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Which Comes First? God and the Self in Calvin and Descartes

John Calvin was one of the great leaders of the Protestant Reformation; Rene Descartes was one of the great pioneers of the Enlightenment. Though not contemporaries their lives, as well as their writings, shared many similarities. Yet it was their differences that set them apart, and these differences ultimately led them down separate paths. Both men were devout Christians and both believed in God, yet they each took a different route to come to their own “knowledge of God.” Calvin arrives at a belief in self by starting with the natural innate sense of God as the most properly basic entity. In contrast Descartes arrived at a belief in God by doubting everything and starting with the self as his epistemological basis. Both Calvin and Descartes reached the same end, but it was the way they chose to take that eventually left two very different legacies.

To understand Calvin’s work one must first understand his background. Like Descartes, Calvin was born and raised in France. “Born at Noyon in Picardy, France, 10 July, 1509, and died at Geneva, 27 May, 1564”(Catholic Encyclopedia: John Calvin). Even though he lived a relatively short life, Calvin left a lasting impression, due in no small part to his upbringing. “Calvin sprang from the French middle-class, and his father, an attorney, had purchased the freedom of the city of Noyon where he practiced civil and canon law.”(Catholic Encyclopedia: John Calvin) Calvin was given a classical education, and his main focus was on law and the humanities, as he was looking to follow in the

family business. He eventually attended the University of Paris, where he had his encounter with early Protestantism. Calvin's faith in Catholicism wavered when some members of his family converted to become Protestants. Finally under men such as Noel Bedier, Corderius, George Cop, and Pierre-Robert d'Olivet, Calvin began to turn from an already loose Catholic upbringing to this new Protestant Reformation. In 1529 the twenty-year old Calvin declared "the 'sudden conversion' to a spiritual life." (Catholic Encyclopedia: John Calvin) In 1531 Calvin was already a Doctor of Law at Orleans and composing several protestant works. He traveled for a few years, and was forced to leave France to avoid the wrath of the Catholic French Francis I. He finally ended up in Strasburg, where Protestants were safe from persecution. It was there that in March of 1536 Calvin published his first version of the *Institutes* in Latin. "The second edition belongs to 1539, the first French Translation to 1541; the final Latin, as revised by its author, is of 1559; but that in common use, dated 1560, has additions by his disciples. 'It was more Gods work than mine' said Calvin, who took for his motto 'Omnia ad Dei gloriam'" (Catholic Encyclopedia: John Calvin). This was to be Calvin's greatest work and is still considered one of the definitive works of Protestant Theology. In July of 1536 Calvin was traveling through Geneva and ended up staying quite a while. He was chosen to serve on a city council that set in motion many few protestant reforms. Taking its cues from the church, the city of Geneva set up a Protestant City State. Calvin's main influence was to pass religious legislation that more or less solidified protestant practices at that time. Though he was exiled in 1538 he was asked to return in 1541, and under his influence Geneva became a sort of Presbyterian Mecca. His influence would reach beyond his life into England and Scotland through the efforts of John Knox. Calvin

preached and taught right up to his death, and his social reforms and institutions were a testament to his influence. Yet more than anything it is the theological and philosophical legacy that Calvin left, which has given Calvin his place among the greatest thinkers of all time.

In arguably his greatest work *The Institutes of Christian Religion*, Calvin begins his great discourse by discussing the knowledge of God, and how the knowledge of the self fits into that. “Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and the knowledge of ourselves. But while joined by many bonds, which one precedes and brings forth the other is not easy to discern”(Calvin 35). Calvin starts his institutes with those famous and cautious words, yet it is soon quite apparent which one Calvin sets a priority on. “Again it is certain that man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God’s face and then descends from contemplating him to scrutinize himself.” (Calvin 37) Calvin continues from this point to argue that men, when they look upon themselves, seem just and holy in their own eyes. Here Calvin touches upon an issue that Descartes also covers, namely that men are quite often deceived. “For because all of us are inclined by nature to hypocrisy, a kind of empty image of righteousness in place of righteousness itself abundantly satisfies us”(Calvin 37-38). Since men only look about them to the earth they can be deceived into thinking that they are paragons of virtue compared to whatever base evil they behold. Thus the knowledge of self is very incomplete and even incorrect without the knowledge of God to inform it. For when men look up to heaven and behold the incredible purity that is God, they see their own “perfection” for what it is. “That is, what in us seems perfection itself corresponds ill to

the purity of God”(Calvin 38). Calvin goes on to list examples of great Saints of the Bible, men and women of obvious goodness, who before the glory and greatness of God paled at their low state. Calvin also flips the argument when he says that men, upon seeing how corrupt and base they are, will be drawn to thoughts of God and the transcendent. “Each of us must, then, be so stung by the consciousness of his own unhappiness as to attain at least some knowledge of God”(Calvin 36). Even though Calvin starts with the self in this argument, the logical priority is on God. Indeed Calvin seems to echo the words of Aquinas in establishing that, “Sacred doctrine is not concerned with God and the creatures equally. It is concerned with God fundamentally, and with creatures in so far as they relate to God as their beginning or end.”(Summa Theol. I. I. 3 (tr. LCC XI. 38 f.)) So even though he initially does not assert which type of knowledge comes first he does make up his mind about which is more necessary. “Yet, however the knowledge of God and of ourselves may be mutually connected. The order of right teaching requires that we discuss the former first, then proceed afterward to treat the latter”(Calvin 39)

In explaining his theory of the knowledge of God, Calvin begins with faith and piety. First Calvin pauses to define what the knowledge of God is. “Now, the knowledge of God, as I understand it, is that by which we not only conceive that there is a God, but also grasp what befits us and is proper to His glory, in fine, what is to our advantage to know of Him”(Calvin 39). Already Calvin has set the bar high, for true knowledge of God seems to demand action. For if one truly knows God, then that one will know what he should do and how he should honor God. Randall Zachman shows that Serene Jones also focuses on this in her work *Calvin and the Rhetoric of Piety*. “Jones therefore reads

Calvin as being primarily interested in persuasively moving his readers to actions, beliefs, and dispositions”(Zachman 352). Calvin does not attempt to feign objectivity but outright states that knowledge demands worship. However Calvin carries that idea on through by saying that before knowledge of God is to be attained, one must already be worshipping. “Pietas, in which the reverence and love of God are joined, is the prerequisite to any true knowledge of God”(Naugle). Here Calvin takes a seemingly reckless step, for it would seem that it is impossible to know God, unless you already know Him. This speaks of Calvin’s coming doctrines of election and predestination, and yet on a more basic level it is simply faith. “...Rightly identified and illustrated as the central and controlling epistemological concept of Calvin’s thought...faith is a necessary condition for the knowledge of God, and that no true knowledge of God is possible without a divine illumination which is a prerequisite of faith”(Armstrong 560). It is faith that initially leads one to believe, “...To feel that God as our Maker, supports us by His power, governs us by his providence, nourishes us by His goodness, and attends us with all sorts of blessings...”(Calvin 40). This is a faith that Calvin calls “primal and simple knowledge”(Calvin 40), and it is this basic knowledge, that leads one to piety.

God is not known where there is no piety or true religion. Nothing is known rightly where God himself is not known (since he is the creator of all things, and the author of all knowledge.) Hence in order for God and all other things to be rightly known, there must be an initial piety in place, for all things are rightly known only when there is piety and true religion (Naugle).

This set of propositions points one exactly to the point that Calvin makes, that piety precedes knowledge. Indeed it is only through piety that men come to knowledge, but

Calvin goes further and explains that God is the mediator and supplier of piety. Indeed mankind would have no faith and belief in God at all, due to the fall, but that God places faith and piety within them. Here once again Calvin places the priority on God, and shows that without God's intervention man is merely fallen and ignorant. Yet this does not excuse any man from rejecting God, for he has left his lasting imprint upon creation and upon all men. For God has left an even deeper mark on men's minds, a fingerprint of the divine, and it is this mark that Calvin termed the *Divinitatis Sensum*.

It is the Sense of the Divine that God has placed in all men; that first awakens a man to piety and gives him faith. Once again Calvin draws on the responsibility that knowledge places on men, for if to truly know God is to worship him, then perhaps a man may excuse himself from worship on the grounds of ignorance. "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"(Calvin 43). With the *Sensum Divinitatis* the excuse is removed, for all men have knowledge of God, though they may lack a full and true understanding of it. In Calvin's commentaries on John 1:5, 9 Calvin has this to say about the text, "There are two principle parts of the light which still remains in corrupt nature: first, the seed of religion is planted in all men; next the distinction between good and evil is engraved on their consciences"(Calvin 43). Calvin also alludes to Cicero, a famous Latin poet, when he says, "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"(Calvin 44). Indeed two of the most revealing factors of all the ancient pantheons, were how the gods

were derived from nature and from man. The ancients looked at the great mountains and the work that is creation, and posited that a god must have made it. Yet when they looked to give their gods personality they often looked within themselves and created their gods in their own image. This is a tribute to the *sensum divinitatis*, and also a statement of the problem that arises because of it. Namely that even with the divine sense of God, one might still get God almost completely wrong because of the depravity of man. This is another of Calvin's classic teachings that sheds light on the inability of human reason alone to come to a true knowledge of God.

In light of the integral nature of the knowledge of God and the self, Calvin approaches the issue of knowing from a distinctly theological angle. Even when Calvin is proving what we know of ourselves, namely our own fallen and corrupt natures, he still uses it as a beacon to point to God. The knowledge of self is very connected with God, but it seems obvious from the beginning that knowledge of God is more certain. On the authority of scripture, and Gods divine intervention, all men know God. All men know God through his creation, and through the *Sensum Divinitatis*. Indeed man would be quite deceived about his own moral state, if he did not have a perfect and Holy God to measure himself against. Even piety, the only way to truly know God, is a gift from God to mankind, and not something a man can possess on his own merit. At the end of the day, man can know something about himself because God first exists to mediate it. Thus Calvin seems to have proven man's existence by merit of Gods revelation and good will. For indeed those things that men truly know, they know by virtue of God's good grace and mercy.

It was to be over a century after Calvin published his *Institutes*, that a French Mathematician was to publish one of his most famous works *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Born in 1596 Rene Descartes had missed Calvin by over thirty years, but he was very much living in the wake of Calvin's legacy. The France that Descartes was born into was staunchly Catholic after the birth of the Reformation, and it was moving full force into the Renaissance. Both men had the chance to live during times of great change, a change that often enough they had a big hand in. If Calvin was to be the Father of Modern Protestant Theology, Descartes was to become the Father of Modern Humanist Philosophy. Peter Phan had this to say of Descartes' legacy, "Descartes is to be considered 'the founder of modernism,' the initiator of 'the metaphysics of subjectivity,' and the forerunner of Kant's 'Copernican Revolution'"(Phan 588).

Descartes led a brief but powerful life, and it is that life that created one of the most lasting philosophical impressions of all time. "Born in La Haye, Touraine (a region and former province of France), Descartes was the son of a minor nobleman and belonged to a family that had produced a number of learned men"(Encarta 1). Descartes was enrolled in a Jesuit school as a young boy, and Catholicism was to exert a strong influence over most of his life. Descartes had a very classical education and eventually graduated from the University of Poitiers in 1616 with a degree in law. "He never practiced law, however; in 1618 he entered into the service of Prince Maurice of Nassau...with the intention of following a military career"(Encarta 2). Yet in 1628 Descartes moved to the Netherlands where he was to spend his life studying science and writing philosophy. His major works were "*Essais Philosophiques*, (Philosophical Essays), published in 1637...*Meditationes de Prima Philosophia*, (Meditations on First

Philosophy, 1641; revised 1642) and *Principia Philosophiae* (The Principles of Philosophy, 1644).”(Encarta 2) Descartes moved to Stockholm to be near his friend, the Princess Elizabeth Stuart, and eventually died from pneumonia in 1650. During his life Descartes made some significant contributions to mathematics, “the systemization of analytic geometry”(Encarta 5). Yet though he would have fashioned himself a great mathematician and a scientist, it is his unique approach to Philosophy that has left its greatest impression.

In his monumental work, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes adopts the project of skepticism as his means to truth. Already the stark contrast between Descartes and Calvin becomes apparent. As Calvin started with what he was sure he knew, and Descartes begins by eliminating what he can't know. Descartes begins by realizing that he has operated under many misconceptions throughout his entire life. “Some years ago I was struck by the large number of falsehoods that I had accepted as true in my childhood, and by the highly doubtful nature of the whole edifice that I had subsequently based on them”(Descartes 12). Descartes wrestles with one of the biggest epistemic problems that is created by even attempting to know anything for certain, namely that one can be deceived. One of the prime examples that Descartes uses is to contrast the difference between dreaming and real life. For while one is in a dream, rarely does one think that the dream world is not real, and often, no matter how ludicrous the setting, one accepts the reality that the dream presents him. “How often, asleep at night, am I convinced of just such familiar events- that I am here in my dressing-gown, sitting by the fire- when in fact I am lying undressed in bed!”(Descartes 13). This is the problem for Descartes, for while he is aware that he could be deceived in everything he thinks is certain he still wants to

have a scientific absolutizing knowledge of things. In Descartes' own words the project turns out like this, "In our search for the direct road to truth, we should busy ourselves with no object about which we cannot attain a certitude equal to that of the demonstration of arithmetic and geometry"(Encarta 3). The skeptical project then is the first step to a greater certainty. Yet Descartes does not take the path of the traditional skeptics, for he has constructive rather than destructive ends in mind. "Descartes' chief aim is to reach his dogma, his hidden truth, and to hold in abeyance the naïve beliefs of everyday life until that truth has been laid bare and grasped with the superior certainty it affords to those who have successfully completed their Cartesian meditations"(Grene 559).

Descartes begins by doubting those things he cannot scientifically prove, and then he even goes so far as to doubt science. So logically through the course of this doubting he dismisses God as well. Not that God is a deceiver, but that one could be quite mistaken about God, since one cannot prove him purely from reason. Ironically enough it is just this task that Descartes will undertake, as he was very concerned about just this issue.

The *Meditations* is Descartes quest for absolute certainty of things based purely on reason, for reason is something that can be known with a great degree of exactness. Thus Descartes must begin with absolute skepticism so as to remove any possibility of his being deceived.

"Although the usefulness of such extensive doubt is not apparent at first sight, its greatest benefit lies in freeing us from all our preconceived opinions, and providing the easiest route by which the mind may be led away from the senses. The eventual result of this doubt is to make it impossible for us to have any further doubts about what we subsequently discover to be true"(Descartes 9).

Thus the skeptical project has removed everything, and wiped the slate clean, so that man is free to discover what might be true.

Descartes begins by doubting anything he cannot know, and this leads him to doubt everything except himself. One of the greatest triumphs of all of Descartes' thinking is that simple assertion that everyone takes for granted, namely "I exist". Descartes makes a radical shift in the history of the world when he posits the priority of the mind over the body, the subject over the object, and the self over God. This is the birth of Modernism and it all begins when Descartes realizes that his own existence is the most necessary thing that he knows. "...the mind uses its own freedom and supposes the non-existence of all the things about whose existence it can have even the slightest doubt; and in so doing the mind notices that it is impossible that it should not itself exist during this time"(Descartes 12). This is the philosophical formation of Descartes' most famous statement, which he goes on to explain. "I am, I exist, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind"(Descartes 17). In the Latin this statement is worded "Cogito Ergo Sum", and the English translation, "I am, I Exist", conveys a more exact philosophical meaning than the popular expression. "I think therefore, I am" is the popular rendering of the cogito, and it is this statement by which Descartes is best known and remembered. With a pure reasoning certainty Descartes renders the self from the vacuum of uncertainty into the strong piercing light of knowledge. For Descartes the first thing he has knowledge of is the self. "This exercise is also of the greatest benefit, since it enables the mind to distinguish without difficulty what belongs to itself, i.e. to an intellectual nature, from what belongs to the body"(Descartes 12). Here Descartes shows the emergence of the mind over the body, as what can be also determined about the self,

is that it is a thinking thing. By the awareness of thought one becomes aware of existence, and by existence one is able to think. That one exists takes an ontological priority over the fact that one can think, but the ability to think is by no means lessened. Indeed it is only through the power of the mind that Descartes is able to reason God back into existence.

It is the existence of God that Descartes writes the *Meditations* to prove, because he is attempting to set up the certainty of the knowledge of God as well. It should not be doubted that Descartes was a devout Christian Catholic, as he even begins his *Meditations* with a dedicatory letter to the School of Theology at The Sorbonne. Even so Descartes must first render up the knowledge of the self before he can work to the knowledge of God. Yet having rendered this knowledge Descartes sets out to give a purely rational scientific proof for the existence of God. He does this by first establishing the concept of the idea, namely that ideas are thoughts in our minds that correspond to things beyond our minds. Many of the ideas we have are factitious, complex ideas created by the outside world, but some are innate and simple ideas that don't seem to come directly from an outside source. God is one such innate idea, and ideas are effects in need of a cause. Now by Descartes' terminology, the objective exists within our minds and is the inner world of ideas. The formal is the outside world of things, and there is strong correspondence between the two worlds. Now ideas have causes, and ideas need as much formal as objective reality. Quite simply the finite cannot cause the infinite since these have unequal objective and formal reality. So if we can conceive of the perfect and the infinite in our objective reality, the mind, it must have at least as much formal reality in the world beyond the mind. The very idea of God implies certain omni-attributes such as

infinity and perfection that would accompany such a being. Thus if we can conceive of a perfect, infinite God, and since our objective reality has to have at least the same level of formal reality, God necessarily exists. (The former paragraph was paraphrased largely off of a lecture over Descartes' Third Meditation, given by Tod Kappelman in the spring of 2002) So through a rather complex Ontological argument Descartes also renders the existence of God, but only through the self's power of reason would this be possible. Ultimately this knowledge of God is not dependent on God's mediation but on the knowledge and wisdom of the self.

Ultimately Calvin and Descartes both render up God and the self, but their methods are quite different. Both men were French, and both were raised in a predominantly Catholic Country. Both men studied law at the University level, and both were undoubtedly great thinkers. Yet much of their similarity ends there, as Calvin rejected Catholicism, and Descartes affirmed it. Calvin was a Theologian, a Politician, and a Pastor. Descartes was a Philosopher, a Scientist, and a Mathematician. Calvin emphasized the need for faith to precede knowledge, and also introduced the dependency that man has on God's grace. Descartes emphasized the need for doubt to precede knowledge, and introduced the independence of man's thought from God's influence. Calvin makes the case for the *Sensum Divinitatis*, and argues that all men know of God's existence. Descartes begins by doubting God's existence, and indeed is only able to regain confidence in God after the success of the Ontological argument. Ultimately Calvin is a religious reformer, who is seeking a return to a more correct Christian doctrine. Ultimately Descartes is a philosophical revolutionary, who is plunging full steam ahead into a brave new Modernist world.

In conclusion Calvin arrives at a belief in self by starting with the *Sensum Divinitatis* that renders God as the most basic entity. In contrast Descartes arrives at a Rational scientific proof of God by doubting everything and starting with the self as his epistemological basis. It seems telling that the successors of Calvin left a legacy of faith and unyielding religion. However the successors of Descartes left a legacy of doubt and strong rationalism, which ultimately led to faith in science and man over theology and God.

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