

WAS CALVIN AN IMPLICIT PANTHEIST? NOMINALIST THEISM, SECONDARY CAUSATION, AND THE ELEATIC PRINCIPLE

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ABSTRACT

This paper defends Fairbairn's charge that Calvin's theology is implicitly pantheistic. It is argued that Calvin's model of divine sovereignty entails occasionalism, which in turn necessitates pantheism via the Eleatic Principle. That this problem is not contrived is also illustrated by means of an examination of the metaphysics of Jonathan Edwards. However, while the problem to which Fairbairn drew our attention is particularly visible in Calvin's theology, it is argued that the same defect is present in all forms of nominalist theism. The fundamental problem is not Calvin's claim that God is the sole efficient cause; rather, in saying this, Calvin merely made explicit what is, in fact, implicit in all forms of nominalist theism, and thereby made the line of argument concluding in pantheism slightly more succinct. The real issue is the fact that nominalist theism makes efficient causation the only ontological bridge between the Creator and the creation. Efficient causation is not capable of serving this role. Only the Platonic doctrine of participation is capable of relating the Creator to the created order in a manner which maintains the integrity of both domains.

KEYWORDS

Calvinism, nominalism, Platonism, causation, theism, Eleatic Principle

"Calvin was as pure, though not as conscious and consistent a Pantheist as Spinoza."¹

"Spinoza . . . may be said to have perfected and reduced to philosophical consistency the Calvinistic conception of Deity."²

Andrew M. Fairbairn,

The Place of Christ in Modern Theology

1 Andrew M. Fairbairn, *The Place of Christ in Modern Theology* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1893), 164 (scanned PDF copy of original publication from Princeton Theological Seminary Library available from <https://archive.org/details/placnmooofair>, downloaded 3/6/2016).

2 Fairbairn, *Place of Christ*, 165–6.

“But being in order is all that we call God, who is, and there is none else besides Him.”³

Jonathan Edwards, *Miscellanies*

“Whatsoever is, is in God, and without God nothing can be, or be conceived.”⁴

Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics*

INTRODUCTION

In his 1893 classic, *The Place of Christ in Modern Theology*, Andrew Fairbairn made a startling claim, that the most orthodox of Protestants, John Calvin, was implicitly a pantheist. He claimed that the only difference between Calvin’s conception of deity, and that of Spinoza, was that the latter was more logically consistent.⁵ Fairbairn, of course, did not say that Calvin was an explicit pantheist. Calvin never overtly embraced pantheism; at a conscious level his confession of faith was robustly opposed to the doctrine. The charge that Fairbairn made, however, is that whatever Calvin’s conscious intentions, an unwitting consequence of Calvin’s doctrine of God is that the distinction between the Creator and the creation, upon which he placed so much emphasis, must ultimately collapse altogether.

The basic problem in Calvin’s thought, according to Fairbairn, relates to his central theme of the absolute sovereignty of God.⁶ As the Reformed evangelical writers Sproul, Gerstner, and Lindsley put it: “There is no disputing the fact that Calvin did not claim to be a pantheist. The great question of Fairbairn is, if Calvin maintained that there is only one efficient will in the universe, how could he be anything other than an *implicit* pantheist?”⁷

Calvin’s problem with pantheism, as understood by Fairbairn, is a corollary of his claim that God is the sole efficient will. It is a product of how Calvin conceives of God’s sovereignty in metaphysical terms. An obvious comeback to which defenders of Calvin can resort, therefore, is to appeal to his doctrine of secondary causation. Calvin unambiguously affirmed the reality of secondary causes.⁸ He was not, at least not explicitly, an occasionalist. On this basis, some defenders of Calvin have argued that Fairbairn’s objection is based on a crude misreading. For example, Warfield accuses Fairbairn of having “miss[ed] his [Calvin’s] meaning altogether.”⁹ The question is, however, whether Calvin’s affirmation of the reality of

3 Jonathan Edwards, *The Philosophy of Jonathan Edwards, From His Private Notebooks*, ed. H.G. Townsend (Eugene: University of Oregon Press, 1955), 74.

4 Benedict de Spinoza, *The Ethics (Ethica Ordine Geometrico Demonstrata)*, trans. R.H.M. Elwes (Project Gutenberg, 2003), <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/3800/3800-h/3800-h.htm>, accessed 17/4/2017, part 1, proposition 15.

5 Fairbairn, *Place of Christ*, 164–6.

6 Fairbairn, *Place of Christ*, 164–6.

7 R.C. Sproul, J. Gerstner, and A. Lindsley, *Classical Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Academic Books/Zondervan, 1984), 294.

8 He writes, “the Christian will not overlook inferior [i.e. secondary] causes.” John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 191 (L17.9).

9 Benjamin B. Warfield, “Calvin’s Doctrine of God,” *The Princeton Theological Review* 7 (1909), 381–436.

secondary causes is logically consistent with his views about the nature of divine sovereignty. This question will be explored in this paper. That there is a real problem in Calvin's thought in this respect, which is not merely a contrivance on the part of his opponents, will be illustrated by considering the trajectory of the thought of Jonathan Edwards, the most metaphysically rigorous of Calvin's successors.

In this paper, it will be argued that the problem to which Fairbairn draws our attention, is not, in fact, specific to Calvinism. Rather, the fundamental problem is a consequence of nominalism with respect to the transcendent. That is, it will be argued that this problem of a collapse into pantheism is inherent not only to Calvinism, but to all forms of nominalist theism, including Arminian versions of this ontology (such as the Molinist nominalist theism of William Lane Craig).¹⁰ It is only because Calvin happens to have presented the central thesis of nominalist theism with uncompromising force and clarity (that God is "entirely other"),¹¹ that the charge of pantheism has been levelled against him. Nominalist theism attempts to bridge the Creator-creation gap by relying on *efficient causation*. That is why God's causal agency is so strongly emphasised in Calvin. Nominalist theism has left no other ontological bridge between God and the creation except for efficient causation. As it turns out, this bridge is not strong enough to carry the weight that must be placed on it, resulting in an inevitable catastrophic failure in which the two domains merge into one. It will be argued that the only real solution to this problem, which enables a genuine distinction between the Creator and the creation to be retained in a stable manner, is a return to "realism with respect to the transcendent"; that is, to participatory theism, or Platonism.

FOUR KINDS OF GOD

At this point, it may be helpful to distinguish, in broadbrush terms, four main positions regarding the relation of God to the created order. This relates to the question of divine immanence, but it must be borne in mind that there are various ways in which immanence can be fleshed out. Even if it is denied that God is present ontologically in the world, a doctrine of immanence might be proposed which is centred around causation rather than being, and/or which asserts God's presence in the world in some other way. So here we are concerned not with immanence in a broad sense, but only with "ontological immanence." Here, then, are the four main possible positions:

1. Nominalist theism: God is not in the world, the world is not in God
2. Participatory theism: God is (in a limited manner) in the world, the world is not in God
3. Pantheism: God is (in a limited manner) in the world, the world is (completely) in God
4. Pantheism: God is (completely) in the world, the world is (completely) in God.

10 William L. Craig, *God Over All: Divine Aseity and the Challenge of Platonism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

11 C. M. N. Eire, *War Against the Idols: The Reformation of Worship from Erasmus to Calvin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 197.

Participatory theism is merely another term for Platonism.¹² It is necessary, however, to say something more about nominalist theism. The basic assertion of nominalist theism is that God is “entirely other”¹³ to the created order. This means that whatever it is that grounds universals in the created realm metaphysically, these grounds are wholly confined to the created realm, and are not eternal or grounded in the divine. That is, nominalist theism involves a denial of the Platonic theory of Forms. It is possible for a nominalist theist to be realist with respect to universals in the created realm. More consistently, a nominalist theist might be a nominalist in a general sense. But what justifies the phrase “nominalist theism” is that all these kinds of theories maintain a nominalism *with respect to the transcendent*.

To explain further what is meant by “nominalism with respect to the transcendent,” we might begin by observing that there are some predicates which are routinely employed to describe both God and the created order. For example, “is righteous.” We might say “Job was righteous,” but we also say, “God is righteous.” The key feature of nominalist theism is that it is nominalist in how it treats the two predicates in this kind of case. Whatever justifies the use of the predicate metaphysically when applied to God, and whatever establishes the predicate when applied to a creature, those grounds cannot be the same real universal instantiated in both cases. Otherwise, given that God is righteous by nature, we have a universal which is eternal and uncreated, but which is also instantiated in the created order; and that just takes us back to the idea of participation. While nominalist theism may not necessarily be nominalist in general terms, it is nominalist in terms of how it relates the created order to God. The nominalism in question is a vertical nominalism (God/creation), and not necessarily a horizontal one (creation/creation). And this is what justifies the use of the term “nominalist theism.” Nominalist theism maintains a strict “Creator-creature distinction.”¹⁴ It is for this reason that there really are no mediating positions between participatory theism and nominalist theism, in the way that there are mediating positions in relation to the general problem of universals, between Platonic realism¹⁵ and nominalism.¹⁶

CALVIN, NOMINALIST THEISM, AND DIVINE IMMANENCE

The Magisterial Reformation was influenced by medieval nominalism from the outset. Luther studied under a number of nominalist philosophers, and was deeply impressed by William of Ockham and his nominalist critique of Aristotle.¹⁷ Some have argued that Zwingli’s thought is thoroughly imbued with Ockhamism.¹⁸ Calvin was also heavily influenced by the

12 On Plato’s theism, see Eugenio Benitez, “The Good or the Demiurge: Causation and the Unity of Good in Plato,” *Apeiron* 28 (1995), 113–40.

13 Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 197.

14 Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, ed. W. Edgar (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2007), 72.

15 The Platonist position regarding universals is traditionally called “realism” in this context. See Nicholas Wolterstorff, *On Universals: An Essay in Ontology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 106, 169–70.

16 See for instance, David M. Armstrong, *Universals: An Opinionated Introduction* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1989). The term “nominalist” can be used in a historical sense to refer to a particular school of fourteenth-century medieval scholastic theology, or in an analytic philosophical sense to refer to a certain type of doctrine concerning the nature of universals. These terms overlap, however, because the historical nominalists were the first to formulate the theory which is now known as nominalism in a philosophical sense.

17 Sproul, Gerstner, and Lindsley, *Classical Apologetics*, 197.

18 W.P. Stephens, *The Theology of Huldrych Zwingli* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 6.

medieval nominalists,¹⁹ whose thought was almost in the air that was breathed in the French universities at the time. It was the nominalists who stressed God's sovereignty and freedom, both central themes in Calvin.²⁰ But given the broad impact of nominalism on the magisterial reformers, why specifically select Calvin as the archetypal representative of nominalist theism? The answer lies in the radical insistence found in Calvin that God is "entirely other,"²¹ and his insistence, in opposition to Lutheranism, on the principle *finitum non capax infiniti*.²² In other words, it is in Calvin that the "Creator-creature distinction" reaches its zenith. Regardless of influences, therefore, it is in Calvin's actual doctrine of God that we find nominalist theism most rigorously and absolutely expressed.²³ Luther and his successors, by way of contrast, muddy the waters with the idea that the finite can contain the infinite, which enables divinity to reside ontologically in ordinary everyday created entities, and therefore allows a "Creator-creature overlap."

Before moving on, it is necessary to say something about Calvin's doctrine of divine immanence. Calvin's dominant way of presenting God as engaged with creation is to use the concept of efficient causation, or, in other words, in terms of omnipotence. Calvin is emphatic that God is causally in control of everything, everywhere. Whenever God's presence in the world is discussed, it is most frequently in terms of the divine will causally determining events and things in the created realm, bringing them into being or changing them, either directly, or by means of secondary causes.²⁴ However, as a less prominent theme, Calvin also characterises immanence with reference to divine omnipresence. He insists that all three persons of the Trinity are present in their fullness everywhere, and that God "fill[s] all things in an invisible manner."²⁵ The problem is that, because they are not ontologically elucidated, it is challenging to see what these claims actually mean in metaphysical terms, given Calvin's radical cleavage between the Creator and the creation. We have in Calvin's writings only a few spatial allusions (such as that God "fills" all things, or is "present" at every spatial location).²⁶ However, he seems to explicitly undercut every possible ontological ground for understanding such statements (by asserting that God is "entirely other," and that the finite cannot contain the infinite).

This problem is perhaps best brought out by considering the problem of divine omnipresence in Cartesian thought, where it has received much more attention. By characterising the material universe in terms of extension, and minds in terms of thought,

19 See A.E. McGrath, "John Calvin and Late Medieval Thought. A Study in Late Medieval Influences upon Calvin's Theological Thought," *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 77 (1986), 58–78. Also S.M. Heim, "The Powers of God: Calvin and Late Medieval Thought," *Andover Newton Quarterly* 19 (1979), 156–66.

20 Heim, "Power of God," 157.

21 Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 197.

22 Calvin does not explicitly affirm this principle, but it is implicit in his attack on the Lutheran understanding of the Eucharist: "Let no property be assigned to his body inconsistent with his human nature. This is done when it is either said to be infinite, or made to occupy a variety of places at the same time." *Institutes*, 571 (IV.17.19).

23 It remains a matter of dispute whether Calvin was a nominalist in a general sense. Whether he was or not, he clearly was a nominalist with respect to the transcendent, i.e., a nominalist theist.

24 See the *Institutes*, 175–6 (I.16.4); and the examples in Heim, "Power of God," 158–9.

25 Calvin, *Institutes*, 583 (IV.17.29). See also I.13.1 (109–10).

26 Calvin, *Institutes*, 583 (IV.17.29), 109–10 (I.13.1).

Descartes created a radical ontological “mind-matter distinction” that is an almost perfect analogue of Calvin’s “Creator-creature distinction.” As in Calvin, God and the material universe are “entirely other” for Descartes; the only difference is that for Descartes there are also other minds besides God which are similarly “entirely other” to the physical world. Thought and extension are, on Descartes’ view, absolutely distinct attributes, like chalk and cheese—or, to use Calvin’s famous contrast between God and humans, like fire and water.²⁷ This distinction caused no end of difficulty for Descartes and his successors—who of course intended their philosophy to be consistent with Christian orthodoxy—with respect to the doctrine of omnipresence.²⁸ The problem is well summed up by Sir Isaac Newton, who wrote: “If we say with Descartes that extension is body, then . . . the distinction between mind and body in his philosophy becomes unintelligible, unless at the same time we say that the mind is in no way extended, and so is not substantially present to any extension, that is, exists nowhere.”²⁹

Returning to the problem of omnipresence in Calvin, his defenders might respond that the words he used to describe God’s presence in spatial terms are being employed only analogously.³⁰ That, however, is not the problem. As I have discussed elsewhere, Platonists also speak analogously of metaphysical realities.³¹ The problem with Calvin’s view is that there does not seem to be any metaphysical content with which to “pad out” the analogy. It is a “thin analogy,” which asserts that in some mysterious way God is entirely other, but yet is also spatially related to the creation; and that the finite cannot contain the infinite, but yet finite space contains at every point an infinite God. Whereas for the Platonist, the analogy is “rich” and can be extensively expanded and elucidated ontologically using the doctrine of participation and the formal/ eminent distinction.³²

JONATHAN EDWARDS AS A CASE STUDY OF THE COLLAPSE INTO PANTHEISM

The challenges that nominalist theism encounters in elaborating a doctrine of divine omnipresence, points to its primary weakness: how to relate the two distinct realms of God and the creation. That this is so can be seen by following the line of argument that led, in the realm of philosophy, from Descartes to Spinoza, and which came perilously close to being followed through upon within Calvinism in the thought of Jonathan Edwards. Edwards was forced to conclude that “God is the only real substance,”³³ and that God is “in effect being in

27 John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. 1, trans. W. Pringle (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), comments on John 4:24.

28 J. W. Reid, “The Spatial Presence of Spirits among the Cartesians,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 46 (2008), 91–117.

29 Newton, *De Gravitatione*, quoted in Robert Pasnau, *Metaphysical Themes 1274–1671* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2011), 330–1.

30 As an example of this defence in another context, see M.S. Horton, “Hellenistic or Hebrew? Open Theism and Reformed Theological Method,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 45 (2002), 317–41.

31 Albert R. Haig, “Modernity, ‘Radical Orthodoxy,’ and Cornelius Van Til: A Journey of Rediscovery of Participatory Theism,” *Colloquium* 47 (2015), 257–73.

32 In the Platonist view, extension is contained eminently in God, but not formally.

33 William S. Morris, *The Young Jonathan Edwards: A Reconstruction* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2005), 347.

general.”³⁴ In saying this, Edwards seems to have virtually affirmed pantheism, since there is barely a hair’s breadth between saying that “God is the only real substance,” and saying “God is the only substance.” The latter formula, of course, is explicit pantheism and the catchcry of Spinoza (“Besides God no substance can be granted or conceived”).³⁵ Indeed, astonishingly for those who know Edwards only as an orthodox Calvinist revivalist, in his private notebooks (the *Miscellanies*) he employs the scripture-derived phrase “Thou art, and there is none beside thee,” not to show that God is the only god, but that God is the only true thing that exists.³⁶ Repeatedly, he seems to affirm positions which are hard to construe as anything but pantheistic.³⁷ For example, in discussing a human reflecting on one of their own thoughts (with the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum* perhaps in the back of his mind), he writes of the ontological basis of that thought:

But if we say ‘tis the substance of the soul, if we mean that there is some substance besides that thought that brings that thought forth, if it be God, I acknowledge it; but if there be meant something else that has no properties, it seems to me absurd. If the removal of all properties, such as extension, solidity, thought, etc., leaves nothing, it seems to me that no substance is anything besides them; for if there be anything besides, there might remain something when these are removed.³⁸

A very plausible interpretation of this passage is that Edwards is arguing here that there is no substance except God, and that everything else (all other “substances,” including human souls, material objects, and so forth) are merely aggregates of properties or attributes within that one substance. That is *precisely* the doctrine of Spinoza. While it seems amazing that a Calvinist theologian would affirm the teachings of Spinoza, there seems no satisfactory alternative explanation for the texts.

Wainwright has defended Edwards against the charge of pantheism by asserting that for Edwards the relation between God and the world involved “creative volition and its immediate effects.”³⁹ However, even the arch-pantheist Spinoza speaks repeatedly of God and the world in terms of agent causality.⁴⁰ Furthermore, Wainwright himself admits that Edwards *was* an explicit occasionalist.⁴¹ Since, as outlined below, occasionalism entails pantheism, if Edwards wasn’t a pantheist, he should have been.

34 William J. Wainwright, “Edwards, Jonathan,” in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, 2nd ed., ed. R. Audi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 253.

35 Spinoza, *Ethics*, part 1, proposition 14.

36 Derived from 1 Samuel 2:2. Jonathan Edwards, *Miscellanies*, cited in Morris, *Young Jonathan Edwards*, 347.

37 Edwards’s natural philosophy centred on the idea that “the world is one organic whole; though of necessity a tight system, it is not a mechanism; it is the continuous ordered creative expression of the one proper substance, the one true being, from whom all things take their origin. For he is, and there is nought else beside.” Morris, *Young Jonathan Edwards*, 348.

38 Edwards, *Philosophy of Jonathan Edwards*, 78.

39 William J. Wainwright, “Jonathan Edwards,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2012 Edition), ed. E. N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2012/entries/edwards/>, accessed 17/4/2017.

40 “God is the sole free cause,” “God is the cause of those things which are in him,” “God acts solely by the laws of his own nature, and is not constrained by anyone,” etc. Spinoza, *Ethics*, part 1.

41 In Edwards’s writings, “the doctrine of God’s absolute sovereignty is explicated by occasionalism.” Wainwright, *Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, 253.

STEP ONE: SECONDARY CAUSES AND OCCASIONALISM

The doctrine of occasionalism states that everything that happens is caused by God's direct action to make it happen. So, striking a match does not cause fire; rather, God reliably produces fire whenever matches are struck. The striking of the match is an "occasion" for God to act in producing fire. On this view, the laws of nature are just descriptions of regularities in God's actions.⁴² Calvin, as has already been noted, explicitly denies occasionalism.⁴³ We must keep in mind, however, that the issue is not what Calvin actually affirmed (he clearly was not an explicit occasionalist), but is rather, what is logically entailed by his core doctrinal commitments. It is worth noting, however, that even in Calvin's overt declarations about causality, commentators have found echoes of occasionalism: "At times, however, he so stresses God's direct action as to sound almost like an occasionalist. He argues for instance that though we are nourished by bread, it is not the bread itself which nourishes us but 'God's secret blessing.'"⁴⁴ The problem arises because of Calvin's insistence that God's will is the sole efficient cause.⁴⁵ Heim writes that "He insists that all individual events *are* directly willed by God . . . For Calvin, the *potentia absoluta* does not only 'indicate what God could have done but what he actually does.'"⁴⁶

Calvin's view that God is the sole efficient cause logically excludes secondary causation, despite his desire to retain secondary causes within his system. However, denying that God is the sole efficient cause, and arguing for secondary causation that is truly independent of God in the created realm, does not solve the problem either; indeed, this was the position of Descartes, who wanted his philosophy to provide scope for a mechanistic conception of the physical universe. Calvin and Descartes are caught on the horns of a dilemma; although neither were explicit occasionalists, either approach results in a collapse into occasionalism. That this is so can be illustrated by the fact that Calvin's most philosophically literate successor, Jonathan Edwards, adopted an explicit occasionalism,⁴⁷ as did Descartes' most important successor, Nicolas Malebranche.⁴⁸

The problem with secondary causation for nominalist theism is as follows. Suppose, in the created realm, that A causes B. Did God will that both A should happen, and also, B? Calvin emphatically replied "yes"; whereas Descartes replied, "not necessarily." Either answer is problematic. To begin with Calvin, the essential problem is that God, in Calvin's view, is omnipotent. If God wills that A should happen, and B should happen, that is in and of itself a sufficient condition for both happening. Any further cause would be redundant,

42 Occasionalism developed originally in the context of medieval Islamic theology, from which it spread into European thought via Nicholas of Autrecourt in the first half of the fourteenth century. It re-emerged amongst the Cartesians, although Descartes himself was not an occasionalist. See Sukjae Lee, "Occasionalism," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016 Edition), ed. E.N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/occasionalism/>, accessed 27/8/2017.

43 Calvin, *Institutes*, 191 (117.9).

44 Heim, "Power of God," 158.

45 Sproul et al., *Classical Apologetics*, 293.

46 Heim, "Power of God," 159.

47 Wainwright, *Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, 253.

48 Nicolas Malebranche, *Dialogues on Metaphysics and on Religion*, trans. M. Ginsberg (London: Routledge, 2013), 51–61.

and unnecessary (it would represent “causal overdetermination”).⁴⁹ This would mean that all secondary causes were superfluous; if they were removed from the system, everything would still unfold in an identical manner. What sense is there, under such conditions, to even say such causes exist? They have no discernible impact upon anything.

One might argue that God wills that B should happen, not directly, but by means of a secondary cause. An analogy might be that I might will something, but might choose to let someone else bring it about, rather than doing it myself. The problem with such analogies, however, is that they only make sense because I am not omnipotent. If everything I willed immediately came about, the option of doing it myself or finding some other means would never present itself. In willing for B to come about by means of secondary causes, it seems that God is still willing for it to come about;⁵⁰ and therefore, its occurrence is guaranteed simply by virtue of divine omnipotence. There are only two options left for secondary causes to be viable. If A is the true secondary cause of B, then either God’s willing B is not efficacious in bringing B about (i.e. God is not omnipotent), or God does not will B, but only “permits” it to happen (which contradicts Calvin’s emphatic repeated assertions). It is to this second option, which Calvin rejected but Descartes adopted, which we now turn, to show that it, too, must lead to occasionalism.

Let us suppose, with Descartes, that there is true secondary causation, whereby A causes B, and God does not will B. There is one special case which needs to be considered separately: the will of free agents, since Descartes, unlike Calvin, held to a (quite radical)⁵¹ doctrine of contra-causal free will. Leaving contra-causal free will aside for a moment, and dealing only with other causal interactions, the idea that God only “permits” such things to occur without willing them, seems incoherent. Suppose that A occurs and causes B, through physical causation (or the laws of nature, however one conceives of these). It is God, the Creator, who wills that the causal relation in question should hold (that events of type A should cause events of type B). Given that A occurs, God surely knows that the causal relation in question will produce B. So how could God will that A should produce B, and yet not be willing B, granted A? If a person wills something, they will everything that they know will certainly flow from that choice. There can be for God no “unintended consequences”; every consequence is foreseen (keep in mind that we are not speaking of free-will choices here, only of other instances of causation).⁵² Of course, God may not *desire* some of the consequences; but that is another matter. It seems, therefore, that Calvin was correct to assert that, under the kind of nominalist theistic system that he presupposed, God is the sole efficient cause. It

49 Jaegwon Kim, “Causation,” in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, 2nd ed., ed. R. Audi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 127.

50 The issue here is not the distinction which some Calvinists make between a “will of desire” and a “will of decree” in God, as in John Piper, “Are there two wills in God? Divine election and God’s desire for all to be saved,” in *The Grace of God, the Bondage of the Will*, vol. 1, ed. T. R. Schreiner and B. A. Ware (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), 107–31. The discussion here only involves God’s will of decree.

51 Descartes held that the will is *always* contra-causally free, in every single decision it makes. He wrote, “the will is by its nature so free that it can’t ever be constrained.” René Descartes, *Passions of the Soul*, trans. J. Bennett (Early Modern Texts, 2010), <http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/descartes1649.pdf>, accessed 17/4/2017, part I, article 41.

52 Most theists who hold to contra-causal free will hold that God foreknows the choices of free agents anyway; but a few (so-called “open theists”) do not, hence the qualification here, so as to be as general as possible in the argument.

is just that he was inconsistent in not drawing from this the required conclusion, namely, that secondary causation is an illusion, and that occasionalism is true. Indeed, the phrase “God is the sole efficient cause” is a perfect summary of the doctrine of occasionalism.

The issue of contra-causal free will, however, has not yet been addressed. There are, in the incompatibilist free will model, certain events (the choices of free agents) which have no causal antecedents. The line of argument above would not require us to suppose that God wills those choices.⁵³ Such choices of free agents are the one exception to the rule. However, whatever flows from the choices of free will agents, God would have to will. Of course, this willing might be regretful, and only because God wishes for created free agents to have some genuine influence on the world (otherwise their freedom would be pointless). But in any case, we are left with only two options, both of them occasionalist. There is a deterministic option, in which everything that occurs is willed by God; and there is a libertarian option, in which everything except the choices of free agents is willed by God, those choices having no causal antecedents, but also having no efficacy, except by virtue of God’s will. But either approach is occasionalist.

Before moving on to step two of the argument, it is worthwhile summarising why Platonism avoids this dilemma. On the Platonist view, efficient causation is just an aspect or part of the structure of Form. Unlike nominalist theism, participatory theism may make use of formal causation as well as efficient causation. The universe as a whole participates in its Form, as does every individual thing or substance within the universe. The whole distinction between divine causation and secondary causation has to be recast. Something of God’s own being is emanated (Form), which interacts with (is “finitised” by) a principle of individuation.⁵⁴ As a result, efficient causal relations are not ontologically “external” to God, since the Forms themselves remain divine. On this view, all efficient causal relationships within the universe are merely expressions of Form (temporality itself being an expression of Form, as is spatial extension). They occur “within” some Form or other. Efficient causal interactions between things or substances must be incorporated within some larger Form of which both are a part, which is why the universe as a whole must have a Form.⁵⁵

In the Platonist view, there are not divine causal relations on the one hand, and secondary causal relations on the other. Rather, every efficient causal relationship is divine *and* secondary at the same time. Whether divine or secondary is the appropriate description in any given case depends on the frame of reference; that is, which Form in the “great chain of being” one is speaking of at the time. Whatever happens is both God’s actual willing *and is also* a secondary or “natural” causal relation. The “natural” causal relation participates in the divine willing, and may be said to be an instance of it. But it may equally be said to be

53 Whether there is such a thing as contra-causal free will or not, is irrelevant to the present argument, and will not be addressed here.

54 How this principle of individuation, or Plotinian “matter” (*hylē*), came into existence is an extremely complex problem which cannot be addressed here. A genuinely theistic Platonism must avoid both the Scylla of panentheism, and the Charybdis of positing an ultimate dualism.

55 Hence the “soul of the All” (*hē psuchē tou pantos*) of Plotinus’s *Enneads* and Plato’s *Philebus*. Plotinus, *Ennead IV*, trans. A.H. Armstrong, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 52–55 (IV,3,7); Plato, “Philebus,” in *Plato: Complete Works*, trans. D. Frede, ed. J. M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1997), 418 (30a–b).

natural, in relation to the “lower” Form of which it is a structural component. Whether one speaks of a particular efficient causal relation as being divine or as being secondary is purely a function of the (implicit or explicit) perspective one is adopting; which Form one has in view when making the statement. Efficient causal relations can only be described relative to some Form, within which they inhere. Thus, the dichotomy created by nominalism, between divine and secondary causes, is abolished. In the words of Étienne Gilson, “we must hold firmly to two apparently contradictory truths. God does whatever creatures do; and that creatures themselves do whatever they do.”⁵⁶ It is only participatory theism that can ground this apparent contradiction in a coherent metaphysical theory. Nominalist theism must ultimately collapse into an unstable oscillation between two irreconcilable opposing poles: divine causation versus secondary causation, pantheism versus naturalism.

STEP TWO: FROM OCCASIONALISM TO PANTHEISM VIA THE ELEATIC PRINCIPLE

Having, then, argued that nominalist theism must collapse into occasionalism (whether of the libertarian or deterministic variety), all that needs to be shown is that occasionalism entails pantheism. This argument requires a crucial additional premise called the Eleatic Principle, after the character in Plato’s *Sophist*, the Eleatic Stranger, who suggests that the essential characteristic of being is causal power.⁵⁷ In contemporary analytic philosophy, the principle was resurrected by David Armstrong,⁵⁸ and has been defended by a range of philosophers, though also coming under criticism.⁵⁹ Colyvan summarises the principle as follows: “This principle justifies belief in only those entities to which causal power can be attributed, that is, to those entities which can bring about changes in the world.”⁶⁰ In a modern context, the principle serves mainly as a principle of inductive reasoning, as a justification for preferring one theory over another. However, the context in the present case is rather different, and is closer to what Plato originally had in mind. All orthodox Christians, even if they are nominalists, must hold to an ontology of substances. That is, while it is perhaps possible to reject the idea that universals are real, while remaining broadly orthodox, it is not possible to reject the idea that substance is real, and remain orthodox. Therefore, views which regard particulars as nothing more than bundles of universals, which Armstrong calls “bundle theories,”⁶¹ or which reject the idea of substance in other ways (such as the idealism of David Hume), are not viable for the purposes of a Christian metaphysic. It is doubtful whether such views could be made compatible with theism of any variety at all.

56 Cited in Michael J. Dodds, *Unlocking Divine Action: Contemporary Science and Thomas Aquinas* (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2012), 208.

57 Plato, “Sophist,” in *Plato*, vol. 7, trans. H. N. Fowler, ed. J. Henderson, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1921), 378–9 (247e).

58 David M. Armstrong, *Universals and Scientific Realism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978).

59 Mark Colyvan, “Can the Eleatic Principle Be Justified?,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 28 (1998), 313–36.

60 Colyvan, “Eleatic Principle,” 313.

61 Armstrong, *Universals: An Opinionated Introduction*, 59–64.

Having accepted an ontology of substances, then, the question becomes, what things should be said to be substances, as opposed to mere bundles which form a part of some greater substance?⁶² There is no need to develop a rigid set of criteria to determine this: indeed, it might be argued, as in Wittgenstein's famous example of "what is a game?," that no such set of explicit criteria are possible at all;⁶³ but at best only rough and ready loose guidelines which approximate our language usage. That is, our ordinary conceptual division of the world into subjects about which we can predicate may not be based upon "principles" which can be expressed in language at all (the conceptual structure of language may be transcendental).⁶⁴ We do not require the Eleatic Principle, therefore, to be a sufficient condition for identifying substance. The question is, however, whether it is at least a necessary condition. That is, could there be a substance which had no causal influence on anything else whatsoever?

A rigorous argument for the Eleatic Principle lies outside the scope of this paper. It seems, however, that to posit the existence of a substance that had no causal influence upon anything whatsoever would render the idea of substance rather meaningless. As has been noted, the intuitive appeal of the Eleatic Principle is strong.⁶⁵ Furthermore, although there are some contemporary analytic philosophers who have rejected it, this fact is, for two reasons, of little significance in the present context. Firstly, these philosophers have invariably been motivated by their explicit commitment to atheistic naturalism, and the primary alternative they present is not tenable for a theist: that an entity has to have a spatio-temporal location in order to be real.⁶⁶ Secondly, these philosophers are not confining the principle to the question of substances only (or even at all), but are applying it indiscriminately to everything in a proposed ontology, including abstract entities, properties, and what might easily be considered bundles (or parts of some larger whole) rather than substances. None of their objections, therefore, seem telling in the present context. A causally inert substance would seem to have no *telos* or end. It would serve no purpose in the scheme of things.

Given the Eleatic Principle, pantheism follows from occasionalism straightforwardly. Occasionalism states that only God's will is causally efficacious; therefore, by the Eleatic Principle, God is the only substance, and only God exists. There is only one infinite substance, God. Spinoza was the greatest, and the most systematically precise, philosopher of early modern rationalism. Unlike Calvin, Edwards, Descartes, and Malebranche, he was prepared to disavow religious orthodoxy and violate confessional boundaries in order to maintain rigorous logical consistency; he was the only one of these writers willing to be expelled by his community as a heretic. His philosophy represents the final cul-de-sac into which those who follow along the path taken by Calvin and Descartes must end. Because participatory theism avoids occasionalism, as discussed above, it likewise avoids pantheism. Thus, we are

62 This question can, on the Platonist view, be rephrased in terms of Form, since whatever has a unified Form is a substance.

63 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations: The German Text, with a Revised English Translation*, 3rd ed., trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, (Malden: Blackwell, 2001), 27e–28e.

64 I have discussed this elsewhere (Haig, "Modernity, 'Radical Orthodoxy,' and Cornelius Van Til," 259–61).

65 Colyvan, "Eleatic Principle," 133.

66 Colyvan, "Eleatic Principle," 135.

left in agreement with Milbank that only the Platonic doctrine of participation is capable of “allowing finite things their own integrity.”⁶⁷

NOMINALIST THEISM AND THE NECESSARY PART OF THE CAUSAL NEXUS

There is another, quite distinct, problem with nominalist theism with respect to the causal “bridge” across the Creator-creation divide. In order for God to be omnipotent, it must be the case that certain causal relations necessarily hold true, independently of God’s willing them or bringing them to be. If God wills that A, then, given divine omnipotence, A must thereby be caused to happen. Hence, an efficient causal relation exists between God’s willing A, and A. Since God is omnipotent, such a relation must always exist between God’s will and its realised object. The question is, what is it that makes this causal relation hold? What is the “bonding” or “agency” between the cause and the effect, known in philosophy as the *causal nexus*?⁶⁸ It cannot be the case that God himself wills these causal relations to hold, because God could not exercise any power unless they already were operational. In other words, God cannot be omnipotent by means of willing it to be so. These causal relations (between God’s will and its effects) cannot be grounded in God’s will itself. They must hold necessarily, and not be created. Whatever establishes these causal relations, therefore, must comprise a necessary component of the causal nexus; a part of the causal nexus that possesses aseity, and exists eternally and necessarily.

Given that causal relations must have some ontological grounding,⁶⁹ the response of the nominalist theist will no doubt be to try to argue that this necessary part of the causal nexus is in some sense an aspect or component of God’s nature. After all, it is the essential ingredient of omnipotence, and could be said to be God’s “power.” The problem is that, assuming nominalist theism to be true, it is difficult to see how this could be so. The causal relations in question are relations *between* the Creator and the creation. These causal relations can only be actualised or exemplified when there is a creation (or, their becoming actualised necessarily requires the creation also to become actualised). One might argue, though, that while these causal relations themselves hold between God and the creation, and they are therefore themselves distinct from the divine essence, nonetheless the *ontological grounds* for these causal relations is completely contained within the divine essence. But given the assumptions of nominalist theism, how can something within the divine essence, ground something outside of the divine essence, except by means of the very causal relations in question? According to nominalist theism, efficient causation is the one and only bridge or connection between the otherwise “entirely other” realms of Creator and creation.

67 John Milbank, “Suspending the Material: The Turn of Radical Orthodoxy,” in *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, ed. J. Milbank, C. Pickstock, and G. Ward (London: Routledge, 1999), 1–20, at 3.

68 Mario Bunge, “The Revival of Causality,” in *Contemporary Philosophy: A New Survey*, vol. 2, ed. G. Floistad (The Hague: Springer, 1982), 133–55.

69 Theories of causation which deny this, such as Hume’s characterisation of causation as the mere “constant conjunction” of events, are in general both implausible and incompatible with theism. See David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Early Modern Texts, 2008), 29–41, <http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/hume1748.pdf>, accessed 17/4/2017.

There is a way out for nominalist theism in relation to this problem, but it is a very unpalatable one. The nominalist theist could abandon traditional theism, and say that, in fact, the necessary part of the causal nexus does possess aseity and exist eternally and necessarily apart from God. This would be like saying that God requires an eternal stage on which to act. Such a claim would resolve this dilemma, at the cost of adopting a non-traditional theism.⁷⁰

Before moving on, it is worth making explicit why participatory theism avoids this problem. As noted above, according to participatory theism, efficient causation is merely an aspect of Form. The efficient causal relations that do exist between God and the creation are ultimately simply a part or aspect of the highest Form, the Form of the Good, God.⁷¹ They participate in God, and so do the created things which are produced. Thus, there is an ontological connection between the created thing and God (in that created things participate in God), which provides the foundation for the causal relation between them. According to participatory theism, efficient causal relations are not the only “bridge” between God and creation. In fact, they are just a secondary aspect of the fundamental bridge, which is ontological in nature: participation. Both the causal relations between God and creation, and the Form of the created things themselves, are contained eminently in God. From the point of view of Form, which includes all efficient causal relations, God’s creation might be considered as an emanation. There is no rigid Creator-creation divide; rather, there is a kind of Creator-creation overlap.

CONCLUSION

It has been argued that Fairbairn’s claim that Calvin’s doctrine of God is implicitly pantheistic is correct. However, while the problem to which Fairbairn drew our attention is particularly visible in Calvin’s theology, it has also been argued that the same defect is present in all forms of nominalist theism. The fundamental problem is not Calvin’s claim that God is the sole efficient cause. In saying this, Calvin merely made explicit what is, in fact, implicit in all forms of nominalist theism, and thereby made the line of argument concluding in pantheism slightly more succinct. The real issue is the fact that nominalist theism makes efficient causation the only ontological bridge between the Creator and the creation. For a number of reasons which have been discussed in this article, efficient causation is not capable of serving this role. Only the Platonic doctrine of participation is capable of relating the Creator to the created order in a manner which maintains the integrity of both domains.

⁷⁰ This means that the common criticism of Platonism that it requires a denial that God alone possesses aseity (see Craig, *God Over All*, 12) can be turned against nominalist theism.

⁷¹ This leaves out some internal complexities. In Platonism, the realm of the Forms (*nous*) functions as an intermediary between the Form of the Good (the One) and the temporal, created realm.