

Theory and Practice in John Wesley's Critique of Calvinism: A Philosophical Examination

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Abstract

On more than one occasion, John Wesley found himself engaged in debate with Calvinists in the Methodist revival. In this article, I philosophically re-examine John Wesley's concerns with the Calvinism of some members of his evangelical cohort. I argue that Wesley's concerns fall into two types: theoretical concerns about the conceptual coherency of a view that makes God the author of sin and practical concerns about the moral implications of a view that suggests some individuals are elect and others are reprobate. I then attempt a principled reconstruction of these objections. I argue that while there is a rational Arminian case to be made here, what is arguably most valuable in this case is the distinctive method of weaving together thought and action in the Christian life the connections between Wesley's theoretical and practical concerns reveal.

Introduction

On February 1st, 1741, John Wesley stood before the congregants at his Foundery and tore up a letter George Whitefield had written him, a letter that had been disseminated to the congregants that day.¹ The precise identity of the letter is contested. Joel Houston argues that the letter was likely a September 1740 personal correspondence between the two Methodist preachers.² In any case, John Wesley stood before his congregation, and declared that he would “do just what I believe Mr. Whitefield would, were he here himself,” and “tore it in pieces.”³ Though the act was an attempt at de-escalation and a public showing of an intention to avoid an open rift with Whitefield, the effort was insufficient to stave off the impending schism and the Methodist revival broke into two camps. Unfortunately for John Wesley, the controversy emerging in the

¹ Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 133.

² Joel Houston, *Wesley, Whitefield, and the 'Free Grace' Controversy': The Crucible of Methodism* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 111.

³ John Wesley, “Sunday, February 1 1741,” in *The Works of John Wesley Volume 19: Journal and Diaries II (1738-1743)*, Bicentennial edition, edited by W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 180.

early days of the 1740s would not be the last time he would find himself theologically sparring with the ideological allies of George Whitefield. The theological disagreement between John Wesley and George Whitefield traced a well-trodden Arminian and Calvinist divide, and the debate would iterate throughout Wesley's public career, including in the aftermath of the eulogy Wesley would give for Whitefield upon his death in September 1770, some years after the two friends had managed to repair their personal relations.⁴

Though it is necessary to have this background in view, my interest in this episode is not historical. Rather my interest in the various Arminian-Calvinist controversies that erupted in the Methodist revival throughout the 18th century is philosophical. Of course, the Whitefield-Wesley debate has been examined before, and along various dimensions.⁵ Theologians and philosophers have also retreaded the Arminian-Calvinist debate in general.⁶ However, my primary interest in examining the debate is not to adjudicate the debate in favor of one party rather than another. While I do believe a philosophical re-examination of the Arminian-Calvinist Methodist controversies can support the construction of something of a plausible Arminian critique, I also believe that the critique is arguably less expansive and less biting than John Wesley appears to have maintained. Instead, my primary aim is to examine John Wesley's concerns in the various controversies in an effort to elucidate the method within his brand of Methodism. In this paper, I

⁴ Allan Coppedge, *Shaping the Wesleyan Message: John Wesley in Theological Debate* (Nappanee: Francis Asbury Press, 2003), 140.

⁵ See: Joel Houston, *Wesley, Whitefield, and the 'Free Grace' Controversy': The Crucible of Methodism* (New York: Routledge, 2020); James L. Schwenk, *Catholic Spirit: Wesley, Whitefield, and the Quest for Evangelical Unity in Eighteenth-Century British Methodism* (Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, 2008); Sean McGeever, *Born Again: The Evangelical Theology of Conversion in John Wesley and George Whitefield* (Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2020); David McEwan, "I Am Yet Persuaded You Do Greatly Err": Whitefield, Wesley, and Christian Perfection," in *Wesley and Whitefield? Wesley versus Whitefield?* Edited by Ian J. Maddock (Eugene: Pickwick, 2018), 87-105.

⁶ See: Roger E. Olson, *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006); Kenneth G. Talbot and W. Gary Crampton, *Calvinism, Hyper-Calvinism, and Arminianism* (Arlington Heights: Christian Liberty Press, 1999); Adam Harwood, *Christian Theology: Biblical, Historical, and Systematic* (Lexham Press, 2022).

argue that an examination of Wesley's concerns in the various Arminian-Calvinist controversies reveals a distinctive method of integrating theory and practice. As I will argue, Wesley's concerns with Calvinism fall into types: theoretical and practical concerns, and the bidirectionality between the two suggests a model of theory and practice in which both are mediated by a pietistic attitude that ultimately constitutes a transcendental precondition for successful engagement in each as well as in their patterning.

In what follows, I develop this case in three steps. First, I examine John Wesley's concern that Calvinism in general makes God the author of sin. I argue that while many scholars have noted Wesley's concern that Calvinist interpretations runs afoul of the analogy of faith, it is equally valid to interpret Wesley's concern as a concern for logical consistency in one's conception of God, and thus as a theoretical concern. I next examine John Wesley's concern that Calvinism is morally dangerous insofar as it tends toward antinomianism. I introduce several ways of testing the inherent moral danger of a view, and I argue that while there is at least one way of finding Calvinism to be morally dangerous, the operant principle is perhaps a less sure ground upon which to build a critique than Wesley appears to have believed. In any case, I contend that this second objection implies that Wesley had equal concern for both the theoretical and practical implications of Calvinism. With this claim established, I examine the relationship between these two types of concerns. I argue that Wesley's concerns run in both directions: that his theoretical concerns have practical implications and that his practical concerns have theoretical implications. I then ask what this bidirectionality means for the shape of Wesley's thought. I distinguish between two models of theory and practice integration, and I argue that Wesley's method is better described in holistic terms as the view that right practice and adequate theorizing are linked by a mediating pietistic attitude.

Theoretical Concerns in the Calvinist-Arminian Methodist Controversies

With respect to the volatile controversy between John Wesley and George Whitefield, scholars and historians can debate the sequence of events and assign precipitating responsibility to whichever party they think first or most provocative, but there is no doubt that John Wesley's decision to publish his sermon "Free Grace" played a catalytic role in the schismatic rift that would tear through the Methodist revival in the early 1740s. In that sermon, Wesley takes aim at the Calvinist conception of election. More specifically, Wesley argues that a modified form of Calvinism, in which God has predestined only an elect, but not the reprobate, is logically untenable. Even with such a modified position, Wesley argues, "[y]ou still believe that in consequence of an unchangeable, irresistible decree of God the greater part of mankind abide in death."⁷ For Wesley, to say that God eternally decrees that some are saved logically entails that some are not. Of course, the contemporary philosopher must admit that logic is not exactly on Wesley's side here. For example, the claim "some Granny Smith apples are green" does not actually imply that some Granny Smith apples are not. However, Wesley's comments must be understood in a context in which all interested parties shared a commitment to a more restrictive position than salvific universalism. In "Free Grace," Wesley was concerned first with the Calvinist's doctrine of limited atonement. Against this position, Wesley held a commitment to the view that the doctrine of unlimited atonement had a better Scriptural basis.

Nonetheless, Wesley's concerns with Calvinism stemmed not just from a concern with the doctrine of limited atonement itself, but with its implications. In *Predestination Calmly Considered*, Wesley returns to the themes of "Free Grace" and with a bit more care. There,

⁷ John Wesley, "Sermon 110: Free Grace," in *The Works of John Wesley Volume 3: Sermons III 71-114*, Bicentennial edition, edited by Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), Sec. 6, p. 546.

Wesley repeats the charge that election logically entails reprobation: “if God hath fixed a decree that *these men only* shall be saved, in such a decree it is manifestly implied that *all other men* shall be damned.”⁸ The chief problem with this implication, Wesley suggests, is that “it flatly contradicts, indeed utterly overthrows, the Scripture account of the justice of God.”⁹ For some scholars, Wesley’s concern here is for fidelity to the Word of God. For example, Mark Weeter reads Wesley’s primary concern here as a concern for Calvinism’s inconsistency with the analogy of faith, or “the general tenor of Scripture.”¹⁰ There is no doubt that is part of Wesley’s concern. However, I would also add that Wesley is equally concerned with the purely speculative, or logical problem he thinks Calvinism creates. In my view, this comes to the fore in Wesley’s treatment of this same issue in *Predestination Calmly Considered*. After raising the concern that Calvinism contradicts Scripture, Wesley actually launches into a conceptual analysis of justice. He asks, “what should those on the left hand be condemned for? For their having done evil? They could not help it.”¹¹ Here, the idea is that God cannot be omnibenevolent if God is unjust, and God is unjust if God punishes individuals for behaviors that are coerced. This is much more conceptual analysis than it is Biblical exegesis.

In *Thoughts Upon Necessity*, Wesley elaborates on this perspective. He considers the view that “man is not self-determined, that the principle of action is lodged not in himself, but in some other being.”¹² Wesley observes that in different systems, the source of action can be found

⁸ John Wesley, *Predestination Calmly Considered*, in *The Works of John Wesley Volume 13: Doctrinal and Controversial Treatises III*, Bicentennial edition, edited by Paul Wesley Chilcote and Kenneth J. Collins (Nashville: Abingdon Pres, 2013), Sec. 13, p. 266.

⁹ *Ibid.*, Sec. 31, p. 277.

¹⁰ Mark L. Weeter, *John Wesley’s View and Use of Scripture* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2007), 204.

¹¹ John Wesley, *Predestination Calmly Considered*, in *The Works of John Wesley Volume 13: Doctrinal and Controversial Treatises III*, Bicentennial edition, edited by Paul Wesley Chilcote and Kenneth J. Collins (Nashville: Abingdon Pres, 2013), Sec. 31, p. 278.

¹² John Wesley, *Thoughts Upon Necessity*, in *The Works of John Wesley Volume 13: Doctrinal and Controversial Treatises III*, Bicentennial edition, edited by Paul Wesley Chilcote and Kenneth J. Collins (Nashville: Abingdon Pres, 2013), Sec. I.1, p. 528.

in different things. In some systems, the source of action is found in the brain, in others in nature, and still in others in God. However, Wesley argues that “every one of these schemes implies the universal necessity of human actions. In this they all agree, that man is not a *free*, but a *necessary* agent, being absolutely determined in all his actions.”¹³ For Wesley, then, freedom consists in the capacity to choose between alternative courses of action. Determination is inconsistent with freedom because determination suggests that one course of action is ultimately inevitable. Here again, Wesley is primarily engaging in conceptual analysis. However, for Wesley, this conceptual analysis does have a theological upshot. For Wesley, theological determinism ultimately entails that God is “the author of sin.”¹⁴ Wesley is aware of the soft determinist or compatibilist view that human freedom and determinism are compatible because freedom is ultimately the capacity to achieve one’s preferences, but he is unmoved. He notes the opposing view that “their actions are voluntary, the fruit of their own will,” but Wesley argues “that is not enough to make them either good or evil. For their will...is irresistibly impelled.”¹⁵ Thus, in John Wesley’s view, Calvinism cannot help but make God the author of sin.

Whether this is a charge that can stick to all forms of Calvinism is debatable. Joel Houston argues that Wesley’s criticisms most directly, and perhaps only, apply to supralapsarian forms of Calvinism.¹⁶ To evaluate these claims, it will help to get the various lapsarian forms of Calvinism clearly in view. In my view, the most concise way to formulate the possible variants is as follows:

¹³ Ibid., Sec II.1, p. 533.

¹⁴ Ibid., Sec. III.1, p. 535.

¹⁵ Ibid., Sec. III.7, p. 539.

¹⁶ Joel Houston, *Wesley, Whitefield, and the ‘Free Grace’ Controversy’: The Crucible of Methodism* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 46.

Supralapsarianism: Election is God's logically primary decree

Infralapsarianism: Election is logically consequent on God's decree to permit the fall

Sublapsarianism: Election is logically consequent on God's decision to offer salvation to all

According to this formulation, the primary distinction between these forms of Calvinism concerns the logical place election occupies in God's eternal decrees. In supralapsarianism, election is God's first decree. In infralapsarianism, election logically follows the decree to permit the fall and in sublapsarianism, election logically follows God's post-fall decision to offer salvation to everyone. Houston implies that Wesley's criticism that Calvinism makes God the author of sin only sticks in the case of supralapsarianism.

Wesley would surely respond that the question is not what logical place election occupies in God's decrees, but whether the cosmic system God creates is deterministic. For Wesley, to say that God is the author of sin is to say that God's providential design causally necessitates sinful action. Thus, we can formulate Wesley's initial notion of what it means to be the author of sin (AoS) as follows:

(AoS1): God is the author of sin if and only if God causally coerces sinful action

With this definition in view, Houston is clearly right to suggest that supralapsarianism makes God the author of sin. According to supralapsarianism, election is God's primary decree.

Assuming that God is infallible, the election of various persons and the reprobation of others is therefore inevitable. As Wesley notes, this view entails determinism. Because AoS1 says that

God is the author of sin, if God causally coerces sinful action, which is what determinism involves, supralapsarianism makes God the author of sin.

Houston's comments suggest that this same line of thinking is inapplicable in the case of infralapsarianism and sublapsarianism. Consider infralapsarianism first. Infralapsarianism is the view that God first decrees the creation of humans, then God decrees to permit the Fall, and then and only then does God (logically) decree election. Now, Wesley would not be moved by this emendation. If God's decrees still necessitate human failure, God is still the author of sin, given AoS1. However, this Wesleyan response seems to miss the point of infralapsarianism. The idea that God decrees to permit the Fall only after God decrees to create human beings is supposed to create an aperture for God's logically subsequent decrees to be informed by God's foreknowledge. Unfortunately, the Calvinist cannot be let off this easily. If God's foreknowledge is infallible, that may very well be because human power does not involve a capacity do otherwise. If that's right, infralapsarianism alone does not actually circumvent Wesley's objection that Calvinism makes God the author of sin, given AoS1.

Nevertheless, there is another commitment the Calvinist could add to infralapsarianism that would render the view immune to this objection. This is a commitment to Molinism. Though the mere idea that God's foreknowledge informs God's logically subsequent decrees does not block God from ultimately becoming the author of sin, Molinism's notion of middle knowledge is more helpful. That's because it is the very nature of middle knowledge that it consists not of what human beings will do, but what they would do, in the circumstances they will find themselves in. If God's decrees are only informed by middle knowledge, and infralapsarianism is true, it is hard to see how God could be the author of sin, given AoS1. In that case, God would not be causally necessitating human sinful action in adopting His providential design. God's

providential design would be merely shaped in response to what God's middle knowledge suggests we will do, not what we must do. Of course, Wesley could argue that middle knowledge is incoherent, or that Molinism is an inviable position, and that may be true, but that is not the same thing as arguing that Calvinism makes God the author of sin.¹⁷ If that's right, then there is at least one way for the Calvinist to avoid Wesley's charge, and because infralapsarianism places election in higher logical priority compared to sublapsarianism, this defense of infralapsarianism applies to sublapsarianism a fortiori, and there is more than one way for the Calvinist to avoid Wesley's charge.

However, there is also one other way to understand the objection that Calvinism makes God the author of sin. According to this way of approaching the issue, the problem with Calvinism cannot be solved by logically variegating the order of God's decrees. The problem lies not with the ordering of the decrees, but with the fact that all forms of Calvinism take the decrees to be logically prior to God's act of creating the universe. Here, the concern is that even though the Calvinist schemes suggest the decree to create the universe is logically prior to God's other decrees, these decrees must still logically precede God's actually creating the universe, but then this means that God actually creates the universes with the intention to actualize a scenario in which the decrees are realized. What this means is that the creation of the universe is performed with the intention that human beings sin. This does not make God the author of sin, given AoS1, but it does suggest an alternative notion of what it means to be the author of sin. Consider:

¹⁷ Barry Bryant argues that Wesley himself ultimately adopted something of the Molinist perspective on the problem of free will and divine foreknowledge (Barry Bryant, "John Wesley's Doctrine of Sin," PhD diss., King's College University of London [1992]: 134). While I recognize the evidence Bryant adduces in support of this claim, I ultimately think the adoption of this perspective completely undermines the possibility of a Wesleyan-inspired critique of the more moderate forms of Calvinism, as I have explained here. For this reason, I would advise the contemporary Wesleyan to stick closer to the Boethian conception of the eternal now than Wesley himself does, at least if one wants to salvage something of Wesley's original critique. For more on the Boethian view, see: Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzman, "Eternity," *The Journal of Philosophy* 78:8 (1981): 429-58.

(AoS2) God is the author of sin if God’s providential actualization involves an intention that
human beings commit sinful actions

AoS2 implies that the only way to avoid making God the author of sin is to suggest that God’s intention to actualize the universe is logically (and perhaps even temporally) prior to God’s cognizance of actual sin. This is ultimately the Arminian view. As Houston notes, the Arminian view is that the Fall is not decreed.¹⁸ Of course, this view might invite its own problems. The Calvinist will wonder how God can be sovereign on this view. The Calvinist can also wonder whether this view entails that God enters time upon the creation of the world. These are concerns the Arminian must ultimately address, but the important point at present is that AoS2 does imply that God is in fact the author of sin in all three of the above forms of Calvinism. The Calvinist can argue that the notion of intention is ambiguous, and that, in the Calvinist view, God does not want human beings to sin, but intention does not require that one want or even prefer the intended outcome. In response, the Calvinist can argue that AoS1 is the better interpretation of the concept “author of sin,” but that is not to deny that AoS2 does give us one way of salvaging Wesley’s objection.

Practical Concerns in the Calvinist-Arminian Methodist Controversies

From the initial “Free Grace” controversy to the 1770 Minutes Controversy and beyond, John Wesley routinely expressed not only the theoretical concerns with Calvinism hinted at above, but concerns about the moral and practical implications of Calvinism he thought would undermine

¹⁸ Joel Houston, *Wesley, Whitefield, and the ‘Free Grace’ Controversy’: The Crucible of Methodism* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 44.

the pietism of the Methodist revival. In “Free Grace,” the first concern Wesley develops in this direction is a concern for preaching. In Wesley’s view, Calvinism renders “all preaching vain.”¹⁹ That’s because the elect are predestined to be saved and those who are “not elected...cannot possibly be saved.”²⁰ In *Predestination Calmly Considered*, Wesley adds that he opposes Calvinism not only “because it is an error...but because it is an error of so pernicious consequence to the souls of men.”²¹ Here, Wesley’s chief concern is for the entailment of the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints from election. If a person is elect, and guaranteed to persevere in that election, Wesley argues one’s pietistic energies will ultimately be zapped. He quotes an imagined recipient of the Calvinist message: “if I am one of the elect I must and shall be saved. Therefore I may safely sin a little longer, for my salvation cannot fail.”²²

Now, these are fairly serious charges. In his various writings, Wesley expounds several ways in which Calvinism leads to moral laxity, or what he describes as antinomianism. Because my interest here is in the general type and rationality of the charge, I will sidestep this exposition. What is important for present purposes is that Wesley’s criticisms here are all specifications of the broader claim that Calvinism is morally dangerous. If even one specification of this broad claim can be proven adequate that will suffice to show that Wesley has legitimate practical concerns with Calvinism. The problem is that the development of this case is immediately hampered by the difficulty of specifying exactly when a view counts as objectionable because it is morally dangerous. In what follows, I attempt a specification of this concern through an

¹⁹ John Wesley, “Sermon 110: Free Grace,” in *The Works of John Wesley Volume 3: Sermons III 71-114*, Bicentennial edition, edited by Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), Sec. 10, p. 547.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ John Wesley, *Predestination Calmly Considered*, in *The Works of John Wesley Volume 13: Doctrinal and Controversial Treatises III*, Bicentennial edition, edited by Paul Wesley Chilcote and Kenneth J. Collins (Nashville: Abingdon Pres, 2013), Sec. 86, p. 317.

²² Ibid.

engagement in an exercise philosophers call “Chisholming,” by proposing a principle and reworking that principle in light of counterexamples until a suitable principle is in view.

To start, let us begin by considering an obviously problematic principle. This is the principle that a view is objectionable because it can be misapplied. We can formulate this as follows:

Misapplication (M): A view is morally objectionable if the view can be misapplied

Clearly M is too strong. The mere possibility of misapplication is not sufficient to justify the claim that a view is morally dangerous. M must be revised. Consider:

Misapplication2 (M2): A view is morally objectionable if the view is misapplied

Unfortunately, M2 is no improvement over M. In fact, if M2 were true, almost every view ever maintained by rational human agents would be objectionable. M2 also requires revision.

Consider then:

Misapplication3 (M3): A view is morally objectionable if the view is misapplied more often than
not

M3 improves on M2 insofar as M3 would not rule out every view ever maintained, but M3 still builds track record considerations into our purview far too strongly. Perhaps the practitioners of

the view in question are just shoddy practitioners. M3 cannot account for this. Consider then one last misapplication principle:

Misapplication4 (M4): A view is morally objectionable if the view is more likely to be
misapplied than not

The problem with M4 is that M4 also fails to discern between the possibility of shoddy practitioners and the actual danger of the view. In fact, there is reason to think every misapplication principle will fail in this regard. That's because a misapplication principle will locate the danger of a view in its propensity for misapplication by definition and such an identification can never deliver the resources needed to discern misapplication from inherent danger. We cannot just look at the mere fact of misapplication if we are going to identify a morally dangerous view, we have to look a bit deeper.

What we require then is a method for identifying the inherent danger of a view that protects us from making erroneous assessments better attributed to misapplication. It seems to me that the best way to develop such a method is to look to the substance of the view and to connect this substance to the systemic loss of some recognizable good. If we reconsider John Wesley's concerns articulated above, it seems to me that this is closer to the method Wesley was in fact applying. For example, in the case of Wesley's criticism of Calvinism, the concern was for piety and the impact of the opponent's particular view on the development of piety.

The question to ask is what kind of connection we should be looking for between the substance of a view and the recognizable goods we are aiming at. One negative connection surely consists of omission. Consider then:

Omission (O): A view is morally dangerous if it fails to recognize some important good

Clearly, an individual levying objection O at a particular view will need to explain what an important good is, but in our present context, the issue is largely moot because there is a shared axiological orientation within the Methodist revival. Presumably, in such a context, O has bite precisely because the interlocutors agree on what goods are important. This would explain some of the vitriol we find in the various Arminian-Calvinist controversies.

Unfortunately, in our present context, O is not particularly convincing. That's because both the Calvinists and the Arminians share a commitment to pietism. To see this, we need to note the difference between Wesley's criticisms of antinomianism and his criticism of Calvinism. In the former case, Wesley accuses antinomians of blatant disregard for the moral law and the ordinances of God. For example, in "A Blow at the Root," Wesley considers the view that because Christ's righteousness is "imputed to us, we need none of *our own*."²³ Here, the concern is that antinomianism fails to recognize some particularly important good, namely, the good of one's own righteousness. Thus, this concern is an O-type concern. Wesley's criticism of Calvinism is not quite this criticism. Wesley knows very well that the Calvinists are preaching to the masses, and he knows very well that they are committed pietists. What Wesley is arguing that

²³ John Wesley, "A Blow at the Root; or Christ Stabbed in the House of His Friends," in *The Works of John Wesley Volume 14: Doctrinal and Controversial Treatises III*, Bicentennial edition, edited by Sarah Lancaster, Randy L. Maddox, and Kelly Diehl Yates (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2022), Sec. 7, p. 120.

Calvinism's doctrines undermine these efforts because they introduce theoretical pressure away from these efforts. This suggests an altogether different principle. Consider:

Erosion (E): A view is morally dangerous if the adoption of that view upsets the realization
and/or protection of some important good

E is a much closer specification of Wesley's concerns with Calvinism. Unfortunately, E is too imprecise. To specify Wesley's objection to Calvinism, we need to say more about what it means to "upset" the realization and/or protection of some important good. Here is an initial attempt at this specialization:

Erosion1 (E1): A view is morally dangerous if the adoption of that view prevents an individual
from rationally realizing and/or protecting some important good as far as possible

E1 is a more specific principle, but it is itself objectionable. E1 fails to recognize the possibility of supererogatory action. For this reason, E1 requires scaling back. Here is a second specification:

Erosion2 (E2): A view is morally dangerous if the adoption of that view prevents an individual
from rationally realizing and/or protecting some important good as far as duty demands

E2 seems to give us the principle we are looking for. While E2 is silent on what specifically duty demands in any particular case, E2 is specific enough to be tractable with input from moral theory.

The question then is whether Calvinism is morally dangerous, given the light of E2. Consider again Wesley's objection that Calvinism makes preaching unnecessary. If Wesley is right about this, Calvinism is objectionable, given E2. That's because, if Wesley is right, the adoption of Calvinism makes preaching irrational. Assuming preaching and/or evangelizing is a moral duty of a Christian, and certainly this was the view of the Methodist revivalists, then if Wesley is right, Calvinism is morally dangerous. Of course, it is open to the Calvinist to argue that Wesley is wrong. The Calvinist might respond to Wesley by suggesting that God's means of election involve preaching and that because any particular preacher cannot foresee who is elect, any particular preacher has no reason not to preach to any particular person.

To evaluate this response, it will help to compare this response to a parallel debate in normative theory. Consider one common objection to Act Utilitarianism. Act Utilitarianism is the view that an action is right if and only if and because that action promotes the greatest total net happiness. Act Utilitarianism is often objected to on the grounds that it can license morally odious action, such as murder. In response, many Act Utilitarians adopt an expected outcome version of the view. According to this expected outcome version, an action is right if and only if and because that action promotes the greatest expected total net happiness. Because murder almost never optimizes expected total net happiness, murder is morally unacceptable, and where this is not the case, murder is not wrong (according to the Act Utilitarian).

It seems to me that the Calvinist is suggesting something analogous in response to the Arminian's E2-type objection that Calvinism undermines grounds for preaching. According to

the Calvinist, there is no reason to expect preaching to be ineffective as a means of grace, and so there is no reason to refrain from preaching, even if one accepts Calvinistic predestination. Is such a response convincing? Well, it seems to me that the response depends on the empirical contingencies of the matter. If it is equally likely that a person is elect as not, refraining from preaching seems like a rational response. In fact, preaching is only the exclusively rational response if it is more likely than not that a given person is elect. Now, the Calvinist can argue that we have no clue about the empirical distribution of this matter, but if we truly have no clue how election is empirically distributed, it is hard to see how the Calvinist can argue that refraining from preaching is irrational.

However, it is important to notice that this concern does not actually run afoul of E2. E2 says that a view is morally dangerous if the adoption of the view rationally prevents a person from realizing and/or protecting some important good. Our present concern is not that Calvinism rationally prevents a person from preaching. Our present concern is that Calvinism does not rationally preclude a person from not preaching. This suggests an alternative formulation. Consider the following principle:

Erosion3 (E3): A view is morally dangerous if the adoption of that view does not rationally rule out a course of action that fails to realize and/or protect an important good as far as duty demands.

E3 is a much stronger principle than E2. In essence, E2 says that a view is morally dangerous because one can no longer rationally do the right thing when one adopts the view. E3 says something much stronger. In essence, E3 says that a view is morally dangerous because it

rationally permits too much. In this sense, E2 focuses on whether a view rationally precludes the right action whereas E3 focuses on whether a view rationally precludes wrong action. For this reason, I suspect some may doubt the legitimacy of E3. I am not sure how much we should expect an epistemic view to morally settle. Consider any number of now debunked views. Take classical psychology for example. Classical psychology paved the theoretical way for the practice of lobotomy, a practice many of us might find or maybe should find morally repugnant. However, many contemporary persons not only find lobotomy to be a morally repugnant practice, many of us contemporaries want to say that classical psychology did not have an impressive enough track record, or strong enough evidential grounds, to warrant the imposition of the risk lobotomy poses on individuals. Now, while I in fact suspect that a good case in this direction can be made, that case nonetheless rests on various evidential and moral considerations that we might not think it is the business of classical psychology to decide. If that's right, then perhaps a principle such as E3 is simply too strong.

Of course, the Arminian might argue that we want and in fact should expect something more out of theology than we want or should expect out of a science, such as psychology. According to this way of approaching the subject, theology is not just the science of God, theology is the science of God and God's ways with humanity, which includes God's expectations for humanity. If a reasonable case can be made in this direction, then perhaps E3 is a suitable principle in at least some contexts, and the Methodist revival is one such context. Perhaps then there is a principle and a case to made on which to rest the Arminian charge that Calvinism is a morally dangerous theology. However, if the Arminian opts to go this route, the Arminian will need to take care lest the Calvinist attempt to turn the tables. In the Minutes controversy in the ensuing years following George Whitefield's death, some Calvinist authors

attempted this reversion. For example, Richard Hill argued that Wesley's distinction sins properly so-called and sins improperly so-called could encourage an individual believer to engage in moral error while claiming perfection.²⁴ In response, the Arminian can argue that Hill's criticism points only to a potential misapplication of the view, and that this possibility does not fall under the scope of E3. That, after all, was the lesson we learned in the exercise that led us to this principle.

In any case, I leave the resolution of this debate up to the reader as well. The important takeaway for present purposes is that there is at least one rational way of interpreting Wesley's charge that Calvinism is morally dangerous. While a fuller treatment of this debate should examine some of Wesley's broader moral concerns, the preceding nonetheless demonstrates the extent to which Wesley had both legitimate theoretical and practical concerns with Calvinism, even if those concerns are perhaps more controversial and less compelling than Wesley himself appears to have maintained and/or recognized. Whatever one should ultimately decide about the rational force of this case, my interests next move me to a consideration of the way Wesley patterned his theoretical and practical concerns and what these patterns reveal about his broader conception of rationality.

Theory and Practice in the Methodist Revival

In the preceding two sections, I have examined several concerns John Wesley expressed for the forms of Calvinism extant and emerging during the Methodist revival. First, I examined John Wesley's concern that Calvinism made God the author of sin. Insofar as this was a concern for the logical coherence of Calvinism, I described this concern as a theoretical concern. I then

²⁴ Allan Coppedge, *Shaping the Wesleyan Message: John Wesley in Theological Debate* (Nappanee: Francis Asbury Press, 2003), 190.

moved to a consideration of John Wesley's concern that Calvinism leads to antinomianism. Insofar as this was a concern for the moral implications of Calvinism, I described this concern as a practical concern. In this section, I briefly want to consider the relationship between these two types of concern. In my view, these two types of concern are not unrelated, and the connection between the two reveals at least part of the implicit structure of John Wesley's theology.

The first connection to make between John Wesley's theoretical and practical concerns emphasizes the practical upshot of Wesley's theoretical concern. As we have seen, John Wesley was concerned that Calvinism would make God the author of sin. I have described this as a concern for the conceptual coherence of Calvinism. According to this way of putting the matter, to suggest that God is the author of sin is to suggest God is not omnibenevolent, and that is an incoherent position to adopt. However, this is only one way of putting this concern. In Wesleyan theology, as in almost any genuinely Christian theology, the human being is made in the image of God.²⁵ To suggest that God is not omnibenevolent, or somehow the author of sin, is to generate not only a conceptual problem, but a moral problem insofar as divine authorship of sin implies a defective normative ideal for humanity.

The second connection to make between John Wesley's theoretical and practical concerns runs in the opposite direction. If God does not demand perfection of us, if God is not aiming at the salvation of all persons, then God is not the God we have been led to believe God is. For Wesley, this practical problem raises a theoretical problem, but it is also raises an epistemological concern. In Wesley's view, Scripture plays a central epistemological role as a source of potential knowledge and a conceptual corroborator of experience. For this reason,

²⁵ Barry E. Bryant, "John Wesley on the origins of evil," in *The History of Evil in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries: 1700-1900CE*, edited by Douglas Hedley, Chad Meister, and Charles Taliaferro (New York: Routledge, 2018), 68.

Timothy Crutcher has argued that Wesley posits a hermeneutical circle between Scripture and experience.²⁶ However, for Wesley, Scripture also has a general tenor, as is exemplified in Wesley's rule or analogy of faith.²⁷ This rule of faith suggests that Scripture ultimately aims at the therapeutic regeneration of the human being from original sin to a state of holiness, best characterized as a life walking by faith with the mind of Christ. If our practical pursuit of holiness is compromised because it is not demanded of us, this threatens the entire epistemological foundation of the Christian way of life. Thus, our practical concerns can raise theoretical concerns, and vice versa.

What then is the nature of the relationship between theory and practice in Wesley's revivalism? One possibility is that theory is simply another form of practice. We could call this view theory-to-practice reductionism (TPR). One advantage of TPR is that it explains why a particular view has bidirectionality, or a why view suggests practice can have theoretical upshot and vice versa. According to TPR, bidirectionality is the result of a common feature of prudential life and the true nature of theorizing. To see this, consider the way our prudential lives are governed by practice patterning. For instance, a sick patient might journey to the physician in search of healing so that he can get back to the work of building the home in which he will raise his kids. Our various life plans always involve this kind of practice patterning. If theory is just another practice we engage in, it makes sense that it will be patterned with other practices, and insofar as the outcome of one practice can influence how one engages with another practice, it makes sense that theory can have practical implications and vice versa.

²⁶ Timothy Crutcher, *The Crucible of Life: The Role of Experience in John Wesley's Theological Method* (Lexington: Emeth Press, 2010), 142.

²⁷ Scott J. Jones, *John Wesley's Conception and Use of Scripture* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1995), 45-7.

However, I am not sure that there is any evidence to suggest Wesley is committed to TPR. Consider Wesley's well-documented comments in the "Preface" to his sermon series, *Sermons Upon Several Occasions*.²⁸ There, Wesley declares his intention "to speak, in general, as if I had never read one author."²⁹ For Wesley, this is necessary to cut out all extraneous understanding and "to know one thing, the way to heaven."³⁰ Fortunately, Wesley says, "God himself has condescended to teach the way...He hath written down in a book...Here is knowledge enough for me. Let me be *homo unius libri*. Here then I am, far from the busy ways of men."³¹ These are the words of a man in search of a foundation. These are not the words of a man treating theory as if it just another link in a chain of practices. Of course, it is true that Wesley is in search of what he calls "the true, the scriptural, experimental religion."³² However, for Wesley, this simply means that this truth has profound practical implications, and this is the feature of Wesley's thought I have already noted. Wesley's commitment to experimental religion does not in and of itself indicate a commitment to TPR.

How then shall we understand the relation between theory and practice in Wesley's practical divinity? One alternative to TPR is what we could call attitudinally suffused theory and practice (ASTP). According to ASTP, theory and practice are ultimately linked or mediated by the attitude of the theorizer and the practitioner. In the case of ASTP, the modulation of both theory and practice by the mediating attitudinal suffusion explains the bidirectionality of theory and practice. As the undertaking and outcome of both theory and practice can affirm or even perturb the theorizer/practitioner's suffused attitude, theory can have practical upshot and vice

²⁸ John Wesley, "Preface," in *The Works of John Wesley Volume 1: Sermons 1 1-33*, Bicentennial edition, edited by Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, Sec. 4, p. 104.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, Sec. 5, p. 105.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*, Sec. 6., p. 106.

versa. Consider for example the way in which the artist's state of mind can influence both the construction and completion of a vision, in the case of, say, painting. If the mood of the completed painting is to exemplify the mood of the painter's vision, the painter will need to maintain that mood in both the development and execution of the vision. When the execution is perturbed because the artist has lost or altered the mood in which the vision was had, the vision will either be lost, partially expressed, or need to be altered in response to the execution.

In my view, the relations between Wesley's theoretical and practical concerns reveal an outlook better described as a form of ASTP than TPR. Consider Wesley's view of prevenient grace and the role it plays even in theoretical knowledge. In "Walking by Faith and Walking by Sight," Wesley suggests that it is possible to employ reason to infer the existence of God.³³ However, Wesley also clearly regards rational capacity as damaged in the Fall and restored by grace. This is best seen in the sermon "The End of Christ's Coming."³⁴ There, Wesley says that God created humanity "in his own natural image...endued with understanding" and while this original understanding probably consisted of "truth by intuition," this only serves to reinforce the contention that, in Wesley's view, the rational faculty of fallen humanity is a damaged, but partly rehabilitated and slower moving form of this original capacity.³⁵ Nevertheless, the reach of this capacity is significantly limited. In "The Case of Reason Impartially Considered," Wesley suggests that "reason cannot produce faith in the scriptural sense of the word."³⁶ As Wesley describes in "The Witness of the Spirit I" scriptural faith ultimately has an experiential ground in

³³ John Wesley, "Sermon 119: Walking by Faith and Walking by Sight," in *The Works of John Wesley Volume IV: Sermons IV 115-151*, Bicentennial edition, edited by Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), Sec. 8, p. 52.

³⁴ John Wesley, "Sermon 62: The End of Christ's Coming," in *The Works of John Wesley Volume 2: Sermons II 34-70*, edited by Albert C. Outler, Bicentennial edition (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985).

³⁵ *Ibid.*, Sec. 3., p. 474.

³⁶ John Wesley, "Sermon 70: The Case of Reason Impartially Considered," in *The Works of John Wesley Volume 2: Sermons II 34-70*, edited by Albert C. Outler, Bicentennial edition (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), Sec II.1, p. 593.

the joint testimony of our spirit with the Spirit but even this experiential ground is embedded in the Christian practice of searching the Scriptures and exemplifying the fruits that mark a genuine perception of assurance from the “supposed testimony...in a presumptuous man.”³⁷ In this way, practice completes what theory starts, but in this case this completion ultimately consists in a theoretical insight: God not only exists, the God who is love, the God of the Bible, exists. This is not just bidirectional insight between theory and practice, it is also a conception of both in which proper engagement ultimately depends on the theorizer/practitioner having the right attitude.

This dependency on having the right attitude dovetails with Wesley’s Arminianism. Consider again Wesley’s rejection of the perseverance of the saints. Wesley’s view is that even the sanctified person can grieve the Spirit, damaging both one’s knowledge of God’s truths and one’s righteousness. As Wesley says in *Serious Thoughts upon Perseverance*, “[t]hose who are grafted in the good olive-tree, the spiritual, invisible church may nevertheless so fall from God as to perish everlastingly.”³⁸ In “The Wilderness State,” Wesley describes some ways in which a genuine believer can fall. There, Wesley notes how, for example, frequent “sins of omission...gradually and slowly” alienate the Spirit.³⁹ Of course, Wesley does believe recovery is possible. In “A Call to Backsliders,” Wesley says that “several of these, thoroughly sensible of their fall, and deeply ashamed before God, have been again filled with his love.”⁴⁰ However, this description of the process only reaffirms the importance of attitude in Wesley’s view of the

³⁷ John Wesley, “Sermon 10: The Witness of the Spirit I” in *The Works of John Wesley Volume 1: Sermons I 1-33*, Bicentennial edition, edited by Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), Sec. II.6, p. 279. See also: Walter Scott Stepanenko, “Some Varieties of Christian Pragmatism,” *Faith and Philosophy* (forthcoming).

³⁸ John Wesley, “*Serious Thoughts upon Perseverance*,” in *The Works of John Wesley Volume 13: Doctrinal and Controversial Treatises III*, Bicentennial edition, edited by Paul Wesley Chilcote and Kenneth J. Collins (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2013), Sec. III.12, p. 247.

³⁹ John Wesley, “Sermon 46: The Wilderness State,” in *The Works of John Wesley Volume 2: Sermons II 34-70*, edited by Albert C. Outler, Bicentennial edition (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), Sec. II.3, P. 209.

⁴⁰ John Wesley, “Sermon 86: A Call to Backsliders,” in *The Works of John Wesley Volume 3: Sermons III 71-114*, Bicentennial edition, edited by Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), Sec. II.6, p. 225.

Christian life. With the wrong “heart” one can fall away from any degree of sanctification, but one can always recover by recovering the correct “heart” and cooperating with the prevenient work of the Holy Spirit. In every step of the way, the goal is always “to be a real, inward, scriptural Christian.”⁴¹

Finally, I would argue that this conception of Wesley’s method also illuminates the sense of Wesley’s commitment to being *homo unius libri*. As many scholars have noted, Wesley was hardly “a man of one book.”⁴² If anything, Wesley was one of the most well-read writers in Britain in the 18th century. Wesley had a broad set of interests, not just in theology and philosophy, but in science and politics.⁴³ The conception of Wesley I have outlined in the preceding dispels some of the tension between Wesley’s statement and his actual habits. According to ASTP, some individuals unify their worldview and their actions by suffusing both with an underlying attitude. In my opinion, this is what Wesley’s *homo unius libri* comment is indicating. The idea is not to literally read one book, but to immerse oneself in that book in the sense that one suffuses every single endeavor one undertakes with the insight and attitude that book teaches and recommends. For Wesley, this is the heart of pietism, and pietism just is the heart religion Wesley unswervingly recommended through this preaching career. It is the religion founded on “faith which ‘purifies the heart.’”⁴⁴

Conclusion

⁴¹ John Wesley, “Sermon 125: On a Single Eye,” in *The Works of John Wesley Volume IV: Sermons IV* 115-151, Bicentennial edition, edited by Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), Sec. 3, p. 121.

⁴² Randy L. Maddox, “John Wesley—“A Man of One Book,” in *Wesley, Wesleyans, and Reading Bible as Scripture*, edited by Joel B. Green and David F. Watson (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2012), 3-18.

⁴³ Randy L. Maddox, “The Rule of Christian Faith, Practice and Hope: John Wesley on the Bible,” *Methodist Review* 3 (2011), 1-35.

⁴⁴ John Wesley, “Sermon 2: The Almost Christian” in *The Works of John Wesley Volume I: Sermons I 1-33*, Bicentennial edition, edited by Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), Sec. II.6, p. 139.

The Arminian-Calvinist ruptures in the 18th century Methodist revival can be profitably viewed from many perspectives. In the preceding, I have focused my attention on John Wesley's criticisms of Calvinism, and I have argued that there is a rational Arminian critique of Calvinism to be developed from Wesley's writing, even if that critique is not as epistemically decisive as the vitriol of the original debates might suggest, or as the few extant militant partisans today might hope. In fact, I have argued that what is most valuable in this critique is not any polemical insight, but a distinctive method of relating theory and practice. An examination of this method not only supports the construction of models of theory and practice integration that have hitherto been concealed, but the examination may also generate resources for further philosophical and theological reflection on the very nature of what it means to be religious and to lead a religious life. Perhaps these models can inform both descriptive accounts of distinct religious approaches and normative confessional accounts of successful religious indoctrination, but even if the fecundity of these models is limited to the context to which they are applied here, the models nonetheless suggest the preponderance of an impressive method within Wesley's Methodism.