



JOHN CALVIN AND VIRTUE ETHICS

Augustinian and Aristotelian Themes

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ABSTRACT

Many scholars have argued that the Protestant Reformation generally departed from virtue ethics, and this claim is often accepted by Protestant ethicists. This essay argues against such discontinuity by demonstrating John Calvin's reception of ethical concepts from Augustine and Aristotle. Calvin drew on Augustine's concept of eudaimonia and many aspects of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, including concepts of choice, habit, virtue as a mean, and the specific virtues of justice and prudence. Calvin also evaluated the problem of pagan virtue in light of traditional Augustinian texts discussed in the medieval period. He interpreted the Decalogue as teaching virtue, including the cardinal virtues of justice and temperance. Calvin was not the harbinger of an entirely new ethical paradigm, but rather a participant in the mainstream of Christian thinkers who maintained a dual interest in Aristotelian and Augustinian eudaimonist virtue ethics.

KEYWORDS: *virtue ethics, eudaimonia, choice, habit, doctrine of the mean, justice, prudence, divine command, Aristotle, Augustine, Calvin*

There is a widely held perception today—shared by ethicists, historians of ethics, and theologians—that the Reformation inaugurated a sharp break from earlier forms of eudaimonist virtue ethics prevalent in the medieval period (Rehman 2012, 473–75, 490; Herms 1982).¹ The assumption that the Reformation broke radically with older theories of virtue, whether Aristotelian or Christian, has been espoused by a number of scholars.² According to Servais Pinckaers, Protestantism

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¹ Abbreviations used in this essay: EN = Aristotle 1894 (cited by Bekker number); ST = Aquinas 1888–1906; CO = Calvin 1863–1900; *Inst.* = Calvin 1559; *Comm.* = Calvin's commentaries; *Prael.* = Calvin's lectures. Unless otherwise indicated, English translations of Calvin's commentaries follow Calvin 1844–55, abbreviated as CTS with biblical book, for example, CTS Romans. On certain occasions, I have emended published translations. I have consulted English translations of Aristotle 1999 and Aquinas 1948.

² See Pinckaers 1995, 283–86; MacIntyre 2007, 53–54, 252; Gregory 2012, 209–11, 265–71; Porter 2012, 95; Herms 1982, 483; Bloesch 1987, 82, 145, 173; Pesch 1987, 92–93; DeYoung 2009, 30; and Couenhoven 2017. This assumption goes back to Sidgwick 1886, 153–54.

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JRE 48.3:519–556. © 2020 The Authors. *Journal of Religious Ethics* published by Wiley Periodicals LLC on behalf of Journal of Religious Ethics, Inc.

replaced virtue ethics with an ethics of law: “What separated Protestantism from the theological tradition preceding it,” he writes, “was, first, the refusal to integrate human virtues within the heart of Christian morality through acceptance and assimilation” (1995, 285). Alasdair MacIntyre likewise interprets the Reformation as a revolt against eudaimonism. He speaks of John Calvin’s conception of God as a despot setting forth arbitrary commands with no comprehensible relation to either human ends or desires (1998, 79). This general sentiment is repeated by Brad Gregory, who speaks unambiguously of the magisterial Reformers’ “repudiation of theological virtue ethics” (2012, 265, and similarly, 209, 211, 269, 271).³

However, an alternative line of scholarship argues that Protestantism retained virtue ethics, and one scholar (Rehman 2012, 476) even charges secondary literature with “gross neglect of primary sources.”⁴ After surveying forty-six Protestant commentaries on Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* published between 1529 and 1682, another scholar concludes that the *Nicomachean Ethics* “continued to form the backbone of [Protestant] moral education” (Svensson 2019). While most of these commentaries remain unexplored, contemporary efforts to retrieve concepts of virtue by reference to early Protestants illustrate the relevance of older virtue traditions for religious ethics (Danaher 2004; Cochran 2014, 2018; Wilson 2005; Herdt 2008; Davis 2004; Fedler 1999; Vos 2015; Nolan 2014; and Hofheinz, 2017, 68–113).

If numerous Protestants espoused varieties of virtue ethics heavily informed by Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, does Calvin (1509–64) form an exception to this broader trend? Judging from the results of recent Calvin scholarship, one would assume that virtue ethics was at best incidental to Calvin’s theology. Summaries of Calvin’s ethics admit the importance of natural law but tend to omit any sections dealing with virtue or happiness (Haas 2009, 2004; Fuchs 2009, 1986; Sinnema 1993, 13; and Hesselink 1992). The various citations to Aristotle and the *Nicomachean Ethics* in Calvin’s works have been dismissed as “more literary than substantial” such that “the direct Aristotelian influence on Calvin is slight” (Partee 1977, 99; see also Anderson 1973, 55–57; Sinnema 1990, 119). Relying on such scholarship, a recent survey states that “Calvin seems to have had little to do with Aristotle’s philosophy” (Kärkkäinen 2017, 198). Calvin’s ethics has been characterized as making a “sharp break with classical philosophers and medieval scholastic theologians . . . both in its ability to discern good and evil, and in its power to direct the human will and affections into virtuous action” (Haas 2004, 93).

In contrast to such scholarship, others argue for Calvin’s positive relation to virtue ethics. Some of the older literature on Calvin’s ethics observed that he discussed virtues and correlated them with the Decalogue (Lobstein 1877, 13, 43, 46, 81, 114–15, 128; Lobstein 1880; Nazelle 1882, 25–31; and Wallace 1959, 126–30,

³ This perspective is also reinforced by scholarship which highlights the continuity of Luther and Calvin with Augustine’s anti-Pelagian polemic on the sinfulness of pagan virtue. See Moriarty 2011, 93–98; Pink 1997, 275–77.

⁴ See also Geesink 1897, 1931, 2:453–511; 1941; Costello 1958, 64–69; Fiering 1981, 66–102; Sinnema 1993; Kraye 1988, 346–47; 2002; Strohm 1996, 94–96; Blank 2008; Baschera 2013; Donnelly 1976, 53, 66, 82–85, 110, 156; Parker 2013; Burton 2014; and Helm 2018, 43–52.

170–92, especially 178). A number of recent works dispute the general idea that Calvin broke with virtue ethics, while affirming that he holds a variant of Christian virtue ethics (Fedler 1999; Vos 2015; Nolan 2014; Anderson 1973, 302–76; and Hofheinz, 2017, 68–113). Many scholars also disagree that Calvin only made slight or negligible use of Aristotelian philosophy. Joseph McLelland long ago pointed to Calvin’s use of Aristotelian logic, noted his use of the “familiar [ethical theme] of the mean between two extremes” and argued that generally “his use of certain categories of thought indicates his continuity with much of Aristotelian tradition” (McLelland 1965, 46, 48).⁵ Others argue that Calvin has a concept of the virtue of prudence which, while perhaps not entirely Aristotelian, is “something like it” (Stevenson 1999, 43, 160n30–31).⁶ Anthony Lane calls attention to Calvin’s use of Aristotelian logical categories—in some cases “fundamental to Calvin’s argument”—that include the ethically significant concept of habit (*habitus*) (Lane 1996, xxv–xxvi; see also Lane 1981, 82). Irena Backus argues that Calvin employed Aristotle’s concept of equity from the *Nicomachean Ethics* (2003b, 17–18; correcting Haas 1997), and Calvin’s “framework [of emotions] . . . is eclectic combining elements of Stoic and Aristotelian theories in particular” (Backus 2003a, 79). Vernon Bourke interprets Calvin’s theory of the will as holding to a “rational appetite theory not unlike that of St. Thomas,” which places Calvin in discontinuity with Aristotle but in continuity with Aquinas’s interpretation of Aristotle (1964, 70), while Richard Muller argues that “Calvin clearly held to the traditional Aristotelian ‘faculty psychology’” and he notes various conceptual parallels to medieval theories (2000, 165–66). Even more strikingly, Risto Saarinen states that “Calvin’s view of acting against better judgement represents the typical Aristotelian-Thomist model” that stems from medieval commentaries on the *Nicomachean Ethics* (2011, 165; see also Raith 2012). These positive indications of the importance of Aristotelian ethics to Calvin’s thought—sometimes filtered through medieval tradition—fit well into revisionary literature on Renaissance humanism, which observes that Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* continued to be the foremost authority for moral philosophy among humanists, including the French humanism of Calvin’s youth (Lines 2012, 2007).

The present essay confirms and extends this second line of scholarship. After Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* was recovered for use in the medieval schools, his work was incorporated by theologians into a larger theological framework informed by Augustine’s theology, and particularly Augustine’s *City of God*. Aquinas’s *Summa Theologiae* is only the most famous example of this work of integration. Despite disagreements over the precise theological significance of pagan virtue, medieval theologians generally affirmed that pagan virtue ethics should not be entirely set aside, but rather corrected and supplemented in light of Christian concepts of teleology, grace, and virtue (Bejczy 2011, 4–6; Marenbon 2015, 160–67). The argument of the present essay is that Calvin shares this larger

⁵ See also McKim 1984; Thiel 1999, 149–51.

⁶ See also Höpfl 1982, 186–87.

medieval agenda of using, correcting, and extending pagan virtue in light of an Augustinian theological framework. It is already well established that Calvin draws eclectically on Platonist and Stoic philosophy, and these ancient traditions are certainly relevant to Calvin's ethical thought.⁷ This essay argues that in addition, Calvin draws both on Augustine's *City of God* and Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* in setting forth eudaimonistic ethical concepts of happiness and virtue. More specifically, Calvin incorporates an Augustinian critique of pagan ethics on the nature of happiness (or supreme good) and an Augustinian view of the sinfulness of pagan virtues, while drawing on Aristotle to flesh out the nature of human faculties, choice, and virtue. When these aspects of Calvin's thought are recognized, he is more appropriately situated in a tradition of mainstream Christian thinkers between high scholasticism and the seventeenth century who maintained a dual interest in Aristotelian and Augustinian concepts of happiness and virtue.

1. Eudaimonist and Augustinian Themes

1.1 *The nature of happiness*

At the outset of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle expressed the assumption, widely shared in antiquity, that there is some highest end (*ariston teleion*), or happiness (*eudaimonia*), which is desirable for its own sake and for the sake of which one pursues other things, even if the nature of this *eudaimonia* is disputed (EN 1097a24–35; on *eudaimonia* in antiquity, see Annas 1993, 43–46, 329–435). Augustine, whose ethical thought is commonly accepted as eudaimonistic, adopted this general assumption but rejected the specific notion that *eudaimonia* is possible in this life. For him, the highest end consists in eternal life, or the possession of God, and this is only complete in the next life (Augustine 1998, 918–25 [19.4], 962–64 [19.27]).⁸ In the medieval period, Augustine's perspective remained dominant (Steele 2019), but Aquinas and other scholastic theologians distinguished, in addition to Augustinian beatitude, an imperfect happiness attainable in this life (ST I-II, Q. 3, A. 6; Q. 5, A. 5; Q. 62, A. 1; Celano 1990; and Steele 2019, 140–41).⁹ Calvin expressed agreement consistently throughout his life with the notion of a supreme good or *eudaimonia*, and as with medieval Christian eudaimonism, he agreed with Augustine that happiness consists in the possession of God in the next life.

Calvin's early remarks on the nature of happiness occur at the beginning of his commentary on Seneca's *De clementia* (1532). There he makes a brief evaluation of

⁷ See Partee 1977, 104–125; Nuovo 1964; Muller 2003, 1:67–69, 365–66; Backus 2003a, 63–101; Zahnd 2009, 9–15, 47–63; and Helm 2018, 27–38.

⁸ For recent discussion, see Cohoe 2020; Tornau 2015; and Tkacz 2012; for a contrary opinion, see Wolterstorff 2012.

⁹ There is perhaps an analogous concept in Augustine 1998, 949–50 [19.20], who mentions beatitude in this life through hope. See for instance Tornau 2015, 278.

the ancient philosophical sects. Concerning final happiness (*de felicitate ultima*), writes Calvin, while Epicurus and others identify it with pleasure, “two are more in accord with truth.” These are the Stoics and Aristotelians. Regarding the Stoics, Calvin cites Augustine’s *City of God* 8.3 on Antisthenes’s identification of the chief good with virtue, and for the Aristotelians, he cites book one of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* (Calvin 1532, 3–4; 1969, 25). Calvin’s remarks here are notable, first, as evidence of an early approval of the concept of *eudaimonia*. Second, Calvin shows interest in both Augustine and Aristotle as authorities on the nature of happiness. Third, even though Calvin cites book eight of Augustine’s *City of God*, he ignores Augustine’s praise of Plato’s moral philosophy in the same book, which possibly suggests either superficial attention to Augustine or the assumption that Plato’s thought does not differ significantly from the other options.¹⁰ Finally, Calvin’s philosophical preferences are clearly with philosophers who identify virtue with happiness. These philosophers in contrast with Epicureans are “more in accord with truth.” This relative ranking of the sects on the nature of happiness remains with Calvin throughout his life. As Backus remarks, “he continued to accord some importance to the Stoic and Aristotelian concept of *eudaimonia* as a state intrinsically linked with virtue” (2003a, 81–85).

In his theological works, Calvin consistently holds with Augustine that *eudaimonia* consists in the possession of God and is only complete in the next life. Beginning already in his *Psychopannychia* (published 1542, but originally written ca. 1534), Calvin cites book nineteen of Augustine’s *City of God* in order to identify the concepts of “peace” and “eternal life” with the “end of the blessed” (*finem beatorum*) (1844–51, 3:434 [CO 5:189]).¹¹ In language typical of medieval Augustinian piety, Calvin describes the perfection of the blessed as consisting in “perfect union with God” (*perfectam cum Deo coniunctionem*) and “union with God” (*cum Deo unionem*); it is “to possess God and enjoy him” (*Deum possidere, et eo frui*). Calvin employs Augustine’s favorite phrase “cling to God” (*Deo adhaerent*), which the latter had taken from the Psalms to describe happiness or the supreme good (1844–51, 3:463–64 [CO 5:211]).¹² In his *Brieve Instruction* against the Anabaptists (1544), Calvin self-consciously identifies his viewpoint as traditional. After citing Augustine and Bernard of Clairvaux, Calvin writes that the possession of heavenly beatitude (*la beatitudo celeste*) immediately after death constitutes the “perpetual doctrine” (*la doctrine perpetuelle*) of the church (CO 7:126; 1982, 140–41). Furthermore, “There is no one who does not concur that the perfection

¹⁰ Calvin’s firsthand knowledge of Augustine in this early period is disputed. See Zahnd 2017.

¹¹ Augustine’s actual phrase is *finis bonorum nostrorum* (Augustine 1899–1900, 2:388 [19.11]). Calvin is probably either paraphrasing Augustine from memory or drawing on a mediating source.

¹² See Psalm 72:28: “mihi autem adherere Deo bonum est” (Vulg.). Tornau 2015, 266n9, counts at least 50 citations of this verse in Augustine’s corpus. On the similarity between Augustine and Calvin on this point, see Zahnd 2009, 52 and 47n169 (on phrases *frui Deo* and *unio Dei*). See also Quistorp 1955, 173–74.

of our beatitude consists in our being perfectly united with God. It is the goal toward which all the promises of God point us" (CO 7:131; 1982, 146–47).

The Augustinian telos of union with God in the next life is repeated throughout Calvin's mature theological works, both in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* and biblical commentaries.¹³ Like Augustine, Calvin holds that through the virtue of hope, the joy of this happiness is partially already a possession of believers, even though hope has reference to the "future life" and "happiness beyond the world (*extra mundum*)" (CTS Romans, 466–47 [CO 49:242 on Romans 12:12]). Yet, the joy from hope in this life is temporary and does not finally satisfy (Calvin 2006, 27 [CO 46:781]).

Union with God as the *summum bonum* is a thread woven throughout the *Institutes*. In book one Calvin approves of Plato's teaching that "the highest good of the soul is likeness to God, where, when the soul has grasped the knowledge of God, it is wholly transformed into his likeness" (1960, 1:46–47 [*Inst.* 1.2]).¹⁴ The seed of religion and knowledge of God's perfections displayed in the universe serve (1960, 1:51 [*Inst.* 1.5.1]) the "highest end of the blessed life (*ultimus beatae vitae finis*)" and provide "access to happiness" (*ad foelicitatem aditus*). Book two of the *Institutes* opens with a consideration of self-knowledge, in which Calvin reminds the reader that God created humanity in his image "that he might raise our minds both to the pursuit of virtue and to meditation on eternal life . . . [and] we may press on to the appointed goal of blessed immortality" (Calvin 1960, 1:242 [*Inst.* 2.1.1]). The consideration of the end for which God created humanity leads one to "meditate on divine worship and the future life," which in turn leads to recognition of one's duty (Calvin 1960, 1:244 [*Inst.* 2.1.3]). Calvin thus grounds ethics in a consideration of the *summum bonum* of the Christian. A significant part of Calvin's argument for the continuity between the Old and New Testament is dedicated to demonstrating that the Old Testament saints conceived of happiness as union with God beyond the present life (*Inst.* 2.10.8–2.10.22). He returns to this theme throughout book three as well (*Inst.* 3.7.3, 3.7.8, 3.9.1, 3.25.2, 3.25.10). He again singles out Plato among the philosophers as the only one who grasped that the *summum bonum* consists in union with God, even though Plato could not even dimly perceive its quality (*qualis*) (*Inst.* 3.25.2). The consistent, albeit qualified, commendation of Plato in the context of the *summum bonum* is reminiscent of book eight of Augustine's *City of God* and thereby further reinforces our impression of Calvin's Augustinianism in this respect.

A clear engagement with ancient philosophical concepts of *eudaimonia* is found in Calvin's exegesis of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7). There he affirms that Scripture overlaps with philosophy in addressing the concept of happiness. Moreover, Calvin assumes with the philosophers that there is a natural universal desire for happiness. In the Sermon on the Mount, Calvin understands

¹³ See CO 31:493, 36:594–95, 654, 37:12–14, 49:242, 361, 55:47; and Calvin 2006, 50–53.

¹⁴ After 1559 this appears in section 1.3.3. Calvin 1539, 5, marginal note: "In Phaedone et Theaeteto"; this note appears in the 1543 and 1550 editions but not 1559.

Jesus to be speaking to his disciples about “true happiness” (*de vera beatitudine*) while correcting common opinions about happiness (*felicitas*) (CO 45:160–61 [*Comm.* Matthew 5:1–2]).¹⁵ Jesus discusses “a topic constantly debated among the pagans: for the principal question posed among the philosophers was the supreme good (*la fin de tout bien*), as they called it: and it is as if one said, human happiness (*la felicité des hommes*)” (Calvin 2006, 18 [CO 46:773]). Calvin understands the “treasure” of Matthew 6:21 to be happiness (*felicitas*) or the supreme good (*summum bonum*). About this happiness Calvin writes,

We know how carefully the philosophers discussed the supreme good (*de summo bono*): indeed, it was the chief point on which they bestowed their labor, and not without cause, since on it depends the entire reason for the formation of life, and to it all the senses are referred. If honor is judged the supreme good (*summum bonum*), the minds of men must be wholly occupied with ambition: if money, greed will immediately predominate: if pleasure, it will be impossible to prevent men from degenerating into irrational indulgence. For naturally we are all drawn to seek the good (*bonum*), and thus it is that false imaginations carry us away this way and that. (CTS Evangelists, 1:333–34 [CO 45:205 on Matthew 6:21])

It is not difficult to see in this passage a condensed summary of key points from book one of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*. Not only does Calvin affirm a natural desire for the supreme good, but the three commonly pursued goods he mentions (honor, money, and pleasure) are the same as those mentioned by Aristotle (EN 1095b13–1096a10). This passage, printed in 1555, also constitutes a mature affirmation of the same concept of *eudaimonia* found in Calvin’s 1532 commentary on Seneca’s *De clementia* (Calvin 1532, 3–4).

Moreover, we find throughout Calvin’s works similar affirmations of a natural desire for happiness. We know, declares Calvin, that “all men naturally desire happiness (*naturaliter felicitatem omnes appetant*)” (CTS Psalms, 1:2 [CO 31:37–38 on Psalm 1:1]), that “the desire to live well and happily (*bene et feliciter*) is common to all” (CTS Psalms, 1:566 [CO 31:341 on Psalm 34:13]), and “all mortals naturally desire to be happy (*beati esse naturaliter appetant*)” (CTS Psalms, 4:402–403 [CO 32:215 on Psalm 119:1]).¹⁶ Should we interpret this “natural” desire as implying a naturally necessary inclination? Calvin suggests that we should. When confronted with the objection that natural necessity and free choice are incompatible, Calvin denies such incompatibility but rather asserts that “Augustine replies that it is of necessity that we desire to be happy, but we none the less [do so] with our will” (1543, 96; 1996, 101; compare Augustine 1913, 272–73 [*De natura et gratia* 46.54]).

¹⁵ He uses the terms *beatitudo* and *felicitas* interchangeably also for Christian happiness. Note the continuity with Augustine (and also Aquinas), according to Pinckaers: for Augustine “the Beatitudes give us Christ’s answer to the primary human question about happiness” (1995, 149). Contra Fedler who denies that Calvin’s virtue ethics is teleological (1999, 166–69).

¹⁶ See also *Inst.* 2.2.26; CO 39:575 [*Prael.* Lamentations 3:24]; CO 46:773; Calvin 2006, 18 [Sermon 62 on Matthew 5:1–4]. Calvin also mentions a natural desire for truth and knowledge. See CO 24:266 [*Comm.* Deuteronomy 18:9]; Calvin 1559, 2.2.12, 2.2.14.

Notably, this affirmation that the desire for happiness is necessary and compatible with human freedom places Calvin in greater continuity with Thomas Aquinas, who followed Augustine's argument that some necessity is compatible with freedom (Augustine 1998, 204–6 [5.10]), than with the voluntarism of Duns Scotus and William of Ockham, who argued that the end of happiness is not willed necessarily (Hoffmann 2019; Osborne 2014, 8–9, 27–28, 37–38, 53–54, 59; and Pinckaers 1995, 244–45, 332–33).¹⁷

1.2 *Critique of philosophers on happiness in this life*

Calvin not only affirms a natural desire for happiness, he also contrasts Christian happiness with the philosophers' concept of happiness in a manner similar to Augustine. In *City of God* 19.4, Augustine contrasted the Christian's *summum bonum*—eternal life—with rival philosophical concepts. According to Augustine's argument, the philosophers variously place the highest good in the soul, body, or both. For Augustine, the important point is that the philosophers are agreed on the attainment of happiness in this life, and it is on this point that he critiques the vanity of philosophy. Augustine argues that the miseries of the body and the enduring war against vice in the soul militate against happiness in this life. He objects in particular to the Stoics who pretend that the evils attending body and soul are not really evils, and in this respect fall short of the better doctrine of the Peripatetics and Old Academy. The Stoic insistence on the possibility of happiness in this life, argues Augustine, is a faulty premise that results in the absurd affirmation that the presence of the greatest sufferings in this life is compatible with happiness. Their pride does not allow them to abandon their faulty premise. Christians, by contrast, who follow Paul (Romans 8:24–25), can reconcile suffering and future happiness through the virtue of hope, which looks beyond the present life for happiness, as well as the virtue of patience, which endures present evils for the sake of future happiness (Augustine 1998, 918–25 [19.4]; see also Boersma 2017).

Calvin employs the same critique of the Stoics while contrasting the Christian virtues of hope and patience. Like Augustine, Calvin draws the line between philosophers and Christianity with the evaluation of happiness in relation to the present life. In Calvin's estimation, both common people and the wise fall prey to the error that happiness involves relief from trouble in the present life, and it is commonly held that "happiness should be judged from the present state [of life]." Calvin calls it the "philosophy" of Christ's disciples that places happiness "beyond this world, and above the affections of the flesh." When Christ pronounces the beatitudes in Matthew 5, he not only corrects the common error that happiness consists in this life, he also "exhorts his own people to patience, by holding out the hope of a reward" (CTS Evangelists, 1:259–60 [CO 45:161 on Matthew 5:2]). Like

¹⁷ The suggestion by Raith 2012, 47n70, of Calvin's continuity with nominalism on this point seems unwarranted.

Augustine, Calvin believes the virtues of hope and patience secure the Christian possibility of happiness beyond the present life. The main difference between Christ's "paradox" in Matthew 5:10 ("Happy are those who suffer persecution") and "the fabrications of the Stoics" is that "Christ does not suspend happiness on vain imagination, but establishes it on the hope of future reward" (CTS Evangelists, 1:266 [CO 45:164–65 on Matthew 5:10]).¹⁸ Again, like Augustine, Calvin attributes the root of Stoic error about the highest good to their pride (CTS Acts, 2:150 [CO 48:405 on Acts 17:18]; see also *Inst.* 3.7.2).

Calvin not only echoes Augustine's critique of Stoic happiness, he also employs the Aristotelian concept of happiness in order to cut off the possibility of happiness in this life. Calvin seems to equate the ordinary concept of happiness with the distinctively Aristotelian notion that, in addition to virtue, external goods are necessary to happiness. It is ordinarily believed that "calamities render a man unhappy" (CTS Evangelists, 1:261 [CO 45:162 on Matthew 5:4]).¹⁹ As part of his argument that Abraham, as the father of the faithful, looked for happiness beyond the present life, Calvin recounts Abraham's many hardships, and concludes, "We will not say that he leads a happy life who struggles long and hard through infinite difficulties, but he who calmly enjoys present benefits without feeling misfortune" (1960, 1:438 [2.10.11]). While this argument is also employed by Augustine against Stoic philosophers (Augustine 1998, 919–20, 922–23 [19.4]), Calvin's premise resembles that of Aristotle. As Victor Nuovo aptly remarks, "Here Calvin's ethics approach Aristotle, who regarded the happy life to be one of moral virtue attended by the enjoyment of a modicum of external goods, lived over a long period of time, without repeated interruptions of hardship and misery" (1964, 159, noting similarity to EN 1100a4–9). Calvin, however, uses an Aristotelian premise to draw the Augustinian conclusion, foreign to Aristotle, that true happiness cannot be found in the present life.

1.3 Imperfect happiness

While Calvin argues against the possibility of true happiness in this life, does he believe, with Aquinas, that there is still an imperfect happiness appropriate to a subordinate natural end? Although he does not employ the language of imperfect happiness, he does relate temporal blessings and goods to eternal life as shadows or signs of perfect happiness. According to Calvin, the blessing of the land of Canaan to the Old Testament saints is a figure or mirror of that "supreme and final happiness" (*summa atque ultima beatitudine*) constituted by the future heavenly inheritance (1960, 1:770 [3.14.2]). Calvin also relates the practice of virtue with a measure of blessing even among unbelievers: "For we see that he bestows many

¹⁸ See also Calvin 2006, 24–26 [CO 46:779–80, Sermon 62 on Matthew 5:1–4]; CO 49:91–92, 154–56, 242 [*Comm.* Romans 5:5, 8:23–25, and 12:12]; CO 36:594–95 [*Comm.* Isaiah 35:7]. On the integral relation of hope and patience in Calvin's thought, see Quistorp 1955, 25–27.

¹⁹ See also Calvin 2006, 18–19 [CO 46:773–74, Sermon 62 on Matthew 5:1–4]; EN 1099a32–b9.

blessings of the present life upon those [unbelievers] who cultivate virtue among men" (1960, 1:770 [3.14.2]). Furthermore, Calvin recognizes the common good of the political realm as a subordinate good corresponding to political virtues. He holds that God is even said to love those that he "does not approve or justify" on account of "political virtues" (*politicas virtutes*) which refer to "an end (*finem*) of which he approves," that is, the "common good" (*bonum commune*) (CO 45:540–41 [*Comm.* Mark 10:21]).²⁰ For Calvin, this is a form of external righteousness. Likewise, in his comments on the story of Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38–42), Calvin disagrees with the theologians of the Sorbonne who follow Aristotle in placing the "highest good and ultimate end of human life" (*summum bonum et ultimum vitae humanae finem*) in contemplation, and thereby justify the withdrawal from ordinary life and despise the "active life" (*activa vita*). According to Calvin, this despising of the active life is contrary to God's intention for people, since "humans were created for the end (*in finem*)" of labor and living for the "common good" (*commune bonum*) (CTS Evangelists, 2:142–43 [CO 45:381–82 on Luke 10:38]). The common good that Calvin references here is a subordinate end distinct from final happiness. Calvin does not yet refer to the common good as imperfect happiness, but he does provide for a subordinate telos to which human action, and indeed pagan virtue, may refer.

1.4 Critique of pagan virtue

Calvin's critique of philosophical accounts of happiness is complemented by a critique of pagan philosophical virtue. This critique of pagan virtue, which is also informed by Augustine, likewise evaluates philosophical ethics negatively in relation to theological ends. Calvin distinguishes between (fallen) humanity's capacity to discern good and evil with respect to (1) the worship of God and (2) civil society, corresponding to the first and second tables of the Decalogue. While fallen reason has "some conception of spiritual worship" and is able to grasp that "sincerity of mind" is required toward God, it is otherwise "blind in many respects" and perverts its initial knowledge. Fallen humanity has "somewhat more understanding" about matters relating to the second table of the Decalogue because these concern the "preservation of civil society." With respect to civil matters, Calvin holds that reason (and thereby philosophy) falls short in two ways. First, it regards the patient suffering of injustice as the mark of a servile person, while permitting the vengeance of wrongs. Second, it fails to understand concupiscence (*Inst.* 2.2.24).²¹ These problems with philosophical ethics are repeated in Calvin's exegetical writings (CO 45:161 [*Comm.* Matthew 5:2, on patience]; CO 49:124 [*Comm.* Romans 7:7, on concupiscence]; CO 36:545 [*Comm.* Isaiah 32:5, on concupiscence]). In addition to these problems, Calvin holds that unbelief renders one sinful even though he may be otherwise regarded as "eminent for

²⁰ On Calvin's references to the common good, see Song 2012, 234–52.

²¹ The description of the servile person matches that found in EN 4.5 (1126a6–8).

distinguished virtues” (CTS 1 Timothy, 40 [CO 52:260 on 1 Timothy 1:15]).²² Calvin also holds that the virtues that appear in “unrenewed men,” such as “gentleness, integrity, temperance, and generosity . . . were but specious disguises.” He clarifies that while an unbeliever often excels in a single virtue, still the presence of other vices demonstrates that “sin reigns in him” (CTS Galatians, 147–48 [CO 50:255–56 on Galatians 5:22]).

Calvin was not the first to hold that the acquired virtues of unbelievers are not true virtues. The idea has roots in Augustine’s later writings, and these informed theological opinion during the medieval period. Augustine understood virtue as “rightly ordered love” (1998, 680 [15.22]), and consequently held that true virtue must be done for the right end (God) and from faith and charity. Since pagans do not have faith, on which charity depends, and they do not act ultimately for the right end, it is impossible for them to have true virtues (Marenbon 2015, 34–41). This Augustinian position was so highly influential that even medieval theologians such as Aquinas, who argued that pagans possessed imperfect acquired virtues, nonetheless agreed with Augustine that only infused virtues are true virtues. The traditional passage discussed in this respect was Augustine’s *Against Julian* 4.3, where Augustine argued that since pagan virtues are done for the wrong ends, they are not true virtues but rather sins.²³ Whereas Aquinas formally agreed with Augustine, Duns Scotus argued to the contrary that, as a matter of definition, true virtue is possible apart from charity (Marenbon 2015, 163–66; Osborne 2003).

Calvin clearly demonstrates continuity with Augustine’s mature evaluation of pagan virtue. He would certainly have known of Augustine’s brief remarks in *City of God* 19.25, where Augustine declares that, on account of the pride of those without knowledge of the true God, their virtues should be counted as vices (1998, 961).²⁴ Rather than *City of God*, Calvin draws specifically on the traditional passage of Augustine’s *Against Julian* 4.3 while reproducing the same argumentation as Augustine. Calvin regards *Against Julian* as containing a “copious” treatment of the sinfulness of unbelievers (Calvin 1844–51, 3:150 [CO 7:475–76]; see also Smits 1957–58, 1:166, 2:208–209). Citing book four of *Against Julian*, Calvin argues that “the observation of Augustine is true, that all who are strangers to the true God, however excellent they may be deemed on account of their virtues are more deserving of punishment than of reward, because, by the pollution of their heart, they contaminate the pure gifts of God.” Like Augustine, Calvin distinguishes between pagan virtues as “good works of God” (*bona Dei opera*) that preserve society and the pagans themselves who “execute [those works] in the worst way” (*pessimè*

²² See also CO 51:205 [*Comm.* Ephesians 4:18]; CO 49:268–69 [*Comm.* Romans 14:23]; and Calvin 1579, 83.

²³ See Augustine 1957, 186–87 [4.3.21]: “You know that virtues must be distinguished from vices, not by their functions, but by their ends . . . Whatever good is done by man, yet is not done for the purpose for which true wisdom commands it be done, may seem good from its function, but, because the end is not right, it is sin.”

²⁴ *Inst.* 3.11.22 cites a nearby passage, *City of God* 19.27.

exequantur) (Calvin 1960, 1:770 [3.14.3]; see also Augustine 1957, 187–88 [4.3.22]). Again, Calvin follows Augustine’s reasoning that pagan virtues are sinful because they are not done with an intention for the right end of serving God (*Inst.* 3.14.3; see also Augustine 1957, 186–87 [4.3.21]; CO 7:475–76; Calvin 1844–51, 3:150). With Augustine, Calvin also explains that lack of faith renders sinful even apparent virtues (*Inst.* 3.14.3; see also Augustine 1957, 188–90 [4.3.24–26]). Elsewhere Calvin remarks that Augustine “wisely explained” in book four of *Against Julian* that “works, however splendid they may appear before our eyes, are of no value or importance before God, except they flow from a pure heart.” Calvin summarizes the argument of *Against Julian* 4.3 that works “ought to be estimated according to their source (*a fonte suo*), and next according to their end (*a fine*) . . . From this therefore we distinguish between good and evil works, vices and virtues, that is, from a right and simple disposition, and next from the end” (CTS Minor Prophets, 4:371 [CO 7:475–76 on Haggai 2:11–15]).²⁵ If the corrupt source renders sinful otherwise apparent virtues, then by contrast grace is a source of true virtue. Using traditional terminology, Calvin refers variously to the Christian virtues of faith, humility, and purity of heart as the “mother” of the virtues.²⁶

2. Aristotelian Themes

2.1 *Voluntary choice*

While Calvin agrees with Augustine on the nature of *eudaimonia*, his treatment of the nature of choice and habit has continuities with Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*. In book three, Aristotle regarded the nature of voluntary choice as a prerequisite to understanding virtue (EN 1109b30–34). Calvin also thinks an evaluation of human faculties and voluntary choice is necessary to understand the extent to which people can practice virtue and vice. According to Calvin, whereas the first consideration of self-knowledge consists in the end (*finem*) of one’s creation, the second consideration consists in one’s faculties (*facultates*). The former teaches one’s duty, while the latter teaches one’s ability (*Inst.* 2.1.3). It is important to observe that Calvin’s remarks on faculties and their ability is scattered across the theological states of innocence and the fall. Moreover, his evaluation of the accuracy of philosophers differs depending on the state (Lane 1981, 72). Calvin is far more positive about the accuracy of philosophers regarding the state of innocence than the state of the fall. But even after the fall, he assumes continuity between the

²⁵ Note the same points, without attribution to Augustine, at CO 23:140 [*Comm.* Genesis 8:21] and CO 55:368 [*Comm.* 1 John 5:12].

²⁶ See Calvin 1579, 83; 1580, 376 [CO 34:234 on Job 21:13–15]; CTS Philippians, 52 [CO 52:24 on Philippians 2:3]; CTS Evangelists, 1:264 [CO 45:163 on Matthew 5:8]. On the traditional phrase “mother of the virtues” as applied to virtues such as prudence, humility, and charity, see Bejczy 2011, 88n83, 100–2.

states on the nature of choice, although the fall corrupts the faculties and thereby restricts human ability to desire and choose the good.

In his discussion of faculties in the state of innocence, Calvin summarizes and basically approves of a philosophical account of the intellectual and appetitive faculties, the capacity of free choice, and the acquisition of virtue oriented toward the goal of happiness. According to Calvin, in the state of innocence, “reason, understanding, prudence, and judgment not only sufficed for the direction of his earthly life, but by them men mounted up even to God and eternal happiness (*foelicitatem*). Then was choice added, to direct the appetites and control all the organic motions, and thus make the will completely amenable to the guidance of the reason” (Calvin 1960, 1:195 [1.15.8]; see also Calvin 2009, 96). Calvin goes on to observe that the philosophers “held this principle, that man would not be a rational animal unless he possessed free choice (*libera electio*) of good and evil; also it entered their minds that the distinction between virtues and vices would be obliterated if man did not order his life by his own planning. *Well reasoned so far (Probè quidem hactenus)—if there had been no change in man*” (1960, 1:196 [1.15.8]; emphasis mine). This last sentence demonstrates that Calvin sees basic continuity between the state of innocence and the way in which philosophers describe free choice in the pursuit of virtue.²⁷

Before proceeding further, it is worth observing a parallel pattern in Calvin’s adoption of philosophical concepts. Calvin, like Augustine before him, adopts the basic ethical concept of happiness (*eudaimonia*) while shifting its object to God and its fulfillment into the next life, in order to conform to Christian eschatology. So too, Calvin adopts the concept of free choice with respect to good and evil, but places maximum philosophical continuity in the state of innocence, in order to conform to Christian hamartiology. In both cases, Calvin’s often severe criticism of philosophy does not lead to the entire abandonment of the concept, but rather its accommodation to Christian doctrine. After sketching philosophical opinions on the faculties of the soul, Calvin says he is forced to depart “a little” (*paulum*) from the philosophers’ way of teaching because the philosophers “mistakenly confuse two very diverse states of man” due to their ignorance of the fall and its attendant corruption (1960, 1:194 [1.15.7]). He also says the philosophers sought “in a ruin for a building, and in scattered fragments for a suitable compound” (1960, 1:196 [1.15.8]). In practice, it seems, the ruins of the philosophers provide Calvin with a useful point of comparison for understanding original human nature apart from sin.

Calvin takes Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* as representative of philosophical opinion on the power of free choice. While Calvin also cites Plato and Cicero as examples of philosophical opinion on the struggle between virtue and vice, he turns to Aristotle for a more precise explanation of philosophical reasoning on

²⁷ Compare CO 23:39 [*Comm.* Genesis 2:9], which also affirms the endowments of judgment, choice, and discrimination between virtue and vice.

the power of free choice. Citing *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.5, Calvin summarizes the arguments of the “philosophers” as a series of premises and conclusions which accurately reflects the account of Aristotle:

Nevertheless, the philosophers hold as beyond controversy that virtues and vices are in our power. If our choice (they say) is to do this or that: *ergo* also not to do it. Again if not to do it: *ergo* also to do it. Moreover we seem to do what we do, and to avoid what we avoid, by free choice (*libera electione*): *ergo* if we do any good when we please, we can also omit it: if we commit any evil, we can also avoid it. (1960, 1:258 [2.2.3], with marginal note “Vide apud Arist. lib. lib. 3 Ethic. cap. 5”; compare EN 1113b3–14)

Further confirmation of Calvin’s choice of Aristotle as representative of the best philosophical opinion on this subject comes from an early remark in his *Psychopannychia*. There he states, “Concerning the faculties of the soul, Plato treats them excellently (*praeclare*) in some places, but Aristotle treats them most acutely of all (*argutissime omnium*)” (Calvin 1844–51, 3:420 [CO 5:178]).²⁸ This evaluation of Plato’s greater excellence but Aristotle’s greater acuteness matches Calvin’s praise of Plato for approaching the Augustinian concept of *eudaimonia* as union with God and his use of Aristotle for explaining various details regarding the faculties of the soul (compare Zahnd 2009, 48–53; Backus 2003a, 90–97; Helm 2018, 32; and Oberman 1993, 274–75n74).

Calvin does not assent to Aristotle’s premise that virtue and vice are entirely within human power in the fallen state. He agrees with Peter Lombard’s distinction (based on Augustine) that, due to the fall, not only were the supernatural gifts taken away, but the natural gifts were corrupted, such that reason is weak and corrupt and the will is captive to evil desires (*Inst.* 2.2.12; compare Calvin 1960, 1:260n18). Backus describes Calvin’s rejection of the philosophers’ opinion of free choice as based on the objection that philosophers grant “too much autonomy to reason and make it the exclusive agent of deciding between right and wrong.” While Calvin “finds their fundamental premise to be false, he thinks that the conceptual framework they provide requires very little adaptation to make it fit the Christian view” (2003a, 97). This is an accurate summary of Calvin’s view, but we can further clarify the precise features of Aristotelian choice that Calvin accepts as also applicable to the fallen state. He accepts Aristotle’s definition of choice as appetitive understanding (*intellectum appetitivum*), and the dependence of the will, as a rational appetite, on the intellect. Citing *Nicomachean Ethics* 6.2, Calvin affirms, “Aristotle himself also truly taught that avoidance or pursuit in the appetite corresponds to affirmation or denial in the mind” (Calvin 1960, 1:194 [1.15.7]; compare EN 1139a21). He also does not object to Aristotle’s view, as expressed in *Nicomachean Ethics* 6.2, that “there are three principles of action:

²⁸ Compare Calvin’s epistle dedicatory to Genesis, on Aristotle as the “greatest philosopher” (*summus philosophus*) (CO 15:197); and Sermon 146 on Job 37:14–24, on Aristotle as the “wisest that ever was” (*le plus sage qui fut iamais*) (CO 35:341).

sense, understanding, appetite” (Calvin 1960, 1:194 [1.15.6]; compare EN 1139a18, as noted at Backus 2003a, 96). What Calvin does not accept in the fallen state, which he did allow in the state of innocence, is the notion, as Lane puts it, that fallen humanity is “poised between good and evil in some sort of moral neutrality” (Lane 1981, 79–80). In his commentary on Ezekiel 11:19–20, Calvin ascribes the concept of choice to humanity after the fall. While not accepting what others ascribe to postlapsarian free choice (*libero arbitrio*), Calvin still affirms two particular endowments of the soul—first, reason, and second, judgment and choice (*iudicio et electione*). He clarifies that “choice and the will depend” on judgment (CO 40:243–44). In addition, Calvin accepts Aristotle’s assumption, which was widely accepted in the medieval period, that voluntary action is characterized by action done with knowledge and freedom from coercion (*non coactione*) (Calvin 1543, 143; 1996, 150, citing EN 3.1; *Inst.* 2.2.7; CO 45:207 [*Comm.* Matthew 6:22, compare to EN 3.1 and 5.8]; Hoffmann 2019; Lane 1981, 78–80).

In sum, Calvin not only views the explanation of choice in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* as representative of philosophical opinion, he also agrees in substance with Aristotle’s view that in choice appetite is dependent on reason, and voluntariness requires both knowledge and the absence of coercion. For Calvin, the philosophers reason well about the nature of voluntary action and its relation to virtue and vice, but their insights are more applicable to the state of innocence than the fallen state. Although this moral psychology, exemplified by Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, requires correction with respect to the attainability of the good in light of Christian doctrine of sin, it is still operative in the fallen state, such that Calvin continues to draw on this psychology to describe human choice after the fall.

2.2 *Virtue and vice as habits*

Since Calvin adopts many features of Aristotelian faculty psychology, which undergird the moral psychology of voluntary action and habit formation, we should expect him to discuss the nature of virtue. In fact, beginning with his commentary on Seneca’s *De clementia*, Calvin employs a number of specifically Aristotelian concepts about virtue. These same concepts reappear and are reaffirmed in Calvin’s later theological writings. One such concept is the Aristotelian notion that virtue and vice are habits. The use of this Aristotelian category is usually associated with Calvin’s contemporary Peter Martyr Vermigli (Donnelly 1976, 84, 103, 105, 156; Helm 2018, 50–52, 192–93), but Lane has observed Calvin’s employment of Aristotle’s category of habit in the 1543 *Defensio sanae et orthodoxae doctrinae de servitute et liberatione humani arbitrii* (Calvin 1996, xxv–xxvi). Calvin’s usage of the concept actually extends to his early commentary on Seneca’s *De clementia* and his biblical commentaries. His agreement with the Aristotelian concept of habit is therefore neither isolated to his polemical context, nor a single instance, but rather constitutes a consistent pattern of thought bridging his early philosophical

and later theological works. In his commentary on Seneca's *De clementia*, Calvin explains the notion of habit by reference to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*:

This is what the philosophers say: that man's mind, as it becomes accustomed to virtues or vices, contracts the habit of them. Now habits are acquired qualities by which with regard to our moral character we conduct ourselves well or badly. So do I understand that passage in Aristotle's *Ethics* [2.1], that moral virtue is acquired by practice. (1969, 81–83; 1532, 27)

Calvin retains the basic concept of an acquired habit in his later theological works. He prefers to discuss it in the context of acquiring vices, or evil habits. In his commentary on Romans (1540), Calvin understands the term malevolence (*ka-koētheia*) in Romans 1:29 as describing someone who “has become hardened in a corrupt course of life by custom and evil habit (*malo habitu*)” (CTS Romans, 81 [CO 49:29 on Romans 1:29]). He also takes Paul in Romans 1:32 to be describing an extreme form of wickedness. Of this, Calvin writes, “For he who is ashamed is as yet healable; but when such an impudence is contracted through a sinful habit (*ex peccandi consuetudine*), that vices, and not virtues, please us, and are approved, there is no more any hope of reformation” (CTS Romans, 83 [CO 49:30 on Romans 1:32]; compare CO 52:447 [*Comm.* Philemon 16]).

Calvin not only makes use of the Aristotelian terminology of habit, he also draws explicitly on book seven of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* in his theological works in order to clarify the nature of habitual sin. His lectures on Jeremiah contain two references to Aristotle on this point. Like his interpretation of Romans 1:29 and 1:32, Calvin interprets both Jeremiah 6:10 and 13:23 as teaching a corruption of habit acquired by long practice, which stands in the way of moral discernment and takes away freedom to do what is right. On Jeremiah 6:10, Calvin observes a parallel between this “contracted habit” (*habitum contractum*) of the Jews and the philosophy of Aristotle. While Aristotle should not be considered an authority on free choice (*liberum arbitrium*)—“for he knew nothing about original sin and the corruption of nature”—his account of intemperance provides a good explanation of human corruption. Aristotle teaches that “those who are most free cannot act well, after they become so hardened in their vices, that *akrateia* [weakness of will] rules in them. For intemperance is as it were a tyrant, which so subjects all the feelings and senses of men to itself, that there is no freedom there” (CTS Jeremiah, 1:329–30 [CO 37:652 on Jeremiah 6:10]).²⁹ In his interpretation of Jeremiah 13:23, which Calvin also reads as teaching “habit contracted by long practice” (*habitu qui contrahitur ex longa consuetudine*), he cites book seven of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* to confirm that a person loses the power to do what is right “when he is so immersed in his own vices as to have lost free choice,” and adds “this also is what experience shows” (CTS Jeremiah, 2:191 [CO 38:172 on Jeremiah 13:23]).³⁰ Calvin's general fondness for book seven of the *Nicomachean*

²⁹ The Greek term is used by Aristotle, for example, at EN 7.1 [1145b11–20].

³⁰ Compare EN 7.8 [1150b29–1151a5], on those who are permanently and incurably bad.

Ethics is further evident from his praise for Aristotle, who “seems to most skillfully distinguish” between incontinence and intemperance (*Inst.* 2.2.23, with citation of EN 7.3).³¹

Aristotle’s discussion in book three of *Nicomachean Ethics* on the relation between voluntary choice and the formation of bad habit is also important to Calvin. In his *Defensio sanae et orthodoxae doctrinae* (1543), Calvin not only affirms Aristotle’s concept of the voluntary (EN 3.1), but also summarizes Aristotle’s opinion, “in the fifth chapter, when he teaches that the unjust and weak are such of their own accord, just because at the beginning it was possible for them not to be so, even though they now cannot be anything else.” What Aristotle says in this place about the weak, Calvin extends to the entire human race. The “native philosophy of Christians” teaches that Adam by voluntary choice not only corrupted himself but also his descendants, “and that it is from this that we derive the habit which resides in our nature.” Aristotle is helpful enough to Calvin that he suggests “join[ing] this teaching about our faulty beginning to Aristotle’s philosophy” in order to understand how the necessity of sinning is also voluntary (1996, 150; 1543, 143).

Calvin is highly sensitive to theological abuse of Aristotle’s notion of habit. He agrees with the Protestant understanding of justification as imputation, and rejects the medieval doctrine of justification as based on the infusion of a new habit in the soul.³² Moreover, he regards philosophers as generally ignorant of the magnitude of sin, which goes beyond habit. On Genesis 8:21, Calvin remarks, “Philosophers, by transferring to habit (*in habitum*), what God here ascribes to nature, betray their own ignorance. And no wonder; for we please and flatter ourselves to such an extent, that we do not perceive how fatal is the contagion of sin, and what depravity pervades all our senses” (CTS Genesis, 1:285 [CO 23:141 on Genesis 8:21]). But the abuse does not negate the use. Calvin can state that, in conversion, God’s grace involves a change of habit. God’s grace, according to Calvin, does not destroy the substance of human nature; “the change takes place in the habit (*in habitu*), not in the substance” (1996, 210; 1543, 203). Calvin adds that grace changes the accidental qualities, not substance, of the soul (1996, 213; 1543, 206). In this respect Calvin is similar to his contemporary Vermigli, a Reformer with overt Aristotelian and Thomist sympathies, who likewise utilizes the category of habit while rejecting justification as based on an infused habit of grace (Donnelly 1976, 156, 158). For at least these two Reformers, the rejection of the Roman Catholic understanding of justification in favor of a Protestant understanding of justification by faith, did not entail an abandonment of the Aristotelian category of habit (compare Rehnman 2012, 491–92).

³¹ For discussion of this passage see Saarinen 2011, 164–74 and Helm 2018, 36–38.

³² See Calvin 1844–51, 3:117 [CO 7:449]; CTS Galatians, 84 [CO 50:205 on Galatians 3:6]; CTS 1–2 Corinthians, 2:242 [CO 50:74 on 2 Corinthians 5:21]; CTS Acts, 1:543 [CO 48:306 on Acts 13:39]; and LaVallee, 1967, 142–43.

As with his use of other philosophical concepts, Calvin makes the concept of habit conform to Christian doctrines of fall and grace. For theological reasons, he is more keen to draw on Aristotle's discussion of habituation in evil (vice) than in good (virtue) when discussing fallen humanity. Nonetheless, Calvin retains a concept of habit even in the work of conversion through God's grace. Calvin did not entirely abandon the traditional philosophical categories of substance and accident in a "paradigm shift . . . from ontology to psychology," as Heiko Oberman supposed, nor was he "far removed from the ontological language of [the medieval scholastic] tradition" (1993, 265–66). Indeed, given Calvin's early agreement with Aristotle's notion of habit, and his persistent reference to habits in his theological writings, we should assume that references to virtues and vices imply some habit formation—either acquired through human exercise or caused by God's grace.

2.3 *Virtue as a mean between extremes*

Calvin not only draws on the Aristotelian description of virtue and vice as habits. He also follows Aristotle's account of virtue as a mean between extremes. Calvin's continuity in this respect is evident in his early commentary on Seneca's *De clementia*. In order to clarify the relation between clemency and strictness, Calvin remarks, "For since every virtue is a sort of mean between extremes (*mediocritas inter extrema*), of which the one tends to defect (*defectum*), the other to excess (*excessus*), the defect as it were is diametrically opposed to the virtue to which it refers, the excess rather imitates the virtue." Calvin goes on to state that "virtues cannot contend against virtues" since "virtues can be diverse, not contrary" (1969, 355; 1532, 146; compare EN 2.6). Elsewhere in the same work, he provides a definition of the virtue of magnanimity that follows Aristotle: "it is a virtue by which we learn to bear either kind of fortune [prosperity and adversity] with moderation (*moderate*)." Citing book four of *Nicomachean Ethics*, Calvin identifies the extremes (*extrema*) of magnanimity as the excess of "inflation of mind and elation" and the defect of "dejection and faintheartedness" (1969, 113; 1532, 41; compare EN 1124a12–20).

As a theologian, Calvin continued to draw on the idea of virtue as a mean from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, which he had appropriated in his commentary on Seneca's *De clementia*. Although in his later works Calvin does not formally state that virtue is a mean, in practice he frequently describes specific virtues or desirable qualities as a mean that avoids two extremes, which he conceives as vices (CO 23:188–89 [*Comm.* Genesis 13:1]; 1980, 268). Just as Calvin's application of four-fold causality to various theological topics indicates agreement with Aristotelian causality (CO 51:147–50 [*Comm.* Ephesians 1:4–8]; *Inst.* 3.14.17; Muller 2000, 156–57, 176), the Aristotelian doctrine of the mean appears to be so ingrained in Calvin's mind that he habitually applies the mean to all manner of practical and theological topics (compare Battles 1978, 16, 32–38; Thiel 1999, 149–51; McKim 1984, 291–310). For example, while interpreting Paul's admonition to "prove all things" in 1 Thessalonians 5:21, Calvin identifies a "twofold error" or "viciousness" (*vitiosum*): on the one hand a "presumptuous prejudice" that rejects

doctrines indiscriminately, and on the other a “foolish credulity” that embraces doctrines without distinction. “Paul admonishes the Thessalonians,” writes Calvin, “to keep the mean between these two extremes (*ab his duobus extremis ad medium*).” The mean in this case is discrimination (*discretio*) (CTS 1 Thessalonians, 300–1 [CO 52:177 on 1 Thessalonians 5:21]).³³

In continuity with the Aristotelian doctrine of the mean, Calvin often describes extremes as either of excess or defect. According to Calvin, James 5:20 requires that Christians “correct vices by gentle means,” but this practice commonly falls into either defect (flattery that overlooks faults) or the opposite extreme of excess (broadcasting evil) (1980, 209–210). He understands Titus 2:3 to teach a mean (*medium*) with regard to dress, avoiding a vice (*vitio*) on each side (wanton or superstitious dress) (CTS Titus, 311 [CO 52:419 on Titus 2:3]; compare Calvin 1579, 1152). Calvin also seems to think of human wisdom (with respect of divine matters) as a mean between “two extreme vices” (*deux vices extremes*): the “very evil extremity” of vain curiosity (*vaine curiosité*), by which some overestimate their ability and speculate into the hidden things of God, and those who become as “brute beasts without any intelligence.” In both cases, men do not keep a “good mean” (*bon moyen*) (1580, 484 [CO 34:522 on Job 38:10–28]). Likewise, when Jesus speaks to the disciples, “It is not for you to know the times and the seasons” (Acts 1:7), Calvin interprets this statement as a corrective to the two “vices” of “vain curiosity” and ignorance. Calvin explains,

This is the true mean between the two extremes (*temperamentum inter duo extrema*) . . . But we must keep, as I said before a mean (*mediocritas*). For we must be desirous to learn so far as our heavenly master teaches us; but as for such things as he wishes to be hidden, one should not dare touch them that we may be wise with sobriety. (CTS Acts, 1:44–45 [CO 48:9 on Acts 1:7])

Given that vain curiosity was a traditional medieval vice of excess in relation to the desire for knowledge, Calvin’s frequent reference to the vice illustrates his appropriation of a medieval ethical concept within an Aristotelian understanding of the nature of virtue as a mean.³⁴

Calvin even applies this concept of the mean to his treatment of predestination in the *Institutes*. According to him, there are two kinds of people, the curious who search into the matter apart from God’s word, and those who completely avoid the question (*Inst.* 3.21.1, 3.21.3). These two views correspond closely to the extremes of excess and deficiency. Calvin’s own view lies between these extremes, in that he advises discussion of predestination as far as God’s word permits.³⁵ Thus, Calvin’s

³³ See also the discussion of “double extremity” at Calvin 1580, 217 [CO 33:577–78 on Job 12:7–16].

³⁴ On this traditional vice, see ST II-II, Q. 167, A. 1. Calvin’s understanding of vain curiosity generally placed stricter limits on knowledge than medieval predecessors (Vial 2009). For Calvin’s references, see CO 48:9 [*Comm.* Acts 1:7]; CO 50:138 [*Comm.* 2 Corinthians 12:4]; CO 52:252 [*Comm.* 1 Timothy 1:4]; CO 52:434 [*Comm.* Titus 3:9]; *Inst.* 3.21.1).

³⁵ This is the context of the well-known distinction between revealed and hidden things (*Inst.* 3.21.3).

approach to the doctrine of predestination ought to be read in the context of his larger practice of seeking the proper mean between the excess of vain curiosity (going beyond God's word) and the defect of ignorance (avoiding the doctrine entirely).

Calvin's usage of the Aristotelian doctrine of the mean exemplifies a similar historical progression as his usage of the category of habit. In both cases the young Calvin overtly indicates his agreement with Aristotle in his commentary on Seneca's *De clementia*. In his later theological works, he continues to assume the validity of these ideas in practice, while applying them also to theological topics. Calvin's mature development as a Protestant theologian involves the adaptation of early philosophical and Aristotelian concepts to theological discourse.

2.4 *Acquired moral and political virtues*

In light of Calvin's Augustinian critique of pagan virtue as sinful, we might expect that Calvin adapts the concept of virtue for an exclusively Christian ethics. Calvin assumes the existence of theological virtues exercised by Christians, for he often refers to faith, hope, and love, as well as humility, patience, and mercy as "virtues."³⁶ He plainly sees Scripture as teaching virtue, for he observes that Scripture does not contain "an exact arrangement in the enumeration of virtues and vices" (CTS Psalms, 2:46 [CO 31:382 on Psalm 37:30]; see also *Inst.* 3.6.1), although he notes that typically in Scripture, "vices are first forbidden and then virtues enjoined" (CTS Romans, 464 [CO 49:241 on Romans 12:9]; see also CO 55:52 [*Comm.* Hebrews 4:12]; Calvin 1980, 161–64). He also refers the reader to patristic treatises for more thorough treatments of specific virtues (*Inst.* 3.6.1). Yet even though Calvin regards the virtues of non-believers as corrupted by sin, he also affirms the acquisition of moral or political virtues, which are especially useful to the civic realm.

The scholastics had developed a concept of acquired moral virtue, or virtue naturally acquired apart from faith among the pagans. Calvin affirms substantially the same idea. In his commentary on Seneca's *De clementia*, Calvin writes, "So do I understand that passage in Aristotle's *Ethics* [2.1], that moral virtue is acquired by practice" (1969, 83). Calvin continues to affirm this idea in his theological writings. To the objection that Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:20 condemns "every kind of knowledge that is apart from Christ," Calvin responds, "Paul does not condemn without qualification (*simpliciter*) either man's natural perspicacity, or prudence acquired from practice and experience, or cultivation of mind attained by learning, but declares that all this is of no avail for acquiring spiritual wisdom" (CTS 1–2 Corinthians, 1:82–83 [CO 49:325 on 1 Corinthians 1:20]; see also CTS Evangelists, 2:39 [CO 45:318 on Matthew 11:25]). Like the medieval scholastics,

³⁶ See CO 49:30, 86 [*Comm.* Romans 1:31, 4:23]; CO 52:24 [*Comm.* Philippians 2:3]; CO 52:139 [*Comm.* 1 Thessalonians 1:2]; CO 52:278, 328 [*Comm.* 1 Timothy 2:15, 6:11]; CO 50:255 [*Comm.* Galatians 5:22]; CO 51:45–51 [Sermon 37 on Galatians 5:22–26]; compare Hofheinz 2017, 77–80.

Calvin also refers to such acquired virtues of “those whom he does not approve or justify” as “political virtues” (*politicas virtutes*). These political virtues include justice, equity, moderation, prudence, fidelity, and temperance (*iustitia, aequitas, moderatio, prudentia, fides, temperantia*). God loves these political virtues, says Calvin, even though “they are not meritorious of salvation or grace,” because they contribute to the common good and preservation of the human race (CTS Evangelists, 2:399 [CO 45:540–41 on Mark 10:21]).³⁷ Presumably Calvin’s appreciation of these moral or political virtues provides an important reason for the fact that the 1559 statutes of the Genevan Academy, probably drawn up by Calvin himself, require that the Greek professor “explain some book of philosophy concerning morals. It shall be a book of Aristotle or Plato or Plutarch or of some Christian philosopher” (Sinnema 1993, 15–16).

From a Christian standpoint, Calvin justifies the correctness and appropriation of philosophical virtue with at least three theological reasons. First, he interprets Romans 2:14 as teaching that the gentiles are “by no means wholly destitute of the knowledge of what is right and just,” and it is by this knowledge that they “distinguish between vice and virtue” (CTS Romans, 97 [CO 49:37–38 on Romans 2:14]; see also CO 45:407 [*Comm.* Luke 16:15]; *Inst.* 2.2.22, 3.14.2).³⁸ Second, Calvin affirms that the actual observance of virtue among the gentiles is a divine gift. He writes, “I do not deny that whatever excellent endowments appear among unbelievers are gifts of God.” These gifts include the “justice, moderation, and equity of Titus and Trajan,” and the “continence of Vespasian” (1960, 1:769 [3.14.2]; see also *Inst.* 2.2.15, 2.3.4). Third, Calvin agrees with Aristotle and other ancient philosophers that humanity is a social animal (*homo animal est natura sociale*), and on this basis declares that “there exist in all men’s minds universal impressions of a certain civic fair dealing and order” (*Inst.* 2.2.13; see also CO 23:46 [*Comm.* Genesis 2:18]).³⁹ With this affirmation that moral knowledge arises as a consequence of the social nature of humanity as created by God, Calvin grounds the basis of virtue not merely in a supernatural cause, but also in the more proximate cause of creation. For Calvin, God designed humanity, or as it were hardwired it, for practicing virtues that cultivate society.

At the same time, Calvin views philosophical virtues as incomplete without the proper theological foundation. In his commentary on Romans, Calvin admits that “the philosophers speak excellently (*splendide*) and with great ability (*magna ingenii*) on the subject of morals,” although without the principles of Christ and

³⁷ Compare Bejczy 2011, 184–85: “Like the twelfth-century Parisian masters, the scholastics sometimes called these virtues *virtutes politicae*, but many of them preferred the designations *virtutes consuetudinales* or *virtutes acquisitae*, which bear an obvious Aristotelian connotation.” On the early development, see Bejczy 2011, 124–33. Calvin’s affirmation of the *virtutes politicae* is ignored by Nolan (2014, 12–18) and Fedler (1999, 157–86).

³⁸ Note that at *Inst.* 2.2.23, Calvin praises Augustine’s treatment of Psalm 57:1 in *Expositions of the Psalms* (Augustine 1865, 673–74), where Augustine discusses the law written on the heart.

³⁹ On Calvin’s early agreement with Cicero, Plato, and Aristotle on humanity as social animal, see Calvin 1532, 29 and Calvin 1969, 85, citing the third book of Aristotle’s *Politics*.

grace their doctrine is like “a beautiful superstructure without a foundation” or a “body without a head.” The “philosophers” that Calvin has in mind are either Aristotle or those who closely follow Aristotle’s method, for Calvin shortly after relates that “philosophers, before they lay down laws respecting morals, discourse first of the end of what is good, and inquire into the sources of virtues, from which afterwards they draw and derive all duties” (CTS Romans, 449 [CO 49:233 on Romans 12]; see also *Inst.* 3.6.1). Calvin here provides a concise summary of the arrangement of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Philosophers such as Aristotle fall short of the principles of Christ and grace, but as Calvin’s remarks on political virtues show, the relation between pagan and Christian virtues is one of correction and addition, and not of simple replacement (contra Pinckaers 1995, 285).

2.5 *Heroic virtue*

Another example of Calvin using a traditionally Aristotelian ethical concept is his repeated reference to heroic virtue (*virtus heroica*). This term, which originally appeared as an inchoate concept in *Nicomachean Ethics* to describe extraordinary virtue that is “heroic and divine” (EN 7.1 [1145a19–20]), underwent various Neoplatonic and Christian influences in the medieval period (Eliasson 2015). It was adopted, for example, by Thomas Aquinas and applied to divine gifts of grace, including the perfect virtue of Christ (ST I-II, Q. 68, A. 1; Costa 2008). Many Protestants, including Luther and Melancthon, continued to speak of heroic virtue in a theological sense as extraordinary gifts of God (Saarinen 1990, 111-12; 2013, 98-100). Along with other Reformers, Calvin stands in positive relation both to the Aristotelian category and to the medieval application of heroic virtue to extraordinary gifts of grace. In his commentary on Seneca’s *De clementia*, Calvin contrasts “excellent and heroic” with “popular virtues” (1969, 143). In his theological works he frequently attributes heroic virtue to biblical saints. According to Calvin, “Moses was a man of heroic virtue (*heroicae virtutis*)” (CTS Psalms, 4:195 [CO 32:110 on Psalm 105:26]; see also CO 48:142 [*Comm.* Acts 7:24]), Abraham possessed “heroic virtues” (CTS Genesis, 1:384 [CO 23:199 on Genesis 14:13]), and David “surpassed others in heroic virtue” (CTS Psalms, 1:560 [CO 31:337 on Psalm 34:5]).⁴⁰ Both Abraham and David were also men of “heroic courage” (*heroica fortitudine*) (on Abraham, see CO 48:232 [*Comm.* Acts 10:14]; and on David, see CO 32:396 [*Comm.* Psalm 141:8]). The apostles provided an “example of heroic courage” (*specimen heroicae fortitudinis*) (CO 48:94 [*Comm.* Acts 4:30]), and Calvin counts “heroic virtue” among the signs of an apostle (CO 50:144 [*Comm.* 2 Corinthians 12:12]; CO 52:358 [*Comm.* 2 Timothy 1:15]). Sometimes even unbelievers are said to possess heroic virtue, as king Darius, on account of his ability to recognize Daniel’s “prudence and other virtues, and holding them in great repute”

⁴⁰ For other examples of Calvin’s ascribing heroic virtue to David, see CO 31:270, 520, 531 [*Comm.* Psalm 26:11, 51:14, 55:2]; CO 44:331 [*Prael.* Zech. 12:8].

(CTS Daniel, 1:351 [CO 41:3–4 on Daniel 6:3–5]; see also CO 25:216 [Comm. Numbers 16:4]).

2.6 Justice

Calvin also appropriates specific virtues from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. One of the clearest examples is his use of Aristotle's concept of justice. Scholars have already observed Calvin's employment of equity (*epieikeia*; *aequitas*) from *Nicomachean Ethics* 5.10, first in his commentary on Seneca's *De clementia* and subsequently in his discussion of divine justice (Backus 2003b, 16–19; compare Haas 1997, 87–88, 131n39; Bohatec 1934, 40–42). But Calvin also accepts Aristotle's division between distributive and commutative justice. In his commentary on Seneca's *De clementia*, Calvin cites Aristotle's definition of distributive justice: "Proportion is what the Greeks call *analogian*. Hence in book five of Aristotle's *Ethics* the proportional right (*ius analogum*), as the proportional (*proportionale*) (so to speak) that concerns distributing honors, when there is a comparison of each" (1969, 65; 1532, 20; compare EN 5.4 [1131a29–32, 1131b16–17]).

This terminology of distributive justice as *ius analogum*, or proportional right, carries over into Calvin's mature theological writings. In two places in his biblical commentaries, Calvin not only agrees with Aristotle but also attributes to Paul an Aristotelian understanding of distributive justice. Commenting on the term equality (*isotēs*) in 2 Corinthians 8:13, Calvin writes:

Equality may be taken in two senses, either as meaning a mutual compensation (*mutua compensatione*), when like is given for like, or as meaning a proper adjustment (*iusto temperamento*). I understand *isotēta* simply as meaning an equality of proportional right (*aequalitate iuris analogici*), as Aristotle terms it. In this signification it is made use of, also, in Colossians 4:1, where he exhorts "masters to give to their servants what is equal." He certainly does not mean, that they should be equal in condition and station, but by this term he expresses that humanity and clemency, and kind treatment, which masters, in their turn, owe to their servants. (CTS 1–2 Corinthians, 2:294–95 [CO 50:101])

On Colossians 4:1, Calvin again writes, "Some understand it [mutual equity] otherwise, but I have no doubt that Paul here employed *isotēta* to mean analogical or distributive right (*iure analogo, aut distributivo*), as in Ephesians [6:9]" (CTS Colossians, 222 [CO 52:127]). In his exegesis of Ephesians 6:9, Calvin affirms the correspondence with Colossians 4:1 and draws the inference that "proportional right" (*ius analogum*) requires not only obligations of servants to masters, but also that masters treat servants justly (CTS Ephesians, 332 [CO 51:231]).

In these three passages, therefore, Calvin draws on the terminology of distributive justice that he explicitly attributes to Aristotle, and consistently concludes that masters have an obligation to treat their servants well. Moreover, there is a fundamental consistency in the employment of the terminology *ius analogum* between Calvin's commentary on Seneca's *De clementia* and theological commentaries from the 1540s. As a theologian, Calvin did not abandon his early philosophical

agreement with Aristotle's concept of justice, but rather gave the concept divine sanction by drawing Paul and Aristotle together in agreement.

2.7 Prudence

References to the virtue of prudence are scattered throughout Calvin's theological writings. He often highlights its importance, both for creation and redemption, as for example when he attributes prudence to Adam in the state of innocence (*Inst.* 1.15.8; 2009, 96–97) and to judges under Moses (CTS Mosaic Harmony, 1:310 [CO 24:190 on Deuteronomy 1:13]), or in his commentary on 2 Peter 1:5, which he paraphrases as teaching, "Strive that virtue, prudence, temperance, and the things which follow, may be added to your faith" (CTS 2 Peter, 373 [CO 55:447]).⁴¹ Unlike the virtue of justice, Calvin does not cite Aristotle on prudence, so it is more speculative as to whether he has Aristotle in mind. Nevertheless, given his explicit agreement with Aristotle's concept of distributive justice, it is plausible that Calvin also drew upon Aristotle for this important virtue. There are certainly conceptual similarities, although for Calvin prudence "arises from divine, not human, initiative" (Stevenson 1999, 43–44). Like Aristotle, Calvin describes prudence as deliberation about the ethical direction of life in general: "God's goodness is conspicuous, not only in the ordinary prudence of mankind, for no one is so made as to be unable to discover between justice and injustice, and to form some plan for regulating his life" (CO 41:579 [*Prael.* Daniel 2:22]; cf. EN 6.5). Calvin also utilizes traditional terminology of *scientia*, *sapientia*, and *prudentia*, when he writes,

Knowledge (*scientia*), therefore, in my opinion, means acquaintance with sacred things — Wisdom (*sapientia*), on the other hand, means the perfection (*consummationem*) of it. Sometimes prudence (*prudentia*) is put, as it were, in the middle place between these two, and in that case it denotes skill in applying knowledge to some useful purpose. (CO 49:499; CTS 1–2 Corinthians, 1:401 [*Comm.* 1 Corinthians 12:8])

This description seems to draw prudence more closely to wisdom than Aristotle's strict division between *phronēsis* and *sophia*, but Calvin may also have in mind the place of Aristotle's discussion of prudence, which appears in between knowledge and wisdom (EN 6.3–7). Prudence is not only a kind of practical knowledge (CO 50:98 [*Comm.* 2 Corinthians 8:7]), it has regard for particulars. On Paul's admonition in Colossians 4:6 to be able to answer every one, Calvin remarks, "For this is not the least important part of prudence, to have due regard to individuals (*singularum*)" (CO 52:129; CTS Colossians, 226). Calvin here agrees conceptually with Aristotle and Aquinas, who both regard prudence as concerned with particulars because the nature of the practical is particular (EN 6.7 [1141b14–16], 6.8 [1141b23–1142a22]; ST II-II, Q. 47, A. 3).

⁴¹ See also CO 45:318 [*Comm.* Matthew 11:25], 45:540 [*Comm.* Mark 10:21]; CO 47:6 [*Comm.* John 1:5]; CO 49:325, 500 [*Comm.* 1 Corinthians 1:20, 12:8]; CO 50:98 [*Comm.* 2 Corinthians 8:7]; CO 52:129 [*Comm.* Colossians 4:6]; CO 38:606 [*Prael.* Jeremiah 29:24–27]; *Inst.* 1.13.16, 1.17.4, and 3.14.3. See also Wallace 1959, 184–89.

3. Divine Commands and the Virtues

We have shown many lines of continuity with the general concept of virtue as well as particular virtues in Aristotle's ethics. Now we will address the general claim by historians of ethics that Calvin and the Protestant reformers taught a rule-based ethic based on divine commands to the exclusion of virtue (Pinckaers 1995, 282–86; MacIntyre 1998, 79; Herms 1982, 485; and Gregory 2012, 209–11, 265–71). For example, it has been argued that Calvin disassociates divine commandments from human teleology and renders the reasons behind the commandments inscrutable. The result is an ethic of rule keeping without discernable purpose (MacIntyre 1998, 79, 81).⁴² We will argue to the contrary that Calvin does not set aside virtue in his exposition of divine commands, but instead harmonizes various virtues with divine commands found in the Bible. On this point, there is general substantive agreement between Calvin and Thomas Aquinas, when the latter states that the moral precepts of the divine law direct the acts of virtue (ST I-II, Q. 100, A. 2 sed contra).

In the first place, Calvin denies that God is an arbitrary ruler but rather encourages inquiry into the purpose of God's laws. Commenting on Daniel 9:14 ("God is just in all his works"), Calvin writes that even though there does not exist any law above God and he is therefore a law unto himself, still "God does not reign as a tyrant over the world" and "he does not arbitrarily govern the world without any rule of justice or equity." Calvin's explanation for apparently absurd divine acts is epistemic: "he performs some things which seem to us absurd, only because our minds cannot ascend high enough to grasp a reason that is not apparent" (CTS Daniel, 2:173 [CO 41:152]; compare *Inst.* 3.23.2; Helm 2004, 326–32; Backus 2003b, 7; Partee 1977, 77n81; Bohatec 1934, 90–91). Those things that are above reason's capacity pertain, according to Calvin, to God's secret unrevealed will, which includes aspects of God's providence and election. God's law, however, pertains to his revealed will that is comprehensible.⁴³ Accordingly, when Calvin interprets the Decalogue, he takes it for granted that "the commandments and prohibitions always contain more than is expressed in words." The meaning is understood when we consider each commandment's reason (*praecepti rationem*) or why it was given to us (*cur datum nobis fuerit*), that is, when we examine its reason or purpose (*finem*) (1960, 1:374 [2.8.8]; compare Vos 2015, 136). Consistent with this general rule, Calvin's sermons on the Decalogue are peppered with the question "why?" as if to lead his audience from the bare words toward the unstated purpose of the commandment (1980, 72, 73, 76, 104, 106, 116, 141, et passim).

Not only does Calvin affirm that one can discern the ends for which God delivered his commandments, he specifically interprets the Decalogue as teaching the

⁴² My focus here is only on the relation between virtues and commandments. For a broader response to Calvin as a divine command theorist, see Helm 2004, 347–88.

⁴³ See in particular the remarks on God's "double justice" in Calvin 1580, 222 [CO 33:590, Sermon 47 on Job 12:14–16]. On the concept, see Schreiner 1989: 322–38, especially 328.

pursuit of virtue and avoidance of vice. In his *Institutes*, Calvin regards it as a matter of common sense (*commune iudicium*) and requiring no proof that when a good thing is commanded, the contrary evil is forbidden, or when a virtue is commended, its contrary vice is condemned (1960, 1:375 [2.8.9]).⁴⁴ On this basis Calvin expands the meaning of the Decalogue beyond bare commands or prohibitions to their contraries. Calvin also expands the meaning of the Decalogue by interpreting each command as a synecdoche. A prohibition that aims at one vice can thereby be taken for a whole group of vices. In the Decalogue, writes Calvin, God “refer[s] a whole multitude of vices to these heads which best represent how heinous each kind is” (1960, 1:376 [2.8.10]). Later he reiterates this interpretive principle when he declares, “For we must always come back to this: one particular vice is singled out from various kinds as an example to which the remaining refer, the one chosen being an especially foul vice” (1960, 1:411–12 [2.8.47]). Calvin’s concepts of virtue and vice, therefore, are integrally related to his arguments for expanding the meaning of the Decalogue to a wider scope of commands and prohibitions. Some of the commandments are interpreted as condemning an example of vice, and the expanded meaning itself includes the promotion of virtue and suppression of vice.

Calvin’s exegetical writings support the same conclusion that the divine law aims at teaching virtue and correcting vice. In his exposition of the Mosaic law, he repeats several times the proverb “good laws spring from evil habits.”⁴⁵ The statutes of the Mosaic law are given “to recall the people from the errors of their evil habits into the right way” (CTS Mosaic Harmony, 3:98 [CO 24:661 on Leviticus 18:4]). When Calvin summarizes the two tables of the Decalogue, he does so in terms of virtues. On Deuteronomy 10:12, Calvin argues that the sum of the law can be expressed as charity (toward both God and neighbor), and proceeds to set forth a “short and clear definition” of this twofold love as consisting in “piety and justice” (*pietatem et iustitiam*). According to Calvin, this short definition is also set forth in Titus 2:12, where Paul states that we should live “temperately, righteously, and godly” (*temperanter, pie et iuste*). The term *sōphrosynē* is added as a “seasoning” to piety and justice, writes Calvin (CTS Mosaic Harmony, 3:190–91 [CO 24:721–22 on Deuteronomy 10:12]).⁴⁶ In his commentary on Titus 2:12, Calvin also includes *sōphrosynē* in piety and justice, but rather than referring to piety and justice as the sum of the law, he calls this a “sum of the Christian life” (*summam christianae vitae*) wherein nothing is lacking for “perfect virtue” (*perfectam virtutem*). Calvin conceives of the virtue of temperance as subservient to justice, just as the virtue of patience is included in temperance (CO 52:423; CTS Titus, 319 [CO 52:423]; see also *Inst.* 3.7.3; Calvin 1980, 167–68). Calvin’s summary of the

⁴⁴ See also Calvin 1980, 190: “For it is fitting for us to define a vice by its opposite virtue.”

⁴⁵ See CTS Mosaic Harmony, (1:481; 2:281; 3:73; 4:94 [CO 24:301 on Deuteronomy 15:19; 482 on Leviticus 27:30; 646 on Leviticus 18:24; 25:211 on Leviticus 24:10]).

⁴⁶ Calvin first identified the virtues of *pietas* and *iustitia*, corresponding to what relates to divinity and humanity, as the teaching of Cicero (1532, 93; 1969, 227–29).

Decalogue in terms of virtues indicates that he regards divine commandments as addressing substantially identical virtues. Divine commandments presume the virtues and harmonize with them.

The substantial identity between commandments and virtues is also indicated by Calvin's interpretation of specific commandments. His reading of the commandments against adultery and theft (the seventh and eighth commandments in Calvin's enumeration) illustrates particularly well Calvin's integration of classical cardinal virtues with divine commandments. Calvin interprets the commandment against adultery not only as positively requiring chastity, but also generally forbidding the vice of intemperance and requiring the virtue of temperance. The "sum" of the commandment forbids "intemperance of the flesh" (1960, 1:405 [2.8.41]). He concludes his exposition by remarking, "For all vices of this sort [that inflame the appetite with intemperance] are like blemishes, which besmirch the purity of chastity" (1960, 1:408 [2.8.44]). His commentary on Exodus 20:14 applies the virtue of temperance in Titus 2:12 directly to the commandment. "The temperance (*temperantia*) that [Paul] commends [in Titus 2:12] is not separate from chastity" (CTS Mosaic Harmony, 3:69 [CO 24:641–42]). In his sermon on this commandment, Calvin similarly extends the commandment beyond chastity in marriage, to the demand that "we control our senses with moderation" (1980, 173). Calvin's reasoning moves from adultery to vices opposed to chastity, and then to the most general vice of intemperance.

The commandment against theft Calvin interprets generally as commanding the virtue of justice and prohibiting injustice. In what appears to be a paraphrase of the definition of justice from Justinian's *Digest*—giving to each his right (*ius suum cuique*)—Calvin writes in his *Institutes* (1960, 408 [2.8.45]) that "the purpose [of this commandment is], since injustice is an abomination to God, to render to each what is his own (*ut reddatur unicuique quod suum est*)." In his commentary on the same commandment, Calvin likewise states, "This is the rule of charity, that every one's right (*ius suum cuique*) should be safely preserved, and that none should do to another what he would not have done to himself" (CTS Mosaic Harmony, 3:110 [CO 24:669 on Exodus 20:15]).⁴⁷ Extending the meaning of the commandment to cover "all unjust means of gain," Calvin also remarks, "the philosophers deliver nearly the same doctrine" (CTS Mosaic Harmony, 3:111 [CO 24:669 on Exodus 20:15]).⁴⁸ These passages, together with Calvin's general remarks on the relation between the Decalogue and virtues, demonstrate that Calvin conceives of specific commandments as referring to specific virtues, and harmonizing in substance with them.

⁴⁷ Compare *Digesta* 1.1.10 in Krueger 1872–1895, 1: "Iustitia est constans et perpetua voluntas *ius suum cuique tribuendi*. Iuris praecepta sunt haec: honeste vivere, alterum non laedere, *suum cuique tribuere*" (emphasis mine). Compare Calvin's remark on Leviticus 18:6, "The Roman laws accord with the rule prescribed by God, as if their authors had learnt from Moses what was decorous and agreeable to nature" (CTS Mosaic Harmony, 3:99 [CO 24:661]).

⁴⁸ The "doctrine" of the "philosophers" probably at least includes Aristotle's account of unjust gain. See EN 5.4 [1131b25–1132b20].

The Decalogue provides the central, but not exhaustive, point of reference for divine commandments, since Calvin interprets various other commands by Christ and the apostles as teaching virtue. Calvin finds the virtue of temperance commanded in various passages in the New Testament. He refers to Philippians 4:12 as a “rule of moderation,” which forbids intemperance and enjoins a “sober and frugal life” (CTS Mosaic Harmony, 4:19 [CO 25:166 on Numbers 11:4]). When Paul writes in that passage, “I know how to abound,” he teaches the use of things “soberly and temperately” and describes a “peculiarly excellent and rare virtue” (CTS Philippians, 124 [CO 52:64 on Philippians 4:12]). Likewise, when he writes, “make no provision for the flesh” (Romans 13:14), Paul forbids the vice of intemperance (CTS Romans, 491 [CO 49:256]). When Jesus commands, “Do not resist evil” (Matthew 5:39), Calvin interprets the command, following the “wise” exposition of Augustine’s epistle, as teaching the exercise of patience, in order to “train the minds of believers to moderation and justice, that they might not, on receiving one or two offenses, fail or lose courage” (CTS Evangelists, 1:298 [CO 45:184 on Matthew 5:39]; see also *Inst.* 4.20.20; compare Augustine 1904, 137–39 [Ep. 138.2.12–13]). Calvin interprets Christ’s command to “give to the poor” (Matthew 19:21) not as condoning the simple parting with riches, but rather liberality toward the poor (CTS Evangelists, 2:397–98 [CO 45:540 on Matthew 19:21]). The commendation of liberality is not particular to Jesus, for “the philosophers dispute splendidly on avarice and liberality,” even though, in contrast to Jesus, the philosophers “never penetrate into the souls, so as to search them and actually distinguish between the greedy and the generous man” (CTS Isaiah, 2:409 [CO 36:545 on Isaiah 32:5]; compare Dermange 2007, 50).

Calvin’s interpretation of various commandments as in principle also including virtue provides a good illustration of the integration between his exegesis and philosophical assumptions. Calvin assumes, as a matter of common sense, that underlying human action are the Aristotelian categories of substance and habit. Consequently, when Calvin reads a commandment regarding a specific act, such as “do not commit adultery,” he assumes the premise that one acts based on good or bad habits (virtues or vices), and draws the appropriate conclusion that the commandment does not only relate to the specific act of adultery, but also to the habit behind the act, such as temperance. Calvin holds, as an unstated premise of his exegesis, that particular actions have their source in habitual dispositions. He also finds virtues being taught in the Scriptures, as in Titus 2:12 and 2 Peter 1:5, so his interpretation of virtues in the commandments is one way of employing Scripture to interpret Scripture. In other words, his exegesis of Scripture as a whole presupposes virtue ethics, which he also understands as explicitly taught in specific passages of Scripture.

4. Conclusion

While many historians of ethics have portrayed the Reformation as a sharp break with the virtue ethics of preceding eras, a close examination of Calvin’s works does not oblige the interpretation of a radical departure from traditional

ethical concepts regarding the supreme good (*eudaimonia*), choice and habit formation, and the virtues. Moreover, besides a strongly Augustinian component to Calvin's thought on happiness and the virtues, there are also distinctly Aristotelian aspects to his eclectic appropriation of philosophical and ethical concepts. This conclusion stands in contrast to a dominant older trend in Calvin studies, which often was reluctant to admit philosophical influences on Calvin's mature theology (Nuovo 1964, 2–4, 9–12), or regarded the influence of Aristotle as “more literary than substantial” (Partee 1977, 99), but in continuity with studies that find early Aristotelian philosophical interests carrying over into Calvin's mature theology (Backus 2003a, 63–101; 2003b, 15–26). Given that the mature Calvin continued to make use of Aristotelian ethical concepts such as the doctrine of the mean and the virtue of justice, which he had explicitly attributed to Aristotle in his commentary on Seneca's *De clementia* (1532), the source of Calvin's continuity with Aristotle's ethics should not be placed primarily in Melancthon's well-known promotion of Aristotelian ethics and philosophy, but rather in the educational context of Calvin's youth, including French humanism.⁴⁹ As Battles rightly remarks, in the composition of Calvin's commentary on Seneca's *De clementia*, Calvin “began to form philosophical attitudes which were to flower, after his conversion, in his mature writings” (Battles and Hugo 1969, 133).

With respect to the nature of *eudaimonia*, Calvin affirms with the larger ancient and medieval tradition that all people naturally desire happiness. His critique of philosophers does not set aside the concept of *eudaimonia*, but rather transforms the substance of the concept with Christian reflection. Calvin was familiar from an early date with book nineteen of Augustine's *City of God* and argues, consistently with Augustine, that happiness consists not in any temporal good, but rather in union with God, which is only finally achieved in the next life. Therefore, like Augustine, Calvin links the virtues of hope and patience in the present life with the complete attainment of this supreme good in the next life.

Calvin draws explicitly on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* for some of the key premises of virtue ethics, including Aristotle's description of voluntary choice and the category of habit. Already in the commentary on Seneca's *De clementia*, Calvin accepted the notion of virtue as a habit, and the categorical use of habit to describe the disposition of human action continued into Calvin's theological works. In his theology, Calvin joins Aristotle's theory of choice and habit formation to an Augustinian doctrine of original sin, in order to provide an explanation of sinful habits, the necessity of sinful works proceeding from a sinful disposition, and the compatibility of such necessity with voluntary choice. Calvin also follows Augustine's mature opinion that the virtues of pagans are sinful because they do not proceed from faith and are not done for the right end.

⁴⁹ See Kaiser 1988, 91–92 for the likely French humanist origins of Calvin's approach to Aristotelian natural philosophy.

Although Calvin thinks that the virtues of pagans are contaminated by corrupt intentions and should be considered sinful in an ultimate theological sense, he values these virtues as useful for the common good of civil society. And in practice, Calvin integrates the cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, temperance, and courage into his own theology. Such virtues are attributed to humanity both in the state of innocence and state of grace. His understanding of virtue in his theological works continues to draw on the Aristotelian concept of virtue as a mean between excess and defect. Calvin also explicitly endorses in his biblical commentaries an Aristotelian understanding of distributive justice, and his understanding of prudence has similarities to that of Aristotle. The importance of the cardinal virtues for Calvin's thought is underlined by the fact that he interprets the expanded meaning of the Decalogue as including the promotion of virtue and prohibition of vice. Calvin understands the commandments against adultery and theft as specifically teaching the virtues of temperance and justice and prohibiting their contrary vices.

As a theologian, Calvin himself did not write a treatise on ethics such as Melancthon, Vermigli, and others did. But his theology integrates traditional concepts of virtue and he assumes the usefulness of philosophical ethics for civil society. There is no support in Calvin's writings to support the supposed "repudiation of teleological virtue ethics" by the magisterial reformers for which Gregory argues (2012, 265). Instead, Calvin's theological works provide ample justification for the subsequent development of Reformed virtue ethics, whether in the form of ethical treatises on the virtues or commentaries on the Decalogue, which correlate the commandments with virtues.⁵⁰

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