

Does Calvinism Make God the Author of Evil?

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Arminians often insist that if "God from all eternity did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass" (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, III.1) then He *must* be morally responsible for evil. If His decree caused everything that happens, they claim, that makes Him the Cause of evil, and that in turn contradicts James 1:13 and 1 John 1:5.

How have Calvinists responded to that charge?

Classic Calvinism does teach, of course, that God's eternal decree is a binding verdict that set everything in motion toward a predetermined end, and God remains sovereign in the outworking of His providence. (*Providence* speaks of His purposeful care and management of everything He created). The decree is *eternal*, meaning it was issued before the foundation of the world. It is God's own sovereign *fiat* (authoritative edict). The word *fiat* is Latin for "let it be done."

But He ordained the means as well as the end. In other words, God is not the direct cause ("the *efficient* cause") of all that He decreed. He is by no means a mere passive observer of unfolding events, nor is He subject to any higher or more determinate will than His own. But His "let it be done" is not necessarily the exact logical equivalent of "I Myself will do this." (See, for example, Job 1:12; 2:6.)

But isn't it still the case that God's decree ultimately causes "whatever comes to pass"?

Well, yes, in one sense. But there is more than one sense of the word *cause*. We rightly distinguish between *efficient* and *final* causes (sometimes labeled *proximate* and *ultimate* causes). These are not concepts made up on the fly for the benefit of dodging Arminian objections. The distinctions between various kinds of causes are long-established differentiations—elementary concepts of truth and logic that go back at least as far as Aristotle.

Aristotle, for example, named *four* categories of cause:

1. **The Final Cause**—that for the sake of which something happens
2. **The Efficient Cause**—the agent whose action produces the effect
3. **The Material Cause**—the substance that gives being to the effect
4. **The Formal Cause**—the shape, pattern, definition, or species of the effect

From the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy's "Aristotle" entry:

The development of potentiality to actuality is one of the most important aspects of Aristotle's philosophy. It was intended to solve the difficulties which earlier thinkers had raised with reference to the beginnings of existence and the relations of the one and many. The actual vs. potential state of things is explained in terms of the causes which act on things. There are four causes:

1. Material cause, or the elements *out of which* an object is created;
2. Efficient cause, or the means *by which* it is created;
3. Formal cause, or the expression of *what* it is;
4. Final cause, or the end *for which* it is.

Take, for example, a bronze statue. Its material cause is the bronze itself. Its efficient cause is the sculptor, insofar has he forces the bronze into shape. The formal cause is the idea of the completed statue. The final cause is the idea of the statue as it *prompts* the sculptor to act on the bronze.

God is the *final cause*; not the *efficient cause* of evil.

To illustrate that someone or something can be the "final cause" of an evil act and yet not be held morally responsible for it, consider these examples:

1. My friend, without my consent, robs a bank to get money to help pay my medical bills. He is the *efficient cause* of the action. He is morally culpable. I am the *final cause*, the one for whose sake the thing was done, yet I am not morally culpable.
2. My enemy, in a fit of rage over something I have done or said, goes on a wanton spree of vandalism. He is arrested, tried, and found guilty, because he is the *efficient cause*. Yet he continues to blame me for the episode. Indeed, I am the *final cause*—for he did this because of me. But I am not morally culpable.
3. A car thief caught in a sting operation makes the futile plea that he is not guilty because he would never have stolen that car if the police had not left it unlocked with the keys in the ignition. Here the cops are absolutely the *final cause*, because they staged the opportunity for the crime in order to catch a ring of serial car thieves operating in the neighborhood. The thief himself is the *efficient cause*. He is also the only person in this scenario with evil intent.

Those are not perfect examples, because there is no exact parallel to a sovereign God, but those examples do clearly illustrate how someone can “cause” an evil action that he or she is not morally culpable for.

In examples 2 and 3, the perpetrator wants to transfer blame from himself, the *efficient cause*, to someone else, the *final cause* in each case. This is what Arminians typically try to do with God, pinning the moral responsibility for all evil on Him, as the *Final Cause*. But the blame for any evil thing lies first of all with the *efficient cause*.

I for one am willing to accept by faith what Scripture

teaches: God is wholly sovereign and has decreed all things according to the sovereign counsel of his own will (Isaiah 46:9-10); yet He is not to blame for the evil His creatures do.

Look again at paragraph III.1 from the Westminster Confession:

God from all eternity did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass: yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures, nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established.

Clearly, historic Calvinism has always recognized the necessary distinction between differing kinds of “causes.” Arminian arguments that deliberately or ignorantly equivocate on the meaning of the word *cause* are both facile and invalid.

Would Calvin himself agree with this account of what Calvinism teaches?

Every now and then an Arminian zealot will try to claim that John Calvin’s own view of the decree was more rigid than that of confessional Calvinism. It’s quite true that Calvin rejected the notion that God’s decree allowed for sin by *bare permission*. He argued (as I have here) that God is by no means passive in the administration of His providence. God *ordained* whatever comes to pass, not unwillingly, but (as noted previously) by sovereign fiat.

We do sometimes use the language of *permission* to describe God’s sovereign control over evil (as in the case of Job, or Peter in Luke 22:31). But we are *not* appealing to “*bare permission*” in the sense Arminians use the expression—that is, making an artificial distinction between “will” and “permission.” In other words, we are not

portraying God as reluctantly suffering that which He is powerless to forestall.

In that regard, Calvinists affirm that divine predestination rendered Adam's fall *necessary*, and *certain*. Calvin himself (*Institutes* 3.23.8) cites Augustine to this effect:

I will not hesitate, therefore, simply to confess with Augustine that the will of God is necessity, and that every thing is necessary which he has willed; just as those things will certainly happen which he has foreseen (Augustine, *De Genesi ad litterum*, Lib. 6, c. 15.)

Calvin, however, goes on to argue that the damnation of the wicked is still just, because the wicked are deserving of such a punishment. They themselves, not God, are the source of the evil for which they are condemned.

Calvin says, "Though their perdition depends on the predestination of God, the cause and matter of it is in themselves." That statement is the segue into this famous quotation:

Man therefore falls, divine providence so ordaining, but he falls by his own fault. The Lord had a little before declared that all the things which he had made were very good, (Gen. 1: 31.) Whence then the depravity of man, which made him revolt from God? Lest it should be supposed that it was from his creation, God had expressly approved what proceeded from himself. Therefore man's own wickedness corrupted the pure nature which he had received from God, and his ruin brought with it the destruction of all his posterity. Wherefore, let us in the corruption of human nature contemplate the evident cause of condemnation, (a cause which comes more closely home to us,) rather than inquire into a cause hidden and almost incomprehensible in the predestination of God.

A more readable translation may make the sense of Calvin's statement clearer:

... The Lord had declared that "everything that he had made . . . was exceedingly good" [Gen. 1:31]. Whence, then comes this wickedness to man, that he should fall away from his God? Lest we should think it comes from creation, God had put His stamp of approval on what had come forth from Himself. **By his own evil**

intention, then, man corrupted the pure nature he had received from the Lord; and by his fall drew all his posterity with him into destruction. Accordingly, we should contemplate the evident cause of condemnation in the corrupt nature of humanity—which is closer to us—rather than seek a hidden and utterly incomprehensible cause in God's predestination. [Institutes 3.23.8]

Clearly, when Calvin argues against "permission," *he is not ruling out secondary causes, nor is he denying the liberty or contingency of sinful agents, nor is he making God the source and author of their sin.* In other words, Calvin does not make God the efficient cause of everything. On the contrary, he emphatically denies that God is the source of the evil in fallen man. *The sinner, not God, is the source of sin.*

But why does Calvin begin that very section of his *Institutes* [3.23.8] by objecting to the word *permission*? And Why does he include a whole section [1.18.1] titled “*No mere ‘permission’!*”?

Again, what Calvin objected to was “the distinction between will and permission.” Calvin argued powerfully against an incipient form of Arminianism which said God's sovereignty over evil goes no further than an *inactive* and *unwilling* permission. The proto-Arminians were saying that God has somehow chosen to limit His sovereignty and therefore He has no sovereign control over evil. God is always and only passive with regard to evil, they said. Or, to employ Calvin's exact words, they denied the doctrine of providence and “substitute[d] a bare permission for the providence of God, as if he sat in a watch-tower waiting for fortuitous events, his judgements meanwhile depending on the will of man” [Institutes 1.18.1].

Notice: what Calvin attacked was "**bare** permission," described by Calvin himself as the notion that God is passive and at the mercy of others' choices. Calvin replied to the free-will zealots of his era by pointing out two ways in which God exercises an active sovereignty over evil [[Institutes 2.4.3](#)]:

1. **By deserting them.** He sometimes withdraws His restraining influence from evil agents when it suits His purposes to do so
2. **By delivering them over to Satan.** He sometimes governs employs the activities of evil agents to achieve His own holy ends

In neither case—and in no *other* case—is God ever the effectual cause or the agent of the evil.

Now, Arminians (and extreme hyper-Calvinists) sometimes cite Calvin's arguments against *bare* (passive, unwilling) permission and claim Calvin actually meant to teach that Calvinists should never use the word *permission* to describe how God sovereignly works. In effect, they are claiming that God, if sovereign, must always be the effectual agent and immediate cause of every action. They moreover sometimes claim that this idea is either standard mainstream Calvinist teaching—or that it's a necessary inference from Calvinist doctrines.

That is an utterly absurd claim on the face of it, for if God never acted by permission in any sense, there would be no such thing as “second causes”—a phrase found in practically all classic Calvinist confessions.

One other quote from Calvin will serve to show where the Reformer stood on the question of whether God is the author or efficient cause of evil. This is from Calvin's comments on Isaiah 45:7 (“I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, **and create evil:** I the LORD do all these things”):

Fanatics torture this word *evil*, as if God were the author of evil, that is, of sin; but it is very obvious how ridiculously they abuse this

passage of the Prophet . . . we ought not to reject the ordinary distinction, that ***God is the author of the “evil” of punishment, but not of the “evil” of guilt.***

In other words, God creates calamity and misfortune for evildoers, but not ontological evil *per se*. Never does Calvin suggest that God forces, coerces, or constrains anyone to sin via an active, efficient agency. Indeed, he emphatically denies all such thinking.

Here is the bottom line: *The matter and guilt of evil lie in man, not God.* He is light and in Him is no darkness at all. He cannot be tempted; neither does He tempt any man. The fact of God's sovereignty does not alter any of this; nor does it make God morally responsible for evil. To suggest otherwise is to be guilty of high blasphemy.

Is this indeed the common teaching of classic Calvinism?

The Westminster Confession of Faith teaches the very same view I have defended here:

The almighty power, unsearchable wisdom, and infinite goodness of God so far manifest themselves in His providence, that it extends itself even to the first fall, and all other sins of angels and men; and that not by a bare permission, but such as has joined with it a most wise and powerful bounding, and otherwise ordering, and governing of them, in a manifold dispensation, to His own holy ends; yet so, as the sinfulness thereof proceeds only from the creature, and not from God, who, being most holy and righteous, neither is nor can be the author or approver of sin. [WCF V.4]

That's what Calvin himself taught, and that's what authentic Calvinism has always stressed.