**WHAT’S LOVE GOT TO DO WITH IT?**

**A Calvinist Response to Paul Moser’s *The Elusive God***

In the first place, I should begin by saying that I am not a Calvinist, and not even sympathetic to Calvinism. By making a Calvinist response to Moser’s work, I am simply attempting to point out an unresolved tension in Moser’s account of the phenomenology of the divine call – what Moser calls the “authoritative call of divine love.” The difficulty, I suggest, arises when we attempt to sort out the relation between divine authority, on the one hand, and the offer of divine love on the other. I will use a Calvinist-inspired objection to Moser’s view, implicitly contained in his own account of what he calls “cognitive idolatry,” to suggest that Moser’s insistence on a non-Calvinist account of divine love as a condition for divine “worshipability” is itself an example of the very cognitive idolatry of which he accuses others. Moser is thus hoist on his own petard.

However, my intention is not merely to criticize Moser. Instead, it is to motivate further reflection upon the relation between the notions of authority and of love in the phenomenology of the divine call. I shall suggest that the mystery here consists in the fact that the very notion of an *authoritative* call of divine *love* is incoherent. To the extent that the divine call takes the form of a demand for a submission to authority, that call is based simply on superior power and the threat of punishment. On the other hand, to the extent that the divine call is expressive of divine love and the invitation to share that love, the notion of authority has no role to play in either explaining or motivating that call or our response to it. Nevertheless, Moser is correct in thinking that both of these incompatible ideas represent moments in the phenomenology of the encounter with God. My suggestion in this paper is that it is the fact of human sinfulness (the consequence of original sin) that explains this paradox. Because human sinfulness alienates and estranges us from our nature as God originally created it, it also estranges us from our supernatural end: eternal life with God. Our alienation and estrangement makes it impossible for us to apprehend God except as an external power demanding our submission and threatening to punish those who withhold it. Only those who are already being redeemed by the grace of Christ are able to see with the eyes of faith, and respond in love and gratitude to God’s gracious offer of salvation. Even so, since conversion is not instantaneous and we thus remain sinners throughout this life, we continue to experience God’s call as both authoritative (insofar as we are still in sin) and at the same time as the embrace of divine love (to the extent that God’s grace has restored our nature to its prelapsarian state.) The paradox, then, lies not in the divine call, but in our sin-distorted apprehension of it, of which I shall suggest that Calvinism is itself a symptom.

**IDOLATRY AND AUTHORITY**

Moser, as a Christian philosopher, takes for granted the stark (and disturbing) assumption that human beings are *fallen* and, as such, are born with a disordered motivational structure that puts us in a state of rebellion against God. While not exactly embracing the idea of total depravity, Moser, like all orthodox Christians, takes it to be case that the effects of the fall and human sinfulness are extensive. Further, the effects of the fall are not simply limited to the conative and affective aspects of our being. Instead, they extend even to our basic cognitive powers insofar as our disordered motivational structure influences our beliefs, radically distorting our view of the world in such a way that we are unable either to grasp certain facts about the world, or having grasped them, to admit that they are so. For example, we take it that we are in a position to view the world objectively and rationally to weigh, for example, the evidence for or against God’s existence from a cognitively neutral point of view. However, if Moser and Christian tradition are correct we are not, in fact, able to do this. This fact, then, has important implications for the epistemology of religion.

The fundamental fact about fallen man, according to Moser, is human *selfishness*, the tendency to place ourselves – and our subjective concerns – at the center of our existence. One aspect of this is our desire for *autonomy*, to have ultimate disposition over ourselves and our lives and the freedom to pursue our own ends, whatever these may be, without interference from others. We want to be a law unto ourselves, and to be free to seek whatever we want, as much as we want, whenever we want it. This in turn motivates us to seek our safety and happiness in the pursuit of wealth, health, knowledge, pleasure, “relationships,” material possessions, and other things that we can acquire (in principle) through our own efforts and over which we have ultimate disposition and control. We want to be in a position to determine for ourselves what happiness, the good life, and human flourishing consists in and be free to pursue whatever sort of life we fancy for ourselves, without the interference or disapproval of others. Indeed, to do this becomes our only natural right, bounded only by the demand of consistency, i.e. that we be willing to extend the same privilege to others so long as their actions do not result in harm to ourselves.

According to Moser, *idolatry* is the general tendency among human beings to seek and place one’s trust in something other than God as the source of one’s safety and happiness. Since human selfishness is at the center of our fallen existence, we are all inherently idolatrous, and thus naturally in rebellion against God. However, we do not simply constitute money, or pleasure, or the pursuit of power as our gods in place of the real God. We also use our sin-impaired reason to build defenses against the apprehension of the real God and to put something else (such as “morality,” or some political ideology) in His place. We then use these constructs (the products of our own speculative imaginings) to establish criteria for determining what may or may not count as “God” from the theoretical point of view. It is here that the job of idolatry in the ordinary sense really begins. Using our own standards and criteria for what can count as God for us, we are thus able to create a god in our own image, one that endorses our fallen point of view, sees the world as we do, and excuses whatever trivial lapses we may commit. At the same time, we also build defensive bulwarks against the inbreaking of the real God, by providing ourselves with seemingly “rational” grounds for denying that any such God could be the real God or even exist. In this way, we fall into a state of *cognitive* idolatry.

Human fallenness, rebellion against God, and idolatry largely create the problem of divine hiddenness. We are like someone hard of hearing who complains that others mumble. Our sin-occluded vision, “aided” by the spectacles of cognitive idolatry, makes it impossible for us to see the evidence for God’s existence, so we complain (or rather more frequently, confidently report) that it is not there. The fact of the matter, of course, is that we have carefully constructed/selected a perspective or point of view designed to filter out any such evidence, or barring that, to minimize its impact, or in the extremity to explain it away as a kind of illusion.[[1]](#footnote-1) In the same way, any sort of evidence or apparent facts about the world (such as categorical moral obligation or the existence of abstract objects) that provide the basis for positing God as its ontological foundation automatically become suspect, motivating us to seek some means to dispense with those entities or putative facts. Indeed, we will even call reason itself into question if we have to in order to avoid recognizing that God exists and having to face the question of what to do about God’s offer of salvation.[[2]](#footnote-2)

If Christianity is true and we are truly fallen, none of this is the least bit surprising. For the divine call consists precisely in the demand that we submit to the lordship of Christ and place God rather than ourselves at the center of our lives. The central fact of sinfulness makes it impossible for us either to clearly apprehend or successfully pursue our true and genuine felicity. Only if we are willing that God’s will be done, rather than our own, can conversion take place and salvation be possible for us. Left to our own devices, even in the best circumstances we can achieve only a perishing and hollow simulacrum of the genuine good for which our nature was intended – eternal life with God – and can only do so by irrevocably turning our back on that good. In our current state, we can love neither God nor the things of God, and have not the power to acquire that love through our own efforts. It can only come as an unearned gift from God, accepted in a spirit of humility and gratitude that is willing to “let go and let God.”

The problem, of course, both for us and for God, is that given our sinfulness, we *don’t want* that gift. We resent the idea that we need saving and that the Christian God makes this demand of us, even going so far as to threaten us with eternal punishment for refusing Him. We believe that there’s nothing wrong with us as we are, or at any rate, nothing seriously wrong that some slight improvements in our material conditions wouldn’t remove and which, if God *really* existed and cared about us, would be busily working to provide for us.[[3]](#footnote-3) We don’t want eternal life with God in Heaven, and can barely conceive what such a thing could be; as such, we are unwilling to make any substantial sacrifice to acquire it. We have no savor for the practice or the virtues of religion, with its rituals, disciplines, and exaggerated moral demands that make us poor companions for sinners and of little use in building the City of Man.[[4]](#footnote-4) We want happiness in *this* life and want a God that, like a cosmic ATM, is ever ready to provide us with the means to get it, whatever we think it consists in, without cost or consequences. That is the only God we are prepared to worship and it is not the Christian God.

This means that the Christian God, if He exists, faces an uphill battle in His campaign to win us to our genuine good. Moser is convinced that one thing that will not help us is more neutral “spectator” evidence: the deaf man will not hear no matter how high we turn up the volume, especially if he doesn’t want to listen in the first place. Besides, God’s object is not merely to produce rational conviction, or assent to the proposition “God exists”: the devils believe, and tremble. What God wants is for us to be able to make a *loving response* to the divine offer of salvation. To this end, He takes steps to provide the conditions necessary for this to happen through the operation of conscience, which convicts us of our sins and gives rise to a feeling of hopeless inadequacy in the face of the project of moral self-transformation. At this point, God presents to us the divine call in the form of an authoritative command to pursue Christian perfection in accordance with the two great love commandments – love God and your neighbor as yourself. This precipitates the crisis of faith; how we resolve this crisis determines our eternal fate. For those who answer that call affirmatively, God gives the help requisite to accomplish that project of moral transformation successfully. Those who reject that call God leaves to their own devices to suffer the fate that they have freely chosen for themselves. The less said about that the better.

The correct response to the demands of skeptics and unbelievers is not to try to provide them with reasons that they will find acceptable, for such persons already occupy a point of view that antecedently rules out the possibility of any such reasons, no matter how cogent they may be when considered in themselves. Instead, what we must do is to *call into question the presuppositions lying back of those demands*. To do this means that we must show that those demands do not arise from some the point of view of disinterested neutral reason, but instead from a sin-distorted cognitive perspective that implicitly begs the question against Christian theism. In so doing, we show that these demands do not require an answer in the terms set by the skeptic or unbeliever. Quite the contrary, it is the skeptic and unbeliever who need their cognitive idolatry peeled away and exposed to themselves and others in order to discredit their demands and to force them to face the stark choice for or against the Christian faith.

In the case of divine hiddenness, for example, the unbeliever’s presupposition is that divine hiddenness is a matter of objective fact. Moser challenges that presupposition by proposing that the hiddenness of God is not a fact at all, but instead an illusion largely of our own creation, and that for God to be manifest to us in the manner demanded by the skeptic and the unbeliever would not be of any benefit to anyone, especially the unbelieving skeptic.[[5]](#footnote-5) In the same way, the problem of evil arises, not from some inconsistency in the Christian worldview, but from a sin-distorted misapprehension of the good for the human person and the role of pain and suffering in accomplishing that end, accompanied by a false because exaggerated view about our ability to judge the ways of God. This he counteracts by emphasizing the inescapable epistemic limitations of our intellect in this area and the need for trust and hope in God to the extent that it is unable to apprehend the details of the Divine plan, as well as the inevitable pain and suffering involved in overcoming our sinful natural bent. In every case, the basic response is to say to the skeptic “Who are you to judge God, supposing that He exists?” thus denying the unbeliever whatever “high ground” he wants to occupy as a basis for calling God and His ways into question. If this appeal succeeds, then the only question left is this: Will you respond in faith and gratitude to the divine call?

**The Calvinist Objection to Moser’s Account** Thus far, a Calvinist reader of Moser will be in general agreement with what he has said. However, he or she will be surprised to find that Moser explicitly rejects most of the distinctive teachings of Calvinist (indeed, reformed) theology: the sovereignty of God (as Calvinists understand it), total depravity, irresistible grace, limited atonement, and predestinarianism (at least as taught by Jonathan Edwards).[[6]](#footnote-6) Moser has a number of reasons for declining these Calvinist views, but the main one seems to be his unshakeable commitment to the thesis that God, in order to be worthy of worship, has to be a morally perfect being. In turn, in order for a being to be morally perfect, it is necessary that such a being be supremely loving, and thus love all persons, including those who have constituted themselves His enemies. Indeed, Moser suggests enemy-love as the litmus test for moral perfection. It follows that no God worthy of worship could hate anyone, or even be partial with respect to His love by withholding it from any of his rational creatures. This does not commit us to universalism, according to Moser, but it does rule out the Calvinist story. According to that story, God is indeed partial to his elect and, even if he does not actually hate the reprobate (though some Calvinists do not stint to say this), allows them to feel the full weight of his wrath just as much as if He did, and this after having done nothing at all to save them. By contrast, Moser affirms that God loves everyone, desires to save everyone, and to that end offers the divine call to every human being. At the same time God’s divine call, though authoritative, is nevertheless noncoercive, since any truly loving response to God’s offer must be freely given, and for God to coerce some and not others to accept His offer would be to show partiality.[[7]](#footnote-7) Moser’s view, then, is a straightforward Arminianism, in which God makes an offer of friendship and reconciliation to sinful human beings by means of the atoning death of Christ and respectfully awaits our free response to that offer.

I am materially in agreement with Moser on all these points. However, it occurs to me that the Calvinist has an obvious counter to Moser’s attempt to exclude his or her position by appeal to the moral perfection of God, one involving Moser’s own notion of cognitive idolatry. Someone engages in cognitive idolatry when one sets oneself up as the judge of God by creating some sort of antecedent standard for what counts as God and using it as a sieve to winnow out potential candidates for God. In doing so, one creates a god in one’s own image, an image that has been distorted by sinfulness. We thus judge according to our own, self-serving standard rather than allowing God to be God, in attempting to dictate terms for worshipability to God. This is precisely what Moser does in giving his account of God as morally perfect and supremely loving.[[8]](#footnote-8) Moser assumes that there is some God-independent standard for worthiness for worship, one of his own concoction, by means of which we can exclude the (otherwise authoritative) claims of a superior being on the grounds that this being falls below the standard he has set for being worthy of his worship. Unless God loves everyone, including unrepentant sinners, then God is not morally perfect, hence not worthy of worship, hence is not God after all – by definition, apparently. Thus, no claimant to the title of God can be admitted unless his love extends even to his enemies. According to the Calvinist, then, Moser is thus guilty of the same cognitive idolatry of which he has accused others. After all, how is Moser different in principle from someone who says, “Well, I could believe in God if it wasn’t for cancer…or the Holocaust…or capitalism…or mosquitoes…?” How does Moser differ in kind from John Stuart Mill, who thought it his moral duty to march into Hell in defiance of any God who would permit such a place to exist? Or, for that matter, from William L. Rowe, who thinks it a sufficient reason to deny God’s existence that He refrains from performing a miracle in order to save the life of a (hypothetical) burning fawn?

Moser must and does protest that this theology makes a hash of the Gospel message as preached by Jesus.[[9]](#footnote-9) According to Moser, the central teaching of Jesus’ ministry is the two great commandments of love: love of God and love of neighbor. Nor is Jesus afraid to put his money where his mouth is – he freely dies for sinners in order to save them, thus demonstrating the depths of the divine love for His enemies. More than this, Jesus makes love of enemies a touchstone of genuine conversion and the foundation for his kingdom on earth. No one who will not willingly love and serve his neighbor is a member of his flock and will have no share in his kingdom. Those who have not served Christ in others, even the least of his brethren, will forfeit not just some extraneous reward but eternal life itself.[[10]](#footnote-10) However, if God tells us to love our enemies, and yet fails to do so Himself, then Jesus is a hypocrite who deliberately misleads us about what is important to his Father.

However, a Calvinist might respond to this by saying that God imposes many practices and obligations on us (to pray to, and worship Him) for our salvation that do not apply in His own case. Further, the Calvinist could point out that, despite (or indeed precisely in virtue of) His moral perfection, God lacks many moral qualities (such as temperance and courage) that while virtues in finite beings are incompatible with His divine perfection. God’s case is not our own; nothing, no matter how important it may seem to us as humans has any importance from God’s point of view, which is focused solely on His glory. To the extent that we recognize that God is the ultimate reality, subject to no external standard and thus incapable of being judged in accordance with any such standard we might invent, we are in no condition to withhold our worship from God in the face of His authoritative demand that we *unconditionally* submit to His almighty power, *period*.

Suppose that a soon-to-be Calvinist reads the Scriptures and, in the course of so doing, feels the authoritative divine call in the form of the offer of the gift of faith, accepts the faith, and then through the inner witness of the Holy Spirit achieves certainty concerning his own election. This fledgling Calvinist will of course experience this as God’s love and mercy extended to him through the atoning death of Christ. However, the same scriptures that led him or her to the faith also persuade the Calvinist that God extends this act only to His elect. These He chose from before all time to receive and accept it, at the same time, God has antecedently excluded many, perhaps most, people from receiving it despite its being absolutely essential for their salvation, because He does not love them. Further, these scriptures inform the Calvinist that receiving or failing to receive the gift of salvation has nothing to do with any fact about the persons who either receive or fail to receive it, including foreknowledge of their acceptance or rejection of that gift. To the contrary, it is not the acceptance or rejection of the gift that determines whether we are saved or damned, but rather God’s all-disposing will that determines whether we will or will not receive, and having received invariably accept that gift. The newly fledged Calvinist may find this troubling, and even wish that it were not true (however relieved he or she might be to find him- or herself among the elect.) However, given that the Calvinist has experienced the authoritative call of God and experienced God’s love and mercy, on what grounds can he or she reject that call as spurious or its author unworthy of being worshipped? I don’t see any *obvious* answer to that question on Moser’s part, at least any that does not beg the question.

**AUTHORITY AND LOVE: A PARADOX**

Immanuel Kant finds the very notion of a divine love command to be incoherent. According to Kant, no one, not even God, can *command* us to *love* one another.[[11]](#footnote-11) That is because love (as Kant thinks of it) is a sentimental feeling and it does not lie within our power to feel that sentiment on command. If Kant were right about the nature of love, then there would be some point to this objection. However, love properly understood (and as it is attributed to God) ought not to be understood in this way. If love were a sentimental feeling, then God could not love, since God lacks a body, a necessary condition for having feelings of any kind. All such predicates, when applied to God, have to be treated *dispositionally*, not as characterizing God as He is in Himself, but simply in terms of how creatures are related to God. When we say that God loves us, what we mean instead is that God is disposed to seek our good for its own sake, simply to benefit us rather to gain anything for Himself. While God can have no higher *end* in creating the universe than to glorify Himself through what He creates, it does not follow that this is His *motive* in creating. God already possesses within Himself a surfeit of glory, to which the created universe can add nothing by way of increase. Therefore, if God creates the universe He creates solely to confer the good of being on whatever He creates and has this alone as his object. This is both a gratuitous and a supererogatory act, one that God was in no way compelled, by either His nature or His goodness, to perform. The very existence of the universe, then, is proof that God is love and the primary means through which God glorifies Himself in creation. There can be no opposition, then, between God’s glory and the perfection of His creatures.[[12]](#footnote-12) God knows all creatures through the contemplation of His own essence as infinitely participable by finite beings. Each created being, including the created universe as a whole, is in its own way an image of God and participates (as *a* being) in what God supremely is (Being Itself) by *aspiration* rather than by materially resembling God as He is in Himself. Each thing, then, glorifies God by achieving the highest degree of perfection it is capable of according to its kind within the overall economy of the created order. A loving God will thus lavish that good on those creatures to the extent possible within the constraints dictated by that order, thereby achieving His *formal* end of self-glorification through the *concrete* realization of the created perfection that best bears and manifests His image.

In line with this primary end and economy, God also has secondary ends. Among them is the desire that finite rational beings, possessing the capacities for knowledge and agency, should know and love their Creator. The divine call is not intended merely so that we might admire or praise God from a distance; it is the call to an intimate, personal relationship with God that is completed in the beatific vision in the next life. Just as God is love, so too does the epitome of human perfection consist in love, not as a sentimental feeling but instead as what Jonathan Edwards called *benevolence toward being*.[[13]](#footnote-13) This attitude consists in the actualization of a disposition to love each thing in accordance with its true worth, always preferring the greater to the lesser good, and like God Himself, always going beyond the call of duty to the performance of supererogatory acts of goodness to others. Our love of God in this life (whom we do not see) is expressed adequately only in love of our neighbor (whom we do see) as God’s presence to us. For this reason, only those who have done good for these, the least of Christ’s brethren, have any share in the Kingdom of God.

Kant’s objection to the divine love commands thus collapses. Nor, despite our sinfulness, is it the case that the divine commands to love God and one another as God has loved us are impossible for us. Left to our own devices, given our sinfulness it is indeed impossible for us to conform to these commands. However, the message of the Gospel is that God has not been left us our own devices. The atoning death of Christ has secured the help we need to save us, and God stands by committed to supplying that help to all who will accept it. Those who freely refuse that help have only to blame themselves that they are unable to do as God commands them and bear the sole responsibility for that choice. Although a loving God stands by, willing to give that help to any who request it, those who resist to the end will be lost through their own terrible choice, and will have no just claim against God for the eternal separation from Him that they have both desired and earned to their eternal cost.

Nevertheless, the notion of a divine love command, or commands, remains paradoxical. It seems incoherent, for example, to command that we perform supererogatory acts. To command something *authoritatively* is to turn that which is commanded into a duty, something one is *required* to do. At the same time, the very essence of a supererogatory act consists in its being an act that, while good to do, is *not* morally required of us, thus not a duty. If the epitome of love (as illustrated in God’s act of creation and the atoning death of Christ) is to perform supererogatory acts, then the divine love commands effectively rob those acts of their essence, making them to be nothing more than what we are required to do and reducing them to the level of ordinary duties. More than this, is makes that command literally impossible to fulfill, since by having commanded those acts and made them duties, they are no longer supererogatory. It is thus literally impossible for anyone, even God, to command us to perform supererogatory acts. As such, it is not possible even for God to command us to love God and each other as God has loved us, not because we cannot perform the acts with God’s help, but because once commanded authoritatively they cannot epitomize the supererogatory love they are intended to exemplify.

Further, once something is the subject of a command, and thus a matter of categorical obligation, then (as Kant points out) performance of the acts commanded becomes a matter of conscientious conformity to a universal law. In that case, the moral worth of the action resides in the fact that the act is done from a sense of duty, of conformity to the rule as an end in itself. No other motive, not even a disposition to benefit another without regard to any benefit to oneself, can endow my actions with moral worth. It may be fortunate that love often motivates our actions with respect to others, since without this non-moral motivation we would find them more difficult to do. At the same time, for us to act from love rather than from moral duty would result in a heteronymous act merely in conformity to law and not done from an apprehension of the practical necessity of one’s conformity to that law *as such*. To command that we love God and our neighbor is once again paradoxical. Either it commands us to act from a motive that is contrary to the very logic of conformity to a command, insuring that we fail to do so, or that we act from conformity to law, which excludes acting from love as our primary aim, in which case it is self-defeating.

This suggests a further point, something we might call the paradox of moral obligation as applied to this sort of context. A categorical obligation based in a law always has the form of the alien imposition on the part of power external to us that commands our obedience regardless of our antecedent willingness to conform. The law, whether we see it as the product of positive legislation or not, must always stand over against me as something that demands of me that I do or believe certain things rather than others in a manner that is indifferent to my inclination, or self-interest. If this were not so, then the law would not be normative and thus not prescriptive (“action-guiding”). It would be either merely descriptive or nothing more than good counsel. Nor can this law be the “product” of self-legislation or the operation of “practical reason” since any law that draws its authority solely from my act of self-legislation would be one that I could change at will. If my practical reason somehow prohibits that I do this, then it becomes in turn a law that binds my will independently of my inclinations, and thus robs me of my “power” of self-legislation, which now is only exercised when I legislate as practical reason demands. In any case, the law and the obligation it imposes always and essentially takes the form of something alien and external to the will to which it is subjected by an external power. It is thus a necessary feature of such a law.

More than this, any such law must not only be an alien and external imposition, it must also be at least potentially *opposed* to inclination and self-love as it exists in the will upon which that law is imposed. Indeed, it is a necessary condition for the moral law to exist that we possess non-moral motivations potentially in conflict with that law. Otherwise, there will no possibility of dereliction from that law and thus no need to legislate it. If one were already disposed to act in accordance with that law, then it would be otiose to impose such a law and create such an obligation. One would act either as that law requires without it having been promulgated, discovered, or imposed, or one would be so disposed that, as soon as one was informed of its content, one’s behavior would immediately conform to its dictates without the need for it to be legislated, imposed, or made obligatory. In that case, to legislate such a law would be superfluous because unnecessary. In terms of the current discussion, this means that the existence of such a law requires as its necessary condition that *one be fallen* and possess a disordered motivational structure that puts us on a collision course with the demands of the divine will. It is here that we will discover the resolution to the paradox inherent in the divine love commands.

**Authoritative Command or Loving Invitation?** I now wish to propose a solution to the foregoing paradox that, once again, appeals to human sinfulness as the key notion. Both Moser and the Calvinist can agree that the experience of the divine call contains two moments: the authoritative command, and second, the person receiving the command as an object of divine love. The question, then, is which of these is the primary clue concerning our relation to God. Is it, as Calvinists apparently think, the moment of authoritative command that subjects us to the (as far as we can know) the arbitrary will of a cosmic tyrant whom we are not allowed to question and who threatens us with dire punishment for so doing? Or, is it the moment in which we experience ourselves as the objects of divine love and recipients of the great, unearned gift of salvation? In my view, priority goes to the second over the first moment; to this extent, I agree with Moser.

Given our fallen state, we have no capacity to love God or respond in love to God’s gracious offer of salvation. As such, God cannot initially address the sinner from the perspective of divine love, since sinners want neither God’s love nor His gift of salvation in their fallen state. For God to make such an offer is to toss pearls before swine and to court universal rejection on the part of sinners. God is thus constrained to meet the sinner on his or her own terms and address him or her in the only terms that he or she will understand. For this reason, God imposes the divine will on the creature as the constraint of a superior, because infinitely more powerful, will prepared to back up its commands with the direst punishments. The sinner, of course, resents this divine imposition and rails against it as arbitrary, unfair, and contrary to human happiness as understood from the fallen point of view. At the same time, God’s will is as immutable as His power is irresistible. I can no more harm, frustrate, or influence God’s will by defying him than I can substantially change the orbit of the Earth by kicking it – my futile defiance can only hurt myself.[[14]](#footnote-14)

In the same way, critics of Pascal’s wager often fail to understand the rhetorical strategy of the argument, thus converting it into a straw man. Pascal is addressing his wager precisely to sinners, i.e. those for whom nothing will motivate except an appeal to self-interest. For such people, only the appeal to fear of eternal punishment or the hope of an infinite reward can move them to take the divine call seriously, even as a possibility. Pascal thus appeals to both of these motives, not because they are morally respectable, but because in the sinner’s case none others are likely to be available in a form that will persuade. Pascal does not suppose that these grounds are a sufficient to convert the sinner, only to motivate sufficient interest to take the possibility of Christianity seriously, and both through the study of Christian apologetics and participation in the life of faith to make the choice for Christ a Jamesian genuine option for the sinner. To this extent, even these morally disreputable motives can be a medium of prevenient grace.

It is indeed more difficult than one might think to justify the claim, on neutral grounds, that God has genuine authority over His creation.[[15]](#footnote-15) In this context, however, that does not matter. The contest between God and the unregenerate sinner is a mere contest of wills, each of which claims sovereignty over sinner’s life, and this struggle is one that will be settled only by the exercise of superior force. Set in these terms, the sinner has no chance of defeating his adversary, the all-powerful God, as so has only the choice of unwilling, unconditional surrender to God or ultimate destruction. Given this, self-interest dictates that one bend the knee, however grudgingly, to an invincible opponent. Those who, like Mill, would rather go to Hell than acknowledge their dependence of God deserve no answer other than that of Fitz James Stephen: “And what would Mill be saying after half an hour of it?”[[16]](#footnote-16) To invite eternal punishment with this kind of grandstanding is surely the height of folly.

To those who remain obdurate, and whose natural tendency is to blame God for everything (as in e.g., the problem of evil as a justification of unbelief), this does in fact remain the relation between God and creature. To the sinner, God’s choice of whom to save and not to save appears arbitrary and unjust, since it does not make sense within the framework of the sin-tainted view of the world. In response to the false presupposition of the sinner’s insolent question, “Why did you make me like this?” God gives the answer of *Romans* 9:23 “Who are you, a sinner, to talk back to me? My will is law, and I do whatever I will.” That, after all, is the only answer that the sinner is due since he or she refuses to see sinfulness for what it is and freely to accept the only antidote: God’s gracious offer of salvation. To unrepentant sinners, God’s treatment can never make sense, seem right, or appear just. God can do no better in their case than bring good out of evil by exemplifying His justice through imposing the eternal separation from God they have earned by their own free choice, which they interpret as God’s unjust wrath.

The error of Calvinism, however, is to suppose that the approach dictated by our fallen state is not just a temporary strategy addressed to hostile and rebellious sinners, but instead the paradigm for relations between God and all those whom He sacrificed His son to save. It is simply an *inversion* (and internalization) of the sinner’s distorted view of God that valorizes the conception of God as a narcissistic, arbitrary tyrant for whom rational beings such as ourselves count for nothing and can be used in any fashion divine whim and fancy can concoct. It is not just that we are not privy to the reasons that God has for granting mercy to some and not others. Rather, *in principle* there could be no such reasons, since if there were God would not be “sovereign” but influenced in His choice by something outside of Himself acting as a cause. Thus, despite the Calvinist’s insistence that salvation is individual and decreed from all eternity, God can have no reason for having mercy on anyone, either corporately or individually. Apparently, God saves some just to show that He can and the elect chosen using a cosmic dartboard in order to preserve God’s status as sovereign. Indeed, on this view the entire cosmic tragedy was completely dispensable, since there was no need for sin or anything else to make God’s decree of election just. God could simply have created the universe with the elect already in Heaven and the damned already in Hell. In this way, Calvinism trivializes the Incarnation and the Atonement in their very attempt to make it the central event of creation.

To those who have been touched by God’s prevenient grace and have not resisted it, the divine offer is more than simply an offer that cannot be refused. Instead, it is seen as what it is: the offer of the gracious, supererogatory gift of eternal life for which we were created, given to us out of love. The person whose soul has thus experienced the divine call as the expression of the love of God and as the invitation to fellowship with God in eternity knows that God is love. Such an one also experiences the love of God and knows that God loves him or her for the sake of the image and likeness of God present there, the unique completion of which is the reason God brought him or her into existence. In perfecting that image and likeness in me (or anyone) God glorifies Himself. God thus (in part) accomplishes His end of glorifying Himself through the very act of glorifying the creature He has made. There is no competition between God and the faithful creature on this point. As God loves Himself, so He loves each of us for His own sake (that He might be glorified) and thus eagerly offers me the gift of eternal life through which I too am glorified. For one who experiences this process occurring with him- or herself there can be no question of responding to an “authoritative call” expressed in submission to an incomprehensible, inscrutable, but irresistible Power. Instead, one responds in gratitude, faith, hope, and the desire to serve so great a benefactor, who has called us to share His love in both senses of that term, i.e., both to share *in* that love withGod and to share that love *with* others. We recognize in such a being one that possesses not just the power, but the authority to command us; however, in the face of this realization, there is no need for God to exert His authority – we freely and lovingly give ourselves to His service.

In this life, we remain always the *viator* – the traveler on the way.[[17]](#footnote-17) We have been freed by grace from the sinner’s blinkered view of the world, but we have not yet achieved the perfection for which we continue to strive in faith and hope through non-resistance to the operation of grace in us.[[18]](#footnote-18) For this reason, the divine call continues to present both aspects in our life in this world: as authoritative call convicting us of our sinfulness and our need to repent and believe the Gospel *and* as the call to profound intimacy with God through cooperation with His redeeming grace. As the work of sanctification and regeneration are accomplished in us through the work of grace, we anticipate Christian maturity, in which divinely inspired love of God and neighbor more and more displace the authoritative demand addressed to the sinner in us as the basis for our Christian walk. This will be the best assurance we can have that we are travelling in the right direction.

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1. Actually, Moser seems to think that there is no such “spectator” evidence at all, on the ground that the presence of such evidence would be irrelevant to the divine purpose in addressing us as Lord of our lives. However, I think this is both to concede too much and overlooks the role that such evidence can play as *praeambula fide*. It would certainly be a strange situation if atheists had the clearer and truer vision of the world than theists, who have *only* divine inner testimony to provide evidence for their claims and have thus merely been fooling themselves in believing that, e.g., “The Heavens proclaim the glory of God.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. As does Hume; see Russell (2008), which documents the deep ingression of Hume’s irreligion into the structure of his *Treatise*, something of which Russell himself fully approves. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See, for example, Hume’s *Dialogues*, Part XI, where Hume proposes four changes in God’s dealings with creatures that would remove most of the evil in the world, making it a place of ease and comfort for sentient creatures. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See again Hume’s many comments on the personality defects of religious people, the “monkish” virtues, and his constant use of worldly standards of evaluation to decry religion as not only useless but harmful to society. Again, it is not the “facts” that Hume appeals to, but those standards themselves, that need to be called into question. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Again, I may have Moser wrong here – it appears that he agrees with the atheist that God really is hidden from us, and contends that He is revealed to us only when He reveals Himself to us through inner testimony. While I don’t dispute that God does reveal Himself to us in this way, I can’t agree that God is *really* hidden and that thus our experience of the presence of divine immanence in the world is nothing but an illusion or a Humean projection. The spectator evidence is there and can be apprehended by us; however, like any fact we don’t want to face, we do our best to ignore it and explain it away. Spectator evidence is not as harmless as Moser takes it to be. Unbelievers would not resist it so much, or pay such high intellectual costs to evade its force, if it were. For most of them, to acknowledge the evidence for theism is the first step on the slippery slope to ultimate confrontation with the Christian God and the Jamesian genuine option to believe. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Moser (2008), 135 and 175-6, 168-9, 70, and 109. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. One can already see a problem here – there can be no such thing as an authoritative yet non-coercive offer. Either what is demanded is attached to sanctions, or it is not. If it is, then it is coercive. If it is not, then it is not an authoritative demand, but simply a offer, request, or at best good counsel. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See Moser (2008), 65, where he describes us as putting God to the test of worshipability. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Moser (2009), 171-80. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. E.g., Matthew 25:35-46 ; not quoted by Moser – this is my own additions. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Kant, *Grundlegung*, 399. Actually, Kant says that practical love (which he defines as beneficence from a sense of duty, either without or even when contrary to inclination) *can* be the object of a command. In that case, it is not the intention to confer a benefit that counts, but only external conformity to the demands of the practical law for its own sake, that motivates the act. As such, I need not care about the object of my beneficence in any manner, or even desire to confer that benefit, in order to exemplify this sort of “love.” It is sufficient for me simply to behave as if I did. This collapses practical love into mere conscientiousness in a manner contrary to any ordinary understanding of the term “love.” [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Calvinists often write as though there was only a finite amount of glory in the universe, so that the contest between God and finite persons is a zero-sum game, according to which anything that glorifies the creature detracts from the glory of the Creator. God, the Cosmic Narcissus, is jealous of His prerogatives and demands that finite creatures remain in a permanent state of abjection and debasement in relation to God. This replaces love of God with a kind of craven sycophancy that borders on masochism. Can anyone *really* believe that this is what God desires, let alone demands, from His rational creatures? Edwards saw beyond this impasse, though not perhaps far enough; see the selection from his *Dissertation Concerning the End for Which God Created the Universe*, in Faust and Johnson (1962), 341-8, especially 345-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See Edwards (1960), especially 3-13. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. I believe that I read this example in Peter Geach, but have been unable to find the reference. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See Murray (2002). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. This anecdote may be apocryphal. In any event, FitzJames Stephen, though he believed that the doctrine of Hell should be propagated on utilitarian grounds, did not believe in Hell himself. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See Oberman (2000), 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. See my *How Free Will Works*, forthcoming from Wipf and Stock. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)