death from agonizing illness or accident. From an Arminian perspective it’s difficult to see the difference between affirming that God is the “author” of all that and that God “designs, ordains and governs” all that.

How is the Arminian God not the "author" of accidents or illness? Do accidents have freewill? Do pathogens have freewill?

Some illnesses are due to high-risk behavior, but many are not.

To Calvinists this makes the human decision to respond positively to the offer of grace “the decisive factor” in salvation. Of course, Arminians never say that and we deny it.

In what sense are Arminians in a position to deny that human acceptance is the decisive factor in responding positively to the offer of salvation?

I say the same about garden variety Calvinism. It is inconsistent. When they say, for example, God is not the author of sin and evil (and all their consequences) but that God “designs, ordains and governs” everything without exception I accuse them of inconsistency. It’s a “felicitous inconsistency” and I choose to focus on the fact that they believe God is not the author of sin and evil. Those who go so far as to say God is the author of sin and evil sully God’s character to the point that I cannot embrace them as brothers or sisters in Christ.

I appreciate Olson's candid admission that he refuses to acknowledge consistent Calvinists as true Christians. Is that a two-way street? Should Calvinists disfellowship Arminians?

Other Calvinists have said so in the past. When they say God created evil and is

*the author of sin and evil they make God
evil. Or else they make evil not evil.
Either way, it's damnable heresy IMHO.*

Once again, I appreciate his candid admission. Do Calvinists get to return the favor? Is Arminianism a damnable heresy?

Election and prayer

I'm going to comment on this post:

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2013/11/can-a-calvinist-pray-for-his-child-to-be-elect/>

Recently I heard of a well-known Calvinist pastor, author, speaker, who, on a podcast, testified that he often goes into his little son's bedroom after he's asleep and prays over him that he be among the elect. While I certainly understand the pastor's sentiment and desire, I wonder if this is consistent with Calvinist theology?

Is it logically consistent for a Calvinist to believe that prayer can play a role (even as a foreordained means to a foreordained end) in bringing it about that a person prayed for be included among the elect?

This seems very different to me from the common Calvinist claim that prayer for the unsaved can be a "foreordained means" to help bring it about that the person, if he or she is elect, comes to repent and believe. (Although I admit having qualms about the logic of that as well!)

According to Calvinism, God elects individuals unconditionally. Salvation itself is not unconditional, so Calvin argued, because it depends on repentance and faith. However, according to Calvin and most Calvinists, an elect person will come to salvation. God will assure it via irresistible grace. But God uses means which he has foreordained to bring it about that the elect repent and believe.

But is it consistent with Calvinism to believe that God uses human means to decide who will be elect? I don't think so. I do not remember any Calvinist theologian saying so.

If God used means to decide who is among the elect (e.g., prayer), then election would not be strictly unconditional.

i) To begin with , what makes Olson think praying to God to do something is equivalent to God using human means to decide what to do? Does Olson think God is undecided unless and until we pray for something? Does God think prayer helps God decide what to do or not to do?

ii) Since every event is predestined, and some events are causally or teleologically contingent on other events, some divine decrees presuppose other divine decrees. For

instance, you can't have a fallen world without a world to fall. In that sense, the decree to create is logically prior to the fall. On the other hand, if the rationale for the fall is to reveal God's justice and mercy in redemption and judgment, then the fall is teleologically prior to creation—as an ends/means relation.

God decrees our prayers, God decrees our election. Assuming (ex hypothesi) that our prayers factor in divine election, election isn't directly conditioned on what we pray for, but on God's decreeing what we pray for. Put another way, our prayers are conditioned on God's decree that we pray. Predestination is still the cause, while prayer is the effect. God decided who and what we'd pray for in the first place. If we pray that God elect a loved one, that prayer is, itself, the result of God's decree.

I think there are Calvinists who simply cannot stomach the implication of Calvinism that a loved one, especially a child, might not be elect, so they revert to inconsistency.

Since Olson is not a universalist, his own statement is inconsistent.

Why BW3 is not a Calvinist

Ben Witherington has a little speech explaining why he's not a Calvinist:

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/bibleandculture/2013/10/14/why-im-not-a-calvinist/>

Of course, it's absurd for him to think he can do justice to the issue in a 6-minute speech, but it's fine with me if Arminians wish to be absurd.

I'm going to comment on some of his statements. It's possible that I misheard a word here or there.

I really didn't believe that before the foundation of the world God had chosen some to be saved and others to be eternally lost...I really didn't believe that the character of God at the end of the day was well represented with the theology that suggests that before anyone was ever created God decided that some were going to be eternally lost and burn forever.

I'd turn that around. I don't think God's character is well represented by a theology in which God creates people who will live forever, but leaves their eternal destination

indeterminate. That's pretty callous. If God is going to create people who will live forever, how can God be said to care for them if he leaves the outcome to chance?

Before God creates a human being, he *ought* to decide what will happen to that individual. Don't create them unless you already decided what will become of them. If you make a sentient being, a being who, once he comes into existence, will never go out of existence, how is it loving to let him take his chances?

On Ben's view, God shoves them into the deep end of the pool to sink or swim. What is more, God knows ahead of time who will drown, and he consigns them to that fate by shoving them into the deep end of the pool.

I really didn't believe that when the Bible commends love, it means God is making an offer you can't refused.

That may explain why Ben is not a Calvinist, but it fails to explain why Ben *shouldn't* be a Calvinist. It simply begs the question.

In the NT there are only three nouns used of God: God is love, God is life, and God is light. Everything else is an adjective. God is righteous, adjective. God is holy, adjective. God is sovereign, adjective.

But it's got to be significant that when we're talking about God and using another noun, it's love, light, and life.

Why think the nouns are more significant than the adjectives? Why not think that's two different ways of saying the same thing—for stylistic variety? To say God is love means God is loving. Love is a divine attribute. Same thing with divine holiness.

Now my understanding of love is that it's got to be freely given and freely received. If that's is the heart of the Gospel...then that has got to be freely received and freely returned.

He gives us no reason to think his understanding of love isn't a misunderstanding of love. Why accept that definition?

Here's a different understanding of love: being a better friend to your best friend than he is to himself. Suppose your friend becomes clinically depressed. He's dangerous to himself. In that state he's susceptible to self-harm. So you protect him from himself, in spite of himself, until he gets better.

***How many people did Jesus die for? 1
Tim 2 is perfectly clear. He died as a
ransom for all. And "all" means all.***

i) To begin with, even Arminians disagree on what it means for Jesus to redeem the lost. Some Arminians affirm penal substitution while other Arminians deny penal substitution. So "ransom" becomes a cipher. Fill in the blank.

ii) Ben also commits the popular semantic fallacy of failing to distinguish between the sense of a word and the referent of a word. What "all" *means* is not the same thing as what "all" *refers* to.

If I walk into a tavern and tell the bartender that I want to buy drinks for "everyone," everyone *means* everyone, but it doesn't *refer* to everyone. It only denotes a tiny subset of humans who happen to be in that particular tavern at that particular time. Not an hour before or later. No one outside the tavern.

***Why would God in a really inefficient
manner send his Son to die for some
when in fact his death atones for the sins
of all.***

i) "Inefficient" in relation to what? Not inefficient in relation to Calvinism, for Calvinism doesn't say the Father sent his Son to die for some when in fact his death atones for the sins of all.

ii) But if we're going to infer the extent of the atonement from "efficiency," then what could be more inefficient than Christ dying to save all when all are not saved?

Prevenient grace that gives everyone the opportunity to respond to the grace of God.

That's a nice sounding sentiment. Why think it's true? For instance, did God bestow prevenient grace on all the heathen peoples in OT times? Does the OT consistently distinguish God's redemptive grace for Israel from all the pagans he leaves in darkness? There are exceptions (e.g. Rahab)–but they are just that: exceptional.

The Bible says Israel is the elect people of God, and those who are in Christ are the elect people of God, and in regard to individuals you could either be in or out.

In the OT, God chose a people-group. A particular clan which descended from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. You were "elect" if you were born into that ethnic group. If you had those bloodlines. You could be an elect Jew all your life even if you were a closet atheist. As long as you were outwardly observant, you were elect. Does Ben think Christians are elect in *that* sense?

NT is replete with passages that talk about those who have made shipwreck of our faith. You can't make shipwreck if something you never had in the first place. If you ain't sailing on the boat you can't shipwreck the boat.

Is Ben really that clueless? Calvinism doesn't say apostates never had *faith* in the first place. Nominal believers can lose their faith. Indeed, apostates were predestined to lose their faith.

What you can't lose is your *salvation*. If you lose your faith, that means you never had *grace* in the first place, not that you never had faith. ("Grace" in the sense of "saving" grace, viz. monergistic regeneration—in contrast to common grace.)

And that has reference to dying in a state of impenitent unbelief. God restores some backsliders to faith.

Homicide or suicide?

Freewill theists draw a bright line between God "causing, commanding, or determining" a human agent to do something, and "allowing" the agent to do it to himself or other humans. Let's consider two different scenarios.

Suppose the paperboy has an affair with the wife of an insurance salesman. While he's away at work every day, his wife and the paperboy conduct an illicit affair. Then, one day, the insurance salesman comes home early and catches them in flagrante delicto. He shoots the paperboy dead. He's convicted of murder, but sentenced for manslaughter due to mitigating circumstances.

Suppose, instead, the paperboy has an affair with the wife of a billionaire. The billionaire finds out. Due to his financial resources, this cuckold husband can be more creative about how he exacts revenge. Shooting the adulterer would be too quick and easy. He wants to make the adulterer suffer.

He has a windowless cell built in the basement of his sprawling mansion. The cell is furnished with a bed, recliner, shower, wc, bidet, and a vending machine that's restocked from the back. There's a dvd player with a set of the paperboy's favorite TV series. Overhead lights come on 16 hours a day, and turn off 8 hours a day. The temperature stays at a preset 70°.

The adulterer is abducted, sedated, and placed in the cell. Then the opening is walled in.

One other thing: the cell contains a loaded revolver.

All his physical necessities are provided for. The captive adulterer has everything he needs to survive in there for decades. Everything he needs to live, but nothing live to for. That's the catch. Everything he needs to go on living except for a reason to go on living.

He has some entertainment, but watching reruns of his favorite TV show will soon become torment.

There's no escape. The only way out is to take his own life. Otherwise, he will die in there of old age.

The vindictive husband knows that an interminable existence in the cell will eventually become unbearable. Sooner or later, the adulterer will use the loaded revolver on himself. The fact that the adulterer executes himself makes it poetic justice—from the husband's viewpoint.

His captor didn't shoot him. His captor didn't put the gun in his hand and pull the trigger. Technically, it was a suicide, not a homicide.

Let's say the captive had libertarian freewill. His captor didn't make the captive off himself. The captive was free to do otherwise. Free to stay alive. Die of natural causes at 90.

Yet isn't there a sense in which the vindictive husband killed him just as surely as if he shot him with the revolver, rather than arranging circumstances for the adulterer to die at his own hand. So was it homicide or suicide?

Craig's selective charity

I'm going to comment on Craig's response:

<http://www.reasonablefaith.org/gods-unconditional-love>

Before commenting on the specifics, I'd like to make a general observation. I'm struck by the fact that Craig is often more charitable towards atheists than Calvinists. I'm also struck by the fact that he makes more effort to inform himself on the details of atheism than he does in reference to Calvinism.

I think it's not hard to explain these passages in light of Scripture's teaching that God loves sinners. Notice that almost all of them come from poetic passages. They are religious hyperbole expressing God's hatred of evil and the wicked acts people commit. It would be a hermeneutical mistake to press them literally as statements of Christian doctrine. Drawing hyperbolic, black-and-white dichotomies was a common semitic idiom. For example, "I have loved Jacob, but I have hated Esau" (Malachi 1.2-3; cf. Romans 9.13) is a way of saying that God has chosen Jacob and not Esau.

When Jesus says, “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14.26), he means that if one prioritizes even one’s most cherished loved ones above Jesus, one’s discipleship is incomplete—a claim which is radical enough without taking it literally! Over against these few hyperbolic passages stands the clear doctrinal teaching of Jesus and the apostles that God loves all persons, even sinners.

i) I think what Craig says in the first two paragraphs is largely correct. However, that stands in ironic contrast to how he immediately switches to passages about divine love. But if he's going to appeal to poetry, hyperbole, and idiomatic expressions concerning divine hatred, would it not be more consist for him to apply the same yardstick to passages about divine love? Don't many of the most vivid depictions of divine love in Scripture have a poetic or anthropomorphic cast to them? Aren't they subject to the same qualifications?

ii) The divine hatred passages aren't the best passages to illustrate the questioner's point. What about divine wrath passages, which are far more prevalent?

God is our model in loving others. We are to love even our enemies.

The problem with resorting to the Sermon on the Mount is that, in contrast to passages of eschatological judgment, this is limited to the church age. So it's a hasty generalization to extrapolate from the Sermon on the Mount to a universal principle.

That is how God loves. Paul later wrote, "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us. . . . while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son" (Romans 5. 8,10). Our love is to be impartial, just as God showers good upon the evil and righteous alike. Our love is to be universal, not reserved just for a few. Our heavenly Father is perfect, and so He loves perfectly.

i) Inferring universality from impartiality is fallacious. Even assuming God is impartial, that doesn't mean God treats everyone the same way. Judicial impartiality is morally discriminating. It condemns the guilty but acquits the innocent.

Impartiality doesn't mean treating everyone alike. Rather, it means treating like cases alike and unlike cases unlike. All

things being equal, you treat two parties the same way, but all things considered, you may treat two parties differently if, in fact, the two parties are relevantly dissimilar.

ii) There's also his equivocal appeal to "impartiality." "Impartial" in reference to what? To say that God is impartial in reference to justice doesn't entail that God is impartial in reference to mercy.

iii) In addition, there are degrees of love. Doesn't Craig love his own wife more than he loves the wives of his colleagues? I certainly hope so. Doesn't he harbor a special love for his own mother?

iv) Finally, he recycles the the popular falsehood that according to unconditional election, God's love is reserved for "just a few." Why is Craig so conscientious about accurately representing the atheists and Darwinians he debates, but so indifferent to accuracy when it comes to Calvinism?

How wonderful God is! As I reflected on Jesus' words, it struck me forcefully that Allah's love as described in the Qur'an rises no higher than the love exhibited by pagans and tax collectors! It is conditional, partial, and has to be earned. But the love of God our heavenly Father is unconditional, impartial, and universal.

Is God's love "unconditional"? Craig believes in hell. Craig believes in damnation. Craig is not a universalist. If God's love is unconditional, why does God make faith and repentance conditions of salvation?

Frankly, Bridger, I'm appalled at the fact that some Christians have an understanding of God's love which is comparable to that of the Qur'an. They actually think that God does not love all people unconditionally. They have failed to understand something so fundamental and basic to Christian discipleship: God's wonderful love.

i) To begin with, Craig cherry-picks his prooftexts. But take the OT. In the OT, God often shows his love for Israel in contrast to how he treats her pagan neighbors. Oftentimes, God makes no effort to do for her enemies what he does for the Chosen People. At the very least, God withholds his grace towards her enemies. At most, God judges her enemies while he forgives Israel. The disparity is stark, routine, and deliberate.

There are some OT prophetic passages which indicate that God will someday extend redemption to the Gentiles, and, of course, that anticipates the new covenant. But that's in studied contrast to God's operating policy under the old covenant.

Moreover, even under the new covenant, you have huge swathes of unreached people-groups

ii) In addition, Craig has concocted a scenario in which

He [God] has instead elected to create only persons who would freely reject Him in any world which is feasible for Him to actualise, persons who, accordingly, freely possess the property of transworld damnation. God in His providence has so arranged the world that as the Christian gospel went out from first century Palestine, all who would respond freely to it if they heard it did hear it, and all who do not hear it are persons who would not have accepted it if they had heard it.

<http://www.reasonablefaith.org/middle-knowledge-and-christian-exclusivism>

Craig finds it necessary to supplement his prooftexting with this conjectural wishful-thinking. But there's no good reason to think his speculation is true.

Olson's Arminian theodicy

I'm going to comment on this post:

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2013/06/a-talk-on-god-and-suffering-given-at-theology-live-event-in-beeville-texas/>

My point so far is simply that innocent suffering, the suffering of small children, for example, is a serious challenge to Christian faith in an all good and all powerful God, the God of Scripture.

i) How is that a challenge to faith in the God of Scripture? Doesn't Scripture acknowledge the suffering of children? Aren't there Scriptural cases in which God directly or indirectly causes children to suffer? It's not as if Scripture fosters the expectation that children are exempt from suffering. That God will always shield children from suffering. There's no inconsistency between the God of Scripture and suffering children. So how is the latter a challenge to faith in the former?

ii) Also, throughout his presentation, Olson assumes a standard of right and wrong. But absent the goodness of God, where does that standard come from?

The great German Lutheran theologian and preacher Helmut Thielicke came to

America once after World War 2. He was one of the few leading pastors of Germany who did not support Hitler and survived anyway. He pastored a large church in Hamburg throughout the war including the devastating bombings in its later months. He wrote many books of theology and his sermons fill many volumes. When he was asked by an American during his visit to this country what one thing he thought Americans needed more than anything else he said "a theology of suffering." Like many people around the world he thought America has been largely immune to the ravages of war, pestilence, famine, epidemic, earthquake. Because of that, he believed, Americans are ill equipped to respond to innocent suffering. I have to agree with Thielicke.

So Americans didn't experience the Civil War. Americans who were drafted to fight in foreign wars didn't experience the ravages of war. Likewise, Americans don't experience natural disasters or epidemics. What was Olson thinking?

Well, theology has four criteria: revelation, including Jesus Christ and Scripture, tradition, reason and experience.

Is tradition a criterion? Since tradition can be wrong, don't we need a criterion to judge tradition? Likewise, don't we need a criterion to judge experience? Even reason needs criteria.

Some suffering, however, seems to be absolutely gratuitous—serving no good purpose.

If that's the case, then I don't see that Olson has a salvageable position. Once you concede the existence of "absolutely gratuitous" suffering, then cobbling together some partial theodicies won't fix the problem. Why would God permit a preventable evil that has no fringe benefits or redeeming value?

Many question that until I mention the suffering of a child being murdered by a sexual predator or a soldier or concentration camp guard. Then, suddenly, most people intuitively agree that some suffering is gratuitous.

I don't find that intuitively obvious. Most lives impact many other lives in a multitude of ways, for better or worse. By the same token, premature death has both good and bad consequences down the line.

Another preliminary matter has to do with the Bible and suffering. What does the Bible say about the subject? Why can't we just turn to the Bible for our answer? Doesn't the Bible contain all the answers? The Book of Job is the only sustained discussion of suffering in the Bible. It offers no theodicy. In fact, it rejects the theodicies of Job's "friends." All it tells us is that not all suffering is deserved. The book was apparently written with that one purpose in mind—to reject the common belief that suffering is always the result of sin in the suffering person's life.

The Book of Job offers a theodicy for *Job's* ordeal. And that would be a theodicy for comparable cases.

Never addressed directly, however, is the problem of totally innocent suffering—the suffering of innocents.

"Innocence" is a relative concept in Scripture. We are all sinners. We may suffer unjustly at the hands of other sinners. And there's no systematic correlation between our sins and what we suffer. But we're not innocent in relation to a holy God.

Nor does the Bible provide a clear, comprehensive, rationally satisfying theodicy—“This is why all suffering is justified in God’s world.” Rather, as many Bible scholars point out, the Bible’s alternative to theodicy is eschatology—the promise that someday all innocent suffering will end. “Every tear will be wiped away” and the creation will be liberated from its “bondage to decay.”

Seems to me that Scripture does outline a theodicy. For instance:

1 As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. 2 And his disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned,

this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” 3 Jesus answered, “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him (Jn 9:1-3).

1 Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. 2 It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was ill. 3 So the sisters sent to him, saying, “Lord, he whom you love is ill.” 4 But when Jesus heard it he said, “This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it” (Jn 11:1-4).

For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all (Rom 11:32).

But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe (Gal 3:22).

Divine determinism is that form of speculative theology, common in some Protestant circles, that claims that God “designs, ordains, and governs” everything without exception including all events of

suffering including innocent suffering—for his own glory. One of the most influential contemporary pastors who promotes this view to thousands of so-called “young, restless, Reformed” Christians is Baptist pastor and author John Piper whose books sell by the millions. According to him, and his precursors such as Puritan theologian and preacher Jonathan Edwards, God foreordains and renders certain even the agonizing death of an infant. God thus becomes sheer power without goodness in any sense of “goodness” meaningful to us.

2) God does not foreordain or cause innocent suffering; it does not glorify him. To believe that is to detract from God’s goodness and love.

He sets (2) in contrast to "divine determinism," but is that a tenable contrast?

i) Since the Arminian God could prevent the "agonizing death of an infant," but refrains from so doing, the Arminian God *makes* the baby die an agonizing death by refusing to intervene. His inaction *makes that happen*. That's the differential factor. Whether or not he intervenes is what makes the difference. How is that distinguishable from God "causing" the infant to die an agonizing death?

ii) Even assuming, for the sake of argument, that that's distinguishable from divine *causation*, how is that

distinguishable from divine *determinism*? If, absent divine intervention, the infant is *bound* to die an agonizing death, then God's inaction makes it *certain* to happen. How is that different from "determining" the outcome? Indeed, since the Arminian God has both foreknowledge and counterfactual knowledge, how is that different from *predetermining* the outcome?

*Another speculative answer, one that does not sacrifice God's goodness or power, distinguishes between two wills of God—God's "antecedent will" and God's "consequent will." It appeals to God's self-limitation to explain why there is evil and innocent suffering in God's world without sacrificing God's goodness or power. A contemporary example of this in Christian theology is pastor and author Gregory Boyd who wrote *Is God to Blame?* But he stands in a long tradition of Christian thought called Arminian theology (after Jacob Arminius who died in 1610). According to Boyd and Arminians, God has to limit his power to allow for human free will. Human rejection of God has pushed God away so that the world is under a self-*

chosen curse. Evil powers, whether personal or structural or both, rule the world. God depends on us, for now anyway, to alleviate suffering. That there be no innocent suffering was God's antecedent will—antecedent to human rebellion against God by means of misuse of free will. That there be innocent suffering in this fallen world is part of God's consequent will—consequent to human rebellion.

So the Arminian solution to the problem of evil is that God *consequently* wills the death of innocents rather than *antecedently* wills their death? How is that distinction morally relevant?

Advocates of this view, however, argue that God respects free will and cannot intervene every time someone is about to misuse free will to cause innocent suffering or else free will would be a mirage, an illusion, not real.

If the police foil a terrorist plot to kill thousands of innocents, does that turn freewill into a mirage?

And God cannot intervene to stop every instance of innocent suffering from illness or calamity because that would be to make this world something other than it is—a “veil of soul making” in which there must be risk and danger in order for people to recognize their need for God. C. S. Lewis, an advocate of this view, said that suffering is “God’s megaphone to rouse a deaf world to its need of him.”

One problem with a soul-making theodicy is that suffering causes some pious believers to lose their faith. They become so bitter and disillusioned that they commit apostasy. So it's counterproductive.

That was revolutionary because traditional theology said God cannot suffer. God is, Christian tradition says, impassible—incapable of suffering... Tradition says God is incapable of suffering, impassible, because to suffer is to change and God is perfect.

That's not what impassibility means. Impassibility means God cannot be affected by the world.

Bushnell, Bonhoeffer and other orthodox Christian thinkers who have adopted the idea of a suffering God in modernity see God's suffering as voluntary in the sense that God could have avoided suffering by not creating the world or by preventing sin and its consequences. Once God created and permitted human defection from fellowship with him into sin God had no choice but to suffer because God is love.

This assumes that suffering is inevitable, which—in turn—assumes that sin and evil are inevitable. But if human agents have libertarian freedom, then in what sense are sin and evil inevitable?

But how does God's suffering with the suffering help them? It helps his reputation, but how does it help those who suffer? God's suffering presence with gives comfort and hope. Comfort in

knowing that one is not alone in suffering.

Isn't that rather like the vindictive attitude of the sniper or the sociopath who wants to make others miserable because he is miserable? "If I can't be happy, no one else deserves to be happy!"

I see this pastoral approach of emphasizing God's suffering with and for those who suffer as compatible with the speculative view of Arminianism—the distinction between God's antecedent will and God's consequent will. In other words, if we are going to say pastorally, as I think we must, that God is present with those who suffer, suffering with them and for them, because God is love, then we must say that this is due to a voluntary self-limitation of God in relation to creation itself. Innocent suffering is a side effect of creature's misuse of free will. It is part of the human condition under the curse of defection from God. We have pushed God out of the center of our world and

our lives onto the cross. God goes voluntarily to the cross—not only of Calvary but of the world of suffering. God is present whenever and wherever innocents suffer because he is love and cannot but suffer with them. This still leaves some questions unanswered. But I believe it relieves much of the stress of believing in an all good, all powerful God in face of innocent suffering in God’s world. God is not a distant, unaffected deity “watching from a distance,” but a God intimately involved in suffering with those who suffer and for them.

That's like saying an ER physician should be in pain if the patient is in pain.

2) God does not foreordain or cause innocent suffering; it does not glorify him. To believe that is to detract from God’s goodness and love.

5) When we suffer we should realize that God may have something good to bring out of it if we hand it over to him and seek his will for that.

If God brings good out of evil, did he not *intend* to bring good out of evil? Was that not his *plan* all along?

Prayerless Arminians

Christians used to think God controls nature. To take a classic example, a farmer would pray for rain.

Likewise, if you were about to be overtaken by a tornado or hurricane, you would pray that God spare you and your family. If there were wildfires threatening your neighborhood, you would pray for divine protection. In the same vein is the pious belief that God can heal.

By the same token, if you were spared, you gave thanks to God for answering your prayer.

Recently, however, some high-profile Arminians have removed natural evils from God's jurisdiction.

So, at the end of the day, anyone who says a natural or man-made disaster, calamity, catastrophe is from God must be thinking either that it was an arbitrary act of God, done for no particular reason other than perhaps to create fear (which still doesn't explain why that particular place), or that it was in some sense God's judgment.

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2012/03/further-thoughts-about-catastrophes-and-gods-judgment/>

That particular but pervasive understanding of God's sovereignty is what might be called "meticulous" (or "exhaustive") sovereignty. In regards to this subject, there are only two real options: either God determines everything (meticulous sovereignty) or God does not determine everything. A well-known example of meticulous sovereignty can be found in various statements made by notable evangelical leaders in the wake of natural disasters, such as hurricanes from Katrina to Sandy. If one affirms meticulous sovereignty, then one must also believe God decided, desired, and carried out the weather conditions, the speed and direction of the winds, the deluges of water, and precisely which homes would be destroyed and which homes would escape.

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/jesuscreed/2013/05/20/a-long-faithfulness-preface/>

The first point immediately confirmed in my heart was theological: God did not do this to my child. God is not the author of evil. God does not terminate sweet lives with a pulmonary embolism. Pulmonary embolisms are a result of the bent nature of this world. As Ann kept repeating, "God is not the problem; he is the solution."

One primary reason I am not a Calvinist is that I do not believe in God's detailed control of all events. Why? First, because I find it impossible to believe that I am more merciful or compassionate than God. Second, because the biblical portrait shows that God is pure light and holy love. In him there is no darkness, nothing other than light and love. And third, the words, "The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away," from the lips of Job (1:21), are not good theology. According to Job 1, it was not God but the Devil who took away Job's children, health, and wealth. God allowed it to happen, but when Job said these words, as the rest of the story shows, he was not yet enlightened about the true nature of the source of his calamity and God's actual will for

his life. God's will for him was for good and not for harm.

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2012/april/when-a-daughter-dies.html?paging=off>

As you can also see, their position is cast in explicit contrast to Calvinism. The motivation is, of course, to exempt God from the problem of evil.

However, your doctrine of providence runs in tandem with your doctrine of prayer. If God isn't responsible for drought, then presumably a farmer shouldn't pray for rain. That's not God's department.

If God isn't responsible for tornadoes, hurricanes, or wildfires, then we shouldn't pray for divine protection. And if we do escape, we shouldn't be grateful to God. We just got lucky. God had nothing to do with it.

Likewise, if a friend or relative is deathly ill, we shouldn't pray for healing. That's none of God's business.

Praying for rain

Last month, Scot McKnight plugged a new book he's written, attacking Calvinism:

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/jesuscreed/2013/05/20/a-long-faithfulness-preface/>

Here are some comments I left on his post:

Dr. McKnight said:

“If God determines everything (as in the meticulous sovereignty approach), then God not only permits but must determine that some young girls and boys will be abused while others will be spared, that some adults will suffer more in this life while others will suffer less. For this essay’s purposes, it is not relevant how tragic situations are explained (e.g., that we are all sinners who deserve these tragedies and even worse; or that God wants to make an example of humans as depraved). What is relevant is that—in this understanding of divine sovereignty—God determines everything, that God

can do otherwise but chooses to bring about awful conditions and events.”

How does Dr. McKnight distinguish between the morality of God *permitting* child and God *determining* child abuse?

God knows that if he intervened to stop a child abuser, the child would not have been abused. Absent divine intervention, the child will be abused. Therefore, divine inaction ensures the abuse.

How, then, is *ensuring* the outcome morally distinct from *determining* the outcome?

Dr. McKnight said:

“That particular but pervasive understanding of God’s sovereignty is what might be called ‘meticulous’ (or ‘exhaustive’) sovereignty. In regards to this subject, there are only two real options: either God determines everything (meticulous sovereignty) or God does not determine everything. A well-known example of meticulous sovereignty can be found in various statements made by notable evangelical leaders in the wake of natural disasters,

such as hurricanes from Katrina to Sandy. If one affirms meticulous sovereignty, then one must also believe God decided, desired, and carried out the weather conditions, the speed and direction of the winds, the deluges of water, and precisely which homes would be destroyed and which homes would escape.”

i) Jesus said God sends sunshine and rain (Mt 5:45). Doesn't that mean God controls the weather?

ii) God answered Elijah's prayer to end the drought by sending rain (1 Kgs 18:42-45). Doesn't that assume God controls the weather? Indeed, doesn't v.1 explicitly attribute the rain to God?

iii) According to Scripture, *some* natural disasters are divine judgments. Noah's flood, as well as the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, are paradigm-cases.

Confining ourselves to the subset of natural disasters that are divine judgments, does Dr. McKnight deny that God was behind these particular events? Presumably he doesn't think the natural disaster which destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah was just *accidentally* punitive. Doesn't its function as a divine judgment mean God was responsible for when and where that happened? That God directed the outcome?

The Leviticus Principle

I'm going to comment on this post:

<http://tyndalephilosophy.com/2013/04/25/a-demonstration-against-calvinism-2/>

It is part of the essence of Calvinism that there are two distinct groups of individuals in God's overall economy: the elect and the non-elect. The elect are the grateful recipients of God's irresistible, unmerited grace and are thereby saved. The non-elect, by sad contrast, receive no such grace; they are passed over. Consequently, they are damned for all eternity.

To be damned for eternity is hardly unique to Calvinism.

Now even Calvinists admit that this scenario makes it at least appear that God is being unjust or unfair.

No, I don't grant that this scenario makes it at least appear that God is unjust or unfair.

After all, why not just give irresistible grace to both groups?

In that case, they wouldn't be two groups.

First recall that according to the Calvinist story, God gives irresistible grace to some (the elect) but not others (the non-elect). If that's the case, then some individuals are shown favor that others are not. The question at once arises: Is this just or fair?

Arises for *whom*? Arminians?

Notice that in asking this question, we're not asking whether it is just of God to punish those who deserve it. Of course it is. Nor are we asking whether it is generous of God to bestow grace on

those who don't deserve it. It most surely is. Rather, we are asking whether it is just or fair for these two (spiritually) qualitatively identical groups—i.e., the elect and the non-elect—to be treated differently.

The standard answer is that it is just to treat spiritually identical individuals differently if both parties have no rightful claim to better treatment.

If two debtors owe me money, I can justly forgive the debt of one but not the other. I owe them nothing: they owe me something. Since both of them are in debt to me, I'm not wronging one of them if I require him to pay me back.

But there is a further, truly fatal difficulty. The Calvinist proponent of (3) faces the following dilemma. Either God has a basis for his differential treatment of the elect and non-elect or he doesn't. If there is no basis, then God's decision to award irresistible grace to the one but not the other of these groups is wholly arbitrary; in which case God is a reckless, unprincipled decision-maker—a

conclusion which is at once both manifestly unfair (to the non-elect) and theologically appalling.

i) To begin with, the inference is fallacious. Even if God's discrimination were "wholly arbitrary," that wouldn't make it unjust.

ii) Moreover, unconditional election doesn't entail that God has no basis for choosing to save one sinner rather than another.

a) For instance, God might save one sinner but not another, even though it's within his power to save everyone, to demonstrate the sheer gratuity of grace. What better way to demonstrate that he's under no obligation to save anyone than by only saving some rather than all?

8 For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, 9 not a result of works, so that no one may boast (Eph 2:8-9).

What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? 2 For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. 3 For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God,

and it was counted to him as righteousness.” 4 Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. 5 And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness (Rom 4:1-5).

b) God might also reprobate some sinners to manifest his justice. If God is good, then it is good for God to reveal his nature.

What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction (Rom 9:22).

iii) God might reprobate some to illustrate the fact that, left to their own devices, sinners love evil.

19 And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. 20 For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed (Jn 3:19-20).

iv) If God saved everyone, then some people who would go to heaven in this world won't go to heaven in that world, for

they won't exist in that alternate world—where everyone is saved.

The elect make different choices in life than the reprobate, and vice versa. Lead different lives. That alters the course of history, including who is born.

Like time-travel stories which involve changing the past, the earlier in time you change the past, the more you change the future.

Many heaven-bound sinners exist due to various choices the reprobate made upstream. If everyone upstream were elect, that would change the course of events downstream.

If God elected everyone, he would be erasing many who are otherwise elect in this world. Saving everyone in that counterfactual future would come at the expense of the elect in a world where everyone is not elect.

Each scenario has tradeoffs. If everyone is elect, many people miss out. For that comes at the cost of another world with a different set of elect sinners.

If you don't think it's appalling, just ask yourself how you'd like it if your professor used a similar method to grade your term paper. Without a doubt, this horn of the dilemma is squarely on the broad road leading to destruction.

If it was a fair test, and several students flunked the test, the professor could justly discriminate. It would not be unjust for the prof. to give some, but not all, failed students a second chance.

Arminians never appreciate the culpability of sin. They treat sin as misfortune rather than guilt. Bad luck rather than just desert.

Well, let's suppose instead that God does have a basis for his differential treatment of these groups. Then according to the Leviticus Principle, it must be contextually relevant. Now the context for giving or withholding irresistible grace is spiritual or salvific. Therefore, according to LP2, it will be just or fair for God to favor the elect over the non-elect only if God's basis for doing so is a spiritually relevant one. By hypothesis, however, there is absolutely no spiritually relevant difference between the elect and the non-elect: they are all dead in their sins; they are all incapable of recommending themselves to God. On this horn of the dilemma, then, God has favored the elect but on a purely context

irrelevant basis. By LP2, therefore, he has acted unjustly.

Here's their prooftext:

Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly (Leviticus 19:15).

The Leviticus Principle is that (ceteris paribus) a judge ought treat the guilty as guilty and the innocent as innocent. If the poor are innocent, they should be acquitted; if the great are guilty, they should be convicted.

It follows logically and inescapably that God's treatment of the elect and non-elect is either arbitrary and unprincipled or it's contextually irrelevant. Either way, the unhappy outcome is that God has unfairly and unjustly favored some with irresistible grace while withholding it from others. But given the Leviticus Principle, the elect and non-elect should have (i) all received an installment of irresistible grace, or (ii) no one of them

received an installment of irresistible grace. That's what biblical justice or fairness demands.

The Leviticus Principle is dealing with defendants. Guilty defendants ought not be acquitted: innocent defendants ought not be convicted.

It's dealing with strict justice rather than mercy or grace.

And since God, if he exists, is essentially just and fair, but Calvinism implies that he's not, it follows that Calvinism actually entails atheism: the non-existence of God.

If Calvinism entails atheism, then atheism has gotten a bum rap.

That's why we're not Calvinists; it's because we're theists.

Not Christians—just theists?

The solution, of course, is simple. We must recognize that because God is supremely fair and just, the grace he gives is universal but resistible. This explains why although God wants everyone to be saved, some aren't. It's not because God passes over some poor, wretched souls, refusing to give them the irresistible grace they so desperately need.

According to Arminianism, some sinners are born with every spiritual advantage while other sinners are born with every spiritual disadvantage.

Some sinners are born to wonderful Christian parents. They hear the Gospel under the most propitious circumstances.

Other sinners are born under circumstances which poison them to the Gospel. Even if they had a chance to hear it, their personal experience has conditioned them to be very hostile to the Gospel.

Universal resistible grace doesn't level the playing field. According to Arminianism, both the son of Charles Hodge and the son of the Grand Ayatollah have universal resistible grace. But the formative experience of A. A. Hodge predisposes him to accept the Gospel whereas the formative experience of the Grand Ayatollah's son predisposes him to reject the Gospel.

Likewise, a child of wise and kind Christian parents has been given a far more appealing introduction to Christianity than the child of hypocritical, legalistic churchgoers.

Universal resistible grace doesn't erase damaging memories, doesn't reverse prejudicial social conditioning, doesn't nullify cultural deterrents.

Is the Arminian God a cosmic terrorist?

I'm going to comment on this post:

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2013/04/where-was-god-when-the-fertilizer-plant-exploded/>

If what many Christians believe about God is true, then the West, Texas disaster (like every disaster) was actually good—"designed, ordained and governed by God" necessarily means "good" in a Christian worldview.

According to predestination, the explosion was "designed, ordained, and governed by God." To say it's good, without further ado, is simplistic.

Something God designs, ordains and governs (the key is 'designs') has to be good in the larger scheme of things.

That qualification is more accurate than the first statement. However, it's still misleading.

It's not the explosion that's good. Rather, the explosion contributes to something *e/*se that's good. A good that wouldn't eventuate apart from the explosion.

This isn't a difficult concept to grasp. Olson prides himself on being a deep thinker, but he's really quite shallow.

Suppose I plan to marry my high school sweetheart. We've been going steady since junior high.

Suppose she'd killed in a traffic accident during our senior year of high school. I'm devastated. She will always hold a special place in my heart.

Still, I don't wish to be a childless bachelor for the rest of my life, so I marry another classmate. We have a good marriage. Our kids turn out well.

Does that make the death of my high school sweetheart good? No. Rather, it makes possible an alternate good. It's not her death that's good, but the resultant alternative. The alternate good is contingent on the tragedy of her premature demise. My marriage is good. My kids are good. None of that would have happened had I married her.

So we're dealing with impossible goods. One set of goods excludes the other set of goods.

Other Christians mean that God is eternally, immutably good in himself and his good character governs what he does. He can't lie, for example. It's not

that he just chooses not to; he literally can't because he is truth itself. Whatever God does is good because he is good; he cannot do wrong. However, some who hold this view ("realist" with regard to God's nature) believe that things we perceive as disasters and evils are designed, ordained and governed by God. To them, the West fertilizer plant explosion (which devastated a nursing home and killed several first responders and injured children and wiped out a large portion of a town) was from God in the sense that it was designed, ordained and governed by God. God didn't just know it was going to happen and didn't just permit it; God planned it and wanted it to happen (even if he regretted its necessity) and directly or indirectly caused it.

i) I don't think God regrets his plan.

ii) Predestination renders the outcome conditionally necessary. Given predestination, the outcome is necessary. But the given is not a necessity. Nothing necessitated God.

iii) How does Olson's permissive approach exonerate God? Did God permit the explosion because that's good in the larger scheme of things? Or did God permit the explosion even though there is nothing to mitigate that evil in the larger scheme of things? If the explosion has no redeeming value, then what was God's justification for allowing it happen? Why does Olson think permission let's God off the hook?

iv) Apropos (iii), I don't see that Olson can invoke the freewill defense.

a) I haven't studied the details of the accident, but presumably the factory exploded because fertilizer is combustible (due to methane gas/ammonium nitrate). Well, it's not as if God would violate the fertilizer's freewill by preventing that accident.

b) Suppose human error was a factor. Maybe factory workers were careless about safety protocols. Even if that's the case, God wouldn't violate their freewill by preventing the accident. After all, they didn't intend the accident. It's not like they sabotaged the plant. Indeed, if they could have foreseen the outcome, they would have taken precautionary measures to avoid the accident. So divine intervention would honor their implicit intentions.

At best, Olson could only invoke the freewill defense if a factory worker deliberately tampered with the equipment. Of course that seems like a rather perverse impediment on divine restraint—where it's only permissible for God to intervene if the agent did not intend to do harm.

c) Maybe Olson would invoke a natural law theodicy, which he links to the freewill defense. Perhaps he'd say a stable

environment with predictable consequences is necessary for making morally responsible choices.

But even if we accept that argument in principle, that has to be balanced against the collateral damage which Olson himself is quick to accentuate: “devastated a nursing home and killed several first responders and injured children and wiped out a large portion of a town.”

Once again, why does Olson think divine permission ipso facto excuses God for letting that happen? Isn't the very question at issue whether God had good reason to let that happen? To cite divine permission as the justification is circular when it's divine permission that demands justification.

Many would say God didn't cause it because they appeal to secondary causes, but if one asks about it's ultimate cause they will explain that God is the ultimate cause of whatever happens.

If that's a problem for Calvinists, then Olson is sitting in the same leaky boat. Isn't the Arminian God the ultimate cause of that accident? The factory is not a personal agent that willed its self-destruction.

Or take catastrophic accidents due to metal fatigue. Isn't the Arminian God the ultimate cause? Even if we grant the existence of libertarian freewill, that doesn't extend to inanimate objects.

Now, to my point about the West, Texas explosion (and all things like it): IF meticulous providence is true (viz., that God designs, ordains and governs whatever happens), then God was orchestrating it and rendering it certain (necessary) for a good purpose.

Agreed. I accept that implication.

What I have found in my (now becoming rather) long life is that many people who say they believe that falter in that belief when they mature and experience really bad things in their own lives—especially happening to loved ones.

I've experienced "really bad things" happen to three of my loved ones. My faith in predestination and providence hasn't faltered. To the contrary, that's what makes it bearable: knowing that this is part of God's wise and benevolent plan. No matter how bleak things seem, that gives you something to hope for.

It's easier to believe that when it's not your town, or your race, or your family it happens to.

Olson is such an arrogant, conceited little twit.

But I've also noticed that few, if any, of those who believe that actually follow through with that belief.

Unlike Olson, I follow through on my beliefs.

Instead of celebrating what happened because God designed it, ordained it and governed it they express grief and sorrow and regret over it (especially when it happens to someone they know and love or their own town or family or whatever).

That piggybacks on the simplistic way he framed the issue at the outset, which I already corrected.

If I were a believer in meticulous providence, divine determinism (and still a Christian) I would feel duty-bound to thank God for whatever happens.

I do.

I might feel great grief and sorrow, but I would follow through the logic of what I believe and say, publicly, that “This is from God and therefore good and I thank and praise him for it.”

- i)** We should always thank God for whatever happens.
- ii)** Of course, people can be overwhelmed by emotion. Does Olson think Arminians are magically exempt from that psychological response?
- iii)** There’s a difference between praising God and praising an event. The factory is just a thing. The explosion is just a thing. Praise and blame attaches to the personal agents. Events are only praiseworthy or blameworthy by extension. A personification.

I suspect, however, that IF more consistent Calvinists and others who believe in meticulous providence/divine determinism actually did that, many people moving toward that view would turn away. Is that why they don't? I can only suspect that's a reason why they don't. (Some do and I give them credit for it.)

Keep in mind that Olson is an intellectual coward. He picks on the laity. He doesn't seek out the most sophisticated proponents of Calvinism.

Another reason many don't is because they know some people would ask them "So what good purpose can you imagine for such a disaster from God?" Of course, they can always appeal to mystery and just say they don't know. That's respectable. Still, "inquiring minds want to know" what are some possible reasons why God would design, ordain and govern (render certain, cause, make necessary) something like what happened in West, Texas two days ago. I suspect that deep in the recesses of their minds some believers in meticulous

providence who live within a 100 miles radius of West, Texas are thinking it might have something to do with the annual “Czechfest” which is like an “Octoberfest” held in the Czech-settled town. Lots of drinking goes on there. Or they might know something else about the town that they think justifies such an act of God.

The problem with such explanations (and a reason people who think them often draw back from saying them) is that so often, as in West, the brunt of the disaster affects the weak and those trying to help the weak (e.g., nursing home patients and first responders trying to put out the fire). Frankly, to put it bluntly, if meticulous providence is true, God would seem to have bad aim (e.g., the hurricane and flood that devastated much of New Orleans left Bourbon Street in the French Quarter almost untouched!).

He imputes to Calvinists the notion that the only good reason for this accident would be divine judgment, then proceeds to burn the straw man he erected.

Again, though, it’s easy to imagine how disasters have good consequences as well as bad consequences. We’re dealing with alternate futures. Alternate histories.

History is complex. Most events have ripple effects. Change one or more variables, and that will make some things better while making other things worse. This is a popular theme in SF movies, viz. *Frequency*, *Looper*, *Mr. Nobody*, *The Butterfly Effect*.

So where does a believer in relational sovereignty think God was when the fertilizer plant exploded? Many will simply say “We can’t know—unless God gives a revelation explaining his ‘place’ in it EXCEPT that God was and is there among the suffering offering grace, comfort, strength, pardon, hope.”

It’s a tribute to Olson’s hidebound insularity that he considers that a plausible theodicy.

At best, that’s like a mechanic who knows the factory is going to explode in a few hours, keeps a safe distance, waiting for that to happen, without preventing the accident or even warning anyone, then comforting the survivors after the fact. At worst, that’s like a terrorist who sabotages the factory, then comforts the survivors.

Calvinism at the burial service

When Koop came to speak at the college where I taught theology in the 1990s I was excited to hear him in person. I had a vague hope of perhaps meeting him, but that dimmed when I saw the crowds that showed up to hear him. The auditorium was packed to the rafters. He lived up to his reputation as a spell binding public speaker. However, he didn't talk about any of the expected subjects—respect for life, AIDS, homosexuality, smoking, etc. His subject was “God Killed My Son.”

Koop spoke that day for almost an hour about God's sovereignty and his son's death. (He also wrote a book about it that was published around the same time.) According to Koop, God arranged his son's tragic death in a mountain climbing accident so that it was immediate and painless (according to the coroner). Most of his talk was about God's sovereignty over all things: meticulous providence. His son was his case study.

According to Koop, whose pastor James Montgomery Boice was one of the most vocal

advocates of high Calvinism among American evangelicals and one of my seminary professors, every event is foreordained and governed by God. That, he said, is the only thing that gave him comfort when his son died—that it was no accident. It was foreordained and rendered certain by God for a divine and good purpose. As I listened, I wanted to stand and ask him (and would have asked him had there been a Q & A session afterwards) whether he would get the same comfort out of thinking God killed his son if his son's death had not been immediate and painless. He made such a huge issue of that. After all, many sons' (and daughters') deaths are not immediate and painless.

A few years later I stood in a hallway in a children's wing of a hospital and heard a small child, probably no more than two or three, screaming in agony in a room down the hall. There was no question about the source of the screaming—it could only be extreme pain. It went on and on the whole time I was visiting my daughter's friend with her. I wanted to stop my ears from hearing it.

If Koop was right, that, too, was from God. If asked, would he tell the parents of that screaming child that her pain was foreordained and rendered certain by God for a good purpose?

I can't say for sure that Koop's son's death wasn't foreordained by God. Perhaps it was. Without a special revelation, I doubt we can know for sure. But I am confident that God did not foreordain and render certain that tiny girls' pains. With Baptist theologian E. Frank Tupper (A Scandalous Providence: The Jesus Story of the Compassion of God) I believe God is not a "do anything, anytime, anywhere kind of God."

In my opinion, the proper response to that little girl's pain (other than medical intervention which I'm sure was being tried) was prayer, not explanation.

A few years after hearing Koop (whom I respected and admired even as I disagreed with him) I had the unique privilege of spending a fairly long time one-on-one with (then) retired Fuller Seminary ethics professor Lewis Smedes. (I was serving as his chauffeur from a large airport to the small city

where I teach. He was coming to give our seminary's annual endowed lecture series.) Smedes was not as famous as Koop, but he was known and still is remembered as one of the leading Christian ethicists. He was also a member of a Reformed church. (He was an ordained minister of the Christian Reformed Church.)

Smedes and I talked about Koop's theology. He told me that when his son died, he stood beside the open grave into which he had just been lowered and swore that he would never tell another person that God took their child. He wrote an article about God's sovereignty that broke decisively with meticulous providence. I explained open theism to Smedes and he expressed strong sympathy with that view and said he would probably have to write an explanation to his synod about his theology as it deviated from what he believed when he was ordained. Smedes and I exchanged e-mails about open theism and his last one to me stated that he embraced that view (without embracing the label). He died soon after that.

One thing I find interesting is how some Christians (and no doubt others) find comfort in believing God

kills people, including children, while others are repulsed by the idea. Equally devout, equally God-fearing, Jesus-loving, Bible-believing people like Koop and Smedes not only hold different beliefs but react so radically differently “from the gut,” so to speak, to childrens’ deaths. And, of course, they interpret Scripture differently. Which comes first, I wonder? The experience or the hermeneutic? Or are they ever really separate?

One thing I look forward to finding out is how many of the “young, restless, Reformed” generation will hold onto their strong belief in God’s absolute, meticulous sovereignty as they mature and experience life—including tragedies in their personal lives. I predict many of them will, like Smedes, change their beliefs.

It’s one thing to believe God can bring good out of innocent pain and suffering and something else to believe God planned it and rendered it certain. The former is a good God; the latter is hardly distinguishable from the devil.

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2013/02/remembering-c-everett-koop-and-lewis-smedes/>

Several problems:

i) It could well be that the zeal of some converts to Calvinism will dampen with the passage of time. Of course, the phenomenon of converts losing their initial enthusiasm as the freshness of their discovery wears off is hardly unique to Calvinism. The zeal of many converts to many theological traditions cools as time goes on.

ii) Koop wasn't a zealous young convert when he attributed his son's death to predestination. BTW, James Boice died of liver cancer at 61.

iii) It's striking that Olson was an evangelist for open theism in his correspondence with Smedes.

iv) Olson mentions a young child in physical agony. Of course, Koop was a pioneering pediatric surgeon, so it's not as if Olson has a monopoly on compassion for the plight of suffering children. Koop made that his life's work.

v) Olson evidently thinks it is evil for a child to suffer excruciating pain. If so, we'd classify that as natural evil in distinction to moral evil. So what prevents the Arminian God from sedating the child? God isn't violating the freewill of the pain receptors.

vi) Perhaps Olson would say natural evil is rooted in moral evil. That natural evil is the result of the fall.

Actually, I wonder if Olson believes in a historical fall, or the historicity of Adam and Eve.

But let's assume he does. Even if (ex hypothesi) the child's agony has its remote source of origin in Adam's sin, why

does that inhibit the Arminian God from sedating the child? God isn't violating Adam's freewill by sedating a child born centuries later. And God isn't violating the child's freewill by relieving its pain. Even if we can trace the child's agony back through a causal chain or historical sequence to Adam's sin, how is that relevant to what should be done now to comfort the child?

Does Olson think the child deserves to be in pain? Does Olson think the child is guilty in Adam? Apparently not. After all, Olson views the child's agony as something deplorable, so deplorable that God would be diabolical if he were responsible for the child's agony.

But if the child did nothing deserving of pain, why would the Arminian God hesitate to sedate the child? The child's pain isn't punitive. So even if this is a natural evil that's rooted in the moral evil of Adam's sin, why would the Arminian God allow the child to suffer like that?

For that matter, don't Arminians think original sin is unjust unless original sin is offset by universal sufficient grace?

vii) Doesn't the Arminian God ensure the child's agony by refusing to anesthetize the child? Olson seems to think the only way to render an event certain is to directly or positively cause it. But that's obviously false.

Suppose I see an egg rolling across a counter. Unless I stop the egg or catch the egg, it will roll off the edge of the counter and fall on the floor. By not intervening, I ensure that the egg will fall to the floor. Likewise, the child's agony is rendered certain by God doing nothing to stop the pain.

viii) In what sense did the Arminian God not plan the child's pain? The child's pain was a foreseeable and

avoidable consequence of God making the world. So that's hardly an unplanned event.

ix) If the parents asked, what would be wrong with saying the child's agony was happening for a good reason? How is that answer supposed to be worse than saying God allows your child to be in agony for no good reason?

x) Sure, prayer might be better in that situation than a theological explanation, but Olson is the one who has the parents asking for an explanation. Olson can't turn around and condemn the Calvinist for giving the parents an explanation when that's how he framed the hypothetical in the first place.

xi) Does Olson think God never kills people? Aren't there many biblical examples of God killing people? As is so often the case, Olson seems to repudiate the God of the Bible:

27 Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord.

28 Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. 29 For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. 30 That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died (1 Cor 11:27-30).

But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, 2 and with his wife's knowledge he kept back for himself some of the proceeds and brought only a part of it and laid it at the apostles' feet. 3 But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land? 4 While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to man but to God." 5 When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last. And great fear came upon all who heard of it. 6 The young men rose and wrapped him up and carried him out and buried him.

7 After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. 8 And Peter said to her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for so much." And she said, "Yes, for so much." 9 But Peter said to her, "How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you

out.” 10 Immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last. When the young men came in they found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. 11 And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things (Acts 5:1-11).

20 Now Herod was angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon, and they came to him with one accord, and having persuaded Blastus, the king's chamberlain, they asked for peace, because their country depended on the king's country for food. 21 On an appointed day Herod put on his royal robes, took his seat upon the throne, and delivered an oration to them. 22 And the people were shouting, “The voice of a god, and not of a man!” 23 Immediately an angel of the Lord struck him down, because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and breathed his last (Acts 12:20-23).

29 At midnight the Lord struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sat on his throne to the firstborn of the captive who was in the dungeon, and all the firstborn of the livestock. 30 And Pharaoh rose up in

the night, he and all his servants and all the Egyptians. And there was a great cry in Egypt, for there was not a house where someone was not dead (12:29-30).

32 “Therefore thus says the Lord concerning the king of Assyria: He shall not come into this city or shoot an arrow there, or come before it with a shield or cast up a siege mound against it. 33 By the way that he came, by the same he shall return, and he shall not come into this city, declares the Lord. 34 For I will defend this city to save it, for my own sake and for the sake of my servant David.”

35 And that night the angel of the Lord went out and struck down 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians. And when people arose early in the morning, behold, these were all dead bodies. 36 (2 Kgs 19:32-36).

41 But on the next day all the congregation of the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and against Aaron, saying, “You have killed the people of the Lord.” 42 And when the congregation had assembled against Moses and against Aaron, they turned toward the tent of meeting. And behold, the

cloud covered it, and the glory of the Lord appeared. 43 And Moses and Aaron came to the front of the tent of meeting, 44 and the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, 45 “Get away from the midst of this congregation, that I may consume them in a moment.” And they fell on their faces. 46 And Moses said to Aaron, “Take your censer, and put fire on it from off the altar and lay incense on it and carry it quickly to the congregation and make atonement for them, for wrath has gone out from the Lord; the plague has begun.” 47 So Aaron took it as Moses said and ran into the midst of the assembly. And behold, the plague had already begun among the people. And he put on the incense and made atonement for the people. 48 And he stood between the dead and the living, and the plague was stopped. 49 Now those who died in the plague were 14,700, besides those who died in the affair of Korah (Num 16:41-49).

God as author analogy

Of course, I think the analogy breaks down. If a human author somehow gained the magical ability to bring her characters to life so that they do actually commit horrific acts of murder (for example), we would hold the author responsible (as well as the now alive characters). The only reason we don't hold authors responsible for murders committed by their characters in novels is because the characters and the murders are imaginary, not real.

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2012/12/calvinism-and-the-god-as-author-analogy/>

Actually, I think creative writers *are* responsible for the characters they create. They are responsible for whether their stories glamorize evil or expose evil for what it is. Are they using the villain as a foil, to promote good by way of contrast? Or does the writer make the villain the anti-hero?

I've already talked with numerous Calvinists about that and other points

related to God's sovereignty and, for the most part, our conversations have ended in what I would consider impasses.

To my knowledge, the only Calvinist whom Olson has publicly debated is Michael Horton. But Horton is basically a popularizer.

Olson hasn't tested his position against the toughest Reformed competition. He hasn't debated Reformed philosophers like James Anderson, Jeremy Pierce, Greg Welty, or Paul Helm (to name a few). He hasn't debated Reformed exegetes like Tom Schreiner, Gregory Beale, Don Carson, or Vern Poythress (to name a few). So he's made things easy on himself.

Likewise, he censors Calvinist commenters at his blog. Now that's his prerogative. But it's duplicitous to shield your position from astute criticism, then complain that you never heard a good response to your objections. Olson himself avoids engaging the most able opponents of his position.

That's not always deliberate, although there's some of that in his moderation policy. I think it's more due to the fact that because he hates Calvinism, he simply lumps all Calvinists together. He doesn't distinguish popularizers from scholars, philosophers, &c.

IF God foreordained and rendered certain a particular event...

“Foreordained and rendered certain” has become one of Olson’s stock phrases. What does he mean by “foreordained” and “rendered certain”? Is he using them synonymously? If not, how do they go together?

Would it be okay for God to foreordain a particular event, but not ensure it? Would it be okay for God to ensure a certain event without foreordaining it? What exactly does Olson find objectionable? The combination? Each considered separately? How does he define his terms? How does he think they’re interrelated?

Does he think foreordination entails the certainty of the outcome? If so, isn’t it somewhat redundant to use both expressions?

For instance, an outcome needn’t be foreordained to be a sure thing. Causation, determinism, or causal determinism doesn’t require premeditation. Chemical reactions are deterministic without the catalyst foreintending a particular outcome.

Does Olson think about what he’s saying, or has it just become mechanical. This phrase rolls off his tongue without consideration.

IF God foreordained and rendered certain a particular event for a greater good (as you assert), why, as a Christian, embrace feelings of abhorrence about them? Shouldn’t you at least TRY not to

feel abhorrence about them? After all, they are actually good from a higher perspective—the one you claim to have that sees them as necessary events brought about by God for the greater good.

Before addressing his objection directly, notice that it would be trivially easy to recast the alleged problem in Arminian terms:

If God has a morally sufficient reason for allowing tragedies, then why, as an Arminian, do you react with abhorrence? After all, God had a good reason for permitting it. If you react with moral abhorrence, aren't you implicitly judging God's wisdom and goodness by allowing this to transpire? If you express moral abhorrence at a tragedy which God allowed, aren't you implicitly expressing moral abhorrence at God's permission?

By Olson's own admission, there are many situations in which God can and does override human freewill. Therefore, God doesn't permit it because he has to:

rogereolson says:

June 28, 2012 at 1:14 pm

I've talked about this quite a bit in the past. No Arminian I know denies that God ever interferes with free will. The Bible is full of it. The point is that in matters pertaining to salvation God does not decide for people. If he did, he'd save everyone. The issue is personal relationship. God cannot and will not override a person's free will when what is at stake is his or her personal relationship with God of love. But God certainly can and does knock people off their horses (as with Saul). I think you are over interpreting Arminianism's view of freewill. Free will, as I have often said, is not the central issue. The central issue (and only reason we believe in free will) is the character of God including the nature of responsible relationality.

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2012/06/more-about-prayer-for-unsaved-loved-ones-and-friends/comment-page-1/#comment-31486>

rogereolson says:

June 30, 2012 at 1:00 pm

*The difference lies in the character of God. I don't have a problem with God manipulating people's wills so long as it doesn't coerce them to do evil or force them to enter into a relationship with him. If God causes a person to turn one way at a corner rather than the other way, so that the person sees a sign that brings attention to his or her need of God, I don't have any problem with that. You seem to be laboring under the misconception that Arminians believe in free will above everything. We don't. That's never been the point of Arminian theology as I have shown in *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities*.*

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2012/06/more-about-prayer-for-unsaved-loved-ones-and-friends/comment-page-1/#comment-31567>

So Olson has conceded that God, consistent with Arminian principles, could prevent many of these tragedies. Therefore, Olson can't say it would be wrong to feel moral repugnance at God's permission because God's hands were tied. For Olson has granted God's vast latitude to meddle in human affairs. Since the Arminian God was in a position to stop child murders, why, by Olson's logic, shouldn't our moral repugnance at the tragedy transfer to moral repugnance at God's inaction?

Perhaps you'll say that such feelings are simply irresistible. But my question is whether you think they are right. What justifies them rationally? Even if they are irresistible, why not ALSO celebrate such horrific events since you know, however you feel, that they are ordained and rendered certain by God FOR THE GREATER GOOD?

Again, IF I held your perspective about God's sovereignty I would do my best to push aside feelings of moral repugnance in the face of, for example, child murders, and view them stoically if not as causes for celebration. Why not?

i) For one thing, it doesn't occur to Olson that the Calvinist God uses our moral repugnance to accomplish his will. Our moral repugnance isn't contrary to God's will. Rather, giving us a sense of moral repugnance is one of the ways in which God moves historical events. Moral repugnance is a deterrent against certain crimes. So moral repugnance is a part of historical causation. World history would unfold very differently absent moral repugnance. Moral repugnance is a factor in what does or doesn't happen. That's consistent with God's plan for history. Human psychology has an impact on history.

ii) In addition, moral repugnance, like the evil which elicits moral repugnance, reinforces the contrast between God and evil. Makes us more appreciative of God.

rogereolson says:

December 27, 2012 at 12:59 pm

But what I am asking is why Calvinists such as the author of the essay in question do NOT celebrate dead soldiers and children. That would seem to be a logical response to their deaths IF those deaths are willed, planned and rendered certain by God for the greater good. Now let me be clear, I'm not claiming that "celebrating" them would mean having no normal human sorrow or feelings of loss. Rather, those normal feelings could remain even as a divine determinist praised and thanked God for the deaths. And by "celebrate" I don't mean publicly. That would rightly be avoided in order not to cause hurt to those who lost loved ones. By "celebrate" I mean only interiorily—within one's own mind. That's what I'm asking of the author of the essay. Does he or doesn't he celebrate in his own mind horrors such as mass murders of children? If not, why not?

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2012/12/calvinism-and-the-god-as-author-analogy/comment-page-1/#comment-36926>

i) This is one of Olson's persistent mental blocks. He's unable to keep two ideas in his head at a time. The same event can be evil in itself, but also contribute to something good. These are both true. One doesn't negate the other. Something can really be evil in its own right, but serve a good purpose in spite of its evil character.

ii) We don't have God's perspective. We can't see for ourselves how all things working together for the good of those whom God has chosen (Rom 8:28).

That's something we take on faith. And there are partial illustrations of that principle in Scripture.

But in most situations, we're completely in the blind. We don't see the future. As a rule, we're in no position to perceive the trajectory by which God brings good out of evil. Our knowledge of the past is fragmentary. Compartmentalized. Our knowledge of the present is fragmentary. Compartmentalized. And our knowledge of the future is guesswork.

We only see what we can see. That's what we're reacting to. The sample of reality that's available to us. The tiny sample that we can inspect.

Two go in, one comes out: John Calvin and Grizzly Adams in the Octogon

David Baggett, philosophy prof. at Liberty U, who coauthored **GOOD GOD: THE THEISTIC FOUNDATIONS OF MORALITY**, with Jerry Walls, contacted me last month, via Alan Kurschner. Indeed, he and a student (whom he quotes) had me confused with Alan, which is very flattering for me, but a terrible comedown for Alan.

In the email, Dr. Baggett and his student made some critical comments about my recent review of the book. Dr. Baggett has indicated that he may or may not get around to a follow-up reply to our exchange, and that, if he does, that could be a while. Given the imponderables of further replies, if any, I'm going to post our exchange thus far.

BTW, to judge by the photo on his faculty webpage, Dr. Baggett is a dead ringer for Dan Haggerty, who starred in **THE LIFE AND TIMES OF GRIZZLY ADAMS**.

Hi Dave,

Alan was kind enough to forward your email to me. I'm the one, not Alan, who penned the critical review of your book.

*Thanks for taking the time to do so,
though I might have preferred if you'd*

spent time doing more than merely defending Calvinism.

What more do you think I should have done?

Just a few thoughts in case you're interested, as a fellow Christian. First, your suggestion that this chapter is likely the best the Arminians have to offer isn't really on target in my estimation. It's true that my co-author Jerry Walls is one of the world's premier Arminian philosophers, but this book was co-written with me, and it's not the best reflection of what Jerry has to say. His book on Calvinism is likely better...

If you're alluding to **WHY I AM NOT A CALVINIST**, which he coauthored with Dongell, I wrote a lengthy review of that years ago. Walls and I also had an email exchange over that review. I also reviewed his criticisms of **CALVINISM IN HELL: THE LOGIC OF DAMNATION**. So I've covered that ground.

...and his recent piece in Philosophia Christi is probably a stronger account.

And I wrote a follow-up review of that article as well:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2012/10/impugning-god.html>

So I've covered my bases.

We were aiming at something more specific in our chapter in Good God: to argue that rational belief in God's goodness, nonOckhamistically construed, requires that God's goodness be sufficiently recognizable. We argued that Calvinists face a big challenge along these lines.

Here's a paragraph, for example, from Jer's recent piece in Phil Christi:

Perhaps the best we can do in the face of such a dispute is to continue to be as clear as we can in articulating these intuitions and teasing out their implications. Perhaps as we do so, one of them will come to be seen by both sides as more plausible than the other. As already indicated, I think it is a

telltale sign that theological compatibilists often engage in misleading rhetoric, which suggests that when their position is perspicuously displayed, even they hesitate to own it. So I call their bluff with a test. If I am wrong, let them openly and without equivocation declare that it is the need to manifest God's very justice that requires, or at least makes it fitting, that he determine some, perhaps many, to resist him forever, and then punish them with eternal misery, persons he could otherwise determine to freely accept his grace and joyfully worship him forever. Let them forthrightly say God is more glorified and his character more fully manifested in determining those persons to hate both him and each other than he would be in determining those same persons to gratefully adore him and love their neighbor as themselves. Let them insistently refuse to obscure matters with misleading rhetoric that implies that God loves the nonelect in a way that he does not on their view, as well as language that suggests their sinful choice to reject him is anything less than fully determined by God in order to display what they call justice.

To ensure a bit more objectivity, I asked a former student to take a look at your comments and offer his analysis. I share them below in case you're interested in taking a look. I doubt it will change your mind, but I figured you took the time to respond, so I'd do the same...Here are the comments from the former student:

I just finished reading Alan's criticisms of your book and there's certainly a lot that could be said in response. He makes several good points, and several others that seem misguided and mostly rhetorical in nature. Two salient points of contention:

(1) He passes too quickly over 1 Corinthians 10:13 and your subsequent points on the text. His rebuttal is rushed and has the air of evasion. I think he should be pressed on this issue.

Several issues:

i) It's true that my remarks were fairly telegraphic. Keep in mind, though, that I was responding to you and Jerry on your own level. It's not as if you two offered a detailed exposition of your proof-text. You touch on that passage in the second half of one paragraph (p69). And you repeat the same objection on the bottom of p72 and the top of 73.

It's not incumbent on me to spend more time on the passage than you do. You don't bother to exegete the passage. You simply took for granted that you understood what it means, and proceeded to draw a logical inference. Since your own appropriation of the text is quite cursory, I think that justifies a cursory reply on my part.

ii) Another reason I didn't say more is that I have a choice between saying a little and saying too much. I've exegeted the passage in my MAR thesis for RTS (available online). And I've had extensive debates with Arminian bloggers on this passage. I've probably written hundreds of pages on this one verse.

For me to devote a lot of attention to this particular verse in my review would be disproportionate to the review, which must cover many additional points raised in your chapter.

Does he believe Christians are free from the bondage on sin in this life as affirmed by the Westminster confession and countless theologians and commentators? Freedom from sin in Christ is a clear New Testament teaching and I would press him to hear his - no doubt interesting - reinterpretation :)

I'm not clear on where your student is going with this question:

i) The Westminster Confession has a doctrine of progressive sanctification. It rejects the possibility of sinlessness in this life.

ii) We could get into an exegetical discussion of what Paul means by the "bondage of sin." For now I'd just say that freedom from "bondage" is not equivalent to the ability to lead a sinless life.

iii) Calvinism teaches different kinds of inability. In Calvinism, original sin results in spiritual inability or "total depravity." That type of inability is counteracted by regeneration.

However, predestination introduces a more global type of inability in the sense that no human being (regenerate or unregenerate) can act contrary to how God has predestined him to act.

iv) Let's not forget that classical Arminian theology has tensions in relation to 1 Cor 10:13. If you continue to affirm God's knowledge of the future, then you're up against the traditional conundrum of how to reconcile God's knowledge of the future with the indeterminate future choices of men. And that, in turn, complicates your appeal to 1 Cor 10:13. How can a Christian have an open-ended choice between resisting temptation or succumbing temptation if God foreknows the outcome? If it could go either way, how is the outcome a prior object of divine knowledge?

There are, of course, familiar strategies to relieve this tension, but they are subject to ongoing dispute. And it's not just Calvinists who think that's a problem. Linda Zagzebski, Dean Zimmerman, Derk Pereboom, William Hasker, Richard Swinburne, Peter van Inwagen, and John

Martin Fischer (to name a few illustrious examples) think that's a problem.

And if you go the middle knowledge route, that collides with the familiar grounding objection.

Now, it's possible that you and Jerry reject God's exhaustive foreknowledge. Mind you, I wouldn't expect a Liberty U prof. to favor open theism—since I believe Liberty U is an SBC-affiliated institution, and the revised Baptist Faith & Message (2000) repudiates open theism. Jerry would be freer (pardon the pun) to take that position.

v) Moreover, although Arminians may say that Christians have sufficient grace to resist temptation, isn't that equivocal? Don't people succumb to temptation because, at that moment, they found the temptation overpowering? If a Christian gives in to temptation, he didn't have the willpower to resist, did he? The temptation was stronger than the desire to resist.

vi) I also don't see how your appeal to 1 Cor 10:13 is consistent with Arminian providence. Isn't your understanding of 1 Cor 10:13 that God won't put Christians (or allow Christians to be put) in situations where the temptation to commit sin would be overwhelming? If so, what makes you think the Arminian God has that much control over the circumstances in which we find ourselves? Given libertarian freedom, don't we largely create our own circumstances? Largely create our own future through the choices we make? And not just individually, but socially. On your view, isn't the future a social matrix generated by the collective, interconnected, interactive choices of all coexisting human agents?

So how can the Arminian God protect Christians from compromising situations? He doesn't create our moral environment. Rather, he must respect the moral environment which libertarian agents collectively generate.

And if either or both of you opt for the open theist route, God would have even less influence over the choice of circumstances in which we find ourselves.

vii) Furthermore, it's makeshift for you and Jerry to say "by God's regenerating grace in their lives they [Christians] can indeed avoid all sin, although this doesn't actually happen in anyone until the culmination of the process of salvation" (69).

Honestly, now, how plausible is it to claim that every Christian can lead a sinless life although not a single Christian in fact refrains from sin?

(2) He seems to think that your point: that Calvinism is morally reprehensible, because it posits a god that damns people he could have saved without overriding their free will, applies equally to Arminianism. He supports this misconception by saying that if (the Arminian) God instantiates a world in which someone (Bill) freely rejects him, he is equally as reprehensible as the Calvinist god (on your moral schema)

because he could have saved that person without overriding their free will by instantiating one of the other worlds in which Bill believed freely. Thus, both the Arminian and the Calvinist god were able to create a world in which Bill believed, and yet they both refrained. I think the idea that your argument applies equally to the Arminian framework is a misconception for the following reason: Alan seems oblivious to the fact that the Calvinist god had absolutely no external restrictions on the world he created. Thus, the only possible set of reasons for creating the world he did create came from within God himself. Bill is damned because God wanted Bill to be damned.

That's simplistic. There are logical constraints on what the Calvinist God can do. Even in Reformed metaphysics, different possible worlds may reflect various tradeoffs. It depends on his objectives.

If God's goal is to save everyone, then the Calvinist God can save everyone.

If, however, his goal is to manifest the gratuity of grace by saving some while damning others, then he can't save everyone consistent with his goal. He could have alternative goals, but given that particular goal, universal salvation is not in the cards.

In contrast, the Arminian God created a world from the feasible pool available to him (given free creatures). Therefore, although the Arminian God may have been able to choose one of Bill's better soteriological worlds, so to speak, he may have also had to choose - in tandem - one of Joni's worst. In any case, there are restrictions on (the Arminian) God that must be acknowledged. Moreover, Bill's free choice is the reason the feasible world in which Bill does not believe exists in the first place!

Several problems:

i) Your student invokes the familiar distinction between feasible worlds and merely possible worlds. However, you didn't employ that distinction in the book, or Jerry's article. Indeed, as I pointed out in my review of Jerry's article, he mentions "a fascinating argument that God could create a nondeterministic world without evil."

ii) As I recall, the possible/feasible world distinction was introduced by Plantinga to deflect the logical argument from evil. But whether Plantinga's response to the logical argument from evil is successful is disputed. Cf. G. Oppy, **ARGUING ABOUT GODS**, §6.2.

iii) Even assuming (ex hypothesi) that this distinction is adequate to deflect the logical argument from evil, you've set the bar higher in your book. A central premise or presupposition of the moral argument, as you formulate it, is the *recognizability* of God's goodness. So that goes above and beyond deflecting the logical argument from evil. That takes us into the territory of the evidential argument from evil.

In order to establish the recognizability of God's goodness (in the face of horrendous or gratuitous evil), it's not sufficient for you to float infeasible possible worlds as a bare conjecture. Rather, you need to demonstrate the plausibility of that metaphysical postulate.

So, instead of the question we run into with Calvinism: why would a god with no external constraints create a world in which evil exists and in which predetermined creatures sin and are punished harshly for their sin forever?...

Supralapsarians already think they have an answer to that question.

...the Arminian question that arises is, why did God choose this world from all the feasible worlds of free action? Seems like the second question is far less intractable than the first. One can readily think of answers to the second question, such as God wanted a favorable ratio of saved to unsaved persons compared to the other feasible worlds or God wanted to maximal number of saved persons given a certain threshold of damned, above which he would not tolerate another.

Given the way in which you and Jerry frame the argument, that fails badly. You've repeatedly said it would be unloving and evil for God not to save everyone if it's within his power to save them.

You can't to an about-face and then say, well, as a matter of fact, there are hellbound sinners whom God could save (without infringing on their freedom), but he chose to instantiate a world in which they are damned because he wanted to maximize the number of saved or strike the best overall balance. For even if you think those are laudable

goals, God is not acting in the best interests of every human being. To the contrary, he is sacrificing some human beings for the benefit of others. I don't see how that utilitarian calculus is at all consistent with the way you and Jerry opposed Arminianism to Calvinism.

However, when we look at the first question, we can only answer that God wanted evil. Since there were no external constraints on his action, we cannot say he wanted the lesser of two evils or that he wanted to turn someone else's evil intention into a good end. We can only say that he wanted evil and shutter as did Martin Luther, and wish that we had never been made men... I think your contention holds and Alan's rebuttal is misconstrued.

It's simplistic to say that according to Calvinism, God "wanted evil," as if evil was an end in itself. Rather, the argument is that God wanted certain incommensurable, second-order goods which are contingent on evil. Evil would have an instrumental function.

The Calvinist God could create a world without evil, but eliminating evil would also eliminate the corresponding good of a redeemed world.

Finally, in the acknowledgements, both in your book and Jerry's article, I don't see any Calvinists. Why don't you and Jerry run your drafts by Reformed philosophers like Greg Welty (SEBTS), James Anderson (RTS/Charlotte), Jeremy Pierce (Syracuse U) and Bill Davis (Covenant College) for constructive feedback? It strikes me as unprofessional that you talk about Calvinists without talking to Calvinists.

Steve Hays

Alan seems oblivious to the fact that the Calvinist god had absolutely no external restrictions on the world he created. Thus, the only possible set of reasons for creating the world he did create came from within God himself. Bill is damned because God wanted Bill to be damned.

I'd like to make one additional observation: the above statement is equivocal.

It could mean either of two different things:

i) The Calvinist God can create an alternate world in which everyone is saved

ii) The Calvinist God can create an alternate world in which all who are damned in this world will be saved in the alternate world—in addition to all who are saved in this world.

Absent further caveats, (i) is true. But as I mentioned before, even that is subject to qualification. If God's goal is to save everyone, then the Calvinist God can (and will) save everyone. But if he has a goal that's at variance with saving everyone, then he can't save everyone pursuant to that goal.

But let's shift to (ii). It's true that if we consider people as discrete individuals, then the Calvinist God could either elect or reprobate the same individual.

If, however, we consider people in relation to other people, and the whole history of the world, then even the Calvinist God could not elect or reprobate the same set of people.

A reprobate will have a different life than his elect counterpart. Make different decisions. This produces different world histories.

Although God could make a world in which everyone is elect, it wouldn't be the same *set* of people.

For instance, suppose I'm reprobate in this world. Suppose I murder a teenager. Had he lived a normal lifespan, he would have fathered three *kids*. *But because he was murdered before he fathered them, those kids don't exist in this world.*

I'm the same person (for purposes of counterfactual identity) in each case, but these two scenarios already

generate different world histories containing different sets of people overall.

Steve

Steve, curious: how would you characterize God's love for the nonelect on your view?

A deceptively simple question!

i) Depends in part on how you define "love." Do you mean "love" in the sense of God's attitude towards the reprobate? How God feels about the reprobate?

Or do you mean "love" in terms of a divine policy? Whether God is acting in the best interests of the reprobate.

ii) Apropos (i), if you mean "love" in the emotive sense of the term, then I don't assume God loves the reprobate.

That doesn't mean God "hates" the reprobate (in the emotive sense). As you probably know, Scripture sometimes uses "hate" hyperbolically and rhetorically, as a rhetorical device to create an antithetical parallel, where loving/hating is a hyperbolic or idiomatic way of expressing choosing/rejecting.

In terms of God's attitude towards the reprobate, I think he views the reprobate as wicked, loathsome sinners who justly merit punishment.

Of course, the same could be said for the elect, but God's policy towards the elect is quite different.

In terms of divine policy, I certainly don't think God is acting in the best interests of the reprobate. But, then, I don't think he's obliged to act in their best interests.

iii) As you know, there are Calvinists who do think God loves the reprobate in some sense. That's not my own position.

However, there's nothing inherently contradictory about that position. It could be a case of tradeoffs.

Suppose God elects me instead of reprobating me. As a result, I will have children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, &c. Not only will I be saved, but as a result of my salvation, some other people will be saved down the line who wouldn't otherwise be saved because they wouldn't otherwise exist.

I don't mean that all my posterity will be saved. Just that, in a family tree, some are saved and some are lost.

However, there's a catch. Had God reprobated me instead of saving me, that, in turn, would yield a different genealogy. Some people would come into existence as a result of my reprobate choices who wouldn't otherwise exist. And a subset of them would be saved.

If God elects me instead of reprobating me, he's depriving those would-be saints of eternal bliss. That alternate

timeline will never play out. (Unless we evoke a multiverse.)

In principle, it's logically possible for the Calvinist God to regret having to reprobate the lost. Any possible world he creates will come at the cost of some who'd be better off in a different world.

I'm not saying that's the correct understanding of God's view towards the reprobate. Just that, when Arminians say it's inconsistent for some Calvinists to affirm God's love for the reprobate, the issue is more conceptually complex.

Hoping for the lost

Does Calvinism oblige you to withhold hope in your child's salvation?

Now imagine that the topic is salvation. Should you hope that Jones is of the elect or of the reprobate? That all depends on whether you have reason to believe Jones is of the elect or of the reprobate. If you have no evidence that Jones is of the elect or the reprobate then you ought to withhold hope that he is ultimately of the elect or reprobate.

The argument as applied to the salvation of Jones depends on the Calvinist view that God is the primary determining cause of human election to salvation or reprobation combined with the belief that human beings ought not will contrary to what God wills. Thus, if God wills to be the primary determining cause of Jones' reprobation then we ought not will other than what God willed.

This is not a problem for Arminianism because on the Arminian view God's will is that all be saved and it is the determining cause of the human being to reject God's salvific offer that is the primary

determining cause of one's reprobation. Thus, on the Arminian view the wish that Jones would be saved is a wish that Jones would act in accord with God's universal salvific divine will. This is very different from the Calvinistic view according to which the wish that Jones would be saved is a wish that Jones would act in a way which may be contrary to God's particular salvific divine will.

Now let's replace the generic "Jones" with your daughter or son, your spouse or parent. It would follow that insofar as you do not have reason to believe your daughter or son, your spouse or parent is elect, that you ought not hope for their election. This, I would think, is a problem for Calvinism.

<http://randalrauser.com/2012/11/does-calvinism-oblige-you-to-withhold-hope-in-your-childs-salvation/>

I'm impressed by how many bad arguments Rauser can squeeze into four paragraphs. That's quite an accomplishment, albeit a rather dubious accomplishment.

i) It is wrong to assume a God's-eye viewpoint unless we actually enjoy a God's-eye viewpoint. That's presumptuous. Since we don't know God's will in the case of any particular individual, we're in no position to will contrary to God's will for that individual. We don't know enough to oppose God's will.

If God wills his salvation, and we withhold “hope,” then one could just as well argue that that’s opposing God’s will.

ii) Even from an Arminian standpoint, Christians often pray for things that God won’t grant. They don’t know ahead of time if it’s God’s will to grant their request. By Rauser’s logic, Christians should never pray for something unless they know in advance that God wills it.

iii) Keep in mind, too, that from a decretal perspective, if we did will (wish, hope) contrary to God’s will, that’s only because God willed us to will contrary to his will. If I hope for someone’s salvation, God predestined me to hope for someone’s salvation. So at one level, that can never be inconsistent with God’s (decretive) will.

iv) There’s also an equivocation here. God “willing” something and my “willing” something don’t mean the same thing. In the context of this discussion, God’s will is synonymous with predestination, whereas our will is synonymous with wishing that something was the case. These can’t be set in direct opposition, for they are not the same thing.

iv) Since God is God and man is man, there’s no reason to think God requires us to feel the same way about the lost that he does. We are human. We have a viewpoint suited to our humanity. And God made us that way. He created us to have emotional attachments. And some people are naturally dearer to us than others.

v) Rauser artificially abstracts predestination from providence. But they are coordinated. Our prayers can factor into the outcome. Friendship evangelism can factor into the outcome. The predestined result doesn’t necessarily

or even normally occur apart from what we do, or neglect to do, for the lost.

vi) Apropos (v), we have more reason to “hope” for what we work for (e.g. friendship evangelism) and pray for, than if we’re talking about some random unbeliever in the phone book.

Likewise, we wouldn’t pray for somebody’s salvation in the first place, or practice friendship evangelism, unless we wish for their salvation. And prayer is a way of aligning our will with God’s will. We submit our desires to God, trusting in his superior wisdom to either grant our request or refuse our request.

vii) “Hope” is standardly defined as a wish, feeling, or desire, combined with confidence, anticipation, or expectation of its fulfillment.

But according to Arminianism, God’s universal saving desire doesn’t result in the salvation of anyone in particular. Therefore, it would be irrational to expect that God will save Jones.

Indeed, there are Arminians who think most human beings are hellbound, based on their understanding of Mt 7:13-14. How can you expect or confidently anticipate that Jones will be saved if only a fraction of humanity will be saved?

viii) Rauser oscillates between “wishing” and “hoping,” as if these are synonymous. But at best that’s equivocal, and at worst that’s a bait-n-switch. For “hoping” means more than “wishing.”

Is the Arminian God omnibenevolent?

The Society of Evangelical Arminians, that beacon of moral and theological discernment, is plugging a post by Randal Rauser:

<http://evangelicalarminians.org/?q=sea.randal-rauser.Calvinism-Arminianism-and-Omnibenevolence>

Arminians like to point out that according to Calvinism God elects some people to damnation.

Calvinists like to point that out too. Reprobation isn't something we're ashamed of.

Of course some Calvinists try to soften this teaching by claiming that the election to damnation is a passive divine act according to which God simply "passes over" and thereby opts not to redeem these people.

Unfortunately this shift in nomenclature doesn't really make the divine act of election to damnation passive in an ethically significant way. Indeed, it calls to mind James Rachels' famous thought

experiment on passive euthanasia so I'm going to borrow from that thought experiment to make my point.

Imagine that Bob decides that old Mr. Jones should die. There are two ways Bob could bring about Mr. Jones' death.

Scenario 1: Bob drowns Mr. Jones in the bathtub.

Scenario 2: Bob witnesses Mr. Jones slip in the bathtub and stands by passively as Mr. Jones drowns.

Scenario 1 may result in Bob's legal culpability in a way that scenario 2 does not (though for regions with a Good Samaritan law Bob may bear some legal culpability in scenario 2 as well). But few will dispute that Bob's moral culpability in Mr. Jones' drowning is equivalent in scenarios 1 and 2.

When the Calvinist avers that God passes over the reprobate, thereby refusing to impute to them the righteousness of Christ which will result in their salvation, the divine withholding parallels Bob's withholding of life-saving aid to Mr. Jones. Just as

God withholds divine aid to result in reprobation so Bob withholds human aid to result in death.

But the thought-experiment disregards the fact that Jones is wicked. Even at a merely human level, there are situations in which we have no duty to save someone's life. Suppose the man who slips in the bathtub is a Mafia Don or malevolent dictator. Suppose he's an "abortion provider." Am I under some obligation to save his life? By saving his life, I will indirectly take the lives of innocent people whom he will subsequently murder.

I didn't create the life-threatening situation. But given the situation, that might be a godsend.

At this point the Calvinist might raise the following tu quoque objection. "Arminianism faces a similar problem," he says. How so? "On the Arminian view God foreknows who will freely reject him and yet he still elects to create those people knowing that they will be reprobated. That isn't any different."

The objection reveals an important confusion. Let's say that there are ten people. 1-5 are elect and 6-10 are reprobate. On the Calvinist view God could have elected all to salvation but opted not to. In other words, on the Calvinist view there is a possible

world in which 1-10 are elect. But God opted not to create that world.

Things are very different on the Arminian view. On this view there may be no possible world in which 1-10 are elect because there is no possible world in which 1-10 repent. That's an important difference.

But still, the Calvinist does have a point, doesn't he? Why didn't God just create a world with 1-5 so that everybody would be elect? The problem with that suggestion is this: there is no reason to think that 1-5 would all be elect in a world where only 1-5 exist.

Let's say, for example, that in the actual world Smith is reprobate and Smith Jr. is elect. Could God create a world in which Smith doesn't exist but Smith Jr. does? Let's assume that he can. Still, does it follow that in that alternate world (or, more specifically, in that subset of worlds in which Smith doesn't exist but Smith Jr. does) that Smith Jr. is elect? This doesn't follow. It may indeed be the case that in every possible world in which 1-5 exist but 6-10 do not that not all of 1-5 are elect.

In conclusion, the Calvinistic view deals a heavy blow to any doctrine of omnibenevolence and

consequently faces a unique problem not faced by the Arminian.

i) First of all, Rauser hasn't given us any tangible reason to think that out of all the gazillions of possible worlds, there's not a single world in which everyone freely believes in God. Why should we think that's a plausible scenario?

ii) And if it only "may" be the case that there is no such world, then it "may" equally be the case that there is one or more such worlds. So why does Rauser lay so much weight on a guess?

iii) In any event, Rauser's comparison fails on its own terms. For he framed the comparison in terms of divine "omnibenevolence." But if the Arminian God knowingly creates a world in which some people will be damned, then he's not being benevolent *to them*.

However, let's go back to the original post, which includes some of Rauser's comments:

Before God creates he surveys the range of possible worlds which have people who freely repent and he opts to create one of those worlds which achieves as optimal a balance of saved over loss as is possible.

But in that case, the Arminian God is not omnibenevolent. For he's not benevolent to the lost. He's not acting in their best interests. To the contrary, he's harming them. He has

sacrificed their welfare for the benefit of the saved. On that view, God is utilitarian rather than omnibenevolent.

This is simply a description of transworld depravity...

What positive evidence is there to think transworld depravity is real?

I don't think that God could have achieved the goods he wants to achieve without the evil of hell (i.e. some creatures in rebellion against him). If he could have achieved that good without hell he surely would have.

But in that case, God's goals conflict with omnibenevolence, and his goals take precedence over omnibenevolence. The Arminian God achieves the goods he wants to achieve at the expense of the damned. His goals override their wellbeing. He squashes anyone who gets in the way of his goals. His goods aren't good *for them*. His goods are *bad* for them.

I'm an annihilationist. That means I believe in a general resurrection to a judgment that culminates in the complete destruction of the unregenerate individual (i.e. "capital punishment").

How is annihilationism omnibenevolent? Rauser may think it's nicer than everlasting punishment, but that doesn't make it omnibenevolent in its own right.

If God is omnibenevolent, why does he need to punish anyone? Why would an omnibenevolent God punish unbelievers for being unbelievers? Why destroy them just because they reject him? How is that benevolent? Why not let them continue to exist on their own in some part of the universe?

If God is omnibenevolent, wouldn't remedial punishment be the only type of punishment he metes out? Punishment intended to help rather than harm?

So what's the point of annihilationism? It's not remedial punishment. Seems purely vindictive from the standpoint of someone who espouses omnibenevolence.

Roger Olson's boyfriend in the sky

What torments him the most, however, is his utter inability to find a girlfriend...To make a long story short (as they say), the writer discovers that he can control the girlfriend by writing about her...

Eventually, the writer becomes disillusioned with this magical phenomenon. He comes to think of the young woman as real which, in the movie, in a sense, she is. Physically, she's "there." But he controls her completely. She becomes whatever his momentary whim causes him to write about her.

Finally, he has a kind of nervous breakdown and starts furiously writing sentences that cause her to be like a puppet—just to demonstrate his power over her. Then, in a moment of utter despair, loving her so much, he writes that she is real and free.

In his book *The Providence of God* Calvinist philosopher-theologian Paul Helm says: "Not only is every atom and molecule, every thought and desire, kept in being by God, but every twist and turn of each of these is under the direct control of God." (p. 22) Yes, of course, he goes on throughout

the book to attempt to demonstrate how this is a good thing. But, in the end, it's unsatisfying for the same reason as the writer's control of Ruby in the movie.

Toward the end of "Ruby Sparks," the writer character discovers that what he is having with Ruby is not a relationship but a condition. Ultimately, she is not yet real. Or, if she is real, she is not a person. What he is having with her is not a personal relationship—from either his or her perspective. His perspective that he was having a personal relationship with her was an illusion. And his power to control her was not in any way glorifying or magnifying of him (as he seemed to think at some points). It was not only unfair to her (since he could cause her to be real and free); it was demeaning to him. What he was doing was unethical.

Now, let's adjust the movie, the parable, just a bit and see what would happen "if." Imagine that the writer finally decided that controlling Ruby was better than giving her reality and freedom. Better for whom? Well, for both him and her. After all, he could then protect her from the many dangers of

being real and free. And he could show off his magical power to his brother (a character in the movie) and his therapist (he does reveal it to both of them). But who would think he was “protecting” her or revealing real ability? All people in their right minds, decent, reasonable people, upon realizing what he was doing to her, would condemn him for it. (In the movie his brother comes to think what he is doing is wrong. His therapist never really believes it.)

Here is my question to Calvinists: even if the writer in the movie treated Ruby with kindness, would you ever agree that he is doing something good—either morally or in terms of showing his greatness? I can’t imagine it. What’s great about using a magical power to control things compared with using persuasion to influence them? And what’s morally good about controlling another person compared with giving them freedom and entering into a real relationship with them?

Of course, Helm, and most Calvinists with him, goes to great lengths to try to show that God is different. It’s okay for God to control his human creatures whereas it would never be okay for humans to do

so (except, of course for small children or hopeless imbeciles).

A ventriloquist may claim to “love” his puppet, but anyone hearing that claim would laugh or cry—considering the ventriloquist either joking or crazy. That would be even more the case if the ventriloquist claimed the puppet loved him!

Philosopher Brümmer also demonstrates, rightly, I think, that strict Calvinism (he uses the Canons of Dort as his foil) is ultimately incoherent insofar as it claims that God is so different, so unique, that somehow it’s good and right for God to control humans in such a manner that would never be considered right or good in human experience. If God is so “wholly other,” such that there are no analogies, then, he says, we really do not know anything about God. This is what I’ve been saying here for a long time—almost since the blog’s beginning. Ultimately, strict Calvinism, divine determinism, must posit a “hidden God,” a voluntarist God who has no nature or whose nature is so radically different from ours that we can’t even conceive of it. And, in light of hell, such a

controlling, manipulative God cannot be conceived as “good” in any meaningful way.

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2012/11/a-movie-illustration-of-whats-wrong-with-calvinism/>

i) First off, I commend Olson for pressing the boyfriend/girlfriend analogy to illustrate Arminianism. I think that’s a very revealing, and apt comparison. And it nicely illustrates some childish weaknesses in Arminianism.

In a healthy romantic relationship, both man and woman give something and get something. It satisfies a deep psychological (and physical) need.

There’s an ineluctable element of self-interest which motivates the relationship. Not just doing something good for another person, but how that’s good for you. We are incomplete without it.

We wouldn’t marry if there wasn’t something in it for us. At least, that’s the expectation going in—although reality doesn’t always turn out that way. We marry to receive something in return. Reciprocated affection. We wouldn’t do it if we didn’t hope to get something out of it. Although romantic love ought to be concerned with the best interests of the beloved, it’s also essentially self-interested. The man wants a woman who wants him in return. He wants her to want him as much as he wants her. And I assume most wives want a husband who desires them rather than viewing them as just a charity case.

And that’s roughly how Olson defines a “real relationship.”

Speaking for myself, I don't seek a "relationship" with God in that sense. If that's what motivated God, he'd be pathetic. I don't need a God who needs me. I don't worship a God who needs me (and other creatures) to complete what's lacking in himself.

In Calvinism, God's love for the elect is an act of sheer disinterested love. God has nothing to get out of it. He does it purely for the good of the elect.

ii) In defense of Olson, someone might say that Scripture itself uses romantic theological analogies. But if you examine the specific examples, they don't intersect with Olson's comparison.

There's the motif of God as a jilted husband who remains faithful to a faithless wife (Hosea; Isa 54; Ezk 16). There's the motif of God defending his bride (Rev 19). There's the motif of God/Christ laying down his life to save his wife (Eph 5). And there's the motif of God marrying down (Ezk 16; Eph 5).

iii) I don't think Calvinism requires God to be "wholly other" or "hidden." That's just Olson's hostile characterization.

And, yes, it is different with God. He's the Creator, we're the creature. That's a fundamental and unilateral asymmetry. Cause and effect.

That's very different from the boyfriend/girlfriend dynamic, where they grow closer to each other, grow through each other, grow into each other.

iv) Olson's illustration also suffers from an inner tension. He says "Then, in a moment of utter despair, loving her so much, he writes that she is real and free."

But what does it mean to say that Ruby is finally set free to be herself? She started out as a figment of the writer's imagination. His idea of the perfect girl. And although she continues to evolve, it's his idea of her that's evolving. She has all and only those characteristics which he invests her with at any particular moment.

So even if he frees her and reifies her at the end (a la **PYGMALION**), she didn't invent herself. Everything she is she got from him. At whatever stage of the process he frees her, what he reifies is his own concept.

Now, we might speculate that after he frees her, she continues to develop on her own. Becomes a somewhat different person. But even so, she didn't make herself from scratch. She could only work with what he gave her. Her potential for further development is limited to his creative idea. At bottom, she can't rise any higher than her source. A reified fictional character is still defined by the writer. By his personal vision.

Is God free?

I'm going to comment on a post by Roger Olson. The original post doesn't seem to be directly available, but you can find it here:

<http://relevancy22.blogspot.com/2012/03/does-god-always-do-wisest-thing.html>

Many (not all) Calvinists argue that libertarian free will or, the power of contrary choice, is an incoherent concept. (E.g., Jonathan Edwards, Lorraine Boettner, R. C. Sproul, John Frame, John Piper, et al.)

- i)** It isn't just "many Calvinists" who take that position. There are non-Calvinist philosophers who also take that position.
- ii)** Olson has a bad habit of citing random Calvinists. But if you're going to attack a belief-system, then you need to attack its best representatives. That means you need to distinguish between popularizers and high-level thinkers. You also need to differentiate between different specializations. Are we dealing with philosophical theology? Exegetical theology? You need to target the best exponents of the relevant discipline.

The reason is, they argue, that it amounts to belief in uncaused effects. They argue that people act according to their strongest motive.

Olson doesn't stop to ask if that's an accurate characterization or mischaracterization of libertarian freedom. Does he disagree with Calvinists who say libertarian freedom amounts to uncaused effects? Or does he agree with that characterization, but denies the incoherence of uncaused effects?

What I've often wondered is whether Calvinists who argue this believe God has power of contrary choice. If God has power of contrary choice, then it cannot be a strictly incoherent concept.

Well, that's simplistic. They may think uncaused effects are incoherent in the case of contingent, timebound creatures. It wouldn't follow that that's incoherent in the case of a timeless, self-subsistent agent (i.e. God).

But to say God does NOT have power of contrary choice seems to make God a prisoner of creation; without power of

contrary choice God's decision to create would be necessary and that would make creation less than gracious and, in fact, a part of God's own life – not a free act as if God could have done otherwise.

Yet Olson has also said:

We have run around this bush numerous times here and I tire of it (no offense intended). From an Arminian perspective, God knows because something happens; it doesn't happen because God knows it. God's foreknowledge corresponds to what happens; it does not cause it or even render it certain.

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2012/06/more-about-prayer-for-unsaved-loved-ones-and-friends/comment-page-1/#comment-31491>

That makes God's knowledge of the future dependent on the future itself. For instance, God's knowledge of what human agents will do is caused by what they will "freely" do (in the libertarian sense), apart from divinely agency.

Doesn't that make God a "prisoner of creation"? His foreknowledge is contingent on the independent choices of his creatures. If his knowledge of the future is the effect of what they freely choose, if he is dependent on them for that information, then doesn't that make him a prisoner of creation?

*The way Jonathan Edwards attempted to get around this in *The Freedom of the Will* was to say that "God always does the wisest thing." Contemporary Calvinists who follow him closely agree. In other words, according to Edwards, God could have done otherwise than create the world, but he created the world because it was "most fitting" to do so.*

My question is how this gets around the problem. To me it seems like a dodge; that is, it seems to attempt to answer the challenge without answering it. It seems like saying both at the same time - that God could have not created and that God could not have not created.

The question is simply this: Is it logically conceivable that God might not have created the world? Is it conceivable that God might have decided against this creation or any creation?

Edwards' answer seems to say yes and no at the same time. That's against the laws of logic UNLESS he can explain how the "yes" and the "no" are referring to different things. But in his explanation, they aren't.

The question is: Is God the prisoner of his own wisdom (or of anything)?

i) Well, that's a very different question. What's the alternative? Is Olson suggesting that for God to have libertarian freedom, he must be free to think or act foolishly? Is Olson saying the God of Arminian theism is a fool?

ii) There's a difference between saying God always acts wisely and saying God always does the wisest thing. We can affirm the former without affirming the latter.

IF one says that God "always does the wisest thing" WITH THE ASSUMPTION that there is always only ONE "wisest thing," then how is one not making creation necessary and therefore not gracious? (A basic principle of theology is that what is by nature cannot be by grace. If I HAVE to rescue you, it's not an act of mercy or grace.)

The upshot is, of course, that IF the creation and redemption of the world by God is truly gracious and not automatic, then God must possess libertarian free will, power of contrary choice. And if God possesses such, it cannot be an incoherent concept.

i) Olson is equivocating. Does he mean “gracious” in the sense of “gratuitous” or “gracious” in the sense of “merciful”?

ii) Moreover, since he seems to be using “gracious” in the soteriological sense, his objection undercuts a key plank of Arminian theology. Arminians routinely contend that God would be morally defective unless he made salvation available to everyone. But on Olson’s own definition, unless God is at liberty not to be gracious or merciful to sinner, then salvation isn’t really an act of mercy or grace.

It seems to me that to say “God always does the wisest thing,” implying by that that God must do such-and-such (e.g., create the world), is the same as to say that God is a machine and that the creation and redemption of the world is not by grace but by nature. Only if God really could have done otherwise than create can creation be by

grace only. Grace cannot be compelled and still be grace.

I think Edwards skirted the issue and so do his followers who repeat his argument in one form or another. To say “God always does the wisest thing” is either to imply that God is an automaton, in which case creation and redemption are automatic and not gracious, or to imply that God COULD do that which is something other than “the wisest thing.”

Assuming, for the sake of argument, that there *is* a wisest thing to do, always choosing to do the wisest thing wouldn't make God an “automaton” or a “machine.” Rather, it would mean God is benevolent and rational. God always does the wisest thing because that's the most reasonable thing to do, and a good God is a reasonable God. Automata don't act for reasons.

The alternative is for God to be unreasonable. Once again, is Olson admitting that the God of Arminian theism is unhinged?

Why assume that there is always only ONE “wise thing” to do – even for God? Why couldn't it have been wise to create but also wise not to create? Of

course, as any rationalist will ask, then why did God create? Was it simply an arbitrary choice – like throwing the dice?

However, I prefer to argue that for God, as for us, there are moments when two alternative options are equally wise and no controlling, determining factor interior (such as motive) or otherwise determines which option one must choose to be right.

I reject the notion that “God always does the wisest thing,” not because I think God is anything less than absolutely wise but because I don’t believe there is always only one “wisest thing” in every situation of choice between options. To avoid making creation and redemption other than gracious, we have to suppose that God really could have chosen not to create. To say “God always does the wisest thing” is to imply that God really could not have done otherwise.

i) Because Roger Olson inhabits an Arminian bubble, where he defines his position exclusively in reaction to Calvinism, he’s oblivious to the fact that the question of divine freedom is hardly confined to Calvinism. That’s an issue which cuts across various schools of thought in historical and

philosophical theology. Arminianism is by no means exempt from the same considerations:

William Rowe, **CAN GOD BE FREE?** (Oxford University Press, 2004).

_____, "Divine Freedom,"

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/divine-freedom/>

http://philosophynow.org/issues/81/Why_Buridans_Ass_Do_esnt_Starve

Arminians must also wrestle with the question of how or whether God is free.

ii) Historically, the question is bound up with two interrelated issues: (a) Is there a best possible world? (b) The principle of sufficient reason.

iii) There are different ways of engaging the argument. You can deny the existence of a best possible world. You can affirm the existence of a best possible world, but deny that God is obligated to instantiate the best possible world. You can deny the PSR, although that's a very costly denial. You can also argue that the question poses a false dichotomy.

iv) Speaking for myself, I doubt the existence of a best possible world. I think there are better and worse possible worlds, but it's not obvious to me that there's a best possible world.

Among the better possible worlds, we have tradeoffs between incommensurable goods. These are incommensurable inasmuch as not all possible goods are compossible goods. One possible world encapsulates some

goods to the exclusion of other goods. These can't both be realized within the same timeline. Rather, they represent alternate timelines.

Let's compare two possible worlds. In 1.0, Ethan marries Effie. They have a happy marriage. They have three kids, who turn out well.

In 2.0, Ethan marries Effie. They have two kids before Effie dies of cervical cancer. Ethan then marries Gwen, by whom he has two more children.

His son by Gwen betrays his (son's) best friend. Later, his son becomes a Christian, repents of his perfidy, and is reconciled to his old friend.

His daughter by Effie is so mad at God for letting her mother die that the daughter becomes a bitter atheist who goes to hell when she dies.

Which possible world is the better possible world? Well, 1.0 is better in the sense that it generally avoids the evils of 2.0. However, it avoids the evils of 2.0 by eliminating the goods of 1.0.

For one thing, Ethan has three kids by his second wife. They don't exist in 1.0. In addition, Ethan's son in 2.0 experiences redemption.

Although 2.0 has certain evils not found in 1.0, those are evened out by certain goods not found in 1.0.

So it's hard for us to say which possible world is better overall.

v) But let's assume, for the sake of argument, that 1.0 is somewhat better than 2.0. Even so, is there some compelling reason why God should choose 1.0 over 2.0? I don't see why.

"Better" for whom? There are people who go to heaven in 2.0 who don't exist in 1.0. So 1.0 isn't better for *them*! And there's no corresponding good in 1.0, for they have no counterparts in 1.0.

Likewise, even if 1.0 is better overall, 2.0 may have a distinctive good which is better *in itself*. What if it's a tradeoff between a possible world where the whole is greater than the parts, and a possible world where the parts are greater than the whole?

Is a possible world with some unique goods which are individually better than anything in another possible world less preferable? Is a more uniformly good world preferable to a world with higher highs and lower lows? Hard to say how we'd make that calculation.

But even if a more equitably good world is better overall, why assume that's preferable to the alternative? What's superior in one respect (whole greater than parts) may be inferior in another respect (parts greater than whole).

vi) For all we know, this is a false dichotomy. What if God doesn't have to choose between instantiating one possible world rather than another? Perhaps God created a multiverse in which different forking paths actually play out in parallel worlds. (Which doesn't mean God instantiates every alternative, just some.)

vii) But the issue is also bound up with the PSR. Alexander Pruss has offered a sophisticated exposition and defense of

this principle:

THE PRINCIPLE OF SUFFICIENT REASON: A REASSESSMENT

(Cambridge University Press, 2006)

“Leibnizian cosmological arguments,” W. L. Craig & J. P. Moreland, eds. **BLACKWELL COMPANION TO NATURAL THEOLOGY** (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009)

viii) There are stronger and weaker versions of the PSR. Let’s define the PSR thusly: Every contingent fact has an explanation. There’s a reason for every event.

What’s striking about the PSR is how closely that principle corresponds to predestination. According to predestination, everything happens for a reason. Indeed, there’s a good reason for whatever happens.

So it’s hard to attack predestination without attacking the principle of sufficient reason. But if Arminians attack the PSR, they will pay a very high price. That throws into question the rationality or intelligibility of the universe. If you question the PSR, you question our ability to explain anything. Where do we draw the line?

ix) However, commitment to the PSR doesn’t commit us to the proposition that God wasn’t free to choose otherwise. Rather, it simply means God had a good reason for choosing to make this world.

Here I’m tempted to throw back at the Calvinist his or her own argument that

God's choice of "some to save" and "others to damn" is not arbitrary without any hint at what might explain it. In other words, if it's fair for the Calvinist to argue that divine selection is not based on anything God "sees" in the elect or the damned (that differentiates them) and yet is not arbitrary, then why couldn't the person who believes in God's power of contrary choice argue that God's choice to create is not arbitrary even though no specific reason for it can be given?

This is one of Olson's stock objections to Calvinism, as if that hasn't been dealt with. Olson has a dishonest habit of repeating the same objections while ignoring the answers.

i) As I recently observed, in 1 Cor 1-3, Paul talks about God disproportionately electing or reprobating certain social classes. One might be tempted to say that makes election conditional, but that's ambiguous—for in this case, God creates the distinguishing conditions. God determines when, where, and to whom you will be born. So God isn't electing or reprobating individuals on account of their social class, as if that's an independent variable. It's not "conditional" in that sense.

Likewise, both Calvinists and Arminians say faith is a necessary condition of salvation. But in the case of Calvinism, faith is not an external factor which affects or effects the divine response. Rather, faith is a divine gift. That's a condition which God himself supplies and satisfies.

In both cases, the condition is ultimately contingent or dependent on divine agency. Not something God responds to. Rather, our responsiveness, or lack thereof, is the result of divine agency.

Likewise, God can have reasons for electing one sinner and reprobating another sinners. But these are his reasons. They don't take their source of origin in the creature. If God differentiates one creature from another, God made them different in the first place.

ii) Moreover, it's not just a question of the individual, but his life-story. If God elected the same individual rather than reprobating said individual, that would result in a different life-story. Conversely, if God reprobated the same individual rather than electing said individual, that would result in a different life-story. And when you combine different life-stories, that, in turn, generates an alternate world history.

So God can have a reason for electing one person and reprobating another: he prefers one world history over another world history. Consider the chain-reaction triggered by God calling Abraham out of Ur. That sets in motion a long-range series of nested events, none of which would take place if God reprobated Abraham.

iii) Furthermore, Arminians don't posit libertarian freedom for its own sake. Rather, they claim that's a necessary condition for praise and blame. However, even if God had

libertarian freedom, that doesn't mean libertarian freedom is a necessary condition for praise or blame.

Now, it's another thing entirely to argue that God possesses power of contrary choice but humans don't. That's a different argument. The natural answer is "Why?" If God possesses it, why couldn't he give it to humans? There doesn't seem to be anything about power of contrary choice that requires deity. It's not like omnipotence, for example.

For one thing, that's giving some humans godlike power over the fate of other humans. For instance, the past choices or choices of past libertarian agents create our present. The alternate possibilities they select become our realities. They shuffle the deck. We must play the hand they dealt.

Consider how Arminians construe Rom 14:15 & 1 Cor 8:11. They actually imagine that God has delegated to mere human beings the power to effectively damn their fellow human beings. To seal their eternal demise through the choices they made for them. Sinful, shortsighted men reprobating their fellow man.

Arminian mysterians

If a Calvinist invokes mystery, that's evasive and euphemistic:

The second major objection to Calvinism is a recurring pattern of euphemism we find among Calvinist writers...they typically try to evade the force of the problem by characterizing it as a mystery, paradox, antinomy, or “biblical tension” J. Walls & D. Baggett, Good God: The Theistic Foundations of Morality (Oxford 2011), 72.

But if an Arminian invokes mystery, that's hunky-dory:

These passages are difficult, and no matter what we might say about them, we don't dispel the mystery of them. J. Walls & D. Baggett, Good God: The Theistic Foundations of Morality (Oxford 2011), 136.

*I am very much in sympathy with arguments that defend libertarian freedom, but I feel the force of objections by critics who think the whole notion is mysterious, and at times even seems to be incoherent. J. Walls, "Why No Classical Theist, Let Alone Orthodox Christian, Should Ever Be a Compatibilist," *Philosophia Christi* 13/1 (Summer 2011), 77.*

When salvation fails to save

I'm going to comment on some statements in this article:

http://enrichmentjournal.ag.org/201203/201203_044_limited_atonement.cfm

Scripture contradicts limited atonement in John 3:16,17; Romans 14:15; 2 Corinthians 5:18,19; Colossians 1:19,20; 1 Timothy 2:5,6; 1 John 2:2. Everyone knows John 3:16,17: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him." Typically, Calvinists respond that in these verses "world" refers to all kinds of people and not everyone.

i) To begin with, it limits salvation to believers.

ii) Moreover, Calvinists don't have to say the "world" refers to all kinds of people. For the word kosmos doesn't mean

“everyone.” Rather, as lexicographers point out, it has more than one meaning. And in Johannine usage it often connotes the evil world order. So it has an ethical rather than numerical sense. That which is opposed to God.

iii) In Johannine usage, kosmos can’t mean “everyone,” for John often sets the “world” in diametrical opposition to those who are not of the “world,” viz. Christians.

iv) Olson also disregards Jn 9:39:

Jesus said, “For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind.”

So the atonement is intended to save some, but condemn others.

First John 2:2 is another passage we cannot reconcile with limited atonement: “He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.” This passage completely undermines the Calvinist interpretation of “world” in John 3:16,17 because it explicitly states that Christ died an atoning death not only for believers, but also for everyone. Here

***“world” must include nonbelievers
because “ours” refers to believers.***

i) Olson is piggybacking on his mistaken appeal to Jn 3:16-17.

ii) Calvinism doesn't deny that Christ died for unbelievers. Christ died for elect unbelievers, whom the Spirit regenerates in due time, thereby making them believers.

iii) The contrast in 1 Jn 2:2 is between those who are already believers, the recipients of John's letter, who belong the church of Ephesus, and those who will come to faith as a result of the apostolic kerygma (cf. Jn 17:20-21). The “other sheep” (Jn 10:16) or the “children of God” (11:52).

Consider the use of the “world” in Jn 17:21. Clearly Jesus didn't expect everyone to believe that God sent him. That would be a false expectation. So the “world” can't be a synonym for “everyone.” Rather, it's being used in a representative sense.

The “world” is a developing motif in the Fourth Gospel (which lays the foundation for 1 John). You need to study how John develops that motif.

***This verse makes it impossible to say that
Christ's death benefits everyone, only not
in the same way. (Piper says Christ's***

death benefits the nonelected by giving them temporal blessings only.)

But John didn't think Christ's death benefits everyone the same way. It doesn't benefit unbelievers in the same way it benefits believers—except for unbelievers who become believers. Indeed, for unbelievers, his death is a source of condemnation. That's maleficial rather than beneficial.

John says clearly and unequivocally that Christ's atoning sacrifice was for the sins of everyone — including those who are not believers.

Does the "whole world" mean "everyone"? Is that what the very same phrase means in 1 Jn 5:19? Yet that passages sets "the whole world" in antithetical contrast to those who are "of God."

What about 2 Corinthians 5:18,19? "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them.

And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.” Calvinists sometimes argue that this passage supports limited atonement. After all, if God was in Christ not counting everyone’s sins against them, then everyone is saved. Therefore, they say, “everyone” must mean only the elect.

i) 2 Cor 5:18-19 doesn’t even use the pronoun “everyone.” Notice how Olson unconsciously substitutes “everyone” for the “world,” as if that’s what Paul said.

ii) Calvinists don’t have to say the “world” refers to the elect in this passage. It’s sufficient to say, in Paul’s own gloss, that the “world” refers to whoever is reconciled to God through his Son. To whoever’s sins won’t be counted against them. And clearly that’s not everyone.

But that’s not true. When Paul says that God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting people’s sins against them, He means if they repent and believe. In other words, the Atonement did reconcile God with the world so He could forgive; it satisfied the demands of

justice so reconciliation is possible from God's side. But it remains for sinners to accept that by faith. Then full reconciliation takes place.

i) 2 Cor 5:18-19 doesn't distinguish between partial reconciliation and full reconciliation. That is Olson's Arminian interpolation. Notice how he has to qualify the force of the passage to harmonize it with Arminian soteriology.

ii) Moreover, Calvinists don't think sinners are reconciled to God apart from faith and repentance either. So his gloss fails to differentiate Arminianism from Calvinism.

iii) Keep in mind that the syntax in 2 Cor 5:19 is ambiguous.

Colossians 1:19,20 says, "For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross." It is impossible to interpret "all things, whether things on earth or things

*in heaven” as referring only to the elect.
This passage refutes limited atonement.*

i) We could just as well say it’s impossible to confine Paul’s cosmic language in Col 1:19-20 to sinful men.

ii) Moreover, the reconciliation in view isn’t said to be contingent on faith and repentance.

So Olson has taken a tiger by the tail. It’s more than he needs, and it threatens to devour his own position.

iii) The passage more likely refers to cosmic pacification through conquest. Compare it to Col 2:15, as well as OT precedents (e.g. Isa 52:6-10).

So does 1 Timothy 2:5,6: “For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all people.” The only way a believer in limited atonement can escape the force of this passage is to interpret the Greek translated “all people” as somehow meaning “all kinds of people,” but that is not an interpretation allowed by the common use of the phrase in Greek literature

outside the New Testament (or elsewhere in it).

i) Olson needs to master the difference between meaning and reference. What the pronoun (“all”) may mean, and who it refers to, are two separate questions.

ii) Keep in mind that Paul, as a missionary to Jews and Gentiles like, can use universal terms to denote the reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles at the foot of the cross (cf. Rom 11:12,15; Eph 2:16). Olson is decontextualizing the passage.

Many Scriptures clearly indicate that Jesus’ atoning sacrifice was meant for everyone; that His substitutionary punishment was for all people. But there are two seldom discussed New Testament passages that absolutely undercut limited atonement: Romans 14:15 and 1 Corinthians 8:11.

From far being “seldom discussed,” these are stock Arminian prooftexts.

In these verses, Paul sternly warns Christians against causing people to be destroyed for whom Christ died. The Greek translation of the words “destroy” and “destroyed” in these verses cannot mean merely harmed or injured. Clearly Paul is warning people that it is possible to cause people for whom Christ died to go to hell (by causing them to stumble and fall by showing off one’s own liberty to eat meat sacrificed to idols). If TULIP Calvinism is correct, this warning is useless because this cannot happen. According to Calvinism, the elect, for whom Christ died, cannot be lost.

- i)** Well, Arminians like I. H. Marshall probably think the “destruction” has reference to annihilation rather than going to hell.
- ii)** Olson overlooks the hyperbolic or metaphorical force of words like “destroy.” What they mean is context-dependent.
- iii)** Christ “dying for” the lost is ambiguous. Calvinists and Arminians don’t mean the same thing by that phrase. So it’s not a case of expanding or contracting the same thing.

When Reformed theology says Christ died for the elect, they mean Christ died to redeem them. Make satisfaction for sin. By contrast, it's not uncommon for Arminians to deny penal substitution (e.g. Grotius, Grider, Joel Green, Randal Rauser). So Arminians don't think Christ died for everyone (or anyone) in *that* sense.

iv) On Olson's interpretation, the "strong brethren" are stronger than Christ. What Christ saves, they can destroy.

v) What's more, on his interpretation, God has given some Christians the power to make other Christians lose their salvation. God has given the "strong brethren" the ability to overpower the "weak brethren" and thereby damn them.

It's remarkable that Olson thinks some men have the power to damn other men. That God has given them the wherewithal to determine the eternal fate of their fellow men. To doom them to hell.

What does it say about the character of Olson's God, if he'd delegate that ability to mere men? And what does it say about the love of God that he'd ultimately place the eternal destiny of some sinners in the hands of other sinners? Is it just bad luck if a weak brother finds himself at the mercy of a strong brother?

If God is love (1 John 4:7) but intended Christ's atoning death to be the propitiation for only certain people so only they have any chance of being saved, then "love" has no intelligible

meaning when referring to God. All Christians agree that God is love. But believers in limited atonement must interpret God's love as somehow compatible with God unconditionally selecting some people to eternal torment in hell when He could save them (because election to salvation and thus salvation itself is unconditional).

Even on libertarian assumptions, there are possible worlds in which everyone freely chooses to be saved, and indeed, in which no one sins in the first place. So why must anyone go to hell?

There is no analogy in human existence to this kind of behavior that is regarded as loving. We would never consider someone who could rescue drowning people, for example, but refuses to do it and rescues only some as loving. We would consider such a person evil, even if the rescued people appreciated what the person did for them.

To the contrary, it's easy to consider situations in which that's the loving thing to do. Suppose one of the drowning swimmers is a serial rapist, serial killer, or pedophile. In that event, it would be unloving to his prospective victims to save him.

Or suppose you knew that by rescuing a swimmer, next week he'd accidentally kill the parents of five underage children in a DIU incident? By rescuing him, you condemn the others to death or tragedy.

Or suppose you knew that by rescuing a swimmer, his future grandson would become an arsonist?

Or does Jesus Christ in His love for all people reveal the heart of God? Calvinism ends up having to posit a hidden God very much unlike Jesus Christ.

Jesus is the judge as well as the savior.

Another response is that this simply means God gives the nonelect a little bit of heaven to take with them on their journey to hell. What kind of love is this — that gives temporal blessings and

happiness to people chosen by God for eternal suffering in hell?

According to Arminianism, God regenerates and sanctifies some believers knowing full well that they will later lose their salvation and go to hell. So Olson's God gives these born-again apostates a little bit of heaven to take with them on the road to hell. What kind of love is this — that gives temporal blessings and happiness to people doomed to eternal suffering in hell?

Some Calvinists say that God must manifest all His attributes and one attribute is justice that makes hell necessary. Again, however, that won't work because the Cross was a sufficient manifestation of God's justice.

If that was a sufficient manifestation of God's justice, then why does Olson's God damn anyone at all? Even if he can't save them against their will, that doesn't mean he must consign them to eternal punishment.

Limited atonement makes indiscriminate evangelism impossible. A believer in limited atonement can never say to any

random stranger or group: “God loves you and Christ died for your sins and mine; you can be saved.” And yet this is the very lifeblood of evangelism — telling the good news to all and inviting all to come to Jesus Christ with repentance and faith. Many Calvinists are evangelistic and missions minded, but in their evangelism and missions they cannot tell everyone within the sound of their voices that God loves them, Jesus died for them, and He wants them to be saved. They can proclaim the gospel (as they interpret it), but they cannot solicit faith by promising salvation through Christ to everyone they meet or to whom they preach.

Yes, it’s terrible. Calvinists can’t proclaim the gospel. They can only mutter things like “I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand” (Jn 10:28). Isn’t that pathetic?

By contrast, the Arminian evangelist can tell the lost that “I will give them temporary eternal life, and many of them will perish anyway because the world, the flesh, and the devil

will snatch them from my weak grasp." Now *that's* the gospel!

Limited atonement is the Achilles' heel of TULIP Calvinism; without it the other points of TULIP fall. If God is truly love, then Christ died for everyone that all may be saved.

But the Olson's God didn't intend the death of Christ to save everyone.

Rewriting history

I'll comment on this:

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2012/07/need-a-renewal-of-christian-humanism/>

It tends to revel in denigration of human beings EXCEPT insofar as they are “elect.” How does one reconcile that with Christian humanism (viz., that all human beings are created in God’s image and possess infinite value and worth)?

i) Only God has “infinite” worth.

ii) What’s wrong with “finite” worth? There are degrees of finite worth. Along with the angels, we’re already at the top of creaturely scale.

iii) Is the infinite worth of human beings a logical entailment of Arminian theology? That may be a flattering phrase, but how would Olson actually go about defending the proposition that Arminian theology necessarily confers “infinite value” on human beings? Is there anything to that claim beyond precious sentimentality?

iv) A presupposition of unconditional election is that God’s elect don’t have greater intrinsic worth than the reprobate. God elects us in spite of the fact that we aren’t more valuable than the reprobate.

It seems to me the only rational way to combine Christian humanism with Calvinist dualism. Dualistic Calvinism that includes belief in eternal reprobation of a definite number of human beings, especially combined with limited atonement, seems to me to open the door to considering some portion of humanity empty of real dignity and worth.

Election and reprobation cut across (or even against the grain) of race, ethnicity, and social class. To the extent that one group is disproportionately impacted, it's the cultural winners in this life who are more likely to be the cultural losers in the afterlife:

26 For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. 27 But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; 28 God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, 29 so that

no human being might boast in the presence of God
(1 Cor 1:26-29).

Back to Olson:

Historically, of course, it played out that way in South Africa and North America.

Olson is so blinded by his loathing of Calvinism that he rewrites history to suit his agenda. Here's an example of how theology played out North America:

As the nineteenth century progressed, it became apparent that tensions were deepening in Methodism over the slavery question. In this matter, as in so many others, Methodism reflected a national ethos because it was a church with a membership that was not limited to a region, class, or race. Contention over slavery would ultimately split Methodism into separate northern and southern churches.

The slavery issue was generally put aside by The Methodist Episcopal Church until its General Conference in 1844, when the pro-slavery and anti-slavery factions clashed. Their most serious conflict concerned one of the church's five bishops, James

O. Andrew, who had acquired slaves through marriage. After acrimonious debate the General Conference voted to suspend Bishop Andrew from the exercise of his episcopal office so long as he could not, or would not, free his slaves. A few days later dissidents drafted a Plan of Separation, which permitted the annual conferences in slaveholding states to separate from The Methodist Episcopal Church in order to organize their own ecclesiastical structure. The Plan of Separation was adopted, and the groundwork was prepared for the creation of The Methodist Episcopal Church, South.

Delegates from the southern states met in Louisville, Kentucky, in May 1845, to organize their new church. Their first General Conference was held the following year in Petersburg, Virginia, where a Discipline and hymnbook were adopted. Bitterness between northern and southern Methodists intensified in the years leading to Abraham Lincoln's election in 1860 and then through the carnage of the Civil War. Each church claimed divine sanction for its region and prayed fervently for God's will to be accomplished in victory for its side.

[http://www.umc.org/site/apps/nlnet/content.aspx?
c=IwL4KnN1Lth&b=5399351&ct=6470777](http://www.umc.org/site/apps/nlnet/content.aspx?c=IwL4KnN1Lth&b=5399351&ct=6470777)

Is Calvinism Islamic?

A popular Arminian tactic is to preemptively discredit Calvinism by associating Calvinism with Islam. I'll make a few observations:

i) Islam is a Judeo-Christian heresy, parasitic on Muhammad's (mis-)understanding of the Bible, as well as free-floating theological traditions then in circulation. Because it borrows so heavily from Christianity and Judaism, it's not surprising that you can find parallels between Islam and Christianity.

For instance, both Islam and Arminianism believe in a divine Creator and Judge. By that yardstick, Arminian theism is Islamic.

ii) Likewise, Islam has parallel debates involving freedom and determinism. If Asharites are analogous to Calvinists, then Mutazilites are analogous to Arminians. As such, the comparison cuts both ways.

iii) Arminians try to preemptively discredit Calvinism by claiming that both Calvinism and Islam subscribe to predestination. As I just pointed out, that's a double-edged sword. But it also oversimplifies the issue. Some distinctions and definitions are in order.

Theological diversity

Islam has both determinist (Asharite) and indeterminist (Mutazilite) schools of thought. So it parallels the spectrum of Christian positions in that regard.

PREDESTINATION

Predestination is sometimes used as a loose synonym for determinism. But, in principle, there's a basic difference. Predestination involves forethought or premeditation. Not just that God "determines" all things, but that all things go according to plan.

This concept is illustrated by the bookish metaphor. God writes down what will happen. Everything that happens onstage was scripted offstage. The players recite their lines. A player/playwright analogy.

You do have some "Arminian" Muslims who reverse this by casting Allah in the role of a scribe taking dictation from the future. Allah is jotting down whatever he foresees. The future is not a transcription of the book; rather, the book is a transcription of the future.

The Bible itself uses the bookish metaphor. For now I'm not going to debate the correct interpretation of that metaphor. I'm just defining and distinguishing various concepts.

OCCASIONALISM

Let's compare predestination to occasionalism to bring out the difference. On this view, God is the sole cause or direct cause of whatever happens:

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/occasionalism/#IslOcc>

<http://www.iep.utm.edu/occasion/#SH2a>

Now, this is deterministic. However, it's logically separable from the notion of a master plan. The Deity could directly

cause everything, but be improvising every step of the way. The Deity might have no idea of what he's going to do next. Even though he causes everything, his actions are purely spontaneous. Making things up on the spur of the moment.

Occasionalism is deterministic, but not predestinarian. Efficient causes, not final causes.

FATALISM

We can also distinguish determinism from predeterminism or predestination.

Fatalism is both deterministic and predeterministic. A classic example concerns the Fates, who predetermine each human lifespan. Unlike mere determinism, it fixes the outcome ahead of time.

However, it differs from predestination in a couple of key respects:

- i)** It can be capricious or random. There need be no higher purpose or coordinated plan. Just sheer, inexorable power.
- ii)** The end is inevitable irrespective of the means. Indeed, fatalism is compatible with libertarian freedom. There can be many alternate routes, but they all lead to the same destination.

CAUSATION

There is no received definition of causality. One question is what pretheoretical intuition are we trying to capture when we define causation. Here's one influential suggestion (by David Lewis):

We think of a cause as something that makes a difference, and the difference it makes must be a difference from what would have happened without it. Had it been absent, its effects — some of them, at least, and usually all — would have been absent as well.

On this definition, predestination is clearly causal. But there's a catch, for on this definition, even bare permission is equally causal.

Here's an example of what's popularly called "predestination" in Islam:

<http://www.answering-islam.org/Index/P/predestination.html>

Consider how we should classify different passages according to the aforesaid distinctions and definitions. They fall into different categories.

Is evil privative?

I'm going to comment on some statements by Roger Olson on this thread:

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2012/04/another-round-in-the-theodicy-debate-this-time-involving-bob-dylan/>

rogereolson says:

April 18, 2012 at 1:00 pm

What are you saying? That the Bible teaches that God caused the holocaust?

Several issues:

i) Of course the Bible doesn't directly or specifically answer that question. The issue is whether the Bible has a general teaching on divine providence that implicitly answers that question.

ii) It isn't just a question of what the Bible teaches. It's also a question of what theological traditions like Arminianism teach. How does Olson define causation? Here's an attempt to capture our intuitive sense of causation:

“We think of a cause as something that makes a difference, and the difference it

makes must be a difference from what would have happened without it. Had it been absent, its effects — some of them, at least, and usually all — would have been absent as well.” D. Lewis, “Causation,” Journal of Philosophy (1973) 70: 556–67.

That seems like a good working definition to me. On that definition, the Arminian God caused the Holocaust. For divine creation and providence makes a difference from what would have happened without it. Absent divine creation and providence, the Holocaust would not have happened.

Olson can propose a different definition, but it mustn't be an ad hoc definition.

iii) Of course, even this definition doesn't mean God *solely* caused the Holocaust. There were human agents as well.

I find it helpful to jump right to the most extreme conclusion and then back up from there to test what a verse might mean. In my opinion, for whatever it's worth, no interpretation of Scripture can stand up that can't be preached standing in front of the gates of Auschwitz.

i) That's just grandstanding. Scripture means whatever it means.

Olson's objection is an emotional bluff. He draws a line in the sand, then dares us to cross it. But that's a tacit admission that his own position is indefensible, so he must resort to these last-ditch tactics.

His objection is a first strike to bar any interpretation that conflicts with his prior commitments, even before we crack open the pages of Scripture and see what it says. That shows contempt for the word of God. We can't preemptively eliminate certain interpretations before we even read what the Bible has to say.

ii) What's so special about Auschwitz? History is littered with atrocities, large and small. Scripture itself chronicles a number of atrocities. The Holocaust doesn't mark a turning point in hermeneutics. This is not a uniquely evil event.

rogereolson says:

April 18, 2012 at 1:05 pm

I disagree that Job says God used Satan as his instrument to bring all those things upon Job. The narrative does not say God wanted those things to happen to Job and therefore brought in Satan and ordered him to go and do those things. To be sure, God allowed it. We've been over that so many times here it's getting tiresome. To me, perhaps not

to you, “permitting” and “ordaining” are not the same.

i) If God didn't want those things to happen to Job, then why did he allow it? Did he allow it against his will? Didn't he want to allow it? Did Satan put the squeeze on God?

ii) According to the prologue, God has a reason for allowing Satan to afflict Job. He was calling Satan's bluff. Rising to the challenge.

iii) Olson keeps trotting out the distinction between “permitting” and “ordaining” as if that's ipso facto exculpatory. Sometimes that's morally relevant, but in other cases it's not.

iv) Let's take a step back. The Arminian God is the creator of the world. The Arminian God knows the future. Olson's God knew that by making Lucifer, Lucifer would fall. He foreknew that Satan was going to propose this wager. Olson's God knew ahead of time that by making Lucifer and Job, this day would come. So it's more than merely allowing it. It's setting the events in motion, with this foreseen result.

Assuming the principle of alternate possibilities, God was free to choose a different timeline in which that didn't happen.

I think God's role in evil has to be understood from a canonical and narrative perspective. As I read the

whole of Scripture and the earliest church fathers, I see the world and its history (since the fall at least) as a battleground, not a stage.

But that doesn't solve the problem. Olson's God has overwhelming force. There's no contest.

It brings me no comfort to think that the merciful and good God of creation and redemption plans, ordains and renders certain things like the holocaust or my mother's death at age 32.

i) Olson isn't the first man or last man to suffer a family tragedy. Charles Wesley lost siblings and children to infant mortality. Yet Charles Wesley had a far more robust doctrine of divine providence than Olson.

ii) The Arminian God ensures events like the Holocaust or his mother's premature death certain by making and sustaining a world with those foreseeable events.

These are results of the fall and of the fact that Satan is the "god of this present age" yet to be defeated. I find Greg Boyd's explanation in Satan and the

Problem of Evil the most convincing (and it does not depend on open theism).

Notice the Manichaeian quality of Olson's argument, as if this is an even match between God and Satan. Surely Satan is no match for God. Does Olson think God is struggling to gain the upper hand?

rogereolson says:

April 20, 2012 at 12:47 pm

I would remind Job that it was "the Accuser's" doing, not God's. Now, please answer this for me: What would you say to comfort a father and mother whose four year old daughter was kidnapped, brutally raped and murdered and thrown in a river (a real incident)?

That she didn't die in vain. Her little life wasn't a tragic waste of human potential. Her life was meaningful. Her death was meaningful. That we can hope and pray.

rogereolson says:

April 21, 2012 at 1:14 pm

So, nothing you wrote there (in answer to my question about how you would comfort the parents of a child who was murdered) stands in contradiction to what I (or any good Arminian) would say. But the difference, I suspect, would appear in what we would say in response to parents who asked “Where was God when the murderer kidnapped, raped and killed my child?” and they MEAN “What was God’s role in bringing it about—if any?” I teach that pastors ought to preach and teach their doctrine of divine providence so that when such things happen the congregants don’t for the first time cry out “Where was God?” because they will already know what God’s role was.

Well, according to Olson, God let it happen because God had too much respect for the freedom of the murderous child-rapist. Olson’s God couldn’t bring himself to trammel the freedom of the rapist and child-killer, even though the assailant was violating the freedom of the child. Olson’s God allows those who are bigger and stronger to abuse the weak, helpless, and defenseless.

Olson’s answer to the question “Where was God?” is that God was right there, watching the assailant rape and kill the little girl.

rogereolson says:

April 24, 2012 at 12:27 pm

Of course, that's just another way of asking about God's role in the whole sorry state of affairs humanity finds itself in. Is this really "the best of all possible world?" A consistent Calvinist would seem to have to say so.

i) A Calvinist doesn't have to say this is the best possible world. For that assumes there is a best possible world. But different possible worlds encapsulate incommensurable goods. No one possible world can exhaust all possible permutations

ii) And what about Olson? Is he saying there was a better possible world than this one, but God refused to make it? Assuming the principle of alternate possibilities, there's another possible world in which the little girl wasn't raped and murdered. So why didn't Olson's God make that world instead? That wouldn't even infringe on anybody's libertarian freedom, for it's simply actualizing a different set of free choices.

rogereolson says:

April 19, 2012 at 12:15 pm

And I'll take a God who permits evil and innocent suffering, for reasons he alone knows and fully understands, over a God who intentionally wants children to be murdered most cruelly, foreordains it and renders it certain and then sends those who commit such heinous acts (even though they could not have done otherwise) to hell "for his glory."

i) Doesn't Olson's God want what he permits? Doesn't Olson's God intend what he permits? Doesn't Olson's God ensure that event when he finalizes one possible scenario by making that the real world?

ii) It's dishonest for Olson to say the Calvinist God wants children to be murdered. The Calvinist God doesn't will evil for evil's sake.

iii) Keep in mind that there are tradeoffs. For instance, if a young child is murdered, the parents are more likely to have another child to offset the loss of the murdered child. If the first child hadn't been murdered, the second child would not exist. There's the evil of the murdered child, but there's the compensatory good of the second child. Which world is a better world—the world with the first child, or the world with the second child?

iv) This isn't just hypothetical. When Cain murdered his brother, Adam and Eve had Seth to offset the loss of Abel.

If Adam and Eve, Seth and Abel all went to heaven when they died, then Adam, Eve, and Seth gained something from Abel's death without ultimately losing Abel in the

process. So that's better in the long term, even though that's worse in the short term.

I'm not suggesting that every murder has a happy ending in the sweet by-and-by. But theodicy is about the overall balance. The question is not whether any particular outcome might be better, but whether it's a better world.

These are tough answers to tough questions. But they are real answers, unlike Olson's petulant dismissals.

rogereolson says:

April 23, 2012 at 4:30 pm

With Augustine and most of Christian tradition I think of evil as the absence of the good. Creatures with free will can bring it about, but it's not a substance (like a germ or a virus). It's like a broken bone—not a substance but a deformation.

i) A broken bone is not a substance?

ii) Moral evil isn't simply non-good, but anti-good. Not simply privation of good, but replacing something good with something bad. Not the absence of something good, but the presence of something bad.

Olson's false dilemma

I'll comment on this post:

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2012/03/part-5-of-response-to-the-gospel-as-center-chapter-5-sin-and-the-fall/>

Also, of course, this view, that God sovereignly decreed sin and did not merely permit it cannot escape making God the author of sin and evil. God could not have “sovereignly decreed” sin without rendering it certain.

- i)** It's true that by decreeing sin and evil, God made it certain. Indeed, that's a fundamental purpose of predestination.
- ii)** However, it's equally true that you can make it certain by allowing it to happen. If you foresee that some event will happen unless you intervene, yet you refrain, then your permission ensures the occurrence of the event.
- iii)** Therefore, by Olson's own argument, the Arminian God is the author of sin and evil

Why does Andrews not address HOW God rendered sin (i.e., the fall) certain?

Virtually every Calvinist theologian I have read explains that God withdrew or withheld the grace he knew Adam and Eve would have needed not to sin. How else could God have guaranteed what he decreed would come to pass without actually forcing them to sin? And yet, non-Calvinists ask, how is that not tantamount to causing them to sin? And if sinning is what they naturally would do apart from a supernatural gift of grace, how was their nature “good?”

i) Once again, it's true that by decreeing the fall, God ensured the fall.

ii) And, once again, it's equally true that you can make it a sure thing short of predestinating the outcome. If God foresaw the eventuation of the Fall unless he took steps to contravene that outcome, then God's inaction guaranteed the Fall. Permission made it certain to occur.

iii) Notice that Olson defines causation in terms of ensuring the outcome. So by Olson's own definition, God caused the fall.

Then, of course, the biggest problem with Andrews' (and most Calvinists')

view) of God's sovereign ordaining of sin and evil is that sin and evil are no longer really bad. Andrews quotes Bavinck that God "willed it [i.e., sin and evil] so that in it and against it He might bring to light His divine attributes." (p. 81) Really. Please. If that's the case, then there is no getting around it that sin and evil are good because without them God's glory could not be fully revealed. It's only a baby step from there to "Those suffering in the flames of hell for eternity can at least take comfort in the fact they are there for the greater glory of God." But it's not even a baby step to belief that sin and evil are really good.

That's simpleminded. It fails to distinguish between ends and means. Something can be bad in itself, but serve a good purpose in spite of itself. Take the Assyrian deportation:

5 Ah, Assyria, the rod of my anger;

the staff in their hands is my fury!

6 Against a godless nation I send him,

and against the people of my wrath I command him,

**to take spoil and seize plunder,
and to tread them down like the mire of the
streets.**

(Isa 10:5-6)

God uses Assyria to punish Judah. The Assyrians were notoriously cruel. Many atrocities were committed in the course of the deportation. So was the Assyrian deportation good or evil?

Both, in different respects. Cruelty for cruelty's sake isn't good. But it had a punitive function. As a means to an end.

Some things are intrinsically evil. In case of what's intrinsically evil, the ends can never justify the means. But other things can be either good or evil depending on the circumstances.

Of course, one traditional Calvinist way of getting around that is to say that the evil of a sinful act lies in the intention with which it is done. But, within a Calvinist doctrine of meticulous providence, even the "evil" intention had to be ordained and rendered certain by God. Then it, too, is not really evil but good.

That, too, is simpleminded. The fact that Adam intends to sin because God intends Adam to sin doesn't mean God and Adam have the same intentions. Take this illustration:

ruse — In military deception, a trick of war designed to deceive the adversary, usually involving the deliberate exposure of false information to the adversary's intelligence collection system.

http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new_pubs/jp1_02.pdf

The fact that it was our intention to deceive the enemy doesn't mean it was the enemy's intention to be deceived.

Let's take some Biblical examples:

**5 Ah, Assyria, the rod of my anger;
the staff in their hands is my fury!**
**6 Against a godless nation I send him,
and against the people of my wrath I command
him,
to take spoil and seize plunder,
and to tread them down like the mire of the
streets.**
**7 But he does not so intend,
and his heart does not so think;
but it is in his heart to destroy,
and to cut off nations not a few;**

(Isa 10:5-7)

The Assyrians unconsciously do God's bidding. They carry out his intentions—even though they don't intend to do so.

Likewise:

49 But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, “You know nothing at all. 50 Nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish.” 51 He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, 52 and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad.

(Jn 11:49-51)

Caiaphas did not intend to bear witness to Jesus. He did so in spite of his malicious intentions to the contrary.

I truly do not see how Calvinists like Andrews can cope with this conundrum. If this is true, then why not celebrate sin and evil and hell? They are God's will and bring him glory.

i) Because sin and evil aren't good in and of themselves. They don't automatically glorify God. Rather, redemption glorifies God. Judgment glorifies God.

We celebrate the results. And we praise the wisdom of God's methods.

ii) Conversely, if the Arminian God permitted sin, evil, and hell, then he willingly permitted sin, evil, and hell. So he willed the permissive results.

How does Olson cope with the Arminian conundrum?

The supreme Arminian conundrum

I'm going to respond to this post by constructing parallel objections to Olson's position, drawn from his own definitions of Arminian theology:

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2012/03/further-thoughts-about-catastrophes-and-gods-judgment/>

True, in this particular blog entry Piper does not explicitly say the tornadoes were God's judgment on those towns. He does say, however, that the tornadoes were "God's fingers." In light of everything else he has written and said about calamities and catastrophes, it is clear to me that he believes not only this tornado outbreak but every natural and man-made disaster (including the 9/11 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, D.C.) are from God and not only in some attenuated sense in which most Christians would say they are from God by concurrence. (That is, by God's permission and granted ability as the creator and governor of nature.)

So, IF Piper does not think this tornado outbreak was God's judgment on those specific towns, what does he think about God's purpose in sending it?

So, IF Olson does not think this tornado outbreak was God's judgment on those specific towns, what does he think about God's purpose in **permitting, enabling, and governing** the deadly tornado?

What I wonder is this: IF Piper was NOT saying that this tornado outbreak was God's judgment, what does he think about it (beyond it was from God)? The natural question, all inquiring minds want to know, is WHY would God drag his fingers across that particular landscape at that particular time? Simply saying something like "to bring people to repentance" doesn't suffice. Of course, Piper's no more obligated than Jesus was to explain further. (Although we don't know that Jesus didn't explain his cryptic comments about those who died when the tower of Siloam fell further.) However, I think he should not be surprised if people assume he thinks God's fingers had a specific purpose for that particular tornado outbreak at that

particular time and that it is God's judgment.

What I wonder is this: IF Olson was NOT saying that this tornado outbreak was God's judgment, what does he think about it (beyond it was from God's concurrence)? The natural question, all inquiring minds want to know, is WHY would God **permit, enable, and govern** the tornado to ravage that particular landscape at that particular time? Simply saying something like "to bring people to repentance" doesn't suffice. Of course, Olson's no more obligated than Jesus was to explain further. (Although we don't know that Jesus didn't explain his cryptic comments about those who died when the tower of Siloam fell further.) However, I think he should not be surprised if people assume he thinks God's **permission, enablement, and governance** had a specific purpose for that particular tornado outbreak at that particular time and that it is God's judgment.

Think of the possible alternatives.

Option 1: God chose those particular, specific towns to destroy with those tornadoes (his "fingers") because of something about them.

Option 2: God chose those particular, specific towns to destroy with those tornadoes (his "fingers") randomly. (Like the TV reporter who blindly throws

a dart at a map of the U.S. and then goes to the location to find a story.)

Option 3: ?

Think of the possible alternatives.

Option 1: God chose those particular, specific towns to **concurrently** destroy with those tornadoes (his “fingers”) because of something about them.

Option 2: God chose those particular, specific towns to **concurrently** destroy with those tornadoes (his “fingers”) randomly. (Like the TV reporter who blindly throws a dart at a map of the U.S. and then goes to the location to find a story.)

Option 3: ?

I can't think of a third option that doesn't fit within one of the first two. Can you? Assuming the tornadoes were “God's fingers,” either God dragged his fingers across that particular landscape at that particular time because of something about that particular landscape or arbitrarily.

If God chose that landscape (towns, farms, etc.) randomly, then he is arbitrary. I'm certain Piper doesn't believe that. I'm sure he believes God

always has a reason for what he does. At least I hope so.

But if God was not choosing arbitrarily, randomly, then he had to have a reason for destroying the towns and farms (etc.) of that particular landscape at that time. What could it be?

How many options are there for thinking of God's reason for destroying a town?

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How many options are there for thinking of God's reason for concurrently destroying a town?

Now, again, I agree that a person can simply say “God did it” and not offer any further explanation, but I think such a person ought not to be surprised if people press for a better answer than that. And surely Piper himself has some idea why God chose that particular landscape to destroy at that particular time in that specific way.

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Option 1: God chose them (the people living there) simply to make an example of what he can do anytime, anywhere, unexpectedly to anyone without any particular reason. Meaning, he chose it because it isn't where people would expect God to do it so that people in such areas won't become spiritually complacent.

Option 2: God chose them because there was something about them or some of them that made

him angry or at least wanting to cause them great harm and even death. Most people would call that “God’s judgment.”

Option 3: ?

Again, I can’t think of a third option that doesn’t fit within one of the first two. Can you?

Option 1: the Arminian God chose them (the people living there) simply to make an example of what he can do anytime, anywhere, unexpectedly to anyone without any particular reason. Meaning, he chose it because it isn’t where people would expect God to do it so that people in such areas won’t become spiritually complacent.

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Option 3: ?

Again, I can’t think of a third option that doesn’t fit within one of the first two. Can you?

Now, remember, all of the above assumes, with Piper and all consistent Calvinists and other divine determinists, that every catastrophe is specifically

from God whether directly or indirectly. That is, they are all sent by God in some manner and are not simply what happens in a fallen world.

Now, remember, all of the above assumes, with Olson and all consistent Arminians, that God is the **first cause** or **supreme cause** of every catastrophe. God **effects** every catastrophe **willingly** and **designedly**. God is never in the **spectator** mode.

Appeals to the book of Job to explain catastrophes raise more questions than they answer. For example, if one correlates what Piper said about this particular natural catastrophe and what he surely believes about all of them (“fingers of God”) with Job, then Satan becomes God’s fingers.

Appeals to the book of Job to explain catastrophes raise more questions than they answer. For example, if one correlates what Olson said about Arminian providence with Job, then Satan becomes God’s partner in crime.

So, at the end of the day, anyone who says a natural or man-made disaster,

calamity, catastrophe is from God must be thinking either that it was an arbitrary act of God, done for no particular reason other than perhaps to create fear (which still doesn't explain why that particular place), or that it was in some sense God's judgment.

So, at the end of the day, anyone who says a natural or man-made disaster, calamity, catastrophe is from God's **concurrence** must be thinking either that it was an arbitrary act of God, done for no particular reason other than perhaps to create fear (which still doesn't explain why that particular place), or that it was in some sense God's judgment.

Now, again, let's step back and take a bird's eye view of Piper's and other Calvinists' divine determinism. If everything without exception is from God, planned, designed and governed by God for a reason such that God is not merely permitting it but actively willing it and rendering it certain (and I demonstrate in Against Calvinism this is the traditional Calvinist view and I am

confident it is Piper's as well), then the holocaust and the kidnapping, torture, rape and murder of an innocent two year old child are also "from God" in that sense.

Now, again, let's step back and take a bird's eye view of Olson's and other Arminians' divine providence. If everything without exception is from God, as their **supreme cause**, not merely permitting it but **designedly willing** it, **effecting** it, and **governing** it (and Olson demonstrates in **ARMINIAN THEOLOGY: MYTHS AND REALITIES** this is the traditional Arminian view), then the holocaust and the kidnapping, torture, rape and murder of an innocent two year old child are also "from God" in that sense.

IF that's true, then, I ask, why ever be upset about such things? Why react emotionally or with righteous indignation as if something happened that shouldn't have happened? After all, God's ultimate purpose in everything is his glory. (I demonstrate that that also is the traditional Calvinist view and I have asked many Calvinists if it's their view and the answer has always been yes.) So,

one who believes that has to say that the holocaust and the kidnapping, torture, rape and murder of a two-year-old child glorify God. Then why object to them? Why oppose them? Why blame the perpetrators? Why try to prevent them?

IF that's true, then, I ask, why are Arminians ever be upset about such things? Why do Arminians react emotionally or with righteous indignation as if something happened that shouldn't have happened? After all, the Arminian God **designedly** and **willingly enabled** and **effected** the natural or moral evil. So, one who believes that has to say that God permitted the holocaust and the kidnapping, torture, rape and murder of a two-year-old child for a morally sufficient reason. Then why object to them? Why oppose them? Why blame the perpetrators? Why try to prevent them?

This is the supreme Calvinist conundrum. Yes, every theology has its soft spots where appeal to mystery is necessary. But this is more than a "soft spot." This is a true conundrum because Scripture directs us to be righteously indignant about certain things and to oppose them and to blame the perpetrators as if they are responsible for them. And we cannot

help it. We all operate daily AS IF horrible events such as these were NOT from God for his glory even if we say, when pushed, they are.

This is the supreme Arminian conundrum. Yes, every theology has its soft spots where appeal to mystery is necessary. But this is more than a “soft spot.” This is a true conundrum because Scripture directs us to be righteously indignant about certain things and to oppose them and to blame the perpetrators as if they are responsible for them. And we cannot help it. We all operate daily AS IF horrible events such as these were NOT **designedly willed, effected, and governed** by God as their **supreme cause**, even if we say, when pushed, they are.

In other words, while divine determinism (including strict Calvinism) may be able to appeal to a few verses in the Bible and while it may be touted in an ivory tower or from a nice, clean pulpit in a nice, clean sanctuary or over the internet, it is literally impossible to live consistently.

In other words, while divine Arminian providence may be able to appeal to a few verses in the Bible and while it may be touted in an ivory tower or from a nice, clean pulpit in a

nice, clean sanctuary or over the internet, it is literally impossible to live consistently.

God "permitted" the tornado

So when Piper says that God did not merely foresee or permit the terrorist attacks of 9/11 but designed and governed them and when he says that a tornado was not merely permitted by God but sent by God, he is simply saying what conservative Calvinists (not necessarily all Reformed people) have always said.

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2012/03/my-response-to-john-pipers-recent-statements-about-god-and-tornadoes/>

Is Olson suggesting that God merely "permitted" the tornado? What's that supposed to mean? Is he ascribing freewill to the tornado? Is the tornado a sentient being with a mind of its own?

Arminius held to the doctrine of concurrence. Concurrence simply means God allows whatever happens.

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2012/03/my-response-to-john-pipers-recent-statements-about-god-and-tornadoes/>

tornadoes/comment-page-1/#comment-25585

Is that all it means? That's not how Olson used to define it. Here's what he used to say:

Arminius was puzzled about the accusation that he held corrupt opinions respecting the providence of God, because he went out of his way to affirm it. He even went so far as to say that every human act, including sin, is impossible without God's cooperation! This is simply part of divine concurrence, and Arminius was not willing to regard God as a spectator.

According to this, God does not permit sin as a spectator; God is never in the spectator mode. Rather, God not only allows sin and evil designedly and willingly, although not approvingly or efficaciously, but he cooperates with the creature in sinning without being stained by the guilt of sin.

God both permits and effects a sinful act, such as the rebellion of Adam, because no creature can act apart from God's help. In several of his writings Arminius carefully explained divine concurrence, which is without doubt the most subtle aspect of his doctrine of sovereignty and providence. For him

God is the first cause of whatever happens; even a sinful act cannot occur without God as its first cause, because creatures have no ability to act without their Creator, who is their supreme cause for existence...

R. Olson, **ARMINIAN THEOLOGY: MYTHS AND REALITIES** (IVP 2006), 121-23.

So by Olson's own definition (summarizing Arminius), God didn't merely *permit* the tornado. Rather, God is the ultimate *cause* of the tornado.

Clearly Calvin understood everything as foreordained and rendered certain by God which, for him, probably also for Piper, does not rule out secondary causes. But secondary cause (which is what I assume you mean by "double effect") doesn't get God off the hook. Ultimate responsibility lies with ultimate cause.

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2012/03/my-response-to-john-pipers-recent-statements-about-god-and-tornadoes/comment-page-1/#comment-25575>

In which case, God is ultimately responsible for the tornado, and the resultant fatalities.

But even more: I'd like to hear one of them (Calvinists or anyone who believes God foreordains and designs and renders certain everything that happens) say publicly that it was God who caused a predator to kidnap, torture, rape and murder a child. I seldom hear or read them saying so. And yet, it would seem that, too, must be included in God's meticulous providence AS IT IS BELIEVED BY THEM.

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2012/03/my-response-to-john-pipers-recent-statements-about-god-and-tornadoes/>

But according to Olson, God didn't merely "permit" the assailant to rape, torture, and murder. God "cooperated" with the sadistic, murderous rapist. God "willingly" and "designedly" "helped" the sadistic, murderous rapist. God is the "effector" of the rapist's sadistic, murderous deeds. God is the "first cause" or the "supreme cause" of the outcome. And "ultimate responsibility lies with ultimate cause."

Judging God's morality

If a person claims he doesn't "judge God's morality" it can only be because he is a nominalist. To such a person I ask "What makes God worthy of worship?" The answer must be "just because he's God." To that I can only respond "Oh, really? Why, then, do Psalm 106 and 118 (among other passages of the Bible) say to worship God because he's good? It's obvious to me that the Psalmist was telling his listeners (and us who read his Psalms) that God is worshipful, whereas "the gods" are not, because our God, the true God, is good. And, according to Psalm 106, God is good because "his steadfast love endures forever."

Was the Psalmist judging God's morality? Is someone who obeys him by worshiping God BECAUSE he's good judging God's morality? It seems ridiculous to say so.

What I get from the Bible is that God is worshipful because he is good. Yes, also because he is all powerful and holy. But it's a package deal. Take

away goodness and he wouldn't be worshipful. That's how I understand Psalm 106 and Psalm 118.

The main reason most Christians don't consider Mormonism a form of Christianity is precisely because its god is not worshipful. By what standard? By the standard given to us by God himself in Scripture.

The standard of goodness I'm using as the criterion is the one given by God himself—loving kindness and steadfast love. That's the standard I'm using to judge OTHER so-called "gods." I'm not "judging" my God, the God of the Bible, at all. I'm simply accepting the standard he has revealed for worshipfulness and using it to rule out worshiping other gods (which, of course, don't exist as real gods because they're not worshipful).

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2012/01/about-judging-gods-morality/>

There are several glaring problems with this argument:

i) The original question at issue was whether Olson would worship the God of Calvinism if he became convinced that Scripture taught Calvinism. His response was to say that, in that event, he'd reject Scripture.

It is therefore incoherent to say he's applying a biblical standard. For, if push came to shove, he'd reject the biblical standard. As he himself says, it's a package deal.

ii) Put another way, he's not using Scripture as an objective standard or criterion of truth. Rather, he's only applying the Biblical standard for the sake of argument.

iii) He's also treating Psalmnic ascriptions of divine "goodness" as a cipher. The psalmist doesn't say God would be monstrous unless he gave us libertarian freedom. Olson didn't get that from Ps 106 or Ps 118.

iv) In addition, the psalmist isn't merely talking about God, or for God, but from God. By inspiration, God reveals himself to and through the psalmist. The psalmist's words are ultimately God's words. So of course this isn't a case of the psalmist holding God to some independent standard of morality. And by that same token, the psalmist isn't using that to judge whether or not the God of Scripture is the true God.

v) Finally, the problem with the god(s) of Mormonism isn't so much their unworthiness but their nonexistence.

Faith & forgiveness

Arminians say the Arminian God is more loving than the Calvinist God. Yet the Arminian God makes faith an obstacle to forgiveness. This is despite the fact that the Arminian God has redeemed everyone.

Given universal atonement, would it not be just for God to simply forgive unbelievers outright?

However, some Arminians (e.g. Grotius, Randal Rauser, Joel Green) reject penal substitution. So they don't even think redemption (in penal substitutionary sense) is a necessary precondition to justly forgive sinners. But in that event, why in the world is faith precondition to be forgiven?

Rauser's spooftexting

According to Randal Rauser:

Many Christians assume that God loves all people. This is hardly surprising since scripture declares that God loves all creation (John 3:16-17) and desires to see all people saved (1 Tim.2:4; 2 Pe.3:9).

- i)** Since Rauser denies the inerrancy of Scripture, why is he prooftexting his position? According to him, the Bible frequently misrepresents God's character. Frequently misattributes actions to God. So even if we grant his interpretation, what presumption is there that these passages accurately reflect God's true intentions?
- ii)** How does Jn 3:16 teach the omnibenevolence of God? Isn't that promise restricted to believers only—a rather small subset of humanity at large?
- iii)** Apropos (ii), why would an omnibenevolent God even require faith? If he were really omnibenevolent, wouldn't he create a physically pleasant afterlife for unbelievers? Why could they not spend eternity on a tropical paradise, forever ignoring God—if they so choose?
- iv)** Is *kosmos* synonymous with "creation" in Jn 3:16-17? No. As one commentator explains:

*Some argue that the term ‘world’ here simply has neutral connotations—the created human world. But the characteristic use of ‘the world’ (ho kosmos) elsewhere in the narrative is with negative overtones—the world in its alienation from and hostility to its creator’s purposes. It makes better sense in a soteriological context to see the latter notion as in view. God loves that which has become hostile to God. The force is not, then, that the world is so vast that it takes a great deal of love to embrace it, but rather that the world has become so alienated from God that it takes an exceedingly great kind of love to love it at all. A. Lincoln, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 154.*

This meaning is attested in standard Greek lexicons, viz. BDAG, EDNT.

iv) 2 Pet 3:9 doesn’t denote all human beings.

God’s patience with his own people delaying the final judgment to give them

the opportunity of repentance, provides at least a partial answer to the problem of eschatological delay...The author remains close to his Jewish source, for in Jewish thought it was usually for the sake of the repentance of his own people that God delayed judgment. R. Bauckham, Jude, 2 Peter, 312-13.

v) 1 Tim 2:4 doesn't denote all human beings:

The purpose of the reference to 'all people,' which continues the theme of the universality in this passage, is sometimes misconstrued. The reference is made mainly with the Pauline mission to the Gentiles in mind (v7). But the reason behind Paul's justification of this universal mission is almost certainly the false teaching, with its Torah-centered approach to life that included either an exclusivist bent or a downplaying of the Gentile mission...Paul's focus is on building a people of God who incorporate all people regardless of

ethnic, social, or economic backgrounds. P. Towner, The Letters to Timothy and Titus, 177-78.

It may be that they [the false teachers] were consumed with genealogies because they restricted salvation along certain ethnic lines (1 Tim 1:4)...When Paul says that God desires all to be saved (1 Tim 2:4), and that Christ was the ransom for all (1 Tim 2:6), he may be responding to some who excluded Gentiles from salvation for genealogical reasons...Titus 2:11 should be interpreted along similar lines...Paul counters Jewish teachers (Tit 1:10,14-15; 3:9) who construct genealogies to exclude some from salvation. T. Schreiner, Paul, Apostle of God's Glory in Christ, 184-85.

Back to Rauser:

Indeed, the notion that God is loving to all, a doctrine known among theologians

by the fancy name “omnibenevolence”, would qualify for many as a basic axiom, a starting point for all further theological reflection.

According to a Catholic philosopher, that’s actually a theological innovation:

<http://branemrys.blogspot.com/2011/07/omnibenevolence.html>

As such, it may be surprising to discover that theologians within the Calvinist tradition reject the doctrine of divine omnibenevolence.

If Rauser were intellectually serious, he’d interact with Paul Helm’s essay “Can God Love the World?” in chap. 8 of **NOTHING GREATER, NOTHING BETTER.**

The other position stakes out a more unambiguous position by declaring without qualification that God does not love those he does not save; indeed, he hates them.

The love/hate lingo is a carryover from Mal 1:2-3. It's a Hebrew idiom for select/reject. A hyperbolic rhetorical contrast.

And why does he hate them? I will argue in a subsequent post that the reasons are arbitrary. That is, he could just as easily have loved those he hates and hated those he loves as hated those he hates and loved those he loves. That, I would submit, is a deeply disturbing implication, both theologically and pastorally.

An alternate history doesn't have the same set of people. An alternate history has different genealogies as well as different tradeoffs.

My Cartesian demon is better 'un yer Cartesian demon!

According to Roger Olson:

This pops up every time a Calvinist points the finger at me and cries “Where’s your exegesis?” as if exegesis is the solution to everything. If only it were. And I agree it is the solution to some things. In other words, there are cases where people are simply practicing bad exegesis and hermeneutics and arriving at blatantly wrong interpretations of scripture. But I suspect many of our disagreements about scripture have more to do with blik than objective exegesis. I know that no exegesis could convince me that God is a monster. If I thought it possible that God is a monster there would be no point in doing exegesis because a monster cannot be trusted.

i) Olson is conflating two distinct issues:

a) What does the text assert to be the case?

b) Does that textual assertion correspond to reality?

If (arguendo) Scripture teaches the existence of a monstrous God, and Olson doesn't believe in the existence of a monstrous God, that would at most mean the Biblical passage is false, not that the exegesis is false.

ii) Olson is alluding to the Cartesian demon. But if the Cartesian demon did exist, he might get his kicks out of inspiring a Bible that teaches Arminian theology, even though the real God is monstrous. The Cartesian demon might get his jollies out of dictating those Wesleyan hymns about God's universal love, or Christ's universal atonement, to beguile the credulous into believing that's what awaits them—only to lower the boom when they die.

It seems to me that SOME Christians view the Bible as divine. That is, they regard it so highly that they put it on the same level with God himself in terms of authority. This is what Brunner meant when he accused fundamentalists and evangelicals of treating the Bible as a "paper pope." But I would go further and say that some Christians treat it as if it were God himself or somehow participated in the divine essence. This appears when people say they would

believe whatever the Bible said EVEN IF it said God is a monster.

Of course, Olson is imputing to them his twisted interpretation of what that would mean if Scripture taught Calvinism.

Then I know they are investing too much faith in scripture and not enough in the God who inspired scripture.

But that's clearly a false dichotomy.

In my opinion, they are flirting with bibliolatry. From my perspective, anyway, scripture is the divinely inspired, infallible witness to God; it identifies God for us. But I only believe that because through it I "hear my Master's voice" (to use another metaphor from Brunner).

It's revealing that Olson has so little confidence in Arminian exegesis. If the true God is Arminian; if the Arminian God inspired the Bible, why does Olson need this ace in the hole?

After all, there are quite a few competent Arminian Bible scholars, viz. Ben Witherington, John Hartley, John Oswalt, C. K. Barrett, I. H. Marshall, Joel Green, Grant Osborne, Scot McKnight, Brian Abasciano. If the Bible teaches Arminianism, then don't they enjoy an insurmountable advantage over Reformed exegetes? They were dealt a winning hand.

It's a backdoor admission on Olson's part that he has so little faith in the witness of Scripture to Arminian theology. Otherwise, why prepare this escape route?

My experience of WHO GOD IS is not limited to scripture; I have unmediated experience of God as good that convinces me that scripture is God's Word—the oracle of God.

But if God really were monstrous, if the Cartesian demon actually exists then wouldn't the Cartesian demon take sadistic delight in snookering Olson by giving him a delusive spiritual experience? Olson wouldn't know what hit him until it was too late.

When I look at scripture I see it "as" the testimony to the God who I experience also outside of it. The experience I have of God outside of scripture does not communicate doctrines, but it does

“speak” to me of God through my personal relationship with Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit within me. But that experience always points me back TO scripture as God’s written self-communication for understanding him more fully. Nothing in my experience of God contradicts scripture; that’s not even possible. But neither is God the prisoner of scripture.

But in this life, we know Christ by description, not experience. We're not the twelve disciples.

So what is the blik difference I’m talking about here? Some evangelicals seem to see experience of God as always mediated through scripture which, from my perspective, seems to incline them toward bibliolatry. This is why they say they would believe God is a monster (or the author of evil or whatever) IF scripture said so. Other evangelicals (like I) seem to see experience of God as BOTH mediated by scripture AND as

unmediated with the latter as primary in terms of knowing God's character as good.

i) I don't even know what Olson means by an "unmediated" experience of God. To say we can experience God outside of Scripture doesn't mean our extrascriptural experience of God is immediate. Rather, it would simply be mediated by something else.

If God subsists outside of time and space, then we can never experience God directly, as he is in himself. Rather, we can only experience God as he discloses himself through various spatial and temporal media. Even inspired visions and dreams convey the experience of God through a temporal process, with interior dialogue or simulated imagery. It's adapted to a creaturely mode of subsistence.

ii) Speaking for myself, I experience God's providence in my life through the lens of Scripture. I use his word to interpret his work.

Certainly I can experience God outside of Scripture. Ordinary providence is one way we experience God—everyday and every hour. But providence alone is often ambiguous.

When I got saved I was not converted to the Bible; I was converted to the God of Jesus Christ. THEN I found more about God through the Bible and believed in it

BECAUSE it told me about the God of Jesus Christ I encountered in conversion and in my personal relationship with him. My experience of God is both unmediated and mediated and the two are inseparable.

i) How does he experience Jesus outside of Scripture? Does Jesus appear to him in visions? Does Jesus speak to him in dreams and apparitions? What is Olson talking about, exactly?

ii) Moreover, we need a benchmark to judge the veridicality or inveridicality of religious experience. If the Bible is not our benchmark, what is?

But when I open the Bible to read and study it I NEVER do so as a tabula rasa—prepared to believe whatever it might say EVEN IF it says (in some passage I had henceforth never noticed) that God is a monster who might hate me and want the worst for me or who loves his own glory more than he loves me (and all of us). If I am tempted to believe that, I go to God and rediscover him in unmediated experience of him through

Jesus Christ or at least remember those times when my heart was strangely warmed and I KNEW without any ability to doubt that God loves me and wants the best for me and does not hate me or love his glory at the expense of my (or anyone else's) well being in its most profound sense (wholeness).

Unless the Cartesian demon is the nefarious source of his strangely heart-warming experience.

This is my perspective on experiencing God. People experienced God before there was a Bible and have experiences of God apart from the Bible. But the Bible fills experience of God with cognitive content. But it cannot contradict the God I know as good through my unmediated experience of Jesus Christ because the only reason I believe the Bible is because it is THAT GOD'S WORD. In and through it I hear my Master's voice in a unique way—as communicating himself to me in a

cognitive way, filling my unmediated experience of God with information. But that information cannot contradict the very pre-cognitive experience of God as unqualifiedly good that I had in my conversion and have in my post-conversion relationship with Jesus Christ.

This statement is incoherent. If his extrascriptural experience lacks cognitive content, then, indeed, the Bible can't contradict his noncognitive experience inasmuch as there is nothing to contradict. A noncognitive experience is consistent with any proposition.

It seems to me that this is a fundamental watershed between evangelicals. Those of us in the Pietist tradition claim unmediated experience of God that authenticates scripture to us but makes it impossible to see scripture as proving that God is evil or the author of sin and evil or loves his own glory more than he loves people created in his own image and likeness. Those evangelicals in the Protestant scholastic tradition at least claim to experience God only through

scripture and at least say they would believe the Bible even if it said God is a monster, the author of sin and evil, who loves his own glory to the extent that it causes him to hate some of the creatures created in his own image and likeness.

Don't cult leaders also appeal to their unmediated experience of God? Doesn't that supply the prism through which they interpret the Bible? Take Swedenborg, Helen Schucman, or the Münsterites.

No amount of arguing or crying "exegesis!" is going to solve this blik dilemma, this continental divide among evangelicals. To be perfectly blunt, I shudder when I encounter people who seem to me to be worshiping scripture to that extent—that there is no unmediated experience of God outside of scripture. I shake my head and wonder about their spirituality even as I continue to embrace them as fellow evangelicals (even if they reject me as one to them).

Reminds of what Peter Hitchens says about his brother's inner promptings:

Christopher describes how at the age of nine he concluded that his teacher's claim that the world must be designed was wrong. "I simply knew, almost as if I had privileged access to a higher authority, that my teacher had managed to get everything wrong."

At the time of this revelation, he knew nothing of the vast, unending argument between those who maintain that the shape of the world is evidence of design, and those who say the same world is evidence of random, undirected natural selection.

It's my view that he still doesn't know all that much about this interesting dispute. Yet at the age of nine, he "simply knew" who had won one of the oldest debates in the history of mankind.

It is astonishing, in one so set against the idea of design or authority in the universe, how often he appeals to mysterious intuitions and "innate" knowledge of this kind...

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-459427/Hitchens-vs-Hitchens.html>

It had to be you

One day, at the end of a class session on Calvinism's doctrine of God's sovereignty, a student asked me a question I had put off considering. He asked: "If it was revealed to you in a way you couldn't question or deny that the true God actually is as Calvinism says and rules as Calvinism affirms, would you still worship him?" I knew the only possible answer without a moment's thought, even though I knew it would shock many people. I said no, that I would not because I could not. Such a God would be a moral monster. Roger Olson, Against Calvinism, 85.

Speaking for myself, this reflects an asymmetry between my view of Arminianism and his view of Calvinism. If I thought the Arminian God was the true God, that wouldn't be my reaction.

Olson doesn't think the Calvinist God is worshipful. Well, I don't think the Arminian God is all that worshipful either. But not because I think the Arminian God is Satanic or

monstrous. For one thing, he's not impressive enough to even be diabolical.

If I thought he were the true God, I'd be disappointed. He'd be a letdown. Compared to the Calvinist God, the Arminian God isn't very godlike.

In some ways he's more like a benefactor who creates a scholarship fund for qualified recipients. Someone you appreciate having around. Someone who's helpful. But all too human. A partner.

I'd be diffident about the Arminian God. Yes, he loves everyone—I guess. But that's like Frank Sinatra singing "It had to be you."

*It must have been, that something lovers call fate
Kept me saying: "I have to wait"
I saw them all, just couldn't fall - 'til we met
It had to be you, it had to be you
I wandered around, and finally found - the somebody
who
Could make me be true, and could make me be blue
And even be glad, just to be sad - thinking of you
Some others I've seen, might never be mean
Might never be cross, or try to be boss, but they
wouldn't do
For nobody else, gave me a thrill - with all your
faults, I love you still
It had to be you, wonderful you, it had to be you*

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4I2KTRFRWuw>

The lyrics sound oh-so personal. Customized. As if Sinatra has one woman in mind. The love of his life.

But in reality, he doesn't have any particular woman in mind. The song is directed at every woman in the audience, every woman who will buy his record—whether one, few, or many.

I guess it works as long as the female listener suspends belief. As long as she forgets that it didn't have to be *her*. That it was never about *her*. She's interchangeable with every other customer.

Likewise, there's that sink-or-swim dynamic to Arminianism. The Arminian God equips everyone. Gives everyone sufficient grace. Universal atonement. But then he sends them packing. Whether they survive or perish is ultimately up to them. They may have everything they need in the backpack, but they are on their own in the wilderness. Some make it out, others fall behind, lose their way, die of exposure.

We're loyal to those who are loyal to us. It's hard to work up much affection or devotion for a God who's that detached.

Olson thinks the worst thing you can say about God is if he's monstrous or devilish. That's what makes him unworthy of our worship.

Speaking for myself, I think the worst thing you can say about God is if, after all the breathless anticipation, you finally meet him in heaven, only to discover that "God" is a

pleasant mediocrity. Like Kirk asking, "What does God need with a spaceship"?

Or, as Piper put it, in response to Rabbi Kushner, "God does not need to be 'all-powerful' to keep people from being hurt in the collapse of a bridge. He doesn't even need to be as powerful as a man. He only needs to show up and use a little bit of his power (say, on the level of Spiderman, or Jason Bourne)."

If the Arminian God is unworthy of our worship, that's because he's such a dud. The more you see, the less you get.

The "monstrous" God of Calvinism

rogereolson says:

October 23, 2011 at 4:49 pm

According to classical Calvinism, God foreordained and rendered the fall of Adam and Eve certain by withdrawing the grace they needed not to sin. In other words, the whole horrid universe of sin that followed their fall was in the plan and will of God—including the eternal suffering of the wicked in hell.

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2011/10/regarding-the-love-and-justice-of-a-god-who-unconditionally-elects-only-some-to-save/comment-page-1/#comment-19814>

Does Olson think God did not anticipate the consequences of his creative actions? Does Olson think God did not intend the consequences of his creative actions? Is God an unwilling participant in world history? A hostage to his creation?

Another thing you don't mention is God's love for all people and his desire that all be saved (1 Tim. 2:4). What kind of God

would choose to save only a portion of fallen humanity IF grace is irresistible? Such a God would be a monster, IMHO.

Where does 1 Tim 2:4 say God's love is unrequited? Where does 1 Tim 2:4 say God's desire is thwarted? Where does 1 Tim say God doesn't save everyone because his grace is resistible?

How does God love all people if he knowingly makes some people who will suffer eternally in hell? How does he desire their salvation if he creates them in the certain knowledge of their doom? If that outcome is the inevitable result of his creative action? Weren't they essentially fated to be damned the moment he played the tape of their foreseen life and death?

How is it monstrous to punish the wicked?

How to stay one step ahead of Roger Olson



To: Reformed demonolaters
From: Upper Management
Re: Security precautions

Roger Olson is gaining on us. He recently said,

When Wesley rightly said of Romans 9 that it cannot mean “that” (what Calvinists believe it means) he wasn’t dismissing Romans 9 as uninspired, not part of God’s Word. He was saying IF it means that (and fortunately there are other valid interpretations than the Calvinist one) God is not good but a monster worse than the devil because at least the devil is sincere. That’s why we cannot be Calvinists—because IF WE believed what Calvinists believe God

would not be good and therefore could not be trusted. We realize that Calvinists (at least most) do not believe God is a monster, but we are saying if WE believed what they believe we would find it necessary to think of God that way—as indistinguishable from the devil.

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2011/10/some-thoughts-about-conversationsdebates-between-calvinists-and-arminians/>

He hasn't yet caught on to the fact that we really are devil-worshippers. He still thinks most of us are simply misguided. But we do need to take some extra precautions.

- Never wear a pentagram when you leave home.
- When you celebrate the Black Mass, use a neutral location—like an Episcopal church.
- Be more discreet in procuring sacrificial victims. Change your black market supplier every few months.
- Renew the contract with Wes Craven to churn out more pulp horror flicks about ritual Satanic abuse. That's the best way to make the whole idea seem utterly ridiculous.

Intentional permission

Roger Olson has done a post on the problem of evil.

<http://rogereolson.com/2011/04/24/church-fires-holocausts-and-gods-intentions/>

But it's hard to make any sense of his position.

i) On the one hand he repudiates the principle that nothing happens which God did not intend to happen.

On the other hand, he doesn't spell out his alternative. He mentions freewill and divine permission in passing. But if that's his alternative, doesn't that merely kick the can a few feet down the street?

If God allowed something to happen, then God intended to allow something to happen, in which case God intended it to happen.

Or is Olson going to take the position that God allows things to happen with no intention of allowing them to happen? If that's his position, it makes it sound as if his God suffers from mental illness.

Keep in mind that he's talking about divinely preventable events like fires, traffic accidents, and fatal diseases.

Surely Olson doesn't think these events are inevitable. That would be necessitarian.

So how does God allow something to happen without intending to allow it to happen? A mentally ill person may be unable to connect his actions with his intentions. May do

things he didn't consciously intend to happen. But I assume Olson doesn't think God is clinically insane.

ii) In principle, a freewill theist could deploy the freewill defense to account for behavioral illness like lung cancer or AIDS.

But what about an illness like breast cancer or cervical cancer? Presumably the patient didn't will to have terminal cervical cancer, or willfully engage in high-risk behavior with that foreseeable consequence.

How would God violate the freewill of the terminal cancer patient by curing her of cervical cancer? Same thing with casualties from house fires and traffic accidents.

Olson says the death of his mother when he was 2 and his brother was 5 "deeply" and "negatively" affected their lives.

Okay, so what's his libertarian theodicy to address that tragic event?

Called to Confusion twice confounded

It's been a while since I visited Called to Confusion, so I moused over there last night and saw a post by Andrew Preslar:

<http://www.calledtocommunion.com/2011/04/thought-experiment-for-monergists/>

From what I can tell, Preslar is one of the more agreeable contributors to that site. So let's see what he has to say:

Monergists, i.e. Calvinists and some Lutherans, claim that man cannot cooperate with God in salvation, because that would detract from God's glory. I think that by God's glory they mean something like "God appearing very impressive to everyone." They probably mean additional though related things, like God doing whatever he wants. But let's stick with that, the idea of God's glory as God being impressive.

First, imagine a man rolling a large stone up a hill. If someone else helps him out a little bit, gives a little shove, then the man does not appear as impressive as he would had he rolled alone.

Now, imagine a man holding a little child in his arms. This man essays to roll the stone up the hill. The child, having comparatively no strength and being absolutely unable to even reach the stone unless his father holds him up, reaches out to push as well. What would be more impressive, for the father to set the child aside and push alone, or for the father to let the child put his hands on the stone and join in the task of rolling the stone up the hill? The answer is obvious. A man who can hold a child, let the child “help,” and still roll the stone up the hill is far more impressive.

Now, there is a sense in which the father does all the work. The child really makes an effort, wills what the father wills, but his little push does not add any strength that was lacking in the father. But there is also a sense in which the child really joins in the father’s work. What would be lacking, without the child’s efforts, would be the element of participation, the agape, friend of the father dimension of moving the rock. Got it?

Now you have the gist of synergism.

God is not a sissy, or a Sisyphus. He moved the stone, and it cannot be rolled back. God does not “need” us, but for that reason he is not afraid to let his children participate in the work of salvation, such that “he will render to every man according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life.”

This prospect of participation, and good works, might fill some with dread, as though you had to start tabulating and chewing fingernails and dreading the day of judgment because, I mean, are any of us really all that swell? Don't worry. Our Father has you in his arms. Stay there, and all will be well. Your heart will grow to be like his heart, and you will love to walk in his ways.

Several issues:

i) No, that's not the “gist of synergism.” And “synergism” isn't synonymous with “cooperation.” “Synergism” is a technical term in historical theology. It involves several notions. In Catholicism, synergism includes the notion of congruent merit. It also involves the notion of libertarian freewill. The outcome is open-ended, for sacramental grace is resistible.

ii) Calvinism doesn't deny a "cooperative" aspect to salvation. Monergism strictly applies to regeneration, not sanctification.

At the same time, Calvinism eschews human merit. And the outcome is not open-ended in the case of the elect/regenerate.

iii) Preslar also trots out the business of judgment according to works, as if Calvinism has nothing to say in that regard. He also fails to explain how judgment according to works entails "synergism" in the technical sense of the world.

iv) To say "stay in God's arms and all will be well" is naïve, worthless advice. Sure, you're safe as long as you stay in God's arms. But that's not the issue. The issue is whether God *keeps* you in his arms. After all, Preslar believes that some born-again Christians lose their salvation. You are safe as long as you are willing to stay in God's arms. But that doesn't make you safe. For you yourself are the weak link in that chain (to vary the metaphor).

v) Then there's the larger problem of his thought-experiment. An illustration is an analogy. The illustration is only convincing to the degree that it's truly analogous to the issue at hand.

vi) Apropos (v), we are even more dependent on God than a young child is on his parents. God is responsible for our being and well being. For our physical and social environment. For our very thoughts. For everything that happens to us, from the cradle to the grave, and beyond.

To be a creature is to be contingent. Everything we have, everything we are, we owe to God. Therefore, we couldn't

assist God even if we wanted to.

This isn't about God having bragging rights. This is simply about the frank reality of what it means to be a creature, what it means to be the Creator. To know our place in the great scheme of things. To have an honest, accurate perception of our inherent limitations. That can be humbling. And many people find it offensive.

To take a comparison, suppose a mediocre, overconfident chess player challenges Capablanca (in his prime). He loses every time. No contest. The loser hasn't a fraction of Capablanca's talent.

Capablanca doesn't beat him to impress anyone. Rather, Capablanca beats him because Capablanca is better. Simple as that. He wins every time, not to wow the public, but because he's a superior opponent. Vastly superior.

In theory, Capablanca could let the weaker opponent win. Capablanca could make calculated "mistakes" to give the weaker opponent an artificial advantage. Help him win. But that would be a charade. Even if he "lost," Capablanca would still be controlling the outcome just as surely as if he won.

vii) So this is not, in the first place, about appearances ("appearing to be impressive"), but bedrock reality.

Now, there may also be occasions when it's useful to impress others. If a man suffers from delusions of grandeur, it can be useful to cut him down to size. To deflate his inflated self-image. To set the record straight.

viii) Over and above the metaphysics of contingency is the issue of morality. We are sinners. We are guilty. As sinners,

we can't merit God's approval. We deserve to be punished.

Going back to #29, yeah, I had the other side of the Lordship Salvation divide in mind when I suggested that the Reformed doctrine of perseverance / inexorable sanctification—bottom line, if you don't synergistically produce good works then you will go to hell—does not sound much like resting in God assurance of heaven sort of good news. The idea that Jesus does it all for you, all the ad intra stuff worked out in love, so do not fret over your sanctification any more than your justification, was a huge draw for me, into the OPC.

i) I don't see how that would draw him to the OPC. The opponents of "Lordship Salvation" weren't Calvinists, but antinomian fundamentalists. They were militantly opposed to Calvinism. Calvinism doesn't take the position that sanctification happens all by itself. Rather, that involves the "means of grace" (broadly defined).

ii) Moreover, Calvinism doesn't take the position that all professing believers persevere. Likewise, it doesn't take the position that sanctification is inexorable for all professing

believers. Rather, God preserves the elect. God sanctifies the elect.

But my burgeoning Reformed faith ran off the rails on exegetical grounds. The exegesis of the “warning passages” seemed pretty fudged, and the “God will bring it to completion” passages did not sufficiently counter-balance that deficiency so for me to remain persuaded. Not that I have a pat interpretation of the “inexorable perseverance” verses. Probably something like an implicit “that is, of course, if you do not jump ship.” This seemed (seems) like less of a stretch than the “warnings refer to non-possibilities” harmonization.

Once again, Calvinism doesn't deny the possibility that professing believers will commit apostasy. To the contrary, Calvinism grants that possibility. However, the elect cannot lose their salvation. That's the difference.

Does Preslar consistently misstate Reformed theology in this post because he's ignorant? In that case he didn't know what he rejected. Or does he know better, but can't be bothered to truthfully state the opposing position?

Happy God vaporized your mom?

randal says:

Saturday, February 19, 2011 at 7:04pm

I outline the possibilities in the chapter on hell. If one holds on to eternal conscious torment then they have the following options.

1. They will suffer because their loved ones will suffer but that suffering will be minimized because of the compensating joys of heaven. This is a possible position but I don't know anyone who has held it.

2. They will be indifferent to the fate of their loved ones. Again this is possible but I don't know anyone who has held it.

3. They will be unaware of the fate of their loved ones. This position has been suggested by many theologians but it is intolerable for numerous reasons including the fact that it turns the new heavens and new earth into a charade.

4. They will rejoice in the damnation of their loved ones because those loved ones will be revealed to

be despicable God-haters. This has been defended from theologians like Tertullian and Aquinas down to John Piper and J.I. Packer in the present age. It is a logically consistent position but also strikes me (and I think any honest person) as reprehensible and absolutely implausible.

This leaves us with two possibilities. First there is annihilation. Our unredeemed loved ones will be destroyed. In that case heaven can begin after our healing from their loss. Second, universalism: they too will be redeemed.

It seems to me that only the annihilationist and universalist positions provide a satisfactory response to the problem of loved ones in hell.

<http://randalrauser.com/2011/02/happy-with-your-mother-in-hell/>

Quite a few issues here:

Since Randal is sizing up the options on purely sentimental terms, let's begin by sizing up his two alternatives on sentimental terms:

i) Per annihilationism, would Randal be happy if God vaporized his mom? Wouldn't that make him bitterly resentful of God?

It reminds me of those revenge movies about the reluctant hero. You know the basic plot. A patriotic Green Beret is court marshaled when his no-good superiors make him the fallguy for their malfeasance.

So he retires to the mountains of Colorado, where he leads a quiet, contented life on his ranch, with his wife, kids, dog, and ponies.

One day there's a knock at the door. His country needs his services. But he refuses.

Then, for whatever reason, the bad guys come after his family. Slaughter his loved ones.

So he hunts them down one by one and dispatches them with Dantean ingenuity.

How would Randal feel about God if God liquidated his mom? Would that foster warm fuzzy feelings? Or would he harbor a grudge?

ii) Per universalism, how would Jessica Lunsford feel if God forgave John Couey? What if your loved ones are hateful to me? Universalism suddenly loses its showroom sheen.
Moving along:

iii) There's no verse of Scripture which says God will damn a Christian's loved ones. Maybe he will, but it's not as if that's a given.

iv) Conversely, we could work back from Rev 21:4: if God will wipe away every tear, then he will restore whatever we need to be whole again.

v) Christians can also pray about the afterlife. We don't have to be passive. Christians are free to pray about the kind of afterlife we'd like to have. What would make us feel fulfilled.

Of course, our prayers may sometimes be off-target, but that's true of prayer generally.

vi) In Calvinism, regeneration precedes faith. Even if a loved one didn't die in the faith, that doesn't ipso facto mean he died unregenerate. Perhaps God already planted the seed, but it hadn't had enough time to blossom here-and-now. What we pray for in this life may blossom in the next.

Mysterious evil

In his recent interview with Reformed philosopher Guillaume Bignon, apostate Dale Tuggy sensed a "mystery appeal" in Bignon's theodicy. For Dale, that's a bad thing. A few quick points:

i) Bignon doesn't resort to mystery in defending Reformed determinism. He responds to objections head-on.

ii) Dale's aversion to mystery is bound up with his antipathy towards orthodox Christian theology. Because Christian theologians appeal to mystery or paradox when defending the Trinity and Incarnation, Dale bristles whenever the mystery card is played.

I'd note that there's a difference between mystery and paradox. While a paradox is mysterious, a mystery isn't necessarily paradoxical.

iii) There's nothing uniquely Calvinistic about appealing to mystery regarding the problem of evil. Consider what two leading freewill theists have to say about that in a recent book on the problem of evil. Molinist W. L. Craig says:

A person who lacks middle knowledge will be unable to assess the long-term consequences of the events that he permits to happen and so cannot have reasons for permitting them that are indiscernible from the standpoint of the

present...Evils that appear pointless or unnecessary to us within our limited framework might be seen to have been justly permitted within God's wider framework. The brutal murder of an innocent man or a child's dying of leukemia could send a ripple effect through history such that God's morally sufficient reason for permitting it might not emerge until centuries later or perhaps in another country. Being limited in space and time, in intelligence and insight, we are simply in no epistemic position to make probability judgments to the effect that "God probably does not have a morally sufficient reason for permitting this event to occur" with any sort of confidence... What James Clerk Maxwell called "singular points" makes it impossible to predict the outcome of present, visible causes...Similarly, in the developing field of chaos theory...One only has to think of innumerable, incalculable contingencies involved in arriving at a single historical

event, say, the Allied victory at D-day. C. Meister & J. Dew, eds., God and the Problem of Evil: Five Views (IVP 2017), 45-45.

And Dale's fellow open theist, William Hasker, says:

In view of the many and severe evils with which the world is afflicted, shouldn't God be doing better? We are inclined to think there must be something more that a powerful and loving God would and should be doing to make the world a better place. As regards the possibility of a better overall plan of creation, it is important to realize that this possibility, if it exists at all, is one of which we have no cognitive grasp whatsoever. Our failure to grasp such a thing is not a matter of mere ignorance, comparable to our lack of information about some as-yet-undiscovered species of insect. This is a fundamental ignorance, and one of the reasons it is so can be found in the phenomenon known as "fine-tuning"...

But couldn't God do more in preventing particular instances of evil? Perhaps he could, though we have little insight into what the consequences of more frequent divine intervention might be. The fact is that very often we just do not know why certain sorts of evils are permitted by God; that this is so can be a test of faith—sometimes a severe test of faith—for a believer. Ibid., 74-76.

Preempting God

According to open theist William Hasker:

If we really, seriously believed that God would prevent any evil that did not have a greater good as its result, this would significantly undermine our own motivation to prevent or mitigate such evils. If I prevent some serious evil from occurring, I will actually prevent the greater good that, absent my interference, God would have brought about as a result of the evil in question. If, on the contrary, the evil would have no such good result, then God will not permit it, regardless of what I do or don't do. The failsafe option, then, is to do nothing, C. Meister & J. Dew, eds. God and the Problem of Evil: Five Views (IVP 2017), 160.

i) I don't think God permits evil only for the sake of greater goods. An alternate good will suffice.

ii) If I was a consistent open theist, I'd be more risk-averse. On that view, God is less likely to override the laws of nature or override the freedom of perpetrators. So why should I stick my neck out? The world of open theism is sufficiently hazardous, sufficiently random, without me further endangering myself for the sake of others.

iii) I don't see how Hasker's alternative solves the problem he poses. If an open theist prevents, or endeavors to prevent, an evil that God would otherwise permit, then isn't the open theist acting as though he's wiser or better than God?

iv) From a predestinarian standpoint, if I intervene to prevent an evil, then that didn't frustrate God's plan. To the contrary, God intended me to intervene in that situation. God intended the consequences of my intervention. God intended the goods that flow from my intervention. So there's no tension. No need to second-guess my actions.

Preexistent future

There's some dispute as to whether the B-theory of time is deterministic. On the face of it, if the future already exists, then that excludes alternate timelines forking off in different directions from the present. That interval has been filled. That slot has been taken. It seems symmetrical with the accidental necessity of the past. If it's now the case that the future is already in place, then that's fixed. A fait accompli. It's already happened—just not in the present.

That doesn't necessarily mean it's deterministic in the sense that the past causes the future. But however the future eventuated, that's now over and done with. Someone in the present has yet to experience that preexistent future, but it's already played out.

Paul Helm has championed the B-theory of time, mainly as a model for creation by a timeless God. A fringe benefit might seem to be how it dovetails with Reformed "determinism".

However, we need to be careful about that. Reformed predestination and providence isn't based on a particular theory of time. And that might actually be inconsistent with what makes the future determinate according to Calvinism.

Assuming that there's a sense in which the B-theory of time makes the future determinate (see above), that's based on the metaphysics of time rather than a divine plan. It could be random.

In Calvinism, the future is determinate in the way a movie plot is determinate. The director has scripted the story in his mind. It has dramatic logic.

But that doesn't mean things *had* to happen in that particular sequence. Indeed, it's quite flexible. In God's imagination, the present could fork off in different directions. It's just that God picks one of those hypothetical trajectories to actualize. What makes it determinate isn't that a particular series of events had to go together, but that God chose to instantiate that particular plot. God can imagine alternate endings, but he didn't reify those counterfactuals.

Perspectives on inspiration

How we model inspiration depends on other aspects of our theology. Let's consider a Reformed paradigm:

Calvinism affirms predestination and meticulous providence. Everything happens because God planned it to happen that way. But there are different ways in which God can implement his plan. God orchestrates events to create apostles, prophets, and Bible writers. Providential preparation includes their social conditioning and formative influences.

God operates in the human subconscious (e.g. Isa 10:5-11) as well as physical events. God doesn't bypass the personality of a prophet or Bible writer, for he created their personality. God is like a luthier and violinist all in one. He makes the instrument, then plays it (so to speak). It has the properties he gave it.

Is it up to us?

Robert Kane is a leading defender of libertarian freewill, so it's to examine how he frames the issue:

Doctrines of determinism have taken many historical forms. People have wondered at various times whether their actions might be determined by Fate or by God, by the laws of physics or the laws of logic, by heredity or environment, by unconscious motives or hidden controllers, psychological or social conditioning, and so on. But there is a core idea running through all historical doctrines of determinism that shows why they are all a threat to free will. All doctrines of determinism—whether they are fatalistic, theological, physical, biological, psychological or social—imply that, given the past and the laws of nature at any given time, there is only one possible future. Whatever happens is therefore inevitable or necessary (it cannot but occur), given the

past and the law. Four Views on Free Will (Blackwell 2007), 5.

i) That overlooks an obvious counterexample. The occurrence of miracles is consistent with predestinarian traditions, yet some miracles are causally discontinuous with the past. You couldn't predict a miracle from the chain of events leading up to the miracle, because the miracle wasn't caused by natural processes. That kind of miracle is like a closed system within a closed system. The result of factors within that smaller closed system. Miracles like that are self-enclosed in relation to the past, but affect the future.

ii) Likewise, according to predestinarian traditions, there's only one actual future, but not because the future is the inexorable product of the past and laws of nature. Predestination doesn't require that mechanism to implement the plan.

To see why many persons have believed there is a conflict between freewill and determinism, so conceived, consider what free will requires. We believe we have free will when we view ourselves as agents capable of influencing the world in various ways. Open alternatives seem to lie before us. We reason and deliberate among them and choose. We

feel (1) that it is "up to us" what we choose and how we act; and this means we could have chosen or acted otherwise. As Aristotle said, "When acting is 'up to us,' so is not acting." this "up-to-us-ness" also suggests that (2) the ultimate source of our actions lie in us and not outside us in factors beyond our control (5).

That roughly corresponds to the phenomenology of human experience, which is what makes it appealing. Moreover, Calvinism affirms that we are agents capable of impacting the world in various ways. Likewise, the ability to contemplate hypothetical alternatives is consistent with predestination. That said:

i) The feeling that it's "up to us" could be illusory. For instance, memories are central to personal identity. Memories shape our character, our outlook, and our choices. Memories make a formative contribution to our psychological makeup. But suppose, like *Dark City*, it was possible to implant false memories. Unbeknownst to myself, my self-image derives from a fictionally personal history. My choices may seem to be "up to me," but they're conditioned by outside factors beyond my ken or control.

By the same token, the feeling that it's "up to us" could be the effect of something that's not up to us. But that lies behind our experience, so we'd be unaware of what causes

our feeling inasmuch as our feeling is the effect of that anterior dynamic. Take the creative process, where a novelist taps into the unconscious. Where do those ideas come from? He can't say, because that lies back of where consciousness takes over. Consciousness is at the receiving end of that subliminal process. The source is a step before that. So Kane's conclusion is underdetermined by the evidence.

ii) Another problem is how his appeal artificially isolates one agent from another. If I'm the only driver as I approach an intersection, I have multiple options. I can go forward, backward, change lanes, turn right, or turn left. But once we add other cars, then that increasingly curtails my options. I can't change lanes if another car occupies that lane. I can't reverse course if there's a car behind me. I can't go forward if there's a car stopped in front of me. I can't go straight if a car in the opposing lane is turning right in front of me. I can't turn if cars in the opposing lane are turning in front of me. I may be hemmed in on all sides.

If we lived in a world where every agent can access alternate courses of action, why wouldn't that generate gridlock, where my preferred alternative impedes your preferred alternative? Admittedly, we live in a world where we aren't mutually hemmed in by each other's choices (although that certainly happens from time to time). But how is that possible if we each have libertarian freedom? Or is it possible because libertarian freedom is false, and there's a traffic light control system (predestination, providence) coordinating our respective choices so that we don't jam up?

Calvinism and hard determinism

I'm going to comment on an article by self-styled Calvinist Theodore Zachariades

<https://www.reformingamericaministries.com/single-post/2017/11/20/Consistent-Theological-Determinism-A-Challenge-to-James-White>

I have not met an Arminian that concedes this compatibilist view of freedom. To them only libertarian freedom is real.

Why should Calvinists use Arminian views as the standard of comparison?

What is the point of using Arminian arguments about supposed freedom to plead for Calvinist conclusions?

Since, by his own admission, Arminians reject compatibilism, appealing to compatibilism is inimical using Arminian arguments about supposed freedom to plead for Calvinist conclusions.

God is a planning Agent.

Free will is thereby an illusion, as our lives have been scripted and planned before by God.

At the end of the day, we live out a script that God has decreed. He asked no counsel or took anything into consideration but His own will in this eternal decree. Meticulous providence rules out free will. Calvinists that affirm their truncated version of free will do so to maintain human responsibility. But the Bible does not use free will as an explanatory category to sustain human responsibility. We are responsible or accountable because we are created beings. God's character, as indicated in His prescriptive law for humans, is the standard by which human behavior will be judged.

If predestination is true, and it cannot be doubted in face of so much evidence, it must follow that free will is false. There is no free will in a universe directed and upheld by the Lord God Almighty. There are those who wish to maintain a semi-Calvinist or hypo-Calvinist view that asserts that free will is compatible with determinism. That still leaves one as a determinist, an inconsistent one, however. I prefer to stress theological hard determinism.⁴ Take the fall of Adam. Was it a free

action or was it determined? I believe you cannot have it both ways. If determined, then was Adam truly free? This problem has a long history. I side with God's decree including the fall of Adam; indeed, even the fall of Lucifer! Free will in a compatibilist-determinist worldview is only free in name.

Libertarians, of all stripes, renounce these arguments by compatibilists, and thereby they win the argument by the definition. If free will is compatible with determinism, why not claim that libertarian free will is compatible with determinism? The reason one cannot is that the determinism side weighs too heavily and truly precludes libertarianism or true free will. Compatibilists like to use the language of free will without having the substance.

i) Let's begin with some standard definitions of hard determinism (or theological hard determinism) from the philosophical literature:

Hard determinists (William James's term) are also incompatibilists, but they accept determinism and deny that we have the

sort of free will required for moral responsibility. Derk Pereboom, Living Without Free Will (Cambridge 2003), xiv.

Hard determinists are incompatibilists who take a harder line: since determinism is true, free will does not exist in the sense required for genuine responsibility, accountability, blameworthiness, or desert. Robert Kane, ed. The Oxford Handbook of Free Will (Oxford 2002), 27.

But another option, typically only hinted at, is to endorse theological hard determinism, according to which theological determinism is true, but as a result we are not morally responsible in the basic desert sense for our actions. Derk Pereboom, "Libertarianism and Theological Determinism," Kevin Timpe & Daniel Speak, eds. Free Will and

Theism: Connections, Contingencies, and Concerns (Oxford 2016), 116.

On that definition, Calvinism is antithetical to hard determinism. That humans are morally responsible agents whose actions are potentially blameworthy or liable to just desert is a Reformed essential. Zachariades is operating with an idiosyncratic definition of hard determinism that doesn't correspond to standard usage. He doesn't seem to know what he's talking about. Certainly his claim is uninformed.

ii) When compatibilists say that human agents are "free" in some respects, what does that mean? The definition of "freedom" in the compatibilist sense depends on the point of contrast. "Free" compared to what? To take one representative example:

We typically make distinctions in the law and in morality between individuals who have been coerced and those who have not. Indeed, we distinguish between agents who have been manipulated (in certain ways), brainwashed, deceived, subject to clandestine subliminal advertising, and so forth, and those who are morally responsible. John Martin Fischer, "Semicompatibilism", Kevin Timpe, Meghan Griffith, & Neil Levy, eds.

The Routledge Companion to Free Will (Routledge 2016), 5.

On that definition, compatibilist freedom means freedom from certain types of manipulation, coercion, deception, brainwashing. So a compatibilist can specify the sense in which determinism is consistent with freedom. Does Zachariades deny that human agents are free in *that* sense?

Likewise:

Semicompatibilism is the view that even though some freedoms—for instance, the ability to do otherwise—are incompatible with determinism, moral responsibility is compatible with determinism J.

Campbell, Free Will (Polity 2011), 29-30.

Does Zachariades imagine that Calvinism is inconsistent with compatibilism (or semicompatibilism) in *that* sense? On the face of it, Zachariades appears to be ignorant of what hard determinism and compatibilism (or semicompatibilism) even mean. Yet these are terms of art. These are philosophical concepts. He needs to show some understanding of what they represent before he's in any position to assess them. As it stands, his discussion is incompetent.

iii) Finally, determinism does not entail premeditation. For instance, the sequence of a randomly shuffled card deck is

determinate, but unplanned. If you take a deck of cards, which has a preexisting sequence, bisect the deck, then randomly shuffle the cards so that a card from one half alternates with a card from the other half, the recombined deck has a determinate sequence even though the order of the cards is random rather than planned.

Determinism is equally consistent with intended and unintended outcomes. Although determinism may be a necessary condition for premeditated events, it's not a sufficient condition. Zachariades needs a more discriminating category than determinism to articulate how everything happens according to a master plan.

God's glory

Here's some additional observations I made in the comment thread to this post:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2017/09/friday-night-calvinism.html>

i) "Doing things for his own glory" sounds as if God has something to gain. However, God is the benefactor, not the beneficiary. In a way, God's actions are sacrificial. Not that he has anything intrinsic to lose, but he acts for the good of the elect.

ii) And, yes, from what I've read, Piper seems to treat all human relationships as temporary disposable bridges. If so, that fails to appreciate human nature, and how God generally blesses us through created media.

Those passages are typically in contrast to pagan idolatry. And of course, "glory", "my name", &c. is synonym for God's unique deeds in creation, redemption, and judgment. There's no comparison in the creaturely realm, much less the nonentities of pagan pantheons.

Consider these two propositions:

i) The good Samaritan gets credit for rescuing a child from drowning

ii) The good Samaritan rescued the child from drowning in order to take credit for his action

There's a difference between doing something admirable and doing something to be admired. In the case of (i),

that's one consequence of the action whereas in the case of (ii), that's the primary purpose and motivation.

There's an anthropomorphic element to some of these texts. Take the famous negotiations between Moses and Yahweh (e.g. Exod 32:11-14; Num 14:13-16; Deut 9) where Yahweh is depicted as very jealous for his honor and reputation, so Moses manipulates Yahweh's image-conscious vainglory to dissuade him from destroying the ungrateful Israelites. What would the Gentiles say?

So this involves a hermeneutical and theological issue. On the one hand, an open theist like Boyd would take that at face-value while a classical theist will say that's anthropomorphic. An example of divine accommodation where God casts himself in a very human role, to make himself relatable to his people, but if we think about it more deeply, from what we know about God's revealed attributes, does God's self-esteem depend on human opinion? Is God really like a member of a street gang who flies into a rage when he's disrespected?

Friday Night Calvinism

In my experience, freewill theists frequently misunderstand what Calvinists mean when they say God does everything for his own glory, and I think some Calvinists (e.g. John Piper) have contributed to that misunderstanding. I've discussed that before.

But now, with the return of football season, I'll use a sports analogy. Suppose you were looking at the stats of a high school quarterback. In four years, he never scored a single touchdown. For that reason alone, you'd conclude that he's a dismal failure as a quarterback.

By contrast, his teammates have an impressive record of touchdowns. You wonder why one of them didn't replace him.

On the other hand, he excels at intercepts, blocking, rushing touchdowns, hand-offs, and pass completion. If you were judging him on paper, you'd be puzzled by his uneven performance. How can he be so good at the other stuff, but never score a touchdown?

Suppose, though, you watch him practice with his team. After a while it becomes apparent that he's a very talented athlete while his teammates are mediocre. If he wanted to, he could just teach them blocking while he scored all the touchdowns.

It turns out that he's going out of his way to make them look good. Giving them opportunities to shine. They succeed because he's their enabler. His objective is to pass the ball or hand off the ball so that each of them can score touchdowns.

Despite the fact that it's his teammates who always score the touchdowns, it becomes evident, if you know what to look for, where the real talent is coming from. So the stats are misleading.

There's a paradoxical sense in which our quarterback glorifies himself by avoiding self-glorification and glorifying his teammates instead. He has the talent, but he diverts his talent and channels his talent into his teammates. He makes them look far better than they really are. His unobtrusive generosity is far more glorious than flaunting his athletic prowess and making himself look good by using his teammates to clear the way.

Compare that to Phil 2:6-11. Everything redounds to the glory of Christ, but indirectly. He did not seek his own glory, yet his self-abnegation is glorious. He's not the beneficiary of vicarious atonement. Rather, he did that for the benefit of others. Yet he clearly gets all the credit.

Molinists in the Matrix

Had an impromptu debate on Facebook with some freewill theists, two of whom are Molinists:

Calvinism makes God the author of evil, even if it is denied.

How does your position square with passages like this:

For it was the Lord's doing to harden their hearts that they should come against Israel in battle, in order that they should be devoted to destruction and should receive no mercy but be destroyed, just as the Lord commanded Moses (Josh 11:20).

And God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the leaders of Shechem, and the leaders of Shechem dealt treacherously with Abimelech (Judges 9:23).

If someone sins against a man, God will mediate for him, but if someone sins against the Lord, who can intercede for him?" But they would not listen to the voice of their father, for it was the will of the Lord to put them to death (1 Sam 2:25).

Absalom and all the men of Israel said, "The advice of Hushai the Arkite is better than that of Ahithophel." For the LORD had determined to frustrate the good advice of Ahithophel in order to bring disaster on Absalom (2 Sam 17:14).

So the king did not listen to the people, for this turn of events was from the LORD, to fulfill the word the LORD had spoken to Jeroboam son of Nebat through Ahijah the Shilonite (1 Kgs 12:15).

19 And the Lord said, 'Who will entice Ahab the king of Israel, that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-gilead?' And one said one thing, and another said another. 20 Then a spirit came forward and stood before the Lord, saying, 'I will entice him.' And the Lord said to him, 'By what means?' 21 And he said, 'I will go out, and will be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.' And he said, 'You are to entice him, and you shall succeed; go out and do so.' 22 Now therefore behold, the Lord has put a lying spirit in the mouth of these your prophets. The Lord has declared disaster concerning you" (2 Chron 18:19-22).

For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie (2 Thes 2:11).

for God has put it into their hearts to carry out his purpose by being of one mind and handing over their royal power to the beast, until the words of God are fulfilled (Rev 17:17).

i) Freewill theists get off on the wrong foot when they cast the issue in terms of "Calvinism makes God the author of evil". If Calvinism is merely repeating and reaffirming what the Bible says, then that's only a problem for Calvinism if Scripture is false.

ii) These passages which attribute a human choice to divine agency. Their choice is said to be the result of God acting on them.

iii) It's not an incidental consequence of divine action, but the specifically intended consequence.

iv) That eliminates the ultimate sourcehood definition of libertarian freedom, for their choice is said to be the effect of God's prior action.

v) That eliminates the principle of alternate possibilities definition of libertarian freedom, for if their choice is the result of divine agency, then they were in no position to choose contrary to God's instigation.

vi) Finally, the passages I quote describe God causing them to make evil or self-destructive choices.

I don't see it even close to being a comparison. If I write the script of a book, I am solely responsible for the actions of the characters. If I create a play where the actors are free but knowing their choices I write the script around it, I am not the direct agent behind their decisions.

- i)** Of course, storybook characters lack consciousness. That's not analogous to predestined conscious agents.
- ii)** In what sense do you think human agents are "free"? If you think the choice could go either way, does that mean their choices are random, like a coin toss? If I flip the coin a minute sooner, it may be heads, and if I flip the coin a minute later, it may be tails?
- iii)** In Molinism, God is choosing from an array of feasible possible worlds. The humans in those worlds aren't conscious agents. They are merely possible persons or abstract objects. Indeed, Craig is a fictionalist. They only become conscious if God actualizes a possible world.

You're reading more into the text than is there. Those same passages in your second point are compatible with both strong actualization via determinism and

*weak actualization via providence
arranged according to middle knowledge
(incorporation of free will choices).*

What an ironic comment considering the fact that you're filtering the text through the colored lens of Plantingian metaphysics, which is totally extraneous to the text. Was the ancient Jewish audience using Plantingian metaphysics as its frame of reference?

You're like a ufologist who construes Ezk 1 as a flying saucer, and when I point out that the ufologist is imposing an extraneous interpretive grid on the text, he counters that Ezk 1 is compatible with the ufological interpretation.

That's not how exegesis works. The meaning of the text is determined by a frame of reference available to the target audience.

I never said the Jewish audience was using those frameworks. I said the texts are compatible with both, so they cannot be used to adjudicate the matter. In other words, they are underdeterminative. None of the texts rule out libertarian freedom even under PAP terms or ultimate sourcehood terms.

Christians are reading more into the text than is there. The Incarnation, crucifixion, and Resurrection narratives are compatible with both a real Incarnation, crucifixion, and Resurrection as well as a virtual Incarnation, crucifixion, and Resurrection. The texts are compatible with an external world or a computer simulation, so they cannot be used to adjudicate the matter. In other words, they are underdeterminative. None of the texts rule out the Matrix.

You criticize me for saying that the biblical data is consistent but not conclusive regarding Molinism and then say that texts on the resurrection are compatible with a virtual resurrection. But actually, that's not true. I think the text does require a physicalist reading of the resurrection. Moreover, any computer simulation analogy is parasitic on the physical world for its resources. I don't see why the Bible's being underdeterminative regarding the issue should preclude concluding to Molinism on other grounds. Why think that's the case?

That's confuses the order of being with the order of knowing. Yes, even the Matrix requires a real world with real energy and machinery to run it. The point, though, is

the inability of somebody plugged into the Matrix to differentiate appearance from reality. Likewise, your hermeneutic invokes a frame of reference that's entirely extrinsic to the text of Scripture or the background knowledge of the original audience to neutralize the text and tip the scales towards Molinism.

Do you agree that at least God has libertarian freedom?

Depends in part on how you define libertarian freedom. For instance, there's the "mere indeterminist causation" theory of action (whatever that means) as well as the "no causation at all" theory. Here's what a premier freewill theist says:

If it goes to the left, that just happens. If it goes to the right, that just happens... There is no way to make it go one way rather than the other...It is a plausible idea that it is up to an agent what the outcome of a process will be only if the agent is able to arrange things in a way that would make the occurrence of this outcome inevitable and able to arrange things in a way that would make the occurrence of that outcome inevitable. If this plausible idea is right, there would

seem to be no possibility of its being [up to the agent] what the outcome of an indeterministic process would be." Peter van Inwagen, Metaphysics (Westview Press, 4th ed., 2015), 278).

God's choices are not caused or determined by anything outside himself. However, God has reasons for his choices. His choices aren't independent of reason, or contrary to rationality.

I don't think God has the freedom to commit evil. Do you? Moreover, libertarian freedom is often defined as ability to do otherwise in under the same circumstances, but God has no circumstances. Divine freedom is sui generis.

Why think that God couldn't weakly actualize every creaturely free will choice simply by placing free creatures in certain circumstances?

i) Because I don't grant the premise of your question (i.e. creatures with libertarian freedom).

ii) Because their choices are either uncaused or at least indeterminate, which makes them unpredictable. If their choices are predictable, then they lack the freedom to do otherwise. Conversely, if their choices are uncaused, then they can't be known in advance.

That's one reason many of the most philosophically astute freewill theists are open theists.

iii) Because their choices are independent of God, and even independent of their own prior mental states. It's a coin flip. Each coin flip is causally independent of the preceding or succeeding coin flip.

iv) And finally, because they don't exist. The counterfactuals of creaturely freedom are disconnected from God.

That's not a problem for Calvinism, where possible worlds are divine ideas, and divine ideas are constitutive. Possible worlds are what is divinely conceivable. God knows his own mind. They are not derivative of what autonomous nonentities would or wouldn't do.

Debating Molinism is like debating Monadology. A mental construct. No reason to think there's anything in reality corresponding to that fanciful construct.

*A few texts in favor of soft
libertarianism: Gen 4:6-7; Deut 30:11-20;
Josh 24:14-15, 22; Psalm 119:108-109;
Isa 5:3-4; Prov 1:23, 28; Jer 26:2-4; Jer
36:3, 7, 17-20; Ezek 18:21-24, 30-32; Ezek
33:11; Zech 1:2-4; Matt 23:37-39; Acts
5:4; 1 Cor 7:37; 1 Cor 10:13; Rev 2:21.*

i) You're confusing material conditionals or material implication (if-then) with libertarian freedom. That's a category mistake.

ii) The fact that we can deliberate about alternate courses of action doesn't imply that those are realistic options. We can imagine many scenarios that we are unable to act on.

iii) Predestination is compatible with hypothetical alternatives. If I did A, B would be the consequence, but if I did C, D would be the consequence. In Calvinism, there are cause-effect relations.

iv) Likewise, predestination is compatible with alternate timelines or possible worlds. In Calvinism, those are representations of God's intellect and power.

Under Calvinism, God is both the necessary and sufficient condition for evil.

It's not nearly enough for you to simply distinguish between necessary and sufficient conditions. In addition, you need to explain how that's morally germane. Evidently, you're stipulating a general principle: if X is a necessary but insufficient condition of an evil choice, then exculpates X, but if X is a sufficient condition of an evil choice, then that inculpates X.

But why should we grant that? Suppose I'm an arms dealer for a Columbian drug cartel. I don't personally murder anyone. I just supply the kingpins and their death squads. So that makes my action a necessary but insufficient

condition in the demise of the innocent victims. Does that let me off the hook morally?

As to your analogy, no free-will theist would grant that God is like an arms dealer for the Cartel. That's disanalogous.

It's only disanalogous if you now concede that your distinction between necessary and sufficient conditionality is an unreliable principle in general to inculpate or exculpate an agent. So you must now supply some additional criterion, over and above mere necessary conditionality, for your argument to have any chance of going through.

Simply having children, in and of itself, doesn't determine what choices they will make, one way or another. So at best, the parent only makes it possible for those children to make bad choices - a necessary but insufficient condition. The sufficient condition would be the children's own choices. So imagine that even in spite of teaching the children right from wrong, one of them goes on to become a criminal. Would the parent then be held morally responsible for the

actions of the child just for bringing them into the world? No, or course not.

You oversimplified what I said, omitting key variables. Try again. What I actually said was: " if God knows that by creating the world, specific evils will transpire, then he renders their occurrence inevitable by making a world with those foreseeable consequences. The events cannot be otherwise given those combined factors. That follows on Molinism and simple foreknowledge Arminianism alike."

The argument wasn't based on creation alone, but knowing full well all the consequences of one's fiat, if one were to do so, then causing a the initial conditions that eventuate in those foreseeable results.

And to play along with your example, if a couple knew that by having conjugal relations on a particular night, Pol Pot would be conceived, then they would indeed be morally responsible for the dire outcome.

God is the "ultimate cause" in that He made evil possible. But He didn't actualize it. His agents did. But under Calvinism, Gods decree is what actualized evil. Satan, Adam, and Eve were just doing what God programmed them to do.

Predestination doesn't actualize anything. Predestination is just a plan. The plan is actualized by creation and providence (occasionally by miracles).

IV. For further reading

Exposition and analysis:

Introductory

Paul Helm, *Calvin: A Guide for the Perplexed* (T&T Clark 2008)

_____, *The Beginnings: Word and Spirit in Conversion* (Banner of Truth 1986)

_____, *The Callings: The Gospel in the World* (Banner of Truth 1987)

_____, *The Last Things: Death, Judgment, Heaven and Hell* (Banner of Truth 1989)

A. A. Hodge, *Westminster Confession: A Commentary* (Banner of Truth 2004)

Anthony Hoekema, *Saved by Grace* (Eerdmans 1995)

John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Eerdmans 1996)

Roger Nicole, *Our Sovereign Saviour* (Christian Focus 2001)

J. I. Packer, *Concise Theology: A Guide to Historical Christian Beliefs* (Tyndale 2001)

Intermediate

Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*

Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Zondervan 1995)

Paul Helm, *The Providence of God* (IVP 1994)

Roger Nicole, *Standing Forth* (Mentor 2001)

J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Crossway 2010)

O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Prophets* (P&R 2004)

Carl Trueman, *John Owen: Reformed Catholic, Renaissance Man* (Ashgate 2007)

Fred Zaspel, ed. *The Theology of B. B. Warfield: A Systematic Summary* (Crossway 2010)

Advanced

William Cunningham, *Historical Theology*, vols 1-2 (Banner of Truth 1960)

_____, *The Reformers & the Theology of the Reformation* (Banner of Truth 1979)

John Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (P&R 2002)

_____, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life* (P&R 2008)

Paul Helm, *Calvin at the Centre* (Oxford 2010)

_____, *Eternal God: A Study of God without Time* (Oxford, 2nd ed. 2011)

_____, *Faith with Reason* (Oxford 2003)

_____, *John Calvin's Ideas* (Oxford 2006)

Vern Poythress, *Chance and the Sovereignty of God* (Crossway 2014)

Thomas Schreiner, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Baker 2008)

_____, *Paul, Apostle of God's Glory in Christ* (IVP 2006)

Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (P&R 1997)

Geerhardus Vos, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vols 1-5 (Lexham Press 2014-)

Bruce Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology* (Zondervan 2007). A few concessions to liberalism. Coverage thins out on the Psalter and the Prophets.

The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield (Baker 1978)

Philosophical defense:

Guillaume Bignon, *Excusing Sinners and Blaming God: A Calvinist Assessment of Determinism, Moral Responsibility, and Divine Involvement in Evil* (Pickwick 2017)

<http://theologui.blogspot.com/2019/03/response-to-kevin-timpe.html>

D. Alexander, ed. *Calvinism and the Problem of Evil* (Pickwick 2016)

Greg Welty, *Why Is There Evil in the World (and So Much of It?)* [Christian Focus 2018]

<http://www.gregwelty.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/pc-17-1-Cowan-Welty-Pharaoh.pdf>

<http://www.epsociety.org/library/articles.asp?pid=269&mode=detail>

<http://www.gregwelty.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/pc-17-2-Welty-Cowan.pdf>

John D. Laing, Kirk R. MacGregor, and Greg Welty (eds.), *Calvinism and Middle Knowledge: A Conversation* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, February 2019)

<https://www.proginosko.com/2009/12/calvinism-assurance-and-inerrancy/>

The ambiguities of freewill from a premier freewill theist:

http://andrewmbailey.com/pvi/Dialogue_Free_Will.pdf

http://andrewmbailey.com/pvi/Thoughts_on_Essay.pdf