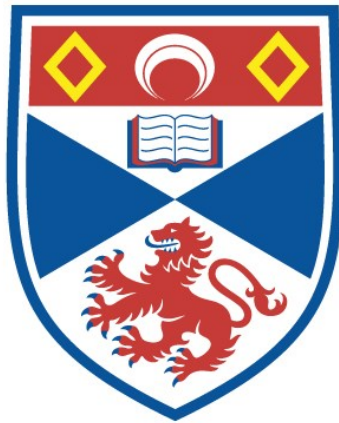


**A GREAT KING ABOVE ALL GODS: DOMINION AND DIVINE
GOVERNMENT IN THE THEOLOGY OF JOHN OWEN**

Timothy Robert Baylor

**A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD
at the
University of St Andrews**



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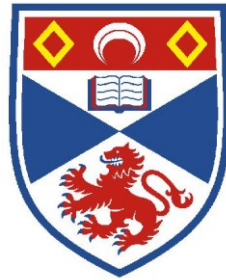
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**A Great King Above All Gods: Dominion and Divine
Government in the Theology of John Owen**

Timothy Robert Baylor



University of
St Andrews

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Divinity
at the
University of St Andrews

May 2016

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	iii
Abbreviations.	v
Abstract.	vi
Introduction	1
Chapter 1: The Divine Will.....	8
1.1 The Nature of the Divine Decree Excursus: The Question of Development	
1.2 The Freedom of the Divine Will	
1.3 The End of the Divine Will	
Chapter 2: Creation and the Natural Dependence of Rational Creatures.....	38
2.1 The Dogmatic Function of the Doctrine of Creation	
2.2 Trinity and the Creative Act(s)	
2.2.1 Creation <i>Ex Nihilo</i>	
2.2.2 The Work of Distinction	
2.3 The Sixth Day	
2.3.1 Human Nature	
2.3.2 Human Vocation and the Image of God	
Chapter 3: Law and the Moral Dependence of Rational Creatures.....	73
3.1 Divine Law and the Moral Dependence of Rational Creatures	
3.1.1 Species of Divine Law	
3.1.2 Natural Law and Natural Rights	
3.1.3 God's Natural Right to Rule	
3.2 Moral Obligation	
3.3 The Righteousness of God's Rule	

Chapter 4: The Covenant and the Ends of Rational Creatures.....	110
4.1 Divine Justice and Covenant Theology	
4.1.1 Divine Dominion and the Critique of Merit-Theology	
4.1.2 The Covenant and the Justice of God	
4.1.3 Remunerative Justice and the Question of Divine Obligation	
4.2 The Covenant of Works	
4.3 The Sabbath and the Ends of Rational Creatures	
Chapter 5: The Mercy of God.....	158
5.1 The Freedom of God’s Mercy	
5.2 The <i>Pactum Salutis</i> and the Form of God’s Mercy	
5.3 The Intention of God’s Redeeming Mercy	
Conclusion.....	188
Bibliography.....	193

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Abbreviations

Comm. — John Calvin. *Calvin's Commentaries*. 22 Volumes. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1974.

CTJ — Calvin Theological Journal

IJST — International Journal of Systematic Theology

MD — Francisco Suárez. *Disputationes Metaphysicæ*. Salamancæ: apud Ioannem et Andream Renaut fratres, 1597.

MJT — Mid-America Journal of Theology

NPNF — Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, ed. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*. Series 1-2. 28 Volumes. London: T&T Clark, 1886-1900.

SCG — Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Contra Gentiles*. 5 Volumes. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1976.

SCJ — Sixteenth Century Journal

ST — Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologiæ*. 61 Volumes. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

PRRD — Richard A. Muller. *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy*. 4 Volumes. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003.

Works — John Owen. *The Works of John Owen*. 24 Volumes. Edited by William H. Goold. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1850-1855.

WTJ — Westminster Theological Journal

Abstract

Scholarship has tended to depict John Owen as a “Reformed catholic” attempting a synthesis of Reformed principles with a largely Thomist doctrine of God. In this thesis, I argue that this depiction risks losing sight of those aspects of Owen’s doctrine of God that are intended to support a distinctly Protestant account of the economy of grace. By an examination of the principles of divine government, I argue that Owen employs the theme of God’s “dominion” in order to establish the freedom and gratuity of God’s grace, and to resist theologies that might otherwise use the doctrine of creation to structure and norm God’s government of creatures.

In chapter one, I argue against prevailing readings of Owen’s thought that his theology of the divine will is, in fact, “voluntarist” in nature, prioritizing God’s will over his intellect in the determination of the divine decree. I show that Owen regards God’s absolute dominion as an entailment of his ontological priority over creatures. Chapters two and three examine the character of God’s dominion over creatures in virtue of their “two-fold dependence” upon him as both Creator and Lawgiver. Chapter four takes up Owen’s theology of God’s remunerative justice in the context of his covenant theology. I show here that his doctrine of divine dominion underwrites his critique of merit-theology and attempts to establish the gratuity of that supernatural end to which humans are destined. Finally, in chapter five, I examine the principles of God’s mercy, expressed in the work of redemption, where I demonstrate how Owen’s conception of divine dominion underwrites the freedom of God in election and his account of particular redemption.

Come, let us sing for joy to the LORD; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation. Let us come before him with thanksgiving and extol him with music and song.

For the LORD is the great God, the great King above all gods. In his hand are the depths of the earth, and the mountain peaks belong to him. The sea is his, for he made it, and his hands formed the dry land.

Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the LORD our Maker; for he is our God and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care.

Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did at Meribah, as you did that day at Massah in the desert, where your fathers tested and tried me, though they had seen what I did. For forty years I was angry with that generation; I said, "They are a people whose hearts go astray, and they have not known my ways." So I declared on oath in my anger, "They shall never enter my rest."

— Psalm 95:1-11

INTRODUCTION

The last two decades has seen something of a renaissance in scholastic theology. The development is, in many respects, a very welcome one as it has shed light on a period of Reformed teaching that has been very poorly appreciated. Among the thinkers who have benefitted from this renaissance has been the work of John Owen. Owen was a personal advisor to Oliver Cromwell and Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University during the years of the Interregnum. In addition to being a very notable public figure, and the *de facto* leader of religious Independents, he enjoyed a reputation as one of the finest theologians of his day. In the estimation of many, he is one of the most penetrating minds that has come out of the Reformed tradition. The renewed interest in the Reformed scholastics has greatly benefitted Owen. The last two decades have seen the publication of many significant research monographs exploring various dimensions of his theology.¹

Recent scholarship, most notably that of Carl Trueman and Christopher Cleveland, have characterized Owen as a Reformed Thomist.² Thomas, of course, formed a basic point of departure for the scholasticism of the Middle Ages. As a scholastic enterprise, Reformed Orthodoxy was itself nurtured under the very long shadow of Thomas, and the influence of Thomas is clearly represented in Owen's thought. But to designate Owen as a "Thomist" is somewhat misleading. Not only does it impute a level of metaphysical depth and coherence that Owen's theology rarely achieves, it also unhelpfully homogenizes the diversity of influences that significantly shape his thought. In order for the classification to fit, "Thomism" must be reduced a generic kind of scholasticism. The classification itself is a matter of relatively little importance. But what matters much more is what this classification potentially *conceals* about the nature of Owen's theological project, particularly in terms of his dogmatic interests and priorities. Readings such as this one attempt to maximize the

¹ Carl Trueman, *The Claims of Truth: John Owen's Trinitarian Theology* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1998); Sebastian Rehnman, *Divine Discourse: The Theological Methodology of John Owen* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002); Trueman, *John Owen: Reformed Catholic, Renaissance Man* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007); Kelly Kopic, *Communion with God: The Divine and the Human in the Theology of John Owen* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007); Brian Kay, *Trinitarian Spirituality: John Owen and the Doctrine of God in Western Devotion* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 2007); Alan Spence, *Incarnation and Inspiration: John Owen and the Coherence of Christology* (London: T&T Clark, 2007); Christopher Cleveland, *Thomism in John Owen* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011); Ryan McGraw, *A Heavenly Directory: Trinitarian Piety, Public Worship and a Reassessment of John Owen's Theology* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014); Edwin Tay, "The Priesthood of Christ in the Atonement Theology of John Owen" (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 2010); Andrew Leslie, *The Light of Grace: On the Authority of Scripture and Christian Faith* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015).

continuity between Owen's doctrine of God and those of his Catholic forbearers. But this emphasis tends to suppress those aspects which Owen builds into his doctrine of God for the express purpose of supporting his distinctly Protestant account of the economy of grace. And, these aspects of Owen's thought emerge quite quickly if one attends to Owen's teaching about the nature of divine government.

Classically understood, divine government is the act by which God moves creatures toward their final end. The concept is more comprehensive than that of "providence", comprising not only teaching about the nature of divine action, but also the purposes and ends for which God moves creatures, as well as the instruments by which he moves them. The doctrine thus seeks to relate first principles about the nature of God and the created order to God's superintendence of creatures. As such, it takes in a very wide ambit of theological judgments about the created order, God's relation to creatures, and the manner and means of God's agency in the world. In contrast with most Thomist accounts, Owen's theology of divine government is distinguished by the restricted place it accords to the doctrine of creation, and by the greater doctrinal scope it accords to divine freedom and the adventitious character of divine grace.

The character of this emphasis is perhaps best observed in the concept of "divine dominion". "Dominion" comes from the Latin *dominium*, which refers to the power or right of ownership which one maintains over a thing possessed. To speak of God's "dominion" over creatures is thus to speak of his right to rule over them and to dispose of them in a manner that he sees fit. This concept features with some regularity across the scope of Owen's writings, performing a variety of different functions. Owen sometimes uses it in describing God's ontological priority over creatures, or his right to rule over them. At other points, it simply refers to his freedom, or the absoluteness of his authority. In some instances, he calls on the concept in order to speak of some divine act as extra-ordinary in the technical sense of being "outside" the established order. In such cases, it points up the limits of some created order and the power of God to fit that order to purpose.

One of the regular applications of the concept is its function alongside Owen's anti-Pelagian critique and his critique of natural religion. This was, of course, a matter of great

² Trueman, *Claims of Truth*, 110; *John Owen*, 22-24; *ibid.*, "John Owen's *Dissertation on Divine Justice*", *Calvin Theological Journal*, 33 (1998): 87-103; Cleveland, *Thomism*, *passim*.

concern in Owen's immediate context. The Socinians were one of Owen's most consistent targets throughout the course of his writing career. Owen regularly opposed the Socinians for what he described as their attempt "to set forth and adorn a natural religion; as if it were sufficient unto all ends of our living unto God".³ Their rejection of the Trinity and of Christ's satisfaction, their cooperative soteriology and their unreserved commitment to reason as the rule of faith are all, to Owen's mind, evidence of the natural order coming to comprehend and absorb the supernatural. At each point, Owen is fighting simply to maintain the distinction between God and creatures and the dependence of the natural order upon the supernatural. Socinianism represents an error of a completely different magnitude, yet nevertheless, Owen thinks that Arminian and Catholic theologies, in a variety of respects, share with the Socinians an inflated conception of how the natural order determines the form of divine government. When engaging these traditions through his anti-Pelagian critique or his critique of natural religion, Owen often invokes the concept of divine dominion for polemical purposes, to degrade theologies which use the doctrine of creation to place (what Owen deems to be) inappropriate strictures on God's freedom.

Scrutiny of this aspect of Owen's thought, therefore, will enable us to observe how he conceives of the relation between God and creatures, the degree to which this relation is fixed by the natural order itself, and the respects in which creation itself is open to adaptation from above. It is my contention that attending to these various aspects of Owen's theology of divine government will offer us a better vantage point from which to assess the dogmatic priorities that govern Owen's thought. Among other things, I think this study will show that, while Owen's accounts of the doctrine of God and creation are more or less consistent, his engagement with these doctrines tends to be very occasional, as it touches on some particular aspect of the economy of grace. As a result, his doctrine of God and of creation tend to be somewhat fragmentary and less than systematic. This is, in part, a consequence of Owen's aversion to forms of theological discourse that he regarded as venturing too far from the idiom of Scripture into philosophical and metaphysical "curiosities".⁴ But this also reflects something of the material character of Owen's theological program as a whole — namely, its preoccupation with the work of redemption. As I will demonstrate in this study, many of Owen's most critical judgments about the nature of God and God's government of creatures

³ John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, 24 vols. ed. William H. Goold (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1850-1855), 1:134.

⁴ See Rehnman, *Divine Discourse*, 73-83, 109-129.

are ultimately determined by particular aspects of his soteriology. This habit reveals a set of dogmatic priorities very different from those of traditional Thomism, and raises interesting and important questions about the nature of Owen's doctrine of God and the manner in which it underwrites his account of the work of redemption.

In chapter one, I will challenge the prevailing reading of Owen's account of the divine will. In contrast with Trueman, who sees an emerging "intellectualism" in Owen's thought, I will argue that Owen consistently maintains a "voluntarist"⁵ position, even if he does modify its application. I will here introduce the concept of God's "dominion" as a correlate to the native freedom of the divine will. Further, I will show how this concept influences Owen's understanding of the nature and order of the divine decrees.

Chapter two will examine Owen's theology of creation. The doctrine of creation forms the backbone of any scholastic theology, and so in this chapter I will introduce the principle concepts that frame Owen's account of divine government. I will demonstrate that Owen's account of divine dominion leads him to a doctrine of creation which, while somewhat minimalist in nature, advances a very strong understanding of the creature's natural dependence upon God, and accords the Spirit's grace an essential role in the image of God and so also in a truly human existence.

From there, we will move on to chapter three, where we will consider the creature's moral dependence upon God as a Lawgiver. This chapter will show how God's dominion over creatures shapes the nature of the moral life. By examining the various species of divine law and the nature of moral obligation, we will see that Owen employs his theology of divine dominion to resist accounts of natural law that construe the moral goodness of any act in terms of its natural advantage. Owen's critique of natural religion thus leads him to concentrate moral action around the movement of the will toward God as its final end. As a result, Owen radically reduces natural law as a source and natural reason as a rule of moral knowledge.

⁵ It is, in my estimation, somewhat misleading to speak of "intellectualism" and "voluntarism" as though they were well defined traditions of Christian thought. In truth, these are frequently used to incorporate an uncomfortably wide array of views about the doctrine of God. And though it is certainly not an insignificant matter, inferences about the systematic importance of the priority of the divine intellect or will are also routinely exaggerated and overdrawn. Still, the terms are useful for naming a pattern of judgments about the causal relationship between the divine intellect and will. I have therefore kept the terms in scare-quotes throughout, in order to signify the somewhat artificial nature of this classification.

Having acquired an understanding of the “two-fold dependence” of rational creatures upon God, chapter four will assess Owen’s theology of the covenant as an instrument of divine government. This will entail an account of God’s “remunerative justice”, setting Owen’s covenant theology in context of the merit-theology of the late Middle Ages. This chapter will demonstrate that Owen employs his account of divine dominion as part of his larger anti-Pelagian critique in order to resist soteriologies that locate the basis of the creature’s merit in the natural order itself. Instead, Owen argues that any merit on the part of creatures presupposes some free promise of God, by which he binds his absolute dominion and commits to reward the creature’s act. We will look at some length at the relationship between the covenant and the natural order, particularly as it relates to the ground of the supernatural end to which humans are destined. Though a tension remains in his writings on this point, I argue that ultimately the trajectory of Owen’s thought would lead us to the conclusion that creation exists only for the sake of the covenant.

Finally, in chapter five, we will turn to the principles of God’s redeeming work in order to evaluate Owen’s theology of mercy — its freedom, form, and intention. Examining the nature of God’s mercy will provide us with a vantage point from which we might assess the relationship between the God’s work of creation and his work of redemption. Owen argues that God’s mercy is neither natural nor necessary to God, but is in fact an act of God’s supreme dominion. This allows Owen to advance a very radical conception of union with Christ, one in which Christ fulfills the identical obligation required of the creature under the moral law. Moreover, it also consolidates Owen’s emphasis on the definitive nature of Christ’s death and the intention of the atonement as securing the salvation of the particular persons of the elect.

By tracing the thread of God’s dominion through Owen’s theology of divine government, this thesis aims to recover Owen’s teaching on the freedom of God. The picture that emerges is one of a theologian deeply concerned with the priority of divine grace, particularly as it is set over-against a doctrine of creation that might otherwise restrict God’s freedom. This emphasis can be observed most acutely in Owen’s theology of the covenant and redemption, where his judgments about the nature of God’s government are directly intended to highlight human inability and the absolute necessity of grace. But Owen’s

emphasis on the priority and freedom of God's grace also has real theoretical force, shaping his account of the divine will, the doctrine of creation and the nature of the moral life.

Owen was a scholastic theologian, and so the form of his theological thought is largely determined by classical doctrinal structures. In that sense, of course, the tropes common within his form of theological reasoning can seem very alien to most kinds of modern theology. But in respect of his emphasis on the freedom of God and the priority of his grace, Owen's account of divine government actually shares a good deal in common with contemporary Protestant or "apocalyptic" theologies that stress the adventitious character of grace as a gift that is super-added to the natural order and which breaks into the world and radically remakes it. This is an aspect of Owen's writings that is lost when we stress the continuity of his thought with figures like Thomas or the Thomists. Such a comparison might be warranted in light of the substantial differences between Owen's thought and that of contemporary theology. But this can come at the expense of seeing Owen as a figure involved in the ongoing work of reformation. We must situate his thought against the evolving background of Medieval scholasticism, but it is nonetheless important that we highlight the more radical implications of Owen's thought in order to see how his thought contributed to the project of theological reform.

Owen's thought is an example of Protestant theology in a scholastic mode, and I will try to show that his commitments about the nature of God's grace in Christ inform the whole of his theological thought. But while I hope my work reflects an appropriate awareness of Owen's social and historical setting, these are not the primary subject matter of this thesis. Nor even is Owen's relationship to the larger Reformed tradition. Contemporary studies of Reformed scholasticism have tended to assess points of continuity or discontinuity between early Reformed theologians and their late Medieval counterparts. Such work has certainly been necessary given the state of research into these figures which badly lacked a sense of connection with the theological traditions that preceded them. These studies have done very valuable and critical work in mapping the trajectories of these traditions and assessing points of debate. But to the degree that these studies take the coherence of a *tradition* as their focal point, they often forgo critical analysis of the dogmatic claims of these thinkers in order to register their convergence with or divergence from various sub-sets of Reformed thought. While illuminating in its own way, this effectively exchanges the task of dogmatic theology for history. But before anything else, Owen was a *theologian*. He was a controversialist and a

defender of the Reformed tradition, to be sure. But he was these things as a *theologian*, which is simply to say that he endeavored to be accountable — and to hold others to account — for what they said about God. That is the goal of this thesis. Therefore, we will concern ourselves primarily with what Owen has to say about God, and how this shapes his teaching about God’s government.

Though the reader will note several points at which I am critical of Owen, in what follows, I have done my best to allow Owen to speak for himself. I have therefore endeavored to restrict any critique to those places that would advance a more complete understanding of Owen’s own thought. My intention is for this material to form a central part of a larger work critiquing Owen’s theology of divine justice. But my immediate hope for this study is threefold. First, that it will correct some important misreadings of Owen theology that have been perpetuated within the secondary literature. Second, that it will illustrate how judgments about the nature of salvation implicate more fundamental theology about the nature of God and God’s relation to creatures. And third, that it will open a discussion on the proper place of the doctrine of creation within Reformed theology.

CHAPTER 1: THE DIVINE WILL

Introduction

In his catechism, Owen divides the works of God into two kinds — those which are internal and immanent, and those which are external or “outward”.¹ The former concerns the divine counsels and decrees, while the latter pertains to God’s works of creation, conservation, and government. This classification reflects the presupposition of scholastic theology that the external works of God reflect the eternal wisdom and perfection of God’s inner life. Since God is perfect in himself, “He undertakes nothing but what he will finish and complete in beauty and order.”² But the scholastic tradition which Owen inherited had been deeply fractured by longstanding theological disagreements concerning the nature of the created realm, its relation to God, and the place of metaphysics in theology. As many of these debates turned on the relationship between God-in-himself and the works of God *ad extra*, it was natural that debate around these issues should migrate to the notion of the divine ideas and their exact relation to the divine will. For if God, who is eternal and unchangeable, is the first principle of all things, then the structures of the natural order as well as all the unfolding events of history must be an expression of those ideas that were present to the divine mind from all eternity. The nature of the theological task depends considerably on naming the relation between the divine essence and those created forms that mediate the knowledge of God’s essence. The attempt to define the logical relationship between God’s intellect and will was an effort to define this relation, and so to characterize the general relation between God and creatures.

In recent years, the nature of the will has become the subject of some debate among readers of the Reformed tradition. A cadre of notable Dutch scholars, such as Antoine Vos, Andreas Beck, Willem van Asselt and others, have argued that Reformed accounts of divine and human freedom tend to conceptualize the contingency of created order in strictly Scotist terms.³ On this reading, the Reformed Orthodox construed the events of history as

¹ *Works*, 1:473-475.

² *Works*, 24:18.

³ A. Vos, “Always on Time: The Immutability of God” in *Understanding the Attributes of God*, eds. Gijsbert van den Brink and Marcel Sarot (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1999), 53-74; *ibid.*, “Scholasticism and Reformation”, and A.J. Beck, “Gisbertus Voetius (1589-1676): Basic Features of His Doctrine of God” in *Reformation and Scholasticism: An Ecumenical Enterprise*, eds. Willem J. van Asselt, Eef Dekker (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 99-119 and 205-226; Willem J. van Asselt, J. Martin Bac, and Roelf T. te Velde eds., *Reformed Thought on*

structurally conditioned by what Vos and others have described as “synchronic contingency”. Effectively, this term describes a conceptual framework that understands the contingent nature of all historical events in terms of a modal distinction which Scotus introduced into his account of the relation between God’s intellect and will. This argument has had something of a mixed reception. Historians like Richard Muller and Carl Trueman have expressed some reservations as to whether this thesis does appropriate justice to the full diversity of Reformed thought on this point.⁴ Paul Helm has been a vocal opponent of this thesis across a series of publications now spanning more than a decade.⁵ Helm raises questions concerning the intelligibility of the concept, its coherence with other prominent Reformed doctrines, and even suggests that synchronic contingency differs very little (if at all) from the version of contingency offered by Molina and the Jesuit doctrine of middle knowledge.⁶

These debates have been frustrated by a variety of different factors — the equivocal use of terms, confusion over the kinds of claims being advanced, failure to delimit the analogy between divine and creaturely willing, and insufficiently distinguishing between the tasks of constructive theology and reception history. But some of the disagreements that have arisen from treating the relevant concepts, e.g., “freedom” and “contingency”, in abstraction from their proper dogmatic setting. Therefore, while I will address some of the more salient issues pertaining to this debate in the sections below, I will do so obliquely, as an attempt to exposit the larger framework of Owen’s theological thought on the divine will as the principle of all things.

Freedom: The Concept of Free Choice in Early Modern Reformed Theology (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010); Martin J. Bac, *Perfect Will Theology: Divine Agency in Reformed Scholasticism as against Suarez, Episcopius, Descartes, and Spinoza* (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

⁴ Trueman, *John Owen*, 57-65; *PRRD*, 4:394-397. Thomas and Scotus are closer on the nature of contingency than has sometimes been acknowledged by advocates of synchronic contingency. See Gloria Frost, “Aquinas and Scotus on the Source of Contingency”, *Oxford Studies in Medieval Philosophy*, vol. 2, ed. Robert Pasnau (Oxford: OUP, 2015), 46-66; Mary Anne Pernoud, “The Theory of the *Potentia Dei* according to Aquinas, Scotus and Ockham”, *Antonianum* 47 (1972), 69-95.

⁵ See the following exchanges: Paul Helm, “Synchronic Contingency in Reformed Scholasticism: A Note of Caution”, and “Synchronic Contingency Again”, *Nederlands theologisch tijdschrift* 57/3 (2003), 207-223, 234-238; A.J. Beck and A. Vos, “Conceptual Patterns Related to Reformed Scholasticism”, *Nederlands theologisch tijdschrift* 57/3 (2003), 224-233; Paul Helm, “Reformed Thought on Freedom: Some Further Thoughts”, *Journal of Reformed Theology* 4 (2010), 185-207; *ibid.*, “‘Structural Indifference’ and Compatibilism in Reformed Orthodoxy”, *Journal of Reformed Theology* 5 (2011), 184-205; *PRRD*, 3:432f.; Richard Muller, “Jonathan Edwards and the Absence of Free Choice: A Parting of Ways in the Reformed Tradition”, *Jonathan Edwards Studies* 1/1 (2011), 3-22; Paul Helm, “Jonathan Edwards and The Parting of the Ways?”, *Jonathan Edwards Studies* 4/1 (2014), 42-60; Paul Helm, “Necessity, Contingency, and the Freedom of God”, and Antonie Vos, “Paul Helm on Medieval Scholasticism”, in *Journal of Reformed Theology* 84 (2014) 243-262, 263-283; Richard Muller’s, “Jonathan Edwards and Francis Turretin on Necessity, Contingency, and Freedom of Will in Response to Paul Helm” and Paul Helm’s, “Turretin and Edwards Once More”, in *Jonathan Edwards Studies* 4/3 (2014), 266-285, 286-296.

First, I will look at the nature of the divine decrees as immanent acts of God’s intellect and will. I will argue here that Owen’s accounts of the divine will are definitely “voluntarist” in nature, in the sense that he grants causal priority to God’s will over his intellect. In an excursus following this discussion, I will address the claims of Carl Trueman that Owen developed an increasingly “intellectualist” account of the divine will. Second, I will then move to consider the freedom of God’s decree, setting Owen’s account of divine freedom against those alternatives which he regards as unduly restrictive of divine freedom. Finally, I will conclude by examining the end of God’s decree, showing how the logic of divine perfection informs the character of God’s decrees and disposes them toward a particular end. I will argue here that Owen’s account of the decree increasingly centers on the person of Christ, moving his thought in supralapsarian directions.

1.1 The Nature of the Divine Decree

Owen does not really devote very much space to theorizing about the relationship between God’s intellect and will. In comparison with Aquinas or Scotus, his discussions of this issue are relatively brief and incomplete. Owen’s comments on the topic are for the most part restricted to three of his polemical treatises — *A Display of Arminianism* (1642), *The Doctrine of the Saints’ Perseverance* (1654), and *Vindiciæ Evangeliciæ* (1655).⁷ He therefore tends to address the issue only when it has bearing on some immediate practical consideration at hand. Nevertheless, each of these texts supplies sufficient evidence to judge Owen’s own position, and an examination of these writings indicates Owen’s subscription to a generally “voluntarist” framework for understanding the nature of the divine will.

Knowledge, according to Owen, is “an absolute perfection” — “he that knows anything is therein better than he that knows it not. The more anyone knows, the more excellent he is”.⁸ The reason for this is that knowledge is a potency of the faculty of the intellect. And it is in the very nature of the intellect to come to rest in the assimilation of the form of any intelligible object. If some thing is “*scibile*”, or capable of being known, lacking knowledge of that thing is itself an *imperfection*, because it implies the intellect’s *potency* for

⁶ See, in particular: Helm, “Structural Indifference”, 196-201.

⁷ *Works*, 10:22-30; 11:140-144; 12:115-140.

⁸ *Works*, 12:129.

knowledge has not been fully actualized, and therefore that the intellect itself is not fully complete or at rest.

Because God is perfect, he can have no accidents added to his nature. He is complete in himself, before and apart from all his works, his existence being a simple, blessed, pure act. And this includes God's knowledge, as well. God is omniscient, and Owen argues that it is strictly impossible to attribute learning to God "without the destruction of his perfection". For anything that has "a determinate cause is *scibile*". And as it belongs to God's perfection to be the First Cause of all things, he must have exhaustive knowledge of all causes immediately in himself. To suggest that God did not possess exhaustive knowledge of some thing would imply that God is not the First Cause of that thing. But this is strictly impossible, because God's existence alone is necessary — all other things exist only by his will. Owen thus concludes that God possesses the knowledge of all things immediately in himself, and in the simple act of his existence.⁹

Owen typically divides God's knowledge according to a distinction borrowed from Aquinas that differentiates God's "simple intelligence" (*scientia simplicis intelligentiæ*) from his "knowledge of vision" (*scientia visionis*).¹⁰ First, God's simple intelligence refers to the comprehensive and intuitive knowledge that God has of all things immediately in himself. This knowledge is natural and necessary to God, his essence being identical with his existence. The object of God's simple intelligence is the infinite divine essence. As such, it cannot be compounded or increased in any way. As Scripture testifies: "His understanding is infinite" (Ps. 147:5). In knowing himself, moreover, God knows all those things to which his "power can extend unto".¹¹ Owen thus describes the content of God's simple intelligence as including "all things that are possible to be done by his power" — that is, God's *potentia absoluta*.

In *Vindiciæ Evangelicæ*, Owen lists two conditions which qualify any thing for being "possible" for God's *potentia absoluta*. First, it must possess an intelligible essence (*esse intelligibile*) that is capable of being known (*scibile*). Second, it can have no inherent "repugnancy to being"; that is, it cannot be logically absurd. It should be noted here that this

⁹ *Works*, 12:129; cf. 10:25; 11:149. Cf. *ST Ia*, q. 14, a. 2.

¹⁰ *ST Ia*, q. 14, a. 9, resp.

¹¹ *Works*, 12:127.

qualification excludes not only logical contradictions, such as the inability of God to make a square circle; it also excludes anything that would be unworthy of or inconsistent with God's own wisdom and goodness.¹² For anything that can be created must be created *by God*, and therefore must be consistent with God's own nature. Still, since God is infinite and infinitely wise, there are an infinite number of possible world-orders that are open to God's power.¹³ And God has immediate and exhaustive knowledge of all of them, because in all of them, God himself is the necessary First Cause.

This points up a radical difference between the mode of God's simple intelligence and that of intelligent creatures. It is in the nature of rational creatures to acquire knowledge by a discursive process of abstraction. Their intellect is made conformable to reality by exercising their powers of sense and reason. And since creaturely powers of reason and observation are finite, their understanding is always partial and fragmented. God, on the other hand, does not acquire knowledge by "any discourses made to him from without".¹⁴ God's knowledge is perfect precisely for the reason that it has no extrinsic cause. All causes depend upon God for their regular operation. Therefore, there is not nor could there be any cause that is finally independent of God himself. And this includes even the free choices of rational creatures.

Below we will consider a bit of Owen's theology of divine providence where we will see that Owen regards the creature as having a natural dependence upon God for everything. This natural dependence is an adjunct of the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* and entails, among other things, that all creaturely existence and act requires a concurrence of divine power as its first principle.¹⁵ God's power upholds all secondary causes and is what enables them to act regularly in the world. This view of God's providence is called "physical premotion". "Physical", here, stands in contrast with "moral", and defines the nature of God's influence over rational creatures. In other words, God's influence over the free decisions of his creatures is not confined merely to the (moral) persuasion of the human will. Rather, according to Owen, the natural movement of the creature's faculties and powers includes a "physical" dependence upon God, and so requires a concurrence of God's power as the first principle of all its activity. In this way, God's power necessarily precedes even the free movements of rational creatures as that which regulates their self-determination and renders

¹² *Works*, 12:127-129; cf. 11:147-148; 12:93.

¹³ *Works*, 10:23.

¹⁴ *Works*, 12:138.

it possible.¹⁶ And because God's power is the first principle of all things, God's simple intelligence includes his exhaustive knowledge of everything else.

God's "knowledge of vision" (*scientia visionis*), on the other hand, is that eternal, immanent act by which God knows those things that will certainly come to pass by virtue of his divine decree — that is to say, his *potentia ordinanda*. As God is simple, Owen notes that God's decree is not an *accident*. Rather, it is itself eternally identical with the divine essence, being only *logically* distinct from God's essential wisdom and will.¹⁷ Still, in order to discern the nature of God's perfection before and apart from all his works, it is necessary to distinguish between those operations of the divine will that are natural and necessary, from those that are contingent and free. That God should will himself in all things is, according to Owen, both natural and absolutely necessary. For God is "infinite good", and it belongs to perfect goodness to aim at the highest end. Accordingly, God could not but will himself as the final end of all his works.¹⁸

But the very fact that God is perfect in himself entails that all God's works *ad extra* are absolutely contingent and non-necessary. For God's perfection and blessedness consist in his full self-possession, which according to Owen entails God's "absolute independence and firstness in being and operation".¹⁹ Speaking in this way of God's perfection points to the fundamentally derivative character of all creaturely goods, and to the antecedent self-sufficiency of God's life *ad intra*. While all things depend upon the work of God, God does not depend on any of his works, because he exists in eternal and infinite fullness. And if only the existence of God is *absolutely* necessary, then in respect of God's absolute independence from the world, his works *ad extra* are not necessary at all but are *absolutely contingent* and *free*.

¹⁶ For more on this, see Cleveland, ch. 2.

¹⁷ Baxter rejects this opinion on the grounds that it is deterministic and abridges human freedom. Instead, he appeals to the concept of "sufficient Grace" as the necessary cause of human freedom. See his, *Catholic Theologie: Plain, Pure, Peaceable: for Pacification of the Dogmaticall Word-Warriors* (London, 1675), II.i.6-7, pp. 27-28.

¹⁸ *Works*, 11:142-143. Cf. Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992), IV.i.4.

¹⁹ *Works*, 6:482; cf. 19:30-31. Cf. *ST* Ia, q. 6, a. 3; q. 19, a. 2; *SCG* I.74; Scotus, *De Primo Principio*, ed. Evan Roche (St. Bonaventure, NY: The Franciscan Institute, 1949), IV.6.

²⁰ *Works*, 12:71; cf. *ST* Ia, q. 3, a. 1, res.; q. 3, a. 7, res; q. 2, a. 3; Cleveland, *Thomism*, 39-46.

Absolutely speaking, then, all God's works *ad extra* are such as might not have been. And in order to discipline theological speech about the nature of God's works by this account of divine perfection, Owen attributes to God what was sometimes referred to as the "liberty of contradiction" and the "liberty of contrareity".²⁰ These were concepts used by moralists to describe the contingency of any act in terms of, first, the agent's freedom either to act or to suspend action, and second, the agent's freedom to have willed some alternative thing. Considered absolutely in themselves, God maintains both a liberty of contradiction and a liberty of contrareity with respect to all of his works *ad extra*. So, with respect to creation, Owen argues that God might have abstained from creating altogether, claiming that "not one holy property of his nature would have been diminished or abated in its eternal glory by that omission."²¹ Likewise, in virtue of his infinite wisdom, God could have created any infinite number of alternate universes than the one he did in fact create. As Owen says,

infinite things, whose actual being eternity shall never behold, are thus open and naked unto him; for was there not strength and power in his hand to have created another world? Was there not counsel in the storehouse of his wisdom to have created this otherwise, or not to have created at all?²²

Here we have a statement of both the liberty of contradiction and contrareity. So far, then, from being natural and necessary to God, all God's works *ad extra* are absolutely contingent because they are grounded in "a pure act of his will and choice".²³

When Owen moves to describe how God's intellect and will are causes of the divine decree, he states that it is the divine *will* which, out of that "large and boundless territory of things possible" to God's absolute power, decrees all that will come to pass. Owen describes the nature of this decree as follows:

. . . all things originally owe their *futurition* [viz. their determination for existence] to a free act of the will of God; he doth whatever he will and pleaseth. Their relation thereunto translates them out of that state of possibility, and [from] being objects of God's absolute omnipotency and infinite *simple* intelligence or understanding, whereby he intuitively beholdeth all things that might be produced by

²⁰ *pjjj*, 3:448-451.

²¹ *Works*, 6:482; cf. 11:141-142, 147-148.

²² *Works*, 10:23.

²³ *Works*, 6:482.

the exerting of his infinite almighty power, into a state of futurity, making them objects of God's foreknowledge, or *science of vision*, as it is called.²⁴

Owen here gives an account of what was sometimes referred to as the "specification" of the divine will. He is in no way implying that the will of God is discursive or undergoes change.²⁵ In himself, God is infinite, pure actuality, and so God's decree is not the result of a deliberative process. But by speaking of possible-entities as being "translated" from one pre-temporal "state" into another, he is drawing an *analogy* to the metaphysics of motion and change in order to specify the *cause* of future contingents. In this respect, Owen's description of possible-entities as occupying pre-temporal "states" is the functional equivalent of the logical "moments" that Scotus posited to distinguish between the modes in which the divine intellect and will serve as causes of God's decree.

Owen claims that though the possibility of any state of affairs ultimately has its root in God's absolute power, which is known to God's simple intelligence, the divine will is that which "translates" a thing out of the "state" of what is *possible* to God's *potentia absoluta*, and into a "state of futurity", which is known to God's knowledge of vision. The language of "translating", here, is intended to name the divine will as the determinate *cause* for the existence of any thing, and in so doing to mark out the contingent nature of its existence. In other words, for Owen, a thing exists not finally because it is *known* by God — for there are an infinite number of things known to God that will yet never exist — but because it is *willed* by God. Consequently, Owen also refers to God's *scientia visionis* as his "free knowledge" (*scientia libera*),²⁶ since by it we consider the reality of some future contingent with respect to its "habitude and relation"²⁷ to the free determination of God's will. So, while Owen frequently employs traditionally Thomist terminology to relate God's intellect and will, he does so in a definitively "voluntarist" way, grounding God's knowledge of vision in a contingent determination of the divine will.²⁸

²⁴ *Works*, 11:142; cf. Turretin, *Institutes*, III.xii.18.

²⁵ Cf. *Works*, 11:143.

²⁶ *Works*, 12:130.

²⁷ *Works*, 11:143.

²⁸ This was a pattern among the Reformed Orthodox, as Muller notes citing Owen's use of these terms in *Vindiciae*: "In the definitions and explanations of the seventeenth-century Reformed orthodoxy, moreover, the more Thomistic language of *scientia simplicis intelligentiae / visionis* is often explained in a voluntaristic manner, yielding the more Scotistic model under the Thomistic language" (*PRRD*, 3:408). These concepts were ubiquitous in the theology of the 17th century, and so Owen may have acquired them from any number of sources. It can, however, be found in Thomas Barlow, Owen's instructor at Oxford (*The Genuine Remains of*

Like many of the Reformed, Owen sometimes explains the contingent nature of God's decree by appealing to the native "indifference" of the divine will in the logical moment "prior" to its specification. Owen appeals to this concept in reference to God at the opening of his *Dissertation on Divine Justice*, where he claims that, absolutely speaking, and with reference to all his works *ad extra*, God's will "is so indifferent as to every exercise . . . on objects without himself, that he might even will the opposite".²⁹ The same concept underpins his theology of election, where it supports the absolute freedom of God's will in the election of some to eternal life and in passing over the reprobate.³⁰ This concept of the will's "indifference" was taken from traditionally "voluntarist" faculty psychologies where it was referred to as the "liberty of indifference". Moralists used this concept to explain the *spontaneous* nature of free choice and the indefinite or undetermined nature of the will prior to its specification. Accordingly, it was sometimes set in opposition to a natural "propensity" or "disposition" of will that inclines any agent toward a particular choice.

When used in reference to God, the concept has a somewhat different application. Naturally, since God's existence is a pure act, one could speak of God's will as being "indefinite or undetermined" only in a very attenuated sense. Speech about the antecedent "indifference" of *God's* will, therefore, is only intended to indicate that God is *uncaused* by all that he wills, so that his action is absolutely spontaneous and not the product of some inner disposition which necessitates his act.³¹ In this respect, at least, God's liberty of indifference has a very different character than that possessed by rational creatures. For when creatures will some thing, they do so in *pursuit* of some good that is extrinsic to themselves. God, on the other hand, is perfect. And as such, he is moved by no good extrinsic to his own nature. God's works *ad extra* may therefore be said to proceed from the absolute "indifference" of God's will, because in all of his acts God is supremely *self-moved*.

that Learned Prelate Dr. Thomas Barlow [London, 1693], 568-576; cf. Trueman, *Claims of Truth*, 111f.; *ibid.*, *John Owen*, 60).

²⁹ *Works*, 10:508. Here we have a reference both to God's liberty of indifference as well as to his liberty of contradiction/contrareity.

³⁰ Cf. *PRRD*, 3:539, where Muller points out that Rijssen uses the distinction between God's *potentia absoluta/ordinanda* to explain the nature of divine dominion in the act of election. The "indifference" of the divine will is intended to name the absolute freedom in which God exercises his dominion over creatures.

³¹ *PRRD*, 3:448-451.

Of course, this is not to deny that there are some works within the economy of grace which God performs by a necessity of nature. But any such act must already presuppose some state of affairs *ad extra* to which God relates. As Owen puts it, “some things may become necessary in a relative state, whose being was not *absolutely* necessary in its own nature”.³² For instance, in his *Dissertation on Divine Justice*, Owen argues that, given the existence of a fallen rational creature, God punishes sin by a necessity of his nature. But such an act is “relatively” or “hypothetically necessary”, that is, its necessity depends on several suppositions, such as the existence of a rational of creature, its appointment for a supernatural end, and its existence in a state of alienation from God. Given these conditions and in respect of his necessary relation to such a creature, though God still acts freely, he cannot be said to be “indifferent” to the creature’s sin but punishes it by a natural necessity.³³ Nevertheless, *absolutely* speaking — that is, considered in itself “prior” to and apart from his determination to create the rational creature, or to ordain it to a supernatural end, or to permit its fall into sin — God’s will is absolutely free and indifferent to any and all of his works *ad extra*, because God’s existence alone is the only act that is *absolutely* necessary. And since creation is a free act of God, even those acts which are naturally necessary to God in a relative state are absolutely contingent, because they might not have been.

Therefore, to speak of the absolute “indifference” of the divine will prior to its specification is a piece of negative theology, intended to deny any causal movement from the created order *to* the divine will. Its positive correlate is the absolute *dominion* (*dominium*) of God. We will encounter this concept again, but Owen describes God’s dominion as his “right, power, and liberty of rule”,³⁴ or, more simply, as God’s “sovereign good pleasure, doing what he will with his own”.³⁵ Owen argues that this dominion is “natural” to God, inasmuch as God is the First Cause upon which all creatures naturally depend.³⁶ Accordingly, it is a necessary implication of God’s ontological priority over creatures which is “unavoidably accompanied” with a “sovereign right” to dispose of creatures in a manner conforming to “the counsel of his will and the rectitude of his nature”.³⁷

³² *Works*, 5:240.

³³ *Works*, 10:509-510.

³⁴ *Works*, 19:100.

³⁵ *Works*, 11:247. “The *dominum Dei* may be defined as that power or rule of God according to which he does with his creatures as he wills” (*PRRD*, 3:538). Cf. Charnock, *The Complete Works of Stephen Charnock*, 5 vol. (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1864), 2:407; Turretin, *Institutes*, III.xxii; Musculus, *Common Places of Christian Religion* (London: R. Woulfe, 1563), f. 417.

³⁶ *Works*, 8:434; 10:500-512; 19:98-105.

³⁷ *Works*, 19:101.

Because this dominion is absolute and absolutely precedes all created things, the “futurition” of any thing or event is entirely attributable to the freedom of the divine will. All things that come to pass are thus an expression of God’s free and sovereign dominion. Since God is wise, all that he ordains ultimately serves his purposes. And it belongs to the perfection of God’s dominion that those things which he purposes should unfailingly come to pass: “God only, whose will and good pleasure is the sole rule of all those works which outwardly are of him, can never deviate in his actions, nor have any end attend or follow his acts not precisely intended by him.”³⁸ All things happen for a reason, because all things ultimately serve the purposes of *God*. In this respect, every event of history does have its own specific *ratio* within the hidden purpose of God’s will. But one cannot seek a more ultimate explanation for any event of history than that God has willed it so to be. For God is the Lord, and so in determining all that will come to pass, God is above all supremely free.

Readers of the “voluntarist” tradition have sometimes regarded this description of the divine will as being far too apophatic in nature. The concern here is that registering the contingency of all God’s works by appealing to God’s liberty to do otherwise functionally permits God’s *potentia absoluta* to eclipse or relativize what may be known of God’s nature from his works. And this can lead to some methodological excesses, in which the knowledge of what God *might have done* according to his absolute power is not sufficiently conditioned by what God *has in fact done* in the economy of grace. The claim that the divine will possesses a native “indifference” is seen as functionally voiding the divine nature of its definite character, reducing it to a blank canvass or an unknowable X. God might be thought to will almost *anything* on this account, since it would be improper to restrict God’s *potentia absoluta* on the basis of his *potentia ordinanda*.

This is rightly a matter of principal theological concern, and one to which the Reformed have not always sufficiently attended. We will return to this criticism further below, but we might simply state here that it is not *necessarily* the case that positing the prior “indifference” of the divine will reduces God’s nature to an unknowable X. For on any conscientious account of the divine will, the possible realities that God might instantiate are themselves determined and delimited by the divine nature. This being the case, God’s “liberty of

³⁸ *Works*, 10:162.

indifference” is strictly directed by his own essential wisdom and goodness. To paraphrase Musculus, the Lord precedes his lordship, and the *Dominus* is before his *dominium*.³⁹ The theological scope which one allots to this concept, therefore, is a matter of judgment, one which depends largely on the positive description that one gives of the divine nature, and the degree to which the order that God has ordained is credited with providing a view into the nature of God.

Of necessity, then, the scholastics distributed the relationship between God’s *potentia absoluta* and his *potentia ordinanda* across a wide range of different dogmatic loci by returning again and again to the nature of God’s relation to creatures in his various works. This endeavor was supported by the scholastic distinction between those acts of God’s will that are hypothetically necessary, i.e., those acts which follow by a necessity of nature upon the supposition of some particular relation of God to the creature, from those which are contingently necessary, i.e., those acts which are necessary only in virtue of a free determination of God’s will that they should occur.⁴⁰ Distinguishing in this manner between God’s acts enabled the scholastics to articulate the character of the divine nature by addressing it throughout the course of God’s government of creatures. This allows for a far more comprehensive and complex picture of the divine nature than has often been granted to “voluntarist” doctrines of God. And any just assessment of this dogmatic structure would therefore have to take into consideration these systematic judgments which define the character of God’s essence in his act. We will have the occasion to view Owen’s opinions on these points throughout this thesis. Though this was a topic to which Owen himself was very sensitive, I will argue that, on the whole, Owen’s tendency is to safe-guard divine freedom, understood in terms of his liberty to do otherwise.

Excursus: The Question of Development

Before moving on to consider the freedom of the divine decree, I should pause to address one possible objection to the interpretation of Owen’s thought which I am advancing here. Over several publications, Carl Trueman has argued that Owen’s position on the relation between

³⁹ Musculus, *Common Places*, f. 417.

⁴⁰ Turretin, for example, divides God’s right of dominion into “natural” and “free”, the latter of which pertain to things “whose opposite [God] could will without repugnancy” (*Institutes*, III.xxii.11).

God's intellect and will develops over time.⁴¹ The principle evidence which Trueman adduces in support of this thesis comes from a change in Owen's position on the necessity of the incarnation. Owen had argued in *The Death of Death* (1647) that God's punishment of sin was merely a discretionary function of the divine will; but six years later Owen reverses this position with the publication of his *Dissertation on Divine Justice* (1653). There, Owen argues that God's perfection requires that he punish sin of necessity and therefore, in order for God to forgive sin, it was *necessary* that God supply a substitute for sinners to bear the penalty due to their sin. In the course of his argument, Owen takes issue with William Twisse and Samuel Rutherford, each Reformed thinkers who drew on Scotus in order to deny that God punishes sin of necessity. Trueman takes this as evidence of "an implicit change in Owen's theology towards a more intellectualist understanding of God".⁴²

Trueman's is certainly correct that the *Dissertation* debuts an account of divine government that is concerned about the manner in which God's *potentia absoluta* is permitted to bracket God's vindicatory justice, and by extension, the necessity of the incarnation. In a very narrow respect, then, it might be said that Owen's moral theology here reflects a more "intellectualist" emphasis, in the sense that he no longer regards God's punitive justice as a free determination of his will, but as following from a necessity of nature. But Trueman seems to locate this change in the relationship between God's intellect and will, *tout court*. He thus argues that, for Owen, God's intellect determines his will,⁴³ and so identifies Owen's theology of justice as "Thomist" on these grounds.⁴⁴ But it is imprecise to locate this change at the level of the general relation between God's intellect and will. And this is apparent from the following considerations.

First, Owen treats the relation between God's intellect and will on two separate occasions following the publication of the *Dissertation* — *The Doctrine of the Saints' Perseverance* (1654) and *Vindiciæ Evangelicæ* (1655). Both of these treatments are definitively "voluntarist" in nature⁴⁵ and do not differ materially from his earlier account in *A Display of Arminianism* (1642). In fact, as we have seen above, Owen's account of the divine will in his treatise on perseverance quite explicitly names the divine will as the cause

⁴¹ See Trueman, "Owen's Dissertation"; *Claims of Truth*, 105-111.

⁴² *Claims of Truth*, 106.

⁴³ "Owen's Dissertation", 98.

⁴⁴ "Owen's Dissertation", 101-102.

⁴⁵ *Works*, 10:22-30; 11:140-144; 12:115-140.

“translating” a possible entity out of God’s *potentia absoluta*, which is known to his simple intelligence, and into God’s *potentia ordinanda*. Furthermore, as we will see subsequently, Owen issues a “voluntarist” critique of natural law in his *Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (1668),⁴⁶ and in his *Pneumatologia* (1674), he gives an account of human moral psychology which grants causal priority to the will.⁴⁷ So, unless we are willing to posit a contradiction in Owen’s own thought, here, it is unlikely that he regarded the *Dissertation* as advancing a claim about the priority of the divine intellect over the will.

Second, the claim that God punishes sin by a natural necessity is not necessarily indicative of any particular position on the priority of God’s intellect or will, generally. Both “voluntarists” and “intellectualists” routinely admitted the distinction between those external acts of God that are naturally necessary, and those that are contingently necessary. So, for example, on the giving of the law, Scotus argues that while the second table of the law is contingently necessary, because it is grounded in a discretionary act of the divine will, the first table of the law is naturally necessary. For on the supposition that God create a rational, moral creature, it was not possible for God to create a moral creature that is not accountable to him as its Lawgiver.⁴⁸ On the other hand, Aquinas, that most intellectual of intellectualists, argued that God does not demand satisfaction for sin by a necessity of nature, but only by a *contingent* necessity.⁴⁹ So, the fact that Owen changes his opinion on the natural or contingent nature of this particular divine act does not necessarily signal a broader change in his position on the general priority of God’s intellect or will.

Finally, though it is not entirely unrelated, the question of whether the incarnation and death of Christ was necessary or merely fitting for the redemption of humankind was not principally a claim about the relationship between God’s intellect and will *per se*. Traditionally, it was treated as a question about the nature of divine omnipotence and its relation to secondary causes. This theme appears prominently throughout Anselm’s *Cur Deus Homo*, where divine omnipotence is often dialectically related to divine justice,⁵⁰ and this

⁴⁶ *Works*, 19:326-344.

⁴⁷ *Works*, 3:281, 503.

⁴⁸ *Ordinatio* IV, d. 17; cf. *Will and Morality*, 57-63, 162-169; Ingham, *The Harmony of Goodness*, 47-55.

⁴⁹ ST IIIa, q. 46, a. 2, ad. 3.

⁵⁰ Note how Boso, Anselm’s interlocutor, initially frames the question: “by what necessity or logic (*necessitate . . . et ratione*) did God, almighty as he is (*cum sit omnipotens*), take upon himself the humble standing and weakness of human nature with a view to that nature’s restoration?” (*Cur Deus Homo* in *Anselmi Opera Omnia*, 6 vols., ed. F.S. Schmitt (Edinburgh:1936-1968) II, p. 48; english translation by Janet Fairweather in *Anselm of Canturbury: The Major Works*, ed. Brian Davies [Oxford: OUP, 2008], 266).

remained a regular feature of scholastic disputes thereafter. For to speak of the necessity of some instrument is to make a claim about whether an agent is capable of bringing about some end without the causal powers of that instrument. When discussing the necessity of the incarnation, therefore, one is making a claim about the nature of divine omnipotence and its relation to the causal powers of Christ's human nature.

Anselm's argument that the incarnation was necessary was controversial among the scholastics for just this reason. Many of the scholastics held that God's omnipotence entailed that anything God can do by means of a secondary cause, he can also do immediately, without the instrumentality of any secondary causes.⁵¹ For as all things were created *ex nihilo*, the causal powers intrinsic to any creature ultimately derive from God, who is their first principle. So, on this basis, Aquinas can infer God's omnipotence from the fact that he created the world *ex nihilo*, because if all things come from God than God comprehends the causal powers of all created things.⁵² For a similar reason, Aquinas also states that neither the incarnation nor the death of Christ was strictly *necessary* for the redemption of humankind.⁵³ Because this would suggest that a created instrument supplied God with a power that he did not previously possess.⁵⁴ The incarnation is the *most fitting* means for God to accomplish his purposes, but since God is perfect and has all power immediately in himself, we cannot exclude the possibility that God might have accomplished this purpose in some other way.⁵⁵

What is at stake in this question, then, is the relation of divine power to the powers of secondary causes. So the relation between God's intellect and will is relevant here only in a

⁵¹ E.g., ST IIIa, q. 1, a. 2, ob. 1; q. 46, aa. 1-3; cf. Ia, q. 105, aa. 1-2. Further see, Lawrence Moonan, *Divine Power: The Power Distinction up to its Adoption by Albert, Bonaventure and Aquinas* (Oxford: OUP, 1994), ch. 7; John F. Wippel, *Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas: From Finite Being to Uncreated Being* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2000), 266-275, 351-375; Cross, *Duns Scotus*, 56-57; Marilyn McCord Adams, *William of Ockham*, 2 vol. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987), 2:1151-1256; Frost, "Source of Contingency"; Pernoud, "Theory of *Potentia Dei*"; Edward Feser, *Scholastic Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction* (Heusenstamm, DE: Editiones Scholastica, 2014), 42-72.

⁵² ST Ia, q. 45, a. 5, ad. 3.

⁵³ Trueman observes this in a footnote (*Claims of Truth*, 108, n. 21).

⁵⁴ See ST IIIa, q. 1, a. 2; q. 46, a. 1. Compare this also to Aquinas' claim that God's free forgiveness of sin is a sign of his *omnipotence*, since it demonstrates that he is not subject to the law of any superior (ST Ia, q. 25, a. 3, ad. 3; cf. Ia, q. 25, a. 5, ad. 2-3; Ia, q. 105, a. 6; IIIa, q. 46, a. 1, ad. 1).

⁵⁵ For more on the relation between divine omnipotence and "fitting"/"necessary" reasons see, Mark-Robin Hoogland, *God, Passion, and Power: Thomas Aquinas on Christ Crucified and the Almightyness of God* (Leuven: Peeters, 2003), 29-47, 150-173; Moonan, *Divine Power*, ch. 6; F.C. Bauerschmidt, *Thomas Aquinas: Faith, Reason and Following Christ* (Oxford: OUP, 2015), 161-165; Bernard Lonergan, *Early Latin Theology*, vol. 19, *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, ed. M.G. Shields, et. al. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 483-533; Pernoud, "Theory of *Potentia Dei*", 77; David Brown, "'Necessary' and 'Fitting' Reasons in

very remote sense as it bears on the nature of secondary causes or the conditions of our knowledge of God's *potentia absoluta*. But the argument of the *Dissertation* does not indulge in much speculation on the nature of universals and secondary causes. Trueman does rightly observe that the *Dissertation* is concerned with the basis in revelation for all human knowledge of God's justice; and this carries real implications for our conception of God's *potentia absoluta*. But Owen's interest in God's *potentia absoluta* within the *Dissertation* focuses not on its metaphysical or conceptual content, but tends to be confined to the doctrine's *moral* applications, as it touches on the necessity of divine punishment. It is better therefore to see Owen's argument in the *Dissertation*, not as a general re-working of the relationship between God's intellect and will, but more specifically, as an attempt to secure the instrumental necessity of the incarnation by grounding the *ratio* of divine punishment in the natural relation between God and creatures.

1.2 The Freedom of the Divine Will

As Owen accords priority to God's will over his intellect, he describes God's will as the "*causa rerum*" — that is, the ultimate cause of all that is.⁵⁶ And it is precisely in the absolute and unqualified causal priority of God over all creaturely existence that God's freedom principally consists. All of creaturely existence effortlessly conforms to the determination of God's will for there is nothing which precedes it. "All things below in their events are but the wax, whereon the eternal seal of God's purpose hath left its own impression."⁵⁷

It is in this respect that some event determined by the divine will can be said to be necessary.⁵⁸ Not because all that God wills is *willed* necessarily. Indeed, for Owen, God wills only himself necessarily, but everything that God wills *ad extra*, he wills contingently. Considered in themselves, those things that God wills *ad extra* are "such things as might not be".⁵⁹ In that respect, therefore, the existence of anything not identical to God's essence is, *secundum radix*, absolutely *contingent*. Yet, because God's knowledge is perfect and infallible, it is absolutely necessary that those things which God foreknows according to his *scientia visionis* should unfailingly come to pass. For this reason, those things that God wills

Christian Theology", *The Rationality of Religious Belief: Essays in Honour of Basil Mitchell* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), 211-230.

⁵⁶ *Works*, 11:143; cf. Trueman, *Claims of Truth*, 115-120.

⁵⁷ *Works*, 8:10.

⁵⁸ "... every thing when it is, and as it is, is necessary" (*Works*, 12:130; cf. ST Ia, q.19, a. 3).

ad extra are said to have a “conditional” or “contingent necessity”. That is, they are necessary not by virtue of what they are *in themselves*, but on the supposition that they have been willed *by God*.

Accordingly, everything that comes to pass exists by virtue of its relation to God’s decree. But while the divine decree does determine the events of history, it does not do so in a manner that *suspends* the contingency of creatures. In order to explain how this is the case, it will help us to draw a distinction here between two kinds of contingency — what I shall call absolute contingency and causal contingency. The first refers to the kind of contingency that conditions the existence of everything that is not absolutely necessary, that is, all that is not God. The second refers to the kind of contingency that conditions the free and spontaneous actions of *rational* creatures that are equipped with the powers of free choice and unbounded by any physical necessity or coercion.⁶⁰

In the first instance, God can will nothing *ad extra* in such a way that it *removes* its *absolute* contingency. To this end, Owen and many of the scholastics employ an analytical distinction to specify the cause for which any created thing is necessary. When some future, contingent event is considered *in sensu composito*, that is, in relation to its determination for existence by the divine will, it is *necessary*, for the divine will is the necessary cause of all that exists in reality. Yet, when some future, contingent event is considered *in sensu diviso*, that is, absolutely in itself, as a possibility alongside other possibilities in God’s *potentia absoluta*, it is *contingent*, for God might have done otherwise.⁶¹ So, Owen states that “in a divided sense, God may do any thing (that is, he may create new worlds), which if a decree of creating this and no other be supposed, he could not do.”⁶²

In this respect, God’s determination of any thing for existence does not remove its absolute contingency, and this is a necessary entailment of God’s simplicity. For God’s

⁵⁹ *Works*, 11:142.

⁶⁰ See Turretin, who argues that unlike “physical necessity or necessity of coercion”, the “hypothetical necessity” of the divine decree does not remove “liberty and contingency”. But this does not in any way reduce the certainty of any event, since “certainty does not arise from the nature of second causes, which are free and contingent, but extrinsically from the immutability of the decree” (*Institutes*, IV.iv.6). See also Frost, “Source of Contingency”.

⁶¹ Owen only sparingly employs the terminology of *in sensu diviso/composito* (cf. *Works*, 10:119, 135, 587; 11:297, 463). However, it was common among the Reformed Orthodox and the logic of this distinction appears throughout Owen’s writings.

⁶² *Works*, 10:587.

potentia absoluta is the root of all things possible.⁶³ And since God is perfect, God has perfect knowledge of all those things to which his power can extend *ad extra*. What God wills according to his *potentia ordinanda* is a sub-set of the infinite possibilities open to his *potentia absoluta*. And while the specification of the divine will “translates” a thing out of God’s *potentia absoluta* and determines it for its future existence, this act does not *remove* the absolute contingency of God’s *potentia ordinanda* because God’s essence logically precedes all his works. And as God’s existence is an eternal, infinite, pure act, God’s power is always in excess of his decree, so that God might always have done otherwise. In this sense, the dialectic between the contingency and necessity of the divine will is strictly unresolvable as a matter of theological method. For inasmuch as a thing exists, it exists by the will of God and must necessarily come to pass. However, since all things depend upon God as their principle, God’s willing of some thing cannot remove its contingency because God remains free in all that he wills. To suggest otherwise would effectively collapse the disproportion between God and his works *ad extra*.⁶⁴

Moreover, in working all things according to the purpose of his will, God does not compete with creatures, but cooperates with them in a manner that befits the basic principles of their natures. Owen thus distinguishes between God’s governance in events that are contingent in their *effects* and those which are also contingent in their *cause*. God moves necessary causes necessarily, and contingent causes contingently.⁶⁵ The example that Owen gives here is the difference between a stone falling from a house and killing someone, and a person dropping a stone from the top of a house to kill some one. The cause of the former event, the law of gravity, operates by a kind of physical necessity and therefore its necessity is natural to it as a cause. Yet, the cause of the latter is the choice of a rational, moral agent. Unlike the physical necessity that governs the laws of nature, the rational creature possesses the rational faculty of the will, which is equipped with the power of free choice (*liberum*

⁶³ *Works*, 10:558; cf. Wippel, “Nonexisting Possibles”; Vos, *Philosophy of Duns Scotus*, 588.

⁶⁴ On Helm’s reading of the Reformed scholastics, God’s willing of future contingents *does* remove their contingency (“Structural Indifference”, 198). However, this mislocates the root of “possibility” by supposing that that which is “possible” is strictly co-extensive with that which has been ordained. This may be true *in sensu composito*, but as we have seen, it is axiomatic for the scholastics that God’s *essence* is the root of all possibility, so that, what is “possible” is more properly defined *in sensu diviso*, with reference to God’s absolute power. Just as God’s power always exceeds his works, so the *potentia absoluta* is not coextensive with the *potentia ordinanda*. The possibilities available to God’s *potentia absoluta* are dogmatically relevant, moreover, because they condition our understanding of what God has ordained within the economy of grace. This is most clearly the case in the doctrine of election where the counterfactual — God might not have elected Peter — establishes the gratuity of the act in relation to Peter.

⁶⁵ *Works*, 12:130.

arbitrium). As such, the operation of the rational will is spontaneous, free and causally contingent.⁶⁶ And therefore God governs rational creatures in a way that does not suspend or disrupt their natural freedom, but cooperates with it to bring about his purposes.

Owen defines this freedom as the “spontaneous appetite” of the will, as it is “subservient to the providence of God”.⁶⁷ The fallenness of creatures does impose serious limitations on the *objects* to which the will is capable of extending itself. So, while sinners are capable of willing some natural good, without the assistance of divine grace, they are absolutely and totally incapable of willing a supernatural good.⁶⁸ Still, even the disruptive presence of sin does not rob the will of its natural function as a free and rational principle of human action. Owen thus argues that, when the creature’s will is permitted to function according to its nature, it is free from “all outward coercion, or inward natural necessity, to work according to election and deliberation, spontaneously embracing what seemeth good unto him”.⁶⁹ The power of spontaneous action, to which Owen here refers, is what was sometimes called the “liberty of contradiction”, which is simply the power of an agent to will or to abstain from willing. The power of deliberation, on the other hand, is a reference to the “liberty of contrariety”, which is the will’s capacity to choose between alternatives.⁷⁰

As the will possesses these powers, its choices are truly contingent. And yet, as they are subordinate to God’s providence, they are also necessary, because determined from eternity by the sovereign will of God. Owen points to the example of the centurion who pierced the side of Christ. This was a *necessary* act insofar as it was known to God’s *scientia libera*. However, it was also a contingent act in two respects.⁷¹ It was *absolutely* contingent, in that God might have ordained it otherwise. And it was also contingently *caused*, in that the will of the centurion moved spontaneously toward its goal. In this way, Owen concludes that the same event can be simultaneously both “contingent and determined, without the least appearance of contradiction, because it is not spoken with respect to the same things or causes”.⁷² To be sure, then, humans do have the power of free choice — they can elect to act

⁶⁶ *Works*, 12:128-129.

⁶⁷ *Works*, 10:119, citing Prosper of Aquitaine.

⁶⁸ *Works*, 10:116, 122; 3:491-500; 11:512-519.

⁶⁹ *Works*, 10:116.

⁷⁰ Owen does not use these terms, but the substance of them are clearly observable in his writings. See *Works*, 10:35-42, 116-122; *cf.* 3:494-496; 11:517. On the distinction between the freedom of contradiction and contrariety, see Muller, “Jonathan Edwards and Francis Turretin”.

⁷¹ Frost, “Source of Contingency”, 61.

⁷² *Works*, 12:130.

or not to act; they can deliberate between courses of action; they can choose spontaneously among alternatives.⁷³ According to Owen, this grants to the wills of rational creatures “as large a freedom and dominion . . . as a creature, subject to the supreme rule of God’s providence, is capable of”.⁷⁴ Yet, under God’s sovereign direction, creatures nonetheless freely enact those purposes which God has eternally ordained.

There is no hint here of any tendency to define creaturely freedom in *opposition* to divine action. For Owen, the creature’s whole being comes from God, and therefore God’s movement of creatures does not compete with the creature’s free movement of itself. It should be noted here, however, that the nature of creaturely freedom is very definitely a *subordinate* concern for Owen.

I had rather ten thousand times deny our wills to be free than God to be omniscient, the sovereign disposer of all men, their actions, and concernments, or say that any thing comes to pass without, against, or contrary to the counsel of his will. But we know, through the goodness of God, that these things have their consistency, and that God may have preserved to him the glory of his infinite perfection, and the will of man not at all be abridged of its due and proper liberty.⁷⁵

For Owen, describing creaturely freedom is simply a means of demonstrating the wisdom and fittingness of God’s works. In this way it supports Owen’s theology of divine perfection. For it belongs to God’s perfection to be the first cause of all things. And since God is the source of all good, creatures are dependent upon God for their whole being and existence. And if all the free motions of creatures require and presuppose a concurrence of divine power to their production, then nothing can come to pass apart from the authorization of the divine will. As Owen states in *Vindiciæ Evangelicæ*, everything is either *caused* by God, as is the case in all things good, or it is *permitted* by him, as is the case in all things evil.⁷⁶ But by maintaining that God’s will is the principle of all creaturely motion, Owen secures God’s ontological absoluteness, and thus that God’s will is unrestrained and unconditioned by anything outside of himself.

⁷³ *Works*, 10:199.

⁷⁴ *Works*, 10:119.

⁷⁵ *Works*, 12:132.

⁷⁶ *Works*, 12:130; *cf.* Cleveland, ch. 2. Owen notes in this context that evil can only be parasitic on something which is first in itself “entitative and physically good” (*cf.* 8:157-158), thus reflecting a broadly Augustinian account of the metaphysics of good and evil.

Consequently, Owen regularly resists any attempt to place conditions on God's decree or to seek some cause of the divine will, as this would occlude God's ontological priority and his absolute *dominion* over creatures. Owen rejects the Arminian doctrine of "middle knowledge" for just this reason. Rather than God's decree forming the very basis and condition for all free creaturely agency, middle knowledge posits that God's will and decree are responsive to and logically consequent on the free choices of creatures. God's knowledge of future contingents is thus grounded in his knowledge of secondary-causes — in a "naked permission",⁷⁷ as Owen calls it, rather than immediately in the knowledge of God's own essence and will. From Owen's perspective, such a position suspends God's causal priority over creatures and restricts God's freedom by making the determination of his will dependent upon some "independent" act that arises within the creature and of which God is not the Author.

If God's determination concerning any thing should have a temporal original, it must needs be either because he then perceived some goodness in it of which before he was ignorant, or else because some accident did affix a real goodness to some state of things which it had not from him; neither of which, without abominable blasphemy, can be affirmed, seeing he knoweth the end from the beginning, all things from everlasting, being always the same, the fountain of all goodness, of which other things do participate in that measure which it pleaseth him to communicate it unto them.⁷⁸

In other words, the claim that God's will is conditioned by his knowledge of secondary-causes presupposes that some creaturely movements may operate independently from any concurrence of divine power. And this suggests that God himself is not the principle of all creaturely motions, nor the First Cause of all the creature's goodness.

In this sense, the doctrine of "free choice" endorsed by the High Calvinists is to be strictly distinguished from the Arminian concept of "free will". Owen defines the latter as the alleged power of the creature to determine itself "independently of the will, power and providence of God, and his disposal of all future events".⁷⁹ Of course, Owen does not dispute the creature's power of deliberation and spontaneous choice. He takes issue only with the "unbounded indifferency" of the creature's will as it is posited by the Arminians. As Owen recounts it, the Arminians describe the will of the creature as being so free and "indifferent"

⁷⁷ *Works*, 10:36.

⁷⁸ *Works*, 10:20; cf. 12:128.

⁷⁹ *Works*, 3:495.

in its act that, even when considered *in sensu composito*, that is, in its relation to the divine decree, it remains “absolutely in our own power to will or not to will, to do any thing or not to do it”.⁸⁰

The key word here is “absolutely”. As we have seen, Owen takes the will of the creature to have a natural liberty, consisting in the freedom of contradiction and the freedom of contrareity. And this presupposes that the will may be indifferent in respect of certain objects or the manner of its exercise. But to claim that the creature’s will is *absolutely* indifferent to its act, even when considered in relation to the divine decree, “is plainly to deny that our wills are subject to the rule of the Most High.”⁸¹ For considered *in sensu composito*, the act of the creature is contingently *necessary*, because willed by God. And the same act can be said to be absolutely contingent *in sensu diviso*, only because it is there considered as something that has *not yet been willed* by God. But to say that the will of the creature is *absolutely* indifferent to its act, even “after” God has willed it, is, to Owen’s mind, “plain non-sense”. Because it takes the “divided sense” as ontologically normative, as though it were really possible for the creature to act independently of the divine will, and without a natural dependence on God’s power.⁸²

But as we have seen, Owen denies that such a freedom is possible for the creature. For God’s providence upholds and maintains the causal powers of all his creatures, so that all created beings are in each moment naturally dependent upon God’s power simply to act in accordance with their nature. To be freed from this natural dependence on God’s power would require the creature to be a *pure act*. And this is absurd, because in its very nature as a *creature*, it is a *composite* being, and so dependent on divine power.⁸³ As such, Owen states that it has its freedom only “by participation” in God’s power.⁸⁴ And since it belongs to God’s perfection for all creatures to exist in a state of natural dependence on him, not even

⁸⁰ *Works*, 10:119.

⁸¹ *Works*, 10:119.

⁸² Though he does not treat this precise distinction, Richard Muller offers helpful background on the Arminian doctrine of providence as it relates to the free actions of creatures. See *God, Creation, and Providence in the Thought of Jacob Arminius: Sources and Directions of Scholastic Protestantism in the Era of Early Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), ch. 12, especially pp. 250–268.

⁸³ *Works*, 10:118–120.

⁸⁴ According to Owen, reducing the creature from potency to act requires the “premotion . . . of a superior agent” (*Works*, 10:120). See Cleveland’s explanation of this point against the background of the *De Auxiliis* controversy (39–46).

rational creatures can act freely without the providence of God. Owen thus denies that the free choices of creatures can condition God's decree.

Similarly, in his *Display of Arminianism*, Owen accuses Johannes Corvinus of attributing an imperfection to God by claiming that God desires the salvation of all men when this desire must ultimately go unfulfilled. To Owen, the acknowledgment of any so-called *ceteris paribus* desires in God must likewise imply a restriction of divine freedom, one that ultimately draws the analogy between divine and human agency in a manner threatening to God's perfection. For, it is "an imperfection in his nature, to desire and expect what he knows shall never come to pass". While this may often be the case in creatures, whose purposes are often frustrated by their own limitations or those placed on them by others, such cannot be the case with God, whose life is composed in perfect beatitude and whose will is the beginning and end of all things.⁸⁵ For as God's will goes before and comprehends all created reality, nothing can come to pass which might frustrate or impede it. "Our God is in the heavens, he does whatever pleases him" (Ps. 115:3).

This impulse to safeguard the freedom of divine action is an important element of Owen's larger theology of God's perfection, and one which seeks to establish the absolute *efficiency* and *priority* of God's grace. Yet, in several places, this tendency to define grace in terms of the absolute freedom of the divine will also leads Owen to *contrast* the freedom of God in the gift of his grace with a *natural disposition* of the divine will to be gracious to the creature.⁸⁶ This claim plays a crucial role in Owen's early theology, particularly in his defense of particular redemption in *The Death of Death*. And so we will leave our discussion of it until our chapter on the covenant of grace. We mention it here only to note that this emphasis on the freedom of God's grace leads Owen's theology of divine perfection to emphasize God's absolute dominion and his freedom to do with creatures as he pleases.

1.3 The End of the Divine Will

While Owen wishes to maintain that the divine will is free from any external constraint, this does not mean that God's works are finally arbitrary. All that God does is in keeping with his

⁸⁵ *Works*, 10:25-26; cf. Cleveland, 33-46.

⁸⁶ E.g., *Works*, 2:82; 10:228, 322; 11:228, 246-247.

nature. And therefore it is necessary that God himself should be the final end of all his works. Owen explains:

For as before the production of all things, there was nothing that could be the end why any of them should be brought forth out of nothing, or towards which they should be disposed; so God, being an infinite agent in wisdom, and understanding, and power, he could have no end in his actings but that also which is infinite. It is therefore natural and necessary unto God to do all things for himself. It is impossible that he should have any other end. And he hath done so accordingly: Prov. 16:4, “The Lord hath made all things for himself.” He aimed at himself in all that he did; there being no other infinite good for him to make his object and his end but himself alone.⁸⁷

The end toward which all God’s works tend within the economy of grace is here determined by the logic of divine perfection. All rational agents act for some end, and therefore God must have an end in the creation of the world. However, this end cannot be anything *ad extra*, for all creatures are fundamentally derivative of God’s goodness, wisdom, and power. Therefore, in all his works, God acts out of love for his own glory and goodness as the final end of all things. “He can have no ultimate end in any thing but himself alone”, for it is impossible that there “should be any thing better than himself or above himself”.⁸⁸ God alone is infinite. And therefore Owen argues that God himself could be the only moving cause for the production of all things.

It was, of course, the consensus opinion of late medieval scholastic thinkers that God himself is the final end of all his acts, but there was substantial disagreement on how this was to be understood. Both Aquinas and Scotus argued that all God’s works are ordered to his *goodness* as their final end. For Aquinas, God’s determination to create is induced by a movement of his intellect⁸⁹ — the *scientia approbationis* — toward that order of creation which, having his own essential goodness as its exemplary cause, most suitably bears his likeness and thus shows forth his praise. God’s goodness is the final end of this creative work in that creatures share God’s likeness and enjoy his beauty.⁹⁰ For Scotus, on the other hand, it is not the divine intellect, but the divine will which finally grounds the decree to create. Because God might always have created differently, the resemblance of creatures to God is

⁸⁷ *Works*, 6:482.

⁸⁸ *Works*, 19:90.

⁸⁹ Since God’s intellect *is* his essence, the effect of creation preexists *in eo* according to the mode of the intellect, and proceeds *ab eo* according to the mode of the will (*ST* Ia, q. 19, a. 4). For Aquinas, therefore, the will of God is the cause of creation, but only as it enacts the determination of the divine intellect.

relativized to some degree by God's infinite *potentia absoluta*. Scotus' restriction of exemplary causes in this manner has the effect of situating the goodness of the creature much more exclusively in its efficient and final causes. A thing's participation in the good is thus concentrated in the creature's attainment of its final end. Created natures are, in this way, instruments appointed for some end determined by the divine will. This ultimately heightens the sense in which God is invested within the unfolding drama of history, as that which God wills out of love for himself as the *Primum Finis*.⁹¹

In keeping with the majority of Reformed thinkers, Owen argued that the end of all God's works is the furtherance of His glory. Every divine work is ordered to it, and the whole course of human history runs toward it. God's glory is "the centre where all the lines . . . do meet, the scope and mark towards which all things . . . are directed".⁹² Owen differentiates between two senses in which Scripture speaks of the glory of God. In many instances, "glory" designates the intrinsic perfection of God's essence. So, Hebrews refers to Christ as the "brightness" of the Father's glory, for in Christ the church gains some small apprehension of "the infinite excellency of God, in his inconceivable perfections, raised up in such brightness as utterly exceeds all our apprehensions". In this sense, glory is the universal perfection by virtue of which God excels all created things. Yet, "glory" has another meaning in Scripture. Not infrequently, it designates the sense of awe which God's perfection elicits among his creatures. In this sense, "glory" refers not to God's intrinsic perfection *per se*, but to our "estimation and opinion" of God.⁹³

Distinguish between these two senses is important in order to maintain the proper order between God's essence and his works. Owen is careful to urge that the economy of grace in no way involves the "addition or accruement . . . of any new real good unto [God]", for God's "absolute eternal perfection and all-sufficiency render this impossible". "God could have omitted all this great work without the least impeachment of his glory. Not one holy property of his nature would have been diminished or abated in its eternal glory by that omission. This, then, depended on a pure act of his will and choice."⁹⁴ In other words, because God is perfect and complete in himself, he is fully independent of his work within

⁹⁰ *ST Ia*, q. 14, a. 8; q. 45, a. 6; *SCG I*.75.

⁹¹ *De Primo Principio*, IV.6; cf. Wolter, "A Scotistic Approach to The Ultimate Why Question", *Scotus and Ockham* (St. Bonaventure, NY: The Franciscan Institute Publications, 2003), 63-83.

⁹² *Works*, 18:48.

⁹³ *Works*, 9:31.

the economy of grace. He does not need to perform it. It is a “pure act of his will and choice”, and so an act of absolute dominion. As such, God’s end within the economy of grace cannot be construed as an attempt to *obtain* glory. It must rather be regarded as an act of divine goodness — the gracious manifestation *ad extra* of that essential glory and perfection that God possesses eternally *ad intra*:

He is absolutely, infinitely, eternally perfect, in himself and all his glorious properties, so that nothing can be added unto him. His end therefore must be, not the obtaining of glory unto himself, but the manifestation of the glory that is in himself. When the holy properties of his nature are exercised in external works, and are thereby expressed, declared, and made known, then is God glorified.⁹⁵

This is the purpose in which God rejoiced from eternity.⁹⁶ It is the end for the sake of which all God’s counsels were designed. All God’s dealings with the creature arise from it and are directed toward it. Therefore, we might say that, for Owen, while the will of God has no *cause*, it does have a *reason* — that is, a *ratio*: the manifestation of God in all of his glory.⁹⁷

Traditionally, Reformed theologians specified the nature of this *ratio* by articulating the relationship between the various divine decrees. This exercise provided a logic for relating the various works of God within the economy of grace, the goods which those works aim at, and the manner in which they all conduce to the ultimate end of manifesting the glory of God. Owen, however, expresses some hesitancy about the Scriptural warrant for this endeavor, stating in one place that, “there is more of curiosity than of edification in a scrupulous inquiry into the method or order of God’s eternal decrees or counsels.”⁹⁸ Owen’s fullest discussion of the matter is in his Exercitation on “The Origin of the Priesthood of Christ”. It is, at best, very evasive. Owen raises the issue only to demonstrate that the incarnation was strictly ordered to the removal of sin, and he even disputes the usefulness of positing any order between subordinate ends of God’s government.⁹⁹ Nevertheless, he does at least deny that the ordination of Christ to become incarnate logically preceded the fall.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁴ *Works*, 6:482; *cf.* 9:31.

⁹⁵ *Works*, 19:90.

⁹⁶ *Works*, 19:69, 90.

⁹⁷ *Cf.* Turretin, *Institutes*, III.xvii.2.

⁹⁸ *Works*, 1:62.

⁹⁹ *Works*, 19:32.

¹⁰⁰ *Works*, 19:24-25, 29-35; *cf.* 20:83-84; 22:264.

Owen's ambivalence at this point prevented him from ever systematically working through the various doctrinal relations between the works of creation and redemption, and as a consequence, he sometimes lacks consistency in these matters, a fault which plagues him at several points. For instance, Owen tentatively entitles himself to an infralapsarian position on the order of the decrees.¹⁰¹ He consistently maintains that the incarnation is strictly ordered to the removal of sin, and therefore is logically consequent to the fall as a repair to and elevation of the state of original creation. At one point Owen goes even beyond Calvin in rejecting the notion that there were any "types" of Christ in the garden of Eden, for this would imply that creation was logically subordinate to the work of redemption.¹⁰²

But because Owen takes the revelation of Christ to be "the special and peculiar end" of Scripture,¹⁰³ his methodological commitment to an exposition of the history of revelation¹⁰⁴ sometimes inclines his thoughts in a more supralapsarian direction. So, in a variety of places, Owen argues that God's full disclosure of himself in the economy of grace would have been *incomplete* apart from the incarnation:

it is necessary that [God] should reveal and make known *all* the attributes and properties of his nature, in works and effects peculiarly proceeding from them and answering unto them, that he might be glorified in them . . . For what reason can be imagined why God will be glorified in one essential excellency of his nature and not in another?¹⁰⁵

Yet, the attributes of God's grace and mercy can be known *only* by the work of Christ's incarnation. Were it not for the disclosure of these attributes made to us in Christ, Owen states that they would have remained eternally hidden in the "abyss of God's essence".¹⁰⁶

This is intended, of course, only to establish the work of Christ as the "centre and circumference"¹⁰⁷ of God's revelation of himself. But at various points, this focused christocentrism of Owen's theology of revelation causes him to lean somewhat strongly on the *felix*

¹⁰¹ *Works*, 8:291-292; 10:321; *cf.*, Trueman, *Claims of Truth*, 50, n. 8.

¹⁰² *Works*, 18:25.

¹⁰³ *Works*, 18:48-49. Owen here contrasts the contemplation of God possible in a kind of natural religion like that of Plato, which reveals God's attributes "absolutely", with the revelation God makes of himself by grace in Jesus Christ, according to which he is specially known as "all in all".

¹⁰⁴ See Rehnmann, *Divine Discourse*, 155-177.

¹⁰⁵ *Works*, 6:485.

¹⁰⁶ *Works*, 18:159-160; *cf.* 1:65-70; 20:83-84.

¹⁰⁷ *Works*, 1:79.

culpa tradition in order to talk about the *unity* of God's works.¹⁰⁸ In these contexts, Owen's accounts of the doctrine of creation are heavily ordered to the work of redemption. In fact, in a few instances, Owen even attempts to explain God's permission of the fall as necessary to the end of fully declaring his manifold perfections:

These properties [grace and mercy] can be no otherwise exercised, and consequently no otherwise known, but only in and by the pardon of sin; which puts it beyond all question that there is forgiveness with God. God will not lose the glory of these his excellencies: he will be revealed in them, he will be known by them, he will be glorified for them; which he could not be if there were not forgiveness with him. So that here comes in not only the truth but the necessity of forgiveness also.¹⁰⁹

Rather than treating God's grace and mercy as relative attributes, and hence as conditional expressions of some more fundamental divine attribute like divine goodness or love,¹¹⁰ Owen treats them as absolute attributes in their own right — attributes which can only achieve expression in God's loving action toward *sinners*. So, in the quotation above, Owen consoles the sinner with the willingness of God to forgive by grounding God's willingness to forgive in His determination "not to lose the glory of these excellencies". And since the excellencies of God's grace and mercy cannot be exercised apart from suitable objects — "it is sinners only, and such as have made themselves miserable by sin, that they can be exercised about" — sinners can take consolation in the knowledge that God purposes to forgive them because their forgiveness is the necessary condition for the fulfillment of God's purpose in all things, namely, the glorification of his grace.¹¹¹

Owen's emphasis on the instrumental necessity of certain creaturely conditions and events for revealing particular divine attributes presupposes that the divine attributes are formally distinct in their operations toward creatures, and requires a very close identification of the attribute signified with its mode of signification.¹¹² Passages like these quite clearly carry an implicit supralapsarian logic that renders sin as the necessary occasion or instrument for full divine disclosure. This naturally calls into question the seriousness with which Owen

¹⁰⁸ *Works*, 1:44-64, 191; 2:89; 4:369; 6:483-486; 18:48-49, 159-160; 19:28, 90; 20:80-84, 368; 23:58.

¹⁰⁹ *Works*, 6:486; *cf.* 1:190-192; 20:80-81.

¹¹⁰ Mercy has a broader usage for Aquinas, as an expression of divine goodness by which God removes defects from creatures (*ST* Ia, q. 21, a. 3-4). So, Aquinas conceives of mercy as being basic even to the act of creation since by this act God removes the defect of non-being to establish creatures in life.

¹¹¹ *Works*, 6:486.

can maintain that creation, itself, was a complete and integral work of God, a point which everywhere undergirds the principle that God's grace *perfects* nature. It also attenuates the distinction Owen lodged earlier between God's *causation* of all things good and his *permission* of all things evil. If rigidly maintained, it would raise serious questions about Owen's metaphysics of good and evil, and whether he can in fact avoid the charge that God is the Author of evil.

More directly to our interest, however, is the fact that these passages indicate Owen's doctrine of creation is, at points, very strongly ordered to his theology of redemption. This supralapsarian logic continues to develop throughout Owen's writings — it even has a role in Owen's mature Christology set forth in *Christologia*. But what is really pivotal to observe here is *why* this thread emerges. Owen argues that God's design was to manifest his glory, and so all things are ordered to that end. But when Owen claims that God acts in all things for the sake of his glory, he has something very particular in mind — the glory that redounds to his *grace*. The revelation of this grace in Christ necessitates certain conditions among God's creatures, namely, their fall and alienation from God. But this ultimately fulfills God's purposes, which is to reveal his gracious character in the pardoning of sinners.

Owen's theology of divine dominion plays a supportive role in this argument by establishing God's absolute freedom in this act and his right to do what he pleases with his own. “[H]e made all things for himself, — that is, the manifestation of his greatness, power, wisdom and goodness”.¹¹³ It is not a dominant role. Owen does not address questions of theodicy and attempt dissolve them on God's sovereign right. But God's absolute dominion does function to explain why the economy of grace takes the form that it does: because all things exist to reveal God's mercy. This points us in the direction of a theme that will reappear throughout this thesis, namely, the way in which Owen's appeals to divine dominion serve to underwrite the freedom of God in his government of creatures. In this instance, it supports Owen's move to order the work of creation to the work of redemption. But we will observe other places where it functions similarly to restrict the dogmatic scope of the doctrine of creation in order to support the freedom and the necessity of God's grace.

¹¹² While Turretin allows the attributes to be formally distinct, he denies any real distinction, claiming the distinction is only virtual in the sense that it is a principle capable of a range of diverse operations (*Institutes*, III.v.6). Cf. Steven J. Duby, *Divine Simplicity: A Dogmatic Account* (London: T&T Clark, 2015), 22.

Conclusion

In contrast with the prevailing accounts of Owen which understand him as a Reformed “Thomist”, the chapter above has argued that Owen’s theology of the divine will is consistently “voluntarist” in nature, granting causal priority to the divine will over the divine intellect. This supports Owen’s theology of divine freedom, which understands the absolute contingency of all God’s works *ad extra* in terms of the prior “indifference” of God’s will — that is, in God’s liberty either to will or not to will some act, or to will an altogether different act. This allows Owen to offer an account of God’s providence that does not compete with the free agency of creatures, and at the same time guarantees the infallible and uncompromising sovereignty of God in all things. God’s absolute dominion over creatures in this respect also conditions the *ends* of God’s government by informing the logic which renders God’s government coherent. Since God is perfect in himself, he seeks nothing for himself in the creature but only to manifest his glory in its fullness, and particularly the glory of his *grace*. Though this emphasis occasionally leads him to advance a supralapsarian logic, it indicates just how centrally Owen locates the work of Christ and the revelation of God’s mercy in the outworking of God’s purposes in the world.

In the next chapter, I will develop some of the points found here in relation to Owen’s doctrine of creation. I will show that Owen’s account of divine dominion intentionally displaces much scholastic teaching on the nature of creation and its dogmatic functions. It will be shown that Owen’s emphasis places significantly greater emphasis on the necessity of divine action, which leads to a restriction in the exemplarist themes found so prominently in Medieval theology. Additionally, it will be shown that Owen identifies the *imago dei* in rational creatures with their habitual righteousness, and concentrates the goodness of rational creatures around their active communion with God by grace.

¹¹³ *Works*, 6:485.

CHAPTER 2: CREATION AND THE NATURAL DEPENDENCE OF RATIONAL CREATURES

Introduction

The creature's relation to God is, for Owen, a textured reality — the kind of thing that admits of several distinct aspects or dimensions. The various dimensions of this relation are distinguished by the kinds of acts that God undertakes in relation to the creature. God is Creator, Lawgiver, Rewarder, Redeemer and Judge. When God engages the creature in some act, the creature obtains a relation to God by that act. And these acts exist in a definite order to one another, with some logically presupposing or following sequentially upon other divine acts. But each of these works has a definite *ratio* within the will and purposes of God. And because these works formally structure Owen's theology of divine government, maintaining the proper distinction between these acts and defining their proper relation to one another is a task of great theological importance.

Therefore, many of the more important elements of Owen's theology of divine government emerge only in the course of examining the etiology that structures his account of the creature's relation to God. This will require us to lay out the various works that God undertakes toward the creature, and then trace those works back up to their principle in the divine nature and will. Though we will treat these works successively, following their material order, we should stipulate here that the material order does not necessarily reflect the order of knowing, or for that matter the pattern of Owen's reasoning. The logic sometimes runs in the opposite direction. This is especially the case in Owen's Anselmian theology of the atonement, where inferences about the nature of divine justice derive from a reasoned contemplation of the mission of Christ. In such instances, warrant swims upstream, as it were. This is as it should be, since God's nature is revealed in his works. But it is important that we recognize from the outset that an account of divine government is by its nature a *systematic* enterprise in that it aims to give a coherent account of the creature's relation to God by describing the relation of God's various works to his nature.

Over the next four chapters we will examine the creature's relation to God under four aspects: God as Creator, Lawgiver, Rewarder and Redeemer. Owen frequently couples these

titles together, or some variation of them.¹ Taken together, they comprise the principal order of God's government, and so it is fitting that they should provide some structure to our study. In the next chapter, we will look at the moral dependence of rational creatures upon God as their Lawgiver. But in this first chapter, we will concentrate on the work of creation and the *natural* dependence which creatures maintain upon God as their Creator. This is necessary in order to survey many of the principles which will structure and shape God's government of creatures as Lawgiver, Rewarder and Redeemer.

After a brief assessment of the nature of Owen's doctrine of creation, we will turn our attention to the nature of creation as a work of the Trinity. This will lead to an examination of the two creative acts: the Son's creation of all things out of nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*), and the Spirit's "work of distinction" (*distinctionis operatio*). We will conclude, finally, with an examination of the creation of human nature on the sixth day. This will include a discussion of the principles of human nature, its integrity in original righteousness, and the special vocation which God appointed it in the order of nature. I will argue here that Owen's doctrine of divine dominion leads him to a theology of creation that advances a strong account of the creature's natural dependence upon God, and prioritizes the creature's active relation to God by grace.

2.1 The Function of the Doctrine of Creation

Corresponding to the internal works of God's counsels and decrees are the external works of God in creation and the government of the world. By these external acts, God enacts the eternal purpose of his will which, being established in perfect wisdom and understanding, tends toward the manifestation of his full and complete perfection, as we have already seen. In this respect, the doctrines of creation and government are important correlates of divine perfection. For the harmony and peaceableness of God's external works are an analogy of the peace and perfection that distinguish the character of God's inner life.

God is "The God of Peace" (Phil. 4:9). And peace, Owen writes, "is comprehensive of that order, rest and blessedness" in which God's life is eternally composed. In the strictest sense, God possesses peace and beatitude absolutely; it is "the glory of his sovereign

¹ E.g. *Works*, 2:377; 4:109; 5:239; 12:531; *Biblical Theology*, 20 [17:39].

diadem”, and as such, belongs to God alone.² Yet as God possesses peace in himself, he also wills to be the Author of peace *ad extra*. The divine works *ad extra* proceed entirely from this inner “repose” and “complacency” of God. And though the full harmony of God’s perfections is known finally only to God himself, it is revealed within all the works of his hands, for “He undertakes nothing but what he will finish and complete in beauty and order”.³ Creation is one of those works which, in its original state of integrity, bears a likeness to its Maker and attested the eternal harmony and blessedness of his life. In a manner of speaking, creation is an act in which God grants creatures a share in his peace by bringing them into being and granting them a nature and form that is suitable to the end for which they have been made.

This analogy between God’s inner and outer works rests on the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, which forms the backbone of Owen’s theology of nature. Since God is eternally perfect in himself, the world is radically contingent and all its goods radically dependent upon God as their first and final cause. Though this conviction sometimes supported detailed and speculative accounts of the metaphysics of created being, Reformed readings of the creation narrative generally tended to restrict the scope of metaphysical speculation warranted by the text of Genesis.⁴ This stands in noted contrast to a longstanding interpretive tradition stretching back to the Patristics. Augustine, for example, thought that God created the world complete and fully formed in an instant, this being more fitting of a perfect agent. Consequently, he understood the six days of creation as a pedagogical device intended to direct contemplation of the various elements of God’s creative work.⁵ This figurative reading of the days of creation provided Augustine with considerable interpretive latitude, which in turn allowed him to read the text as speaking more directly to matters of metaphysics.

By contrast, however, Reformed readings of the creation narrative typically understand the six days literally, often leading them to regard the narrative as a kind of creation-history, which focuses exposition of the text more squarely on the sequence of God’s acts, rather than on the metaphysical nature or mode of those acts. Owen’s approach to the creation narrative

² *Works*, 3:368.

³ *Works*, 24:18.

⁴ There are notable exceptions to this, e.g., Zanchi’s massive and metaphysically sophisticated, *De operibus Dei intra spatium sex dierum* (Neostadium, 1602).

⁵ Augustine, *De Genesi ad litteram*, Book I.1-18, translated as “The Literal Meaning of Genesis”, in *On Genesis, The Works of Saint Augustine*, ed. John E. Rotelle, O.S.A., trans. Edmund Hill, O.P. (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2002), 168-186.

is similar. And thus, while his doctrine of creation operates broadly within the metaphysical framework hammered out by the scholastic reception of Augustine, elements which receive much fuller exposition in Medieval or other Reformed works are often entirely missing in Owen, or are discussed only very briefly.

For example, the relation between form and substance occupied a considerable amount of space in Medieval treatments of creation, but with the exception of a few oblique mentions, Owen leaves this issue entirely undiscussed. And while Owen does occasionally offer some very compressed thoughts on the nature of the creative act, he rarely ventures any claims regarding the metaphysics of finite being or the nature of its production by God. The matter is much the same with respect to the metaphysics of good and evil. Unlike Thomas Barlow, who leads his *Exercitationes Aliquot Metaphysicae De Deo* with an extended reflection on the nature of good and evil, Owen concentrates attention on the disruptive effects of evil's presence in the world, making only occasional reference to the nature of evil as a privation of the good.

In practice, then, Owen's doctrine of creation functions much more as a kind of prologue to the history of redemption than it does as the basis for a speculative metaphysic. Of course, Owen does incorporate some metaphysical elements, particularly in specifying the natural dependence of the creature upon divine power. But Owen's primary interests are in those aspects of the doctrine which correspond to the redemptive missions of the Son and Spirit within the economy of grace. Therefore, the form of Adam's existence in his original state, the nature of his relation to God, the responsibilities which he bore within the covenant of works, and the character of his office as a covenant head all feature prominently because they form the doctrinal framework for any account of the work of redemption.

2.2 Trinity and The Creative Act(s)

Following a long tradition in Christian teaching on creation, Owen divides the work of creation into two distinct divine acts.⁶ The first creative act pertains to the work of *creatio ex nihilo*, which is God's immediate and effortless production of all things out of nothing. This work included the creation of all immaterial beings, such as angels, as well as the production

⁶ This distinction was sometimes registered linguistically, by differentiating between the various biblical terms for the word "create" (*bara'* or *yatzar*). See Calvin, *Comm. Genesis*, 1:1, 21.

of a “dark body of matter”, consisting of the physical substance out of which all material creatures were subsequently formed. The second creative act concerns what has often been described as the “work of distinction” (*distinctionis operatio*).⁷ This is that work whereby God forms material creatures out of “that dark, confused heap” which he produced out of nothing, assigning them their distinct natures and grouping them according to their created kinds.⁸

Distinguishing between these two creative acts was, in the first instance, a matter of biblical interpretation. Owen’s appeal to the creation of “a dark body of matter” here is an attempt to gloss the words of Genesis which originally describe the earth as being, “without form and void” (Gen. 1:2). Owen appears to regard the production of this mass as included within God’s work on the first day of creation. But in all the divine works that follow this act, God is depicted as bringing order to this originally confused and chaotic mass.⁹ The creation narrative speaks of this work in terms of God “separating” or “dividing” (*yavdel*) creatures into distinct species and kinds (Gen. 1:4, 6, 14, 18). By depicting created forms as products of divine agency, the work of distinction draws attention to the wisdom of God which framed the universe in a manner befitting its ultimate purpose and end.¹⁰

In scholastic theology, the distinction between these two creative acts also commonly supported several doctrinal interests. First, many Christian theologians used this distinction as a means of conceptualizing the relationship between form and matter. Since Augustine believed that the world was fully formed by God instantaneously, he held that the reference to the earth being “without form and void” was intended to signify a distinction between the *power* by which God creates matter, and the *wisdom* by which God grants creatures their natural forms.¹¹ Though many scholastic thinkers broke with Augustine in taking a more literal reading of the 7 days of creation, this metaphysical gloss was often maintained and enhanced by positing a distinction between “primary” and “secondary matter”. In contrast with “secondary matter”, which described the state of matter as it is limited and defined by its

⁷ Lombard, *Sentences*, III.xiii.1.

⁸ *Works*, 8:458; *cf.* 3:95-99, 163, 166.

⁹ *Works*, 3:95-96; *cf.* Augustine, “Literal Meaning of Genesis”, I.15; *ST* Ia, q. 66, a. 1; Bonaventure, *Breviloquium*, II.ii, translated in *Works of St. Bonaventure*, vol. 9, ed. Robert Karris, trans. Dominic Monti (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publication, 2005).

¹⁰ *Cf.* Calvin, *Comm. Genesis*, 1:3.

¹¹ “Literal Meaning of Genesis”, I.13-15; *cf.* Rowan Williams, “Creation”, *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Allan D. Fitzgerald, et. al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 251-254.

form, “primary matter” describes a chaotic and inchoate created substance, possessing no form whatsoever. This distinction enabled scholastic thinkers to gain analytical purchase on the metaphysical character of form and the precise nature of its relation to matter. However, these questions were often the source of great disagreement among the Medievals. Some, like Aquinas, regarded primary and secondary matter as being only *logically* distinct, while others, like Scotus and Suarez, argued for a *real* distinction between the two.¹² Disagreements like these had far reaching theological implications, not only for construals of the nature of created existence, but also for the knowledge of God and even the theology of the incarnation.

Heppe alleges that the Reformed position was generally closer to Aquinas on this point. It became standard, he claims, “to reject the . . . doctrine of the original creation of a formless chaos”.¹³ Owen certainly fits this general pattern, stating that the “chaos” described by the Genesis narrative refers not to an absolute *absence* of form, as posited by the scholastic concept of “prime matter”. Rather, the formlessness referred to here indicates only the general absence of *beauty* and *order* that attended the original confusion of the natural elements of the universe¹⁴ — a confusion which God removes by his work of distinction. Accordingly, for Owen, the distinction between the first and second creative acts does not concern the relation between form and matter absolutely, but is a feature of the creation narrative designed to instruct us that the natural order was conceived of and framed by God’s infinite power and wisdom.

Second, as this distinction was used by Augustine to conceptualize the relationship between God’s power and wisdom in the act of creating, it was also regarded as having significant trinitarian implications. The majority opinion among the Medievals was that creation was an act belonging to all three persons of the Trinity, though in respect of different

¹² Feser, *Scholastic Metaphysics*, 171-177; cf. John F. Wippel, “Prime Matter and Substantial Form” in *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, 295-375.

¹³ *Reformed Dogmatics*, 197-198; ST Ia, q. 66, a. 1. E.g., Zanchi, *De operibus Dei*, lib. I, c. iv; Voetius, *Selectarum Disputationem Theologicarum, Pars Prima* (Utrecht: Johannes a Waesberg, 1648), d. 35, p. 617620; cf. Goudriaan, *Reformed Orthodoxy and Philosophy, 1625-1750: Gisbertius Voetius, Petrus van Maastricht, and Antonius Dreissen* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 85-133; J. A. van Ruler, *The Crisis of Causality: Voetius and Descartes on God, Nature and Change* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 37-70.

¹⁴ E.g., Calvin, *Comm. Genesis*, 1:1-3; Wollebius, *The Abridgement of Christian Divinitie* (London: T. Mabb, 1660), I.5; Ames, *Marrow of Divinity* (London: Griffin, 1642), I.viii.46-47; Calvin, *Comm. on Genesis*, 1:2; Junius, *Protoktisia, Seu Creationis A Deo Factae, Et In Ea Prioris Adami Ex Creatione Integri & ex lapsu corrupti*, Historia (Heidelberg, 1589), comm. on Gen. 1:2; Leigh, *Treatise of Divinity*, III.2; Pictet, *Christian Theology*, III.3; Ridgley, *Body of Divinity*, I.xiv-xv, p. 333.

causes. As an agent creates things like itself, the act of creation must belong to God in respect of his essence, which is proper to each of the persons of the Trinity. Bonaventure's account is representative when he claims that,

Because all things flow from the first and most perfect Principle, who is omnipotent, all wise, and all beneficent, it was fitting that [creatures] should come into being in such a way that their very production might reflect these same three attributes.¹⁵

The order of this triad of attributes — power, wisdom and goodness — is a consistent theme within Bonaventure's trinitarian thought, and they are appropriated to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit respectively.¹⁶ In the context of the doctrine of creation, Bonaventure correlates this triad with the efficient, exemplary, and final causes of creatures. The Father's power is the efficient cause of creatures, granting all things their distinct mode of being. The wisdom of the Son, who proceeds from the Father, is the exemplary cause after which all creatures are fashioned and according to which they receive their form. And the goodness of the Spirit, who proceeds from both the Father and the Son, is the final cause of all things, from which creatures derive their goodness and order.¹⁷

Bonaventure thus argued that all creatures are marked by an imprint of the Creator in their very being, a trace of the Trinity (*vestigia Trinitatis*), bearing witness to their origin, pattern and end in the being of God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.¹⁸ This vestige of the Trinity is not, for Bonaventure, a proof of the doctrine of the Trinity deducible by natural reason. It is rather a *sign* — a kind of remainder embedded within the very entity of the creature which is discoverable by faith and which refers the natural goodness of the creature to its first cause. In this way, this theologoumenon functioned to register the entitative goodness of creatures by pointing to the inherent likeness between the creature's being and

¹⁵ *Breviloquim*, II.ii.2; II.xii; VII.i.2.

¹⁶ See Etienne Gilson, *The Philosophy of Bonaventure*, trans. Dom Illtyd Trethowan and Frank J. Sheed (Paterson, NJ: St. Anthony Guild Press, 1965), 182-183, 242-243; Russell L. Friedman, *Medieval Trinitarian Thought from Aquinas to Ockham* (Cambridge: CUP, 2010), 5-49; Leonard J. Bowman, "The Cosmic Exemplarism of Bonaventure", *The Journal of Religion* 55/2 (1975), 181-198. Similarly, see *Synopsis Purioris*, X.8-12.

¹⁷ *Breviloquim*, II.ii.2; cf. *ST Ia*, q. 45, aa. 6-7.

¹⁸ Following Augustine's use of Wisdom 11:20, Aquinas and Bonaventure both index the *vestigia* to the creature's "measure, number, and weight", which are its substance, form, and order, respectively (*ST Ia*, q. 45, a. 7; *Breviloquim*, II.ii.2; cf. Augustine, "Literal Meaning of Genesis", IV.7-12; *ibid.*, *De Trinitate*, IV.10, translated as *On the Trinity* in *Works of Saint Augustine*, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Edmund Hill [Hyde Park: New City Press, 2012]).

its three-fold cause in the persons of the Trinity. As such, it was a corollary that supported the exemplarism so crucial for much of Medieval metaphysics.

On balance, Owen's use of the trinitarian appropriations is more fluid than that of the Medievals. He does argue that all creatures are marked with an imprint of the divine nature, and while he is not always consistent, in some of these instances he even invokes the ordering of the attributes listed above by Bonaventure, suggesting that this imprint is a vestige of the Trinity.¹⁹ Yet, Owen does not make systematic use of this feature, and where he leans most heavily into the trinitarian character of the relation between the attributes of power, wisdom and goodness, he typically reverses the order.²⁰ In any event, as it respects the operations of the Trinity in the work of creation, Owen follows the appropriations as laid out by Basil of Caesarea.²¹ Basil ascribed the "original cause" of creation to the Father, the "creative cause" to the Son, and the "perfecting cause" to the person of the Holy Spirit.²² Similarly, Owen attributes the "authority" of creation to the Father, and appropriates the two creative acts to the persons of the Son and Spirit — creation *ex nihilo* and the continued conservation of the natural order is appropriated to the work of the Son, while the agency of the Holy Spirit is credited with the work of distinction, perfecting creatures by forming them according to their created kinds. In the first instance, Owen reads texts like Hebrews 1:2²³ as establishing the pre-existence of the Son as the agent of creation. So, just as Christ is the eternal Word of the Father made flesh, so also he was the "principle efficient cause" by which God "produced the worlds out of nothing".²⁴ And secondly, Owen sees the appropriation of this "perfecting" work to the Holy Spirit flowing naturally from the biblical association of the Spirit with the efficient power of God who infallibly brings God's purposes on earth to their final fruition.

¹⁹ E.g., *Works*, 3:189; *cf.* 1:61, 183; 2:413; 4:91; 8:505; 19:333. On Reformed appropriation of the *vestigia trinitatis*, see *PRRD*, 4:157-162.

²⁰ *Works*, 1:182-187, 369; 3:93-95.

²¹ "And in the creation, bethink the first, I pray thee, the original cause of all things that are made, the Father; of the creative cause, the Son; of the perfecting cause, the Spirit . . ." (*De Spiritu Sancto*, c. xvi [NPNF, 8:23-24]).

²² *Works*, 3:94; *cf.* 1:361; 12:271; 20:74-78; 3:94-105.

²³ In his commentary on the passage, Owen sets his interpretation of this text over against the reading of Grotius, who translates the *di hou* as "for him", thus taking the phrase as establishing the *purpose* for which God created the world — namely, Christ (*Works*, 20:77-78). Though Owen is generally sympathetic to this kind of Christocentrism, he opposes this reading of the text on both grammatical and theological grounds, complaining at one point that it simply supplies the Socinians with "one evasion more" with which to deny the Son's pre-existence (*Works*, 12:271). Instead, Owen takes the *di hou* instrumentally, "by him", thus referring to the eternal Son as the *agent* of creation. In so doing, he links this text to other biblical passages central to Christian teaching on Christ's preexistence, e.g., Proverbs 8:22-24, John 1:1-3, and Colossians 1:16. On the function of this teaching within Owen's polemical context, see Trueman, *Claims of Truth*, 160-164.

²⁴ *Works*, 12:265-278; 20:74-76; *cf.* Calvin, *Comm. Genesis*, 1:3.

Owen avers that the order of subsistence does not strictly necessitate that the first creative act be appropriated to the Son. For since power belongs to God by virtue of his essence, nothing prevents the Father or the Spirit from being the immediate agent of creation out of nothing.²⁵ Still, Owen argues that the Son took on this work for a particular reason — namely, in anticipation of his work of redemption as the Mediator. “The making of the worlds, and all things in them, in the first creation by the Son, was peculiarly subservient to the glory of the grace of God in the reparation and renovation of all things by him as incarnate”.²⁶ This kind of correlation between the work of the Son in creation and redemption is not unusual among the Reformed, but the order here is notable. It is not that Christ’s work of redemption is rooted in the Son’s prior work as the mediator of creation, as Calvin and Bonaventure had argued.²⁷ For Owen, the Son’s work of creation is not properly a function of his mediatorial office because the former does not belong to the covenant of redemption, which is the ground of Christ’s mediatorial work. Rather, creation is an act of sovereignty and dominion, one which belongs to the Son absolutely in his divine nature as he is the sovereign Ruler of all things.²⁸ Nevertheless, Owen does maintain here that the Son assumed the work of creation in anticipation of his redemptive work on behalf of the church. Here again, we see that Owen’s christocentrism leads him to explain the works of the Trinity in creation by reference to God’s purposes in the history of redemption.

Taken together with Owen’s “voluntarist” account of the divine decree, this difference in Owen’s trinitarian theology significantly restricts the doctrinal basis for the kind of *natural* exemplarism that is often found in figures more indebted to the Platonic tradition, like Bonaventure or Aquinas.²⁹ This is not exactly accidental. Owen spent most of his public ministry combating the spread of natural religion in England, a trend which he took to be eroding the very foundations of religious belief. The natural resemblance of creatures to God was a principle underwriting much of the natural religion in England, not only in the realm of moral theology and in teaching on the nature of merit, but also as it concerns the place of

²⁵ *Works*, 20:78; cf. 3:93, 157.

²⁶ *Works*, 20:79; cf. 20:107.

²⁷ See Joseph Tylanda, “Christ the Mediator: Calvin versus Stancaró”, *Calvin Theological Journal* 8/1 (1973), 516; cf. E. David Willis, *Calvin’s Catholic Christology: The Function of the So-Called ‘Extra Calvinisticum’ in Calvin’s Theology* (Leiden: Brill, 1966), 67-73.

²⁸ See Owen’s commentary on Heb. 1:2, where he distinguishes between Christ’s natural dominion over creation as he is *divine*, from the “grant” of dominion given to him as Mediator, under the covenant of redemption (*Works*, 20:41-42, 47-69; cf. Trueman, *The Claims of Truth*, 162-163).

²⁹ E.g., Bonaventures’, “Collations on the Six Days”, *Works of Bonaventure*, vol. 5, trans. José de Vinck (Paterson, NJ: St. Anthony Guild Press, 1970), 1-19.

natural reason in theology.³⁰ By minimizing these elements, Owen can reduce the doctrinal scope of nature, proportionally enhancing the necessity of divine action and *supernatural* grace.³¹ Of course, Owen also deems this to be the more straightforwardly biblical judgment. And in any case, stressing the distinct action of the trinitarian persons in the two acts of creation carries the additional advantage of providing increased exegetical support for defending the consubstantiality of the Son and Spirit against the anti-Trinitarians.³² We now turn to examine these two creative acts in sequence.

2.2.1 Creation *Ex Nihilo*

Though the nature and mode of God's first creative act was a topic of great interest among the Medievals, Owen's account of the Son's creative act is comparably compressed. The reason for this is likely due to the fact that Owen takes creation *ex nihilo* to be an article of faith accepted on the authority of divine revelation. So, while many notable Reformed thinkers take it to be deducible from natural reason,³³ Owen takes this to be the prime example of the *limits* of human reason and the necessity of faith.³⁴ For the doctrine itself runs contrary "to the most received principle of natural reason, '*Ex nihilo nihil fit*,'—'Nothing

³⁰ E.g., Antitrinitarians of the 17th century often rejected the eternal generation of the Son as absurd on the grounds that such a generation has no analogy in the natural realm.

³¹ Note the contrast Owen draws between the natural knowledge of God posited by Plato and the supernatural knowledge of God available in Scripture. The former arises strictly from "inbred notions of nature" and proceeds by contemplation of God's works in providence to consider only those attributes that are "revealed absolutely". But Scripture supernaturally discloses the "special and peculiar end" revealed in Christ, in which God is known as "all in all" (*Works*, 18:48-49).

³² *Works*, 2:393-394, 402.

³³ Ussher, Pictet and Leigh all imply that creation *ex nihilo* is deducible from the light of reason (Leigh, *A Treatise of Divinity*, III.2; Pictet, *Christian Theology*, III.2; Ussher, *Body of Divinity*, IV, 81-82). In his treatise "The Reason of Faith" (1677), Owen implies that God's creation of the world can be deduced by natural light (*Works*, 4:91). However, in his lengthiest discussion of creation *ex nihilo*, his comment on Hebrews 11:3 (1684), he states that "aides of reason . . . may confirm our minds in the persuasion of the original creation of all things"; but the fact that all things were created *ex nihilo*, "faith alone discovers" (*Works*, 24:21). Cf. Aquinas, who argues that natural reason can discover *that* the world was created, but it cannot know the nature of the act by which it was created, or whether the world itself is eternal (*ST* Ia, q. 46, a. 2).

³⁴ In his scathing digression in *Theologoumena Pantodapa*, "On the Mingling of Philosophy with Theology", Owen offers the following quotation taken from Juan Luis Vives' commentary on Augustine's *City of God*. The quotation is offered as an illustration of the deleterious effects that speculative reason can have on a theological doctrine: "'Theologians', [Vives] says, 'all agree that only God is able to create something out of nothing. And Thomas expands on this, whose arguments are refuted by Scotus, so that his own might be established, which are then overthrown to take-up Occam, and his arguments are confirmed, but then Pierre D'Ailly destroyed these too; in this way they play games about a very serious thing (*neque adeò vel ludunt in re seria*), even gathering to themselves their own followers and factions under the aegis of this heavenly thing. What habits can be changed, what depraved desires can be quelled and elevated, what can finally be done by a doctrine marked by extended and fierce disagreement, which is turned this way and that merely for the purpose of pleasing human desires, and which has been routinely battered by stubborn quarreling (*concussa machinis tam pertinaciter litigantium*)?'" (*Works*, 17:466-67 [*Biblical Theology*, 681], translation mine).

comes of nothing”³⁵. All human creativity presupposes a material object as the medium of its art and in this way is dependent upon natural laws and properties that God has already inlaid within the created order. As a matter of necessity, then, human creativity consists only in the inventive manipulation of nature. But in God’s first creative act, there was no material cause. God simply called beings into existence out of a void. In the words of du Bartas,

Nothing but nothing had the Lord Almighty
whereof, wherewith, and whereby to build this Citie.³⁶

The production of the universe out of nothing is, in other words, an act of sheer omnipotence. It follows, then, that there is no creaturely analogue to this act, and that the power by which God brings creatures into being *ex nihilo* must be wholly incomprehensible to us. Human reason is too lowly to perceive this truth, and so must entrust itself to the teachings of Holy Scripture with the promise that, “if *by faith* we are assured of the creation of the world out of nothing . . . , it will bear us out in the belief of other things that seem impossible unto reason, if so be they are revealed.”³⁷

In denying any material cause of God’s first creative act, the scholastics intended to affirm the dependence of all things on God and to designate God’s power as the sole efficient cause from which all things proceed.³⁸ “He was eternally All”, Owen writes, “when all things else that ever were, or now are, or shall be, were nothing.”³⁹ As the first of God’s transitive works, therefore, creation must be understood as a communication of divine goodness. Owen points here to the divine name recorded in Exodus 3:14, “I Am”, as establishing the fact that, in himself, God is infinite, pure Being (*esse*). In the act of creation, God grants creatures life by a participation in his own existence.

For all being and goodness being, as was said, in Him alone, it was necessary that the first outward work and effect of the divine nature must be the communication of being and goodness unto other things.⁴⁰

³⁵ *Works*, 24:17.

³⁶ Guillaume du Bartas, *Divine Weeks and Works* (London: Robert Young, 1633), 3.

³⁷ *Works*, 24:17, emphasis mine; cf. Aristotle, *Physics*, I.4; Aquinas, *De potentia*, q. 3, a. 8; *ST Ia*, q. 46, a. 2.

³⁸ *Works*, 24:20-21; cf. Wollebius, *Christian Divinity*, I.5; Leigh, *Treatise of Divinity*, III.2.

³⁹ *Works*, 1:368.

⁴⁰ *Works*, 1:369; cf. Wollebius, *Christian Divinity*, I.5.v.

This implies that the creative act was an infinite act of divine power. For “there is no measure, no proportion, between an infinite Being and nothing”.⁴¹ And if there is no proportion, then there must be an infinite qualitative distinction between them. Owen thus argues that there is a “peculiar impress of divine omnipotency upon all the works of God”, for in the act of creating, God reaches across an infinite gulf, bringing creatures out of the void of their non-existence, and establishing them in *esse* by a communication of his divine power.⁴²

This communicative act endows the creature with a “finite, limited, dependent being”,⁴³ that is, a created subsistence, sometimes called a “*suppositum*”. Owen holds to the scholastic axiom that being and goodness are convertible. As such, he describes existence as the creature’s “first goodness”, itself a participation in God’s “absolute goodness, which is being”. Any further goods that the creature might possess supervene upon this first, radical good.⁴⁴ In a few places, Owen argues that the gift of this *suppositum* not only grounds the creature’s existence, but also individuates it as a distinct entity.⁴⁵ Yet, the creature’s existence is not so given in its creation that it no longer remains dependent on divine power. Owen very clearly wishes to advance a strong account of the creature’s natural dependence upon God. This dependence is of course founded on the infinite act of divine power which first brought creatures into existence *ex nihilo*. But Owen argues that the nature of this dependence surfaces even more clearly in God’s work of *conservation*.⁴⁶

According to Owen, the whole of the natural order exists in immediate dependence upon God so that “there is continually, every moment, an emanation of power from God unto every creature, the greatest, the least, the meanest, to preserve them in their being and order.”⁴⁷ Indeed, the whole created order is so fully dependent upon God that God’s power must be seen as “piercing through every . . . particle of it”.⁴⁸ To deny the ongoing dependence of creatures on God’s power could only lead to a kind of deism, as though God had so

⁴¹ *Works*, 17:563 [Banner Edition: 16:495].

⁴² *Works*, 20:348-349.

⁴³ *Works*, 1:369.

⁴⁴ *Works*, 20:349.

⁴⁵ *Works*, 17:567 [Banner Edition, 16:499]; *cf.* 1:233; 2:418; 4:384-385; 20:467.

⁴⁶ It should be noted, however, that while Owen’s sets forth the basics of a generally scholastic account of conservation, it lacks the kind of detail that would be necessary to place it within a specific metaphysical tradition.

⁴⁷ *Works*, 20:348.

⁴⁸ *Works*, 20:107.

imparted his life to creatures that they could now exist independently and without his assistance.⁴⁹ But such an opinion reduces God's conservation of creatures to nothing more than his choice not to destroy them. Additionally, it robs God of the glory of his governance, depicting him as a mere "idle spectator of most things in the world".⁵⁰

On top of being blasphemous, Owen thinks that this is strictly impossible. For it is a part of the very essence of a creature to be dependent on divine power. And this follows as a consequence of the infinite ontological difference between God and creatures. It is not surprising, then, that Owen argues that the creature's natural dependence upon God derives of necessity from God's own perfection:

the reason hereof is taken, first, from the limited, finite, dependent condition of the creation, and the absolute necessity that it should be so. It is utterly impossible, and repugnant to the very nature and being of God, that he should make, create, or produce any thing without himself, that should have either a self-subsistence or a self-sufficiency, or be independent of himself. All these are natural and essential properties of the divine nature. Where they are, there is God; so that no creature can be made partaker of them. When we name a creature, we name that which hath a derived and dependent being. And that which cannot subsist in and by itself, cannot act so neither.⁵¹

In other words, self-sufficiency and self-subsistence are *divine* perfections. God cannot will for creatures to exist independently from himself, because the very notion of a creature existing independently of divine power is an absurdity.

It is therefore intrinsic to the very essence of any creature to have a natural dependence upon God. As Paul witnessed to the Athenians, "In him we live, and move, and have our being" (Acts 17:28). The creature is in fact so dependent upon God for its being and existence (*esse*) that, apart from the constant communication of divine power, Owen claims that creatures have a natural tendency to disorder and dissolution — a tendency which God's work of conservation continually abates. The material universe "could not subsist a moment, nor could anything in it act regularly unto its appointed end, without the continual supportment, guidance, influence and disposal of the Son of God".⁵² Indeed, as creation lives of divine power, Owen argues that creatures possess no intrinsic principle by which they

⁴⁹ *Works*, 20:348.

⁵⁰ *Works*, 10:35, *contra* the Arminians in *Remonstantium Apologia*, c. vi.

⁵¹ *Works*, 20:106.

⁵² *Works*, 20:105. Cf. Augustine, "Literal Meaning of Genesis", IV.12; *ST* Ia, q. 104, a. 1, resp.

might resist their own deterioration — without the hand of Christ supporting them, all created bodies would immediately devolve into “a slothful heap”.⁵³ Accordingly, the destruction of the universe would not require any special act of God’s power, for “the very suspension of that constant emanation of omnipotency which is necessary unto its subsistence would be sufficient for that end and purpose.”⁵⁴

In other words, the creature’s potency for existence (*esse*) is strictly *obediential* in nature, which is to say that it is not native to the creature, but derives entirely from an extrinsic, supernatural cause.

It is true, God hath in the creation of all things implanted in every particle of the creation a special natural inclination and disposition, according unto which it is ready to act, move, or work regularly; but he hath not placed this nature and power *absolutely* in them, and *independently* of his own power and operation. The sun is endued with a nature to produce all the glorious effects of light and heat that we behold or conceive, the fire to burn, the wind to blow, and all creatures also in the like manner; but yet neither could sun, or fire, or wind preserve themselves in their being, nor retain the principles of their operations, did not the Son of God, by a constant, continual emanation of his eternal power, uphold and preserve them; nor could they produce any one effect by all their actings, did not he work in them and by them. And so is it with the sons of men, with all agents whatever, whether natural and necessary, or free and proceeding in their operations by election and choice.⁵⁵

Aquinas makes a similar point by arguing that the creature’s possession of its existence is more like the way that the atmosphere holds light, than it is like the way that an iron holds heat. An iron, when it is taken from the fire, glows red with heat, because it is of such a nature that it is capable of retaining heat. But the atmosphere does not hold light in the way that a hot iron holds heat, because the atmosphere is not of such a nature that it is capable of retaining light. Its brightness ceases when the sun sets. Aquinas argues that the creature is similarly dependent upon God for its being. It is not naturally capable of retaining its *esse*, for this belongs only to God, who alone exists of himself.⁵⁶ The point, quite simply, is that the existence and form of the creature — along with the regular operation of all its causal powers

⁵³ *Works*, 20:105.

⁵⁴ *Works*, 20:348; 9:347; *cf.* *ST* Ia, q. 104, a. 1, resp. & ad. 4; aa. 3-4; Suárez, *MD*, d. 21, s. 1 (*On Creation, Conservation, and Concurrence*, trans. A.J. Freddoso [South Bend: St. Augustine’s Press, 2002], 114); *MD*, d. 31, s. xiv (*On the Essence of Finite Being as Such, On the Existence of That Essence and Their Distinction*, trans. John P. Doyle [Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1983], 233).

⁵⁵ *Works*, 20:105-106.

⁵⁶ *ST* Ia, q. 104, a. 1, resp.; *cf.* a. 3, ad. 1, 3; a.4, ad. 2; Suárez, *MD*, d. 31, s. xiv (*Essence of Finite Being*, 232-239).

— requires by nature a regular communication of divine power to preserve and maintain them in being.

In this respect, Owen argues, God’s power is much more eminently displayed in his work of conservation than it is even in the work of creation *ex nihilo*. For if God’s omnipotence is evident in the act of first calling creatures out of non-being and into existence, then how much more is his power displayed through his continual work of conservation, by which he maintains the cosmos in being, each moment preventing it from sinking back into that “primitive nothing (of which cask it always smells strongly)!”⁵⁷ The natural dependence of the creature on God’s power thus serves as a land-mark throughout Owen’s thought, pointing to the great lowliness of creatures and to God’s natural dominion over all that he has made. At the same time, however, it also points to the great generosity and humility of God in condescending to things so meager and lowly.⁵⁸ In a way, it is not unlike the sinner’s dependence on Christ for grace. And this, Owen argues, is why Scripture appropriates the work of conservation peculiarly to the person of the Son. Such a work is fitting in view of the Son’s work of redemption,

because by his *interposition*, as undertaking the work of mediation, he reprieved the world from an immediate dissolution upon the first entrance of sin and disorder, that it might continue, as it were, the great stage for the might works of God’s grace, wisdom, and love to be wrought on. Hence the care of the continuances of the creation and the disposal of it is delegated unto him, as he that hath undertaken to bring forth and consummate the glory of God in it, notwithstanding the great breach made upon it by the sin of angels and men.⁵⁹

There is, in other words, an analogy between the finiteness and sinfulness of creatures, in that both tend toward the creature’s dissolution and destruction. There is therefore a corresponding analogy in the Son’s works of conservation and redemption, by which the creature is maintained in life by the power of God. And in both the creature is entirely dependent on the divine prerogative. Grace, like the creative act itself, is an act of God’s absolute dominion, and as such is supremely free. The creature thus has the exact same right and claim to existence, as it has to divine grace — none at all.

⁵⁷ *Works*, 20:107.

⁵⁸ *Cf. Works*, 17:564-565 [Banner Edition: 16:495-496].

⁵⁹ *Works*, 20:107.

2.2.2 The Work of Distinction

If the first act of creation respects the power of the Son to produce all things out of nothing and to conserve all things in being, then the second creative act respects the wisdom and power of the Spirit to fashion creatures and order them in a manner that befits God's ultimate purpose. Owen gives a brief treatment of this "work of distinction" in *Pneumatologia*,⁶⁰ rooting it in an interpretation of Genesis 1:2 — "And the Spirit of God moved (*merachepeth*) upon the face of the waters" (KJV). Accounts of the works of the Trinity in creation have sometimes placed greater emphasis on the role of the Word of God as the agent of the work of distinction. Calvin, for example, argues that the work of the Spirit envisaged in verse 2 is simply the sustaining and rendering stable of material mass of creation, while the work of forming and filling creation begins in verse 3 with the Word of God — "And God said".⁶¹ But because Owen emphasizes that the order of operations follow the order of subsistence among the persons of the Trinity, he envisions the Spirit's work here as the perfecting of creatures by the bestowal of their natural forms.

Since the verb employed in Genesis 1:2 is elsewhere used to describe the gentle manner in which a bird rests upon its nest in order to communicate heat and life to its eggs,⁶² Owen argues that Genesis here designates the Spirit's "cherishing and preservation" of that inchoate material mass which God produced in the first creative act. Though this work is not a creation *ex nihilo*, still, it is a truly creative act. For though this mass contained the "radical humour" and "material principle of life and being" for all creatures, Owen argues that in itself and apart from the gracious influence of the Spirit, this substance was only "a dead sea, a confused deep, with darkness upon it, able to bring forth nothing."⁶³ Nevertheless, by the communication of "a quickening and prolific virtue" to this mass, the Spirit imbued it with the "principles of all those kinds, sorts, and forms of things, which, in an inconceivable variety, make up [creation's] host". Hereby the Spirit rendered an otherwise desolate substance so fertile to the production of creatures that, at the Word of God, it immediately "brought forth all sorts of creatures in abundance, according to the seeds and principles of life which were communicated unto the rude, inform chaos". Owen thus characterizes the Spirit's

⁶⁰ *Works*, 3:94-103.

⁶¹ Calvin, *Comm. on Genesis* 1:2-3.

⁶² *Works*, 3:97; cf. Basil, *Hexameron*, II.6 (*NPNF*, 8:62-63); ST Ia, q. 66, a. 1, ad. 3; Calvin, *Comm. Genesis*, 1:2.

⁶³ *Works*, 3:98.

work of distinction as an act of “adornment” or ornamentation of the material realm. Because the Spirit here builds upon the radical good of material existence by the addition of further goods, granting creatures their distinct forms, dividing them according to their created kinds and situating them within their proper station and rank. In this sense, Owen claims the whole “form, order, beauty and perfection” of the created order derives immediately from the Holy Spirit.⁶⁴

Along with much of the scholastic tradition, Owen follows Augustine in classifying the various aspects of the work of distinction with reference to the Spirit’s determination of the creature’s fixed “measure, number and weight” (Wis. 11:20).⁶⁵ The “measure” of the creature refers to that which by which the creature’s matter is set apart and designated as belonging to *this particular* creature. It is, in other words, the basis of the creature’s individuation. The creature’s “number”, on the other hand, refers to the natural form of the creature, by virtue of which it is certified as belonging to a particular species or created kind. The creature’s number thus has reference to all those properties and powers that compose its form. By sovereignly implanting these natural forms within the creature, the Spirit’s work of distinction constitutes the creature as what it is, assigning it a definite place within the hierarchy of creatures that is proper to the economy of God’s government.⁶⁶

But this work of distinction does not only distinguish particular creatures and assign them a natural form, it also determines the natural character of the creature’s life. For, as the scholastics commonly acknowledged, to define the nature of some thing is to specify its existence for some particular *end*. Owen thus argues that, inscribed within the natural form of any creature, there is “a special natural inclination and disposition, according unto which it is ready to act, move, or work regularly”, and this inclination naturally conduces toward the creature’s attainment of its end.⁶⁷ In Augustine’s terms, this is the creature’s “weight”: the ordered tendency of its nature toward its final end. Of course, to speak of a natural inclination within the creature is not to make a claim about the relative effort required for the creature to attain its end. Nor is it a claim about the innate sufficiency of the creature’s *natural* powers to

⁶⁴ *Works*, 3:98-99.

⁶⁵ *Works*, 6:433; Augustine, “The Literal Meaning of Genesis”, IV.3-5; *cf.* *ST* Ia, q. 5, a. 5, resp.

⁶⁶ *Works*, 3:96.

⁶⁷ *Works*, 20:105; *cf.* 6:303-304; 8:157-158; 20:348.

realize its end.⁶⁸ Rather, it is simply to posit the *fittingness (convenientia)* of the creature's nature for its end. And it is on this basis that the scholastics held as axiomatic that every creature has a "natural inclination" (*naturalem inclinationem*) toward its end.⁶⁹

This inclination which God has bestowed on the creature has the character of a *natus impressionem*. Owen at one point alludes to the illustration of Aquinas, who likened the "natural impression" which God implants upon creatures to the kind of impression that an archer places on an arrow's path of flight.⁷⁰ Though the arrow itself has no powers of self-determination and no knowledge of its direction or its end, it is directed toward its end by one who *does*, namely, the archer.⁷¹ Similarly, as all creatures were made by God for some end, they too have a natural inclination toward their *telos*, though some might know it better than others. This inclination consists in the readiness of the creature's nature for some particular mode of perfection. This inclination is intrinsic to the natural appetites of the creature, and as any creature might have a variety of different powers, these appetites might be natural, sensible, or rational.⁷² But since all creatures desire their own perfection, in each case, this natural inclination constantly directs the creature toward those objects and ends in which it might find its perfection.⁷³

Herein lies the real difference between the impression that an archer leaves on an arrow and that which God leaves on His creatures. For the archer acts extrinsically upon the arrow by an act of compulsion, so that the arrow's orientation to its end is the product of an act of force. But since God is the Creator, the impression that God implants upon the creature is internal to the creature's very nature, so that its orientation toward its end is natural to the creature itself. Consequently, that act is most "natural" to the creature which conduces to the creature's attainment of its end. And since a thing is denominated "good" in respect of its disposition toward its final end, the natural impression by which the creature acts in pursuit of its end actually defines the *rule* of the creature's goodness (more on this in the next chapter).

⁶⁸ As we will see, in the context of his moral theology, Owen subordinates this theme to his doctrine of grace, arguing that, in fact, the regular motion of the rational creature toward its end is itself dependent on a supernatural gift of grace. See *Works*, 3:321.

⁶⁹ *Works*, 20:350; ST Ia, q. 104, a. 1, s.c.; cf. IaIIae, q. 91, a. 2, resp.

⁷⁰ *Works*, 8:10.

⁷¹ ST Ia, q. 103, a. 1, ad. 1.

⁷² Cf. ST Ia, q. 51, a. 1.

⁷³ *Works*, 6:254.

In assigning a natural form to creatures, then, the Spirit's work of distinction defines the nature of the creature's participation in the good and sets it in motion toward its final end. Accordingly, as the Spirit is the Author of the creature's nature, his governance of creatures is never *coercive* or *violent*⁷⁴— it never suspends creaturely freedom or disrupts creaturely peace. For his is the work of the *Creator Spiritus*, which is fully harmonious with the natural constitution he gifts to creatures. In fact, according to Owen, the Spirit's agency in Scripture is especially distinguished by its *holiness* — that is, its coherence with and conformity to the good purposes of God. Scripture refers to Him as “the Holy Spirit” for just this reason, and contrasts the character of his work with the agency of some *evil* spirit. Owen points here to 1 Samuel 16:14-15 where, because of Saul's opposition to the purposes of God “the Spirit of the Lord” is said to have departed from him, removing his gracious influence, and “an evil spirit from the Lord” was permitted to punish him. Contrasts like these are intended to exhibit the *holiness* of the Spirit's works. And since the Spirit's works are “all good as they are holy”, Owen argues that they naturally conduce to the good and flourishing of God's creatures, cooperating with the principles of their natures so that they might attain their end.⁷⁵

2.3 The Sixth Day

2.3.1 Human Nature

The Spirit's work of distinction reaches its zenith on the sixth day with the creation of human beings, who are the culmination of God's works. One of the distinctions basic to Owen's anthropology is between human nature considered both *naturally* and *morally*.⁷⁶ Under the former, we consider human nature in reference to the principles of its *essence*, that is, those constituent faculties and powers that distinguish humans from all other creatures as a distinct created kind. Under the latter, however, we consider human nature in reference to its distinct *vocation* — the end to which it is appointed by God, the principles of its obedience, and its conduct under the law, which was instituted by God to guide rational creatures toward their appointed end. I will follow a similar division here, briefly describing Owen's account of the

⁷⁴ *Works*, 3:98, 319-320; 6:303-304.

⁷⁵ *Works*, 3:59.

⁷⁶ E.g., *Works*, 3:99.

principles of human nature, before moving on to consider the distinct vocation of humankind and the principles of its moral obedience to God.

Scripture represents the creation of human nature by a double-act of God. First, in the formation of Adam's animal nature from "the dust of the ground", and secondly, in the animation of his animal nature by the communication of a "vital, immortal principle", that is, a living soul, which is signified by God's act of breathing "the breath of life" into Adam's nostrils (Gen. 2:7).⁷⁷ Human beings are therefore complex creatures, having both a mortal, animal nature, and an immortal, angelic nature.⁷⁸ Since, in the words of Aquinas, God gives all creatures "a natural inclination toward their due (*debitum*) act and end",⁷⁹ the union of these two natures in humankind signifies something of the special vocation of humankind as a "*medium participationis*" — a microcosm in which the full unity and perfection of creation's material and spiritual realms coalesce.⁸⁰

Included within the natural inclination of any animal nature are certain natural appetites designed for the sustenance and nurturing of its life. Owen distinguishes these appetites according to those that are "common" to all living animals and those which are "special" to the nature of rational creatures.⁸¹ The "common" appetites to which Owen here refers are those natural and inborn desires of any animal for those things that are "commodious" or "pleasing" to its nature. Though he rarely employs the term, these appetites were widely known as the *affectio commodi*. As the creature's animal nature possesses a diverse range of powers, it has a range of natural appetites. The desire for food, or for sex, or for nurturing offspring are all expressions of these appetites. And while they might become deranged or disordered in some creature that seeks their fulfillment in unbecoming ways, still, the desires themselves are fundamentally good. For however much they might miss the mark in other ways, insofar as these appetites are *natural*, they incline the creature to pursue those goods which contribute to some dimension of its own well-being. Since humans share an animal nature in common with other creatures, they also possess natural appetites which guide them toward the flourishing of their natural life. So, like all animals, humans naturally

⁷⁷ *Works*, 3:100-101; 9:347.

⁷⁸ *ST Ia*, q. 75, aa. 5-7.

⁷⁹ *ST IaIIae*, q. 91, a. 2, resp.

⁸⁰ Cf. Ames, *Marrow of Divinity*, I.viii.61-64; *Synopsis Purioris*, X.

⁸¹ *Works*, 6:303-306; cf. 17:41 [*Biblical Theology*, 23].

desire food, and sex, and to nurture their young. And these desires are all expressions of God's wisdom and goodness in the act of creating.

Yet, by virtue of his creation with a living soul, Adam also possessed a rational nature which elevated him above the other animals, as through the rational faculties of intellect and will it has the power to contemplate and love what is good. The intellect is the "leading" or "directive faculty" of the soul. For just as all creatures seek their own perfection by nature, the intellect provides guidance to rational creatures by aiding them in the discovery of the good. In this manner, it supports the rational action of the creature by the discernment of any good thing, presenting it before the faculty of the will, as an object of a rational choice. The will, on the other hand, is the vital and free principle of the creature's rational actions. According to Owen, the intellect does not *determine* the course of the will, *per se*, but merely makes presentation of the good before the faculty of the will.⁸² The will, by the very nature of its exercise, is a free principle having the power of free choice (*liberum arbitrium*). It is therefore capable of both spontaneous action and deliberation, and can act according to its nature only when free from any violent extrinsic force, or inner necessity.⁸³

Now, as we have seen already, Owen opposes the Arminian construal of creaturely freedom that takes the creature's will to be an independent, autonomous principle of operation, requiring no concurrence of divine power for its act. The rational creature carries an inner, natural dependence on divine power so that it is incapable of acting regularly toward its end without some communication of God's power supporting its act. From his perspective, then, the Arminian position construes divine providence as an act extrinsic to human nature, severing the inner relation between divine and creaturely action, and ultimately taking a sizable step toward deism in the process. For similar reasons, Owen also opposes the manner in which Arminians define the "freedom" of the creature as the power of the will to choose between good and evil. On such a definition, the will of the creature is conceived of as having an absolute indifference to any object whatsoever, as though it were "a power equally ready for good or evil".⁸⁴ In the first instance, such a definition suggests to Owen a general

⁸² *Works*, 3:281, 503. On Owen's faculty psychology, see Kopic, *Communion*, 35-66; cf., Gavin McGrath, "Puritans and the Human Will: Voluntarism within Mid-Seventeenth Century English Puritanism as Seen in the Works of Richard Baxter and John Owen" (PhD Diss., University of Durham, 1989), 209-250; Allan Wolter, *The Philosophical Theology of Duns Scotus*, ed. Marilyn McCord Adams (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), chs. 7-9.

⁸³ *Works*, 10:119. For further background, see Muller, "Jonathan Edwards and Francis Turretin".

⁸⁴ *Works*, 3:494.

misunderstanding of the nature of rational choice. For as we have said, God has made creatures to seek their own perfection, and situated them within the world, surrounded by goods which they are naturally disposed to desire. Insofar as humankind is a rational creature, therefore, it necessarily acts for the sake of something *good*. So, even when the creature sins, it always acts *sub ratione boni* — in pursuit of something which it perceives to be *good*.⁸⁵

Furthermore, the movements of the will are naturally subject to the “affections”, which are the habitual attractions of any rational creature to some particular good by its appetites. These affections can be either natural and inborn, like the desire of a parent to protect its child, or acquired, like the desire of a smoker for a cigarette.⁸⁶ Because these desires are formable to habit, they can accrue strength over time, compounding the force of the will’s attraction to some particular good. But while the habitual action of the will might contribute to the inclination of the affections toward some good, the rational creature is *not* free to elect whether or not it finds some thing desirable. The will acts *on the basis* of its desires, not *without* them. And so, in this respect, the simple act of willing or desiring that proceeds from the affections necessarily precedes all rational acts of choice. This is why Owen often speaks of the affections as “sails” which propel the soul onward toward its goal. For without them, there can be no rational act of the willing whatsoever.⁸⁷

Because creatures are naturally subject to God’s government, they exist for the sake of some act that is determined by God and in which they attain their perfection. The freedom of the creature therefore consists in its liberty to attain the end appointed to it by God’s wisdom. The liberty of any creature is thus strictly confined to the just order that has been ordained by God’s government.⁸⁸ Since God’s government is righteous, he governs all creatures toward a *good* end — that good for the sake of which all things exist, namely, his glory. The liberty of the creature can therefore extend only to those things that are *good*. No one can have a *right* to anything evil, and therefore no one can have *liberty* to something evil, either.⁸⁹

Now, as humans are rational creatures, the pursuit of that good end appointed to them by God possesses an ineluctably *moral* character. Owen thus argues that their freedom must

⁸⁵ *Works*, 6:254.

⁸⁶ *Works*, 6:304-305.

⁸⁷ *Works*, 8:80.

⁸⁸ *Works*, 10:466, where Owen divides liberty into *ius ad rem* or *ius in re*; cf. Tuck, *Natural Rights Theories: Their Origin and Development* (Cambridge: CUP, 1982), ch. 1.

be strictly defined in reference to their “ability to choose, will, and do that which is spiritually *good*”. In Augustinian fashion, Owen argues that the sinner’s pursuit of spiritual evil is no part of its *freedom* but only of its *bondage to sin*.⁹⁰ Properly speaking, therefore, free-will belongs to the saints alone, “who are renewed by the Holy Ghost . . . in a power and ability to like, love, choose, and cleave unto God and his will in all things.”⁹¹ This is the special act for which *rational creatures* exist, and thus it is the one in which they find their ultimate blessedness. In fact, in direct contrast with the anthropology of much late medieval catholic thought which posited two ends for rational creatures, consisting in a natural and a supernatural beatitude,⁹² Owen denies that rational creatures might have a purely natural end. For since intelligent creatures have the power to know and love the good, the very constitution of humankind is such that they “could not be satisfied, nor . . . attain absolute rest, but in the enjoyment of God.”⁹³ Accordingly, their freedom — and their goodness — consists in the conformity of their powers to the will of God, and their cleaving to him by faith and love.

2.3.2 Human Vocation and the *Imago Dei*

God created all things to the end of manifesting his glory, but creation conduces to this end in a variety of different ways and in several different respects. In one digression of his Hebrews commentary, Owen names four aspects in which the goodness of the natural order consists.⁹⁴ First, all creatures are good in respect of their *existence*. Existence is the creature’s “first goodness, on which all other concernments of it depend”. Secondly, creatures are good in virtue of their *ordered relation* to one another. This is that “goodly beauty” (*kalòn kagathón*) of the natural order which was praised by the philosophers and which, by the “light of nature”, has always attested the wisdom and goodness of the Creator. Thirdly, creation is good in virtue of its functional coherence. God has formed the world in “great variety and diversity” with every created thing having its own “work, service, and operation allotted unto

⁸⁹ Cf. *Works*, 6:163; 7:509.

⁹⁰ This is point that has long roots in the Christian tradition reaching back to Augustine.

⁹¹ *Works*, 3:495.

⁹² See Lawrence Feingold, *The Natural Desire to See God According to St. Thomas and His Interpreters* (Naples, FL: Sapientia Press, 2010), 229-259.

⁹³ *Works*, 19:336. In at least one place, Owen suggests that, hypothetically, humankind could have had a purely natural beatitude (*Works*, 18:144). More typically, however, Owen acknowledges a natural blessedness that is partial in this life and “connatural” to human nature. But he argues that this capacity is finally grounded in and exists for the sake of the supernatural end for which humankind has been made, and thus cannot be independent of it. I will return to this below in our treatment of the Sabbath.

it”.⁹⁵ Owen draws an analogy here to Paul’s image of the inter-dependence of the members of the body in 1 Corinthians 12. Just as the body is dependent upon all its parts so that the eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you”; in a similar way, God has arranged all the parts of the cosmos in a mutual and complementary dependence upon one another.

Finally, Owen states that creation is good in virtue of its “orderly tendency unto the utmost and last end, which is the glory of him by whom they were made”. Owen means to pick out here the *exemplary* character of creatures as they show forth God’s glory. As Owen states elsewhere, God “is the sole cause and fountain of all good that in any kind any creature is made partaker of . . . And he is so only good, that there is nothing so in any sense but by a participation of it, and a likeness unto him therein”.⁹⁶ Accordingly, all creatures, by the very act of their existence and in their inconceivable variety and order, attest the “infinite, eternal ocean of goodness” from which they have their being. In other words, creatures are good as they are signs referring their goodness to their Maker. And by means of these manifold signs of God’s glory, God elicits the praise of his people:

This [the glory of God] also is implanted upon the whole creation of God. And hence the psalmist calls upon all the inanimate creatures to give praise and glory unto God; that is, he calls upon himself and others to consider how they do so. This is the point, the centre, where all these lines do meet, without which there could be neither beauty nor order nor use in them; for that which errs from its end is crooked, perverse, and not good.⁹⁷

Owen describes the creature’s “ordered tendency” toward its end as “the point, the centre, where all these lines do meet” because, as we have seen, this is the final end of creatures and the purpose for which they exist, namely, that they might bring glory to God.

Yet, if the creature exists in order that it might refer its goodness to God as its First Cause and Final End, then *rational* creatures exhibit the glory of God in a special way. For as they are endowed with an immortal soul, having the faculties of intellect and will, they honor God not only by the intrinsic goodness of their natures, and the natural act of their existence, but also *morally*, through the free and voluntary exercise of their rational faculties in the love and enjoyment of God. Humans therefore have a unique vocation among God’s creatures.

⁹ *Works*, 20:349-350.

⁹⁵ *Works*, 20:349-350.

⁹⁶ *Works*, 3:583.

Man was a creature that God made, that by him he might receive the glory that he aimed at in and by the whole inanimate creation—both that below, which was for his use, and that above, which was for his contemplation. This was the end of our nature in its original constitution. Thereunto are we again restored in Christ.⁹⁸

Owen's reference here to human "use" of things below and "contemplation" of things above divides the vocation of humans according to a distinction basic to the piety of the Augustinian tradition. In Book I of *De Doctrina*, Augustine arranges his moral theology around a distinction between "use" (*usus*) and "enjoyment" (*fruitio*). Those things which exist for *their own sake* are meant to be *enjoyed* by rational creatures, while those things that exist for the sake of another are intended to be *used* by them. Since God exists for his own sake, and all other things exist for God's sake, God alone is the ultimate object of all rational enjoyment. But as God is infinite and incomprehensible, he makes himself known to creatures through the *use* of a myriad of created signs. In this way, created goods serve as signs and instruments referring their goodness to God.

This is the absolute bedrock of Owen's moral theology. God, above all, is to be worshipped and adored; and created things exist for the sake of manifesting God's goodness. Creation is used properly, therefore, only when it conducts creatures into the enjoyment of God. Where a created thing becomes the object of the creature's enjoyment *tout court* — that is, where it becomes an end *in itself* — its character as a sign is broken and, in a sense, its relation to the final end of all things is severed.⁹⁹ Humans become idolaters in the act of their conversion to the enjoyment of the creature, fixing their delight on some derivative, created good, rather than God, who is the Fountain of all Goodness. Were it not for the Spirit's grace, all rational creatures would labor under this same futility. But by his guidance, they are lead to make right use of created goods and so are conducted into the enjoyment of God's essence, fulfilling that purpose for the sake of which they themselves (and creation more generally) were finally made.

⁹⁷ *Works*, 20:350.

⁹⁸ *Works*, 1:61.

⁹⁹ The full seriousness of this point, for Owen, could only emerge with a full examination of his *Dissertation on Divine Justice*, which we cannot undertake here. However, we do point the reader to the final chapters of that work, where Owen describes sin as an act of de-creation (*Works*, 10:618-624).

In a sense, then, Owen regards the rational creature as the keystone holding together God's design in heaven and earth. For God's intent in creation is "to be admired in all them that believe" (2 Thess. 1:10). And this requires a creature equipped with the power to make use of these created signs to "admire, adore, applaud, glorify and praise" God as their Maker.¹⁰⁰ For this reason, Owen describes humankind as "a kind of mediator" between God and creation. Because these created signs exist for the sake of rational creatures, and fulfill their purpose only as they direct them to God in humble adoration.¹⁰¹ It is as rational creatures gather up these signs in acts of worship and praise that God "receive[s] all his glory from them."¹⁰² Indeed, Owen states that worship is "the animating life and form of the whole", without which the rest of creation is "but as a dead thing".¹⁰³

They [inanimate creatures] could not any way declare the glory of God, but passively and objectively. They were as an harmonious, well-tuned instrument, which gives no sound unless there be a skilful hand to move and act it. What is light, if there be no eye to see it? Or what is music, if there be no ear to hear it? How glorious and beautiful soever any of the works of creation appear to be, from impressions of divine power, wisdom and goodness on them; yet, without this *image of God* in man, there was nothing here below to understand God in them — to glorify God by them.¹⁰⁴

In this act of worship the whole created order is brought to fulfillment. This is, in fact, the ultimate end of God's institution of the Sabbath, which we will examine later. God's rest from his labors on the seventh day declares his delight in creation and the dignity of all his creatures. So, in the sanctification this day for worship, God calls the creature to delight in the source and end of all created goodness, and by this act to offer to Him "a revenue of glory out of the creation", which is naturally and rightfully due to God as their Lord and Creator.¹⁰⁵ Owen thus regards the observance of the sabbath to be a duty inscribed upon the law of nature. For in the worship of God, rational creatures fulfill their purpose for existence in the pursuit of their final end — the contemplation and love of God.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁰ *Works*, 6:483.

¹⁰¹ "And as for those other creatures to which [Adam's] power and authority did not immediately extend, as the sun, moon, and stars, the whole inanimate host of the superior world, they were ordered by Him that made them to serve for his good and behoof, Gen. 1:14; Deut. 4:19; so that even they also in a sort belonged unto his inheritance, being made to serve him in his subjection unto God" (*Works*, 20:43).

¹⁰² *Works*, 19:334. Unrepentant sinners, on the other hand, render glory to God in respect of his infinite holiness and justice, and by their "desires that he were otherwise" (6:483).

¹⁰³ *Works*, 1:183.

¹⁰⁴ *Works*, 1:183.

¹⁰⁵ *Works*, 6:461.

Yet, as God is infinitely above his creatures, the end for which humankind was created is one that infinitely exceeds their natural powers. For just as the finite cannot contain the infinite, so the natural cannot obtain the supernatural. Consequently, Owen argues that, in order to obtain their end, it was necessary that Adam and Eve be created in a state of *original righteousness* (*iustitia originalis*), just as Scripture testifies: “God hath made man *upright* (yāšār)” (Eccl. 7:29). This original righteousness included not only the absolute sinlessness of our first parents, but entailed that they were concreated with the supernatural gifts and graces of the Holy Spirit. This gave their natures a positive inclination and readiness of nature to act in pursuit of their supernatural end. In this respect, these supernatural graces were, in fact, so necessary to their vocation, Owen claims that had they been made without them, Adam and Eve would have been *incapable* of answering the end for which they were made, rendering the gift of their immortal souls both irrational and absurd.¹⁰⁷

Owen describes these gifts of the Spirit as a form immediately implanted upon their souls by the work of distinction. This form had the character of a *habit*. Habits were often described by the scholastics as a kind of “second nature”, since they incline and dispose a person to act in a certain manner or for a certain end. This habit of grace which the Spirit created in the souls of Adam and Eve thus inclined their rational appetites to the love and obedience of God in all things.¹⁰⁸ As such, their minds were ready for the discernment of God’s will, their affections were oriented toward the love of God, and their wills were fully compliant for the performance of all the duties that God required of them. Likewise, the lower powers of their sensitive appetites offered no resistance, but worked harmoniously in cooperation with their rational appetites. In short, this habitual righteousness was that natural inclination or impression which God implanted on the nature of rational creatures, fitting them with every virtue necessary for the attainment of their end in communion with God.

Owen generally avoids describing original righteousness as a “superadded” grace, mainly to deny any quarter to Socinians who argued Adam that was originally created in a state of pure nature (*in puris naturalibus*), and that grace was added subsequently to restrain Adam’s concupiscence.¹⁰⁹ Nevertheless, he does affirm what many medieval theologians

¹⁰⁶ *Works*, 19:337.

¹⁰⁷ *Works*, 18:143.

¹⁰⁸ *Works*, 3:102.

¹⁰⁹ *Racovian Catechism*, V.x, p. 330; cf. Oberman, *Harvest*, 47.

intended by the term,¹¹⁰ namely, that this grace was *accidentally* related to Adam's nature (being both "distinguishable and separable" from his natural faculties), and that it was strictly necessary in order for Adam to attain his supernatural end.¹¹¹ This is an important element of Owen's anthropology, and one that factors heavily in Owen's account of regeneration. If space permitted, much more could be said about it. But maintaining this distinction between nature and grace supported his critique of natural religion, ultimately enabled him to ground the creature's communion with God wholly in the work of grace.

Humans cannot attain to God by their natural powers and faculties alone because, as Owen puts it in one of his earliest sermons, "the right use of naturals depend[s] on supernaturals".¹¹² For a creature can only act for those ends that are proportionate to its powers. But as God is infinitely above his creatures, there can be no proportion between them. This natural disproportion between God and creatures is a necessary entailment of God's natural dominion over the creature, and in this context, it grounds the absolute moral necessity of grace. In order to fulfill their vocation, then, rational creatures are wholly dependent on the supernatural grace of the Holy Spirit to direct, sanctify, and elevate their works so that they might attain to that supernatural end for which they exist — the love and worship of God.

After the fall, sinners retain the natural faculties and powers which were once the subject of original righteousness,¹¹³ but they are deprived of that habitual righteousness with which they were first endowed. As their natures lack those gifts of the Spirit which first advanced them in their love and service of God, they are wholly in bondage to sin and the image of God, which consisted in their original righteousness, is entirely destroyed. Owen

¹¹⁰ Aquinas, *ST Ia*, q. 95, aa. 1-2; *IaIIae*, q. 110, a. 3. Cf. John Rziha, *Perfecting Human Actions: St. Thomas Aquinas on Human Participation in Eternal Law* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2009), 142.

¹¹¹ *Works*, 3:103; cf. Trueman, *John Owen*, 67-71. Though Owen describes original righteousness as "superadded" in *A Display of Arminianism* (10:85), Trueman attributes this to a mere "youthful imprecision", rather than to any material theological point. But this is not the only instance in which Owen appeals to the concept. He uses the same language in several places throughout *Pneumatologia* (1674) when describing the moral necessity of the Spirit's work of regeneration, arguing that "to deny such a quickening principle of spiritual life, superadded unto us by the grace of Christ, distinct and separate from the natural faculties of the soul, is, upon the matter, to renounce the whole gospel" (*Works*, 3:287). Likewise, in a section comparing the work of the Spirit in Adam and in Christ, Owen claims that original righteousness is "superadded unto the natural faculties", identifying this superadded grace as "the image of God in Adam" (3:169).

¹¹² "A Vision of Unchangeable Free Mercy" (1646), *Works*, 8:23.

¹¹³ Owen states that the fall, "leaves the soul with all its natural properties entire as to their essence . . . but of all the power and abilities which it had by virtue of its union with a quickening principle of spiritual life, it is deprived" (*Works*, 3:287).

points to 1 Corinthians 2:14, arguing that here Paul depicts the fallen man *as* the “*natural man*” (*psuchikos anthrōpos*), for being deprived of the supernatural gifts of the Spirit, he lives a purely *natural* existence, incapable of attaining his supernatural end. Scripture thus describes the *mind* of the natural man as spiritually blind because it is incapable of apprehending the beauty of the gospel (1 Cor. 2:14). Likewise, the *will* of the natural man is said to be spiritually *dead*, because its affections are entirely unresponsive to spiritual goods (Eph. 2:1).¹¹⁴

Owen thus denies that the unconverted person has, by nature, any “formal disposition” to spiritual life with God. To concede that they do would reduce the gratuity of the Spirit’s work by suggesting that the sinner’s conversion is finally attributable to a disposition that was always native to the sinner himself. But no such disposition exists in the natural man — he is dead in trespasses and sins. Regeneration is a work of *grace*, and therefore cannot be a cooperative work but must be a wholly *monergistic* act of the Spirit. The sinner is therefore entirely passive in it, maintaining only a “material disposition” to spiritual life.¹¹⁵ But in what does this “material disposition” consist?

It is not entirely clear. Owen implies that the rational faculties of the intellect and will are part of this material disposition as the “remote powers” renewed by the Spirit’s regenerative grace.¹¹⁶ And the illustrations that Owen employs suggest that the sinner’s material disposition to regeneration consists in a passive potency that, while natural to the creature’s faculties,¹¹⁷ can only be actualized by an external cause, much in the way that marble can be fashioned into a statue only by the hand of a sculptor. At the same time, however, Owen explicitly defines this material disposition as an “obediential potency” (*potentia obedientialis*).¹¹⁸ This was a technical term that was typically reserved to denote the passive power of any created thing to be induced to some act by divine omnipotence, like the

¹¹⁴ Owen covers the inability of the mind and will in Book III, chapters iii-iv of *Pneumatologia* (*Works*, 3:242-297).

¹¹⁵ *Works*, 3:229.

¹¹⁶ *Works*, 3:289, 295, 320.

¹¹⁷ The “natural man” is a capable recipient of God’s regenerative grace, in the way that a dry piece of wood is able to burn (*Works*, 3:229), or in the way that a blind man is capable of sight (3:262; *cf.* 1:383), or in the way that a cadaver is capable of natural life (3:295-296).

¹¹⁸ *Works*, 3:284, 295. This flows from Owen’s doctrine of regeneration which follows Thomas (rather than Lombard and Calvin) in defining grace as a quality adhering in the essence of the soul, the presence of which is necessary for the exercise of virtue in the natural powers of the creature (*cf.* *ST IaIIae*, q. 110, a. 3; a. 4, ad. 3-4; *Sentences* II, d. 27).

power of water to be transformed into wine.¹¹⁹ As such, it was generally *contrasted with a* natural potency. A natural potency is imminent within the creature's given nature, and can be reduced to act by a natural cause. But properly speaking, the creature's nature is not itself the subject of a *potentia obediencialis*, and therefore an obediencial potency can be activated only by a *supernatural* cause. Therefore, in describing the creative act by which God forms faith in the regenerate, Owen draws an analogy to *creatio ex nihilo*, arguing that,

the effects of creating acts are not *in potentia* anywhere but in the active power of God; so was the world itself before its actual existence. This is termed *potentia logica*, which is no more but a negation of any contradiction to existence; not *potentia physica*, which includes a disposition unto actual existence.¹²⁰

Owen's approach here mirrors a fairly traditional Augustinian-scholastic¹²¹ account of the relationship between nature and grace, denying that the creature has any intrinsic, natural potency for the supernatural (either active or passive), while still affirming that the creature's faculties are a *fitting* subject of this supernatural power.¹²² This suggests that, while Owen regards the natural faculties as "remote powers" upon which grace is operative,¹²³ and credits them with a "material disposition" to communion with God,¹²⁴ still, the power to live unto God is not proper to these faculties as such, but is itself a power that must be given to them by *grace*. To put the matter simply, in the matter of living unto God, Owen regards human nature to be nothing more than an "inferior alloy" of grace.¹²⁵ This gives Owen's theology of grace a strongly adventitious character as it offers human nature an entirely new potency and power. At the same time, however, it also allows Owen to place the mystery of grace at the very center of a truly human existence.

¹¹⁹ Cf. *ST* Ia, q. 115, a. 2, ad. 3; for a fuller survey of *potentia obediencialis* see Feingold, *Natural Desire*, ch. 7; de Lubac, *Mystery of the Supernatural*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1998), chs. 4-5; Dennis Des Chene, *Physiologia: Natural Philosophy in Late Aristotelean and Cartesian Thought* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), pp. 24-34.

¹²⁰ *Works*, 3:321.

¹²¹ Cf. Feingold's treatment of Báñez, (*Natural Desire*, chs. 11-12).

¹²² E.g., The beatific vision was often regarded as being an obediencial potency, but it is one for which the faculties of rational creatures are particularly suited. This is sometimes referred to as a "specific" obediencial potency, in order to designate the fitting relation between the natural powers of the creature and its end. So, Feingold writes with reference to Cajetan, "To say that the rational creature has a unique obediencial potency to receive grace and glory is to say something very specific and *mysterious*. It means that the reception of grace and glory does not violate or contradict human nature, making it into *another nature*" (*Natural Desire*, 112113).

¹²³ *Works*, 3:289, 295, 320. Owen can refer to these faculties as "passive powers" upon which God's grace is operative (*Works*, 3:289).

¹²⁴ *Works*, 3:229.

¹²⁵ *Works*, 10:128.

Indeed, this is why Owen regularly identifies the *imago Dei* in humans with their habitual righteousness. Because human nature truly reflects the image of its Creator only when it is animated and ordered by the Spirit's *grace*. "Herein lies the whole of that dignity which our nature was made for and is capable of . . . It is holiness alone that is honourable, and that because there is in it the image and representation of God."¹²⁶ Owen's exegetical warrant for identifying the image with the creature's holiness is found in Ephesians 4:24 and Colossians 3:10. Taken together, these texts link the restoration of the image of God in creatures to the Spirit's regenerative work, through which the sinner is made anew in "righteousness and true holiness".¹²⁷ Owen takes this as confirmation that the image of God *just is* the "spiritual perfection" of habitual righteousness which the Holy Spirit first imprinted on our natures by his work of distinction, and which he restores in our natures again through his work of regeneration.¹²⁸

Readers of Owen have not always appreciated this point. Kopic's reading, for example, attempts to soften this identification by arguing that while the creature's likeness to God is destroyed with the loss of original righteousness, the image of God, which includes its rational faculties, is retained.¹²⁹ Most of the passages that Kopic adduces in support of his claim do not clearly demonstrate that the natural faculties are themselves included in the image, but only that they are the seat upon which the *image* rests — what Owen often refers to as the "next" or "remote" powers within which the Spirit's grace is operative.¹³⁰ The primary text which Kopic cites in support of his claim is taken from a passage of *Pneumatologia*, which states that, after the fall, there remain "some feeble relics of this image yet abiding with us".¹³¹ Owen does advance a distinction between image and likeness, here. But in context, the distinction between image and likeness tracks on Owen's earlier distinction between definitive and progressive sanctification.¹³² So, Owen states that likeness to God varies from Christian to Christian, depending on the degree to which they have been

¹²⁶ *Works*, 3:581.

¹²⁷ *Works*, 3:101-102, 169, 222; 12:143; 17:443.

¹²⁸ *Works*, 12:143.

¹²⁹ *Communion*, 37-42. For a rebuttal to this argument, see Suzanne McDonald, "The Pneumatology of the 'Lost' Image in John Owen", *Westminster Theological Journal* 71 (2009): 323-335.

¹³⁰ *Works*, 3:222, 417-421.

¹³¹ *Works*, 3:580.

¹³² See his discussion of definitive sanctification in *Works*, 3:436-467. This distinction proves pivotal in Owen's response to the question of how Christ can unite himself with sinners without himself being defiled by their sin (463-467).

made new by sanctifying grace. But this holiness is the consequence of regeneration, which implants on the sinner a “radical conformity and likeness to God” by the infusion of a new spiritual principle. This, Owen argues, is what distinguishes the persons of the elect from “other men who are not partakers of [God’s] image”.¹³³ This distinction of the elect is in fact the whole point of the paragraph in which this quote is found. In light of this, it seems more natural to read Owen’s statement about the “relics” of the image as metonymy, referring to the “remote powers” upon which the image originally sat.

But even if it is granted that Owen was not fully consistent on this point, the trajectory of his thought leans overwhelmingly toward the identification of the image with the infused grace of regeneration. Suzanne McDonald has shown how this identification is supported by Owen’s trinitarian theology and his confession of the *filioque*.¹³⁴ Just as the Spirit eternally proceeds from both the Father and the Son, so it belongs to the Spirit’s mission in time to apply to the elect all those benefits which Christ has purchased on their behalf. McDonald has rightly argued that this ultimately has the effect of binding election very closely to the *imago Dei*. But we might note three further reasons why this identification is desirable for Owen.

First, and most immediately, identifying the *imago* with the creature’s habitual righteousness allows Owen to affirm in the strongest possible terms the absolute necessity of grace for fulfilling the human vocation. One of the central concerns which preoccupies Owen in *Pneumatologia* is the nature and ground of the moral life. Through Books III and IV of that work, which treat the nature of regeneration and sanctification respectively, Owen is engaged in a running polemic against the Socinians, who argue that the moral life consists simply in the cultivation of natural virtues. Owen’s purpose is to establish the absolute moral necessity of the Spirit’s grace as the supernatural principle and ground of the moral life. The identification of this principle with the *imago Dei* points to the natural disproportion between God and creatures, as well as the absolute moral inability of the unregenerate to do acts that are spiritually pleasing to God.¹³⁵ Owen ardently defends both of these points, so as to maintain the full freedom and necessity of God’s grace.

¹³³ *Works*, 3:579-580.

¹³⁴ *Re-Imaging Election: Divine Election as Representing God to Others & Others to God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 5-30.

¹³⁵ *Works*, 3:293-297. Owen argues that the unregenerate can perform deeds that are *materially* good, but because they do not have the Spirit, they cannot perform any act in a way that respects the *end* of the law,

Secondly, identifying the *imago Dei* with the creature's state in grace places the creature's active relation to God at the center of Owen's anthropology, in this way underscoring the fact that human beings exist for one, supernatural end — the love and service of God. Human creatures are most fully themselves in the act of worship, and through this act they bring God's purposes in creation to their fulfillment.

His eternal power and Godhead are manifest in the things that are made; but none of them, not the whole fabric of heaven and earth, with all their glorious ornaments and endowments, were either fit or able to receive any impressions of his holiness and righteousness—of any of the moral perfections or universal rectitude of his nature. Yet, in the demonstration and representation of these things doth *the glory of God* principally consist. Without them, he could not be known and glorified as God. Wherefore he would have an image and representation of them in the creation here below. And this he will always have, so long as he will be worshipped by any of his creatures.¹³⁶

Put simply, the creature's delight in God is the mirror image by which God represents himself in the world. This might easily be dismissed as merely a formal feature of Owen's thought, but in actuality, it enables Owen to level a very powerful critique of natural religion, and to re-assert the indispensable necessity of habitual grace for all moral action whatsoever. Ultimately, it serves his ecclesiology by sharpening the distinction between the church and the world in terms of the inner nature of the moral life as a life of communion with God. In fact, critics panned Owen's *Pneumatologia* for just this reason, arguing it advanced a distinctly non-conformist theology of regeneration.

Finally, the identification of the image with the grace of regeneration allows Owen to consolidate his emphasis on the necessity of the atonement. If human vocation consists in the act of rendering worship to God in perfect righteousness and holiness, and if all fallen creatures are incapable of such an act, then they can be restored to their proper place in God's economy only if one offers that service in their place. Christ himself is uniquely suited for such a work because, as he is the eternal Son of God in flesh, he is the "image of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15) — the eternal archetype of the *imago Dei* in humankind. In his work of redemption, therefore, Christ "did perfectly renew that blessed image of his on our nature

namely, the worship of God. And since the formal character of any moral act is determined by the end to which the will is directed, Owen argues all the acts of the unregenerate are formally evil.

¹³⁶ *Works*, 1:182-83.

which we lost in Adam”.¹³⁷ And by Christ’s ongoing intercession, he communicates “the effects and likeness of the same image unto us which was essentially in himself”.¹³⁸ Owen thus argues that Christ is the full revelation and only true exemplar of the *imago Dei* which was destroyed in Adam¹³⁹ in order to underscore the absolute necessity of Christ’s work.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have surveyed Owen’s theology of creation in order to assess the nature of the creature’s natural dependence upon God. Owen’s theology of creation *ex nihilo* sets forward a very powerful account of God’s natural dominion over creation and of the necessity of God’s power to conserve and maintain it in being. Likewise, the natural order that structures creaturely life is the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit, who endows creatures with their natural forms and so sets them in motion toward their final end. With respect to humankind in particular, the Spirit has equipped humans with both a sensible nature, in common with other animals, and a rational nature, by means of which they can attain to the supernatural end for which they were made — the knowledge and love of God. Since this end fully exceeds the natural powers of the creature, Owen argues that it was necessary for God to implant in humans a supernatural grace through which they might live unto God and attain their special end. But the gift of this grace, like the gift of life, is a sovereign and free act of God. As such, it must not be confused with a potency that is naturally resident within the creature. It is a supernatural principle, given and maintained solely by the power of God.

Advanced and ordered by this grace, God’s image is reflected to the world through the holiness and righteousness of his creatures. And in their act of their worship, as they employ those natural signs of God’s goodness created for their use, God’s purposes in heaven and earth are fulfilled in the enjoyment of his creatures. In essence, the Spirit’s grace *just is* the natural inclination that God implanted on creatures at their first creation. Identifying the image of God with the creature’s state in grace renders grace necessary to fulfill the human vocation and emphasizes that creatures exist for the singular purpose honoring and worshipping God. Such a strong distinction between nature and grace gives grace a deeply

¹³⁷ *Works*, 1:170.

¹³⁸ *Works*, 1:219.

¹³⁹ *Works*, 1:170-172.

adventitious character, as it brings new powers and potencies to created nature which it did not previously have.

Both Owen's emphasis on the creature's active relation to God as the core of its vocation, and his arguments for the necessity of divine grace are here underpinned by his theology of divine dominion. For all things exist for God's sake, but human creatures are too lowly to make an approach to God without the assistance of God himself in the gift of grace. Owen carefully maintains both of these features in his theology of creation so that he can resist the creep of natural religion and maintain the freedom of God's grace. This allows him to advance a very sharp distinction between the church and the world, once again highlighting the necessity of the Spirit's grace for the fulfillment of the moral life. In the next chapter, we will see how Owen develops these principles within his moral theology and God's government as Lawgiver.

CHAPTER 3: LAW AND THE MORAL DEPENDENCE OF RATIONAL CREATURES

Introduction

In the last chapter, we surveyed Owen's account of God's creative acts. In this chapter, we turn to consider the nature of God's government of rational creatures as their Lawgiver. In doing so, we do not leave behind the doctrine of creation, or mankind's relation to God as Creator. For, God's creative work is the principle of his office as a Lawgiver. So, we do not leave God's work of creation behind in this chapter, but proceed to examine it more completely.

God governs rational creatures by means of both his law and his covenant, which are the instruments of his rule. The law is an instrument of God's general providence and respects the government of humans in respect of their natures as moral creatures, holding the rational faculties of intellect and will. The covenant, on the other hand, is an instrument of God's special providence, respecting the government of humans as they are creatures ordained for the supernatural end of the enjoyment of the vision of God.¹ At various points in Owen's thought, the law and covenant are very closely bound-up with one another so that they can be somewhat difficult to distinguish. But as I will explain later, the relation and distinction between these two is of real dogmatic significance to Owen. For while the law follows of necessity on the creation of the rational creature, the promise of reward contained in the covenant is a free act of God and as such is not necessary, but is superadded to the natural order of God's free goodness.

In the next chapter, I will discuss the major features of Owen's covenant theology in relation to God's work as the Rewarder of rational creatures. In this chapter, however, I intend to look at God as he is the creature's Lawgiver. In the pages that follow, I will show that the natural dependence of the rational creature upon God entails its *moral* dependence, as well, and that the character of this moral dependence is determined by God's natural dominion over the creature. I intend to argue that, as a result of this focus, Owen orients the moral life around the creature's active relation to God. In conjunction with his critique of natural religion Owen concentrates the moral goodness of any act in the intention of the

¹ See *Works*, 10:32-33.

creature's will. This substantially restricts the dogmatic scope of natural reason and natural law within his moral theology, and leads to an account of God's moral government that is designed to highlight the moral necessity of grace.

The chapter will proceed, first, by introducing the concept of the creature's moral dependence on God as a Lawgiver. This will consist of three parts examining the various species of divine law, the joint-concepts of "natural rights" and "natural obligations" which control so much of Owen's moral theology, and finally, the special instance of God's natural right to rule over the creature. Though it effectively moves in reverse, this ordering of the material will prove more useful because Owen describes the nature of God's authority and his right to rule over the creature through his theology of natural law. Secondly, I will move on to treat the nature of moral obligation in Owen's thought, looking particularly at the question of what makes the law *binding* for the creature. Finally, we will conclude the chapter by addressing potential criticisms of Owen's moral theology in a section concerning the *righteousness* of God's rule.

3.1 Divine Law and The Moral Dependence of Rational Creatures

Given the nature of the powers with which God has endowed humankind, the pursuit of their end has an ineluctably *moral* character. Through the faculties of the intellect and will, rational creatures are capable of knowing and loving what is good. And the knowledge and love of what is good is the very essence of the moral life.² The mere possession of these rational faculties, then, constitutes the human person a responsible, moral agent. Owen explains:

He [Adam] was made a rational creature, and thereby necessarily in a moral dependence on God: for being endowed with intellectual faculties, in an immortal soul, capable of eternal blessedness or misery, able to know God, and to regard him as the first cause and last end of all, as the author of his being and object of his blessedness, it was naturally and necessarily incumbent on him, without any further considerations, to love, fear, and obey him, and to trust in him as a preserver and rewarder. And this the order of his nature, called "the image of God," inclined and enabled him unto. For it was not possible that such a creature should be produced, and not lie under an obligation unto all those duties which the nature of God and his own, and the relation of the one to the other, made necessary.³

² *Works*, 3:503.

³ *Works*, 19:336.

The rational faculties essential to human nature presuppose the creature's "moral dependence" upon the Creator. For God is the "object of his blessedness". And just as the creature's environment and all the powers of its nature come entirely from God, so the right and proper employment of the creature's faculties in the pursuit of its end is also something that derives entirely from God. Creatures thus exist by nature in a state of moral dependence upon God which requires them to be obedient to him in all things in order to attain their end.

For just this reason, Owen argues that it was necessary that God give a *law* to rational creatures in order to govern the right use of their powers. Because even though God is free in the constitution of the natural order, having created a creature with such rational powers, Owen says that it was not possible for God to govern it by means of "a mere physical influence" alone in the manner that God governs other "irrational or brute creatures".⁴ For rational creatures obtain the good by means of their rational faculties. And it is in the nature of the will, as a rational faculty, to operate by deliberation and free choice, so that it is inconsistent with its nature to be *compelled* to some action. To govern humans by a strictly physical influence would be absurd, then, because it would rob them of the freedom that is essential to the rational nature that God himself had given them. It was necessary, therefore, that God govern them through the instrumentality of a *law* regulating the right use of their faculties. Law (*lex*) is a species of *justice* (*justitia*), and it is in the nature of a law to command and prescribe what is *right* (*jus*).⁵ In this way, the law provides all who are subject to it with some instruction in the pursuit of what is good, maintaining creatures in their proper order and relation, both to God and to one another.

The first end of any law is to instruct, direct, and guide them in their duty unto whom it is given. A law which is not in its own nature instructive and directive is no way meet to be prescribed unto rational creatures.⁶

For Owen, then, it is both natural and necessary for rational creatures to be morally dependent upon God as their Lawgiver.⁷

⁴ *Works*, 5:241.

⁵ *Works*, 5:247; cf. *ST* IaIIae, q. 96, a. 3; IIaIIae, q. 57, a. 2; Suárez, *De Legibus*, I.vii

⁶ *Works*, 19:343.

To say this, of course, is not merely to acknowledge the necessity of the law as an instrument of divine government. It is also to indicate that the rule governing the right use of the creature's faculties (and by extension, the creature's participation in the good) derives of necessity from *God*. For since God is the First Cause of all things, creatures also have a *natural* dependence upon God. The distinct nature or character of this dependence rests solely on the liberty of God to frame the natural order and the manner of creaturely life in a way that most accords with his wise purposes for creatures. In rational creatures, this dependence entails a *moral* vocation in service to the divine command, so that it is within the liberty of God to obligate the creature to those acts which he deems best accomplish the purpose of his will. Owen thus states that, "what is a *law* to us, in the administration of things, in God is his *right*, in conjunction with his most wise and just will; for God, as it is said, is a law unto himself".⁸ This right is God's *jus imperandi* — his right to command the creature.⁹

Like virtually all 17th century thinkers, Owen sees a close analogy between divine and human law. A law has the power to command because it expresses the will of some "superior", who justly holds the right and authority to command.¹⁰ Human laws are thus binding and authoritative because they express the will of a superior who has the right to command. As John Neville Figgis has noted, nothing was more universally accepted in 17th century moral and political philosophy than the necessity of obedience to authority.¹¹ Authority exists for the good of any subordinate, and therefore resistance to any rightful authority is immoral. Whenever one did advance an argument for resistance to some particular authority, it took the form of a dispute about the *limits* or proper *conditions* of any legitimate human authority. Of course, since God is superior to creatures in every way, divine law is the highest and most ultimate authority. The authority of all human law is therefore strictly derivative and subordinate. As such, it is legitimate only insofar as it is a rightful minister of divine authority.

⁷ *Works*, 3:102; 17:41-42 [*Biblical Theology*, 23-24]; 19:336; cf. Charnock, *Works of Stephen Charnock*, 2:408;

⁸ *Works*, 10:504. Along with the classical Christian tradition, Owen maintains that only those laws which are *just* can truly be regarded as law. When Owen's claims that God is a "law unto himself", therefore, this carries the sense that, as the rule of justice, God's own nature is the principle of all that can truly be called "law" (cf. 5:247).

⁹ *Works*, 3:609-610.

¹⁰ *Works*, 19:100.

¹¹ *The Divine Right of Kings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1914), 221-222.

Those various laws which bind any of God's creatures are authoritative insofar as they are traceable to the divine law which forms the basis of all authority whatsoever. In this way, divine law is regarded as the absolute ground of all moral action, and the creature's moral dependence upon *God* the ultimate presupposition of all moral government whatsoever. This means that any legitimate law, across all their various species, must be compatible with and founded upon divine authority as its proper ground. And as God's rule is just, any law that is unjust is *ipso facto* not a law.¹² Consequently, most moral and political philosophy of the period proceeded by setting forth an account of divine law, and then mapping its various relations to human law. The analogy between divine and human law was often mutually reinforcing, here, so that the character of God's moral government is brought into focus by a comparison with the practices of just government generally. Accordingly, the exact nature of the creature's moral dependence upon God will emerge only as we expand on the various species of divine law and the manner in which God's authority structures creaturely life by their subjection to that law.

3.1.1 Species of Divine Law

Owen generally recognizes three different species of divine law: moral, positive, and natural law. Each of these species issue of divine authority and as such are *binding* to the creature — that is, they have the power to obligate the creature to the performance of certain *duties* (debita), for the obedience of which the creature will be held responsible before God's justice. These species of law are diversified both by the *cause* of their institution and their particular *mode of publication* (that is, the manner in which they are declared to creatures). Owen takes it as axiomatic that since there is no more perfect rule of righteousness than the divine essence, God's own nature is the absolute measure of the justice of any law. However, as I have argued above, Owen also espouses a “voluntarist” account of the relationship between the divine intellect and will. Consequently, he understands divine law as being jointly-determined by both God's intellect and will.

That God should have any external rule or law in his government of the world is absolutely and infinitely impossible; but his law and rule is the holiness and righteousness of his own nature, with

¹² *Works*, 19:100; cf. 10:509.

respect unto that order of all things which, in his will and wisdom he hath given and assigned unto the whole of creation.¹³

God's law arises jointly from both the "righteousness of his . . . nature", as well as from his "will and wisdom". As a result, Owen observes a distinction within his moral theology between moral laws, which arise immediately and necessarily from the natural relation between God and rational creatures, and positive laws, which depend entirely on the free determination of God's will.¹⁴

The "moral law" refers to that rule which governs the creature's right conduct in respect of its natural and necessary relation to God. Owen describes it as follows:

Supposing the nature, being, and properties of God, with the works of creation, on the one hand; and suppose the being, existence, and the nature of man, with his necessary relation unto God, on the other; and the law whereof we speak is *nothing but the rule of that relation*, which can neither be nor be preserved without it. Hence is this law eternal, indispensable, admitting of no other variation than does the relation between God and man, which is a necessary exurgence from their distinct natures and properties.¹⁵

Since the moral law follows immediately on the natural and necessary relation of God to human creatures, it has two terms — one in the nature of God and the other in the nature of humankind. In Owen's writings it often goes by the name of the "law of creation", because it follows on the natural form of human beings and is an immediate correlate to the law of nature. Accordingly, Owen at times uses the language of "natural" and "moral" interchangeably in describing this law.¹⁶

We should observe a distinction here, however. Natural law, like the moral law, is fixed and unalterable, deriving its moral necessity from some aspect of the creature's nature or the

¹³ *Works*, 19:111; cf. 5:256, where Owen argues that Christ could not have been subject to the law as he was divine, because "the divine nature cannot be subjected unto an outward work of its own, such as the law is".

¹⁴ *Works*, 19:331-333. On the relation of this distinction to a "voluntarist" account of the divine will, see Wolter, *Will and Morality*, 54-64, 254-261; Mary Beth Ingham, *The Harmony of Goodness: Mutuality and Moral Living According to Duns Scotus* (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2012), 149-180; *PRRD*, 3:532-540.

¹⁵ *Works*, 3:241; emphasis mine. Cf. Grotius, *De Iure Belli*, I.I.x.3-5.

¹⁶ Owen uses these terms somewhat promiscuously throughout his *Exercitation on the Causes of the Sabbath* (*Works*, 19:326-385). The distinction is more clearly expounded in his treatise, *On Justification*, in which Owen tightens his account of the relation of the moral law to his theology of union with Christ (5:240-241).

character of the natural order more generally.¹⁷ But natural law has a broader scope than the moral law, taking-in not only those obligations which humans have *to God* as rational creatures and moral agents, but also those expressed within the second table of the law, which pertain to humankind as it is a *social* animal.¹⁸ The moral law, in the sense that Owen employs it above, is a *reduction* of all laws that bind human beings to those obligations that are fundamental and indispensable to human creatures *in respect of their moral dependence* upon God.¹⁹ The moral law and the natural law, therefore, are not strictly co-extensive with one another. But the moral law was published together with the law of nature, and is a sub-set of it governing the creature's relation to God.²⁰

Because divine authority is the basis of all law, Owen regards the moral law as constituting the essential core of the moral life and forming the foundation upon which all other creaturely moral obligations are based. Consequently, in any and every moral duty whatsoever, Owen argues that the creature has a relation to some aspect of the moral law.²¹ This is a point that we would be wise not to pass over too quickly. For since it is natural and necessary for the rational creature to be morally dependent upon God, Owen thinks that the very existence of a rational creature necessarily entails its natural obligation to obey God. The binding authority of the moral law requires no further condition than that "God be God, and man be man". Accordingly, the creature can come under no condition, either now or in eternity, when it is not obliged to God under the moral law, as the abrogation of this law would entail an essential alteration of either the nature of the creature or of God. Furthermore, Owen claims that this obligation extends both to the "substance" of the moral law, and to the "manner" of obedience that it requires.²²

The substance of this law was that man, adhering unto God absolutely, universally, unchangeably, uninterruptedly, in trust, love, and fear, as the chiefest good, the first author of his being, of all the present and future advantages whereof it was capable, should yield obedience unto him, with respect unto his infinite wisdom, righteousness and almighty power to protect, reward, and punish, in all things

¹⁷ *Works*, 19:339-344; *cf.* Turretin, *Institutes*, XI.i.22.

¹⁸ See *Works*, 19:345.

¹⁹ *Works*, 19:355; *cf.* 3:525. Though Owen does not explain it in these terms, we might say that the moral law consists in those laws which would bind human beings in every possible world. "This necessary law, *so far* forth as it was necessary, did immediately and unavoidably ensue upon the constitution of our nature in relation unto God" (*Works*, 5:241, emphasis mine).

²⁰ *Works*, 17:39-42 [*Biblical Theology*, 20-24].

²¹ *Works*, 3:525; *cf.* 19:406.

²² *Works*, 5:241; *cf.* 5:261, where Owen argues that Christ's human nature remains subject to the law of creation even in heaven.

known to be his will and pleasure, either by the light of his own mind or especial revelation made unto him.²³

The moral law thus enjoins the creature to complete and unqualified obedience of the will of God. The compatibility of this point with Owen's theology of union with Christ is a matter which came under heavy scrutiny in the 1650's and 1670's, as Baxter and others accused Owen of Antinomianism.²⁴ An examination of this material is beyond the scope of our purposes. But essentially, Owen ultimately attempts to reconcile this tension by clarifying the nature of the relationship between the covenant and the natural order. Whether or not Owen proves fully consistent on the point, it is clearly an element of his moral theology which he is intent on retaining.

In contrast with the moral law, which is necessary and absolutely unalterable, "positive law" is a discretionary commandment instituted by God. Positive law carries the same obligatory force as any moral law, for its authority is finally grounded in a principle of the moral law, namely, the creature's obligation to obey God. However, in God's *potentia absoluta*, positive laws might have been otherwise and are thus prudential, circumstantial, and capable of being altered at God's discretion. The ceremonial laws governing Israel's worship, for example, were positive laws. Though they served as a useful guides under the old covenant, they were abrogated with the inauguration of the new covenant in Christ. Owen also acknowledges the category of "mixed" commandments, which contain both moral and positive dimensions. He classifies the 4th commandment, the observance of the Sabbath, as a mixed commandment since it is natural and necessary that the rational creature set aside time for the worship of God, though the day of that worship is discretionary and alterable.²⁵ As these laws are alterable, they are not discoverable by reason and so it is necessary that they be published by some special act of divine revelation.

Though positive law is discretionary, Owen urges that it is not for this reason fully *arbitrary*. It is true, of course, that "where nothing can be discerned in commands but mere authority, will, and pleasure, they are looked on as merely respecting the good of them that

²³ *Works*, 5:241.

²⁴ See Boersma, *A Hot Pepper Corn*, 219-256; Trueman, *Claims of Truth*, 199-226; Cooper, *Formation of NonConformity*, 55-100.

²⁵ *Works*, 19:331; cf. Beeke and Jones, "John Owen on the Christian Sabbath and Worship", *Puritan Theology*, 655-657; Kopic, *Communion with God*, 211.

command, and not at all theirs who are to obey”. Such a rule naturally discourages and disheartens those who are governed by it. But Owen assures us that this is not the case with God. We might draw an analogy at this point to what we said earlier regarding the nature of the divine will. Because God’s power is coextensive with his wisdom and his goodness, God can create only those creatures which are worthy of his wisdom and goodness. The same is true with God’s laws, as well. For the laws which now order creaturely life existed eternally in the mind of God. This is the “eternal law” according to which God determined he would govern his creatures. Like the essence of any creature, this eternal law is not merely an effect of God’s power, but is also the “fruit of infinite wisdom and goodness.” As such, it perfectly coheres with that order which God has established in his wisdom. Owen thus insists that God issues no law which does not serve the “highest advantage and interest” of his creatures, even if this advantage cannot always be discerned on the basis of natural reason alone.²⁶

The final species of law is that of “natural law”. Because God is the author of all creaturely forms, God governs his creatures in a manner which fully accords with their natures. It follows, then, that the nature of the moral order should be fixed, at least in part, by the natural forms that God has implanted upon creatures by his “work of distinction”. As we have seen already, Owen argues that when God forms creatures, he imprints within them a natural inclination toward their end. In the creature, this inclination of its nature has the character of a *rule* or *law* that either guides the creature to or averts it from particular kinds of acts.²⁷ This law was known as the “law of nature”,²⁸ because it follows on the creature’s natural form and specifies the natural relation of the creature’s acts to its end. Accordingly, the supreme cause of this law is, as Owen states, “the will of God, constituting, appointing, and ordering the nature of things”.²⁹

Though this law follows on the form of the creature, Owen warns that the law of nature should not for this reason be mistaken for those general, physical principles that regulate the natural realm. Of course, these principles, too, are designed by God and upheld by his

²⁶ *Works*, 3:616.

²⁷ *Works*, 19:405.

²⁸ *Works*, 19:338-343; *cf.* 17:41. There is, of course, a very rich natural law tradition within Reformed thought, and several recent studies have attempted to recover it (*e.g.* Stephen J. Grabill, *Rediscovering the Natural Law in Reformed Theological Ethics* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006]; David VanDrunen, *Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms: A Study in the Development of Reformed Social Thought* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010]). Owen draws freely on this tradition; however, as I will argue below, his appropriation of this tradition is very cautious, even when compared to other Reformed thinkers.

²⁹ *Works*, 19:343.

providence — God “gave to the sea his decree, that the waters should not pass his commandment” (Prov. 8:29). But, as Owen puts it, the law of nature does not properly respect “the nature of nature” (*naturæ naturatæ*); that is, it does not principally concern the properties of any natural cause in terms of what renders that cause measurable or predictable. It is, rather, “a law given unto our nature as a rule and measure” — the *lex naturæ naturantis* — “the law of nature working *naturally*”. Accordingly, it primarily respects the proper *order* of creatures, and the nature of their regular movement toward their end.³⁰ Since all creatures exist by the will of God, and God does nothing without reason, every creature participates in the law of nature in some fashion, inasmuch as its natural form is suited to some purpose within God’s grand design. In this sense, one might consider the “natural inclinations” of water to run downhill or of birds to fly to be expressions of the law of nature. But “law” is chiefly concerned with the conduct of *moral* agents, and so Owen concludes that the “natural law” most properly respects the moral actions of *rational* creatures.³¹

Like most of the scholastics, Owen holds that the law of nature is published to creatures by means of the created order itself, which possesses an inherent intelligibility discernible to the rational faculties of creatures. Human beings thus obtain knowledge of the natural law in two ways: first, through certain “inbred notions”, by which Owen probably intends principles of moral conduct which God implants upon the mind and which are self-evident (*per se nota*); and secondly, by the discursive use of their natural reason.³² While the former are inextricable from humans as they are rational creatures,³³ Owen maintains that the latter is devastated by the fall. And for reasons that will become clear later on, Owen’s critique of natural religion leads him to restrict the compass of natural reason in several ways. It is not only the creature’s sin but also its *finiteness* that inhibits its moral discernment. This ultimately reduces the reliability of the law of nature as a source of moral knowledge. As a consequence, it plays a proportionally smaller role in his moral theology, causing him to depend more heavily on the law of Scripture as a guide in the good life. This notwithstanding, however, Owen does believe that creatures maintain some limited access to the knowledge of God and the moral life through the light of nature.³⁴

³⁰ *Works*, 19:342.

³¹ *Works*, 19:338, 342; cf. *ST* Ia, q. 91, a. 2; see also, q. 93, a. 5, resp.; Suárez, *De Legibus*, I.ii.7-9 in *Selections from Three Works of Francisco Suárez*, trans. Gwladys L. Williams et. al. [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1944]; Turretin, *Institutes*, XI.i.5.

³² *Works*, 15:449; cf. 17:39-40 [*Biblical Theology*, 20-21].

³³ E.g., *Works*, 6:254.

³⁴ *Works*, 16:306-312. Cf. Trueman, *Claims of Truth*, 56-62.

3.1.2 Natural Law and Natural Rights

In its capacity as a law, the natural order itself prescribes certain norms which govern the creature's moral action. As we have seen, natural law is a species of divine law, stipulating what is due, right and equal according to the order of nature. Along with many theologians of the 17th century, Owen understands these norms as laying out certain natural rights and obligations which accrue to the creature by virtue of its subjection to the law of nature. These joint concepts — of “natural rights” and “natural obligations” — are fundamental to Owen's overall moral vision, controlling not only his political theology but also his account of the creature's relation to God. In order to understand the nature of Owen's moral theology, therefore, we must obtain a firmer understanding of these concepts.

Because the law of nature is the handiwork of God, following immediately as it does on the instituted order of creation, to claim a “natural right” to anything is to make an appeal to divine authority. Thinkers of the 17th century often contrasted natural rights with contract rights for just this reason. For while contract rights are adventitious, arising out of some voluntary arrangement between contracting parties, natural rights are possessed immediately on the basis of the natural order and as such are grounded in the prerogative of the divine will. Natural rights and obligations thus logically precede any social engagements in which the creature might participate or offer its consent.

Much of the moral and political philosophy of Owen's day circulated around the proper relationship between contract rights and natural rights. This was especially the case in England, where civil war made theoretical questions concerning the source of the Magistrate's civil authority one of the most subversive and politically volatile intellectual disputes of the century. The significance of this distinction can be clearly seen in 17th century discussions regarding the “right to resistance” (*ius resistere*).³⁵ Do citizens have a natural right to resist the magistrate should it become tyrannical? If so, is such a right *inalienable*? Many royalists, like John Selden, argued that, while humankind was created with a natural right to liberty, the right to liberty is *alienable*. Therefore, when a people give their consent to be ruled by some sovereign, it is also possible for those people to forfeit their right to resist that sovereign (depending on the particular nature of the political compact involved). By

³⁵ See Tuck, *Natural Rights Theories*, ch. 4; cf. Witte, *Reformation of Rights*, ch. 4.

contrast, those who opposed the Monarchy often did so on the grounds that the right to resistance is a natural right that is strictly inalienable, and so cannot be ceded to any sovereign.³⁶ It is not difficult to see how, in the context of a civil war, such an apparently esoteric matter might have had immediate and very serious real-world significance.

Historians and philosophers have often distinguished the natural rights tradition by its special focus on the *subjectivity* of the moral agent to whom any right or obligation is said to “belong”. The moral agent here serves as a conceptual locus of justice, so that a “right” (*ius*) can be spoken of as something that one “has” or “possesses” — it is a moral “power” at the discretion or disposal of the one in whom it inheres. The accent here falls on the moral freedom of the agent to employ this power in a manner which she sees fit. Owen’s own moral theology is firmly rooted in this tradition. As he puts it: “that which is any one’s *right* he may use or not use at his pleasure”.³⁷ Because of this unique focus on the subjectivity of the moral agent, the correlative concepts of “dominion”, “liberty”, and the power of “alienation” have often accompanied the natural rights tradition in order to articulate the extent of the moral agent’s freedom to dispose of the right in question.

Natural rights were often divided into two distinct species — an *ius ad rem* and an *ius in re*. An *ius ad rem* refers to the right that a person has to something which they do not yet actively possess, such as a worker’s right to compensation for her labors. An *ius in re*, on the other hand, is a “perfect right”, in that the object of the right in question is already actively in the possession of the moral subject. An *ius in re* was understood as a kind of property right according to which a person had “dominion” (*dominium*)³⁸ over some thing — that is, the liberty to use their property in the manner that they see fit, without the interference of others. A person’s right to their house would be one example. As they have an *ius in re* in it, they maintain a perfect right either to live in it, to tear it down, or to sell it.

Now, while readers of the natural rights tradition customarily recognize variants in the way these concepts are employed, there is a general recognition in the secondary literature that the subjectivity of the moral agent acquired a new, important status within the moral

³⁶ Tuck illustrates this point throughout his work by demonstrating how advocates of slavery often argued that “liberty” necessarily implied a person’s power to alienate one’s natural right to freedom. This same theoretical maneuver also funded the considerable strand of British totalitarianism represented in thinkers like Selden and Hobbes.

³⁷ *Works*, 10:207, emphasis added.

philosophy of the early Modern period. As this coincided within a very rapidly shifting political landscape, it has often been argued that this emphasis proved determinative for the development of the liberal-democratic tradition which now dominates political and moral discourse in the West. Critics of the liberal tradition have sometimes argued that the *very concept* of a subjective right is destructive of more classical accounts of the nature of justice which tend to construe an *ius*, not as a “moral power” at the disposal of some subject, but as an equitable *relation* between two parties.³⁹ On this reading, subjective rights are seen as a fiction, having a natural tendency toward a kind of “possessive individualism”.⁴⁰ More recently, these criticisms have been incorporated into narratives offering a wide-scale critique of Modernity.⁴¹ These narratives sometimes even depict the emphasis on the moral subject contained within early natural rights theory as an indirect cause of the larger moral relativism and atheism that has come to mark life in the Modern west.

Space prohibits a full evaluation of these claims. Yet, whatever one makes of the legitimacy of these larger critiques of Modernity, it is by no means clear that the “possessive individualism” that often attends political and moral discourse in the Western world today was the *inevitable* outgrowth of the natural rights tradition of the 17th century. Because many early Modern theorists, especially Protestant moral theologians, developed their accounts of natural rights theory *within* some larger theology of natural law.⁴² And so while they treat the individual as a conceptual locus of justice and right, natural rights were not regarded as being competitive with just relations under the law. Rather, they were in fact seen as a necessary *entailment* of them.

The law establishes the right relation of rational creatures to God and to one another. The appeal to “rights” and “obligations” which formally structures the logic of the natural

³⁸ Tuck defines dominion as “a claim to total control . . . against all the world” (*Natural Rights Theories*, 15).

³⁹ E.g., Alistair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 3rd Edition (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2007), 69. Recent works have challenged this argument on both historical and philosophical grounds. See especially Brian Tierney, *The Idea of Natural Rights: Studies on Natural Rights, Natural Law, and Church Law, 1150-1625*, Emory University Studies in Law and Religion (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

⁴⁰ See C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), 33, 89-90, 105.; cf. Michael Allen Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 226.

⁴¹ See, for example, Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 1992); Michael Buckley, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990); and Brad Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

⁴² See John Witte, Jr., *Reformation of Rights: Law, Religion, and Human Rights in Early Modern Calvinism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

rights tradition is thus a means of designating the opposing *termini* of any just relation. “Rights” and “obligations” stand together, here, defining the mutual responsibilities incumbent upon any two parties *by the law of nature*. And since justice requires that each person render to the other what is “due” to them, these rights and obligations accrue to a *person precisely in virtue of their natural relation to one another*. For most early Modern theologians, then, to speak of some natural right or obligation presupposes already a normative set of relations established by God in the natural order which govern the interaction of all rational, moral agents. This is certainly the case with Owen. For though Owen takes steps to dramatically reduce the scope of natural reason as an instrument of moral discernment, he never questions whether the law of nature remains a concrete norm of the moral life — that is a given.

Owen thus claims that these relations under the law of nature contain a kind of “covenant” within them, respecting the “personal services and rewards” which are incumbent upon each party in virtue of this relation.⁴³ Of course, in respect of the extensive scope of the law of nature, a wide variety of relations fall under its authority. But one of the most paradigmatic examples comes from the relation of parents to their natural-born children.⁴⁴ The act of bringing a child into the world places a *natural obligation* on the parents to provide the child with food and shelter, so that children are said to have a *natural right* to sustenance from their parents. On the other hand, the parents have a right of natural dominion over their child because of its natural dependence upon them. Consequently, the child has a *natural obligation* to obey her parents, giving the child’s father and mother a *natural right* to the child’s obedience, at least, insofar as their commands are just. In both instances, the rights and obligations that accrue to parents and children ensue on the natural relation between the two, and describe a just and equitable condition in respect of the things in question — sustenance or obedience.

This is an especially evocative image because the moral necessity of parental authority is rendered transparent by an analogy to the physical dependence of children. The very nature

⁴³ *Works*, 19:92.

⁴⁴ Owen, too, takes this to be among the most obvious applications of natural law. “There is implanted in [man], in the principles of his nature, concreated with them, a love and care for [children].” So, he refers to the pagan practice of child sacrifice as the prime example of “the strength of sin . . . to obliterate the law of nature, and to repel the force and power of it” (*Works*, 6:304). Hobbes’ assimilation of natural law to natural rights is no where more evident than when he claims that a baby feeding at its mother’s breast is actually engaged in an implicit kind of contractual agreement (*Leviathan*, II.xx).

of natural generation entails that children are dependent upon their parents for their life and wellbeing. The moral imperative of parents to provide for their children, or of children to obey their parents, thus follows more or less obviously from the natural, physical dependence of the child. Because the connection between the natural and the moral is so transparent in this instance, it was often borrowed as an analogy to explain the moral obligations attending other relations of authority.

For example, political theorists often drew the analogy between the natural right of a Father to a child's obedience, and the the natural right of a Sovereign to the obedience of his subjects. This was, quite naturally, a heavily contested analogy in 17th century England and Scotland, as some used it to support the notion of the divine right of kings. Just as a father, by a natural right, has authority over his child prior to and without the consent of the child, so the king has a natural right to rule which does not depend upon the consent of the people, but derives from a direct grant of authority issued to him by God.⁴⁵ Some royalists claimed on these grounds that the 5th commandment — “honor your father and your mother” (Ex. 20:12) — prohibited taking up arms against one's king. In his *Lex Rex*, Samuel Rutherford argues insistently that this analogy does not hold. For since a king does not grant life to his subjects in the manner that a father does to his child, he cannot be thought to have a *natural* right to rule over his people without some prior consent.⁴⁶ Royal authority, for Rutherford, is a contract right.

The relation between a father and a child was also frequently employed by theologians who used it as an analogy to describe the moral obligations that attend the natural relation between God and rational creatures. For example, in describing the nature of divine authority, Owen writes the following:

Authority, wherever it is just and exerted in a due and equal manner, carrieth along with it an obligation unto obedience. Take this away, and you will fill the whole world with disorder. If the authority of parents, masters, and magistrates, did not oblige children, servants, and subjects unto obedience, the world could not abide one moment out of hellish confusion. God himself maketh use of this argument in general, to convince men of the necessity of obedience: “A son honoureth his father, and a servant his master: if then I be a father, where is mine honour? and if I be a master, where is my fear? saith the Lord of hosts unto you, O priests, that despise my name,” Mal. 1:6;—“If in all particular

⁴⁵ See Figgis, *Divine Right of Kings*, 219-255.

⁴⁶ *Lex Rex* (Edinburgh: Robert Ogle and Oliver & Boyd, 1843), XV.

relations, where there is any thing of superiority, which hath the least parcel of authority accompanying of it, obedience is expected and exacted, is it not due to me, who have all the authority of all sovereign relations in me towards you?"⁴⁷

Owen's use of Malachi 1:6 in this context to support the concept of natural obligations is a classic example of the interdependence of early Modern theology and exegesis. Like the relation of parents to their children under the law of nature, God has authority over creatures simply in virtue of his natural relation to them. Consequently, God has a *natural right* to their honor and worship as well. This particular analogy had a variety of different functions in 17th century divinity, some of which could be very controversial.⁴⁸ But minimally, it served to indicate that creatures have a *natural* obligation to observe God's authority. In doing so, it understood the obligations of the creature toward God under the moral law as a subset of the natural law. This leads us now to consider the nature of God's natural right to rule over the creature.

3.1.3 God's Natural Right to Rule

According to Owen, "All authority arises from relation" — a father exercises authority over a son by virtue of their natural relation to one another, and a sovereign exercises authority over his subjects by virtue of the political relation he has to them through his royal office. God's authority over creatures, however, arises simply "from their relation to him as their Creator."⁴⁹ This is indeed a *natural* relation, similar in some ways to that existing between parents and children. Just as children share in the nature of their parents, the creature depends upon God for its existence and form. Owen thus describes God's right to rule over the creature, his *jus regiminis*, as the "*natural right of Deity*".⁵⁰ This right justly entitles God to command the creature, so that it has a natural obligation to obey God in all things.

But there is also an important dissimilarity, here — even an *infinite* dissimilarity — between the authority that fathers exercise over their children, and the authority that God

⁴⁷ *Works*, 3:609-610.

⁴⁸ For example, Owen takes issue with John Goodwin's application of this analogy when Goodwin argues that God continues his love and favor toward creatures because his natural relation to creatures as a Father presupposes a natural *obligation* to care for them and lead them to eternal life. See Owen, *Works*, 11:247; cf. Goodwin, *Redemption Redeemed, wherein the most glorious Work of Redemption of the world by Jesus Christ is vindicated against the Encroachments of later times*, 1651 edition reprint (London: Tegg, 1840), 324-325.

⁴⁹ *Works*, 16:308.

⁵⁰ *Works*, 10:508.

exercises over his creatures. For given the ontological priority of God over creatures, the act of creation is one of *absolute* dominion, so that it belongs to God's freedom to determine the ends which his creatures shall serve as well as the nature of their service to those ends. In this respect, God's relation to creatures is very *unlike* the relation of a parent to a child. Because in the generative act of creation, God does not merely produce another creature in the same species with himself. Rather, he crosses an infinite ontological divide, bringing creatures into being out of nothing. In so doing, he is the author of the creature's whole existence, nature and end. The creature's relation to the Creator is thus qualitatively different from every other kind of relation that the creature maintains. And consequently, God's authority over the creature is of a wholly different nature, as well.

In his 1668 exercitation on the "Necessity of the Priesthood of Christ", Owen describes God's right to rule over the creature in the following way.

The right, therefore, which God hath to act [as a Ruler] . . . is *supreme* and *sovereign*, arising naturally and necessarily from the relation of all things unto himself; for hereby, — namely, by their relation unto him as his creatures, — they are all placed in an universal, indispensable, and absolutely unchangeable dependence on him, according to their natures and capacities. The right of God [to] rule over us is wholly of another kind and nature than any thing is or can be among the sons of men, that which is paternal having the nearest resemblance of it, but it is not of the same kind; for it doth not arise from the benefits we receive from him, nor hath any respect unto our consent, for he rules over the most against their wills, but depends merely on our relation unto him as his creatures, with the nature, order, and condition of our existence, wherein we are placed by his sovereignty. This in him is unavoidably accompanied with a right to act towards us according to the counsel of his will and the rectitude of his nature. The state and condition, I say, of our being and end, with the relation which we have unto him and to his other works, or the order wherein we are set and placed in the universe, being the product or effect of his power, wisdom, will and goodness, he hath an unchangeable, sovereign right to deal with us and act towards us according to the infinite, eternal rectitude of his nature. And as he hath a right so to do, so he cannot do otherwise.⁵¹

The first thing to note here is Owen's claim that God's right to rule over the creature is *natural* and *necessary*, following immediately from the creature's natural dependence upon God as its Creator. God's right to rule arises merely "from the relation of all things unto himself". But what exactly is the relation between God's creative act and his right to rule the creature?

⁵¹ *Works*, 19:100-101.

The logic informing this relationship sometimes differed in Reformed accounts. Calvin, for example, denies that there can be any justification of God's right to rule since it follows as a matter of course from God's efficient causality, which guides and sustains creatures.⁵² John Collinges, following a significant strand of humanist thought, claims that "every Superior being hath a kind of natural right to rule over those that are inferior to it". Since God is the Supreme Being, he is perfect in every respect and exceeds creatures in every order of goodness as their original exemplary cause. God thus rightly rules over creatures not only as he exceeds them by nature, but also as he is the cause of their goodness.⁵³ Thomas Ridgley, on the other hand, derives God's right to rule over creatures from the fact that He is the first cause of all things, and therefore must also be the final cause. For as God is the Creator, his will absolutely precedes the existence of creatures. And as he has "made all things for himself" (Prov. 16:4), so it belongs to him to govern the world toward that end which he has appointed it to serve, namely, his glory.⁵⁴ Turretin claims God's right to rule has a two-fold foundation, in the supreme excellence of God's nature and in the natural dependence of creatures upon God.⁵⁵

Of course, these reasons are not necessarily exclusive of one another. Owen relates God's authority to each at different points in his writing. However, as Owen most frequently speaks of God's right to rule following immediately on the natural dependence of creatures, he is most accustomed to resolving God's right to rule upon God's absolute dominion. "Dominion", it was said, is a kind of property right by which one has the moral power and liberty to dispose of their possessions in a manner which they deem fit. To speak of God's "dominion" over creatures, then, implies a right in God to rule over them. This is why Owen states above that God's right to rule is "unavoidably accompanied" by his right to act toward us "according to the counsel of his will". Because God's right to rule follows necessarily on God's natural relation to creatures. But, as Owen states above, the nature of our relation to the Creator derives simply from the "nature, order and condition of our existence *wherein we* are placed by his sovereignty". In other words, the nature of our relation to God is itself an effect of God's dominion. According to Owen, therefore, God's right to rule over rational

⁵² E.g., *Lectures on Daniel*, 2:21; *Comm. Romans*, 9:15-18, 21; Witte, *Reformation of Rights*, 116-117.

⁵³ Collinges, *Several Discourses Concerning the Actual Providence of God, Divided into Three Parts* (London, 1678), I.8, p.103; cf. Charnock, *Works of Stephen Charnock*, 1:8; 2:408-409.

⁵⁴ Ridgley, *Body of Divinity*, I.viii, see points II.1-5; cf. Pictet, *Christian Theology*, VII.ii; II.5.

creatures should be regarded as a “branch” or species of God’s “natural dominion”, which “is necessary, and belongs to God, *as God*”, so that it “cannot be promised [viz. surrendered] to any”.⁵⁶

When Owen states that this right to rule over the creature “is necessary, and belongs to God, *as God*”, we should understand him to be making two distinct claims — one about the nature of the *creature*, and the creature’s *relation* to God, and the other about the nature of *God*. With respect to the former, Owen’s point is that God stands in such a relation to the creature that it was not possible for God to create a creature over which he is not the Lord. Of course, God’s rule over the creature is not *absolutely* necessary, since God might have chosen not to create the creature at all. But on the supposition that he *would* create, Owen argues that it is strictly impossible — and, indeed, a contradiction in terms — that God should create a creature that is not subject to his rule. As we have seen already, God’s perfection entails that God is the First Cause and Final End of all created things. Accordingly, God has a natural right *in the creature (ius in re)* simply by virtue of the creature’s natural dependence on divine power. God’s right to rule is thus strictly *inalienable*. For since the creature cannot exist apart from its natural dependence on God, it is strictly impossible that God should ever cease to exercise this right over the creature. “For suppose the creation of all things, and it is as natural and essential unto God to be the ruler of them and over them as it is to be God.”⁵⁷

However, while it follows necessarily on the existence of any creature that God has a natural “right, power, and liberty of rule” over it,⁵⁸ we should be careful to note that God’s right to rule is not *grounded* in his creative act *per se*. As we have said, the creation of the world was itself a contingent act, and therefore God’s right to rule over the creature is likewise contingent on God’s free determination to create the world. And Owen here resolves God’s right to rule into his “natural dominion”, which he claims “belongs to God *as God*”. The very fact that Owen names God’s dominion as a property belonging to God *as he is God*, and not only as he is the *Creator*, indicates that God’s right to rule has its basis *in re*, in an

⁵⁵ *Institutes*, III.xxii.5. See James Bruce, *Rights in the Law: The Importance of God’s Free Choice in the Thought of Francis Turretin* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2013), 37-40.

⁵⁶ *Works*, 8:434. According to Bruce, Turretin distinguishes God’s right of dominion and his right of government by their objects, with the former respecting non-rational creatures and the latter respecting rational creatures (*Rights in the Law*, 101-102).

⁵⁷ *Works*, 19:101.

⁵⁸ *Works*, 19:100.

absolute divine attribute, and as such is strictly inseparable from the perfection of the divine essence.⁵⁹ Dominion, in other words, is “in God”.⁶⁰

The precise sense in which dominion is “in God” we have observed already in our discussion of the divine decree. I showed there that, for Owen, God’s will is so perfectly free that, prior to its determination to act, it possesses an absolute “indifference” toward all things it might possibly create or realize *ad extra*. The “indifference” of God’s will, in this context, was used to indicate the absolute freedom of God as both self-moved and uncaused. God is perfect in himself, and therefore his acts are governed by no other rule but his own essential wisdom and will. And since God is free in himself, he is free to do what pleases him.⁶¹ This freedom is God’s *jus dominii* — his right of dominion.⁶² This is why, in the block quote cited above, Owen describes God’s dominion as “an unchangeable, sovereign right to deal with us and act towards us according to the infinite, eternal rectitude of his nature.”⁶³ Because just as all things are naturally dependent upon the divine will as their first cause, so God retains an absolute and inalienable right over creatures to do what he will with his own.

So then, God’s natural right to rule (*jus regiminis*) over the creature *ad extra* has its final basis *in re*, in God’s natural right of dominion (*jus dominii*), which is nothing other than the freedom of God’s will as he is the first cause of all things. And this means that God’s right to rule over the creature derives not only from his relation to it as such, but from the simple act of God’s existence. For this reason, Turretin distinguished God’s right to rule as an “absolute right” as opposed to an “ordinate right”, because it derives from something that absolutely transcends the natural order, and so is not finally subject to ordinate justice.⁶⁴ Though Owen does not state it in these terms, ostensibly, he holds the same view. This is important because it underscores the absolute difference between divine and human government. God’s right to rule is an extension of his transcendence over all things, and so

⁵⁹ *Works*, 19:100.

⁶⁰ *Works*, 12:448.

⁶¹ *Works*, 10:464.

⁶² *Works*, 19:100.

⁶³ *Works*, 19:101. Charnock distinguishes God’s dominion from his omnipotence, arguing that the latter refers to his “physical power” while the former concerns a “moral power” to do what he will (*Complete Works of Stephen Charnock*, 2:407). “Dominion” is, for Owen, a term comprehensive of both God’s right and his power.

⁶⁴ “Although the absolute right is not revealed by the law, it must not therefore be held as contrary to the law. It is above and beyond the law, but not against it; nor moreover can it be called unjust, inasmuch as it is not conformed to the law because the adequate rule of justice is not the law alone, but partly the nature of God and partly his will” (Turretin, *Institutes*, III.xxii.8). On Turretin, see James E. Bruce, *Rights in the Law*, 37-40; Grabill, *Rediscovering the Natural Law*, 163-173.

unlike earthly authorities, God has an absolute dominion and an unconditional right to do what he pleases with creatures.

In the genus of morals, this right entitles God to command the obedience of creatures, which is his *jus imperandi*. Of course, as Owen notes here, God can enact his right of dominion only in keeping with “the infinite, eternal rectitude of his nature”, and so can command the creature only in ways that are consonant with his wisdom and goodness. But because God’s dominion is natural and indispensable, his authority to command is absolute and insuperable, giving him a natural right (*ius ad rem*) to the creature’s obedience. The creature’s moral dependence upon God is therefore both natural and necessary:

He who *commands* us . . . is our *sovereign lawgiver*, he that hath *absolute* power to prescribe unto us what *laws* he pleaseth. When commands come from them who have authority, and yet are themselves also under authority, there may be some secret abatement of the power of the command. Men may think either to appeal from them, or one way or other subduct themselves from under their power. But when the power immediately commanding is sovereign and absolute, there is no room for tergiversation. The command of God proceeds from the absolute power of a sovereign legislator. And where it is not complied withal, the whole authority of God, and therein God himself, is despised. So God in many places calleth sinning against his commands, the “despising of him,” (Num. 11:20, 1 Sam 2:30).⁶⁵

Owen’s statement at the close of this paragraph returns us to what we have said above regarding the moral law as the core of natural law. Because God has the absolute right to command the creature, anything short of the creature’s full and unqualified obedience to divine law constitutes the “despising” of *God*, not merely of God’s *law*. For it is *from God* that the creature has received its being, and it is *upon God* that the creature is naturally dependent, and so it is *to God* that the creature owes its full and unqualified obedience. In short, as God has a natural right *in* his creatures (*ius in re*), he has a natural right *to* the creature’s obedience (*ius ad rem*).

The creature’s natural obligation to God does, of course, enjoin it to the performance of certain special acts or duties. So, for example, Owen argues that rational creatures are obligated by the law of nature to observe the Sabbath as a discrete time set apart for the

⁶⁵ *Works*, 3:610; cf. 16:308-309; 21:23.

worship and service of God.⁶⁶ However, the creature's obligation to God is not exhausted in acts of worship. For since God is the author of the creature and the natural order which the creature occupies, all those moral obligations which accrue to the creature by the law of nature find their ultimate ground in divine authority, which is itself the foundation of all law. As divine law is the final basis of all moral obligation, the honoring and obedience of God is the "general end" of all moral action, and the final standard to which they are accountable.⁶⁷

In other words, God is himself the proper object of all moral action, and all other natural obligations are *morally* relevant because of their relation to the *divine command*. Just like spokes on a wheel are all supported by the hub, so all moral obligations are grounded in and supported by the great commandment. In this way, the coherence of the moral order depends entirely on this first and principal moral duty — to love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength. In fact, Owen claims that the rational creature does not discharge *any* of its moral obligations under the law of nature unless each of its acts is performed in definite moral obedience to God:

It is not enough for him [man] to answer the instinct and secret impulse and inclination of his nature and kind, as in the nourishing of his children; but he must do it also *in subjection to God*, and obey him therein, and do it unto his glory — the law of moral obedience passing over all his whole being and all his operations.⁶⁸

In a sense, then, the special relation of creature to God adds another stipulation to all other obligations that the creature sustains by the law of nature. So, Owen states that the laws of nature are "seconded"⁶⁹ — or, we might say "doubled" — by the divine commandment, so that they necessarily include both a natural and a spiritual obligation. But it is in this "second", spiritual obligation that the creature's moral obedience find its origin and end. And so it is properly *this* act which their moral conduct respects. There is therefore a definite order between the two tables of the law — the second table rests upon the first. The obligation to love your neighbor as yourself has real seriousness and depth, because it is a *divine* command, and the creature can have no greater or more fundamental obligation than the love and obedience of God.

⁶⁶ *Works*, 19:331-332.

⁶⁷ *Works*, 3:503.

⁶⁸ *Works*, 6:305.

⁶⁹ *Works*, 6:305.

3.2 Moral Obligation

For Owen, the formal cause of all moral obligation is the command of a superior.⁷⁰ Wherever authority is exercised justly in the act of commanding, an obligation to obedience inexorably ensues upon all those under that authority. Yet, in order for something to have the character of a *law*, Owen claims that it must carry “a *binding* force, or be coercive”.⁷¹ The command of any superior is binding, according to Owen, because it includes (at least tacitly) either the promise of reward for obedience or of punishment for disobedience.⁷² Any law is binding for the same reason, because it includes within it a “virtual promise and threatening” that is underwritten by the power of the lawgiver.⁷³ We have seen already that the creature exists in a state of natural dependence upon God and as such is subject to God’s rule by a natural necessity. This subjection includes the creature’s moral dependence upon God as its Lawgiver. As a result, the creature is obliged to the obedience of the divine law in virtue of God’s absolute authority over the creature. But in what sense is the creature *bound* by this law? In what way does it enjoin the creature? And by what means does it exercise a “virtual promise and threatening” for its obedience or disobedience?

We noted briefly above that Owen’s regular engagement with the Socinians over the nature of moral theology consistently leads him to a critique of natural reason as a reliable guide in matters of moral discernment. As a result of this critique, Owen rarely attempts to explain the binding nature of divine law in terms of its *natural conduciveness* to human flourishing. This is not because the divine command is, as such, arbitrary, irregular, or interruptive of the natural order. For since God’s command is an expression of his wisdom, Owen takes the law to be generally stable and unchanging, notwithstanding particular dispensations of positive law.⁷⁴ Nor does Owen harbor doubts as to whether the creature finally benefits by obedience to God’s command. As we have seen, Owen assumes that it belongs to God’s wisdom and goodness that he issues no command which is not to the “highest advantage and interest” of his creatures.⁷⁵

⁷⁰ *Works*, 21:22-23.

⁷¹ *Works*, 19:339, emphasis original; *cf.* 6:163-166.

⁷² *Works*, 3:610-611.

⁷³ *Works*, 3:613.

⁷⁴ See Owen’s discussion of the binding nature of the law in “extraordinary” circumstances, such as God’s command to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac (*Works*, 5:245).

⁷⁵ *Works*, 3:616.

Rather, if Owen only rarely appeals to the natural conduciveness of the divine command for the promotion of human flourishing, it is for reasons pertaining largely to Owen's understanding of the *ends* of moral action. A full examination of this point is beyond the scope of this chapter. But we might simply point out that, for Owen, the goods that *naturally* accrue to the creature by its obedience to the divine command are themselves quite apart from what makes an act morally praiseworthy.⁷⁶ For it is the *end* of any act that gives it its proper nature, and the ultimate end of all moral action is that God might be loved and enjoyed. As we have said above, created goods are intended to be used as signs and instruments which refer their goodness to God as the source of all good. "God alone is loved for himself; all other things for [his sake], in the measure and degree of his presence in them."⁷⁷ Therefore, the knowledge of those natural benefits that might attend the creature's obedience cannot themselves be morally dispositive. This is an inference which Owen draws from his Augustinian theology of worship. If the thought of pleasing God is not a good sufficient enough to elicit the creature's loving obedience, then Owen thinks the creature will certainly not rise any higher by the additional consideration of some natural advantage.

If we do the things that are commanded, but not with respect to the authority of God by whom they are commanded, what we so do is not obedience properly so called. It hath the *matter of obedience* in it, but the *formal reason* of it, that which should render it properly so, which is the life and soul of it, it hath not: what is so done is but the carcass of duty, no way acceptable unto God.⁷⁸

In other words, in virtue of God's natural dominion over creatures, humankind has a natural obligation to love and serve God by its obedience. But this obligation is not discharged unless it is performed out of reverence for God's authority. Otherwise, it deprives God of what is his due. In this way, Owen argues that an act is morally perfected by the end toward which the will moves. And while Owen does not think that intention is *all* that matters about a moral act, such a statement clearly concentrates the moral goodness of any act around the intention of the *moral agent*, rather than the intention of the *action* as such.⁷⁹ It is the end of the *will* rather than simply the end of the *action* that designates any act as being morally good.⁸⁰

⁷⁶ Cf. *Works*, 7:396.

⁷⁷ *Works*, 7:421.

⁷⁸ *Works*, 21:23.

⁷⁹ This is a definitively "voluntarist" account of moral action. Cf. Wolter, *Will and Morality*, 48-54.

⁸⁰ Further on this point, see Owen's account of moral action in *Pneumatologia* (*Works*, 3:293-297, 502-527).

Concentration the goodness of any moral action around the intention of the agent has real effects for the way in which Owen construes the nature of moral obligation generally. In fact, one of Owen's most forceful critiques of natural moral philosophy borrows from the "voluntarist" tradition in arguing that natural law cannot provide a sufficient basis for establishing the creature's moral obligation.⁸¹ For while reason might discern within the law of nature certain actions that are naturally *advantageous*, on what grounds could it possibly be shown that we have a *moral obligation* to obey the law of nature? Owen argues that in order to do so, one would have to appeal to the divine command, which cannot itself be inferred from the natural order alone. Consequently, Owen explicitly *contrasts* the binding character of divine law with the preceptive power of the natural order. As it is material to our interests here, I reproduce Owen's argument at length:

Now, unto a complete law it is required, not only that it be instructive, but also that it have a *binding* force, or be coactive; that is, it doth not only teach, guide, and direct what is to be done, persuading by the reason of the things themselves which it requires, but also it must have authority to exact obedience, so far as that those who are under the power of it can give themselves no dispensation from its observance. But thus it is not with these dictates of reason. They go no further than direction and persuasion; and these always have, and always will have, a respect unto occasions, emergencies, and circumstances. When these fall under any alterations, they will put reason on new considerations of what it ought to determine with respect unto them; and this the nature of a universal law will not admit. Whatever, then, men determine by reason, they may alter on new considerations, such as occasioned their original determination. I do not extend this unto all instances of natural light, but to some only; which sufficeth to demonstrate that the unalterable law of nature doth not consist in these dictates of reason only. Suppose men do coalesce into any civil society on the mere dictates of reason that it is meet and best for them so to do, if this be the *supreme reason* thereof, no obligation ariseth from thence to preserve the society so entered into but what is liable unto a dissolution from contrary considerations. If it be said that reason dictates and commands in the name of God, whence an indissoluble obligation attends it, it will be answered, that this introduceth a new respect, which is not formally included in the nature of reason itself. Let a man indeed use and improve his own reason without prejudice,—let him collect what resolutions, determinations, instructions, laws, have proceeded from the reason of other men,—it will both exceedingly advance his understanding, and enable him to judge of many things that are congruous to the light and law of nature; but to suppose the

⁸¹ See Stephen Darwall, "The Foundations of Morality, Virtue, Law and Obligation", *The Cambridge Companion to Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. Donald Rutherford (Cambridge: CUP, 2006), 225; Knud Haakonssen, "Divine/Natural Law Theories in Ethics", *The Cambridge History of Seventeenth-Century Philosophy*, vol. 2, ed. Danial Garber and Michael Ayers (Cambridge: CUP, 1998), 1317-1357.

law of nature to consist in a system or collection of such instances and observations is altogether unwarrantable.⁸²

This argument, which is taken from Owen's exercitation on the "Causes of the Sabbath" in his *Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (1668), bears resemblance to a similar critique of the "intellectualist" moral tradition advanced by Suárez in his *De Legibus*.⁸³ The argument trades on a distinction between the character of the natural order as an effect of divine power and wisdom, having God as its efficient cause, from its character as a divine *command*, which is morally binding in respect of God's authority.⁸⁴

Effectively, this argument seeks (at minimum) a real distinction between natural and moral goodness, in order to identify the divine command as the real basis of all moral obligation. Because of the regularity of the natural order, reason has the power to discern certain goods and evils that naturally ensue on certain kinds of acts. Yet, strictly speaking, this is insufficient to establish the creature's *moral obligation* in respect of any act. For moral obligation follows on the command of a superior. But it does not follow that, because an act is naturally advantageous, that it is therefore commanded by a superior. So, while the *fact* of the creature's moral obligation to God might be deducible from the natural order itself, the character and specific duties attending that obligation are not necessarily deducible from that order. For obligation arises from a cause that is *above* nature, namely, the divine command.

The purpose of this argument is not to dispense with natural law as binding norm, but only to underscore the fundamental insufficiency and limitation of natural reason as a basis for moral discernment. By arguing that the power of the law to *bind* is not coextensive with the power of nature to *instruct*, Owen effectively relocates the ground of moral obligation away from the natural order as such to the revealed will of God. Finite human reason cannot presume to command in the name of God because it cannot *naturally* know the will of God. This allows Owen to argue that one might have an obligation under the law of nature which

⁸² *Works*, 19:339-340.

⁸³ *De Legibus*, II.vi.

⁸⁴ "*Aliud vero est, hanc legem naturale esse à Deo effective tanquam à prima causa, aliud esse a Deo, ut à legislatore præcipiente, & obligante*" (Suárez, *De Legibus*, II.vi.2). All acknowledge that Suárez distinguishes between the natural "facts" of the created order and divine "commands" which establish a moral obligation on the basis of some fact. But the status that Suárez assigns to the natural law as either a mere natural fact or divine command is somewhat disputed. See Terence H. Irwin, "Obligation, rightness, and natural law: Suárez and some critics", *Interpreting Suárez* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 142-162; Finnis, *Natural*

yet cannot be known by the use of natural reason. And this is in fact much of the burden of Owen's "The Causes of the Sabbath", which argues that creatures have a *moral* obligation to sabbath observance, even though the worship of God *on the seventh day* might not be deducible from the natural order.

The force of Owen's objection here would likely have escaped figures holding to a more traditionally Thomist account of natural law, in which natural law is itself conceived of as a superior that commands in the name of God. On this account, the natural rewards and punishments inherent within the natural order are morally binding precisely in virtue of their attractive or aversive power, by which they guide the creature toward that which is advantageous to it. But it is not hard to understand what motivates this move, either. This critique of the natural law tradition coheres with Owen's conviction that God himself is the proper object of all moral action, and it provides real leverage to Owen's critique of natural religion. In fact, in the wider context of this passage, Owen's critique of natural religion appears in full force. The reference above to those who argue that "men do coalesce into any civil society on the mere dictates of reason that it is meet and best for them so to do" is an oblique reference to Thomas Hobbes. And a few paragraphs later, Owen alludes to Hobbes' theory of natural law, comparing it with cannibalism (!) in its assumption that "power and self-advantage are the rule of men's conversation among themselves in this world".⁸⁵

Hobbes derives his general theory of justice from the natural right of self-preservation, and ultimately concludes that the existence of a coercive power to establish rights and enforce laws is a necessary condition of all justice. For justice is giving to each his *own*, or what is *due* to him — which is a kind of proprietary right. But in the state of nature, people have no proprietary rights; there is only an unrestricted "right to everything; even to one another's body."⁸⁶ The state of nature is thus an inherently competitive and hostile condition. Accordingly, Hobbes' first law of nature establishes the natural right of each person to use all means necessary to preserve life and self against all others.⁸⁷ For, "Where there is no common power, there is no law: where no law, no justice."⁸⁸ Nevertheless, in this "war of all against all", the law of nature instructs us by our natural desire for self-preservation, that

Law and Natural Rights (Oxford: OUP, 2011), 325-343. A similar distinction can be found in the thought of Selden (*Tuck, Natural Rights Theories*, 93-94).

⁸⁵ *Works*, 19:341.

⁸⁶ *Leviathan*, I.xiv.4.

⁸⁷ *Leviathan*, I.xiv.1-4.

when others seek peace, we should be willing to lay down the exercise of our own rights to have peace rather than war.⁸⁹ This, according to Hobbes, is the rational foundation of all civil government.

While Hobbes' theory might succeed in demonstrating the great *advantages* of forming and maintaining a civil society, as Owen points out above, it is not clear that this sufficiently establishes a moral obligation to do so. For while the natural order might recommend some arrangement as particularly suitable to human nature, on what basis could Hobbes establish a person's *obligation* to lay down his "right to everything" and to seek peace? Essentially, Hobbes argues that this obligation extends from the regularity of the natural order, and the reliability of reason to discern that order. For as God is the Creator, the suffering that attends the violation of any law of nature has the character of a divine punishment, even if that punishment is administered *ductu naturæ*, as a natural function of the established world order.⁹⁰

For Hobbes, then, the concept of God functions more or less as a kind of postulate that secures the final absoluteness of natural reason. Since the establishment of the natural order is itself the absolute expression of divine power, reason cannot prescind from it or attempt to bracket it by appeal to the supernatural. In fact, Hobbes argues that since no man can determine how God, in his absolute power, will judge the world, all extra-natural punishments or rewards cannot serve as reasons which rationally inform moral discernment in this life.⁹¹ In this way, Hobbes makes divine government coextensive with (if not entirely reducible to) the world's natural processes. As an expression of divine power, therefore, the law of nature is a coercive instrument by which God requires obedience from creatures and "punishes those that break his laws". And since the threat of punishment is the ground of all moral obligation, Hobbes concludes that God's right to rule over his creatures descends immediately from his "irresistible power"⁹² which cannot be contested, and which grants God

⁸⁸ *Leviathan*, I.xiii.13.

⁸⁹ *Leviathan*, I.xiv.5-7.

⁹⁰ Hobbes assures us that it is most unreasonable to deal treacherously with those seeking peace, or to disingenuously strike a covenant for peace. For the person who thinks it reasonable to deceive those with whom he has covenanted for protection, finally seeks protection from himself alone (*Leviathan*, I.xv.5).

⁹¹ On this points, see Tuck, *Natural Rights Theories*, 126-127.

⁹² *Leviathan*, II.xxxi.5.

an unrestricted “dominion” (*dominium*) over creatures, entitling him to do with them as he pleases.⁹³

Hobbes moral philosophy illustrates in dramatic fashion what Owen fears about positing a general coincidence between the creature’s moral obligations and the dictates of right reason. For if knowledge of the moral life were simply a matter of rationally discerning how certain behaviors advantage the fulfillment of our natural appetites, moral science might ultimately be assimilated to a species of metaphysics, anthropology, or psychology, rendering any appeal to God, his grace, revelation, or just to the supernatural in general, completely unnecessary. And though Owen does not think the principles of the moral life can be rendered intelligible *apart* from any account of the nature and ends of creatures, he is deeply pessimistic about the ability of natural reason to *deduce* these principles from the natural order, especially as it is fallen. In its fallen condition, natural reason is endlessly accommodating to the sinner’s tastes. And if the law of nature were subject only to natural reason, it would inevitably confuse the *fact* of our (now perverted) natural appetites with the *norms* of natural law. In such a case, the law of nature is reduced to little more than a wax-nose. How, then, could the sinners’ reason or appetites be trusted to reliably “command in the name of God”? For when the preceptive power of the law is held captive to fallen reason, divine authority merely becomes a pretext for sin.⁹⁴ Here, once again, we see how Owen’s emphasis on the necessity of grace leads him to an account of the moral life that proportionally restricts the dogmatic scope of natural reason and natural law.

Owen thus states that, after the fall, the law of nature is “a great measure made useless by sin”. In his mercy, God preserves knowledge of the law both by the “vocal revelation of his will” contained in the decalogue, and by the renewal of our natures by grace.⁹⁵ Yet even here, the regeneration of the Christian should give no reason for complacency. The church remains in constant dependence upon the Spirit’s grace. For though we may be born-anew by

⁹³ This right entitles God to what Hobbes calls the power of “affliction”. This is God’s power to do with creatures as he pleases. In conjunction with this point, Hobbes raises the question of why evil people prosper. For if punishment follows simply as a matter of course from obedience to the laws of nature, should we not expect that the righteous will prosper and the wicked will perish? Hobbes answers that it is within God’s power to do as he pleases with creatures (Job 38:4), and therefore, while Scripture assigns Adam’s sin as the cause of the curse, it does not follow that God could not have afflicted Adam even if Adam had not sinned (*Leviathan*, II.xxxi.5-6).

⁹⁴ Cf. *Works*, 7:123-144, and 423-430, which are two chapters offering an extended critique of religion, pointing to the various reasons for which sinners delight in religious practices, even while they are secretly at odds with God.

the Spirit's work, our sinful natures remain in violent opposition to the truth, so that reason is constantly in danger of perverting even the plain teachings of Scripture. In fact, Owen claims that a person can learn more about their moral duty by observing the *resistance* of their sinful nature to the teachings of Scripture, than it can by making the most fervent use of the light of nature and natural reason.⁹⁶ We must therefore remain vigilant against boldness and pride, constantly and carefully attending to every teaching contained in the Word of God, lest our minds grow weary of obedience and be lead away into sin.

So, while Owen agrees that the command of a superior is the formal cause of all moral obligation, he locates the *binding* force of the divine command not in the power of *natural* laws to punish or reward. Rather, he grounds this in a *supernatural* cause — that is, in God's *vis exsequendi*, which is the inexhaustible power of God to enforce his law and to punish those who transgress it. This power accompanies God's right to command the creature and underwrites its binding force.

See now that I, even I, am he, and
there is no god with me:
I kill, and I make alive;
I wound, and I heal:
neither is there any that can deliver out of my hand (Deut. 32:39, KJV).

This power to kill and make alive is the power of a sovereign. And as God's power extends not only to matters of temporal-life, but also to matters of life-eternal, God's commands are of disproportional significance to the creature. For they pertain not only to finite goods, but to the creature's "highest capacities of blessedness or misery". As such, they "cannot be balanced by any consideration of this present world without the highest folly and villany unto ourselves."⁹⁷ Moreover, while earthly rulers might be deprived of their power by sedition or by the rebellion of their people, since God's government is natural and necessary, God can never be deprived of his rule.⁹⁸ Consequently, his commands are attended by an "unavoidable efficacy".⁹⁹ For since the creature is subject to God's rule by a natural necessity, it is liable to all the promises and threatenings contained in God's law. Being a rational creature which

⁹⁵ *Works*, 19:405.

⁹⁶ *Works*, 19:357.

⁹⁷ *Works*, 3:613.

⁹⁸ *Works*, 20:54.

⁹⁹ *Works*, 3:612-613.

desires its own happiness, Owen argues that humans have a natural duty (*debitum*) to obey God in all things. And this obligation follows immediately from the *simple fact* that the creature is subject to God's government and will be held accountable by it. In short, the law *binds* the creature in respect of the certainty of divine justice. God's judgment is absolute and inescapable, and therefore the creature's duty before God is unconditional and unavoidable.

3.3 The Righteousness of God's Rule

We have already said that God has a natural right to command creatures in virtue of his natural dominion over them. But why should creatures obey God? God is clearly the creature's Superior. And in light of his omnipotence, it is clearly to the advantage of the creature to obey God. But as we saw in the last section, Owen distinguishes between the law of nature's power to reward and to punish, on the one hand, and its power to morally *obligate* the creature, on the other. We raise the same issue here — what makes it *right* and not simply *advantageous* that we obey God as our Superior?

Given Owen's account of what makes God's commands *binding*, one might wonder what separates Owen's general theory of moral obligation from that of Hobbes, who roots God's right to rule in his power to punish. Ralph Cudworth made a similar point in his *The True Intellectual System of the Universe*, noting the likeness between Puritan moral theologies and that of Hobbes.¹⁰⁰ Leibniz, too, issued a comparable critique of Protestant natural law theory in his critical treatise on the writings of Samuel Pufendorf, the eminent 17th century Protestant philosopher. Leibniz argued that if a law is based on a superior, and all moral judgments are based on laws, then there could be no a priori justification of God's right to rule. For as all laws derive from the divine command, all our moral judgments are conditioned by God's prior determination, and thus already presuppose God's rule. Leibniz inferred from this that there can be no arguments from the nature of justice that could ground the creature's moral obligation to God. And in absence of any such reasons, one is left only with arguments from self-interest, like that offered by Hobbes. If this is the case, Leibniz concludes, then reason can make no distinction between God and the devil.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ *The Cambridge Platonists: A Brief Introduction*, ed. Tod E. Jones, Sara Elise Phang (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2005), 27-28.

¹⁰¹ See Petter Korkman, "Civil Sovereigns and the King of Kings: Barbeyac on the Creator's Right to Rule", in *Natural Law and Civil Sovereignty*, eds. Ian Hunter and David Saunders (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002), 109-122.

To be sure, there are some important similarities between Hobbes account of moral obligation and that of the Puritans. And these are not merely accidental. As Martinich has shown, the covenant theologies advanced by the Reformed in the 17th century provided Hobbes with a handy conceptual framework from which he borrowed liberally in his *Leviathan*, even if only formally.¹⁰² Moreover, many Independents, like Owen, shared with Hobbes a commitment to a form of Erastianism, which sought to dispense with ecclesiastical jurisdictions, assimilating their authority to that of the state so that the state would exercise certain powers in the regulation of the church. As Erastians looked to the coercive powers of the state as instruments to advance ecclesial reform, they often drew liberally on “voluntarist” moral philosophies, which concentrated the authority of law in the will of a superior and included the threat of punishment as being essential to the binding character of the law.¹⁰³

There are important differences between Hobbes and Owen, however — differences which Owen would be very eager to assert. For while Owen regards punishment as essential to the binding character of any law, he is *not* arguing, in the manner that Hobbes does, that God’s power to punish is the *basis* of his right to rule. To be sure, Satan holds the power to afflict the creature, but this does not give him a right to command it.¹⁰⁴ A command has the power to obligate only insofar as it is just (that is, as it conforms to the law of God), and only as it issues from one having the *just authority* to command.¹⁰⁵ So, while Satan might have powers which far exceed that of the creature, he has no power to *obligate* the creature, because he has no *right* to obligate it. “All men have originally another lord, unto whom they owe all obedience, nor can any thing discharge them from their allegiance thereunto; and this is the law of God.”¹⁰⁶

Since the critique of Leibniz was published nearly 20 years after Owen’s death, it is impossible to know exactly how Owen might have responded to the claim that the creature’s

¹⁰² *The Two Gods of Leviathan: Thomas Hobbes on Religion and Politics* (Cambridge: CUP, 2002).

¹⁰³ In Owen, see chapter XVI of “A Vindication of the Animadversions on *Fiat Lux*” (*Works*, 14:378-392). Cf. Sarah Gibbard Cook, “A Political Biography of a Religious Independent: John Owen, 1616-1683”, PhD diss., (Harvard University, 1972), 414-416; Jeffrey R. Collins, *The Allegiance of Thomas Hobbes* (Oxford: OUP, 2005), ch. 6.

¹⁰⁴ *Works*, 1:217. Owen does state at one point that Satan has a “right and title” over the unconverted, in the sense that he is a minister of God’s judgment on sinners (*Works*, 11:305). But Owen denies that sin and Satan have any right to rule in the soul (7:509). Cf. Musculus, *Common Places*, f. 418.

¹⁰⁵ *Works*, 19:100; cf. 10:509.

¹⁰⁶ *Works*, 7:509.

moral obligation cannot be founded on the nature of justice, because there can be no *a priori* justification of God's right to rule. Yet he almost certainly would have denied the coherence of the claim. It is true, of course, that there can be no *a priori* justification of God's right to rule, just as there can be no *a priori* justification of the claim that God has created all things out of nothing. This follows simply from the infinite ontological distance between creatures. God's right to rule is an *absolute* rather than an *ordinate* right. It is not *derivative* in the manner that an earthly sovereign's is, but is grounded in *the simple, perfect act of God's* existence. And since God can have no superior, his commands are not subject to some higher, abstract standard which might authorize their just character.¹⁰⁷ But it does not follow from this that the creature's obligation to God is not a matter of strict justice. For if God's essence and will are, *ipso facto*, the final rule of every order of justice, then the command of God is unimpeachably just, and the absolute rule of all that is right and good for the creature.

But for this same reason, the basis of God's right to rule cannot be reduced to the fact that his power cannot be contested. Because God's goodness and righteousness are inseparable from the perfection of his essence, so it is *right* for the creature to obey God in all things *because* God is *perfect*. Indeed, Owen argues that the rightness of God's rule over the creature extends necessarily from his perfection:

It was not a mere free act of his will, whereby God chose to rule and govern the creation according unto the law of the nature of all things, and their relation unto him; but it was necessary, from his divine being and excellencies, that so he should do.¹⁰⁸

By rooting the rightness of God to rule in his "excellencies", Owen establishes all those ways in which the divine nature excels creaturely beings as the basis of his authority. This is a very traditional point often found in scholastic literature. If authority is the right of a superior, then there can be no higher authority than God, for God is superior to all things. God's innate perfection therefore renders it necessary that he should rule over creatures, and that for their own good. For the glory of God is the *bonum universi* — the common good toward which the universe is ordered.¹⁰⁹ And it is precisely in virtue of God's perfection that he guides creatures toward this end.

¹⁰⁷ *Works*, 19:111.

¹⁰⁸ *Works*, 1:186.

The excellence and perfection of God's nature therefore composes his authority and directs the rule of his government. For as God's goodness is inseparable from his power, God rules his creatures in absolute righteousness: "what an external law is to a subordinate judge, that God's righteousness and holiness is unto him, as he is the judge of all the earth".¹¹⁰ God's perfection is the basis for that *justitia regiminis* which conditions all of God's works toward his creatures in perfect equality and uprightness.¹¹¹ The obligation of the creature to obey God, therefore, is finally resolved not into God's *power* alone but into his *righteousness*, which is nothing other than the outward expression of God's perfection in the act of governing his creatures. And though God's *jus regiminis* derives from that which is infinitely above the natural order, his dominion and absolute perfection, Owen emphasizes that God governs creatures in a manner that accords with his law. For the law is a revelation of God's nature and the very image of his righteousness and holiness.

Still, Owen's account of moral obligation has one very significant and controversial implication for his account of divine government — one which, for some, would seem to compromise the full *goodness* of God's righteousness. By defining the *binding* character of the law in terms of its "virtual promise and threatening", Owen excludes the possibility that one might have a moral obligation *without the threat of punishment*. This makes a break with a very venerable moral tradition represented in classical figures like Plato, and some of Owen's near contemporaries, like Grotius and Baxter.¹¹² This tradition held that the threat of punishment was only *contingently* related to the law, as a discretionary mode of divine correction and an instrument for the instruction of those who err.¹¹³ As a consequence, obligation can in fact exist independently to any threat of punishment, in both the natural law and God's covenant to reward the creature.

¹⁰⁹ *Works*, 10:271; cf. 1:186; 10:588, 612.

¹¹⁰ *Works*, 19:111.

¹¹¹ *Works*, 19:102.

¹¹² Grotius, *De Jure Belli*, II.XX.v-viii; on Baxter, see Boersma, *A Hot Pepper Corn*, 124-131. Cf. Rutherford, *Covenant of Life Opened*, I.vii, pp. 25-26.

¹¹³ So, both Grotius and Baxter held that the suffering experienced by those whom God's chastises (Hebrews 12:10) is a species of punishment. Owen, on the other hand, distinguishes between the general character of punishment and chastisement: "Chastising is an effect of his love.—It is not only consequential unto it, but springs from it. Wherefore there is nothing properly penal in the chastisements of believers. Punishment proceeds from love unto justice, not from love unto the person punished. Chastisement is from love to the person chastised, though mixed with displeasure against his sin" (*Works*, 24:260-261).

Owen, however, sides here with figures like Selden and Hobbes who argued that the threat of punishment is necessary to law *as law*.¹¹⁴ Owen thus claims that the institution of a “penal law” was not merely a free effect of God’s wisdom in the creation of Adam. It was in fact *necessary*, being required by “the *order of all things*, with respect unto their dependence on himself as the supreme ruler of all”.¹¹⁵ For it is by the instrument of a penal law that God maintains his necessary rule over creatures in the event of their rebellion. As a result, Owen argues that God cannot obligate the creature to any act without at least the *virtual* threat of punishment.¹¹⁶ Because the rebellious creature can be maintained in subjection to God’s rule only by the instrument of punishment.

This claim is somewhat controversial, even among the Reformed. And it has several applications in Owen’s moral theology which we do not have space to explore. But in the main, its purpose is to indicate the *legal* character of divine government. Since the law is an expression of God’s own righteousness and perfection, the whole of God’s government is ordered to the maintenance and upholding of the law. Even the act of divine punishment is not an extra-legal act. Punishment is the *vindication* of the law and the satisfaction of divine justice. This is why Owen refers to punishment in *The Death of Death* as an act of God “exacting a due debt”.¹¹⁷ The formal cause of punishment is the guilt that is contracted by the violation of the law;¹¹⁸ and punishment is essentially *retributive* in nature — it is *vidicta noxae*, “the revenge due to sin”.¹¹⁹ Owen’s thought develops on the question of the *necessity* of divine punishment, which is reflected in the argument of his *Dissertation on Divine Justice*. But Owen’s account of the *nature* of divine punishment remains consistent throughout his life and can be found in his earliest writings.¹²⁰ In this respect, Owen’s conception of moral obligation can be seen as an outgrowth of his larger atonement theology. Indeed, as we shall see, much of Owen’s explanation of the nature of Adam’s moral

¹¹⁴Of course, an earthly sovereign may have a *de jure* right to command without the power to enforce his commands *de facto*. And Owen acknowledges that, “want of force doth not lessen authority” (*Works*, 16:309). But this is only because the authority of earthly sovereigns are underwritten by the authority of God, who has the absolute power to reward or punish. Accordingly, even where earthly sovereigns lack the power to enforce their commands, their commands are accompanied by the virtual promise and threatening of divine judgment (*cf. Works*, 14:383-386). *Cf.* Tuck’s discussion of Grotius and Selden, *Natural Rights Theories*, 91-93.

¹¹⁵*Works*, 19:105; emphasis original.

¹¹⁶*Cf. Works*, 5:264, where Owen argues that the threat of punishment was only a “moral cause” of Adam’s obedience prior to the fall.

¹¹⁷“We do not say punishing is an act of dominion, but an act of exacting a due debt” (*Works*, 10:272).

¹¹⁸*Works*, 5:202.

¹¹⁹*Works*, 5:199; 12:439.

¹²⁰*Works*, 10:78-79, 90-91, 265-273.

obligation to God in the garden is a function of his Christology. It is, in effect, his atonement theology in reverse.¹²¹

Owen briefly considers the possible objection that his account of divine authority might assign the creature a *servile* status, since the creature's obedience to God is always performed, at least in part, for the sake of avoiding some penalty.¹²² By entertaining this criticism, Owen likely intended to address an argument commonly employed among the "Antinomians"¹²³ who argued that Christ's work had abrogated the *Law as law*, so that while the Law continues in its *preceptive* capacity, as a guide in the moral life, the Christian no longer has an *obligation* to keep the Law. The implication of this claim is that "obligation" is, itself, a feature of the law as it is a "schoolmaster" intended to drive sinners to Christ (Gal. 3:24-25). But having come to Christ and being justified in him, the law no longer "obligates" Christians but only "instructs" them. With the removal the creature's "obligation", it is freed from its servile status and restored to the freedom of sonship, having its eternal blessedness eternally secured. Owen's response to this claim is that the servile bondage of any creature stems not from God's promise or threatening, *per se*. Adam, after all, received the law in the garden — "in the day that thou eatest thereof, thou shalt surely die" (Gen. 2:17) — without the least coercion or prejudice to his status as a son of God. Therefore, bondage is not the consequence of the law, *per se*, but is rather a moral disposition occasioned by the creature's *fallenness*.¹²⁴ God's promises and threatenings simply delimit the original domain of the creature's freedom, and thus also its highest happiness and joy.¹²⁵ Accordingly, Owen affirms that the fear of the Lord — in its proper way and place — is "the principle part of our liberty".¹²⁶

Conclusion

¹²¹ See especially *Works*, 5:262-275, where Owen treats the nature of the law's binding power in order to establish the necessity of the imputation of Christ's righteousness for obtaining eternal life.

¹²² *Works*, 3:613-614; *cf.* 5:281.

¹²³ As this was a polemical label, it was used derisively to describe a very wide range of views, some of which did not merit the term. Owen himself had been accused of antinomianism by Baxter. However, it does reflect divergent understandings about the nature of moral obligation in the 17th century. These disputes have been well treated in the secondary literature. See Kevan, *Grace of Law: A Study of Puritan Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 167-172; David Como, *Blown By the Spirit: Puritanism and the Emergence of an Antinomian Underground in Pre-Civil-War England* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004); and Theodore Dwight Bozeman, *The Precisianist Strain: Disciplinary Religion and Antinomian Backlash in Puritanism to 1638* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

¹²⁴ *Works*, 3:461.

¹²⁵ *Works*, 6:613-614.

¹²⁶ *Works*, 3:614.

In the foregoing, I have argued that Owen's account of the moral dependence of the rational creature concentrates the moral life around the creature's active relation to God, and particularly the intention of the *will* in any moral act, as it moves out of respect for divine authority. Anything less than this deprives God of the honor and love for which he is rightfully due in virtue of his natural dominion over creatures. More could be said at this point by examining Owen's understanding of the virtues or by detailing his moral psychology. But the foregoing sufficiently indicates how Owen's theology of divine freedom and dominion structurally orients his moral theology around the creature's communion with God. This emphasis leads Owen to restrict the doctrinal scope of natural reason and natural law in order to highlight the necessity of the supernatural, divine grace of the Holy Spirit. Simply put, without the Spirit's direction, the creature is simply incapable of living the moral life.

This coheres with what we saw in the last chapter regarding Owen's distinction between nature and grace, which was intended to highlight both the freedom of God's grace as well as its absolute necessity for a truly human existence. The inner connection between divine dominion and Owen's critique of natural religion will come into even greater focus in the next chapter, when we consider the nature of the covenant. It will be demonstrated that Owen employs his theology of divine dominion to beat back moral theologies which ground the meritorious character of any moral act in the act itself. Instead, Owen advances a vision of the covenant that privileges its gratuity, and ultimately, its freedom.

CHAPTER 4: THE COVENANT AND THE ENDS OF RATIONAL CREATURES

Introduction

In our last chapter, we examined Owen's account of divine government with respect to God's work as a Lawgiver. We saw that, because humans are equipped with the rational faculties of intellect and will, they are necessarily moral agents, and so require a law governing the right use of their moral powers. God thus governs humans by the gift of his law, which is both an expression of his innate holiness, as well as a determination of his will for his creatures. This law is binding on the creature in virtue of God's authority and the necessary subjection of the creature to God's rule. We thus said that the creature has a natural, moral obligation to obey God's commands.

In this chapter, we turn our attention to God's work as the Rewarder of his creatures. The theme of divine judgment, which is implicit in God's act of rewarding, provides the eschatological point of reference orienting the whole of Owen's theology. God is a Judge who, in accordance with his justice and at the end of days, will reward the righteous and punish the wicked. For Owen, this eschatological judgment is rendered proleptically in the death and resurrection of Jesus, who by an act of absolute dominion is constituted a *surety*, or representative on behalf of his people. Having examined the nature of divine law, we have already some sense of the *rule* of God's judgment. But examining the nature of God's government through the lens of divine *reward* affords us with two further advantages.

First, God's act of rewarding creatures provides us with access to some of the more important principles of Owen's theology of divine justice. Within the context of the 16th and 17th centuries, theological debates concerning the nature of "merit" were often proxies for articulating a variety of disputed questions concerning the general nature of divine justice. Scripture teaches that God rewards his creatures in accordance with his justice. In 2 Timothy 4:8, for example, the Apostle expresses his expectation that, on the last day, he will receive the "crown of righteousness" from the "Lord, the *Righteous Judge*" (*ho dikaios kritēs*). For the Medievals, "merit", in its proper sense, names the just and equitable relation between some good act of the creature, on the one hand, and the reward which is apportioned to that act by God's "remunerative justice" (*iustitia remunerativa*), on the other. To give an account of the nature of God's act of rewarding creatures, therefore, required one to address several

crucial questions about the general nature of divine justice. What is the formal basis of the creature's merit before God? In what sense can God be said to "owe" a reward to any creature? And how should one classify the justice by which God rewards the creature? These were questions of central importance to any Christian soteriology, but they also carried important implications for theological anthropology, as well. For if justice is the habit of giving to others "what is due" to them, then in the act of defining "what is due" to the creature of God's justice, the theologian is, in a sense, also defining the nature of the creature and its relation to the Creator. In this way, questions about the nature of merit carried serious implications about the doctrine of creation and its function in moral theology.

Secondly, examining the nature of reward also affords us the opportunity to address the *ends* of God's government. Owen, like many other Reformed thinkers, annexes his account of merit and reward entirely to his theology of the covenant. The covenant is founded on the gracious promise of God to reward the labors of creatures far above what they deserve, crowning their obedience with eternal life and everlasting rest in the blessed vision of God. Owen argues that rational creatures are ordained to a *supernatural*, rather than to a merely *natural* end; and it is through the instrumentality of the covenant that God leads his creatures to attain this end. Remunerative justice is thus part of God's good government of the world, through which he grants the elect entrance into their supernatural rest.

But while it is by means of the covenant that rational creatures attain their end, Owen also emphasizes that God is free in the constitution of the covenant, so that a large part of its graciousness consists precisely in its *contingency*. The contingency of the covenant forms part of Owen's larger critique against natural religion and the synergism that he detects within the various Catholic, Arminian and Socinian opponents with which he engages. Owen's primary interest is to protect the absolute priority of grace at every available opportunity, resolving it finally into the mere freedom of God's sovereign dominion. As I will demonstrate in the remainder of this thesis, the theology of divine dominion which Owen advances is controversial and has far-reaching consequences for the way in which he construes the ends of rational creatures, the general character of divine justice, and the nature of God's government. But the force of this doctrine derives initially from Owen's intent to protect the *gratuity* of God's gifts, and as such it is intimately bound up with his theology of God as the gracious Rewarder of his creatures.

In order to gain a wider view into Owen's theology of divine government, then, this chapter will examine his theology of remunerative justice and its relation to the doctrine of creation. I shall do this in three parts. In the first part, I will situate Owen's theology of the covenant against the wide range of opinions in the Christian tradition on the nature of God's remunerative justice. This will involve an examination of Owen's account of the nature of merit, and the manner in which he leverages his theology of divine dominion into a critique of natural religion. From there I will assess the implications of Owen's account of the divine promise as the basis of God's remunerative justice. Lastly, I will evaluate Owen's opinion regarding whether or not God can carry proper "obligations" toward his creatures. In the second part of this chapter, I will move on to give a summary of Owen's teachings on the nature of the covenant of works in particular. Finally, in the third part, I will turn to Owen's theology of the Sabbath to consider the relationship between the covenant and the ends to which God has appointed the rational creature.

4.1 Divine Justice and Covenant Theology

According to Cicero's memorable phrase, justice is the act of giving to others "what is due" (*ius suum*) to them.¹ As it is a particular² virtue, justice has its seat in the will and is an inclination of the rational faculties toward the performance of that which is right and equal. With respect to its exercise, justice is an inherently *social* virtue which aims at the perfection of any community by rightly ordering its constituents to the public good. Justice does this by establishing a kind of "equality" (*aequitas*) between persons in respect of some particular matter.³ And it is in virtue of the equality of any act that it can be said to achieve a fair and right balance with that which is "due".

The rule or measure of the just act thus consists in its *fittingness and proportion* with that which is *due* to another person. Of course, determining the nature of this equality and the proper proportion in which it consists can be a very complicated affair. Just judgment is a highly contextual matter and thus depends on a wide variety of different considerations. The dignity of the parties involved, the nature of one's relation to those parties, the social setting

¹ *On Duties*, I.15.

² Justice was often regarded as being a general virtue, as well as a particular virtue, because *iustitia* often refers to the universal rectitude of a person, and because the exercise of justice naturally requires the enlistment of many other virtues beside.

of the act, the nature of the act itself, the goods which the act concerns, the kinds of powers at one's disposal, and so on. All these factors must be weighed appropriately in order to arrive at a just judgment. In order to determine what is the just mean in any particular circumstance, the scholastics often followed Aristotle in distinguishing between two species of justice: commutative justice and distributive justice. The distinction between these two types of justice evolved throughout the late Middle Ages and early Modern period alongside a rapidly changing social landscape.⁴ As a consequence, the precise nature of the distinction can be somewhat difficult to map, and authors themselves are not always aware of the semantic drift.

Aquinas divided these two kinds of justice by a part/whole relation. So, distributive justice governs the action of the *whole* community toward any of its parts in the distribution of common goods. Today, distributive justice is often associated with social welfare programs sponsored by the state, but the concept is much broader than this and encompasses a wide range of different kinds of collective enterprises. It would have pertained not only to concrete common goods, say, unemployment benefits, but also to “soft” public goods, like opportunities, offices, responsibilities, equal pay, etc. So, distributive justice concerns what any society or corporation owes to its members with respect to the *distribution* of some particular common good. It therefore measures equality by a “geometric” proportion, making a fair distribution to each from the common stock. Commutative justice, on the other hand, respects the relation of one part of the community to another part in the *exchange* of goods. Commutative justice judges the fairness of any transaction in terms of an “arithmetic” proportion, which measures the equality between the kinds of services or goods that are exchanged.⁵ We associate commutative justice most frequently with the ethics of commerce and business, though Aquinas did not limit it to this. The distinction between these two kinds of justice thus principally concerns the *nature* of the actions involved, distribution or

⁴ It should be noted that most of the scholastics would not have opposed “equality” with a kind of social hierarchy. The matter of justice pertains to the equality of persons in respect of *some particular matter*. With the rise of natural rights theory in the 16th century, rights increasingly became the basis for all distributive justice. So, for Grotius, commutative justice was regarded as governing “perfect rights” — the right of a person to something over which he exercises *dominium (ius in re)*; distributive justice, on the other hand, now concerned “imperfect rights”, or a right *to* a thing (*ius ad rem*) (*Iure Belli*, I.viii.1). Tuck has noted that, by making distributive rights the basis of distributive justice, Grotius effectively assimilated distributive justice to commutative justice (*Natural Rights*, 66–67). Hobbes weakens the distinction even further by dispensing altogether with the notion of natural proportion as the rule of justice, and by aligning the distinction more along institutional lines — distributive justice belonging to the State and commutative justice belonging to contracts between private persons (*Leviathan*, I.xv.14).

⁵ ST II-II, q. 61, aa. 1–2.

exchange, and the *proportion* by which the act is determined to be “equal”, geometrically or arithmetically.

Now, throughout the late Middle Ages, the nature of *divine* justice was a matter of substantial disagreement among scholastic theologians. The reason for this was, quite simply, that God is not a person like other persons — God is the *Creator*, and as such the creature’s relation to God is of a fundamentally different nature and kind altogether. If justice implies a kind of equality between two persons, then defining the nature of God’s justice entails claims about the relation between God and creatures, which was another subject of considerable disagreement. God is infinite and creatures are finite, so that there is no proportion between them. But, if there can be no proportion between God and creatures, then in what sense can there be an *equality of justice* between them? And so, on what basis could God be said to justly reward the creature’s labors as a “Righteous Judge”?

Medieval theologians were of several minds on how this question ought to be answered. In his earlier writings at least, Aquinas had himself denied that God deals with creatures according to commutative justice. There can be no question as to whether there is any *exchange* between God and creatures, because there is an absolute inequality between God’s gift of eternal life and the creature’s meritorious deeds. Given the disparity between them, it is clear that creatures merit congruently (*de congruo*), and therefore that God rewards only according to the “geometric” proportion of distributive justice. Nevertheless, if God’s rewarding of creatures is truly to be considered an act of *justice*, then there must be some kind of proportion which establishes the relation between the good works that creatures perform and the creature’s desert of reward from God. According to Wawrykow, Aquinas grounds this proportion in the creature’s *nature*, at first. Since the creature’s whole nature comes from God, there is by the provision of divine wisdom a kind of natural fittingness between the end of the creature and the natural goodness of those acts by which the creature attains its end. This fittingness is the proportion that God’s justice principally respects in rewarding his creatures.

In his later theology, however, after having given sustained attention to the special character of the graced act, Wawrykow argues that Aquinas increasingly grounds the proportion of merit in the intrinsic “dignity and value of grace.” According to Wawrykow, this regularly leads Aquinas’s theology of merit into a species of commutative justice. For

inasmuch as God's grace is a participation in the work of the Spirit, it effects a *real* and *definitive* elevation of the creature's acts, bringing about a qualitative change in their dignity and merit. As a result, there is not only an "equality of proportion" between the intrinsic goodness of the act and its reward, there is also an "equality of quantity". On Aquinas's later account, therefore, grace enables the creature to merit *condignly* (*de condigno*) — by an "arithmetic" proportion.⁶

If Wawrykow is correct in this reading, then Aquinas's thought stands at a significant distance from that of Scotus. On Scotus's account, moral acts have a real goodness that is natural and intrinsic to them, but there cannot be any intrinsic proportion between the creature's act and its reward, either in respect of its nature or in respect of the dignity and value of grace. The creature's action thus cannot be of such a nature as to formally or "automatically"⁷ merit something from God on the basis of *justice*. For justice presupposes that there can be some equality between two parties. But since God is infinitely above all created things, there can be no equality between God and creatures.

Merit thus requires an additional act of God's will so that the creature's act might be *accepted* as meritorious and so *given* a right to reward from God. This is the divine *acceptio*, according to which God, in his wisdom and goodness, appoints a measure according to which he will accept the creature's works as meritorious, in spite of their imperfection or their natural disproportion to the promise of sharing in his infinite life. Accordingly, the creature can only merit congruently (*de congruo*), by a geometric proportion. But though this promise of reward is a stable feature of the created order, establishing a bond of mutual friendship between God and creatures, as it is an effect of God's own love and grace, the divine *acceptio* formally supersedes the natural order. So, while Scotus takes all God's actions toward creatures to be a matter of distributive justice,⁸ the divine *acceptio* itself forms the ultimate *basis* and *ground* of the creature's merit. Consequently, whenever the creature merits, God's remuneration of the creature is not merely an act of justice — it is always also an act of divine grace.

⁶ Wawrykow, *God's Grace and Human Action: 'Merit' in the Theology of Thomas Aquinas* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2016), 74-75, n. 31; cf. 205-233.

⁷ Wolter, *Will and Morality*, 49; cf. Ingham, *The Harmony of Goodness*, 30, 129-135.

⁸ Scotus, *Ordinatio* IV, d. 46; Wolter, *Will and Morality*, 243.

Francisco Suárez's account differs in important ways from both of these. Like Aquinas, Suárez wishes to argue that God rewards creatures in accordance with justice. But justice implies a *debitum* of one person to another. And since God is the first cause of all things, he is infinitely above creatures, so that there can be no equality between them. With Scotus, then, Suárez argues that while creatures have a natural obligation to God, God can have no natural obligation to creatures. Any obligation of the Creator toward the creature can only arise in virtue of God's promise, as God enters into a kind of pact with creatures.⁹ By the creation of a covenant, God binds himself to creatures so that, on the terms of strict justice, he is formally *obligated* by his righteousness to keep his promise. Accordingly, as God commits to reward the creature for some act, upon its performance, Suárez claims that the creature obtains a *right* to reward (*ius ad rem*) from of God's justice.

Suárez thus argues that God's distributive justice is the foundation of all God's justice toward creatures. However, in making a promise to creatures, God effectively establishes a proportion between the creature's work and reward. As the meritorious acts of creatures are really elevated by grace, they are made *equal* to the reward extended in the promise, namely, eternal life. He thus claims that creatures can be said to merit *condignly* (*de condigno*), and in accordance with God's *commutative* justice. According to Suárez, attributing commutative justice to God in this way does not *abridge* God's perfection, however. For since God is the source of all the creature's gifts, he maintains a natural and inalienable right of dominion in all things. Strictly speaking then, the creature cannot make God a debtor by its merits because all that the creature possesses by *right* it holds jointly, as it were, by a grant of divine dominion.¹⁰

Now, since Owen's own career took place fairly late in the development of the Reformed tradition, during a period that has come to be known as "High Orthodoxy", many of the conceptual and exegetical judgments that he would use to address these issues were inherited from Reformed thinkers who had preceded him. Among the most important of these was certainly the concept of the covenant, which in Owen's lifetime became an organizing

⁹ *Disputatio De Iustitia Qua Deus*, in *Varia Opuscula* (Sumptibus Iacobi Cardon & Petri Cauellat, 1620), II.41.

¹⁰ "Diximus autem supra, quia hoc ius respicit Deum ut debitorem, ideo posse non deficere aliquo modo ab illo rigore, quem inter homines habet ius iustitiæ comutatiuæ: quia nimirum necessario subordinatur tale ius superiori iuri, seu supremo dominio, quod Deus habet in omnia creata, & in omnia creaturarum iura" (*Disputatio De Iustitia Qua Deus*, III.31; cf. I.10-13). See also Daniel Schwartz, "Suárez on Distributive Justice", *Interpreting Suárez*, 163-184.

principle for much Reformed theology.¹¹ By the middle of the 17th century, it was a regular feature of Reformed moral theology to name the covenant as the sole basis and ground of any merit from God's "remunerative justice".¹² In English churches, this claim achieved confessional status in chapter VII of the Westminster Confession:

The distance between God and the creature is so great, that although reasonable creatures do owe obedience unto Him as their Creator, yet they could never have any fruition of Him as their blessedness and reward, but by some voluntary condescension on God's part, which He has been pleased to express by way of covenant.¹³

The passages of Scripture adduced by the Westminster divines in support of this point highlight the absolute *incommensurability* between God and creatures, suggesting that the disproportion between God and creatures excludes any natural equality between them on the basis of strict justice — "For he is not a man, as I am, that I should answer him, and we should come together in judgment. Neither is there any daysman [arbitrator] betwixt us, that might lay his hand upon us both" (Job 9:32-33).

The reasons why this claim emerged in Reformed thought are various, and it would take us too far afield to fully explore them here.¹⁴ Yet, one of the central dogmatic functions of this claim was to oppose the intrinsic and necessary connection posited by many Catholic theologians between the creature's good deeds and merit. Essentially, by insisting that creatures can merit only *ex pacto*, the Reformed sought to exclude the idea that the works of creatures were deserving of reward *ex natura rei* — that is, by their very nature. While this was an important (and very early!) strategy of the anti-Pelagian critiques advanced by many of the Reformed, it was by no means unique to them. As I mentioned above, the same idea

¹¹ The literature here is vast. For a very helpful survey of the relevant literature, see the introduction to Mark Beach's, *Christ and the Covenant: Francis Turretin's Covenant Theology as a Defense of the Doctrine of Grace* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2007).

¹² Rutherford, *Covenant of Life Opened*, 20-21; Baxter, *An End of Doctrinal Controversies which have lately troubled the churches by reconciling explication* (London, 1691), 113-115; John Ball, *A Treatise of the Covenant of Grace* (London: G. Miller, 1645), 9-10; Thomas Blake, *Vindiciæ Foederis, Or, A Treatise of the Covenant of God Entered with Man-Kinde*, Second Edition (London, 1658), 9-10; Johannes Braun, *Doctrina Foederum sive Systema Theologiæ* (Amsterdam, 1691), I.III.VIII.ii.13; Pictet, *Christian Theology*, III.vii, pp. 152-153; Turretin, *Institutes*, VIII.iii.1-2; Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants Between God and Man* Comprehending a Complete Body of Divinity, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: Thomas Turnbull, 1803), I.iv.11-13. ¹³ *WCF*, VII.1; citing, Is. 40:13-17; Job 9:32-33; 1 Sam. 2:25; Ps. 113:5; Ps. 100:2; Job 22:2-3; 35:7-8; Lu. 17:10; Acts 17:24-25.

¹⁴ On this point, see Aaron Denlinger, *Omnes in Adam ex pacto Dei: Ambrogio Catarino's Doctrine of Covenantal Solidarity and Its Influence on Post-Reformation Reformed Theologians* (Bern: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2010).

had also been advanced by the likes of Suárez and Bellarmine, figures who were not infrequently the explicit targets of Reformed anti-Pelagian critiques.¹⁵ Moreover, the idea has long roots which reach back to late Medieval Catholic thought, particularly in its Scotist and Nominalist traditions.¹⁶

Still, establishing God's covenant as the basis of all creaturely merit ensured that the whole economy of God's dealings with creatures proceeded from a free and gracious act of divine condescension. Not only did this point accord with the larger Reformed emphasis on God's sovereignty and dominion over creatures, it also permitted later covenant theologies to address the biblical concepts of "grace" and "works" more directly in terms of the covenantal schema. This allows thinkers like Owen to draw a very sharp distinction between the nature of God's remunerative justice in the covenant of grace and the covenant of works, and to give a far more detailed account of Christ's election to the mediatorial office. The covenant is one of the few areas of Owen's thought that has received some significant attention. And while there is still much that remains to be said about this aspect of Owen's thought, many of the existing studies have provided sufficient surveys of the historical setting of Owen's covenant theology, along with the exegetical or traditionary considerations that attend it. Readers interested in those aspects can consult the works cited below.¹⁷ Our concern here is with a very specific aspect of Owen's covenant theology, namely, its theoretical relation to the created order, and so our discussion will be limited accordingly.

4.1.1 Divine Dominion and the Critique of Merit-Theology

According to Owen, "merit", in its proper usage, refers to the "intrinsic worth and value in works, arising from the exact answerableness unto the law and proportion unto the reward, so as on the rules of justice to deserve it."¹⁸ Reformed theologians often sought to advance a

¹⁵ E.g., John Davenant, *Treatise on Justification*, 2 vols., trans. Josiah Allport (London: Hamilton, Adams, & Co.), II.liv-lxvi.

¹⁶ Stephen Strehle's book, *Calvinism, Federalism, and Scholasticism: A Study of the Reformed Doctrine of Covenant* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1988), usefully traces this theme from the late Medievals through many of the Reformed scholastics. See also Oberman, *Harvest*, 1-8, 160-184; Denlinger, *Omnnes in Adam*, 193-280; van Asselt, *Federal Theology*, 248-254; Lillback, *Binding of God*, 29-57; Beach, *Christ and the Covenant*, 80-85.

¹⁷ David Wai-Sing Wong, "The Covenant Theology of John Owen", PhD diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 1996; Bobick, "Owen's Razor: The Role of Ramist Reason in the Covenant Theology of John Owen", PhD diss., Drew University, 1996; Trueman, *The Claims of Truth*, *passim*; Rehnman, *Divine Discourse*, ch. 6; Edwin Tay, "Priesthood of Christ", ch. 2; McGraw, *A Heavenly Directory*, ch. 5; Joel Beeke and Mark Jones, "The Minority Report: John Owen on Sinai", *Puritan Theology*, 293-304.

¹⁸ *Works*, 14:202; cf. 14:67.

reduced sense of this term, one which was freed from many of the accretions of Medieval Catholic thought. As a precedent, they frequently pointed to the use of the term within the early church fathers, where “merit” carried the less technical sense of “to obtain” some thing.¹⁹ When Owen uses the term, however, he typically does so selectively, and usually in its more technical sense.

Drawing on the teaching of Paul in Romans 4:4, Owen argues that the proper nature of merit is that it confers a *right (ius ad rem)* on the one who works, so that their reward is “reckoned of debt”:²⁰

. . . that which is truly meritorious indeed deserves that the thing merited, or procured and obtained by it, *shall* be done, or *ought* to be bestowed, and not only that it *may* be done. There is such a habitude and relation between merit and the thing obtained by it, whether it be absolute or arising on contract, that there ariseth a real right to the thing procured by it in them by whom or for whom it is procured. When the labourer hath wrought all day, do we say, “Now his wages *may* be paid,” or rather, “Now they *ought* to be paid”? Hath he not a right unto it? Was ever such a merit heard of before, whose nature should consist in this, that the thing procured by it *might* be bestowed, and not that it *ought* to be?²¹

It is therefore proper to the very nature of merit that the one to whom the service is rendered possesses a natural obligation to reward or remunerate the person performing the act in accordance with strict justice.²² Owen thus rejects the Scotist doctrine of the divine *acceptio*, and the claim that the creature’s merit before God is not measured according to strict justice but by a “gracious condescension of God”. To Owen’s mind, such a teaching “perfectly overthrows the whole nature of merit”, in that it dissolves the necessary *proportion* between what is *done* and what is justly *deserved*. Furthermore, Owen argues that the Scotist position attempts “to unite and reconcile those things which God hath everlastingly separated and opposed”, namely, grace and merit.²³ As Paul states, “To him that worketh is the reward not

¹⁹ E.g., Owen, *Works*, 14:201; Davenant, *Treatise on Justification*, II.liii-liv. Calvin laments the use of the term altogether, but especially in the way that it is set in opposition to God’s justification of the sinner (*Institutes*, III.xv.2).

²⁰ Cf. *Works*, 19:95; cf. 3:379-380; 10:287-288; 11:299-300; 12:508.

²¹ *Works*, 10:206.

²² “Strict justice” carries a semi-technical sense in these texts, and designates that which is properly and simply required on the basis of justice. Cf. *Works*, 8:628, where Owen contrasts “strict justice” and justice tempered with mercy.

²³ *Works*, 3:380.

reckoned of grace, but of debt” (Rom. 4:4). Therefore, to deny a reward to one that has merited it, is to act *unjustly*, denying the laborer what is his rightful due.

As we shall see, Owen does not dispute that God may have real obligations to creatures, but he *does* deny that God might have any obligation to creatures arising merely from their *natural* relation to him. In the first instance, an agent can only act for an end that is proportionate to its nature.²⁴ And given the “infinite disparity” between God and creatures, there can be no natural proportion between them, and so no natural rule of justice that would *obligate* God to reward the creature’s works.²⁵ *Ex natura rei*, the works of the creature are neither condignly nor congruently meritorious because they fall infinitely beneath the dignity of God. “That a creature should make any return unto God, answerable or proportionable unto the effects of his goodness, love, and bounty towards it, is utterly impossible.” As such, the creature is naturally incapable of placing God in its debt. “For what can we properly merit at his hands, whose precedent bounty we come infinitely short of answering or satisfying in all that we do?”²⁶

Yet, perhaps even more fundamental for Owen than the inherent disproportion between God and creatures, is the fact that God has a natural dominion over the creature. As we have seen already in our last chapter, Owen argues that God has an absolute right of dominion in virtue of being the first cause of all things. This right in the creature entitles God to the complete and unqualified obedience of the creature. This is *due* to God simply in virtue of God’s natural dominion, before and apart from any covenant which God might formalize between himself and the creature. With respect to strict justice, therefore, the creature has a natural duty and obligation to obey God in all things. And, “Who can merit by doing his duty?”²⁷ Owen points here to Luke’s gospel, where Jesus commands the disciples, “when ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants; we have done that which was our duty to do” (Luke 17:10). This text was a favorite among Reformed thinkers for demonstrating the absoluteness of God’s right over the creature. As Owen says, “God is bound to reward no man for obedience performed, for that is due to him by natural right”.²⁸

²⁴ *Works*, 10:53, 127-128.

²⁵ *Works*, 2:8

²⁶ *Works*, 21:117.

²⁷ *Works*, 3:379.

²⁸ *Works*, 10:552.

This appeal to God's absolute dominion over the creature functionally voided any Catholic appeal to the concept of "supererogatory" works, which are works that in some way *exceed* what is required of the creature. For Owen, the creature can perform no good act which is not already *due* to God in virtue of God's right over the creature. And therefore, the creature cannot go "above and beyond" its obligation to God, because it owes God all that it is and has. Nor can the creature's act be meritorious in virtue of the inherent dignity and value of grace operative within the creature by the Holy Spirit. For since the creature has a natural dependence on divine power, all the creature's actions depend by the order of nature on a prior movement of God. Therefore, any act by which the creature might presume to merit some reward from God is, itself, a divine gift. So, there is a sense in which the creature is "more in God's debt after his working than before his working", to borrow a phrase from Samuel Rutherford.²⁹

In support of this point, Reformed thinkers frequently appeal to texts like Romans 11:35-36, "Who hath first given to [God] that it should be recompensed to him again? For of him, and through him, and to him are all things." Everything the creature has comes from God, even the power by which it acts. But according to Owen, the nature of merit is such that it requires that the service that we render to God "be every way our own . . . and not his more than ours".³⁰ It could only be for the sake of pride or sheer foolishness, then, that a creature would suppose its deeds to make God a debtor.

For what can a poor worm of the earth, who is nothing, who hath nothing, who doth nothing that is good, but what it receives wholly from divine grace, favour, and bounty, merit of Him who, from his being and nature, can be under no obligation thereunto, but what is merely from his own sovereign pleasure and goodness?³¹

God is under no natural obligation to reward the works of creatures, and therefore Owen categorically rejects the notion that there could be any commutative justice between God and creatures, arguing the idea itself is intended only to prop-up the "rotten fiction" of a salvation

²⁹ Rutherford, *Covenant of Life Opened*, 23; cf. Davenant, *A Treatise on Justification*, IIviii.

³⁰ *Works*, 3:379. One might wonder whether merit, so conceived, is possible at all, since the creature's power to act is wholly derived from God. But that is precisely the point — to eliminate any basis for merit from within the natural order. ³¹ *Works*, 21:115.

by works.³² Any obligation of God to remunerate the creature must therefore come from a free and contingent act of God's will — which is to say, it must come by way of a promise.

4.1.2 The Covenant and the Justice of God

It is not, then, the intrinsic worth of the creature's own acts that forms the basis for its reward, but rather the gracious promise of God set forth in the covenant. In order to emphasize the grace of God displayed in establishing the covenant, Owen occasionally contrasts the creature's relation to God in the covenant with its status apart from the covenant, relative to God's absolute dominion. For example, in his *Exposition Upon Psalm 130* (1668), Owen writes the following concerning the covenant of works:

Now, a covenant between God and man is a thing great and marvellous, whether we consider the nature of it or the ends of it. In its own nature it is a convention, compact, and agreement for some certain ends and purposes between the holy Creator and his poor creatures. How infinite, how unspeakable must needs the grace and condescension of God in this matter be! For what is poor miserable man, that God should set his heart upon him, — that he should, as it were, give bounds to his sovereignty over him, and enter into terms of agreement with him? For whereas before he was a mere object of his absolute dominion, made at his will and pleasure, and on the same reasons to be crushed at any time into nothing; now he hath a bottom and ground given him to stand upon, whereon to expect good things from God upon the account of his faithfulness and righteousness. God in a covenant gives those holy properties of his nature unto his creature, as his hand or arm for him to lay hold upon, and by them to plead and argue with him. And without this [the covenant] a man could have no foundation for any intercourse or communion with God, or of any expectation from him, nor any direction how to deal with him in any of his concernments. Great and signal, then, was the condescension of God, to take his poor creature into covenant with himself; and especially will this be manifest if we consider the ends of it, and why it is that God thus deals with man. Now, these are no other than that man might serve him aright, be blessed by him, and be brought unto the everlasting enjoyment of him;—all unto his glory. These are the ends of every covenant that God takes us into with himself; and these are “the whole of man,” [Eccles. 12:13.] No more is required of us in a way of duty, no more can be required by us to make us blessed and happy, but what is contained in them. That we might live to God, be accepted with him, and come to the eternal fruition of him, is the whole of man, all that we were made for or are capable of; and these are the ends of every covenant that God makes with men, being all comprised in that solemn word, that “he will be their God, and they shall be his people.”³³

³² *Works*, 10:501-502.

³³ *Works*, 6:470-471.

As in his treatise *Of Communion with God*,³⁴ Owen here depicts the creation of the covenant as the foundation of all the creature's fellowship with God. The contrast which Owen draws here between the status of creatures "before" and "after" the covenant concentrates attention around the covenant's *adventitious* character. Unlike the law, which Owen argues was necessary in order for God to govern the rational creature in a manner that accords with its nature, the covenant was added merely by God's free goodness and favor. The opposition of God's natural and rightful "dominion" over creatures, with his "condescension" to them in the covenant highlights the *gracious* character of God's dealings with humankind. With the institution of the covenant, God elevates creatures out of their lowly position and grants them a dignified and privileged status as his covenant partners.

This emphasis on the freedom of God is generally characteristic of a Reformed theology of grace, but in this setting, it appears to suggest that Owen sees a *real* distinction (as opposed to merely a *notional* distinction) between the covenant and the natural order. So, while Owen argues that Adam was concreated with this covenant,³⁵ he maintains that Adam could not have had knowledge of the covenant on the basis of natural reason alone, but required it to be disclosed by an act of divine revelation, because the creation of the covenant was above nature, and so a free and superadded work of God.³⁶ Indeed, it might well have been otherwise. For as God has an absolute dominion over the creature, he is under no necessity, whether internal or external, to grant this covenant status to creatures. It is rather a free act of God's dominion. As Owen states in his Hebrews commentary, "God might have dealt with man in a way of *absolute sovereignty*, requiring obedience of him without a covenant of a reward infinitely exceeding it."³⁷

One might read the counterfactual in passages like these, as though Owen were actually countenancing the idea that God was just as likely to have made the creature without the covenant as with it. If this were the case, it would carry some very serious implications for Owen's anthropology. For if the supernatural end of creatures is contained in the *covenant*, and if God could have made humans without the covenant, then, hypothetically at least,

³⁴ *Works*, 2:6-9.

³⁵ *Works*, 19:337.

³⁶ "*Quamvis ideo naturâ suâ, usumque et finem quod attinet, plane supernaturale fuerit (nam ut Deo homo, secundùm fœdus præmium æternum pollicitans, obediret, ex Dei liberrima erat constitutione); tamen, quia ἐν τῇ 5ῃ Οὐρανὸν καὶ ἔμφοτον, id ei naturale fuisse dicimus. Naturale quidem illud proprie dicitur, quod ipsam naturam necessariò comitatur, aut ex principiis naturæ ortum ducit. Eo sensu lumen hoc homini naturale non fuisse constat*" (*Works*, 17:40 [*Biblical Theology*, 21]).

creatures might have had a strictly *natural* end. But we have noted already that Owen denies this, claiming that since humans have the power to know and love the good, their nature is such that they “could not be satisfied, nor . . . attain absolute rest, but in the enjoyment of God.”³⁸

To be sure, Owen does think the contingency of the covenant is strictly entailed by God’s natural dominion over creatures. This is crucial for securing the divine *initiative* in grace, and so underwrites much of Owen’s moral theology as well as his anti-Pelagian critique. As God is the first cause of all things, nothing *ad extra* can be the *cause* of the divine will. Furthermore, Owen also regularly argues that if God did good to creatures or showed them mercy out of some *natural necessity*, then he would not have the freedom of his natural dominion to do with them as he pleases.³⁹ This freedom is absolutely essential to Owen’s account of definite atonement as it supports both the freedom of God’s election, and the particularity of divine love.⁴⁰ Yet, in other texts, Owen is much more willing to emphasize the gift of the covenant as becoming of God’s goodness.⁴¹ And even in the block quotation above, Owen states that the end included in the covenant — namely, the enjoyment of God — is “all that we were made for or are capable of”. This suggests that Owen sees the covenant as absolutely central to God’s purposes for humankind. Exactly *how* this is the case is a question which we will explore further below.⁴²

Alternatively, we might understand the counterfactual in statements like those above as being primarily *analytical* in nature. In this case, the possibility of God creating humankind without the covenant is hypothetical, and serves only to exclude any *natural obligation* on the part of God to reward the creature’s works. In other words, the counterfactual indicates that it is not divine *righteousness* but divine *goodness* which renders the covenant necessary. Trueman positions Owen’s view closer to this opinion by drawing a comparison with Herman Witsius, on the grounds that Owen and Witsius are both critical of the voluntarism of figures like Twisse, and that they represent “a more intellectualist stream within Reformed theology”.⁴³ Witsius argues that the covenant was a free act of divine condescension and

³⁷ *Works*, 19:337; emphasis original.

³⁸ *Works*, 19:336.

³⁹ E.g., *Works*, 10:227; cf. 6:434; 11:247.

⁴⁰ We will return to this issue again in the next chapter.

⁴¹ *Works*, 20:65.

⁴² See the discussion of Owen’s theology of the Sabbath below.

⁴³ Trueman, *John Owen*, 74-75; Witsius, *Economy of the Covenants*, I.iv14-23.

maintains that it would have been unworthy of God's goodness to create human creatures without the promise of reward. "For a holy creature is God's very image. But God loves himself in the most ardent manner, as being the chief good: which he would not be, unless he loved himself above all. It therefore follows, he must also love his own image."⁴⁴ But "God does not love in vain", and since it is in the nature of a lover "to do all the good in his power to the object of his love", it follows that it would be unbecoming of God's goodness to create a creature bearing his own image, and yet deny it all hope of eternal life and beatitude.⁴⁵ So, while Witsius denies that creatures could merit *ex natura rei*, he also goes to great lengths in insisting that God's goodness strictly excludes the possibility that he might have formed a human creature *without* the covenant. The distinction between creation and covenant appears to be a *real* one, then, but the ends of human creatures strictly excludes the possibility of their separation.

There are certainly texts in Owen's corpus that support such a reading. For example, in an exercitation of his Hebrews commentary, Owen cites Hebrews 11:6, which states that God is a "rewarder of them that diligently seek him", and claims that being a rewarder of creatures is "essential" to him and "inseparable from his nature".⁴⁶ But there are also good reasons to question whether Owen can seriously maintain this point, given his other commitments. We will return this issue further below, but if for the moment we grant the point that Owen's use of the counterfactual has an *analytical* intention, the manner in which Owen describes the covenant in relation to God's dominion is of special significance because it defines the specific *nature* of God's condescension to the creature. The quotation we cited above states that, in forming the covenant, God gives "bounds", or, we might say "limits", to his sovereignty over the creature. The covenant gives the creature "ground . . . to stand on" and to "expect good things" from God's "faithfulness and righteousness". The covenant provides a basis upon which the creature might "lay hold" of God's "hand or arm", in order to "plead or argue with him" on the basis of the "holy properties of his nature". These latter phrases in particular recall that passage of Job which we saw above the Westminster divines employed to demonstrate that God had no obligation to reward the good works of creatures:

⁴⁴ Witsius, *Economy of the Covenants*, I.iv.15.

⁴⁵ Witsius, *Economy of the Covenants*, I.iv.16. Similarly, Baxter suggests that Adam's status as a rational creature made it necessary that God should reward him with eternal life for his obedience (*Catholic Theologie*, II.1, pp. 30-31).

⁴⁶ *Works*, 18:144.

For he is not a man, as I am, that I should answer him, and we should come together in judgment. Neither is there any daysman [arbitrator] betwixt us, that might lay his hand upon us both (Job 9:32-33).

This passage was often used to establish God's transcendence over all created orders of justice, and the absolute nature of God's dominion over creatures. Yet, as Owen employs it here, this language points to God's voluntary or self-imposed submission to some order of justice. Language like this points to an aspect of Owen's covenant theology that appears frequently in his thought, but is easily overlooked, namely, that the covenant *creates* the legal context in which the relation between God and creatures can be arbitrated according to the principles of *justice*. Apart from this context, the creature has no claim on God's justice whatsoever, but is merely the object of God's absolute dominion. Yet, by extending his promise to creatures and establishing a covenant between them, God elects to impose a kind of "restriction" on his natural dominion of creatures. That is, he lowers himself to be bound by the principles of justice and to keep his promise to them which, in his perfect righteousness, he cannot fail to do. This is why Owen claims that "every covenant between God and man must be founded on and resolved into promises".⁴⁷ For while the creature naturally owes all that it is to God, God can have no obligation to creatures but that which he assigns himself by the grant of his promise.⁴⁸

This aspect of Owen's theology of divine justice occasionally surfaces in conjunction with his account of Christ's work. In his 1650 reply to Richard Baxter, "Of the Death of Christ", Owen gives an account of divine justice as the immediate object of Christ's death in which he claims that, since God has absolute dominion over creation, any just obligation that

⁴⁷ *Works*, 23:65.

⁴⁸ It is worth observing here that, in *Cur Deus Homo*, Anselm appeals to the moral necessity which one imposes on himself in the act of making a promise as an analogy to explain the kind of necessity by which God governs rational creatures toward the attainment of their end. For both of these acts belong to that necessity according to which God maintains his glory by accomplishing all those purposes which he sets out to perform. God's objective in the creation of humankind is to lead creatures to happiness. And this end is like a promise which God is honor-bound to keep, so that God's honor demands he govern his creatures toward this end. Unlike Owen, however, Anselm does not regard this "promise" as being *superadded* to the natural order, but as being given *in* and *with* the creature's rational nature (*Cur Deus Homo*, II.1). Having formed creatures for this purpose, Anselm claims that God's redemptive work is necessary in virtue of "the unchangeability of God's honour". "For this reason, 'necessity' is a misnomer. Let us say, nevertheless, that it is a necessity that the goodness of God should bring to completion what it has begun with respect to mankind, because of his unchangeability, although the whole of what he does is grace" (*Cur Deus Homo*, II.5). In other words, Anselm grounds this "promise" in a kind of natural necessity in God, rather than in a contingent expression of the divine will, in the manner that Owen does. This point will emerge again in our discussion of the intention of the atonement.

God might maintain toward creatures could only come through God's own "free engagement", by entering into a covenant with them:

For justice, that which is commutative properly, with one consent, is removed from God. "Who hath given first unto him and it shall be rendered unto him again?" Neither is distributive justice to be supposed in him antecedent to some free engagement of his own. Where no obligation is, there cannot be so much as distributive justice properly. All obligation from God to the creature is from his own free engagement; otherwise he stands in no relation to it but of absolute dominion and sovereignty. All the justice of God, then (we consider not the universal rectitude of his nature, but) in reference to the creature, is "justitia regiminis," Ps. 33:4, 5, 1 John 1:5; and therefore must suppose some free constitution of his will⁴⁹

Effectively, Owen's argument here is that the relation between God and creatures excludes the possibility that God might have a natural obligation in justice toward the creature. Justice implies some obligation to give another what is "due" to him. But God has an absolute dominion over creatures. He therefore possesses a perfect right to do with them as he pleases, such that it would be impossible for God to act unjustly toward any creature for the simple reason that, strictly speaking, the creature has no rights over God.⁵⁰

In fact, the only natural "debt" that Owen acknowledges God can maintain toward creatures antecedent to the covenant is the "*debitum naturæ*" — the obligation to equip the creature with everything that it needs in order to fulfill its purpose.⁵¹ For example, Owen states that the grace of original righteousness was "due" to Adam in order for him to attain that end for which he was created.⁵² Yet even here, it is not to the creature *as such* that this debt is due, but to God's own purposes. For since God is the author of all things, creatures exist at his pleasure. In equipping his creatures, then, God sustains a "debt" not to the creature, but only to himself, to form creatures in a manner befitting the wisdom and goodness of his purposes. This is not a matter of distributive justice, though. For if God were to deprive the creature of some thing necessary to attain its end, he would not wrong the *creature* but only act against his own purposes. As such, this "debt" is simply a function of

⁴⁹ *Works*, 10:464.

⁵⁰ This does not mean, of course, that God could do *anything* to the creature. All God's acts toward the creature are regulated by the wisdom and goodness of his nature.

⁵¹ Owen appeals to this concept at several points in his moral theology (*Works*, 10:70; 3:284; 18:143-144; 19:335-336).

⁵² *Works*, 10:70.

God's justitia regiminis, according to which he wisely executes that purpose which he freely determined in himself.

In support of this point, Owen marshals passages from two contemporary authorities. The first is taken from Suárez's *De Libertate Divinitæ Voluntatis*, which asserts that there can be no obligation of God to the creature "without some promise or pact from which the debt of his faithfulness and justice tends to arise".⁵³ Owen appealed to this same passage from Suárez in an earlier publication of his sermon, "A Vision of Unchangeable, Free Mercy", preached before Parliament in 1646. There, the quotation supports Owen's claim that God has no *obligation* to send the gospel to any continent or country, and so it is not an act of "remunerative justice"⁵⁴ but of "his mere good pleasure" that God sends the gospel to any people.

[T]here is no such justice in God towards the creature, but what is founded upon some preceding covenant, or promise of God to the creature, — which is the only foundation of all relation between God and man, — but only those that attend creation and sovereignty.⁵⁵

In both texts, Owen's quotation of Suárez is paired with one from Suárez's fellow Jesuit and bitter rival, Gabriel Vasquez. The quotation, which is taken from Vasquez's commentary on Aquinas's *Summa*, asserts that God's distributive justice is *consequent* on the creation of some covenant between God and humankind — "There can be no proper justice where no obligation intervenes. God has no obligation until he commits himself to their trust, therefore no distributive justice is found in God prior to his promise."⁵⁶ The reason for this, according to Vasquez, is that there is an infinite disproportion between God and creatures, and so no natural rule of justice by which to determine any equality between them. Yet, after the

⁵³ "Si de debito quæratu respectu creaturæ, in Deum cadere non potest, nisi ex aliqua snppositione ipsi Deo voluntaria, quæ non potest esse nisi promisso aut pacto aliquo, ex quibus fidelitatis aut justitiæ debitum oriri solet" (Suárez, *De Libertate Divinitæ Voluntatis*, in *Varia Opuscula*, d. 1, s. 2, n. 5).

⁵⁴ In context, Owen is critiquing conditional election and foreseen faith. God's sending of the gospel is not in remuneration for some good act or quality which God foresees among any people. It is merely an act of God's sovereign grace.

⁵⁵ *Works*, 8:22.

⁵⁶ "Nulla justitia proprie esse potest, ubi nulla intercedit obligatio; Deus nulla obligatione tenetur, antequam ipse fidem suam astringat, ergo ante promissionem nulla juatitia distributiva in Deo reperitur" (Vasquez, *Commentaria ac Disputationes in Primam Partam Sancti Thomæ Tomus Primus*, n. 1, q. 21, a. 1, disp. 86, c. 3).

promise is given, there is “another rule [*ratio*] of communion” established between them without which there could be no distributive justice.⁵⁷

Any obligation of God to the creature according to the established order of justice must therefore depend on some antecedent and contingent institution of the divine will — that is, God’s *promise*. Otherwise, God has no relation to humankind but that of “absolute dominion and sovereignty”. Owen slightly amends this position with the publication of his *Dissertation on Divine Justice* in 1653. He argues there that God’s vindicatory justice (or, retributive justice) is not merely an effect of the “free constitution of his will”, but is natural and necessary to God as he is the Governor of all things. In that respect, at least, Owen will come to see God’s distributive justice as necessarily entailed by the creative act, itself. However, Owen maintains his position above with respect to God’s *remunerative* justice.⁵⁸ If the creature were capable of meriting *ex natura rei*, then the absolute dominion of God over the creature would be compromised. The contingency of the covenant is integral to maintaining the gracious character of eternal life as a free gift of God. God has no natural obligation to reward the creature, and therefore it is only through an act of divine condescension that God can sustain an obligation toward his creatures.

But how should we understand this divine “obligation”? In just what sense can it be said that God is “bound” by justice to keep his promise to creatures? Many of the scholastics argued that, properly speaking, there could be no justice between God and creatures, even after a covenant had been formally established, because that would collapse the infinite disproportion between God and creatures. Given his absolute dominion over all things, is it possible for God to have a real and proper obligation to creatures? Is all such language simply metaphorical, or does Owen think it really possible for God to have an obligation toward his creatures by the principles of justice?

4.1.3 Remunerative Justice and the Question of Divine Obligation

⁵⁷ “*quia nunquam Deus observat aequalitatem proportionis, etiam post promissionem; nec videtur esse aliquis modus, quo ullam observare post. Sed ante promissionem est etiam alia communis ratio, ob quad distributiua iustitia in Deo esse nequir*” (Vasquez, *Commentaria*, n.1, q. 21, a. 1, d. 86, c. 3).

⁵⁸ Owen thus acknowledges an asymmetry between God’s vindicatory and remunerative justice: “there is not any natural, indispensable connection between obedience and reward as there is between sin and punishment” (*The Saints’ Perseverance* [1654], *Works*, 11:229; cf. 10:511; 19:107).

The question of whether God can have proper obligations to his creatures on the basis of strict justice was a point of disagreement among the theologians of the early Modern period. The question had been taken up at the beginning of the 17th century in a back-and-forth dispute between Francisco Suárez and Gabriel Vasquez. Though the dispute formally concerned the nature of merit, it touched on a wide range of issues, especially divine justice. Among many scholastics, the exchange garnered considerable notoriety for its subtlety and sophistication, if also for its acrimony. Though this dispute drew scorn from many Reformed thinkers, the central tropes and thought-experiments of this debate were incorporated with some regularity into accounts of divine justice offered by the Reformed scholastics.

In his *Commentaria*, which we saw Owen cite above, Vasquez had denied that God can have obligations to creatures on the basis of strict justice. For justice requires some proportion of equality between two parties. But since God has a natural dominion over all things, God maintains an absolute, natural right over creation. This dominion, moreover, is *natural* to God, so that his right over all things cannot be alienated or relinquished. So, when God promises something to creatures, his promise does not confer upon creatures a proper *right* to the thing promised, which might form the basis for some claim against God. Because God is the rightful Lord of all things. And therefore God can have no proper obligations on the basis of strict justice, “even after the promise” (*etiam post promissionem*)⁵⁹ is issued to the creature, because there can be no equality of proportion between God and creatures.

To illustrate this point, Vasquez lays out a thought-experiment. Imagine that a master promises to give a gift to one of his servants, and even swears an *oath* to give it to him, but then eventually withdraws his promise and keeps the gift. Has the master violated the *right* of the servant? The answer depends considerably on whether the promise of the master is thought to confer a right to the thing promised. In such an instance, Vasquez argues that the vice of the master who breaks his promise is not that of injustice, *per se*, but that of *faithlessness*.⁶⁰ For since the master has absolute dominion over the servant, in renegeing on his promise, the master does not violate any *right* of the servant, as such, but rather breaks his

⁵⁹ Vasquez, *Commentaria*, n.1, q. 21, a. 1, d. 86, c. 3.

⁶⁰ “*Similiter, si dominus vestem promisit seruo manenti in statu pristino seruitutis perfectæ, debet e veritate ei soluere; praesertim si iuramento fide adstrinxit. Ceteru quia semper tanquam seruo promisit, manet in potestate illius salva veritate & fide, vestem semel donatam auferre, aut etiam promissam negare; hoc est, nisi esset contra fidelitate, contra iustitiam no esset. Eo quod si ille seruus manet semper ex omni parte seruus, rem illam non possidet alio iure, quam serui; ac proinde domini sui est*” (Vasquez, *Commentaria*, n.1, q. 21, a. 1, d. 85, c. 6).

own word and honor. In a similar way, all of creation remains under God's absolute power and authority as its natural Sovereign and Lord. God's promise cannot therefore confer upon his creatures a *right* to reward, but only an *expectation* of it. For Vasquez, then, it is for the sake of his *veracity* and his *faithfulness*, and not out of an obligation to strict justice, that God keeps his promise to the creature.⁶¹

Suárez, on the other hand, argues that God *can* have obligations to creatures. In his treatise, *Disputatio De Iustitia Qua Deus* (1599), which was authored largely in response to Vasquez's *Commentaria* (1598), Suárez offers the following counter-example.⁶² Imagine that the owner of a vineyard agrees to pay some some temporary laborers to harvest his grapes. Now, if one of the workers were to bring along one of his friends who was in need of employment, but who was not personally extended the promise of payment, does the owner have an obligation to remunerate the extra worker? According to Suárez, it depends on whether the owner had prior *knowledge* of the additional worker. If he *did not* have prior knowledge of the laborer, he is not obligated to remunerate him because he did not consent to his labor.⁶³ However, if the owner *did* have prior knowledge of the laborer, and did not stop him from working, Suárez argues that this amounts to tacit consent, and so the owner is obligated to remunerate him.⁶⁴ In this instance, the tacit consent of the owner to receive the labor confers a right to remuneration upon the worker, so that denying him his wage, the owner would be not only unfaithful but also *unjust*.

Faithfulness is a species of justice, because promise-making is an act of *right reason*. And a person only breaks his promise when either he *cannot* keep it, as is the case when unforeseen circumstances prevent him from keeping it, or when he *will not* keep it, in which cases he is said to be *unfaithful*. However, when a person makes a promise with the full

⁶¹ "Cum igitur omnis creatura, quamvis promissione Dei facta, sub potestate Dei, taquam serua sub domino plenæ seruitutis iure permaneat quoad omnia, & singula, quæ possidet; si Deus gloriam semel collatam auferret, aut promissionem denegaret; infidelis & falsus esset, sed non iniustus, ergo implendo id, quod promisit, ex sola promissione nulla inter ipsum & nos oritur iustitiæ obligatio" (Vasquez, *Commentaria*, n.1, q. 21, a. 1, d. 85, c. 6).

⁶² *Disputatio De Iustitia Qua Deus*, II.37-41.

⁶³ *Disputatio De Iustitia Qua Deus*, II.41.

⁶⁴ "Sed contra hoc instatur, nam ad summum procedit quando domino ignorante laborat: at vero, si dominus sciat alium laborare in vinea sua, & opus illius re vera cedit in utilitatem vineae, dominus ex iustitia tenetur tribuere mercedem: quia iam tacite consentit in opus sibi utile, & mercede dignum. Cum ergo iustorum opera semper siant Deo sciente, vel etiam iubente, id satis erit ad obligationem iustitiæ, si in ipsis operibus sit sufficiens ratio dati, & accepti, quod possit iustitiam fundare; nam propter promissionem non cedunt opera iustorum in maiorem gloriam Dei, vel honorem, quam per se se valeant" (*Disputatio De Iustitia Qua Deus*, II.38).

knowledge that he either cannot or will not fulfill that promise, he is not only said to be *unfaithful* but also *unjust*, because he acts untruthfully and unequally. Now, God always acts with right reason, and since God knows all things, his promise cannot be contingent upon any unforeseen circumstance. So, when God commits his promise to any of his creatures, he may be said to have real *obligations* them, because God's word depends wholly on his *truthfulness*, which is a species of *justice*.⁶⁵

Disagreement on this issue can be found among the Reformed as well.⁶⁶ John Davenant, for example, uses an illustration that is essentially identical to that offered by Vasquez when he argues against both Suárez and Bellarmine that God cannot be thought to have any proper obligation to reward his creatures. To Davenant, this would imply an imperfection in the divine essence — that “something is wanting on the part of God” which is restored through an exchange with the creature.⁶⁷ When we speak of “justice” between God and creatures, therefore, we do so only improperly by way of a *similitude* or *analogy* to justice. But properly speaking, there can be no strict justice between God and creatures, even after the promise is given. Creatures cannot bring God “into court” over his promise, for the same reason that a father or master cannot be brought into court over a promise made to their child or servant — namely, because they have dominion over the one to whom the promise is given.⁶⁸ The issuing of a promise does nothing to alter this fundamental inequality. It does not introduce some proportion between God and creatures, according to which God's acts might be measured against some debt that he owes to them. For there remains an infinite, natural disproportion between God and creatures. God cannot therefore have any proper obligation to reward those works, because God cannot be *enriched* by them.⁶⁹

Accordingly, Davenant argues that it is not out of an obligation to *justice*, but merely out of his own *faithfulness* that God keeps his promise.⁷⁰ To the analogy advanced by Suárez,

⁶⁵ *De Libertate Divinitæ Voluntatis*, II.ii.9.

⁶⁶ Cf. Turretin, *Institutes*, III.xxii; Baxter, *The Life of Faith in Three Parts* (London, 1670), III.v; Rutherford, *Covenant of Life Opened*, I.vii, p. 40-45; Anthony Burgess, *The True Doctrine of Justification Asserted and Vindicated From the Errors of Many* (London: Printed for Thomas Underhill, 1654), II, p. 18; Gisbertus Voetius *Selectarum Disputationem Theologiarum, Pars Prima*, d. 19, p. 342; Thomas Goodwin, *Exposition of Ephesians*, in *Works*, 2:223; Witsius, *Economy of the Covenants*, I.i.xiv; Charnock, *Works of Stephen Charnock*, 2:316, 427; Jonathan Edwards (of Oxford), *A Preservation Against Socinianism* (Oxford: Printed at the Theatre for Henry Clements, 1698), 46-47.

⁶⁷ *A Treatise on Justification*, II.lxiv, pp. 173-174.

⁶⁸ *A Treatise on Justification*, II.lxiv, pp. 174-175.

⁶⁹ *A Treatise on Justification*, II.lxiv, pp. 175-176.

⁷⁰ *A Treatise on Justification*, II.lxiv, p. 172.

Davenant responds that since God is the first principle of all things, he does offer a kind of consent to the labors of all his creatures. But it does not follow from this that God is required to reward them. For in the instance provided by Suárez, the owner of the vineyard is enriched by the work of the laborer, and so has an obligation to repay him. But there is “no man who can assert that he has given more to God than he has received from him”, and therefore God could never come under obligation to reward the creature. In fact, Davenant goes so far as to claim that, if it were possible for God to break his promise and violate his faithfulness, he would still not be guilty of any injustice, even if he excluded all the saints from heaven.

For although he who has made a promise is bound to give as much as he has promised; yet, in case the promise originates in grace and munificence, and where the thing promised far exceeds the value of work required, the promise itself must be looked upon as an act of favor, not a yielding to the claims of justice; and the performance of it as imposed by the obligation of adherence to fidelity, not as an exaction to be paid for equity's sake.⁷¹

Owen, on the other hand, nonetheless quite clearly endorses the idea that God can have proper obligations to creatures.⁷² This point is in fact basic to the whole structure of Owen's covenant theology. Owen classifies God's *veracity* or *truthfulness* as a species of *justice*.⁷³ Truthfulness is an essential property of God, and as such it “immediately attends every obligation that, by any free act of his will, God is pleased in his wisdom to put upon himself.” According to Owen, God's truthfulness logically precedes and is, in fact, the basis *ad intra* of that distributive justice by which God keeps faith with creatures. Accordingly, when God makes a promise to any, Owen claims that God “is obliged, for the veracity and justice which attend all his engagements, to make out, as in his infinite wisdom shall seem meet, all those things which [by his promise] he hath set, appointed and proposed”.⁷⁴ In his *Doctrine of the Saints' Perseverance* (1654), Owen argues against John Goodwin that when Scripture speaks of God's faithfulness it refers not to a disposition of God's nature by which he is naturally and generally inclined to show love and mercy to his creatures. God's faithfulness is rather

⁷¹ *A Treatise on Justification*, II.lxiv, p. 178.

⁷² Owen elsewhere denies that God can be subject to ordinate justice. Against the Socinian claim that Christ could not have merited salvation for us since he had to merit for himself, Owen argues that it is only Christ's *human nature* that is “made under the law” (Gal. 4:4). His divinity cannot be subject to the law because “the divine nature cannot be subject unto an outward work of its own, such as the law is” (*Works*, 5:256; cf. 19:111). Owen does not seem to think that this stands at odds with his other commitments, but it is probably best to read this not as a programmatic point, but as a polemical response to the claims of the Socinians (Tay, “Priesthood of Christ”, 121).

⁷³ “That justice which consists in *words*, respects either commands, and it is called equity; or promises and assertions, and is *veracity* or truth” (*Works*, 19:99; cf. 10:464, 503, 507-508, 511).

the *truthfulness* and *veracity* by which God keeps his promises. In a manner reminiscent of Suárez, Owen here argues that promise-making is an act of right reason. And since God unfailingly knows all things that shall come to pass, were any of God's promises to fail, it would imply that God is not only *unfaithful* but also *untrue* (and hence, *unjust*). For in such an instance, God would have acted in an unequal manner, committing himself to an act which he knows he either cannot or will not perform.⁷⁵

The idea that God can possess real obligations surfaces in a variety of Owen's writings, but its material significance to his thought is most evident in the "double-payment" argument which supports his theology of definite atonement in *The Death of Death* (1647). Owen argues that the covenant of redemption⁷⁶ is an eternal pact between the Father and the Son concerning the particular persons of the elect. In this covenant, the Father promises the Son that he will grant grace and glory to the elect on the condition that the Son would take on flesh and make full satisfaction for their sins.⁷⁷ Having voluntarily assumed this "law of the Mediator" upon himself, the Son took on flesh and offered his life as a satisfaction for sin. Upon the completion of his work, then, Christ fully merits the promises contained in the covenant. As the elect are united to Christ by the covenant as their Sponsor and Head, Christ's work confers upon the elect an *ius ad rem* to eternal life. Having promised their salvation to the Son by a covenant, God thus has an *obligation* in strict justice to redeem them.

All these hath our Savior by his death merited and purchased for all them for whom he died; that is, so procured them of his Father that they ought, in respect of that merit, according to the equity of justice, to be bestowed on them for whom they were so purchased and procured. It was absolutely of free grace in God that he would send Jesus Christ to die for any; it was of free grace for whom he would send him to die; it is of free grace that the good things procured by his death be bestowed on any person, in respect of those persons on whom they are bestowed: but considering his own appointment and constitution, that Jesus Christ by his death should merit and procure grace and glory for those for whom he died, it is of debt in respect of Christ that they be communicated to them. Now, that which is

⁷⁵ *Works*, 10:464.

⁷⁶ *Works*, 11:233-34.

⁷⁷ Though very interesting, the implications for Owen's doctrine of the Trinity are very complex and would take another essay to adequately unpack. I note only that Suárez denies that there could ever be an "obligation" between the persons of the Trinity, for this would introduce an "inequality" between them, which is impossible (*De Libertate Divinitae Voluntatis*, d. 1, s. 2, n. 5). Owen, however, explicitly acknowledges that this covenant introduces an "inequality" between the Father and the Son. However, he takes this inequality to be strictly *economical* (*Works*, 19:88), extending only to the terms of the covenant (19:83-84), which is a contingent, free, and external work of God (19:86).

thus merited, which is of debt to be bestowed, we do not say that it *may* be bestowed, but it *ought* so to be, and it is injustice if it be not.⁷⁸

So while the election of any individual is an act of free grace, since the merits of Christ are distributed by means of a covenant, Owen here describes redemption as a “debt” which the Father owed to the Son “according to the equity of justice”, so that it would be an act of “injustice” were he not to pay it.⁷⁹

Owen concludes from this point that the atonement must be *definite or particular* in nature, because if any of those for whom Christ died were ultimately to fail to obtain eternal life, it must imply either a “defect in the merit of Christ, or in the justice of God.”⁸⁰ For if Christ’s work has made full satisfaction for sin and fulfilled the condition of the covenant, it would be *unjust* for God to require “a second payment” at the hands of one whose debt has already been paid.⁸¹ It could only be an act of injustice which exacts the same debt twice. “If the Lord, as a just creditor, ought to cancel all obligations and surcease all suits against such as have their debts so paid, whence is it that his wrath smokes against some to all eternity?”⁸² It should be noted here, however, that Owen’s whole argument above turns on the injustice that would be done to *Christ* if the elect were not redeemed. In themselves, sinners are deserving of God’s wrath. And since God has absolute dominion over his creatures, he is under no obligation to extend mercy or grace to any of them.⁸³ He can do with them as he pleases. So if God were unjust for depriving them of any benefit purchased by Christ, it is not because they are undeserving of hell. Rather, it is that their redemption was *promised* to Christ — it is for *their* sake that Christ suffered and died. And so, in order for God to deprive salvation to *them*, he would have to break his promise to *him*. As Owen puts it, “When the

⁷⁷ *Works*, 19:94.

⁷⁸ *Works*, 10:288.

⁷⁹ *Works*, 10:464; 11:300, 309; 22:161. Though Anselm does not ground the claim in an eternal pact between the Father and the Son, he implies that God would be unjust not to compensate Christ for his work (*Cur Deus Homo*, II.19).

⁸⁰ *Works*, 10:288.

⁸¹ Anselm raises a similar objection in *Cur Deus Homo* (I.19). Boso wonders why the Lord’s prayer teaches sinners to ask God for forgiveness of their sins/debts (*debita*) if God in fact requires that recompense be made for sin. “For if we are paying off a debt, why do we pray that he should remit it? Surely God is not unjust, so as to demand a second time recompense which has been paid?” Anselm suggests that creatures do not deal with God as equals, and that the penitential disposition prescribed in the Lord’s prayer is, itself, included in the recompense that the creature makes to God for sin.

⁸² *Works*, 10:273; cf. Owen’s earliest treatise, *A Display of Arminianism* (1642), where he employs the same argument (10:88, 93-96).

⁸³ This is a theme we will return to in the next chapter.

labourer hath wrought all day, do we say, ‘Now his wages *may* be paid,’ or rather, ‘Now they *ought* to be paid’?”⁸⁴

Of course, this argument assumes already that the covenant was constituted in such a manner that Christ made satisfaction for sin by offering a payment *identical* (*solutio ejusdem*) to the obligation required of sinners by God’s justice, and not merely an *equivalent* payment (*solutio tantidem*). To claim that Christ made an equivalent payment would imply that the gracious acceptance of God was necessary in order to render it effective, and therefore that the right to grant what was promised remained in God. But Owen argues that Christ has made such full and complete payment for sin, that grace and glory are now due to the elect by strict justice.⁸⁵ To be sure, this indicates a heightened sense of what it means for Christ to “procure” or “purchase” salvation on behalf of the elect. For by the work of Christ, the elect actually acquire an *ius ad rem* to eternal life. It is notable in this respect that, as early as his *Display of Arminianism* (1642), Owen objects to the notion that, following the death of Christ, God the Father still maintains an absolute right to apply the benefits of salvation freely, as he sees fit.⁸⁶ Owen rejects this opinion on the grounds that, if the right “remained wholly in God”, then Christ cannot be said to have actually obtained “redemption for us from our sins” but only “a liberty unto God of saving us on some condition or other”.⁸⁷ In other words, unless the elect receive an *ius ad rem* to eternal life, one which God is obliged to honor by his justice, then Christ does not actually redeem us from sin, but only makes us redeem-able. This is a striking argument because it defines the *efficacy* and *perfection* of Christ’s work with the *transfer* of a right, and with the obligation which that right places upon God to save the elect.⁸⁸

⁸⁴ *Works*, 10:206. This clearly echoes the illustration which we saw Suárez offer above.

⁸⁵ For a fuller treatment of Owen and Baxter’s disputes on this matter, see Cooper, *Formation of Nonconformity*, 59-86; Trueman, *Claims of Truth*, 206-225; Boersma, *A Hot Pepper Corn*, 245-254; and Tay, “Priesthood of Christ”, 195-209.

⁸⁶ This was a position commonly held by those holding to a doctrine of universal redemption — Arminians and Socinians, yes, but also hypothetical universalists, like Davenant.

⁸⁷ *Works*, 10:95.

⁸⁸ Davenant, being a hypothetical universalist, claims that all men obtain a general right to eternal life by Christ’s death. But he understands this as an “improper” right and, in any case, he argues that one can lay claim to the benefits purchased by Christ only by means of faith, which is the sovereign gift of God. Accordingly, he denies that Christ’s death immediately confers any benefit upon the elect. See Davenant, *Dissertatio De Morte Christi* (Cambridge, 1683), translated as *Dissertation on the Death of Christ in An Exposition of the Epistle of St. Paul to the Colossians*, vol. 2, trans. Josiah Allport (London: Hamilton, Adams and Co. 1832), IV, pp. 426-427, 440-441, 480-483.

Early Modern disputes on the nature of pardon and forgiveness often circulated around this same point, as well. Baxter and Grotius, for instance, had both rejected the concept of satisfaction as advanced by Owen — namely, that Christ offered the very thing (*idem*) which creatures are obligated to yield to God — on the grounds that pardon and satisfaction of the *idem* are mutually exclusive of one another.⁸⁹ God can pardon sins, or Christ can make satisfaction for them (that is, for the *idem*), but both cannot be true at the same time.⁹⁰ The underlying assumption of this objection is that pardon, properly speaking, refers to the right of a sovereign to remit the punishment of the guilty. But if one has an *obligation* to do something, he cannot have a *right* or *liberty* not to do that same thing. Therefore, if God has an *obligation* to withhold punishment from the elect in virtue of Christ's satisfaction he cannot *pardon* them, properly speaking, because God is not acting from the liberty of a right but from the moral necessity of an obligation. Owen's response is not to deny that God has an obligation to pardon the sin of the elect. Instead, he argues that the whole dispensation of grace, with Christ's satisfaction and work, has the character of pardon. And this is because it rests on a free and gracious promise of God, according to which Christ was constituted our surety and mediator in the covenant of redemption.⁹¹

Now, Alan Clifford's work has been particularly critical of Owen's atonement theology, arguing that it is governed by an abstract teleology and that the commercial themes in Owen's thought over-extend the analogy between sin and debts. In response to the criticisms of Owen raised by Clifford, Trueman has attempted to minimize the importance of this point, arguing that the commercial themes are only of "subsidiary" importance to Owen's atonement theology, and that the analogy between sin and debts should not be understood in "crudely quantitative terms".⁹² Clifford does indeed impute a very rigid commercialism to Owen, as though Owen's atonement theology cannot operate outside of the analogy between sins and debts. Indeed, Clifford claims that the theology of definite atonement "stands or falls" on this

⁸⁹ Grotius and Baxter maintained that Christ made satisfaction for sin in that he provided that which was the *equivalent (tantundem)* due. This allowed them to claim that Christ made real satisfaction for sin, while also claiming that God genuinely pardons their sin in the act of accepting an equivalent payment, in place of the *idem* originally required of sinners.

⁹⁰ Baxter, *Aphorismes of Justification* (London: Printed for Francis Tyton, 1649), 109, 304-306. This criticism, which was also advanced by the Socinians (*Racovian Catechism*, V.8, p. 305), developed out of a theme from Anselm's own *Cur Deus Homo*, where Anselm defines pardon as God's will not to punish (I.12, 19). Of course, this was not a problem for Anselm's atonement theory, because he did not regard Christ's satisfaction as a punishment for sin, but as an *alternative* to punishment (I.8, 10).

⁹¹ *Works*, 10:444-446.

⁹² *Claims of Truth*, 140, n. 115; 220-225. Tay makes a similar argument ("Priesthood of Christ", 212-215).

analogy.⁹³ But this criticism fails to recognize that the commercial analogy that runs throughout Owen's atonement theology derives its force from a more fundamental moral discourse that is grounded in the natural law, namely, the moral obligation of any person to make "satisfaction" or "restitution" for personal injury or loss which their actions have inflicted upon another. Owen himself acknowledges this point, which is why he states that sins "are not debts only or properly", but are assigned the term "metaphorically".⁹⁴ In my estimation, then, Trueman is certainly justified in his claim, to the extent that Owen's argument is not strictly *reducible* to the commercial analogy.

However, it would be wrong for us to characterize this as a merely "subsidiary" point for Owen. To be sure, the analogy between sin and debts was not exclusive to High Calvinists embracing particular redemption. Virtually all atonement traditions stemming from Anselm made considerable use of this analogy as well to explain why the incarnation and death of Christ was a fitting means for recovering sinners.⁹⁵ But Owen's use of the commercial analogy does reveal an important (if often unstated) detail peculiar to his theology of divine justice — namely, that in formalizing an eternal covenant between himself and the Son, the Father *obligates* himself to forgive the sin of the elect. This concept is, in fact, inextricable from the notion that Christ offered the *idem* on behalf of the elect, and so lies at the very heart of Owen's account of Christ's work. As such, this point does in fact underwrite the whole economy of redemption, for Owen. And, in that respect, Clifford is correct to observe the special importance of commercial themes to Owen's project.

The double-payment argument advances a key element of Owen's atonement theology, and so aptly illustrates the importance which Owen assigns to the notion that God carries obligations to creatures by his promise. To my knowledge, Owen nowhere addresses the problem of whether this introduces a kind of proportion between God and creatures, though he clearly thinks the divine promise introduces a proportion between that which is promised and that which is performed. However, as Owen followed Suárez on several of these points, it is conceivable that he might have made recourse to Suárez's argument that all creaturely rights are held jointly with God, as a grant of his dominion, so that even in matters of justice

⁹³ Clifford, *Atonement and Justification: English Evangelical Theology 1640-1790, An Evaluation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 127. It is worth noting that other Reformed thinkers have criticized Owen at this same point. Bavinck, for example, expresses concern about the degree to which Owen identifies sins with debts (*Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:401).

⁹⁴ *Works*, 10:567. "Debt", here, carries the sense of *debitum*, "obligation".

there remains a kind of disproportion between God and the creature.⁹⁶ In any event, however, the notion that God has real obligations is fundamental to Owen's account of divine justice, and the whole purpose of this claim was to explain the efficiency of Christ's satisfaction in light of God's absolute dominion over creatures.

4.2 The Covenant of Works

The concept of a "covenant" is used in a wide variety of ways in Scripture, and Owen recognizes that the mere use of the language does not denote the proper "nature and conditions" of a covenant.⁹⁷ At the same time, however, while Scripture never expressly names it as a covenant, Owen argues that Adam's original relation to God did have the *nature* of a covenant. For "the law of his obedience was attended with promises and threatenings, rewards and punishments, suited unto the goodness and holiness of God"; and "every law with rewards and recompenses annexed hath the nature of a covenant".⁹⁸

Unlike other covenants in which God acts unilaterally on an "absolute promise",⁹⁹ the covenant of works was a *conditional* covenant¹⁰⁰ in that Adam's enjoyment of the promised reward was contingent upon his continued personal obedience to God's commands. In the state of innocence, Adam had no right or title to eternal life given to him immediately in and with his creation — he had to *obtain* a right to reward by his *works*.¹⁰¹ The principle of the covenant of works was "do this and live". And in spite of the fact that any work Adam performed would be fully disproportionate to the reward promised, Owen emphasizes that, had Adam given his full and complete obedience to God, fulfilling the condition of the covenant, he would have obtained an *ius ad rem* to eternal life of God's justice, and so would have truly merited it. Owen thus describes the covenant of works as being fundamentally "remunerative" in nature, "respecting an antecedent obedience in us."¹⁰²

⁹⁵ Anselm himself depends heavily on commercial analogies throughout *Cur Deus Homo* (I.11-15, 20-25).

⁹⁶ *Disputatio De Iustitia Qua Deus*, III.31.

⁹⁷ *Works*, 19:81.

⁹⁸ *Works*, 19:337.

⁹⁹ *Works*, 19:81.

¹⁰⁰ See Stoeber, "The Covenant of Works in Puritan Theology", 204-231.

¹⁰¹ Correlatively, Owen claims, in contrast with Piscator, that mere pardon of sin is insufficient to grant sinners a right to eternal life — the sinner must be made a participant in the imputed righteousness of Christ (*Works*, 5:269).

¹⁰² *Works*, 23:69.

The conditional nature of this covenant is a theme which Owen sees throughout Scripture. First, in the narrative of Genesis 2, in which God includes a penalty and promise alongside his command to Adam and Eve that they should not eat of the fruit of the tree.¹⁰³ Again, the conditional nature of this covenant features heavily in the old covenant instituted at Sinai. According to Owen, the Siniatic covenant included a re-publication of the law originally contained in the covenant of works. So, while the people of Israel participated in the promises of the new covenant, Owen thinks the form of religion under the old covenant more closely mirrored the rigid legal demands of the covenant of works.¹⁰⁴ This, on Owen's reading, is the one of the principle reasons that the apostles often contrast the new covenant, inaugurated by Christ, with the ministry of Moses (Heb. 8:6; cf. 2 Cor. 3).¹⁰⁵

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the conditional nature of the covenant of works is reflected in the formal character of the work of Christ. Just as grace perfects nature, so Owen understands the necessity of Christ's work and the nature of his merit as a repair of the broken conditions stipulated within the covenant of works (Rom. 8:3, 4). So, in Galatians 4:4, when Christ is said to have been born "under the law to redeem them that were under the law", Owen argues that "the law" here refers to the *moral* law, which is the rule of obedience annexed to the covenant of works.¹⁰⁶ Christ submitted himself to this law for our sakes, not only by bearing its sanctions and becoming a "curse" for us through his vicarious death, but also by his obedience, fulfilling the law and so actively meriting the covenant promises on our behalf.¹⁰⁷ By implication, then, the form of Christ's work speaks to the *conditional* nature of our original relation to God by this covenant.

In his commentary on the book of Hebrews, Owen lays out three essential qualities of any covenant: i) it is between at least two distinct persons or parties, ii) it is a voluntary agreement, iii) it pertains to things in the power of the parties covenanting together, and ultimately serves their mutual advantage.¹⁰⁸ The covenanting parties in the covenant of works

¹⁰³ *Works*, 18:499 f.

¹⁰⁴ While Owen argues that old testament saints did participate in the new covenant, he claims that the form of worship under the Siniatic covenant, which he describes as a "yoke of bondage", "belonged not unto" the new covenant as such, though it was not inconsistent with it (*Works*, 23:65). Further, see Ryan McGraw's *A Heavenly Directory*, 166-186.

¹⁰⁵ See *Works*, 23:68-100. Cf. "The Minority Report: John Owen on Sinai", in *Puritan Theology*, 293-304; McGraw, *A Heavenly Directory*, 166-174.

¹⁰⁶ *Works*, 5272-275.

¹⁰⁷ *Works*, 5:223-240, 251-273, 275-277; 10:265-273; 23:54-64.

¹⁰⁸ *Works*, 19:82-83. Owen has different variations of this, e.g., his treatment of the nature of a covenant in *Vindiciae Evangelicae* (*Works*, 12:498-499).

were God and human creatures, with Adam functioning here as a “public person” representing the corporate interest of humankind. Of course, Owen regards Adam as being an historical figure and the natural-head of the human race, from whom all human persons share a common lineage and ancestry. But while this natural relation to Adam is essential for understanding his legacy, Owen argues that it is only a divine *appointment* that could establish Adam in his official capacity as a covenant-head and representative:

Now, this could not be [*viz.* that the human race is represented in Adam] but by virtue of some divine constitution; for naturally Adam could have no other relation to his posterity than every other man hath unto his own: and this was no other but that *covenant* which God made with all mankind in him; whose promises and threatenings, rewards and punishments, must therefore equally respect them with him.¹⁰⁹

For Owen, as for most of the Reformed scholastics, the nature of Adam’s capacity as a covenant-head was largely inferred from the analogy which Paul draws between Christ and Adam in Romans 5.¹¹⁰ The elect participate in Christ’s righteous life and sacrificial death by virtue of his appointment as their sponsor in the covenant of redemption (which we will see in the next chapter). In a similar way, fallen creatures participate in Adam’s sin (“so death passed among all men”, Rom. 5:12) because Adam had been appointed a representative of the covenant of works.¹¹¹ Adam’s headship in the covenant of works is therefore a mirror image of the headship of Christ in the covenant of grace.

In accordance with his right to rule, God formed Adam immediately within a covenantal relation, the covenant being “inseparably annexed” to the law of his creation.¹¹² In this respect, the covenant between God and Adam was of a somewhat different nature than those covenants made between equals, which antecedently require the consent of both covenanting parties in order for the covenant to be ratified. Of course, God, having absolute dominion over his creatures, is well within his right to establish such a covenant with Adam. Still, Owen argues that Adam nonetheless offered his voluntary consent to the covenant of works. First, by those innate inclinations concreated with his nature, which uniformly attested

¹⁰⁹ *Works*, 18:149.

¹¹⁰ See Owen’s extended exegesis of this passage, *Works*, 5:321-338. Owen claims that a simple reading of the passage “without prejudice” would be sufficient to evince “that the design of the apostle is to prove, that as the sin of Adam was imputed unto all men unto condemnation, so the righteousness or obedience of Christ is imputed unto all that believe unto the justification of life” (5:322). Cf. Trueman, *John Owen*, 73.

¹¹¹ According to Owen, sinners share in sin’s corruption by virtue of their natural relation to Adam (*Works*, 1:199), while the guilt of Adam’s sin is imputed to sinners by virtue of their covenantal relation (5:325). Owen notes that Adam’s covenant-headship ceases upon the breaking of the covenant (22:390).

the goodness, holiness, and justice of God's covenant. And secondly, by his acceptance of the pledges of the covenant, the two trees given in the garden, which were signs of the promises and sanctions that God stipulated as part of the covenant of works.¹¹³

In any case, the covenant of works is not only fair and equal but, according to Owen, was to the highest advantage of the creature. In the first instance, the rule or law appointed to regulate this covenant was nothing other than the law of nature.¹¹⁴ And as such, the demands of this law were fully proportionate to those powers and abilities first given to Adam in his creation. He was fully ready to love and serve God. It was as well as if God had commanded a fish to swim or a bird to fly. In other words, in giving this covenant to humankind, God required nothing of Adam but what he had already disposed him to perform by the native inclinations of his given nature:

God in the first covenant required nothing of man, prescribed nothing unto him, but what there was a principle for the doing and accomplishing of it ingrafted and implanted on his nature, which rendered all those commands equal, holy, and good; for what need any man complain of that which requires nothing of him but what he is from his own frame and principles inclined unto?¹¹⁵

Secondly, in this covenant, God rewards the creature in a manner that is disproportionate to what their works truly deserve. For by nature, the creature's works "come infinitely short of the desert of an eternal reward by any rule of divine justice".¹¹⁶ So, when God crowns these meager efforts with eternal life, he gives creatures *infinitely more* than their due. Consequently, Owen states that the reward promised in the covenant of works "did in strict justice exceed the worth of the obedience required, and so was a superadded effect of [God's] goodness and grace".¹¹⁷ Owen thus regards the covenant of works as upholding the priority of divine grace, for by it God accords a value to creaturely acts and crowns them with a reward far exceeding their natural desert.

¹¹² *Works*, 19:406.

¹¹³ *Works*, 23:61.

¹¹⁴ On the relationship between the rule of the covenant and the law of nature, see below.

¹¹⁵ *Works*, 6:472.

¹¹⁶ *Works*, 3:379-380.

¹¹⁷ *Works*, 19:337.

Lastly, Owen states that the “immediate end” of this covenant was “to bring man by due obedience unto the rest of God”.¹¹⁸ The covenant thus extends to creatures the promise of eternal life — and such a life as is “accompanied with every thing needful to make it blessed and happy”. Indeed, it promises eternal life in the presence of *God* and in the rapture of the beatific vision, in which the creature will have immediate enjoyment of the divine essence. In a sense, therefore, the reward promised in this covenant is, as Owen states, nothing short of “God himself”.¹¹⁹ Such a reward is infinitely beyond the reach of the creature’s natural powers, and so is incomparably greater than any good which humans might have hoped to obtain by natural means. What greater promise could be given to creatures?

We should note in conjunction with this final point that not all Reformed accounts agreed in naming a supernatural end as the reward extended by the covenant of works. One example sometimes cited in the secondary literature was Owen’s good friend Thomas Goodwin, who in his treatise *Of the Creatures, and the Condition of their State by Creation* argues that, in the garden, humankind was originally destined only to a natural beatitude “enjoyed *per modum naturæ*”. It is only with the advent of the grace of Christ that humans are elevated to the promise of a supernatural beatitude in the vision of God.¹²⁰ This appears to have been a minority view, confined mainly to Puritan England and Scotland. But it is very suggestive of the doctrinal interests driving many Reformed anthropologies of the period, the extent of their critique of natural religion, and the lengths to which they would go in order to identify Christ himself as the guarantor of the creature’s supernatural end. Indeed, as Mark Jones has shown, Goodwin himself was a supralapsarian,¹²¹ and this feature of his thought was an extension of the *felix culpa* theme, specifying the manner in which the work of Christ exceeds God’s works in creation and providence more generally.

While Owen did not follow Goodwin on this point, passages of his writing do evince some supralapsarian sympathies. I have already illustrated this point above in our section on

¹¹⁸ *Works*, 19:406.

¹¹⁹ *Works*, 6:473.

¹²⁰ *The Works of Thomas Goodwin*, vol. 7 (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1863), 48-53; cf. Heppe, 294-295; Rowland Ward, *God and Adam: Reformed Theology and the Creation Covenant* (Wantirna, Australia: New Melbourne Press, 2003), 108-111; Joel Beeke and Mark Jones, *A Puritan Theology* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2012), 227-229; Mark Herzer, “Adam’s Reward: Heaven or Earth”, *Drawn Into Controversie: Reformed Theological Diversity and Debates within Seventeenth-Century British Puritanism*, ed. Michael A. G. Haykin and Mark Jones (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), 162-182; Beach, *Christ and the Covenant*, 128-135.

¹²¹ Mark Jones, *Why Heaven Kissed Earth: The Christology of the Puritan, Reformed Orthodox Theologian, Thomas Goodwin* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2010), 23.

the end of the divine will, where I showed Owen's tendency to identify the redemptive work of Christ as the necessary form of God's self-revelation. Throughout the course of his career, Owen's theology becomes increasingly Christologically concentrated, ultimately leading him to posit a very sharp break between the covenant of works and the new covenant. And this raises questions about the relation Owen posits between the covenant of works and the ends of rational creatures. This is an important element of Owen's theology of divine government informing both his account of divine justice as well as his argument for the necessity of the incarnation. Owen addresses some of these issues in an exercitation from his Hebrews commentary, "Of the Causes of the Sabbath" (1668),¹²² and so our next section will be set within a discussion of the nature of the Sabbath as the pledge of the covenant.

4.3 The Sabbath and the Ends of Rational Creatures

We have already observed that Owen regards worship as the fundamental vocation of human beings, but in this section we concern ourselves with a closely related question of the *ends* of rational creatures. It makes sense that we should turn to Owen's theology of the sabbath to do this, because Owen regards the "day of rest" as both an ordinance of creation, in which the creature fulfills its vocation by the worship of its Creator, and also as a "pledge of the covenant", by which the creature shares in the promises extended to them by their Great Rewarder.¹²³

We cannot do full justice to this topic in Owen's thought here. He did, after all, write over 300 pages on the topic in his theological commentary on the book of Hebrews. Of course, in many respects, this reflects how heavily politicized sabbath-observance had become in post-Laudian England, where it acquired the status of a shibboleth.¹²⁴ Strict observance of the sabbath was one of several so called "strategies of alienation" that distinguished "Puritan" practice, highlighting the widespread religious and political divisions of the time.¹²⁵ However, the practice was much more than merely a political or cultural protest. To the Puritans, it was principally a matter of Christian witness and obedience. As

¹²² *Works*, 19:326-384.

¹²³ *Works*, 19:345.

¹²⁴ See Kenneth L. Parker's, *The English Sabbath: A Study of Doctrine and Discipline from the Reformation to the Civil War* (Cambridge: CUP, 2002), ch. 7. On Owen's theology of the Sabbath, see Kapic, *Communion*, ch. 6.

Owen understood his own context, he claimed that “the profession of our Christian religion in the world at this day doth depend upon it” — that is, on the observance of the sabbath.¹²⁶ So, clearly, he regarded it to be a topic of considerable theological importance.

The biblical creation narrative concludes on the *seventh* day, when it is said that God “rested (*šābat*) from all his work” (Gen. 2:3; KJV). Like Augustine, Owen notes that the resting here attributed to God cannot refer to the cessation of all God’s operations toward the creature. For as John 5:17 says, God is “working until now”, as God’s power constantly supports creatures and conserves them by his providence.¹²⁷ To what, then, does God’s sabbath rest refer? Augustine had highlighted the fact that God is said to rest, not on the sixth day after the creation of humankind is completed, but on the *seventh* day which has a “morning”, but no “evening”. This, Augustine argued, indicates that the “rest” envisioned by the text refers to God’s eternal delight in his own perfection *ad intra*, rather than in the works of his hands *ad extra*:

. . . in loving himself he preferred himself to the things he had made, by sanctifying, not the day on which he began to make them, nor the one on which he completed and perfect them, in case his joy should seem to have been increased by them whether in the making or the completion of them, but the day on which he rested from them in himself.¹²⁸

In other words, God’s “rest” is an *eternal* “day” to be contrasted with *created* time. This is intended to reinforce the derivative nature of creaturely goodness, and in this way to indicate God’s perfection *in se* as the first and final cause of all things.

Owen’s reading, by contrast, is more historically oriented, arguing that the “rest” envisioned here indicates the cessation of God’s work of distinction, and signifies God’s delight in the works of his hands as being “suited unto the end aimed at”.¹²⁹ Owen draws an analogy here to the idiom of Zephaniah 3:17, which depicts God’s delight in the promised redemption and sanctification of Israel by saying that God “will *rest* in his love”. God’s love for Israel will be made perfect and complete — it will “not complain of any thing in them”,

125 Andrew Cambers, drawing on Baxter’s autobiography, uses this as his main example of the “strategies of alienation” by which “the godly” distinguished themselves from their neighbors (*Godly Reading: Print, Manuscript and Puritanism in England, 1580-1720* [Cambridge: CUP, 2011], 21-22).

126 *Works*, 19:263.

127 *Works*, 19:334; Augustine, “Literal Meaning of Genesis” IV.11.

128 “Literal Meaning of Genesis”, IV.15-16.

or “seek for a further object”; rather, it will “rest with contentment”, being “fully satisfied in that object he hath fixed his love on”.¹³⁰ In the same way, God’s resting from the work of creation indicates “the satisfaction and complacency that [God] took in his works, as effects of his goodness, power, and wisdom”.¹³¹

Unlike other Reformed figures who regarded the Sabbath as an institution of the old covenant,¹³² one which is ultimately fulfilled in Christ, Owen sides with a long-standing strand of Christian teaching which understood the Sabbath to be a creation ordinance.¹³³ Consequently, Owen regards it as an indispensable moral obligation following necessarily on the law of our creation. Yet, Owen classifies the Sabbath as a “mixed” law, that is, one having in its nature elements of both moral and positive law.¹³⁴ The particular *day* set aside for worship was a positive institution, and so undiscoverable to natural reason. Under the *old* covenant, the observance of the sabbath was fixed on the seventh day, as a reminder of God’s work of creation. With the inauguration of the *new* covenant, however, the observance of the sabbath was moved to the first day of the week, the “Lord’s day”, as a sign of Christ’s victorious resurrection and the completion of his work of redemption. Still, Owen claims that the sanctification of some *particular time* for the worship of God — one day in seven, at least¹³⁵ — remains an element of the moral law, and as such is unchangeable and essential to the moral order of the universe.

As it is a mixed command, Owen sees the institution of the sabbath as having several distinct ends. In the first instance, the sabbath is a reminder of the delight and joy that God takes in all the works of his hands, and especially in those creatures which he has made in his own image. Moreover, the sabbath was also intended to be a means of rendering that honor and worship which is naturally due to God in virtue of the creature’s moral dependence upon him. Owen argues that a particular *time* is necessary to this end because the worship of God

¹²⁹ *Works*, 19:335.

¹³⁰ *Works*, 2:25. It is worth noting that as Owen employs it in this context, “love” is God’s “consequent love” — that is, God’s approbation of those good things which he has made.

¹³¹ *Works*, 19:334.

¹³² E.g., Calvin, *Institutes*, II.viii.28-34.

¹³³ On the history of this point, see Parker, *English Sabbath*, ch. 2.

¹³⁴ *Works*, 19:331. The classification of “mixed” laws was, itself, something of a controversial nature. See Kopic, *Communion*, 210-211.

¹³⁵ This principle is based on the notion of a “hebdomadal (or, “weekly”) revolution of time”, a concept which Owen takes to be both universally attested and explicitly taught in Genesis (*cf.* 19:308-313, 426-427). The freedom of God in establishing the covenant is reflected in the determining the sabbath to be on a day of God’s

is a properly *social* act, and so cannot be fulfilled without the gathering of God's creatures in a particular time and place.¹³⁶ Finally, the sabbath was intended as a pledge of that perfect rest in which creatures attain their end, namely, in the vision of God's essence which is explicitly promised in the covenant. These last two ends of the sabbath correspond to the special *vocation* and *end* of human persons, respectively, but it is the *ends* of creatures which principally concerns us here.

In an attempt to demonstrate the ongoing relevance of sabbath-observance for new covenant Christians, Owen frequently assigns the ends of the sabbath to different *grounds*, distinguishing those unchanging aspects of the sabbath that are grounded immediately in *creation*, from those which are grounded in the administration of the *covenant*, which is itself contingent and subject to change. Owen consistently argues that worship, as the vocation of the rational creature, is an obligation "inseparable from our nature"¹³⁷ because it is grounded in the law of nature.

The worship of God is that which we are made for, as to our station in this world, and is the means and condition of our enjoyment of him in glory, wherein consists the ultimate end, as unto us, of our creation. This worship, therefore, is required of us by the law of our creation; and it is upon the matter all that is required of us thereby, seeing we are obliged by it to do all things to the glory of God . . . No man, therefore, ever doubted but that by the law of nature we were bound to worship God, and solemnly to express that worship; for else wherefore were we brought forth in this world?¹³⁸

Yet Owen appears to equivocate when specifying the *basis* and *ground* of the vision of God as the creature's final end, sometimes grounding it in the *covenant* and at other times in the nature of the creature's *rational faculties*. This is a point of some consequence. Ambiguity on this point conceals some of the more radical implications of Owen's theology of divine justice, and it allows him to hold together teachings that might otherwise be in tension with one another.

Now, traditionally, the scholastics defined the *essence* of any creature in terms of its existence for the sake of some particular *act* or *end*. But creatures can only act for an end that

choosing, but "so long as God is pleased to establish any covenant with man, he hath and doth invariably require one day in seven to be set apart unto the assignation of praise and glory to himself" (*Works*, 19:337).

¹³⁶ *Works*, 19:336.

¹³⁷ *Works*, 19:332.

¹³⁸ *Works*, 19:332.

is proportionate to their nature, and since the essence of God is infinite, it infinitely exceeds all powers of human nature. For this reason, the scholastics typically maintained a distinction between nature and grace — that is, between human nature *abstractly considered*, and human nature *as it is advanced and elevated by grace*. This distinction entailed the *superadded* character of grace and, for many, served to reinforce the priority and necessity of God’s grace for living the life of faith. The creature can live unto God only by the grace of God, and not by its natural powers alone. Yet, because a creature’s nature must be proportionate to its end, this distinction between nature and grace often lead the Medievals to distinguish between two separate ends for human beings — a natural end that is proportionate to human nature abstractly considered, and a supernatural end that is proportionate to human nature as it is elevated and advanced by grace. Accordingly, many also posited a *natural* beatitude, in which the natural powers find their rest, and *supernatural* beatitude, which is the rest and final end enjoyed by the saints and all those sanctified by the Spirit’s grace.

As we have seen already, though Owen does not prefer to speak of grace as being “superadded” to human nature, he does in fact affirm the substance of this claim in his distinction between nature and grace. Yet, as Owen’s statement above indicates, he denies that rational creatures have two ends. Instead, he argues that humans were made for one *supernatural* end because the “capacity” of rational creatures is of such a nature that they could not attain rest in a purely *natural* end. For example, the following quotation, taken from Owen’s exercitation, “The Causes of the Sabbath” (1668), discusses the original state of Adam under a “threefold consideration” — first, as a rational creature; second, as a covenant-partner with God; and finally, as created under the terms of the covenant of works, in particular. The first two of these points are of particular interest in relating the covenant to the ends of the rational human nature.¹³⁹ With respect to the first consideration, abstracting human nature from its setting under the covenant, Owen writes the following:

He [Adam] was made a rational creature, and thereby necessarily in a moral dependence on God: for being endowed with *intellectual faculties*, in an immortal soul, capable of eternal blessedness or misery, able to know God, and to regard him as the first cause and last end of all, as the author of his being and object of his blessedness, it was naturally and necessarily incumbent on him, without any further considerations, to love, fear, and obey him, and to trust in him as a preserver and rewarder. And

¹³⁹ The third and final consideration of Adam’s original state does not add substantially to the relationship between covenant and creation. It merely describes the “peculiar form” of the covenant of works, specifying the

this the order of his nature, called “the image of God,” inclined and enabled him unto. For it was not possible that such a creature should be produced, and not lie under an obligation unto all those duties which the nature of God and his own, and the relation of the one to the other, made necessary.¹⁴⁰

Passages like these also seem to suggest that Adam’s supernatural vocation and end were rendered necessary by the capacities of his *rational faculties*,¹⁴¹ by virtue of which he is “capable of eternal blessedness or misery”, and having God as the “object of his blessedness”. Additionally, Owen also appeals to an argument from the *debitum naturæ*, claiming that the creature’s natural capacities could not be “esteemed reasonable” unless given for the end of the enjoyment of God.

And this belonged unto that state of man wherein he was created, namely, that he should have a pledge of eternal rest. Neither could his duty and capacity be otherwise answered or esteemed reasonable. His duty, which was working in moral obedience, had a natural relation unto reward; and his capacity was such as could not be satisfied, nor himself attain absolute rest, but in the enjoyment of God.¹⁴²

In essence, this claim presupposes that the intellectual powers of humankind are adapted in advance for the special end of knowing and enjoying God. Indeed, it is on this basis that Owen infers that sabbath-observance is itself a dictate of the *moral law*, and so a natural obligation held on the basis of “the law of man’s creation”.¹⁴³ But if all creatures exist for the sake of some act in which they are perfected, and if rational creatures attain perfection only in the enjoyment of God, then this argument implies that it would have been *absurd* — and therefore *impossible*, God being a supremely rational being — to have given Adam his rational faculties and powers only to deny him the promise of an eternal enjoyment of the divine essence.¹⁴⁴

Yet, as I have argued in this chapter, Owen also claims that the enjoyment of God’s essence is an end which God extends to creatures only by means of the *covenant*, the

rule of Adam’s reward — “absolute strict righteousness and holiness” — and identifying the seventh day as the time appointed for the worship of God under this covenant (*Works*, 19:338).

¹⁴⁰ *Works*, 19:336-337. Emphasis original.

¹⁴¹ Though, it should be noted, that Owen does not exclude original righteousness from this consideration, referring as he does to the image of God which “inclined and enabled” Adam to live unto God. Accordingly, Owen is not here speaking of human nature *absolutely*, in *abstraction* from divine grace and in a state of “pure nature”. Indeed, as we have seen previously, Owen thinks that, in a state of pure nature, humankind is absolutely incapable of having God as the object of its blessedness.

¹⁴² *Works*, 19:335-336.

¹⁴³ *Works*, 19:337.

¹⁴⁴ This point also features prominently in the argument of Anselm (*Cur Deus Homo*, II.1).

immediate purpose of which is to bring creatures into God's rest.¹⁴⁵ Owen understands the covenant to be an act of divine grace, and therefore a fundamentally *contingent* expression of God's government. So, one page later in his treatment on "The Causes of the Sabbath", Owen writes the following concerning the second consideration of Adam's condition in his original state, namely, as he is God's covenant-partner:

Man in his creation, with respect unto the ends of God therein, was *constituted under a covenant*. That is, the law of his obedience was attended with promises and threatenings, rewards and punishments, suited unto the goodness and holiness of God; for every law with rewards and recompenses annexed hath the nature of a covenant. And in this case, although the promise wherewith man was encouraged unto obedience, which was that of eternal life with God, did in strict justice exceed the worth of the obedience required, and so was a superadded effect of goodness and grace, yet was it suited unto the constitution of a covenant meet for man to serve God in unto his glory . . . Now, this covenant belonged unto the law of creation; for although God might have dealt with man in a way of *absolute sovereignty*, requiring obedience of him without a covenant of a reward infinitely exceeding it, yet having done so in his creation, it belongs unto and is inseparable from the law thereof.¹⁴⁶

We have noted already above that Owen thinks that every command of an authority carries an implicit promise of reward and punishment. In a very general sense, then, Adam and Eve could not have received any command from God without the promise of reward or punishment. However, in this context, Owen has in mind the *particular* rewards and punishments annexed to the covenant of works. Here, when the contingency of the covenant is in view, he describes that the supernatural end of rational creatures in eternal life as a "*superadded effect of goodness and grace*", indicating that the covenant is accidentally related to the natural order, and as such is neither natural nor necessary. God had a right of dominion over his creatures and so might have dealt with humans according to his "absolute sovereignty" — that is, he was under no *natural obligation* to grant the creature a reward "infinitely exceeding it".¹⁴⁷

When we raised this issue earlier in this chapter, I suggested that Owen's claims regarding the possibility of God creating man *without* the covenant might be understood

¹⁴⁵ *Works*, 19:406-407.

¹⁴⁶ *Works*, 19:337. Emphasis original.

¹⁴⁷ As we will see in the next chapter, Owen denies that God has a natural inclination to seek the happiness of the creature (*Works*, 10:322), for God's dominion over the creature entitles him to do with it as he pleases. This thread of Owen's thought also suggests that it is not necessary for God to govern rational creatures toward a supernatural end.

analytically. On this reading, the counterfactual is intended not so much to speculate about whether the covenant might not have been, as to identify the real and actual *basis* of the creature's reward in the works of God. In this respect, it is an element of Owen's critique of natural religion indicating that the creature's reward does not follow from its works *ex natura rei*,¹⁴⁸ but is rather a gracious effect of God's *promise* extended in the covenant. Yet, even so, if the *covenant* is a free and contingent institution of God, and so only *accidentally* related to the natural order, this implies that the supernatural end promised to the creature in the covenant was a free institution of God, and so not strictly necessitated by the nature of the rational creature as such.

It would appear from this, then, that Owen is caught on the horns of his doctrine of creation — is the promise of a supernatural end the free and contingent institution of God, and so not necessary to human nature; or, do the intellectual faculties of rational creatures require a supernatural end, so that the creation of a rational creature would be absurd without the promise of the vision of God? If Owen maintains that the covenant was superadded to the natural order, then it is possible that human beings could have existed *without* the covenant. And so it appears that Owen would be forced to contradict himself and to concede that the creature might have had a purely natural end after all, even if only theoretically.¹⁴⁹ This would likely disturb important elements of his moral theology. In particular, we have seen that Owen's critique of natural religion leads him to identify God as the proper object of all true moral action, concentrating the moral goodness of any act in the intention of the *will*, rather than in the intention of the *act* and its objective conformity to the order of nature.¹⁵⁰ Positing a natural end for creatures alongside a supernatural end would require Owen to soften this critique and allot a more expansive role to the law of nature within his moral

¹⁴⁸ As we have said, this pertains equally to human acts as they are natural *and* as they are elevated by grace. The formal ground of merit is the *covenant*, and not from the creature's works as such.

¹⁴⁹ Owen appears to argue this very point in an earlier exercitation on the messiah where, citing Hebrews 11:6, he claims that the inclination to reward the creature is "essential" to God and "inseparable" from the divine nature. Owen even claims that this reward is due of God's *justice*. But he distinguishes between the general reward due to Adam for his obedience — namely, the "continuance" of his blessed condition in the state of innocence, which issues from divine justice as a *debitum naturæ* — and the eternal enjoyment of the divine essence which is the *special* reward annexed to the covenant: "for, that obedience should be rewarded is of justice, but that such a reward should be proposed unto the temporary obedience of a creature as is the eternal enjoyment of God, was of mere grace and bounty" (*Works*, 18:144). This suggests that the creature might have had a strictly natural end, even if only hypothetically.

¹⁵⁰ Owen acknowledges that an act can be "materially" good without having God as its object, but because the proper object of moral action is God, moral action must properly contain something "supernatural in it" (*Works*, 3:473-475). The unregenerate are thus incapable of proper moral action, which is why Owen resists the claim that "moral virtue" is all God requires of the saints. For Owen takes "moral virtue" to refer to wholly *natural* moral acts. Spiritual virtues, by contrast, "exceed the sphere of morality" (3:525).

theology than he was previously comfortable. Alternatively, Owen might maintain that the vision of God is the necessary end of all rational creatures, but in this case he would seem to be brought into conflict with his emphasis on the contingency and freedom of the covenant. But this element played a crucial role in his theology of grace and his critique of merit theology. Conceding this point would force him to forfeit important elements of his theology of divine justice, and would likely require him to acknowledge some kind of natural proportion between the creature's act and reward.

How, then, does Owen attempt to reconcile the relationship between the covenant and the ends of rational creatures? We should say first that this does not appear to be a question which Owen entertained at any considerable length. As a result, ambiguity on this point persists throughout Owen writings and with important material consequences for his theology of divine government. The attempt to reconcile these positions would therefore be somewhat speculative. Nevertheless, were one to attempt a "repair" of Owen's thought on this point, there is a passage in his commentary on Hebrews which is suggestive of how Owen might have responded to such a criticism.

Fairly early in his career, Owen faced heavy criticism from Baxter and others who argued that his account of the atonement was antinomian because he claimed that Christ formally fulfilled the sinner's obligation to the moral law. And if Christ fulfilled the moral law in the sinner's place, then it would appear that the sinner is no longer obligated to obey God under the moral law. Later in his career, in response to these criticisms, Owen begins to speak about the covenant as though it comprised the form of the moral law.¹⁵¹ By describing creation and covenant as standing in a similar relation to that of matter and form, Owen is able to simultaneously unite the two very closely, while also allowing for considerable flexibility in the formal character of the creature's relation to God. This enables Owen to maintain his appeals to the unchanging nature of the moral law, while also affirming that Christ formally fulfilled the obligations of the moral law stipulated of the creature under the covenant of works.

¹⁵¹ This can be seen in Owen's Hebrews commentary, but it is most explicit in *Pneumatologia* (1674) and *Justification* (1677). See *Works*, 5:246-248, 275-276; 3:525-527, 604-609.

This relationship between creation and the covenant in fact undergirds Owen's larger theology of the sabbath. "[A]ll our rest in God is founded in his own rest in his works".¹⁵² But sinners, having broken the covenant by sin, are incapable of finding rest in the covenant of works. They must therefore take refuge in a new work of God — in the redemptive work of Christ, who was appointed as Mediator to obtain their rest and purchase their right to glory. Just as God rested on the seventh day, bringing an end to his work of creation and delighting in his creatures, so Christ rested on the first day by his resurrection, bringing to conclusion his work of redemption that he might rejoice in his new creation, that is, the church.¹⁵³ The worship of the saints on the *first* day of the week is thus a living witness to Christ's finished work, and to the *uniqueness* of the rest extended to sinners in the covenant of grace.

the observation of the *seventh day precisely* was a pledge of God's rest in the covenant of works, and of our rest in him and with him thereby; so that it cannot be retained without a re-introduction of that covenant and the righteousness thereof. And therefore, although the command for the observation of a Sabbath to the Lord, so far as it is moral, is put over into the rule of the new covenant, wherein grace is administered for the duty it requires, yet take the *seventh day precisely as the seventh day*, and it is an old testament arbitrary institution, which falls under no promise of spiritual assistance in or unto the observation of it. Under the new testament we have found a new creation, a new law of creation, a new covenant: the rest of Christ in that work, law, and covenant.¹⁵⁴

Christ has brought an end to the law of the covenant of works, and when the author of Hebrews calls us to "labour . . . to enter into that rest" (4:11), he calls us to share by faith in the promises of the new covenant purchased by Christ.¹⁵⁵

Owen thus continues to posit a real distinction between the covenant and the natural order so that the law of the covenant can be radically altered in the advent of Christ. But Owen's mature view does not regard the covenant as a mere *addition* to a natural order that is already more or less self-contained. For the covenant is fundamental to all God's purposes in creation. So, while the covenant is accidentally related to the natural order, *it is not merely an* accident. In "Of the Lord's Day", an exercitation of his Hebrews commentary, Owen puts it this way:

¹⁵² *Works*, 19:407.

¹⁵³ *Works*, 19:419; 21:331-336.

¹⁵⁴ *Works*, 19:426.

¹⁵⁵ *Works*, 21:338; Kopic, *Communion*, 217-221.

The law of creation had a covenant included in it, or inseparably annexed unto it . . . Thus, therefore, must it be also in the new creation and the law thereof. Yea, because the covenant is that which as it were gathereth all things together, both in the works and law of God, and in our obedience, disposing them into that order which tendeth to the glory of God and the blessedness of the creatures in him, this is that which in both [the old and new] creations is principally to be considered; for without this, no end of God in his works or law could be attained, nor man be made blessed in a way of righteousness and goodness unto his glory.¹⁵⁶

The covenant “gather[s] all things together” in the sense that it supplies that “order” according to which God governs all things toward their end. To state the matter somewhat differently, we could say that creation finds its *telos* in the covenant, because the covenant determines the definite character and form of the creature’s relation to God. Owen of course maintains that God is free in the institution of the covenant, so that he was under no necessity to grant the covenant to creatures. God might therefore have dealt with mankind in a way of “absolute sovereignty”, rather than by the instrument of the covenant.¹⁵⁷ But Owen states here that God could not have accomplished his purposes in creation *without* the addition of the covenant, which suggests that, in a manner of speaking, *creation exists for the sake of the covenant*.

We might draw an analogy here to the theology of nature and grace that we observed previously in Owen’s account of human vocation. Creatures exist for the worship and praise of God, but they are incapable of praising God as they should by their natural powers alone. They are dependent on divine grace. So, while Owen thinks that grace perfects nature, he argues that human nature is merely an “inferior alloy”¹⁵⁸ to grace so that he can credit the creature’s power of living unto God wholly to the work of God’s grace. In a similar way, we might think of the natural order as an “inferior alloy” to the covenant. The covenant adds form, order and definition to the natural order, and in this way perfects it. So, while creation is a necessary pre-condition for the covenant, the covenant is itself the real *basis* of creation, supplying the end for the sake of which it exists.

¹⁵⁶ *Works*, 19:406.

¹⁵⁷ *Works*, 19:337.

¹⁵⁸ *Works*, 10:128.

In this respect, at least, Owen's theology of the covenant is not unlike that of Karl Barth. Barth famously described the covenant as the internal basis of creation, and creation as the external basis of the covenant. Barth also similarly speaks of the creature's nature as merely "equipment for grace" — that which exists to be addressed by God and taken up into his covenant. This gives grace a kind of "superadded" character, even while it insists that the creature's nature has no abstract, independent end, but exists only to live in communion with God.¹⁵⁹ Similarly, Owen appears to think that the rational powers of the creature exist for the sake of the *covenant* (and *not* vice versa) and for the grace of the Spirit through which they can obtain the end promised in the covenant. For this reason, it would be a mistake to think that Owen's theology of divine government seriously countenances the idea that God might have created humankind without the promise of the covenant. For although God had no obligation, and thus was under no external necessity to grant the covenant to creatures, humans exist only for the sake of the covenant. To presume the creation of a rational creature *without* the covenant would require us to posit altogether different ends for the created order than the ones that God in fact has instituted. The covenant *completes* God's work in creation by ordering creatures toward that end for the sake of which all things exist, namely, for the glory of God. We can even say, therefore, that the institution of the covenant was necessary on the basis of God's *iustitia regiminis*. For it belongs to God's righteousness of rule to govern his creatures in a manner that fully conforms to his good purpose, and God's good purpose is fully expressed in the grace by which he covenants with us.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have seen that Owen calls upon his theology of divine dominion in order to leverage out theologies of merit that are grounded in the nature of the creature's act. Instead, Owen argues that, given the infinite disproportion between God and the creature, any merit of the creature must be founded upon the covenant. The whole purpose of this argument was to cut strongly against the various species of natural religion in England, particularly as it regarded the latent moralism and semi-pelagianism of these circles. By denying any basis for merit within the natural order, Owen can ground God's remunerative justice in his free, contingent, and gracious condescension to the creature in the covenant.

¹⁵⁹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 31 vols., ed. G.W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2009), III/1, p. 231; cf. Webster, *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995), 64.

This covenant places “bounds” on God’s dominion and creates the conditions under which God and creatures might commune together under the terms of strict justice. Owen even argues that God maintains proper obligations to creatures by the covenant. Though somewhat controversial, we saw that this underwrites Owen’s theology of definite atonement through his “double payment” argument, which makes the efficiency and perfection of Christ’s satisfaction conditional on its communication of a right to eternal life to his elect. In this way, Owen’s theology of divine justice is tailored to support the unconditional nature of salvation by enhancing the sense in which Christ is said to “procure” or “purchase” salvation on behalf of the elect.

In the final section of this chapter, we examined an unresolved tension in Owen’s thought on the proper ground of the special end of humankind, namely, the vision of God — whether it arises contingently from the covenant, or whether it is necessary on the basis of their rational faculties. While Owen places considerable emphasis on the real contingency of the covenant, I suggested that it is best to read Owen as arguing that the covenant is the *form* of the moral law, which in God’s absolute dominion, it is his right to determine. So, while analytically speaking, God might have created humankind apart from the covenant, creation itself exists *only for the sake of the covenant*. Effectively, this moves discourse about the form of the creature’s communion with God away from the natural order as such, to the *covenant*, which is *above* nature. Against figures like Baxter and Grotius, this allows Owen to entitle himself to an unusually powerful conception of union with Christ. As we have said, this ultimately serves Owen’s theology of the new covenant, enabling him to assign the creature’s moral obedience a different end, as Christ has fulfilled the moral law in the creature’s stead.

In each of these respects, Owen leverages his theology of divine dominion to render the covenant as the basis and established form of God’s government of creatures. At each point, Owen’s concern is with the way in which the theology of nature arrests the freedom of God and the unconditional nature of God’s grace. Owen’s teachings here evidence a set of priorities very foreign to that of traditional Thomism. Indeed, they presuppose not only a very different understanding of divine government, but different accounts of creation, the will of God, and even the nature of God, as well. As we move now into the final chapter of our study, an analysis of principle aspects of Owen’s teaching on God as Redeemer, we will see how Owen’s theology of divine dominion shapes key elements of his account of the economy

of grace, particularly the doctrine of election. But Owen's priorities there are much the same — to secure the unmitigated freedom of God and the unconditional nature of God's grace.

CHAPTER 5: THE MERCY OF GOD

Introduction

Having observed the principles of divine government in Owen's account of creation, the giving of the law, and the establishment of the covenant, we are now in a position to enter the final part of our study — an account of God as Redeemer. The purpose of the present chapter is to explore Owen's teaching on the nature of God's redeeming mercy. This, of course, is a very large and expansive theme in Owen's writings, and we cannot hope to survey it all. We concern ourselves here only with the *principles* of God's mercy rooted in God's own inner life.

A proper appreciation of this theme requires a somewhat broad frame of reference, however, because Owen's account of God's mercy centers almost exclusively around his Christology. Much like Anselm, Owen thinks that Christ's work reveals certain exigencies about the nature of divine government that require God's forgiveness to take the particular form that it does in the work of Christ. Owen's commitments about the nature of Christ's satisfaction are therefore determinative for his understanding of the nature of both God's justice and his mercy. It should come as no surprise, then, that Owen's *Dissertation on Divine Justice* (1653), which slightly emended his earlier account of the divine justice in *The Death of Death* (1647), followed a lengthy and heated debate with Richard Baxter regarding the nature of Christ's death.

In the *Dissertation*, Owen retracts his earlier position that Christ's propitiatory death was only contingently necessary as a determination of God's wisdom and will. Instead, he advances the claim that the death of Christ was hypothetically necessary in order for God to forgive sinners, viz., God could not forgive sinners *without* Christ's propitiation. Owen's argument in the *Dissertation* should be understood as the outgrowth of his ongoing debates with Richard Baxter. And, in point of fact, this argument offers relatively few (though significant) material changes to the account of divine justice offered in Owen's earlier writings. In my judgment, the *Dissertation* is better seen as rendering Owen's account of Christ's satisfaction found in *The Death of Death* more internally consistent. Still, this alteration does entail a handful of changes to the way in which Owen thinks about the nature of divine forgiveness. For example, following the *Dissertation*, Owen no longer claims (as he

did in *The Death of Death*) that God could have pardoned sinners simply by exercising his right of absolute dominion. Instead, he comes to think that, “All forgiveness is founded on propitiation”.¹ On his earlier position God’s election to provide forgiveness by propitiation was merely a *discretionary* arrangement, rather than a necessity of his nature.

This notwithstanding, however, Owen’s central commitments regarding the nature of God’s forgiveness remain, on the whole, thoroughly consistent across the course of his career. And this is for the simple reason that Owen’s theology of forgiveness was developed in very close connection to his account of the nature of Christ’s satisfaction, which was, of course, a subject about which Owen made up his mind very early in his career, and from which he never really departed. So then, by exploring the principal theological commitments that shape Owen’s account of divine forgiveness, we will be in a better position to assess the character of Owen’s theology of divine government.

Given the sheer scope and size of Owen’s writings on this topic, the material covered in this section is necessarily abbreviated. Happily, many of the topics under consideration have already received very capable treatment in the secondary literature,² so I will refer the reader to these works for a more comprehensive accounting of the broader historical and doctrinal contexts of Owen’s thought on this point. For the present chapter, we aim to consider the mercy of God as that divine attribute which grounds God’s redemptive mission. I will do this in three parts. First, I will examine the freedom of God’s mercy in relation to fallen sinners. This will provide us with some context for assessing the nature of that inner work of God by which God moves in mercy toward the creature, namely, the election of grace. Secondly, we will then look at the *form* that God’s mercy takes in the work of Christ, as well as its basis and ground in the eternal covenant between the Father and the Son. Finally, I will turn to the

¹ *Works*, 6:381.

² Boersma, *A Hot Pepper Corn*, *passim*; Kapic, *Communion with God*, 67-146; Beeke and Jones, *Puritan Theology*, 491-506; Hans Burger, *Being in Christ: A Biblical and Systematic Investigation in Reformed Perspective* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008), 30-86; Cooper, *Formation of Nonconformity*, *passim*; Clifford, *Atonement and Justification*, *passim*; J. V. Fesko, “John Owen on Union with Christ and Justification”, *Themelios* 37/1 (2012):7-19; George Hunsinger, “Justification and Mystical Union with Christ: Where Does Owen Stand?” in *The Ashgate Research Companion to John Owen’s Theology*, ed. Kapic and Jones (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012), 199-211; Edwin Tay, “Priesthood of Christ”; *ibid.*, “Christ’s Priestly Oblation and Intercession: Their Development and Significance in John Owen”, *Ashgate Companion*, 159-170; Trueman, *Claims of Truth*, 151-226; *ibid.*, *John Owen*, 67-121; Gert van den Brink, “Impetration and Application in John Owen’s Theology”, *Ashgate Companion*, 85-96; Robert Keith McGregor Wright, “John Owen’s Great High Priest: The Highpriesthood of Christ in the Theology of John Owen”, (PhD diss., University of Denver, 1989).

issue of the “intention” of God’s redeeming mercy, which will enable us to assess the relationship that Owen posits between the orders of creation and redemption.

5.1 The Freedom of God’s Mercy

The freedom of God is of first importance in understanding Owen’s theology of mercy. But as God is bound in his justice by the covenant of works, the full freedom of God’s mercy appears only in light of the breach of the covenant by the creature’s fall into sin. As we saw in the last chapter, the covenant of works was *conditional* and *remunerative* in nature. Its law was, “Do this and live”. And this law stipulated the reward of eternal life on the condition of perfect obedience, and eternal death as the punishment for disobedience. When, by his disobedience, Adam violated the covenant of works in the fall, the covenant itself was not dissolved. On the contrary, this covenant remains in force even to this day as the rule governing God’s dealings with his creatures, extending the promise of life for those who obey, and the promise of death for those who disobey.³ As Owen states it, the covenant of works was “never abrogated formally”, but was only “made weak and insufficient unto its first end” — that is, in its power to lead creatures to God as the object of their final rest.⁴

Having sinned, humankind became “obnoxious” to the law of this covenant in two respects. First, they were deprived of the Spirit’s grace⁵ and thereby rendered naturally and morally incapable of fulfilling God’s commandments. They are *morally* incapable because, without the healing power of the Spirit’s grace, their faculties are now subject to vicious and depraved moral habits. And they are *naturally* incapable because, without the elevating power of the Spirit’s grace, they cannot act for any good that exceeds the powers of their nature.⁶ In virtue of this natural and moral inability, Owen argues that the sinner cannot attain to God as its final end, and indeed has no desire to do so. “Sin is enmity to God as God.” And though nothing exists without a relation to God and God’s goodness, the sinner fixes his affections only on *natural* things in such a way that he despises all things in the respect and to the degree that they are signs of God’s goodness. As Owen puts it: “the nearer . . . any thing is to God, the greater is [sin’s] enmity unto it”.⁷

³ *Works*, 23:62.

Works, 23:61.

⁵ Owen states that this depravation, itself, has “the nature of a punishment” (*Works*, 3:266–267).

⁶ E.g., *Works*, 3:267–270.

⁷ *Works*, 6:180.

Secondly, as they have transgressed the law by their sin, creatures also fall under the sanctions of the covenant, sustaining what Owen describes as an “obligation to punishment”.⁸ But if, as Owen argues, all obligation from God to the creature is by way of a covenant, then it should be immediately apparent that when the covenant of works is broken by human sin, what is “due” to the creature in justice is the punishment of the creature under the sanctions of the covenant. Justice, of course, demands that this punishment be proportionate to the offense, and in his wisdom, God appointed this penalty to be death. As God is infinite, his dignity is infinite, and so the offense of sin is also infinite. Yet, because the creature itself is finite, it is incapable of ever making restitution of the injury which was done to God’s glory. As such, its punishment must be eternal.⁹

For these reasons, the creature is, of itself, completely incapable of making any claim on the promise of eternal life. And it must be emphasized at this point that God is under no obligation whatsoever to restore what sinners have spoiled. By the law of its creation, the creature already owes to God all that it is and has, so that it is naturally undeserving of any reward from God for its good deeds. But as a sinner who has transgressed God’s commandments, the creature is even more in God’s debt than it was before, both because he has deprived him of that honor and obedience which is rightfully his, and because he has done so in malice. The creature is now not only *undeserving* of any reward, but is also positively *unworthy* of it. There can therefore be no question about whether God has any obligation to redeem sinners in view of his justice. If anything, strict justice demands that the sinner be put to death.

In his mercy, however, God does not actually leave all his creatures under the condemnation of his justice, but extends pardon to sinners by way of the covenant of grace. Yet this act of liberality arises entirely from the freedom of God’s absolute dominion. As such, it cannot be thought to be necessary or inevitable. In his *Exposition Upon Psalm 130* (1668), Owen thus denies that creatures can have knowledge of God’s mercy to sinners on the basis of natural reason alone. For God exercises his forgiveness by “an absolute, free, and sovereign act of his will”, and an act such as this can be known only by special revelation.¹⁰

⁸ *Works*, 12:496.

⁹ *Works*, 10:618.

¹⁰ *Works*, 6:428.

So while God's righteousness and justice are implanted on the human heart by the law of nature, God's mercy is "a pure gospel truth, that hath neither shadow, footstep, nor intimation elsewhere. The whole creation hath not the least obscure impression of it left thereon."¹¹ In other words, while humankind has (limited) knowledge of the *law* by nature, knowledge of the *gospel* is something truly foreign to the natural man.

The law is *connatural* to him; his domestic, his old acquaintance. It came into the world with him, and hath grown up with him from his infancy. It was implanted in his heart by nature,—is his own reason; he can never shake it off or part with it. It is his familiar, his friend, that cleaves to him as the flesh to the bone; so that they who have not the law written cannot but show forth the work of the law, Rom. 2:14, 15, and that because the law itself is inbred to them. And all the faculties of the soul are at peace with it, in subjection to it. It is the bond and ligament of their union, harmony, and correspondency among themselves, in all their moral actings. It gives life, order, motion to them all. Now, the gospel, that comes to control this sentence of the law, and to relieve the sinner from it, is foreign to his nature, a strange thing to him, a thing he hath no acquaintance or familiarity with; it hath not been bred up with him; nor is there any thing in him to side with it, to make a party for it, or to plead in its behalf.¹²

Owen's purpose in denying that God's mercy is discoverable by natural reason is to highlight the adventitious character of God's grace as a gift that is neither necessary nor inevitable. This is a theme that features throughout Owen's writings, but it is every bit as much a *moral* conviction as it is a *theological* one. In the section following the paragraph above, Owen goes on to explore the "false presumptions" of God's forgiveness with which the wicked are said to comfort themselves. Owen claims that this is generally of two sorts: one arising from an "atheistical" disbelief in God's judgment, and the other from a "general persuasion" of God's kindness.¹³ Owen differentiates the latter from a genuine experience of God's mercy by claiming that such a general persuasion of God's kindness is (1) loose and uncertain, (2) it arises easily and without any trial of the soul, (3) it produces no real love for God, but only a "contempt and commonness of spirit in dealing with him", (4) it generates no "serious" hatred of sin, (5) it brings no rest to the soul, and (6) it has its ground in self-righteousness and pride. In short, a "general persuasion" of God's mercy begets spiritual *complacency* rather than *carefulness*.¹⁴ It rests on the goodness of God revealed generally in

¹¹ *Works*, 6:431. Owen acknowledges, of course, that many claim to have such knowledge. But he states that any such knowledge must come from a "corrupt tradition, and not at all from any universal principle that is inbred in nature, such as they have of God's holiness and vindictive justice" (*Works*, 6:392).

¹² *Works*, 6:389-390.

¹³ *Works*, 6:393-394.

¹⁴ *Works*, 6:394-398.

creation, rather than marveling at God’s redemptive work in *Christ*. By denying any natural basis for the knowledge of God’s forgiveness, Owen is here attempting to disrupt this spiritual complacency and turn the sinner once again to a dependence upon God by highlighting the freedom of his grace.

Accordingly, Owen argues that the first “discovery” of God’s mercy is to be found only in God’s promise to Adam. Herein God communicates his covenant of grace to sinners, and it is not without significance that the first discovery of God’s mercy to humankind comes in the form of God’s *promise*.

All things lay now under wrath, curse, confusion, and disorder; nothing was left good, lovely, or desirable in his eye. As in the first creation, that which was first brought forth from nothing was וְהָיָה אֲדָמָה עֲרֵב וְרֵבֵב, “without form, and void,” empty of all order and beauty,—nothing was in it to induce or move God to bring forth all things in the glory that ensued, but the whole design of it proceeded from his own infinite goodness and wisdom,—so was it now again. There was an emptiness and vanity brought by sin upon the whole creation. Nothing remained that might be a motive unto a merciful restoration, but all is again devolved on his sovereignty. All things being in this state and condition, wherein all doors stood open to the glory of God’s justice in the punishing of sin, nothing remaining without him to hold his hand in the least, the whole creation, and especially the sinner himself, lying trembling in expectation of a dreadful doom, what now cometh forth from him? The blessed word which we have, Gen. 3:15, “The seed of the woman shall break the serpent’s head.” It is full well known that the whole mystery of forgiveness is wrapped up in this one word of promise. And the great way of its coming forth from God, by the blood of the Messiah, whose heel was to be bruised, is also intimated. And this was the first discovery that ever was made of forgiveness in God. By a word of pure revelation it was made, and so faith must take it up and receive it.¹⁵

This paragraph echoes many of the themes which we explored in our last chapter concerning the relationship between divine justice and the covenant. But in the paragraph above, Owen describes the effect of the breaking of the covenant on the relation between God and creatures. Just as Owen depicted God’s institution of the covenant as a self-imposed *binding* of his dominion, so now he depicts the breaking of the covenant as the unloosing of God’s dominion: “all doors stood open . . . nothing remained without him to hold his hand in the least”.

¹⁵ *Works*, 6:434.

It is interesting to note here that, in connection with this point, Owen describes the effects of sin by employing the imagery of de-creation. This indicates just how fully integral the covenant is to God's purposes in the created order. Medieval thinkers had often grounded the work of redemption in the natural disposition of God to love those creatures which bear his likeness. Rational creatures are, in their own way, exemplars of the divine nature. And just as God cannot but love himself, so also he loves his image as it is reflected in his creatures. But as we have seen already, Owen does not grant much room to the natural exemplarism of the Medievals. And, in any event, he identifies the *imago Dei* with original righteousness, so that the image is fully destroyed by the fall. Sin is not merely a disruption of the moral order, for Owen; it effaces the natural order as a whole, emptying creation of its original beauty and goodness as though it were once again reduced to a formless chaos. Consequently, Owen states that there is nothing remaining in the natural order that might be a "motive" capable of moving God to redeem creatures, but "all is again devolved on his sovereignty".

Owen's purpose here, quite simply, is to highlight the *gratuity* of the covenant of grace by denying that there is anything *ad extra* that might be thought a necessary *cause* of God's mercy. God does not show mercy to sinners because it is required of his righteousness as their Creator. Quite the contrary! Justice in this matter requires only the creature's punishment and death. And it is only self-righteousness or pride that would keep the sinner from acknowledging this. The "proper use of forgiveness" is, according to Owen, "that all may be of grace; for when the foundation is pardon, the whole superstructure must needs be grace."¹⁶ God's mercy is thus entirely free and undeserved. So free, in fact, that Owen regularly compares the freedom of God in establishing this covenant to the freedom of God in creating *the world ex nihilo*:

Let none, then, once imagine that this work of entering into covenant about the salvation of mankind was any way necessary unto God, or that it was required by virtue of any of the essential properties of his nature, so that he must have done against them in doing otherwise. God was herein absolutely free, as he was also in his making of all things out of nothing. He could have left it undone without the least disadvantage unto his essential glory or contrariety unto his holy nature. Whatever, therefore, we may afterwards assert concerning the necessity of satisfaction to be given unto his justice, upon the supposition of this covenant, yet the entering into this covenant, and consequently all that ensued thereon, is absolutely resolved into the mere will and grace of God.¹⁷

¹⁶ *Works*, 6:398.

¹⁷ *Works*, 19:86.

So then, God's mercy is inscrutable because it arises from the freedom of God's sovereign dominion. Just as creation was a free, contingent act of God's dominion, so too is *redemption* a free act of God's dominion. It is in this freedom that Owen finds the gratuity of the good news. The redemption of sinners was neither necessary nor inevitable. But in the fullness and freedom of his sovereignty, God did not elect to leave his creatures hopeless but extends to them the promise of life by the sending of his Son. God's grace is most free, and for that reason, most gracious.

5.2 The *Pactum Salutis* and the Form of God's Mercy

Because sin has so universally corrupted the creature and the created order, the missions of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit to redeem sinners include a wide variety of different kinds of causes and acts. Adoption, regeneration, justification and sanctification are all distinct acts that God undertakes in order to reclaim and restore his own. Yet, according to Owen, all of these graces are merely "branches" of a river that come "streaming from the fountain of the covenant of grace".¹⁸ And though the declaration of this covenant was first made to Adam and Eve in the wake of their fall from grace, it was conceived before the world began as part of the outworking of God's eternal purposes.

At the time of his career during the period of High Orthodoxy, Owen was the beneficiary of several generations of Reformed teaching that had developed very sophisticated doctrinal structures for the purpose of relating the doctrine of God to a distinctly Reformed conception of the economy of grace. Many of the later Reformed, like Owen, accomplished this by means of the *pactum salutis*, or as it was otherwise known, the "covenant of redemption", or "covenant of the mediator". This was a uniquely Reformed doctrine which conceived of the basis for the work of redemption in terms of a covenant in the eternal counsels of God's trinitarian life. In this way, the *pactum salutis* functions to underwrite the redemptive missions of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and integrates teaching across the whole economy of redemption, including the nature of Christ's satisfaction, the administration of the covenant of grace, and the doctrine of election. This doctrine is of great dogmatic significance for Owen, and one that emerges relatively early in

¹⁸ *Works*, 11:226.

his writings. Owen makes systematic use of the concept as early as *The Death of Death* (1647), but there are hints of it already in passages of his *Display of Arminianism* (1642).

Modern theology has tended to be very critical of this doctrine, often arguing that it distorts the doctrine of the Trinity, that it misconstrues the nature of Christ's work, and that it is unduly speculative.¹⁹ Each of these criticisms warrant careful consideration on their own terms, but we should comment briefly here on the latter, so as to remove any misunderstanding of what Owen intends with this doctrine. To be sure, the *pactum salutis* is a speculative doctrine in the proper sense. And in his treatment of the doctrine in his Hebrews commentary, Owen appears aware of its relative novelty, and so is particularly sensitive to spelling-out its exegetical basis. But one cannot, without substantial qualification, simply dismiss the doctrine of the *pactum salutis* on the grounds of it being speculative, as though that implied that it has no real basis in God's revelation of himself. To argue this would be to fundamentally misrepresent the material relation the Reformed posited between the doctrine of the *pactum salutis* and the concrete form of Christ's work within history. For, methodologically speaking, apostolic witness to the nature of Christ's life and ministry form the basis in revelation for the knowledge of this eternal covenant. So while the *pactum salutis* forms the ground of Christ's mission in the order of being, the person and work of Christ have priority over this covenant with respect to the order of knowing.

It is, in fact, just here that the Reformed debt to Anselm is most clearly evident. In his *Cur Deus Homo*, Anselm had attempted to explain the "necessity" of Christ's work by reference to principles about the nature of divine government that were themselves inferred from a reasoned contemplation of the *form* of Christ's mission. These principles, in turn, provided an interpretive framework clarifying the nature of Christ's work *a posteriori*. In this way, the full picture of God's government emerges as the work of Christ is placed alongside God's other works in history, and is interpreted with them. Such a method does of course assume a certain level of "necessity" or "fittingness" to the precise form that redemption takes in the work of Christ. But as Anselm puts it, if one were to suggest that God might just as well have redeemed the world by some other means, then "how can you show him to be

¹⁹ E.g., see Barth's now widely cited (though often very poorly understood) critique of the doctrine in his *Church Dogmatics*, IV.1, 54-63. For a contemporary re-habilitation of the doctrine, see John Webster, "'It was the Will of the Lord to Bruise Him': Soteriology and the Doctrine of God", *God of Salvation: Soteriology in Theological Perspective*, ed. Ivor J. Davidson and Murray Rae (Farnham, England: Ashgate, 2011), 15-34. Cf.

wise?”²⁰ In other words, the fitting or necessary *form* of Christ’s work is a necessary postulate granted for the purpose of explicating the wisdom of God and the inner coherence of God’s works.²¹

The *pactum salutis* serves a similar function in Reformed thought, in that it facilitates an exposition of the coherence of God’s works by rendering explicit those principles in the divine essence and will which determine the nature and form of Christ’s work within the economy of grace. In this respect, the *pactum salutis* functions at the highest level of abstract reasoning about the nature of God’s saving work within history, integrating a wide range of exegetical, theological, and philosophical judgments about the nature of Christ’s work and its place in God’s government of creatures, finally setting these judgments in relation to teachings on the nature of God’s immanent life. As such, it should be seen as a Reformed twist on the *a posteriori* logic inherited from Anselm that so powerfully influenced the structure of Reformed accounts of the work of Christ.²² Over the course of his career, Owen increasingly defines the nature of divine government in reference to the work of Christ, which he takes to be necessary not only for securing the forgiveness of sins, but accomplishing God’s purposes in the world more generally. Yet, the tendency to treat the form of Christ’s work as a concentrated event of revelation disclosing the principles of God’s government is an emphasis present right from the beginning in Owen’s theology of the *pactum salutis*.

Now, we have observed already in the last chapter that Owen regards a proper covenant to be formalized whenever two parties mutually and voluntarily consent to certain terms and conditions. That the first and second persons of the Trinity are capable of such an act is clear, to Owen. For though the Father, Son and Holy Spirit share one divine will and intelligence, these being properties of their shared essence; still, any act of the divine essence must terminate on a particular person of the Trinity.²³ So there is nothing preventing the Father and

Trueman, “From Calvin to Gillespie on Covenant: Mythological Excess or an Exercise in Doctrinal Development?”, *IJST* 11/4 (Oct 2009): 378-397.

²⁰ *Cur Deus Homo*, I.6.

²¹ Many have criticized Anselm’s account of the necessity of the incarnation for just this reason, arguing that it is highly rationalistic and depicting it as a species of perfect-being theology. I think this is a misreading of Anselm. But in any case, among the Reformed, this logic was typically wedded with a very sober critique of the limits of natural reason, which, in practice, often served to reinforce Reformed commitment to the Scripture principle. God is to be contemplated in his works, that is true. But God himself is the authoritative interpreter of his works through the gift of his *Word*.

²² Further on this point, see Muller’s *Christ and the Decree*, *passim*.

²³ *Works*, 19:77-78; *cf.* 2:405-407.

Son from willing “distinctly” in this matter, giving to their agreement the “nature of a covenant”.²⁴ And though the divine decree is eternal, and so involves no deliberation or temporal extension, Scripture itself describes the decree of God as being a “counsel” (Zech. 6:13; Eph. 1:11), the very notion of which implies the joint and reciprocal actions of the persons of the Trinity.²⁵

In covenants that are bilateral, Owen claims that the acceptance of the covenant introduces a new relation between the covenanting parties, and that the just balance of this relation is regulated according to the *terms* of the covenant. In the case of covenants that respect the services of one person to another, Owen states that the ratification of such a covenant

indispensably introduceth an inequality and subordination in the covenanters as to the common ends of the covenant, however on other accounts they may be equal; for he who prescribes the duties which are required in the covenant, and giveth the promises of either assistance in them or a reward upon them, is therein and so far superior unto him, or greater than he who observeth his prescriptions and trusteth unto his promises. Of this nature is that divine transaction that was between the Father and Son about the redemption of mankind.²⁶

The language of “inequality” here is intended to recall the notion of justice as a balanced or equitable (*aequalitas*) relation between persons. The covenant introduces an “inequality” between covenanting parties in the sense that it invests each party with certain contract rights and obligations in accordance with the terms of the covenant. In doing so, it places a binding *moral obligation* — a *debitum* — upon each party to uphold the agreement.

Although the *pactum salutis* is an inscrutable divine act, veiled within the mysterious communion of the persons of the Trinity, Owen nonetheless argues that the same principles hold true for the eternal counsel of God. In striking a covenant together, the Father and Son assume obligations to one another to perform those duties about which they have mutually agreed. And having made this promise, they are bound in justice and by the righteousness of their nature, to the fulfillment of this covenant. Because the Father and the Son are co-equal in glory, Owen is careful to indicate that any “inequality” or “subordination” that the *pactum*

²⁴ *Works*, 19:77.

²⁵ *Works*, 19:85-86; *cf.* 2:406.

²⁶ *Works*, 19:83-84.

salutis introduces between the Father and the Son must be understood as strictly *economic* in nature.²⁷ For as Owen specifies above, this inequality extends only to the terms of the *covenant*. And the covenant, like all that God wills *ad extra*, is freely and contingently willed.²⁸ Therefore, any inequality between the Father and Son concerns only their redemptive missions *ad extra*, and not their immanent life *ad intra*.

That there *is* such an *economic* inequality between the Father and the Son is apparent to Owen from the fact that Scripture everywhere speaks of the Father “sending” the Son (e.g. John 8:42). This “sending” suggests an authority on the part of the Father and an obligation to obedience on the part of the Son. Because the Father and the Son are co-equal in all things pertaining to their essence, such authority and obedience could be consistent with the divine nature only if it respected a covenant to which they had freely consented. So then, since Owen holds to a traditional Chalcedonian Christology, he interprets the Son’s obedience to the Father in the economy of grace as evidence, not of any *natural* and *necessary* subordination to the Father, but only of a *contingent, economic* submission to the Father’s authority, as he is the “Author” of the covenant.²⁹ Accordingly, the Son’s submission to the Father is not necessary to God, but is a contingent effect of the divine will, attesting the unique nature of the Son’s mission in time as the Mediator of the covenant of grace.

Owen thus points to texts like Matt. 27:46, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me”, and John 14:28, “my Father is greater than I”, as expressing the Son’s relation to the Father as he is constituted a Mediator (according to both natures) under the covenant of redemption.³⁰ Similarly, he takes both Psalm 2:7 and 40:8 as attesting this covenant, since the New Testament frequently employs these texts in support of Christ’s divine appointment for his mission (Acts 13:33; Rom. 1:4; Heb. 1:5; 5:5; 10:5-7).³¹ Owen draws on other texts as

²⁷ This is related to the Reformed claim that Christ is a mediator according to *both* natures. It is worth noting that Catholic covenant theologians did not permit this. For example, we have seen already that Francisco Suárez endorsed the notion that God can have proper obligations. Suárez denied, however, that there could be any obligation *between* the persons of the Trinity. For this would require an inequality between them, which is inconsistent with the perfection of their existence. See *De Libertate Divinitæ Voluntatis*, d. 1, s. 2, n. 5, page 579.

²⁸ As we have said, Owen thinks that if this covenant were *natural* and *necessary* to God, then it would not be gracious.

²⁹ *Works*, 19:86. There is, of course, an analogy between the Son’s submission to the Father in time, and his filiation from the Father in eternity. But they differ in the fact that the latter is grounded in a necessity of nature, while the former reflects Christ’s service within “the terms of the covenant”, which is only contingently necessary.

³⁰ *Works*, 19:84-85.

³¹ *Works*, 12:505-506.

well, Psalm 110:1, Ephesians 1:4, Galatians 3:16, and 1 Peter 1:20 among others. But he gives the most extended treatment to Proverbs 8:30-31. This was the *locus classicus* for the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son, who was commonly identified as the personification of Wisdom spoken of in the text. In his Hebrews commentary, Owen interprets this text as referring not only to the Son's eternal generation, but also to his appointment for the work of redemption in *pactum salutis*. In verse 30, Wisdom claims to have been with God in eternity "as one brought up (*'amôn*) by him". Owen takes the term *'amôn* passively to refer to "one that is in the care and love of another . . . to be disposed by him". But one is always "brought up" or "disposed" for "some especial end or purpose". And as Prov. 8:30 has in view the eternal communion between the Father and the Son, for what end and purpose could Wisdom be "nurtured" or "brought up" before the Father? Surely, Owen reasons, this cannot have reference only to God's *immanent* life, for the Son's communion with the Father is natural and necessary. Owen thus concludes that this refers to God's work *ad extra*. But rather than associating it with the work of creation, which is explicitly mentioned in the text, Owen claims that it refers to "the work of the redemption and salvation of mankind, the counsel whereof was then between the Father and the Son".³²

Like every covenant, this eternal pact between the Father and Son stipulated certain duties and rewards. The duties assumed by the Son are contained in what Owen sometimes calls "the law of the Mediator".³³ This law required that Christ assume the work of a "surety" or "sponsor" on behalf of the elect. "Surety" is a term borrowed from contract law, and refers to one who assumes responsibility for the debt or obligation of another, in the event that the principle holder of the debt is incapable of discharging it. Owen infers Christ's "suretyship" from a variety of different biblical passages and themes, principally those which speak of the nature of Christ's work as being *pro nobis*. Unlike Aquinas who holds that one friend can make satisfaction for another by virtue of their bond of love, Owen holds that Christ's work of satisfaction has no other precedent in creation.³⁴ It was in fact entirely foreign to the natural order as originally constituted:

³² *Works*, 19:68.

³³ *Works*, 2:157-158; 12:505.

³⁴ *ST I-II*, q. 87, a. 7. Further on this point, see my essay "'One with Him in Spirit': Mystical union and the Humanity of Christ in the Theology of John Owen", *"In Christ" in Paul: Explorations in Paul's Theology of Union and Participation*, WUNT II, ed. Michael J. Thate, et. al., (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 431-436.

There was no such thing, nothing of that nature or kind, in the first constitution of that relation and obedience by the law of our creation. We were made in a state of immediate relation unto God in our own persons as our creator, preserver, and rewarder . . . ‘Do this and live’ was the sole rule of our relation unto God. There was . . . nothing of the interposition of a mediator with respect unto our righteousness before God, and acceptance with him; — with is at preset the life and soul of religion the substance of the gospel, and the centre of all the truths revealed in it.³⁵

As Christ’s mediatorial work has no precedent within the natural order, it must have a cause which transcends that order. Owen thus describes the “interposition” of the Mediator as an act of “supreme dominion”. In the *pactum salutis*, the Father “innovates the obligation” that the elect were under, writing the name their surety onto the debt instead.³⁶ Because sinners are condemned under the *covenant of works*, the obligation of the Son under the law of the Mediator has a particular form, stipulating that Christ should perform three acts: first, that he should assume a human nature and be made flesh (John 1:14); second, that he should render universal and perfect moral obedience to the Father in submission to his will (Phil. 2:7); and finally, that he should bear the punishment due to sin, voluntarily submitting himself to the curse of the law and suffering death (Gal. 3:13-15).³⁷ By this work, Christ makes full satisfaction for sin, and completely discharges sinners of the obligation to which they were beholden under the moral law and by God’s justice.

The Father commits to support the Son in this work by endowing him with the Spirit’s graces. But in return for his obedience, the Father also promises to reward the Son. Once again, Owen infers these promises from the teachings of Jesus and the Apostles. This is particularly the case in their appropriation of certain Old Testament texts, like Psalm 110:1 and Isaiah 53:10-12. For as these passages hold out the promise of life, victory, and prosperity to the Lord’s Servant, they were commonly used in early Christian preaching to establish a basis in revelation for the victorious resurrection and reign of the Messiah following his humiliation, suffering and death (Acts 2:34-35). Owen takes these promises as being *remunerative* of the Son’s obedience. And as such, they presuppose a heavenly pact between the Father and the Son which undergirds the economy of grace.

³⁵ *Works*, 5:44-45.

³⁶ *Works*, 12:448.

³⁷ *Works*, 19:94-95.

Owen divides these promises into two sorts. First, with respect to his person, the Father promises to reward Christ with the glorious exaltation of his body and his public triumph over his enemies (Phil. 2:10). Second, with respect to his work, the Father guarantees the salvation and final deliverance of all those sinners that Christ came to save (John 6:39; Heb. 2:13).³⁸ It is this latter promise in particular that Owen takes to be the real matter of the covenant of grace. For as we have said, the covenant of grace has its ground in the *pactum salutis* and was intended to make full and complete provision for the safe-passage of the elect into eternal life. But because this promise is conditional upon the Son's concurrence in the covenant of redemption and his fulfillment of its terms, Christ himself is said to be the principle of the covenant of grace.³⁹ This, Owen argues, is why Paul identifies *Christ* as the true heir of the promises made to Abraham (Gal. 3:16).⁴⁰ Christ is the *prōton dektikon* — the principal recipient of all the promises contained within the covenant of grace.⁴¹ All the benefits of salvation come to the elect, therefore, only in and through the person of the mediator.

In pouring out his love, there is not one drop that falls besides the Lord Christ . . . Though the love of the Father's purpose and good pleasure have its rise and foundation in his mere grace and will, yet the design of its accomplishment is only in Christ. All the fruits of it are first given to him; and it is in him only that they are dispensed to us. So that though the saints may, nay, do, see an infinite ocean of love unto them in the bosom of the Father, yet they are not to look for one drop from him but what comes through Christ.⁴²

In effect, this point serves to ground the whole of the economy of redemption entirely in the election of Christ.⁴³ For in offering his voluntary consent to these terms, the Son ratifies the covenant of redemption, and so is constituted from eternity as the church's mediator and surety. And since every grace by which the saints attain eternal life is purchased

³⁸ *Works*, 19:93-94.

³⁹ Though Christ merits the *benefits* of the covenant of grace, Owen denies that Christ, by his death, merits or procures the covenant of grace, *absolutely*. "Who can conceive that Christ by his death should procure the agreement between God and him that he should die?" The death of Christ ratifies, fulfills and inaugurates the covenant of grace, but as this covenant rests on the eternal *pactum* between the Father and the Son, it cannot be procured by the work of Christ in time. Still, as the will of the Son is necessary to concur with the Father in the *pactum salutis*, the person of Christ (in respect of his divine nature) is truly said to be a cause and co-principle of the covenant of grace. See *Works*, 5:190-196.

⁴⁰ Owen regards the Abrahamic covenant to be a re-publication of the covenant of grace. Further, see *Works*, 17:266 [*Biblical Theology*, 365-367].

⁴¹ *Works*, 1:146; 5:191; 23:153.

⁴² *Works*, 2:27.

by the Son, Owen states that all the promises of the gospel find their original basis and ground in the election of Christ, who is “the great original, matter, and subject of the promises”. Much in the way that a machine has an initial motion that subsequently moves all its subordinate parts, so in a similar way, the election of Jesus Christ “principles all other promises [of the gospel] whatsoever”, setting in motion a myriad of graces which work for the redemption of God’s elect.⁴⁴ In short, Christ himself is the sum of the gospel. But the election of Christ itself depends on Owen’s concept of divine dominion, which allows God to “innovate the obligation” and place Christ under its debt instead. In this way, Owen grounds the exceptional nature of Christ’s substitutionary work, and so the unconditional nature of redemption, in the absolute freedom that attends God’s “supreme dominion”.

5.3 The Intention of God’s Redeeming Mercy

Having now treated its freedom and its form, we come finally to a consideration of the “intention” of God’s mercy as it is expressed in the atonement. By the 1640’s, the divine intent of Christ’s satisfaction was a somewhat familiar dispute within the Reformed tradition, one with relatively well-defined lines of debate and disagreement.⁴⁵ An “intention” refers to the end aimed at in any action. Since God is the principle of all things, to question God’s “intention” in the work of redemption is to ask about the “immediate end” of Christ’s mission and how it coheres with God’s other acts in the world. In a way, these disputes raised questions not dissimilar to those of Anselm, in that they were concerned to locate the nature of Christ’s redemptive mission against the wider background of God’s government of all things. Unlike Anselm, however, this issue was adjudicated in terms of the “value” of Christ’s death and with reference to biblical testimony about its *sufficiency* and *efficiency* in relation to the reprobate and the elect.⁴⁶

⁴³ Owen sometimes situates the election of Christ as logically consequent on the election of the church (e.g. *Works*, 8:291-292), but these passages are rare, and the trajectory in Owen’s thought moves more and more in the opposite direction.

⁴⁴ *Works*, 11:228.

⁴⁵ On early Reformed disputes about the extent of the Atonement, see especially W. Robert Godfrey, “Reformed Thought on the Extent of the Atonement to 1618”, *WTJ* 37/2 (1975), 133-171; *ibid.* “Tensions within International Calvinism: The Debate on the Atonement at the Synod of Dort”, PhD diss., Stanford University, 1974.

⁴⁶ Christian teaching on the atonement has used the sufficiency/efficiency distinction in order to specify the intention of the atonement since Lombard. See *Sentences*, IV.iii.20.3.

Of course, the intention of God in the mission of the Son was a topic about which Owen made up his mind very early in his career. *The Death of Death* (1647), Owen's most well-known work, was an extended critique of those who claimed that the death of Christ had some universal intention. Owen frames much of this work as a rebuttal to Thomas Moore in particular. Moore was something of a novice as a theologian and his opinions, expressed in *his treatise The Universallity of God's Free-Grace to Mankind in Christ Proclaimed and Displayed* (1646),⁴⁷ were taken by Owen as representative of the creeping Arminianism in England. To Owen's mind, the doctrine of universal redemption substantially weakened the efficacy and perfection of Christ's work. For if Christ died for all persons without exception, then Christ's death can only be said to make every person *redeemable*, but it did not immediately redeem any. On this account, all the emphasis falls on Christ's intercession and the believer's appropriation of Christ's benefits by faith. And while universal redemption did not logically exclude an Augustinian doctrine of grace, Owen's concern was that it left the door wide open to faith being seen not as a "distinguishing mercy" of God's electing grace, but only as a condition which *we* supply, throwing us back once again on a kind of semi-Pelagianism.

Owen's argument in *The Death of Death* seeks to slam this door shut by defending the proposition that God had *one* intention in the sending his Son, and that this was the redemption of the persons of the *elect*.⁴⁸ Owen mounts a wide variety of different arguments in defense of this claim, most of them inferring the *particular* (as opposed to universal) intention of God in sending Christ by examining the formal character of Christ's work. He points here to the nature of Christ's death as a ransom, to the whole work of redemption as springing from the *pactum salutis*, to the indivisible operations of the Trinity, and to the unconditional nature of the covenant of grace. Across each of these arguments, Owen advances the claim that God's intention in the satisfaction of Christ is to communicate to the elect a *right* and *title* to eternal life. Christ came "to save that which was lost" (Matt. 18:11).

The whole of Christ's life and work, therefore, is one, single means ordered to the accomplishment of *this* end, the redemption of the elect. As such, the work of Christ cannot be divided — the oblation and intercession of his priesthood are inseparable from one

⁴⁷ London, 1646. Note that, rather than speaking of universal "redemption", Moore's title refers to universal "grace". Though many Reformed held to universal *redemption*, "universal grace" was often associated with Arminian teaching.

another, and strictly coextensive.⁴⁹ And since God is perfect and unfailingly accomplishes all that he intends to perform, we must conclude that God intended to save by Christ's oblation and death all and *only* those to whom the benefits of redemption are finally applied by Christ's intercession. This positively excludes the possibility that Christ's work could be rendered ineffectual by some fault or failing in the elect. And it supports Owen's claim that every grace bestowed upon the elect, even the faith by which they believe,⁵⁰ is itself procured and purchased by Christ's work.

Now, although Owen was primarily concerned with rebutting Arminian and Socinian arguments in favor of universal redemption, *The Death of Death* also obliquely addresses the arguments of so-called "hypothetical universalists", like John Davenant, who affirmed both a fully Augustinian account of predestination as well as an unflinching doctrine of universal redemption.⁵¹ These thinkers held that the covenant of grace was made not only with the elect, but with all of humanity. In this respect, the redeeming work of Christ was intended to establish a new providential order in creation at large. Examining Owen's disagreement with these thinkers about the nature of God's *intention* is illuminating at this point because it sets Owen's views in relief as it concerns the various *orders* of God's government in the works of creation and redemption.

The hypothetical universalists typically followed the schoolmen in distinguishing God's intention in the death of Christ according to an antecedent and a consequent act of God's will.⁵² According to his *antecedent* will, God determines that Christ will die for sinners and that all persons will be saved by faith in Christ's satisfaction. Note that the emphasis here falls on the relationship between Christ's satisfaction and faith as the ordained means of participating in Christ's work. In other words, in his antecedent will, God determines that all who will be saved, will come to salvation by means of faith in Christ. According to his *consequent* will, on the other hand, God determines the particular persons of the elect to

⁴⁸ *Works*, 10:157.

⁴⁹ See Tay, "Priesthood of Christ", ch. 4.

⁵⁰ *Works*, 10:254-258; 11:247.

⁵¹ See his *Dissertation on the Death of Christ*. Further on hypothetical universalism and its relation to Reformed thought, see Jonathan Moore, *English Hypothetical Universalism: John Preston and the Softening of Reformed Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007); *ibid.*, "The Extent of the Atonement: English Hypothetical Universalism versus Particular Redemption", in *Drawn Into Controversie*, 124-161; Muller, *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition: On the Work of Christ and the Order of Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), chs. 4-5.

⁵² The distinction itself had a variety of interpretations. On the general function of the distinction in Reformed thought, see Muller, *PRRD*, 3:465-469.

whom he will sovereignly grant the faith necessary to obtain eternal life. It should be apparent from this that God's antecedent and consequent wills concern objects that are sometimes *contrary* to one another. But they do so in order to distinguish a logical order within the acts of God's willing.

God's consequent will is therefore sometimes termed an act of "simple willing" (*simpliciter voluntas*).⁵³ That is, it determines that concrete state of affairs that God wills to actualize and bring into existence. God's antecedent willing, on the other hand, is a "conditional" or "hypothetical" will that, in a manner of speaking, describes what God might have willed "under different circumstances". Of course, figures like Davenant would be quick to urge that God is not like other agents whose wills are constrained by circumstances beyond their control. The hypothetical universalists do not advance the distinction between God's antecedent and consequent will to support a doctrine of middle knowledge, as Arminius did.⁵⁴ God is the first cause of all things, and so all that God wills to take place infallibly comes to pass. But this phrase helpfully indicates that there is an abstract order which logically *precedes* God's determination of any concrete event. Since this order itself comes from God, and God's will is rational, God wills in accordance with the order that he has established.

In order to explain this point, Aquinas draws a helpful analogy to a judge in the act of pronouncing the death sentence upon some murderer. According to his antecedent will, the judge wills that the person in question might live, for he is a creature created in God's image, made for life and deserving of life. Yet, according to his consequent will, in respect of the person in question being a *murderer*, the judge wills the death of that person for the good of the community. In the very act of pronouncing judgment, the judge simultaneously wills contrary outcomes, though in different respects. Indeed, his will would be inordinate if he did *not* will them both, because the person in question is *both* a murderer and a creature made in God's image.⁵⁵ But because the judge is a minister of the common good, he pronounces the murderer's execution because it would be a miscarriage of justice to let the murderer go free.

This analogy suggests that the antecedent will of God functions as a kind of analytical hypothesis allowing theologians to distinguish the nature of God's intention according to the

⁵³ E.g., ST Ia, q. 19, a. 6.

⁵⁴ However, the distinction was often employed by the Jesuits, Arminians and Socinians to support a doctrine of conditional election and middle knowledge. See Muller, *Arminius*, 186-188.

various orders of his government. Baxter confirms this point, claiming that this distinction properly belongs to God's office as a Governor. He understands God's antecedent will as his "legal will", on account of which God desires justice in accordance with the order that he has established. God's consequent will, on the other hand, he calls his "judicial will". And by this will, God makes particular judgments in keeping with the order that he has established in his legal will.⁵⁶ In general, this distinction aided in specifying the logical relationship between God's various orders of activity. But hypothetical universalists employed this distinction in order to differentiate between God's intentions in sending his Son to die for sinners.

We have seen already that every creature obtains the good in a manner that accords with its nature. As rational creatures have the power of intellect and will, they obtain the good by means of their rational faculties. And inasmuch as faith is a form of knowledge, it is strictly indispensable in order for the rational creature to obtain happiness and rest. Moreover, since God is the principle of all things, and all things are ordered to God as their final end, it belongs to God's government to guide creatures to the attainment of their final end. Hypothetical universalists argued that the mercy of God displayed in the sending of his Son was an expression of God's government of creatures as he is their Creator. According to his consequent will, God grants the means of faith only to the persons of the elect. But antecedently, God is the Creator of all things, and so seeks the happiness of all his creatures, to relieve their misery, and to guide them toward their final rest. Nor can he do otherwise. For this universal love toward his creatures is natural and necessary to him as he is God.⁵⁷ God's universal love for his creatures is the basis and ground of that mercy by which he sent his Son to die so that all who should believe in him would be saved, as Scripture itself testifies (John 3:16).⁵⁸

Of course, this inclination does not *oblige* God to grant faith and the means of grace equally to all persons.⁵⁹ God's special love remains free and extends itself freely, particularly and unconditionally to the persons of the elect for whom alone Christ's atonement is made efficacious. Faith is an evidence of this electing love, as God extends it freely by right of his

⁵⁵ *ST* Ia, q. 19, a. 6; *cf.* q. 23, a. 3.

⁵⁶ *Catholick Theologie*, I.xv.360-361, pp. 56-57.

⁵⁷ Davenant, *Death of Christ*, V, pp. 466-467; citing Aquinas, *Sent.*, III.19.

⁵⁸ Davenant, *Death of Christ*, III, pp. 388-389.

⁵⁹ *Death of Christ*, VI, pp. 480-483. Davenant rejected the teaching of Amyraut that God gave sufficient grace universally to all sinners in order to make them capable of believing.

natural dominion over creatures.⁶⁰ But, the will of God to save all men and women cannot, for this reason, be reduced merely to a “revealed will” (*voluntas signi*), as though it were not also actually expressive of God’s will of good pleasure (*voluntas beneplaciti*).⁶¹ For Christ’s work is not universal merely in virtue of its internal *sufficiency*, as though it were *capable* of effecting universal redemption, but in fact lacked a universal *relation* to all persons that might render that work effective. Rather, Christ’s death carried a real universal significance as well. It is a “universal cause” of salvation in that God’s justice is truly satisfied by it, ratifying the covenant of grace to all men, and giving God a plenary right to extend the forgiveness of sins to all who receive Christ by faith. Accordingly, Davenant claims that Christ’s death grants every person a “right” to claim eternal life.⁶² However, the reprobate do not in fact receive eternal life, not because Christ has not truly redeemed them, but because they lack the power to *receive* the virtue of Christ’s work, as God has not granted faith equally to all.

Now, like Davenant, Owen affirms the full “internal perfection and sufficiency” of Christ’s satisfaction. In virtue of both the dignity of the God-man and the greatness of his suffering, Owen claims that the sacrifice of Christ was in “every way able and perfectly sufficient to redeem, justify, and reconcile and save all the sinners in the world, and to satisfy the justice of God for all the sins of all mankind, and to bring them every one to everlasting glory.”⁶³ In other words, the glory and honor of Christ’s work so excels the collective debt of human sin that it infinitely exceeds it by proportion, and so has the intrinsic power to redeem each and every sinner who has ever lived. Moreover, the intrinsic sufficiency of Christ’s atonement is itself the basis and ground for the preaching of the gospel to all nations, and for the free invitation of all to believe in Christ.⁶⁴ But while the *proportion* of Christ’s work makes it internally sufficient for all persons without exception, the efficiency of Christ’s work depends on its *relation* to its intended object. And that relation is not natural or necessary to God’s government, but is superadded by the covenant of redemption in the election of grace, through which the persons of the elect are virtually incorporated into Christ as their Surety and Head.⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Note here that faith, for the hypothetical universalist, is not *purchased* by Christ, but is freely given by right of God’s sovereign dominion.

⁶¹ So Baxter, *Catholick Theologie*, I.xv.360-361, pp. 56-57.

⁶² *Death of Christ*, VI, p. 473.

⁶³ *Works*, 10:296-297.

⁶⁴ *Works*, 8:20; 10:297.

⁶⁵ *Works*, 10:296; *cf.* 10:441; 19:94.

Since the efficiency of Christ's sacrifice is fixed by the terms of the covenant, Owen argues that the intention of God in the atonement must have been for the redemption of the elect alone, whose salvation was the matter of the *pactum salutis*. Alternatively, were God's intention in the atonement thought to be universal in scope, this must imply some imperfection in the work of God. For if Christ died to save those who in fact ultimately perish, then either God is incapable of bringing about the purpose for which he sent Christ to die, or Christ's death did not objectively accomplish anything, in which case it is unclear why Christ was made to suffer and die at all. In order to maintain the perfection of God's work in Christ, therefore, Owen thinks that we must confess that God had one intention in the atonement, and that was to make full redemption of the persons of the elect.

As Owen limits the intention of the atonement in this way, he also rejects the distinction between God's antecedent and consequent wills⁶⁶ in order to maintain that Christ's atoning work arises not out of a *general* love toward *all creatures*, but out of that *special* love of God for the *elect*. This is, in fact, the whole substance of the argument in *The Death of Death* — that Christ's work definitively secured the redemption of the elect, because the mission of the Son is an effect of God's *electing* love. As a result, Owen is forced to deny that there is an "actual and necessary *velleity*" in God according to which God naturally seeks the happiness of his creatures. Because if there *were*, then Owen would be drawn into a conflict regarding the limited scope of God's redemptive mission. To be clear, Owen does not deny that God's mercy is an effect of the intrinsic goodness of God's nature.⁶⁷ And he affirms that God's mercy is an expression of God's own essential goodness: "Infinite goodness and grace is the soil wherein forgiveness grows. It is impossible this flower should spring from any other root."⁶⁸ But on the supposition of the creature's fall from grace, Owen denies that God expresses mercy to the creature as a necessary consequence of his nature: "Mercy and pardon do not come forth from God as light doth from the sun or water from the sea, by a necessary consequence of their natures, whether they will or no".⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Like Turretin and several other High Calvinist thinkers, Owen is generally suspicious of this distinction, regarding it as virtually Arminian. See *Works*, 10:226-227, 323; cf. Turretin, *Institutes*, III.xvi.1-14.

⁶⁷ "All the acts of his will are the effects of his nature" (*Works*, 6:399).

⁶⁸ *Works*, 6:400.

⁶⁹ *Works*, 6:402. Such a statement would be insufficient to rebut the claims of a figure like Davenant, but it would resist the teachings of some Arminians, like John Goodwin.

Owen's stated reason for this judgment is that it is inconsistent with the nature of God's "eternal blessedness and all-sufficiency" to desire the salvation of the reprobate.⁷⁰ He explains as follows:

a natural affection in God to the good and salvation of all, being never completed nor perfected, carrieth along with it a great deal of imperfection and weakness; and not only so, but it must also needs be exceedingly prejudicial to the absolute blessedness and happiness of Almighty God. Look, how much any thing wants of the fulfilling of that whereunto it is carried out with any desire, natural or voluntary, so much it wanteth of blessedness and happiness. So that, without impairing of the infinite blessedness of the ever-blessed God, no natural affection unto any thing never to be accomplished can be ascribed unto him, such as this general love to all is supposed to be.⁷¹

In other words, Owen concludes that God cannot have a natural disposition to be merciful to sinners, because if he did have such a disposition, then no sinners would perish. It should be apparent from this quote that Owen's theology of divine perfection, no less than his pastoral theology, is what drives his account of particular redemption.⁷² God's perfection requires his absolute freedom and blessedness. But how could God be free and at peace in himself if his will is continually frustrated and he is incapable of bringing about those ends which he desires? "God only, whose will and good pleasure is the sole rule of all those works which outwardly are of him, can never deviate in his actions, nor have any end attend or follow his acts not precisely by him intended."⁷³ Christ's mission must therefore have the redemption of the elect alone as its final intent.

Of course, hypothetical universalists like Davenant also wished to maintain the absolute freedom of God and the un-frustrated purpose of his will. But they distinguished here between God's antecedent and consequent wills in order to maintain the point that God wills all things in accordance with the order that he has established. The final purpose of this distinction, then, was to maintain the proper relationship between the orders of creation and redemption. Grace perfects nature. The natural order as it proceeds from God was good, and God continues to love and affirm that order insofar as it is good.⁷⁴ Advocates of hypothetical

⁷⁰ *Works*, 10:228; cf. Turretin, *Institutes*, III.xvi.6-8.

⁷¹ *Works*, 10:322.

⁷² It is decidedly not, as Clifford has argued, an abstract commitment to an aristotelean teleology (*Atonement and Justification*, 95-110).

⁷³ *Works*, 10:162.

⁷⁴ Owen affirms the same point (*Works*, 2:31, 170; 12:534), though he denies its relevance with respect to the redemptive mission of the Son.

universalism thought it necessary to register this point in the logic of salvation as well, in order to maintain that the work of redemption itself proceeds from God's natural relation to creatures, and the tendency of his government toward their perfection. As God is the Creator, he loves those creatures that bear his likeness. He thus naturally wills their happiness, and for this same reason, he also wills the mission of the Son for their redemption.

By denying this distinction on the grounds that it implies an imperfection in God's freedom, Owen is rejecting the notion that God's universal love for creatures as they are exemplars of his goodness is the cause for the sending of his Son. Of course, God does love all of his creatures as he is their Creator. In fact, it could hardly be otherwise. For, properly speaking, love is "to will good to any one". And since God's will is the principle of all things, his willing good to any is itself "operative" of the thing willed, effectually communicating the goodness that was intended.⁷⁵ In this sense, God's love does extend universally to all humankind, even to the reprobate, for without this love they could not exist in being for even a moment.

God is good to all men, and bountiful, being a wise, powerful, liberal provider for the works of his hands, in and by innumerable dispensations and various communications of his goodness to them, and may in that regard be said to have a universal love for them all.⁷⁶

Yet, precisely because God's love is operative of the thing willed, Owen concludes that God's love for creatures cannot be *natural* to God. For, "that which is natural must be equal in all its operations; and that which is natural to God must be eternal".⁷⁷ In the first instance, however, it is clear that God's love does not extend to all creatures equally in its operations, ends, and effects. "Some he loves only as to temporal and common mercies [viz. natural goods], some as to spiritual grace and glory; for he hath mercy on whom he will have mercy."⁷⁸ And this is God's right by virtue of his natural dominion over creatures: "May not God do what he will with his own?"⁷⁹ To Owen's mind, therefore, the mystery of God's mercy cannot be explained by appealing to a necessary disposition of the divine nature, because this cannot explain why God elects some and reprobates others, as Scripture clearly attests: "As it is written, Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated" (Rom. 9:13). Becoming a

⁷⁵ *Works*, 2:63.

⁷⁶ *Works*, 12:552; cf. *ST* Ia, q. 20, a. 2

⁷⁷ *Works*, 10:323.

⁷⁸ *Works*, 2:345.

recipient of God's mercy thus requires "a free act of the will of God to deal with us according to this his abundant goodness", otherwise, "we can have no interest therein."⁸⁰ But if this is in fact the case, then God must grant his mercy freely, and not on the basis of any natural relation to creatures, but merely by right of his absolute freedom and dominion.⁸¹

It is in defense of this point that, in *The Death of Death*, Owen advances the very Scotist claim that God can have no "natural affection, whereby he should necessarily be carried to anything without himself [*viz.* anything *ad extra*]"⁸² Owen employs this principle in his discussion of God's love in John 3:16 to contradict the claim that God's mercy toward sinners is an effect of a natural inclination of God's nature to love and will the good toward creatures. Its purpose is thus to reinforce the freedom of God's redeeming love as an act of divine dominion. In an appendix to *The Death of Death*, Owen expands on this point, combining it with a rejection of the notion that God's love is properly *appetitive*. God's redeeming love does not follow from God's apprehension of the good that is in creatures.⁸³ For that which is temporal and contingent cannot be the cause of that which is eternal and necessary. God's love, like his essence, is a perfect act. And God wills only himself necessarily, all other things he wills contingently.⁸⁴ Consequently, Owen concludes that God's love for creatures is neither natural nor necessary, but is grounded in a contingent act of his will.⁸⁵ As such, it is free in all of its operations.

His love is a free act of his will; and therefore, though it be like himself, such as becomes his nature, yet it is not necessarily determined on any object, nor limited as unto the nature, degrees, and effects of it. He loves whom he pleaseth, and as unto what end he pleaseth.⁸⁶

With the publication of his *Dissertation on Divine Justice* (1653), Owen partially rescinds his claim that God does not act by a necessity of nature toward anything that is *ad*

⁷⁹ *Works*, 11:227-228.

⁸⁰ *Works*, 6:402.

⁸¹ "In brief, wherever there is any mention of election or predestination, it is still accompanied with . . . his free power and supreme dominion over all things" (*Works*, 10:63).

⁸² *Works*, 10:322; *cf.* 10:427. This claim was not uncommon among the High Calvinists of the period.

⁸³ In this instance, Owen is responding to the suggestion that Christ might be the cause, and not the effect, of God's love toward sinners.

⁸⁴ "Every thing that concerns us is an act of his free will and good pleasure, and not a natural, necessary act of his Deity." (*Works*, 10:227). Owen is here denying *both* the absolute and the natural necessity of God's love for creatures.

⁸⁵ *Works*, 10:427. Behind this claim is a distinction between God's *amor naturalis* and *amor complacentiæ*. See *Muller, PRRD*, 3:564-568.

⁸⁶ *Works*, 2:344.

extra. Instead, he comes to argue that God does punish sin by a necessity of nature. But as a feature of his theology of grace, Owen continued to maintain that God has no natural disposition to be merciful to the sinner.⁸⁷ Throughout this study, we have seen that Owen's account of divine government is systematically arranged to privilege the freedom of God's grace. This emphasis derives jointly from Owen's anti-Pelagian critique and his increasing concern with the spread of natural religion in England. Both of these themes are apparent in his account of particular redemption, the whole of which is designed to maintain the free and unconditional nature of God's grace. And here we observe yet another instance in which Owen's theology of grace entails a different conception of the relation between God and the natural order.

Owen makes no use of exemplary causes in defining the *ratio* of God's redeeming mercy; indeed, he goes to considerable lengths to deny their relevance in this matter. This is ultimately why Owen denies that God's forgiveness and placability are discernible by reason from the natural gifts which God gives to sinners,⁸⁸ and argues instead that the first discovery of God's love and mercy to sinners was revealed only in the promise of the covenant of grace.⁸⁹ The intention of God's redeeming work takes its rise not from a natural and universal love of God for his creatures, but from the free and *discriminating* love of God's election — his *amor beneplaciti*.⁹⁰ Christ himself, therefore, is the great sign of God's *electing* love.

[The elect] can be partakers of no other love, neither in itself nor in its fruits, but that alone wherewith the Father first loved [Christ]. He loveth him for us all, and us no otherwise but as in him. He makes us “accepted in the Beloved,” Eph. 1:6. He is the Beloved of the Father κατ’ ἐξοχήν [according to prominence]; as in all things he was to have the pre-eminence, Col. 1:18. The love of the body is derived unto it from the love unto the Head; and in the love of him doth God love the whole church, and no otherwise. He loves none but as united unto him, and participant of his nature.⁹¹

This allows Owen to speak with great forcefulness about the unconditional nature of the covenant of grace and about the consolation that is available to the church in the standing that Christ obtained for them. The church can be fully assured of the Father's love, not because of what they are in themselves, but because the Father loves them for the sake of his Son, who

⁸⁷ E.g., *Works*, 2:82, 344-345; 9:43-44; 10:511; 11:228-229, 246-247; 12:552-561; 19:107.

⁸⁸ See above. Owen holds that this is revealed only with the promise made to Adam and with the institution of the first sacrifice. See *Works*, 6:427-437; 10:512-554; 17:75-76 [*Biblical Theology*, 78-79]; 19:236-259.

⁸⁹ *Works*, 6:433-434; 22:169.

⁹⁰ *Works*, 2:21; 10:318-329, 427.

loved them to the end. However, because Owen in this way enforces such a strong distinction between the orders of creation and redemption, his conception of God's redeeming love does not carry the same affirmation of the created order that it does in thinkers like Aquinas or Davenant. The work of redemption is not seen as flowing from the normal order of God's government. It reveals God's free and redeeming love, but it does not tell us about God's general love for his creatures. Redemption comes from a work that wholly exceeds the created order and in this respect possesses a kind of superadded or supereminent quality.

This is apparent, for example, in *The Doctrine of the Saints' Perseverance* (1654), where Owen responds to the claim of John Goodwin that, since God is a "faithful Creator" (1 Pet. 4:19), he has a natural disposition to help the saints, to keep them from evil, and to confirm them in holiness. Owen argues, by contrast, that the grace by which the saints persevere does not arise from a general "disposition" of God's nature to be good to creatures, but springs entirely from the "free purpose of his will". He concludes by claiming that,

There is no law nor relation of creation that lays hold on God so far as to oblige him to the communication of one drop of his goodness to any of the creatures beyond what is given them by their creation, or to continue that unto them for one moment, all the dispensation of himself unto his creatures flowing from his sovereign good pleasure, doing what he will with his own.⁹²

This passage is striking because it juxtaposes the acts of creation and redemption in terms of a communication of divine goodness. In the act of creation *ex nihilo*, God's communication of his goodness to the creature was a free and contingent act. There was nothing about the nature of creatures, nor the nature of God himself that required this act. It was sheerly an act of God's absolute dominion. In a similar way, Owen urges that there is nothing about the nature of God or his relation to the natural order which obligates him to any act of goodness beyond the simple maintenance of creaturely existence. Not even the love by which God maintains the elect in grace has its foundation in "a disposition as is imagined".⁹³ It rests solely on a free act of God's will.

Obviously, Owen's theology of unconditional election forms the larger background for these claims. Owen merely wants to assure believers that, "the most conditional promises are

⁹¹ *Works*, 1:146.

⁹² *Works*, 11:247.

⁹³ *Works*, 11:247.

to be resolved into absolute and unconditional love”.⁹⁴ God’s work of redemption has its roots in the election of *grace*. And God’s election is *gracious* precisely because it is a free and unconditional act. The saints need not worry, therefore, that they might be excluded from God’s love because their obedience is too feeble, or because they have left some condition unperformed. For God’s redeeming love has no basis in their works whatsoever — it is simply a free and gracious gift. Yet, as such, it is an act of God’s absolute dominion which is neither natural or necessary, but is resolved entirely into the prior indifference of the divine will.⁹⁵ This effectively illustrates the full freedom that Owen assigns to God’s dominion as well as the heavily “voluntarist” character of his doctrine of grace. But, in essence, Owen here suspends the entire economy of grace in mid-air, denying it any natural basis in the divine nature, and with some pretty worrying consequences. For in doing so, he effectively reduces God’s natural relation to the sinner merely to that of an efficient cause. Not only can human works not form a cause of election, but there is nothing about the nature of sinners as creatures, nor about the nature of their relation to God, nor even about the nature of God himself that disposes God to act in mercy on their behalf.

A generous reading might at this point be inclined to think of this as a rather isolated misstep, but in fact, this is the natural correlate to Owen’s larger theology of divine justice. By nature, God has a natural dominion over creatures such that there can be no justice between them except by a gracious condescension on the part of God, entering into a covenant with the creature and freely extending his promise to them as the rule of their mutual communion. In the last chapter, we raised the question as to whether this implied that rational creatures might have had a purely natural end. But this same question now bears on us at this point, as well. For if God’s justice toward the creature is established only in the giving of the covenant, then what happens when that covenant is broken? Is it natural to God to continue the original purpose of the first covenant, and provide a means for sinners to attain their supernatural end? Owen’s answer here is quite clearly a ‘No’. Having granted the covenant to the sinner as a means of obtaining eternal life, God is not obliged — either by his righteousness or by his goodness — to provide sinners with a means for attaining their supernatural end. This clearly operates with a much more attenuated notion of divine goodness than is found in Thomas. The righteousness of God’s government must here consist in God’s “fairness” to creatures, rather than in his regular movement of creatures

⁹⁴ *Works*, 11:233.

⁹⁵ *Cf. Works*, 6:428, 434; 10:591-592.

toward a supernatural end. And it implies that Owen has a very different understanding of the sense in which God's "glory" is the comprehensive end of God's government. But it is clear that this focus derives from Owen's concern to resist making God's natural relation to creatures the *basis* of his redemptive work, and in this way to maintain the freedom of God's grace as arising from his absolute dominion over creatures.

Conclusion

I have argued here that Owen's theology of mercy is deeply shaped by his account of divine dominion and the freedom of God's grace. Owen wishes to affirm the unconditional nature of grace in the strongest possible terms. And therefore, as part of his larger anti-Pelagian critique, Owen continually resists any attempt of his opponents to ground God's redeeming work in his natural relation to creatures. To Owen's mind, this could only occlude the full freedom of God's election as well as the absolute perfection and efficacy of Christ's satisfaction. Instead, Owen insists that mercy is an effect of the love of God which, by right of his absolute dominion, is absolutely free. "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and T will have compassion on whom T will have compassion" (Rom. 9:15). Indeed, the full graciousness of God's redeeming mercy appears only in light of the adventitious nature of God's grace — that it was neither necessary nor inevitable, but freely willed by God. This concern stands at the very heart of Owen's argument in *The Death of Death*, which is one of the earliest and most important works in his corpus.

Once again, therefore, we see that Owen's account of divine government is systematically arranged in order to exclude attempts to use the doctrine of creation to restrict God's freedom or to render his grace foreseeable and predictable. Owen employs "voluntarist" conceptual structures to this end, but in many respects this is really beside the point. What drives many of these theological judgments is not Owen's account of the divine nature, as such, but his moral theology and the spiritual vision that informs his account of grace. A vision of God's grace as so free and unconditional provides the sinner with confidence in the work of Christ and assurance of the irrepressibility of divine favor to all who are united with Christ. Moreover, it engenders a *careful* piety, one that looks with amazement upon the mystery of God's love. By contrast, the presumption of a general disposition in God to be merciful to sinners, in Owen's mind, encourages a kind of spiritual

complacency that places undue confidence in the flesh and ultimately ceases to marvel at God's mercy.

Of course, such a dramatic vision of the freedom of God's grace comes at a considerable cost. Owen is forced to deny that God's redeeming love is naturally necessary to God, but is merely a contingent expression of his will. Such a claim about the nature of God is worrisome for multiple reasons. In the first instance, it is methodologically concerning for the manner in which it brackets the mercy of God revealed in Christ from consideration of the divine nature. Christ's mission might tell us a great deal about God's will for the elect in particular, but for Owen, it tells us virtually nothing about the ends to which God governs humankind. And if we do not obtain knowledge of this point in the work of Christ, then where do we obtain it? Furthermore, it also has the potential to seriously undermine Christian confidence in the goodness of God. For if it is not natural for God to govern creatures toward himself as their final end, then the "humanism" that is proper to the Christian faith, as a religion that proclaims the great dignity and ennoblement of humankind as creatures created for the enjoyment of God is seriously called into question.

CONCLUSION

Contemporary readings of Owen's thought have tended to see him as a "Reformed catholic", attempting to offer a synthesis between late Medieval scholastic thought — particularly in its Thomist varieties — and High Orthodox Reformed theology. But such approaches risk losing sight of several of the central controlling interests of Owen's theology of God and God's government. I have argued here that Owen's use of the theme of "divine dominion" reveals an account of God's government that privileges the freedom of God and dramatically reduces the role of the doctrine of creation as a controlling norm of God's government.

We have seen the function of this theme in Owen's theology of the divine will, where it indicates God's causal priority over creatures and the character of all his acts as absolutely self-moved. In his theology of creation, we observed the manner in which this concept aids Owen in advancing a very powerful conception of the natural dependence of creatures as well as a theology of grace that, while essential to a truly human existence, nonetheless is superadded to human nature. In our chapter on divine law, we saw how Owen's theology of divine dominion leads him to concentrate the moral life around the creature's active communion with God. As a consequence, he draws on the work of Suárez in order to level a critique against natural law traditions which articulate moral obligation in terms of the natural advantage that attends any moral act.

Owen's employment of divine dominion was most potent in his critique of merit theology. We observed that, in order to counter Medieval theologies which locate the ground of merit *ex natura rei*, Owen argues that God has no natural obligation to reward the good moral acts of creatures because he has an absolute dominion over them. This allows Owen to consolidate his account of reward to the gracious promise of God in the covenant. Finally, in our chapter on the mercy of God, we saw that Owen made use of his theology of divine dominion in order to deny claims by the proponents of universal redemption that God has a natural inclination to seek the happiness of his creatures. Instead, Owen maintains that as God has a natural dominion over creatures, he does not have any natural and necessary affection for any of his creatures *ad extra*.

In each instance, Owen returns to his concept of divine dominion in order to resist what he takes to be a misguided attempt to use the doctrine of creation to control or regulate the

character of God's government. The consistent concern that has motivated this resistance is Owen's interest to defend the priority of divine grace by protecting the freedom of God. The theme of dominion functions here to underscore God's right over the creature and the creature's absolute dependence upon God. This, in turn, allows Owen to depict God's grace as complete gratuity — entirely free and undeserved.

As we have seen, however, Owen's interests in the nature of the economy of grace engender a doctrine of God that is very different than the traditional Thomist doctrine. Owen's account of the divine will is more voluntarist. His doctrine of creation and natural law are more modest. He observes a strict distinction between his theology of nature and the covenant, and his account of the redemptive mission of the Son also has a kind of superadded character, in that it does not follow from God's general government of creatures but is a radically new act of God. Taken collectively, Owen's theology gives a vision of divine government that is active and free. One which privileges the adventitious and in a sense even "apocalyptic" character of God's grace. In this respect, Owen's theology of divine government shares much more in common with contemporary Protestant thinkers like Karl Barth than much of the secondary literature on Owen has acknowledged. Owen's critique of natural religion and the natural law tradition, his theology of the *imago Dei*, the manner in which he relates creation and covenant, and his persistent concern to safeguard the freedom and priority of God's grace anticipate, in several important respects, many of the central themes which modern Protestant theology has sought to privilege. As such, his theology provides resources for such contemporary projects by illustrating how one might register the full freedom of God's grace within a scholastic mode.

Yet, Owen's theological vision is not driven by an abstract doctrine of divine freedom or a polemical interest to resist the spread of natural religion. Rather, he is attempting to advance a moral and spiritual vision that maintains God's rightful place at the very center of human existence. Nature is an "inferior alloy" of grace, because the true nature of the creature emerges only as it is lifted out of its weakness by the divine act, and drawn into communion with God by the Spirit. It is in this act of worship that the creature — and with it, the whole of creation — finds its entire reason for being. Indeed, the whole nobility and dignity of the creature consists in its calling to know and love God. But it is precisely this end that is threatened by human sin, as the affections of men and women are turned from the enjoyment of God to the love and worship of created goods. By its conversion to the creature, the sinner rebels against

God's dominion, casting off its moral dependence on God and denying him his rightful place at the center of their affections.

Owen thus understands the realm of history as a conflict between two dominions, competing for the affections of men — the dominion of sin and grace. While sin has no right to do so, it nonetheless holds the vast majority of mankind under a natural and insuperable dominion. And though sin denies men and women the dignity of their high calling and enslaves them to the service of their sensible appetites, yet they still “wear its livery” and “boast themselves in their bondage”. Simply by virtue of being God's creatures, they retain a natural right “to cast off the rule of sin, and to vindicate themselves unto liberty”. But they do not have power in themselves to do so, for “Sin's dominion is broken only by grace”.¹

By the Spirit's grace these affections are radically renewed, and over time, they are progressively turned back to God. Accordingly, Owen sharply distinguishes the church and the world on the basis of the habitual inclination of their affections, arguing that the life of grace assumes a very foreign disposition — it renounces the things of this world and all its goods in order that it might cultivate a desire and affection for God. The true marks of the Christian, therefore, are above all carefulness and sincerity — *sincerity*, in the honest and responsible avowal of one's true affections, and *carefulness*, in attending to God's every command and guarding one's heart against the love of earthly goods.

In order to expound the spiritual nature of the Christian life, therefore, Owen's piety draws heavily on the *contemptus mundi* tradition, depicting the Christian vocation in terms of its ascetical practices.² Genuine love for God here stands in contrast with a love of created goods. In the original order of creation, all things were “desireable unto men, and the enjoyment of them would have been a blessing . . . For they were the ordinance of God to lead us unto the knowledge of him and love unto him”.³ But in our sin, we deny God the glory that is rightfully his, turning instead to love and worship the creature. In this way, God's own creations are made “effectual means to draw off the heart and affections from

¹ *Works*, 7:509.

² A full exposition of this theme within Owen's moral and spiritual writings would, I think, bear out much of what we have seen here already — namely, that much of Owen's critique of natural religion is driven by his moral theology and his desire to place the free gift of God's grace at the very center of Christian piety.

³ *Works*, 7:397.

God”.⁴ And Satan most commonly accomplishes this by the promising satisfaction to the lusts of men, in this way blinding their eyes through the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life.

God has therefore “poured contempt on the things of this world, in comparison of thing spiritual and heavenly”,⁵ and this is most eminently signified in the suffering and death of his Son on the cross.

What can be seen or found in this world, after the Son of God hath spent his life in it, not having where to lay his head, and after he went out of it on the cross? Had there been aught of real worth in things here below, certainly he had enjoyed it, if not crowns and empires, which were all in his power, yet such goods and possessions as men of sober reasoning and moderate affections do esteem a competency. But things were quite otherwise disposed, to manifest that there is nothing of value or use in these things, but only to support nature unto the performance of service unto God; wherein they are serviceable to eternity . . . In his cross the world proclaimed all its good qualities and all its powers, and hath given unto them that believe its naked face to view and contemplate; nor is it now one jot more comely than it was when it had gotten Christ on the Cross.⁶

God’s dominion over all things reveals itself most powerfully in the cross, for it is here that God has laid bare the full vanity and emptiness of the world. There is nothing to the world — no lasting good or pleasure — that it does not have by way of God’s free goodness. What gain is it, then, for the sinner to acquire all earthly goods but lose the enjoyment of that supernatural good for which he was made? Owen thus warns the Christian not to conduct the affairs of this life — in the building up of wealth, in the care of family, or in the maintenance of social standing — so as to set one’s affections upon them. Rather, we should fix our eyes upon Christ who, as the “author and finisher of our faith”, was “poor, despised, reproached, persecuted, nailed to the cross, and all by this world”. “Whatever be your designs and aims”, he urges, “let his cross continually interpose between your affections and this world”.⁷

In the last analysis, then, it is this moral and spiritual vision that really underwrites Owen’s emphasis on God’s dominion. Creation exists for the sake of God, and it is empty without him. The sign of the cross thus declares the vanity of this world and the ruin of all

⁴ *Works*, 7:398.

⁵ *Works*, 7:397.

⁶ *Works*, 7:398.

⁷ *Works*, 7:399.

those who reject divine rule and rebel against God's rightful dominion. Yet, at the same time, it also reveals the true nature of discipleship in this life. For though the Christian is assaulted by temptations and afflictions of every sort — though she may be deprived of all earthly goods and even threatened with the loss of life itself, it is in the love and service of God that the Christian truly lives. For as it is a creature appointed for the knowledge and love of God, it is in this act, and not otherwise, that the creature fulfills its nature. The call to worship, therefore, is the announcement of God's dominion over all things. And this call must sound again and again, for it is only in the service of God's rule that God's creatures can find their rest.

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