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HOW REFORMED IS REFORMED EPISTEMOLOGY? ALVIN PLANTINGA AND CALVIN'S 'SENSUS DIVINITATIS'

In his recent two volumes on epistemology, Alvin Plantinga surveys contemporary theories of knowledge thoroughly, and carefully defends an externalist epistemology. He promises that in a third volume, *Warranted Christian Belief*, he will present John Calvin's *sensus divinitatis* as an epistemic module akin to sense perception, a priori knowledge, induction, testimony and other epistemic modules. Plantinga defines the *sensus divinitatis* as a 'many sided disposition to accept belief in God (or propositions that immediately and obviously entail the existence of God) in a variety of circumstances'.¹ Like other epistemic modules, it produces beliefs in an appropriate cognitive environment, aims at the production of true beliefs, and generates beliefs which have a high statistical probability of being true.

Plantinga's use of Calvin comes as no surprise to those who are familiar with his corpus. He characterizes his epistemology as 'Reformed Epistemology', and in earlier articles on the epistemic justification of theistic belief, he discusses Calvin at length. This earlier work sparked great controversy, and led to very fruitful debates in philosophical theology and epistemology. Strangely, however, few scholars have questioned Plantinga's claim to be representing the Reformed Tradition. In fact, many simply rehearse his discussion of Calvin superficially. In this essay, I explore Plantinga's exegesis of Calvin critically. First, I outline how he presents the *sensus divinitatis*. Second, I examine the passages in Calvin's *Institutes* which Plantinga discusses, and argue that he depicts the *sensus divinitatis* inaccurately. He fails to distinguish different kinds of knowledge of God, ignores the complexities of Calvin's discussion of natural theology, and disregards Calvin's negative assessment of the *sensus divinitatis*. Third, I consider whether Plantinga can support his exegesis by linking the *sensus divinitatis* to Scripture. I argue that although Calvin describes how Scripture corrects the sinful human mind, he never links Scripture and the *sensus divinitatis* explicitly. Finally, I conclude by arguing that in using the *sensus divinitatis* as a potential source of knowledge, Plantinga obscures Calvin's insightful analysis of the noetic effect of sin. Briefly discussing one of Calvin's sermons on *Job*, I propose that we

¹ Plantinga (1993*b*, p. 212n24). For further references to Calvin, see Plantinga (1993*a*, p. 86; 1993*b*, pp. 42, 48, 183).

understand the *sensus divinitatis* primarily as an illuminating concept which reveals the perversity of the human mind.

THE 'SENSUS DIVINITATIS' AND THE PROPER BASICALITY OF
THEISTIC BELIEF

In his articles on the proper basicity of theistic belief, Plantinga focuses on the first book of Calvin's *Institutes*. I will examine one of his well-known articles, 'Reason and Belief in God', in which he discusses Calvin carefully.² In this article, he defends the thesis that a person can be epistemically warranted in believing in God without providing a theistic argument. In discussing what he calls 'The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology', Plantinga describes how the Reformed Tradition has generally held a dim view of natural theology. After briefly mentioning Bavinck, he turns to Calvin, noting ironically that Calvin is 'as good a Calvinist as any'.³ He begins by quoting from a passage which, because of its importance for Plantinga and the Reformed Epistemology movement, I will reproduce in its entirety:

There is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity. This we take to be beyond controversy. To prevent anyone from taking refuge in the pretense of ignorance. God himself has implanted in all men a certain understanding of his divine majesty. Ever renewing its memory, he repeatedly sheds fresh drops. Since, therefore, men one and all perceive that there is a God and that he is their Maker, they are condemned by their own testimony because they have failed to honour him and to consecrate their lives to his will. If ignorance of God is to be looked for anywhere, surely one is more likely to find an example of it among the more backward folk and those more remote from civilization. Yet there is, as the eminent pagan says, no nation so barbarous, no people so savage, that they have not a deep-seated conviction that there is a God. So deeply does the common conception occupy the minds of all, so tenaciously does it inhere in the hearts of all! Therefore, since from the beginning of the world there has been no region, no city, in short, no household, that could do without religion, there lies in this a tacit confession of a sense of deity inscribed in the hearts of all. Indeed, the perversity of the impious, who though they struggle furiously are unable to extricate themselves from the fear of God, is abundant testimony that this conviction, namely, *there is some God*, is naturally inborn in all, and is fixed deep within, as it were in the very marrow... From this we conclude *that it is not a doctrine that must be first learned in school*, but one which each of us is master from his mother's womb and which nature itself permits no one to forget.⁴

From this extended excerpt, Plantinga draws several conclusions about Calvin and theistic belief. First, he argues that we are created with a strong

² Plantinga and Wolterstorff (1983a, pp. 16–94). In his recent two volumes, Plantinga refers readers to this article for a more detailed discussion of Calvin, see Plantinga (1993b, p. 212n24). The 1983 essay summarizes Plantinga's position well. He repeats the same exegesis in almost identical words in the following works: Plantinga (1983a, 1984). ³ *Ibid.* p. 65.

⁴ *Institutes* I, iii, 1. Plantinga adds italics to the italicized sentences. Calvin does not emphasize these sentences. All references to the *Institutes* in this essay are to the Ford Lewis Battles translation, edited by John McNeil.

tendency to believe in God. This tendency is 'in part, overlaid or suppressed by sin', and without sin, we would believe in God with the 'same natural spontaneity that we believe in the existence of other persons, an external world, or the past'.⁵ Nevertheless, the inclination to believe in God remains strong. Second, Plantinga maintains that because belief in God is natural for human beings, a person who lacks this belief is in an epistemically inferior position. He resembles a man who 'does not believe that his wife exists, or thinks she is a cleverly constructed robot and has no thoughts, feelings, or consciousness'.⁶ Finally, although sin suppresses belief in God, such belief is present in all human beings. It is a universal feature of the human condition.

A variety of environmental circumstances can activate this universal tendency to believe in God, including the beauty of the natural world. Plantinga excerpts from those passages in the *Institutes* where Calvin describes in beautiful language how human beings can apprehend God's handiwork in the marvels of the heavens.⁷ He maintains that for Calvin, those who accede to their wonder at God's workmanship 'are entirely within their epistemic rights in doing so'.⁸ They do not need an argument in order to believe that God creates beautiful flowers; this belief is not based on propositions, and in fact, Calvin states that they can know that God acts in the natural world without any argument whatsoever.

Plantinga supports this claim further by rehearsing Calvin's discussion of how we know that God is the author of Scripture.⁹ The secret testimony of the Spirit provides all the proof we need that God's Word is revealed in the Scriptures. Plantinga insists that Calvin would apply the same kind of reasoning to theistic arguments.¹⁰ The Christian does not need natural theology, and, in fact, he ought not to believe in God on the basis of an argument. Otherwise, as Plantinga notes in an amusing aside, he would be subject to perpetual doubt, and would 'have to keep checking the philosophical journals to see whether, say, Antony Flew has finally come up with a good objection to my favourite argument'.¹¹ Believing in God on the basis of an argument is like believing in the existence of one's spouse on the basis of an analogical argument for the existence of other minds. It is a flimsy structure which cannot and should not form the basis of a belief.

CAN THE 'SENSUS DIVINITATIS' PRODUCE THE BELIEF THAT GOD IS BENEVOLENT?

The first thing we should note about Plantinga's exegesis of Calvin is that he says nothing about the chapters which precede Calvin's discussion of the *sensus divinitatis*. In the first chapter of the *Institutes*, Calvin presents his famous

⁵ Plantinga (1983, p. 66).

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Institutes*, I, i, 5.

⁸ Plantinga (1983, p. 67).

⁹ *Institutes*, I, vi–viii.

¹⁰ In an excellent article on natural theology, Michael L. Czapkay Sudduth develops this argument more extensively, see Czapkay Sudduth (1995, pp. 53–68).

¹¹ Plantinga (1983, p. 67).

correlation between the knowledge of God and the knowledge of man. We cannot understand ourselves without understanding God, and cannot understand God unless we understand ourselves. Calvin notes that in relation to these two kinds of knowledge, ‘which one precedes and brings forth the other is not easy to discern’.¹² Assuming that human beings are sinful, he wrestles with the question of how the fallen mind can acquire the knowledge of God which provides knowledge of the self.

The opening pages of the *Institutes* have provoked a great deal of controversy, which I will not discuss in this essay.¹³ The most important point for evaluating Plantinga’s exegesis is how Calvin insists that we cannot know ourselves if we simply know that God exists. We must go beyond the knowledge that God is the ‘One whom all ought to honour and adore’, and realize that God is ‘the fountain of every good, and that we seek nothing elsewhere than in him’.¹⁴ True knowledge of God consists of the knowledge that God is the cause of all goodness, wisdom and rectitude in the universe. Additionally, this knowledge includes the knowledge that God is benevolent towards us. Calvin calls this kind of knowledge piety, which he defines as ‘that reverence joined with love of God which the knowledge of his benefits induces’.¹⁵ The pious mind trusts that God is the Author of all goodness, and expresses love, obedience and gratitude towards God constantly.

By neglecting this discussion of piety, Plantinga misses Calvin’s contrast between the *sensus divinitatis* and piety. Plantinga notes correctly that human beings have a natural tendency to believe in God. However, what kind of knowledge or belief does the *sensus divinitatis* produce? Early in his article, Plantinga discusses how we should understand the term ‘God’, and defines belief in God as a belief in a person who ‘exists *a se*, is perfect in goodness, knowledge, and power’.¹⁶ He does not assert explicitly that the *sensus divinitatis* yields knowledge of all God’s attributes. However, when he discusses the *sensus divinitatis*, he never qualifies his definition, and implies that the *sensus divinitatis* generates the belief in the kind of God he describes. In contrast, Calvin never states that the *sensus divinitatis* generates the belief that God is benevolent. It gives us some awareness of God’s power, majesty and unity. However, Calvin emphasizes how this awareness is vague, and accompanied by extreme dread. Although this dread may temporarily vanish, ‘it returns at once and rushes in with new force’.¹⁷ Despite all attempts to smother it, fear of God, ‘sharper than any cauterizing iron’, gnaws at our

¹² I, i, 1.

¹³ Much of this controversy concerns how Calvin structures the *Institutes*. Dowey maintains that Calvin arranges the discussion according to the *duplex cognitio Dei*, a two-fold knowledge consisting of knowledge of God the Creator and knowledge of God the Redeemer (Dowey 1952). In contrast, Parker strongly rejects Dowey’s thesis, insisting that we understand the *Institutes* in terms of the Apostles’ Creed, see Parker (1969).

¹⁴ I, ii, 1. The image of a fountain is a key image in many of Calvin’s discussions of God’s goodness. For a discussion of this image, see Gerrish (1993, chapter 2).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Plantinga (1983, p. 20).

¹⁷ All quotations in this paragraph are from I, iii, 2, 3.

consciences. Repeatedly, Calvin uses the word 'fear' to characterize the sense of the divine, and depicts how it 'violently' rushes in to 'trouble' the mind. Nowhere does he assert that it reveals anything about God's benevolence.

Nevertheless, perhaps natural beauty can trigger the *sensus divinitatis* to produce the belief that God is benevolent. Plantinga argues, as we have seen, that a beautiful flower can activate the *sensus divinitatis* to produce a belief in God. Indeed, Calvin describes the beauty of God's creation in extraordinary language. God 'daily discloses himself in the whole workmanship of the universe'.¹⁸ All human beings feel an awe at the 'sparks' of the divine presence in nature, and cannot help but be 'completely overwhelmed' by its 'boundless force'.¹⁹ Calvin describes how the human being is a 'microcosm' of the universe,²⁰ and lists a host of things which manifest God's presence, including the faculties of the soul and parts of the body,²¹ thunderstorms and tumultuous seas,²² and justice in human societies.²³

This discussion of nature easily lends itself to Plantinga's reading. However, Plantinga ignores the enormous controversy these passages have provoked, precipitated in part by the famous Barth–Brunner exchange.²⁴ Barth and Brunner debated the question of whether Calvin believes that natural theology is possible. Recent scholarship points to the shortcomings of this debate, discussing in particular how both thinkers never defined the term natural theology adequately. Contemporary scholars focus on the context of Calvin's discussion of nature, and debate whether a kind of natural theology or theology of nature is possible once Scripture alters human sinful perception. Mary Potter Engel and Susan Schreiner emphasize how we must carefully consider Calvin's anthropology and theology of nature from the multiple perspectives from which Calvin writes. Engel brings out the way in which Calvin moves to and from God's perspective, man's perspective, the perspective of the redeemed, and the perspective of the faithless. She warns the reader always to note which perspective Calvin employs, insisting that failing to recognize shifting perspectives leads to interpretative errors.²⁵ Schreiner argues that Calvin has a well-developed theology of nature, but she demonstrates that this theology is possible only for the faithful. Calvin makes numerous claims about God's handiwork in the heavens, particularly in his extended discussion of nature in his *Psalms* commentary. However, he almost always qualifies these claims by linking them to our ability to perceive God, and indexing them to the capacities of the faithful. The faithful only gradually receive the perception which Adam once possessed, before he

¹⁸ I, v, 1.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ I, v, 3.

²¹ I, v, 4.

²² I, v, 7.

²³ I, v, 8.

²⁴ Plantinga never mentions this controversy in either the text or the footnotes. For the Barth–Brunner debate, see Barth and Brunner (1946). Dowey demonstrates how Barth and Brunner use the term natural theology vaguely, see Dowey (1952, Appendix II). For the contemporary discussion, see Schreiner (1991), Bouwsma (1988, chapter 9), and Steinmetz (1995, chapter 2). For a philosophically rigorous defence of the possibility of natural theology for the faithful, see Czapkay Sudduth (1995, pp. 53–68).

²⁵ Engel (1988, Introduction).

rejected God's gifts ungratefully. Unlike Adam, they must perceive God in nature through the 'spectacles' of Scripture. Nevertheless, the regeneration of the human person into the *imago dei* gradually enables him to apprehend God's handiwork, and 'allows the contemplation of nature to become again a legitimate religious activity'.²⁶

In his naive reading of chapter 5, Plantinga overlooks how Calvin discusses our perception of God in nature from Adam's perspective. When Calvin discusses the *sensus divinitatis*, he speaks from the perspective of fallen man. However, when he turns to God's presence in nature, he shifts to the perspective of Adam before the Fall.²⁷ He does not describe the human capacity to apprehend God's action in the natural world from the position of a post-fallen human being. Immediately before discussing the *sensus divinitatis*, when he defines piety, he announces that he will discuss our knowledge of God not in terms of the knowledge of Christ the Redeemer, but in terms of 'the primal and simple knowledge to which the very order of nature would have led us to *if Adam had remained upright*'.²⁸ He goes on to state that in the ruin created by the Fall, 'no one now experiences God either as Father or as Author of salvation, or favourable in any way'.²⁹ Calvin affirms that, objectively, God revealed Himself to Adam in all the intricacies of the human mind, human body and the natural environment. However, subjectively, human beings in their fallen condition cannot perceive this revelation.³⁰ Throughout his wonderful testament to God's revelation, Calvin reminds the reader continually that Adam's perception is not open to us. He notes that although God presents Himself to us in the mirror of His works, 'such is our stupidity that we grow increasingly dull toward so manifest testimonies, and they flow away without profiting us'.³¹ He concludes Book One, chapter 5, by boldly stating that it is 'therefore in vain that so many burning lamps shine for us in the workmanship of the universe to show forth the glory of its Author'.³² In our fallen state, we may perceive some sparks of God's goodness in nature, but we soon 'smother' them 'before their fuller light shines forth'.³³ Without Scripture and the Holy Spirit, fallen man cannot perceive God's benevolence in the natural world.

IS THE 'SENSUS DIVINITATIS' A RELIABLE EPISTEMIC MODULE?
IDOLATRY AND THE LABYRINTH OF THE HUMAN MIND

So far, we have seen that Calvin neither affirms that the *sensus divinitatis* produces knowledge of God's benevolence, nor states that natural beauty

²⁶ Schreiner (1991, p. 106). See all of chapter 5 of this work for a careful presentation of Calvin's theology of nature.

²⁷ Wilhelm Niesel noted this shift forty years ago, see Niesel (1956, chapter 2).

²⁸ I, ii, 1. The italics are mine. Schreiner describes how Adam had the power to ascend to God by contemplating nature; see Schreiner (1991, pp. 65–6).

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ For this distinction between objective and subjective revelation, see Dowey (1952).

³¹ I, v, 11.

³² I, v, 14.

³³ *Ibid.*

activates the *sensus divinitatis* to produce this belief. Because knowledge of God's benevolence is the most important kind of knowledge for Calvin, it appears that the *sensus divinitatis* is not a reliable belief-forming module. In fact, as Calvin presents it, it is decidedly unreliable. Although Plantinga acknowledges that it is 'tainted' by sin, he insists that it can still reliably produce a belief in God. However, he ignores Calvin's harsh negative assessment of the *sensus divinitatis*. Without Scripture and the Holy Spirit, it leads us into an epistemic disaster. Calvin describes this disaster using one of his favourite images, the labyrinth. Bouwsma notes how this image 'suggested the powerlessness of human beings to extricate themselves from self-centred alienation from God'.³⁴ Without Scripture and the Holy Spirit, the human mind constricts itself in a claustrophobic labyrinth of wandering images. Although human beings share much in common as members of the same species, each person 'privately forges his own particular error', losing himself in a fantasy world of his own making.³⁵ Calvin notes that 'just as waters boil up from a vast, full spring, so does an immense crowd of gods flow forth from the human mind'.³⁶ We cannot live with the dread that the *sensus divinitatis* produces, and attach ourselves to some idol in the vain hope that it can alleviate our fear. However, although we may briefly grasp that God exists, we 'fall back into the ravings or evil imaginings of our flesh, and corrupt by our vanity the pure truth of God'.³⁷

Dewey Hoytenga notes correctly that despite this vivid portrayal of epistemic confusion, we retain the vague knowledge that God is powerful and majestic.³⁸ However, Calvin emphasizes that even the best philosophical minds destroy any possibility of knowing that God is benevolent. He attacks the Stoics for creating a 'multiplicity' of gods, the Egyptians for 'sedulously' brooding on God in their 'mystical theology', and the Epicureans, who 'conjure up a cloud out of men's ignorance to conceal their own piety'.³⁹ He even dismisses Plato, perhaps his favourite philosopher, who was 'the most religious of all and the most circumspect', but who 'vanishes in his round globe'.⁴⁰ Neither the learned nor the ignorant can gain any knowledge of God's benevolence from the *sensus divinitatis*. Calvin summarizes his account of its unreliability by noting that 'if men were taught only by nature, they would hold to nothing certain or solid or clear-cut, but would be so tied to confused principles as to worship an unknown god'.⁴¹

Calvin insists that although the *sensus divinitatis* is unreliable, those who do not believe in God are responsible for their unbelief. Plantinga fails to mention this aspect of the *sensus divinitatis*, overlooking the role it plays in

³⁴ Bouwsma (1988, p. 46). Throughout his biography, Bouwsma discusses this image extensively.

³⁵ I, v, 12.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ I, v, 11.

³⁸ Hoytenga (1991, pp. 154–5).

³⁹ I, v, 12.

⁴⁰ I, v, 11. Calvin's understanding of the relationship between faith and philosophy is complex. For a discussion of this issue, and of the philosophies which Calvin mentions in this passage, see Partee (1977). See also Engel (1988, chapter 3).

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

convicting the heathen for their impiety. Calvin insists that because God reveals His benevolence in the natural world, even if we cannot apprehend it, we are ‘justly denied every excuse when we stray off as wanderers and vagrants even though everything points out the right way’.⁴² We corrupt the seed of the knowledge of God within us, and are not instructed adequately by nature and the ‘bare and simple testimony which the creatures render splendidly to the glory of God’.⁴³ We replace our vague apprehension of God’s presence with ‘dreams and specters of our own brains, and attribute to anything else the true source of the praise of righteousness, wisdom, goodness and power’.⁴⁴ This perversion is inexcusable. Parker characterizes the idea of inexcusability by arguing that for Calvin, God endows the heathen with the *sensus divinitatis* not ‘simply that they might be aware of His existence, but in fact to make them inexcusable before His judgment throne that they have not made use of this awareness and worshipped and served Him’.⁴⁵ Despite our distorted perception of God, God holds us completely responsible for our unfaithfulness.⁴⁶

SCRIPTURE AND THE PERVERTED ‘SENSUS DIVINITATIS’

In the face of these numerous passages depicting the unreliability of the *sensus divinitatis*, why does Plantinga select it as a reliable epistemic module? Perhaps he intends to argue that it is reliable only if it is combined with Scripture. As far as I know, he never makes this argument. However, he might find warrant for it in Calvin’s discussion of how Scripture helps human beings apprehend God’s revelation in nature.⁴⁷ Referring frequently to light and sight, Calvin uses his well-known image of Scripture as ‘spectacles’. Like ‘old or bleary-eyed men’ who have a book thrust before them but cannot read more than two words without their glasses, human beings require the ‘spectacles’ of Scripture to help them ‘read’ God’s handiwork in the natural world.⁴⁸ Scripture, ‘gathering up the otherwise confused knowledge of God in our minds, having dispersed our dullness, clearly shows us the true God’.⁴⁹ God’s presence in nature is an ‘inexplicable labyrinth unless we are conducted into it by the thread of the Word’.⁵⁰ Calvin summarizes the role of Scripture in helping us to see God in the natural world by asserting that ‘the human mind because of its feebleness can in no way attain to God unless it be aided and assisted by his Sacred Word’.⁵¹

⁴² I, v, 15.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Parker (1969, p. 53). Parker carefully discusses the word ‘inexcusability’, describing how Calvin uses it in his *Romans* commentary.

⁴⁶ Calvin’s notion of inexcusability is theologically problematic, given that we can do little to alter our sinful failure to perceive God. However, I will not address this complex issue in this essay.

⁴⁷ I, vi–vii.

⁴⁸ I, vi, 1.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ I, vi, 3.

⁵¹ I, vi, 4. Calvin’s discussion of Scripture raises complex questions about hermeneutics, ecclesiology and authority. For a discussion of some of these issues, see Dowey (1952, pp. 86–124), Parker (1969, pp. 72–92), and Schreiner (1991).

Once Scripture provides the spectacles, can the *sensus divinitatis* function properly, and produce the belief that God is benevolent? Hoitenga suggests one way of linking the *sensus divinitatis* and knowledge of God's benevolence when he argues that believers recognize that God is the author of Scripture on the basis of the natural knowledge of God which the *sensus divinitatis* generates. Once we know that God is the author of Scripture, we know that God is benevolent towards us. Hoitenga acknowledges that 'Calvin himself does not reach this conclusion, but it seems like an obvious way to relate Calvin's concept of revelation to his concept of the *sensus divinitatis*'.⁵² Attractive as this thesis might be, it is implausible. Calvin's discussion of Scripture offers no warrant for the connection Hoitenga makes. Calvin describes Scripture as 'another and better help to be added to direct us aright to the very Creator of the universe'.⁵³ He never mentions the *sensus divinitatis*, except to contrast our vague and indistinct knowledge of God with the illumination of Scripture and the Holy Spirit. We learn from Scripture that 'God, the Creator of the universe, can by sure marks be distinguished from all the throng of feigned gods'.⁵⁴ Scripture and the Holy Spirit, *not* Scripture and the *sensus divinitatis*, enable man to 'contemplate God's works, since he has been placed in the most glorious theatre to be a spectator of them'.⁵⁵ Because of human sinfulness, Scripture communicates what God's revelation in nature cannot communicate. It does not supplement the *sensus divinitatis*; it replaces it.

In addition to the paucity of evidence for any link between the *sensus divinitatis* and Scripture, Calvin rarely discusses the *sensus divinitatis* in other parts of the *Institutes*. It reappears briefly when he discusses the two kingdoms and conscience, but only as a negative concept illustrating the fear which conscience provokes.⁵⁶ Otherwise, Calvin ignores it. When he discusses the faculties of the created soul and the *imago dei* which it mirrored, he affirms that Adam knew God's benevolence naturally. However, he never discusses the *sensus divinitatis*. He does not list it as one of the faculties of the soul, or as part of the understanding or will.⁵⁷ He never states that Adam knew God by reasoning about God's benevolence from the *sensus divinitatis*, or through the *sensus divinitatis* directly.⁵⁸ In his crucial account of how we receive faith, Calvin emphasizes faith as the knowledge of God's benevolence toward us, its firmness and certainty, its ground in the promise of Christ, and the role of the Holy Spirit in sealing faith in the sinful human heart.⁵⁹ He omits any mention of the *sensus divinitatis*, and accords it no role in bringing faith to faithless human beings. Finally, when he discusses regeneration, Calvin emphasizes how the Holy Spirit restores human beings into the *imago dei* gradually. Christ, the Law and the Holy Spirit all work to bring this

⁵² Hoitenga (1991, p. 167).

⁵³ I, vi, 1.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ I, vi, 2.

⁵⁶ III, xix, 15–16.

⁵⁷ II, xv.

⁵⁸ Hoitenga recognizes that Calvin rarely discusses the *sensus divinitatis* after Book I, see Hoitenga (1991, p. 154).

⁵⁹ II, ii.

transformation about, but again, Calvin discusses these topics without returning to his earlier discussion of the *sensus divinitatis*.⁶⁰ To summarize, the *sensus divinitatis* plays no role in the most important parts of Calvin's thought, and Calvin gives no indication that it is a reliable source of knowledge if it is combined with Scripture.

THE 'SENSUS DIVINITATIS' AND THE PERVERSITY OF THE HUMAN MIND

The absence of any explicit discussion of the *sensus divinitatis* in most of the *Institutes* cannot rule out the possibility that it plays some implicit role in Calvin's theology. Yet, combined with Calvin's highly negative discussion of how it leads to idolatry, the exegetical case for Plantinga's positive use of the *sensus divinitatis* is thin. However, beyond exegetical accuracy, does Plantinga's reading have any theological or philosophical drawbacks? In the last part of this essay, I want to suggest that by appropriating the *sensus divinitatis* as an epistemic module, Plantinga obscures one of Calvin's great insights; the power of the human mind to trap itself in its own sinfulness. For Calvin, the problem of human sinfulness is not simply the problem of the bondage of the will; rather, it is primarily a problem of a distorted mind which separates us from God's grace. When he outlines the characteristics of the *imago dei*, he focuses on how the understanding presents objects for the will to follow.⁶¹ He returns to this account when he describes the Fall, characterizing it as an act of faithless ingratitude. He emphasizes how sin engulfs the entire person, entering the very 'citadel' of the mind.⁶² The wandering confused mind presents false objects to the will, and the perverted will attaches itself to these objects, trapping the person in a cycle of behaviour from which she cannot escape.⁶³

In the *Institutes*, in his *Psalms* commentary, and in a host of sermons, Calvin depicts the intricacies of this noetic effect of sin. To illustrate the power of his analysis, let me briefly turn to one of his sermons on the book of *Job*, entitled 'Does not God count my Steps?'⁶⁴ In this sermon, Calvin links perverted images, inward acts, delight and external actions. Commenting on how *Job*

⁶⁰ II, vi–viii. Calvin also rarely discusses the *sensus divinitatis* in his commentaries and sermons. For example, in his 1540 commentary on *Romans*, in discussing 1: 18–32, he insists that God has objectively revealed Himself to the pagans, but they are blind to His revelation because of sin. In this commentary, the *sensus divinitatis* plays no role in the knowledge of God which the Christian possesses. For excellent discussions of the development of Calvin's account of our natural knowledge of God, see Steinmetz (1995, pp. 23–40) and Parker (1969, chapter 2). Steinmetz discusses the history of the exegesis of this passage, and compare Calvin's exegesis to that of other thinkers in the sixteenth century. He both point out that Calvin does not use the words *sensus divinitatis* in the *Romans* commentary. ⁶¹ I, xv, 7.

⁶² II, i, 9.

⁶³ I am, of course, simplifying a complex account of sin and the Fall. For careful discussions of how Calvin presents the *imago dei* and how sin defaces it, see Torrance (1949), Gerrish (1993, chapter 2), and Schreiner (1991).

⁶⁴ This is a sermon on *Job* 31:1–4. All quotations are from the Nixon translation of the *Sermons from Job*.

describes a 'covenant' with his eyes, he states that there are 'three degrees of vice in the formation of sin'.⁶⁵ The first degree of sin is cognitive; it consists of 'fleeting imagination that a man conceives when he looks at something'.⁶⁶ The second degree of vice consists of the delight or pleasure in a particular image. Having conceived a fantasy, we are 'somehow titillated, and feel that our will is drawn there'.⁶⁷ Finally, we consent to the pleasure or delight, the cycle of sin is complete, and we act sinfully.

Exploring this cycle of sin further, Calvin cites the example of a faithful man who doubts whether God is good.⁶⁸ All human beings sometime ask if God thinks of them, and Calvin maintains that we cannot control this kind of thought. Nevertheless, it is sinful. It spawns a host of further doubts; perhaps God 'hides' from human beings, perhaps God has no concern to aid troubled souls.⁶⁹ Although the faithful man knows that these ideas are false, he sins by thinking them. If he delights in them, he falls into the second stage of sin. Finally, he may succumb to this delight, and conclude that 'evil has conquered, and God has procrastinated too long in extending His hand to me. I see myself here, as it were, desperate'.⁷⁰ The third degree of sin leads to sinful action. Using the image of childbirth, Calvin states: 'if after an infant will be formed, it only remains further to give it birth, so nothing more is here necessary except that the outward act should come'.⁷¹

Calvin underscores how difficult it is to avoid these three degrees of sinning. Job made a covenant with his eyes so he could control his sight and his evil thoughts, but this covenant could only endure because the Holy Spirit acted on him. Most human beings cannot control the thoughts which sense perception elicits, and therefore cannot avoid having sinful thoughts constantly. Calvin rejects the claim that thoughts are not sinful unless we consent to them. God is merciful and does not impute sinful thoughts to the faithful. Nevertheless, they remain sinful. God commands human beings to love God with all their hearts and understanding, and we cannot love God if evil thoughts fill our minds.

Because we cannot control our sense perception and the evil thoughts it elicits, God's beautiful creation becomes a breeding ground for sin. The beauty of the earth and the heavens should lead us to God, but lead instead to perverted images. Calvin focuses particularly on sight, observing that it is 'impossible, or else it is not without a great difficulty, and beyond our powers' that we open our eyes without 'conceiving some offence against God'.⁷² Images stream into our consciousness day and night, and we cannot control taking pleasure in them. Without the Holy Spirit acting on us, we delight in them, consent to them and then act on them.

⁶⁵ Calvin (1952, p. 167).

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ Doubt about God's providence is a constant theme in the *Sermons from Job*. Repeatedly, Calvin describes how the faithful continually battle false images and pictures which lead to sin. For a discussion of the themes of faith, perception and doubt in these sermons, see Schreiner (1994, chapters 4-5).

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Calvin (1952, p. 168).

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² Calvin (1952, p. 174).

This sermon illustrates vividly how Calvin analyses the problem of perverted image throughout much of his corpus. In the *Job* sermons, he focuses on a person who already has faith, but is still plagued by sinful images. When he discusses the *sensus divinitatis* in the *Institutes*, Calvin assumes the perspective of the faithless. As we have seen, the *sensus divinitatis* produces a host of images and fantasies which lead us away from God. The *Job* sermon demonstrates how these images lead inexorably to a cycle of sinful behaviour. Without Scripture and the Holy Spirit, the faithless have absolutely no hope of escaping this cycle. Only those who know God's benevolence through faith can begin a gradual ascent out of their epistemic confusion. By ignoring the idolatrous aspects of the *sensus divinitatis*, and retrieving it for the purposes of defending theistic belief, Plantinga neglects a key problem which Calvin struggles to convey. For Calvin, the noetic effect of sin is a basic facet of the human condition, which shapes how he understands justification, faith, regeneration and a host of other topics. The centrality of this theme in Calvin's thought, and the role that the *sensus divinitatis* plays in illustrating it, provide ample reason for rejecting Plantinga's positive use of the *sensus divinitatis*.

CONCLUSION

Alvin Plantinga has significantly influenced contemporary epistemology and philosophical theology. He has radically challenged evidentialist and foundationalist epistemologies, altered debates about theistic arguments, and helped to initiate a minor renaissance in philosophical theology. Nevertheless, despite these positive contributions, his claims to be representing Calvin's theology are questionable. In drawing from Calvin, Plantinga excerpts selectively from the early chapters of the *Institutes*, ignoring crucial passages which challenge his positive assessment of the *sensus divinitatis*. He fails to distinguish the kinds of knowledge of God which Calvin identifies, and disregards considerable scholarly debates about Calvin and natural theology. Most importantly, he obscures Calvin's brilliant insights into the noetic effects of sin, minimizing the impact of sin on our noetic faculties. Plantinga can legitimately assert that he is developing a philosophically appealing idea which is present in Calvin, as long as he does not claim to be interpreting Calvin's thought accurately. However, if he and other Reformed Epistemologists want to claim the mantle of the great Reformer, they must engage his thought with far greater care.⁷³

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