“Their Very Hearts Are Touched”:
Knowing God and Knowing Creation with John Calvin

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> "To live in the face of doubt, eyes happily shut, would be to fall in love with the world. For if there is a correct blindness, only love has it. And if you find that you have fallen in love with the world, then you would be ill-advised to offer an argument of its worth by praising its Design. Because you are bound to fall out of love with your argument, and you may thereupon forget that the world is wonder enough, as it stands. Or not. (Even if the world has a designer, and if falling in love with the world is knowing this designer, praising the Design would not satisfy him or her as an expression of this knowledge. Unless the praise is directed *to* him or her; in which case there is no argument.)"
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> - Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*

> "Therefore, to be brief, let all readers know that they have with true faith apprehended what it is for God to be Creator of heaven and earth, if they first of all follow the universal rule, not to pass over in ungrateful thoughtlessness or forgetfulness those conspicious powers which God shows forth in his creatures, and then to learn so to apply it to themselves that their very hearts are touched."
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> - John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*

Introduction

The Indian novelist and essayist Amitav Ghosh writes that "The events of today's changing climate, in that they represent the totality of human actions over time, represent also the terminus of history. For if the entirety of our past is contained within the present, then temporality itself is drained of significance."[1] The worry that life in time lacks significance is not foreign to Christian theological reflection. Fear over history's meaninglessness is typically assuaged through appeals to God's sovereignty, to the fact that nothing takes place outside of divine power. But to what evidence should one look in order to trust in the faithfulness of God?

In John Calvin's commentary on Job, Calvin affirms Job's frustration with history. Humans view history through "a great darkness which rules over the larger part of the world."[2] The just seemingly suffer needlessly while the evil attain power and receive rewards. Job is not wrong to find his suffering unjust, but he simply cannot view history—including the history in which he

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[1] Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago:
[2] John Calvin, *Sermons from Job*, trans. Leroy Nixon (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1952), 220.

lives—properly. Job's sin is not his desire for justice, but, according to Calvin, inasmuch as Job refuses to acknowledge any fault of his own and hopes to face God as an adversary, "he justifies himself rather than God."[3] Rather than defending the justice of God against the human perception of history, Job justifies himself against the possibility of deserved suffering.

Calvin thinks that God's answer to Job displays where Job should properly seek solace in the face of history's apparent injustices, namely the awesomeness of the created order. That God upholds the universe and causes the visible world to be maintained itself is beyond human comprehension. As Susan Schreiner explains, "the wonders of nature must lead the believer to trust that God governs human history with the same power and wisdom evident in creation."[4] Can Calvin's reading of Job make sense in the age of climate change? Whereas the connection between God's power over both nature and human history might bring solace to Job—for whom only history's justness was in question—can knowledge of creation be a source of hope when even the ground underneath one's feet is uncertain?

Answering these questions requires understanding what it means to *know* creation in the first place. A cell biologist, a naturalist, and a commercial fisherman might all make claims to know the world, but what counts for knowledge to each individual will probably be different. The criteria for knowing may entail different philosophical starting points, ethical commitments, and possibly also different affective dispositions. For each of these individuals to know creation in the way that Calvin thinks can strengthen the assurance of faith in God will entail an encounter between their particular epistemic frameworks and certain theological commitments. Indeed, the encounter between different ways of knowing has already taken place in the formation of any particular subject. While it is not possible to completely isolate any specific factor that goes into

[3] Ibid., 222.
[4] Susan E. Schreiner, *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?: Calvin's Exegesis of Job from Medieval and Modern Perspectives* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1994), 146.

shaping one's subjectivity, changing the way one knows the world through modifying, say, one's theological way of knowing creation might transform one's way of knowing scientifically, ethically, politically, and affectively as well.[5]

This essay considers one particular theological way of knowing the world—that of John Calvin—in order to consider how this theological epistemology might contribute to and be changed by the problem of knowing the world as creation in the present time. Part I offers a description and analysis of how Calvin thinks the self, the world, and God are known together. This section ends with a discussion of the activity and posture that Calvin thinks Christians should take toward creation, namely contemplation that leads to worship of God. Part II then brings Calvin into conversation with some alternative forms of knowing the world: animism and affect theory. This section attempts to connect Calvin's recommendation that Christians contemplate nature so that "their very hearts are touched" to ways of knowing creation—especially other-than-human creatures—that relate to the world through language and feeling. The essay concludes with a discussion of how Calvin's theological epistemology, when aided by animism and affect theory, might challenge restrictive ways of knowing and relating to the world that either lead people to hopelessness or acquiescence in response to the challenges of the Anthropocene, especially climate change.

Part I: Calvin's Epistemology of God and Creation

In the opening chapter of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion,* Calvin claims that "no one can look upon himself [sic] without immediately turning his thoughts to the contemplation of

[5] I see this as related to Willis Jenkins' project of exploring "how far new possibilities of agency can be opened within received worlds by learning from problems how to use our traditions differently—with the view that using traditions differently is how they are changed." Willis Jenkins, *The Future of Ethics: Sustainability, Social Justice, and Religious Creativity* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2013), 8.

God." This is because the "mighty gifts" with which humanity is endowed should lead one as "rivulets" can be traced back to "the spring itself."[6] Calvin later makes a similar claim that because God "discloses himself in the whole workmanship of the universe," humanity "cannot open their eyes without being compelled to see him."[7] Knowledge of self, world, and God are, for Calvin, inextricably bound together. In order to consider what it might mean for knowledge of creation to bolster faith in God against the uncertainties of history, it is necessary to unpack how knowing oneself, the world, and God together operates in Calvin's theology. Part I examines these interrelated knowledges, the effects of sin on human knowledge and the correction provided by scripture, and concludes by looking at the active contemplation of creation Calvin understands to be a vital part of the Christian life.

Knowledge of God, the Self, and the World

In the *Institutes*, Calvin discusses knowledge of God with two categories: Knowledge of God the Creator and Knowledge of God the Redeemer.[8] Calvin insists, "it is one thing 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 blessing—and another thing to embrace the grace of reconciliation offered to us in Christ." The difference between these two knowledges of God rests in their respective sources. While one can know God as Creator through both the "fashioning of the universe" and "the general teaching of Scripture," it is only possible to know God as Redeemer through "the face of Christ" as revealed in scripture through the inspiration of

[6] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeil, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster press, 1960), 1.1.1.
[7] Ibid., 1.5.1.
[8] There is debate about the *duplex cognitio*. Edward Dowey, Jr. think the two structuring forms of knowledge of the *Institutes* are knowledge of God as Creator and Redeemer. T.H.L. Parker argues that the two knowledges are of God and of ourselves. See: Edward Dowey, Jr., *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1994), 43; and T.H.L. Parker, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1959), 119.

the Spirit.[9] While knowledge of God the Redeemer is significant for properly understanding God as Creator (as will be seen below in the discussions of sin's effects on human knowing), this section will focus primarily on the implications of the knowledge of God the Creator for humanity's knowledge of the self and the world.

All human knowledge of God, for Calvin, is due to God's accommodation to "our human measure and human capacity for understanding."[10] Calvin insists that it is not simply humanity's sinfulness that requires God's accommodation, but "even if man had remained free from all stain, his condition would have been too lowly for him to reach God without a Mediator."[11] The knowledge of God the Creator cannot, then, be understood to be natural theology, at least as defined, say, by the Gifford Lectures: "the part of theology that does not depend on revelation."[12] God's accommodation of humanity's sinfulness will be discussed in the next section, but for present purposes it is important to remember that Calvin understands the ways humans know God through creation is always through revelation.

Edward Dowey helpfully divides knowledge of God the Creator that is derived from creation into "subjective" and "external" revelations. The subjective sources are the *sensus divinitatis* and the conscience, while the external revelations are nature and history.[13] The *sensus divinitatis* is that affective and noetic sense by which "God himself has implanted in all men a certain understanding of his divine majesty."[14] Though the *sensus* is a form of knowledge (not merely a

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[9] Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.2.1.
[10] Cornelis Van der Kooi, *As In a Mirror: John Calvin and Karl Barth on Knowing God: A Diptych* (Boston: Brill, 2005), 42.
[11] Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.12.1.
[12] "What is Natural Theology?" The Gifford Lectures, accessed March 15, 2018, https://www.giffordlectures.org/overview/natural-theology.
[13] Dowey, 50.
[14] Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.3.1.

feeling), it "is not derived, but is 'basic,' fundamental to humanity."[15] Dowey follows Reinhold Seeberg in connecting Calvin's *sensus* to Schleiermacher's feeling of "absolute dependence" and Otto's "creature feeling."[16] While it is not the result of intellectual effort, the *sensus divinitatis* is an awareness of being a certain type of entity, namely a creature. Similarly, Calvin understands conscience as a knowledge that goes beyond "a simple awareness." Conscience goes further to act as "a keeper assigned to man, that watches and observes all his secrets so that nothing may remain buried in darkness."[17]

Calvin also seems to connect human conscience to the same sort of commands that keep the natural world functioning as it should. Dowey observes that Calvin refers to this capacity as "'internal law,'…and…the 'law of nature.'"[18] Commenting on Romans 4:13, Calvin notes that the Jews cannot contribute anything to their justification through ceremonial observations of the Law because if such things mattered for justification God "would not have said [them] through the (written) law, but rather through the law of nature."[19] Conscience, then, contains within it knowledge enough of God's will to be inexcusable for not following it, if not the capacity of will to carry it out. As the *sensus divinitatis* refuses to allow humanity to forget its creatureliness (i.e., the fact of being created by God), the conscience will not permit humanity to forget that it is the recipient of a mandate: the will of God.

Humanity knows God through the external revelations of creation—nature and history—in distinct ways. As will be seen, for Calvin nature is the more reliable source for humans to know God given humanity's limited ability to see the whole arc of history. Emil Brunner explains that,

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[15] Van der Kooi, 71.
[16] Dowey, 55.
[17] Calvin, *Insitutes*, 4.10.3.
[18] Dowey, 58.
[19] John Calvin, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans and to the Thessalonians*, trans. Ross Mackenzie (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1980), 91.

"nature is for Calvin both a concept of being and a concept of a norm."[20] Nature, then, refers not only to what is but also to what or how things should be. Nature's perceivable shape and direction is not, for Calvin, an end in itself. Rather, "the skillful ordering of the universe is for us a sort of mirror in which we can contemplate God, who is otherwise invisible."[21] For Calvin, mirrors are metaphors for places in which God indirectly makes godself known. Van der Kooi identifies five such mirrors in Calvin's theology: "the creation of heaven and earth"; humanity itself and human "faculties"; scripture; the incarnation; and the sacraments.[22] The mirror of creation, then, reflects an order that is not only given by God but is evidence of God's constant care for the world.

Schreiner writes that the order found in creation "is not a hierarchy but the stability, regularity, and continuity of creation."[23] But order, stability, regularity, and continuity do not mean that creation is ever independent of God. Observing "the starry host of heaven," Calvin explains that the order of the stars and planets is evidence of God's continual governance of these bodies. While the heavens represent, for Calvin, the greatness of God's control of the universe, he also insists that "there are as many miracles of divine power, as many tokens of goodness, and as many proofs of wisdom, as there are kinds of things in the universe, indeed, as there are things either great or small."[24] Schreiner explains that since God is so constantly involved in the order of the universe, for Calvin, implies not only that nature is "contingent and

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[20] Emil Brunner, "Nature and Grace," in *Natural Theology: Comprising 'Nature and Grace' by Professor Emil Brunner and the reply 'No!' by Dr. Karl Barth*, trans. Peter Fraenkel (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002), 37.
[21] Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.5.1.
[22] Van der Kooi, 62-63.
[23] Susan E. Schreiner, *The Theater of His Glory: Nature and the Natural Order in the Thought of John Calvin* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 22.
[24] Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.14.21.

dependent; it [is] also precarious."[25] This precariousness can be seen in Calvin's assumption that the natural position of the waters is to cover the earth; but for God's holding back the waters, the land would be overtaken.[26] To know creation, then, requires remembering its constant dependence upon God: "We are very base indeed if…we do not learn that nothing in the world is stable except in as far as it is sustained by the hand of God."[27]

History, for Calvin, is also a place where God's power can be known. Calvin points to the fact that "in their desperate straits God suddenly and wonderfully and beyond all hope succors the poor and almost lost." Moments when "wanderers," "the needy and hungry," "prisoners," "shipwrecked," and "half dead" are lifted up while the mighty are "cast down from the high level of their dignity" reveal, for Calvin, God's presence in and power over history.[28] Calvin acknowledges that "the examples that the Lord shows us both of his clemency and of his severity are inchoate and incomplete." Sometimes the poor and vulnerable remain poor and vulnerable while the rich and powerful only increase in stature. For Calvin this is not evidence against God's control of history, but simply an indication that "there will be another life in which iniquity is to have its punishment, and righteousness is to be given its reward."[29] History is thus only a partially observable site of God's works because humanity cannot empirically observe history's eschatological fulfillment. Calvin insists (following Augustine in *City of God* 1.8) that if all sin were now to be punished there would be nothing kept for the final judgment, but if no

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[25] Schreiner, *Theater*, 23.
[26] John Calvin, *Commentary on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, trans. by John King (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1981), 1:9. Calvin grants that this fact is revealed by scripture but he also argues that the natural philosophers of his day would make the same point.
[27] John Calvin, *Commentary on the Psalms,* trans. James Anderson (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1981), 104:5.
[28] Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.5.8.
[29] Ibid., 1.5.10.

sin were presently punished no one would believe in providence.[30]

So, in creation God is revealed through the *sensus divinitatis*, the conscience, creation, and history, but it is important to specify exactly what Calvin thinks can be known about God through these sources. Randall Zachman explains that even as early as his 1537 Catechism, Calvin "distinguishes between seeking knowledge of God's essence and seeking knowledge of God through God's works."[31] Calvin writes that whereas God is invisible, God's works are observable:

> We see, indeed, the world with our eyes, we tread the earth with our feet, we touch innumerable kinds of God's works with our hands, we inhale a sweet and pleasant fragrance from herbs and flowers, we enjoy boundless benefits; but in those very things of which we attain some knowledge, there dwells such an immensity of divine power, goodness, and wisdom, as absorbs all our senses.[32]

Calvin is not simply suggesting that it is easier to know God through God's works than to know God's essence; instead, Calvin mandates that, whenever God is thought, it should be God's works that come to mind: "Therefore, as soon as the name of God sounds in our ears, or the thought of him occurs to our minds, let us clothe him with this most beautiful ornament; finally, let the world become our school if we desire rightly to know God."[33] To know God through God's works reveals God's "life, wisdom, and power" and "exercises in our behalf his righteousness, goodness, and mercy."[34]

That God communicates God's life, wisdom, power, righteousness, goodness, and mercy through creation should, thinks Calvin, assuage the feeling of terror created by God's power. Zachman argues that, for Calvin, "Power by itself…is absolutely terrifying, and if all we know of

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[30] Ibid.
[31] Randall C. Zachman, *Image and Word in the Theology of John Calvin* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 27.
[32] Calvin, *Genesis*, Argument: 57.
[33] Ibid., 60.
[34] Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.5.10.

God is power, we are lost. We are crushed. It just reduces us to nothing."[35] If the goodness or mercy of God seems like it might be overshadowed by God's power, Calvin issues a reminder that the world's "stability…depends on this rejoicing of God in his works; for did he not give vigour to the earth by his gracious and fatherly regard, as soon as he looked upon it with a severe countenance, he would make it tremble, and would burn up the very mountains."[36] As previously discussed, the world's stability rests upon God's constant care. The waters do not overtake the land because God holds them back.[37] God ordains the "innumerable and yet distinct and well-ordered variety of the heavenly host."[38]

God's goodness, wisdom, mercy and power are not only communicated through the nonhuman world but through human self-understanding as well. Calvin writes that God's powers are only comprehended "when we descend into ourselves and contemplate by what means the Lord shows" the character of God's works.[39] For Calvin, knowledge of self and world are interrelated as he argues that humanity is "a microcosm" containing "within himself enough miracles to occupy our minds."[40] Dowey points out that for Calvin "knowledge 'of ourselves' is a term which Calvin uses by synecdoche for all man's knowledge of creation." Knowing oneself is not categorically distinct from knowing the world, but "the knowledge of [humanity] and of other parts of the created world form a single category which stands in correlation with knowledge that specifically concerns God."[41] This means that, for Calvin, no human knowledge is independent from knowledge of God. Dowey calls this the "double epistemological context" in

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[35] Randall C. Zachman, *Reconsidering John Calvin* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 10.
[36] Calvin, *Psalms*, 104:32.
[37] Calvin, *Genesis*, 1:9.
[38] Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.5.2.
[39] Ibid., 1.5.10.
[40] Ibid., 1.5.3. Cf. Calvin, *Genesis*, 1:26.
[41] Dowey, 21.

which creation stands: "as knowledge within the world ("of ourselves") and as revelation of God.[42]

Given Calvin's microcosmic anthropology and the double epistemological context of human knowing, the motif of descending into the self takes on cosmological significance.[43] Calvin's first use of the descent motif argues that "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." Since humans tend to pridefully view themselves as "righteous and upright and wise and holy," human knowledge needs to be chastened by "the Lord, who is the sole standard by which this judgment must be measured."[44] Since "knowledge of himself" ("*Sui notitiam*") is a synecdoche for knowledge of the whole world, one might wonder what it would mean to behold God for the purposes of scrutinizing nonhuman creation. It seems obvious for Calvin's theocentric epistemology to say that knowledge of God is necessary for knowledge of the self (and therefore the world), but in order to understand how knowing God chastens knowledge of creation it is necessary to understand the effects of sin on human knowledge.

The Effects of Sin, and the "Spectacles of Scripture"

Humans are meant to know God through creation by means of the *sensus divinitatis*, the conscience, nature, and history, but what happens to these epistemic sources as a result of sin? The simple answer is the *sensus*, conscience, nature and history are not abolished, but only function to make humanity inexcusable for sin. This section will unpack how sin distorts these ways of knowing and show how such distortion is healed.

According to Dowey, the "'knowledge' or 'persuasion' that God exists, which man receives

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[42] Ibid., 22.
[43] Use of the descent into the self are found throughout the first three books of the *Institutes*. E.g., 1.1.2, 1.5.10, 2.8.1, 2.16.1, 3.4.32, 3.12.5, and 3.13.3.
[44] Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.1.2.

internally by 'natural instinct,' causes him to react religiously."[45] This is the proper work of the *sensus divinitatis*, but this effect does not cease to exist among fallen humanity. Calvin insists that though sinners seek to conceal themselves from God, even their attempt at hiding reveals "the fact that some conception of God is ever alive in all men's minds."[46] This awareness of one's creatureliness, when distorted by sin, results in "secret dread and open idolatry."[47] Rather than simply denying God's existence (although this may result as well), the sin-ladened *sensus divinitatis* makes the human mind into what Calvin famously calls "a perpetual factory of idols."[48] As Paul Helm explains, "Because the issue of God's existence is of considerable importance for men and women, that is, it is not a mere theoretical or trivial issue, sin leads, via a mechanism of self-deceiving willfulness, to the true God being displaced from within the category of the divine by many gods, or by no god."[49] Sinful humanity, therefore, does not cease to be religious. Rather, the object of one's faith and worship shifts from God to something within creation.

Like the *sensus*, conscience does not cease to operate in fallen humanity. Calvin understands the role of conscience as not allowing "man to suppress within himself what he knows, but pursues him to the point of convicting him."[50] However, in sin, the awareness of God's will is decoupled from humanity's ability to carry it out. As Van der Kooi puts it: "Conscience confronts man with a gaping chasm, a gulf between them and God."[51] Calvin insists that conscience is not only personal or individual, but is also the basis for religious and civil

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[45] Dowey, 53.
[46] Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.3.2.
[47] Dowey, 54.
[48] Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.11.8.
[49] Paul Helm, "John Calvin, the 'Sensus Divinitatis', and the Noetic Effects of Sin," International Journal for Philosophy of Religion 43, no. 2 (April 1998), 98.
[50] Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.19.15.
[51] Van der Kooi, 40.

institutions. However, the fact that conscience remains distorted by sin means that these institutions are not inviolable.[52] As previously discussed, Calvin associates conscience with the recognition of what "nature dictates."[53] Humanity's ability to learn the will of God from the order of creation is diminished by sin not so much as to be utterly incapable of recognizing an order in or will for creation, but for acting in accordance with even what is perceivable. Conscience under sin becomes "the tribunal of judgment before which men are condemned."[54]

Whereas nature presents a mirror revealing the goodness, wisdom, and righteousness of God's works, Calvin makes clear that through creation subjected to sin God involves "the human race in the same guilt."[55] As with the *sensus divinitatis* and the conscience, the revelation of God in nature functions in a distorted manner. Again, Calvin insists that the problem is not with the function of the revelatory source but with humanity: "Therefore, although the Lord does not want for testimony while he sweetly attracts men to the knowledge of himself with many and varied kindnesses, they do not cease on this account to follow their own ways, that is, their fatal errors."[56] In reflecting on the revelation of the created order, Calvin feels compelled to confess "that it can be said reverently, provided that it proceeds from a reverent mind, that nature is God," but he warns that such a statement could be harmful if misunderstood.[57] Such a misunderstanding is what takes place when sinful humanity attempts to know nature. Commenting on sinful humanity's worship of "the creature rather than the Creator" (Rom. 1:25 NRSV), Calvin writes that "religious honour cannot be given to the creature without taking it away from God in an unworthy and sacrilegious manner. It is an empty excuse to pretend that the

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[52] Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.19.15.
[53] Dowey, 58.
[54] Ibid., 70.
[55] Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.6.1.
[56] Ibid., 1.6.14.
[57] Ibid., 1.5.5.

images are worshipped for God's sake, since God does not acknowledge such worship, nor regard it as acceptable."[58] Rather than viewing creation as a site of revelation given by God, humans are tempted to worship creation itself.

There is also a sense in which sin distorts not only the perception of nature, but also nature itself. Here sin's effects on nature and history are closely related. In his commentary on Genesis Calvin makes clear that although in the serpent "itself there was no sense of sin," (3:14) Satan was able to pervert the gift of craftiness "which had been divinely imparted to the serpent."[59] Here nature is not blamed for sin, but is nevertheless used by Satan to sow disorder. Calvin also understands human sin as having similar effects. In his commentary on Jeremiah, Calvin writes:

> We indeed see nothing so regulated in every respect in the world, that the goodness of God can be seen without clouds and obstructions: but we do not consider whence this confusion proceeds, even because we obstruct God's access to us, so that his beneficence does not reach us. We throw heaven and earth into confusion by our sins. For were we in right order as to our obedience to God, doubtless all the elements would be conformable, and we should thus observe in the world an angelic harmony. But as our lusts tumultuate against God; nay, as we stir up war daily, and provoke him by our pride, perverseness, and obstinacy, it must needs be, that all things, above and below, should be in disorder, that the heavens should at one time appear cloudy, and that continuous rains should at another time destroy the produce of the earth, and that nothing should be unmixed and unstained in the world.[60]

So, nature is both improperly perceived by humanity and warped by humanity's sin such that "disorder penetrated the physical elements of creation." Whereas before the fall creation's order was precarious, depending at every moment on God's upholding, Schreiner explains that "After the fall, the forces of disorder became so threatening that creation required even more the immediate restraining providence of God lest it collapse into complete chaos."[61]

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[58] Calvin, *Romans*, 1:25.
[59] Calvin, *Genesis*, 3:14; 3:1.
[60] John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah and Lamentations*, trans. John Owen (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1981), 5:25.
[61] Schreiner, *Theater*, 29.

Likewise, history suffers from the same disorder. As discussed above, because human knowledge is subjected to the limits of temporality the revelatory nature of history is difficult to ascertain. Calvin says that the reason events in history seem subject to fortune is because "the order, reason, end, and necessity of those thing which happen for the most part lie hidden in God's purpose, and are not apprehended by human opinion."[62] The only solace to be gleaned from the human observation of history is the recognition that God has not allowed the world to collapse completely into chaos, but the assurance of God's providence is not ascertainable inductively by examining history through human knowledge alone.

As has been seen, God reveals Godself through creation—through the *sensus divinitatis*, the conscience, nature, and history—but after the fall these sources cannot be properly known by humanity. Whereas humanity *qua* humanity has always stood in need of God's accommodation, fallen humanity requires further aids in order to perceive even the revelation of God in creation rightly. These further accommodations are the Bible[63], the incarnation of Christ[64], and the sacraments.[65] Because the Bible is, for Calvin, the "better help…to direct us aright to the very Creator of the universe," the rest of this section will focus on the way Calvin understands scripture as correcting the distorted ways of knowing God through creation.[66]

Van der Kooi explains that Calvin's attention to scripture does not focus on the human reception or interpretation of scripture but rather on the result of scripture's revelation, namely the saving knowledge of God in Christ.[67] That is to say, Calvin is not overly anxious about interpretative debates over scripture but is confident in scripture's effectiveness in revealing

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[62] Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.16.9.
[63] Ibid., 3.2.6.
[64] Ibid., 2.6.4.
[65] Ibid., 4.16.31; 4.17.1.
[66] Ibid., 1.6.1.
[67] Van der Kooi, 93.

God. Calvin does not, however, understand the interpreation of scripture as a "mechanical reading" but, it is, according to Dowey, "an accomplishment, under the guide of the Holy Spirit, of thorough, patient scholarship."[68] If Dowey's description of "thorough, patient scholarship" sounds too intellectualistic, Calvin describes knowing God the Creator through scripture as an experiential process of reading the text for the purposes of looking at the world around oneself to see the continuities between Word and world.[69]

In his Genesis commentary, Calvin describes God as inviting "us to himself by means of created things…For by the Scripture as our guide and teacher, he not only makes those things plain which would otherwise escape our notice, but almost compels us to behold them; as if he had assisted our dull sight with spectacles."[70] In the *Institutes*, Calvin writes:

> Just as old or bleary-eyed men and those with weak vision, if you thrust before them a most beautiful volume, even if they recognize it to be some sort of writing, yet can scarcely construe two words, but with the aid of spectacles will begin to read distinctly; so Scripture, gathering up the otherwise confused knowledge of God in our minds, having dispersed our dullness, clearly shows us the true God.[71]

Calvin's use of the metaphor of spectacles further illustrates the fact that it is not the revelation of creation that is distorted but rather the human perception and understanding of God's self-disclosure. Marilynne Robinson writes that for Calvin's theology "it is *precisely* our higher capacities that are flawed—seeing, we do not see, and hearing, we do not understand. The emphasis in Calvin is not on sin as it is commonly understood, but on perception—its radical limits, and at the same time its glories and exhilarations."[72] Scripture corrects human perception

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[68] Dowey, 34.
[69] Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.10.1.
[70] Calvin, *Genesis*, Argument: 62.
[71] Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.6.1.
[72] Marilynne Robinson, "Calvinism as Metaphysics," *Toronto Journal of Theology* 25, no. 2 (September 2009): 178.

of creation in that it communicates to what Calvin calls the "feebleness" of the human mind.[73]

More specifically Calvin thinks that "the secret testimony of the Spirit" points us with "pure eyes and upright sense toward" scripture that reveals "the majesty of God."[74] The majesty of God, for Calvin, is a recognition of God such that humanity can distinguish God the Creator from "all the throng of feigned gods."[75] If the distortion of revelation found in the *sensus divinitatis*, conscience, nature, and history leads to humanity's being led into idolatry, scripture points humanity back toward the true God such that creation can rightly be perceived. Dowey explains that scripture reveals two classes of knowledge of God the Creator: first, it communicates what is "still obtainable in creation with the aid of the 'spectacles of Scripture'" and, second, it provides new knowledge that is only available in scripture.[76] Scripture reaffirms and points humanity back to the sources of revelation in creation—the *sensus*, conscience, nature, and history—but it also reveals the Trinity, the means of creation, and the special providence of God.[77]

While God's triune nature is only revealed in scripture and the existence of a Creator is part of the *sensus divinitatis*, Calvin's doctrine of creation is fundamentally trinitarian: "God by the power of his Word and Spirit created heaven and earth out of nothing."[78] Similarly, even though conscience communicates the divine will, nature reveals God's care for the universe, and history reveals God's general providential action, Calvin sees the doctrine of providence as especially communicated through scripture. Calvin argues that a "carnal sense" of providence "thinks there

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[73] Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.6.4
[74] Ibid., 1.7.4.
[75] Ibid., 1.6.1.
[76] Dowey, 125.
[77] Dowey. 126.
[78] Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.14.20

is an energy divinely bestowed from the beginning, sufficient to sustain all things."[79] Scripture, however, informs the believer that God cares about the individual, both at the level of humanity and of the natural world.[80]

Rather than abolishing the revelation of God in creation, scripture allows creation to properly witness to its Creator. When viewed with the spectacles of scripture, Creation—now properly perceived and known—no longer leads humanity into idolatry but fulfills its God-given purpose. Commenting on Paul's contrasting the wisdom of the world and the foolishness of God in 1 Corinthians, Calvin writes "the Apostle does not require, that we should altogether renounce the wisdom that is implanted in us by nature, or acquired by long practice; but simply, that we subject it to the service of God, so as to have no wisdom but through his word."[81] Recalling Dowey's language of a "double epistemological context," knowing creation through the spectacles of scripture makes all human knowledge potentially revelatory so long as it is brought into obedience to God. In order to see what it might look like to contemplate creation with the aid of God's self-revelation in scripture, the final section will consider a few moments where Calvin either calls Christians to learn from creation and actually reflects on creation himself.

Contemplating Creation

In the 1534 preface to his cousin's, Robert Oliévtan, New Testament translation, Calvin describes the world as having been "engraved [with] the glory of [God's] power, goodness, wisdom, and eternity." Calvin depicts creation not just as the passive bearer of God's revelation but as evangelists:

> It is evident that all creatures, from those in the firmament to those which are in the

[79] Ibid., 1.16.1.
[80] Ibid., 1.16.5-7.
[81] John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, trans. John Pringle (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1959), 3:18.

> center of the earth, are able to act as witnesses and messengers of his glory to all men; to draw them to seek God, and after having found him, to meditate upon him and render to him the homage befitting his dignity as so good, so might, so wise a Lord who is eternal; yea, they are even capable of aiding every man *wherever he is in this quest*. For the little birds that sing, sing of God; the beasts clamor for him; the elements dread him, the mountains echo him, the fountains and flowing waters cast their glances at him, and the grass and flowers laugh before him. Truly there is no need for long searching, since everyone could find him in himself, because every one of us is sustained and preserved by his power which is in us.[82]

It is notable that God's witnesses and messengers in the world are able to assist those who are seeking God, regardless of what stage they may be in on that quest. Though this represents an early text in Calvin's theology, the fact that it is situated in a preface to the New Testament communicates Calvin's insistence that the revelation of scripture does not render the revelation of creation redundant. Indeed, Calvin points his readers (i.e., New Testament readers) back to the creation, both human and nonhuman, to receive God's revelation.

In the introductory argument of his Genesis commentary, Calvin tells his readers: "finally, let the world become our school if we desire rightly to know God."[83] Again, this exhortation is particularly interesting because it comes at the beginning of a biblical commentary. It is helpful to think about the way Calvin's discussion of God's creation of the world in the first two chapters of Genesis might lead people from the text to the world. Commenting on plants' ability to produce seed, Calvin wants readers to acknowledge that "all this flows from the same Word. If we therefore inquire, how it happens that the earth is fruitful, that the germ is produced from the seed, that fruits come to maturity, and their various kinds are annually reproduced; no other cause will be found, but that God has once spoke."[84] Such an explanation may sound as though Calvin is here making a case against scientific knowledge, but only a naturalistic positivism

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[82] John Calvin, *Commentaries*, trans. Joseph Haroutunian (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1958), 59-60; emphasis mine.
[83] Calvin, *Genesis*, Argument: 60.
[84] Ibid., 1:12.

would seem to be troubled by Calvin's assertion. Just a bit earlier in the commentary Calvin makes clear that Genesis is not about scientific explanation: "He who would learn astronomy, and other recondite arts, let him go elsewhere."[85]

Life's ability to produce life, thinks Calvin, should not primarily be of scientific interest (though it may be that too), but should first and foremost communicate a theological truth about God's intention for and work in the world. Scripture offers the reminder that God allows humanity to perceive the efficacy that God puts in natural processes.[86] Whereas a scientific perspective might seek knowledge of the world for its own sake, Calvin's purpose in knowing creation is wonder.[87] Rather than seeing God's activity in creation as only setting things in motion and letting them run their course, Calvin thinks Christians should be astonished that God's power works through creatures such that it is "infused into their nature."[88] This reality cannot be fully recognized with human eyes alone, but scripture reforms humanity's vision to see the world anew.

For Calvin, it is not only animate creatures and natural processes that exhibit God's power; even seas and mountains respond to God. Reflecting on Psalm 114's description of the parting of the Red Sea during the Hebrews' exodus from Egypt—"the sea saw, and fled"—Calvin writes that "the sea…though a lifeless and senseless element, is yet struck with terror at the power of God…The sea, in rendering obedience to its Creator, sanctified his name…and the mountains, by their quaking, proclaimed how they were overawed at the presence of his dreadful majesty."[89] In

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[85] Ibid., 1:6. This is not a dismissal of science; in the same chapter Calvin describes astronomy as an art that "unfolds the admirable wisdom of God" (Calvin, *Genesis*, 1:16).
[86] Ibid., 1:11.
[87] "And, truly, the Lord, although he is the Author of nature, yet by no means has followed nature as his guide in the creation of the world, but has rather chosen to put forth such demonstrations of his power as should constrain us to wonder" (Calvin, *Genesis*, 1:20).
[88] Ibid., 1:22.
[89] Calvin, *Psalms*, 114:3.

this case, God's power is exhibited through a miracle as Calvin thinks it plainly obvious that the sea "could not be dried up…had not God, by his invisible agency constrained them to render obedience to his command."[90] But the miraculous, for Calvin, is not an exception to physical laws. Instead, Calvin insists that since creation's existence is grounded in the power of God "there are as many miracles of divine power, as many tokens of goodness, and as many proofs of wisdom, as there are kinds of things in the universe, indeed, as there are things either great or small."[91] The parting of the Red Sea is a miracle, yes, but it is no more miraculous than the presence of dry land among the water or the fact of creaturely existence at all.

Aided by scripture, Calvin thinks that knowing the world will change the religious lives of Christians. For Calvin, contemplating creation is not an optional pastime, but is mandated by God. Commenting on God's resting on the seventh day, Calvin maintains that the seventh day was set aside that God "might fix our attention, and compel us…to pause and reflect" upon God's works.[92] This understanding of the Sabbath does not mean that creation deserves one seventh of our attention. Indeed, Calvin thinks that far too little attention is paid to God's work in creation:

> There is no doubt that the Lord would have us uninterruptedly occupied in this holy meditation; that, while we contemplate in all creatures, as in mirrors, those immense riches of his wisdom, justice, goodness, and power, we should not merely run over them cursorily, and, so to speak, with a fleeting glance; but we should ponder them at length, turn them over in our minds seriously and faithfully, and recollect them repeatedly.[93]

The goal of such intense contemplation is not primarily knowledge, at least inasmuch as knowledge is understood to mean propositions or facts. Calvin claims that those who contemplate God's revelation through creation will know that they have properly understood

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[90] Ibid., 114:5.
[91] Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.14.21.
[92] Calvin, *Genesis*, 1.5.
[93] Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.14.21.

"what it is for God to be Creator of heaven and earth," if attention to creation is applied "so that their very hearts are touched."[94] This change of heart, as it were, leads to a twofold way of relating to God. First, one will "reflect upon the greatness of the Artificer" who has created such a beautiful and orderly world.[95] Second, one will recognize not only that God has "destined all things for our good and our salvation" but also "feel his power and grace in ourselves…and so bestir ourselves to trust, invoke, praise, and love him."[96]

That knowledge of creation should lead to worship fits with Calvin's definition of piety: "I call 'piety' that reverence joined with love of God which the knowledge of his benefits induces."[97] If the knowledge of God's benefits bestowed in creation leads to reverence joined with love, then knowledge of creation must be chastened such that it leads to worship. To ignore creation entirely would be an act of ingratitude, but to mistake anything in creation for an object to be worshipped would be to fall into idolatry. Both ingratitude and idolatry prevent the worship of God.

The failure to worship is, for Calvin, to be taken with the utmost seriousness. Calvin insists that the world's "stability…depends on this rejoicing of God in his works; for did he not give vigour to the earth by his gracious and fatherly regard, as soon as he looked upon it with a severe countenance, he would make it tremble, and would burn up the very mountains."[98] What would cause God to no longer rejoice in his works according to Calvin? A failure of worship: "If on earth such praise of God does not come to pass, if God does not preserve His church to this end, then the whole order of nature will be thrown into confusion and creation will be annihilated

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[94] Ibid.
[95] Ibid.
[96] Ibid., 1.14.22.
[97] Ibid., 1.2.1.
[98] Calvin, *Psalms*, 104:32.

when there is no people to call upon God."[99] For the worship of God to cease would mean that creation is no longer functioning as it should. This would entail not simply a discontinuation of worship (as though there were some neutral position between right worship and idolatry) but would mean that some other idol was receiving humanity's praise and obedience. Calvin is, however, confident that God will "never leave himself without some to testify and declare his justice, goodness, and mercy."[100] So if some (though clearly not all) are lead by the revelation of scripture to participate in creation's worship of God, what is creation's status in this time before the eschaton?

Commenting on Romans 8:20, Calvin maintains that "However much, therefore, created things may be inclined by nature to some other course [i.e., rather than the will of God]…because He has given them a hope of a better condition, they sustain themselves with this, and postpone there longing until the incorruption which has been promised to them is revealed."[101] Why does creation maintain some semblance of order even in the continual presence of sin? Calvin's answer is that creation is sustained by hope of its restoration. This hope is not self-generated but is a gift given by the God who created, sustains, and will transform the cosmos.

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Having examined Calvin's theological epistemology of God and creation, it is clear that Calvin thinks knowing creation should lead one to faith in and worship of God. Though the fall impairs humanity's ability to perceive creation's revelation—distorting creation's witness into idolatrous temptations—scripture allows one to properly see the work of God in creation. The

[99] I here use W. David O. Taylor's translation from Calvin's commentary on Psalm 115:17. W. David O. Taylor, *The Theater of God's Glory: Calvin, Creation, and the Liturgical Arts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2017), 45.
[100] Calvin, *Psalms*, 115:17.
[101] Calvin, *Romans*, 8:20.

one area where it is not possible for humans to see clearly is history. Schreiner points out that when Calvin does exhort Christians to seek God's hand in history he points "not to the 'revolutions' and changes of the everyday world but to the 'mystery' of God's salvific plan."[102] But this would seem to point away from creation, because knowledge of the cosmos' redemption is not part of creation's revelation. So does Calvin's way of knowing God and creation leave one with an epistemic break between history and the rest of creation? It would seem that, for Calvin, the answer is yes. Scripture may enable one to contemplate creation such that the *sensus divinitatis*, the conscience, and the order of creation may rightly strengthen one's trust in God's sovereignty, but for the present time history remains confused.

Part II: Relating to and Feeling the World

For Calvin, understanding one's place in and relation to creation is pivotal for knowing and worshipping God. The revelation of God in scripture reforms humanity's ability to perceive God's work in creation, and this leads to faith and worship. What can be made of this way of knowing the world in the present time? Calvin thought observing the created order should bolster one's faith against the vicissitudes of history, but in the Anthropocene—this time when nature and human history have converged—what does it mean to know the world when even the stability of the created order seems to be becoming less and less certain? This part of the essay will consider that question by bringing Calvin's theological epistemology of creation into conversation with animism and affect theory. It would certainly be inaccurate to suggest that Calvin's theology was working within these epistemological frameworks. Instead, these frameworks may help Calvin's theology (as well as those who think and practice their religious faith through it) better address what it might mean for the creation to witness to its creator.

[102] Schreiner, *Theater*, 113.

Relating to the World: Animism

In his 1871 book *Primitive Cultures*, E.B. Tylor first developed the concept of animism, understood as the "doctrine of universal vitality."[103] Tylor understood animism to be the first stage in a cultural or civilizational evolutionary process moving through religion to science. Tylor argued that the "lower races" believed all things had a "ghost-soul" that he describes as "a thin unsubstantial human image, in its nature a sort of vapor, film, or shadow; the cause of life and thought in the individual it animates; independently possessing the personal consciousness and volition of its corporeal owner."[104] Though Tylor's animism carried with it explicitly racist and colonialist logics, scholars in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century are making efforts to rehabilitate the concept. This section will consider how animism, understood as what Nurit Bird-David calls "relational epistemology,"[105] might be brought together with Calvin's epistemology of creation.

Tim Ingold explains that one problem with contemporary evaluations of animistic beliefs is that persons or communities who attribute vitality or spirit to inert things do not simply *believe* something "about the world." Instead, their way of relating to things "could be described as a condition of being alive to the world, characterised by a heightened sensitivity and responsiveness, in perception and action, to an environment that is always in flux, never the same from one moment to the next."[106] According to Ingold, animacy is not a human projection onto things in the world but "is the dynamic, transformative potential of the entire field of relations

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[103] Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive Cultures: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art and Custom*, vol. 2 (New York: Holt, 1889), 285.
[104] Ibid., 387.
[105] Nurit Bird-David, "'Animism' Revisited: Personhood, Environment, and Relational Epistemology," *Current Anthropology* 40, no. S1 (1999): 77.
[106] Tim Ingold, *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 67-68.

within which beings of all kinds, more or less person-like, continually and reciprocally bring one another into existence."[107] Following Marilyn Strathern's concept of "dividual" (as opposed to "individual), Bird-David suggests that animism is characterized by the privileging of relations rather than of individual entities: "When I individuate a human being I am conscious of her 'in herself' (as a single separate entity); when I dividuate her I am conscious of how she relates with me."[108]

What Ingold and Bird-David describe is a framework in which one is attentive to the relations present in a particular context in order to understand how both oneself and certain things around oneself achieve the status of person. Contrary to Tylor's insistence that "primitives" mistakenly believed all things to have a "ghost-soul," Ingold and Bird-David point to the maintenance of personhood that takes place in animistic communities. Describing the practices of the Nayaka, a hunter-gatherer community in South India, Bird-David connects the way the Nayaka understand one another and the way the Nayaka know the Devaru or other-than-human persons in their environment. The human members of the community, Bird-David explains, get to know one another not "in themselves but…*as they interrelated with* each other, Nayaka-in-relatedness with fellow Nayaka."[109] The interrelated concepts of kinship and personhood are, for the Nayaka, understood as having to do with "sharing and relating."[110] In the same way, Nayaka understand their environment by considering their relationship to it: "Things are perceived in terms of what they *afford the actor-perceiver because of what they are for him*."[111] This is true for both things in the world that are considered to be persons or devaru, as well as for everything else. Certain stones or elephants may be devaru based upon actions of

[107] Ibid., 68.
[108] Bird-David, 72.
[109] Ibid.; emphasis in original.
[110] Ibid., 73.
[111] Ibid., 74; emphasis in original.

mutual recognition, while others may not.[112]

Nayaka maintenance this way of relating to the world through practice of the pandalu in which certain Nayaka, simultaneously in a ritual performance and trace-like behavior, "'bring to life' a variety of devaru." This practice entails the community's evaluation of how successfully the performers bring the devaru to life as well as communication between the Nayaka and the devaru performers.[113] Bird-David describes the pandalu as "'making [devaru] alive,' that is, raising people's awareness of their existence in-the-world and, dialectically, producing and being produced by this, socializing with them."[114] It makes little sense to dismiss the idea of devaru or the practice of pandalu by suggesting that one led to the other. First, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to make a causal argument based around how a practice creates an idea or vice versa. Second, the interaction with devaru that takes place within the pandalu is not a distinct reality from that which takes place in the environment. Both are, for the Nayaka, instances of relating to devaru. In her essay on "Eating Meat and Eating People," the philosopher Cora Diamond writes of that the idea of humans having duties to one another "is not a consequence of what human beings are…not justified by what human beings are: it is itself one of the things which go to build our notion of human beings."[115] Her point is that knowing what duties one has to humans and knowing what a human is are part of the same activity. Likewise, knowing how to relate to things in the world so as to be able to recognize devaru and the activity by which one practices relating to devaru are not necessarily distinguishable activities.

Bird-David argues that whereas a "modernist epistemology is a totalizing scheme of

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[112] "The lack of mutual engagement prevented the kind of relatedness which would have constituted *this* elephant (at *this* moment) as devaru while it might be perceived as dear on other occasions" (Bird-David, 75).
[113] Bird-David, 76.
[114] Ibid., 77.
[115] Cora Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and the Mind* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 324.

separated essences, approached ideally from a separated viewpoint, the object of this animistic knowledge is understanding relatedness from a related point of view within the shifting horizons of the related viewer."[116] If the modernist epistemologist seeks to know from a static distance, the relational knower seeks to understand what Tim Ingold calls the dynamic "meshwork"[117] of relationships that constitute oneself. Indeed, the modern scientific perspective "rests upon an impossible foundation, for in order to turn the world into an *object* of concern, it has to place itself above and beyond the very world it claims to understand."[118]

At this point one may want to ask: what has Nayaka to do with Geneva? To see some potential points of connection between Calvin's theology of creation and animism, one place to start is with the idea of creation as a witness or messenger. For Calvin to claim that "all creatures…are able to act as witnesses and messengers" of God's glory need not mean that creatures are only puppets or tools in divine control. Marilynne Robinson explains that Calvin's image of creation mirroring God describes "a state of being that is experiential, fluid, momentary and relational, and which reveals, without in any sense limiting or becoming identical with the thing revealed."[119] That creatures are witnesses, messengers, and mirrors of God does not mean they lose their creatureliness. In fact, the actions of witnessing, communicating, and mirroring do not point to a similarity between God and the creature but rather to a relationship. It is this relation with the divine that makes every creature—whether a tree, a bird, a sea, or a human—what it is.

It is not only the creature's relationship with the divine that, for Calvin, shapes each

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[116] Bird-David, 77.
[117] Ingold, 70.
[118] Ibid., 75.
[119] Marilynne Robinson, *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought* (New York: Picador, 2005), 217.

individual. Calvin sees humanity as a microcosm.[120] This can be understood as meaning that humanity's self-understanding is bound up with its relationship to the rest of creation. Here Calvin's imagination could be augmented by animism's relational epistemology. Calvin tends to see creation communicating God's work through its order, stability, beauty, and provision for human needs, but these are not the only way of relating to creatures. Few of Calvin's examples of relationships between human and nonhuman creatures entail mutuality. One striking exception is Calvin's insistence that those who possess land should "so partake of its yearly fruits, that he may not suffer the ground to be injured by his negligence."[121] While Calvin's concern here is with the potential fecundity of the land, the language of injury implies a mutuality between humans and a particular field. Does this mean that, for Calvin, land achieves something like the status of personhood? Probably not.

One does see, however, an openness to engaging with the world as speaking, witnessing, and teaching. If a modern epistemology, according to Bird-David and Ingold, requires achieving a distance from the object to be studied, then Calvin's theology can at least be said to emphasize the relatedness between humanity and the rest of creation. Since, for Calvin, God's revelation in creation takes place through both human and nonhuman creatures, no distance between oneself and the world is obviously possible. It is precisely the relationship between humanity and all the creatures of the world that matters for Calvin. When brought together with the relational epistemology of animism, Calvin's theology might be seen as helping to decenter the individual or the particular creature as occupying an all-consuming importance.

Feeling the World: Affect Theory

Bruno Latour once asked people at a conference what they thought the antonym of the word

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[120] Calvin, *Genesis*, 1:26; *Institutes*, 1.5.3.
[121] Calvin, *Genesis*, 2:15.

body was. Latour claims that the most "arresting" responses were "unaffected" and "death." From this he learns, "to have a body is to learn to be affected, meaning 'effectuated', moved, put into motion by other entities, humans or nonhumans. If you are not engaged in this learning you become insensitive, dumb, you drop dead."[122] This way of defining what it means to have a body draws attention to what it feels like to be embodied—a reality that often (perhaps usually) exceeds one's physical or discursive control. This section will consider how the turn to affect may enhance Calvin's epistemology of creation so that attention is paid to what it feels like to be a creature in the world. This section will engage primarily with Donovan Schaefer's *Religious Affects*, paying special attention to his concept of intransigence, the idea that affect both shapes the body and works with preexisting contours of embodied existence.

Schaefer sees affect theory as pushing back against the cultural-linguistic turn in religious studies and anthropology. He insists, "Accounts of power that reduce…phenomena to 'language-like systems' return to the logic of Enlightenment secularism, in which religion is always only a way of thinking."[123] To assert that the flows of power that shape experience can only be viewed through turning one's attention to language, to texts, thinks Schaefer, is to miss much of how power works on and through bodies. Bodies simply become texts to be read, and the experience of those bodies that cannot be rendered into language is granted little or no significance. Additionally, given the poststructuralist turn in philosophy of language, Schaefer sees the plasticity of texts being projected onto the plasticity of bodies. The substance, the materiality of bodies, then loses its importance as the malleability of its meaning threatens any notion of a

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[122] Bruno Latour, "How to talk about the body? The normative dimension of science studies," *Body and Society* 2(3): 205.
[123] Donovan Schaefer, *Religious Affects: Animality, Evolution, and Power* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 11.

body's stability or concreteness.[124]

Affect theory, in Schaefer's view, asks: "what if power was not a symbol system, but something enfolding and exceeding language in the ways it plays across bodies—a 'thing of the senses'?"[125] The turn to affect, is not simply about feelings or emotions, but what Schaefer calls "the sedimentation of how we feel."[126] Schaefer sees affect as negotiating a tension between the plasticity of bodies and the shapes left behind after power (be it physical, discursive, or affective) has done its work. To pay attention to affect is not move away from the sorts of rationality that can be expressed in language, but instead expands the scope of how bodies are understood. Bodies are not simply linguistic projections or hyper-malleable material, they contain—they are—workings that exceed language and that resist shaping.

Paying attention to affect also reveals the ways bodies are places of encounter between oneself and others. Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg, in their introduction to *The Affect Theory Reader*, claim that "Affect arises in the midst of *in-between-ness*: in the capacities to act and be acted upon."[127] This means there is no way to learn about the self without also learning about the others that make one who one is. For Schaefer, this allows interpreters of religion to not only pay attention to the way religion shapes the bodies of religionists, but also to notice the nonhuman entities that affect religious bodies.[128]

Schaefer develops the concept of intransigence to describe the way bodies both change and also remain resilient: "Rather than viewing bodies entirely in terms of a highly plastic set of

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[124] To be fair, Schaefer acknowledges that it is not simply the overly linguistic analysis of bodies that lose any notion of a body's static attributes. Some Deleuzian strains of affect theory also display this tendency. Schaefer, 13.
[125] Ibid., 23.
[126] Ibid., 35.
[127] Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg, "An Inventory of Shimmers," in *The Affect Theory Reader,* ed. Gregory J. Seighworth and Melissa Gregg (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 1.
[128] Schaefer, 35.

sculpted dispositions—a sort of phenomenological sand castle—affect theory is interested in the ways that the shapes of emotions express intransigence. Intransigent structures are susceptible to reconfiguration without being so flexible as to lack consistency."[129] Part of Schaefer's concern here has to do with how affective experiences can be shared. If bodies were totally plastic, then how would it be possible for certain experiences to produce the same affects across individuals, especially individuals across cultural-linguistic boundaries? There must, thinks Schaefer, be enough consistency in bodies to allow for shared experience while also being enough plasticity to allow for a diversity of experiences and expressions of experience.

Schaefer wants to ground intransigence in biological structures. He argues that "embodied histories are a convergence between biological histories and the lived experience of bodies navigating systems of power."[130] One way to think about this is to picture the intersection between understanding what one *is* and what one *does* (or what others do to one). To be a homo sapien does not wholly determine the meaning of one's experience, but one's actions always occur within that framework. To pay attention to the affective experience of being, say, a human being, is to understand "the way things feel for the kinds of animals we are."[131]

In Calvin's way of knowing creation, something like the affective turn is already evidenced. Calvin insists Christians should contemplate creation "so that their very hearts are touched."[132] This experience is not only evoked by observing nonhuman creatures, but also by feeling God's "power and grace in ourselves" so as to "bestir ourselves to trust, invoke, praise, and love him."[133] This affective experience shapes not only how one relates to God, but also one's relationship with the world itself. The world not only causes one to worship God, but becomes

[129] Ibid., 37.
[130] Ibid., 50-51.
[131] Ibid., 51.
[132] Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.14.21.
[133] Ibid., 1.14.22.

recognized as being a site of worship itself. Russ Leo suggests that, for Calvin, faith itself is something like a "pious affection which determines the relationship between man and God and which, in turn, organizes the subordinate affections…accordingly."[134]

Thinking through Calvin's epistemology of creation with affect theory, might help to expand how the *sensus divinitatis* is understood. To understand oneself as created, Calvin insists, is a type of knowledge that is not derived propositionally but nevertheless counts as knowledge. One might want to suggest here, that the *sensus* is an affective way of knowing, one that results from humanity's simultaneous awareness of its embodied existence and relationship with the divine. But, as has been seen, the *sensus* needs to be reformed by scripture. It needs faith in order for its knowledge to lead one to piety. Leo suggests that the knowledge of faith combines with the "'feeling' of God" of the *sensus* so that it "affords the communicant affective knowledge of God's benevolence and love, a knowledge which is proper to heart and mind because it, in effect, structures the division as well as the assembly (heart and mind together)."[135]

So, Calvin's epistemology of creation might be understood as an interaction between the knowledge and feeling of being a creature before God. This means that to know creation requires one to be cognizant of the structures both in oneself and in the world that make affect possible (in Schaefer's language, the intransigent arrangements that make one "the kinds of animals we are") as well as the affective experiences and transformations that take place through one's relationship with oneself, the world, and God. Affect theory allows for a more capacious understanding of knowledge, and since, for Calvin, properly knowing the world leads one into worship, faith and worship are expanded beyond simply right belief to include embodied dispositions.

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[134] Russ Leo, "Affect Before Spinoza: Reformed Faith, *Affectus*, and Experience in John Calvin, John Donne, John Milton, and Baruch Spinoza" (PhD diss., Duke University, 2009), 106.
[135] Ibid.

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Through these brief forays into animism and affect theory, Calvin's way of knowing God and creation has been shown to have some convergences with relational and embodied ways of knowing oneself and the world. What has not yet been addressed is how these conversations about knowing the world help to account for the problems of knowing the world in the time in which human history and nature can no longer be easily distinguished. While animism and affect theory might bring new ways of relating to and feeling into Calvin's theology, how do relational epistemology and affect offer new ways of understanding or correcting Calvin's insistence that the contemplation of creation can give solace to one's faith in the face of events that, to human eyes, appear anything but comforting? Beginning to answer this question will be the task of the final part of this essay.

Conclusion

In *We Have Never Been Modern*, Bruno Latour argues that the so-called modern world is founded on a divorce between the natural (i.e., nonhuman) world and the human social world.[136] In the modern world, science governs the way we know nature while human knowledge is left to politics. The problem with this arrangement, according to Latour, is that no one is particularly good at following through with the separation. Thus, the world is filled with hybrids:

> On page six, I learn that the Paris AIDS virus contaminated the culture medium in Professor Gallo's laboratory; that Mr Chirac and Mr Reagan had, however, solemnly sworn not to go back over the history of that discovery; that the chemical industry is not moving fast enough to market medications which militant patient organizations are vocally demanding; that the epidemic is spreading in sub-Saharan Africa. Once again, heads of state, chemists, biologists, desperate patients and industrialists find themselves caught up in a single uncertain story mixing biology and society.[137]

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[136] Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 13.
[137] Ibid., 2-3.

These hybrids are places where the natural and the social, the scientific and political, mix together to create monstrous problems. They are not monstrous because of their scale—though that may also be the case—but rather they are monstrous because they defy the rules of modernity. They blur the divide between nature and culture, and therefore they cannot be acknowledged for what they are.

While Calvin himself inhabited a world that had not yet been placed under the conditions of modernity that Latour narrates, one can see in the way he distinguishes between observing the created order and observing the events of human history a split similar to what Latour calls our "modern constitution."[138] In reality, human history and nature do not exist in separate spheres but are intermingled. Disasters such as famines, earthquakes, and hurricanes may not be clearly traceable to human causes (although sometimes it may be possible to do so), but the human responses (or failures to respond) often exacerbate the injustice of these situations. Neither Saudi Arabia nor the United States of America created the cholera epidemic in Yemen, but the Saudi led military campaign in the country (with little to no response from the U.S. government) did create the conditions for the disease to spread. With regard to climate change, political actors in the United States have sought to discredit evidence of humans having caused the phenomena as though the lack of a human cause logically implies that there is no need for any human response.

For Calvin, contemplating creation—with the help of God's revelation in scripture—should allow one to observe God's work in the world, but what happens to Calvin's epistemology of creation when nature and human history are no longer understood as separate spheres. One could suggest that Calvin is simply wrong in his confidence that the world communicates God's wisdom, goodness, power, and mercy. Calvin is most certainly incorrect about some of his claims about the world (to my knowledge scientists do not uphold the assertion of Calvin and the

[138] Ibid., 29.

natural philosophers of his day that it is the natural position of the waters of the earth to overtake the land). But Calvin's contention that the world communicates God's glory need not be so easily set aside.

This essay has brought Calvin's epistemology of creation into conversation with animism and affect theory in order to suggest that perhaps the most important contribution of Calvin's theology of creation is its potential for expanding what it means to know. If knowing the world simply means knowing *about* the world, then Calvin's way of knowing creation is probably no help for facing the problems posed by climate change. But if knowing carries with it the implication of relationship and feeling, then perhaps Calvin's way of knowing the self, the world, and God may at least lead those who think with and through him to better understand the ways their lives are bound up with the world. If knowing the world means being drawn into a relationship with one's environment, then, following Calvin, one may find that one's relationship with God is bound up with one's relationship with space. If feeling oneself to be loved by God entails an affective awareness of being a particular sort of a creature in a particular sort of place, then climate change threatens not only one's physical existence but one's religious or spiritual life as well.

These shifts in understanding what it means to know the world do not offer certainty in the face of disaster, but may offer new resources for thinking through the ways one commits oneself to one's particular place with its flora, fauna, and topography. Likewise, one's understanding of faith may shift as well. If faith and worship become impossible without creation, one may be compelled to take greater risks on behalf of God's creaturely witnesses and messengers. Calvin insists that the world is sustained by hope.[139] It will, no doubt, feel foolish to commit oneself to something merely hoped for, something not yet seen. In this way, perhaps creation is not

[139] Calvin, *Romans*, 8:20.

communicating as clearly as Calvin thought it would.

In his book, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*, the philosopher Jonathan Lear reflects on what it might mean for one to understand ideals as no longer livable.[140] The first part of the book focusses on Plenty Coups, a Crow chief, who assesses that "after the buffalo went away things ceased to happen."[141] For him to make this claim meant that his Crow way of life, the things which make Crow life meaningful, were so bound up with the life of the buffalo, that with their virtual extinction Crow life—at least as previously understood—was no longer possible. It is difficult to imagine Christians making such a claim about their particular way of life within the created world. Perhaps this is because Christian life, whatever this entails, is not relationally or affectively as bound to any particular part of creation as was Crow life. But perhaps, in the face of a crisis as large and complex as climate change, Christians will learn to stake the meaning of their lives to the world. Perhaps in committing themselves to know the world—to understand themselves as formed by their relationships with creation and feel their creatureliness as dependent upon it—Christians may find hope. Lear insists that "radical hope anticipates a good for which those who have the hope as yet lack the appropriate concepts with which to understand it."[142] In learning to know and love God and the world with John Calvin perhaps all that can be asked for is to "feel [God's] power and grace in ourselves."[143] Even if we fail to understand what God's grace and power means for the future, we can hope that it will be enough for us.

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[140] Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 52.
[141] Ibid., 39.
[142] Ibid., 103.
[143] John Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.14.22.

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