



Blindness, Imagination, Perception: Calvin's 1559 Institutes and Early Modern Visual Instability

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**Blindness, Imagination, Perception:
Calvin's 1559 *Institutes* and Early Modern Visual Instability**

A dissertation presented

by

AnnMarie M. Bridges

to

The Committee on the Study of Religion

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Abstract

Although studies of visual culture continue to privilege visible artifacts, and especially images, it is also the case that visual habits are imagined and inculcated through texts. This project reinterprets John Calvin's 1559 *Institutes of the Christian Religion* against the backdrop of sixteenth-century visual instability—a hitherto unexamined dimension of the work's historical context. This research is made newly possible by a recent burgeoning of scholarship on early modern European sensory cultures. Situating the *Institutes* against this backdrop reveals that “perception”—a term I employ as a shorthand for the sixteenth-century process whereby visual experience is conditioned by the imagination even before it becomes the basis for conscious thought—is a previously unrecognized but central organizing concern of Calvin's magnum opus. Underappreciated dimensions of the *Institutes* come to light when we reexamine its striking perceptual motifs (from sinful “blindness” to clarifying lenses, mirrors, and marks) in light of the contested status of vision and visual epistemology in early modern Europe.

This research reveals that both the *Institutes*' theological teachings and its distinctive form are designed to intervene in its readers' perceptual habits. In Chapters One through Four, I show how three of the text's major themes—the knowledge of God, accommodation, and idolatry—appear in a fresh light when approached in terms of the *Institutes*' concern with perception. In Chapters Five through Seven, I show how interpreting the text as centrally concerned with problems of perception can illuminate both well-understood and still-puzzling

features of its Latin prose style. Ultimately, this dissertation offers a case study, not only of a distinctively Reformed visual piety, but also of how perceptual habits might be cultivated through texts. In so doing, it makes good on the intuition, expressed by many scholars, that Protestant leaders were not rejecting but “reforming” the role of the senses in religious life. Finally, by reinterpreting Calvin’s *Institutes* explicitly from the perspective of visual culture, this project also begins to redress the relative absence of sustained theological analysis in studies of visual culture, whether in early modernity or beyond.

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Acknowledgments

This project came together in three pieces. First, in an office hours discussion about historical method, Ahmed Ragab promised me that my text was preoccupied with something—something that I was taking so much for granted that the text’s constant engagement with it was imperceptible to me. This conviction in hand, I began to look for the invisible stakes of Calvin’s *Institutes*. Second, during his stint at the Harvard Society of Fellows, Daniel Jütte introduced me to Bob Scribner’s work on late medieval ways of seeing. Reading Scribner’s reflections on the sacramental gaze, I began to see the *Institutes*’ own preoccupation with perception—and what precludes it. Third, I came across Stuart Clark’s 2009 monograph, *Vanities of the Eye: Vision in Early Modern European Culture*. Clark’s account of the myriad ways that early modern people believed visual experience could be compromised by subjective conditions of the viewer persuaded me that the *Institutes*’ concern with how sin distorts perception is an indigenous dimension of the text’s sixteenth-century milieu. Together, these three fortuitous gifts from other scholars led me to the premise of this dissertation, which is that underappreciated dimensions of Calvin’s magnum opus come to light when we interpret the text’s perceptual motifs against the visual instability of its early modern European setting.

The finished project bears the mark of many sharp and generous minds. I remain indebted to my earliest teachers on these subjects, René Meyer, Matthew Meyer Boulton, Ron Thiemann, and especially Michelle Sanchez, whose reading of Calvin has been an inspiration from the beginning and who saw this project through to the end as a member of my committee. I am also grateful to my colleagues Joshua Cohen, Greg Given, Amulya Mandava, Sarabinh Levy-Brightman, Mike Motia, Charlie Carstens, Constance Furey, and Mark Jordan for thought-provoking conversations that moved this project forward in measurable ways. Special gratitude is reserved for my brilliant friend Sarah Griffis, whose ambitious vision for this project at times outstripped my own. Her confidence in this research pushed me to take it ever further, so as to live up to her own standards for it, which she always graciously represented as having already been met.

My debt to Lee Palmer Wandel would be great had I only benefitted from her published work. It is not a stretch to say that Lee’s brilliant essay, “John Calvin and Michel de Montaigne on the Eye,” laid the groundwork for this project by showing me what becomes possible if we return the *Institutes* to its sixteenth-century setting—not the relatively narrow context of religious reform, but the Europe-wide environment of visual culture. Lee thus had a formative hand in this project years before we began corresponding. Heaping generosity upon generosity, she allowed a cold call from a stranger halfway across the country to blossom into a deeply enriching and challenging mentorship. Lee gifted me some of the greatest encouragements a young scholar can receive: the willingness to listen to my half-formed instincts, and the graciousness to urge them on—even to extend them by way of her own thinking. Every reading of the *Institutes* is distinctive, but to meet a reader who seemed to know the same Calvin as I—with whom I could speak about Calvin as of a mutual friend—was immeasurably heartening.

Anne Monius, another mentor who adopted me out of sheer graciousness, added me to the schedule of her weekly advisees after I sought her out with questions about Ricoeur’s *Time and Narrative*. Anne’s willingness to invest in a project on Calvin is a testament to her remarkable ability to inhabit another scholar’s project—not only an act of extreme generosity, but also an incredible feat of sympathetic imagination, one that is vanishingly rare. The questions that shaped this research emerged out of several years of weekly reading with Anne. Her

premature death before the culmination of this project pains me deeply. Anne believed in this research so much that I suspect, had she been able, she would have willed it into being. In a way, that is exactly what she has done. I can still hear Anne's relentless questioning as I write, and I know that there are questions she put to me that I have yet to answer. I will not stop thinking about Calvin until I have answers that I think might have satisfied her—which any student of Anne's will tell you, is a very tall order indeed.

Many people have wondered aloud to me—and presumably many more silently—why Charlie Stang, a patristics scholar known for his work on Pseudo-Dionysius, was the right advisor for this project on Calvin's *Institutes*. The answer is that Charlie was the right advisor for me. When I think about the twists of fate that brought this partnership into being, I am persuaded by Calvin's vision of an all-encompassing providence that leaves no detail to chance.

Charlie introduced me to an approach to textual interpretation that continually returns to the text for answers to the questions the text itself generates. Charlie often invokes the ideal of a text that teaches us how to interpret it, but this is not only a feature of texts. It is also a disposition of the reader, for which Charlie has been the ideal model. Perhaps counterintuitively, Charlie has also been the ideal guide to help me find my way in the male-dominated field of Theology. It was in Charlie's classes that I developed a style of reading, questioning, and ultimately writing that perhaps could not have matured elsewhere. And it was under his protection that I made peace with the irreducible difficulty of writing as a female scholar with strong views about Calvin—that most toxic villain of modernity, a subject certainly unfit for any polite young woman.

Most importantly, this dissertation everywhere bears the marks of the best gift Charlie gave me as an advisor—his trust in me, which taught me to trust myself. Because he never confused my voice or my thoughts with his own, I did not need to learn to stand on my own thinking; Charlie placed me there, then gave me the space to work that thinking out for myself. This project is not his in any way except that I am persuaded that no one but Charlie could have created the environment in which it became possible. I would not have had it any other way.

Finally, I am immeasurably blessed to enjoy an extended family with unflagging enthusiasm for my scholarship. I will be forever grateful to Amanda, Marc, Barbara, Annie, Rutt, and Cody for their constant encouragement and many material forms of support. I am sadly aware that this level of familial support is not the norm among female doctoral students, which makes me all the more grateful to these remarkable people, whose trust in me and in the value of my work reflects an uncommon degree of both imagination and feminism.

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March 18, 2020
COVID-19 self-quarantine
in beautiful Denver, Colorado

For my mother, who taught me how to think,

and for Anne, who taught me how to read.

Introduction

“They do not... apprehend God
as he offers himself,
but imagine him
as they have fashioned him
in their own presumption.”
– John Calvin

“External objects surrender to our mercy,
they dwell in us as we please.”
– Michel de Montaigne

The celebrated opening paragraph of John Calvin’s 1559 *Institutio Christianae Religionis* describes the process whereby humans can become acquainted with God. Under even fallen conditions, accurate perception of self should lead naturally and immediately to the perception of God: “From the *sensus* of our own ignorance, vanity, and poverty... we recognize (*recognoscimus*)” the abundance of good things in God. Indeed, Calvin emphasizes that the inevitable result of honest self-examination is that one will “immediately turn his *sensus* to gaze upon God.”¹ In each phrase, Calvin uses the term *sensus*—from *sentio*, to discern by the senses—which indicates first a capacity for corporeal sensation and secondarily a mental feeling, disposition, or frame of mind.² However, there is a problem with the mutually reinforcing projects of *sensus* of self and *sensus* of God: they can be disrupted by the effects of sin.

Epigraphs: John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.4.1 and Michel de Montaigne, *Essais* II.2.

¹ John Calvin, *Institutio Christianae Religionis* (Berolini: Gustavum Eichler, 1834), 1.1.1. English translation from John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960). Note that I have departed from Battles’ translation, which reads: “In the first place, no one can look upon (*aspicere*) himself without immediately turning his thoughts (*sensus*) to the contemplation (*intuitum*) of God, in whom he lives and moves. For, quite clearly, the mighty gifts with which we are endowed are hardly from ourselves... Indeed, our very poverty better discloses the infinitude of benefits reposing in God... Thus, from the feeling (*sensus*) of our own ignorance, vanity, poverty, infirmity, and—what is more—depravity and corruption, we recognize (*recognoscimus*) that the true light of wisdom, sound virtue, full abundance of every good, and purity of righteousness rest in the Lord alone.”

² Only in a transferred sense does *sensus* indicate a faculty of thinking or understanding. Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary. Founded on Andrews’ Edition of Freund’s Latin Dictionary, revised, enlarged, and in great part rewritten* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879). Perseus Digital Library. Note that unless otherwise specified, definitions come from this text.

Calvin names this problem in the second, less-studied paragraph of the text, where we also find the *Institutio*'s first extended verbal image. According to Calvin, sin causes humans to perceive—or, more accurately, to misperceive—themselves as righteous. Calvin casts humans' failure to recognize how sinful we are as the result of a perceptual distortion caused by the use of the improper baseline or perceptual standard. Because human *sensus* of self is calibrated according to corrupted human standards, "what is a little less vile pleases us as a thing most pure." The result is that "we seem to ourselves (*nobis videmur*)" righteous by comparison. Calvin likens the distortion to an optical illusion: "Just so, an eye to which nothing is shown but black objects judges something dirty white or even rather darkly mottled to be whiteness itself."³ With this image of a "darkly mottled" surface that only *appears* white due to local visual cues, Calvin evokes the phenomenon of sliding baseline distortion—specifically, a case that scientists call the simultaneous contrast illusion⁴—to capture the distorted *sensus* of self that results from sin.

To appreciate the stakes of this image—the text's first rich depiction of the human condition—it is helpful to situate Calvin's comments against the backdrop of early modern understandings of color perception. It was well-known to early modern people that a target looks darker when juxtaposed with a brighter region; in fact, the variable appearance of shades was an explicit locus of reflection in Renaissance color theory.⁵ In a late fifteenth century treatise on drawing and painting often hailed as one of the groundbreaking texts of the early Renaissance,

³ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.1.2.

⁴ In the classic simultaneous contrast illusion, a spot of gray placed on a black background is perceived as lighter and brighter in color than a spot of the same color gray on a background of white. One way to think of this phenomenon is in terms of perceptual anchoring: when the gray spot is placed against a black backdrop, the gray acts as an "anchor," or standard, against which the mind judges the blackness of the background—and the comparative lightness and brightness of the gray. When placed against a white background, however, the same gray spot looks dark and dull because, in this case, the *white* serves as the anchor for the *gray*. Daniele Zavagno, Olga Daneyko, and Kenzo Sakurai, "What Can Pictorial Artifacts Teach Us about Light and Lightness?" *Japanese Psychological Research* 53, no. 4 (November 2011): 455-56.

⁵ Moshe Barasch, *Light and Color in the Italian Renaissance Theory of Art* (New York: New York University Press, 1978), 24.

Leon Battista Alberti remarks on the same phenomenon that Calvin evokes in the *Institutio*: “Ivory and silver are white, but if compared to a swan or to snow-white linen cloths, they appear somewhat pallid.”⁶ Interestingly, this comment occurs in Alberti’s discussion of contrast as a route to understanding: what is dark and obscure, he notes, is only “found out by comparison.”⁷

Calvin seems to be assuming the same epistemological principle when he continues to use variations in visual contrast to suggest that accurate human *sensus* can only be restored through a perceptual adjustment. The required instrument of recalibration is the appropriate perceptual anchor—namely, God’s majesty, which Calvin describes as the “sole standard (*unica est regula*)” by which humans should be measured, indeed, the “straightedge to which we must be shaped (*ad cuius amussim conformari nos oportet*).”⁸ A dramatic recalibration occurs when God’s “genuine splendor”—true whiteness, in this optical illustration—is juxtaposed to the darkness of the human condition:

Then, what masquerading earlier as righteousness was pleasing in us will soon grow filthy in its consummate wickedness. What wonderfully impressed us under the name of wisdom will stink in its very foolishness. What wore the face of power will prove itself the most miserable weakness.⁹

This passage narrates the perceptual shift caused by the application of the “straightedge” of God’s splendor. Calvin’s language evokes the instantaneity and involuntariness of lightness perception, the way the imposition of visual contrast makes the world rearrange itself into a new

⁶ *De pictura*, bk. 1, ch. 18. Translation from *On Painting: A New Translation and Critical Edition*, ed. and trans. Rocco Sinisgalli (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 38.

⁷ Alberti, *De pictura*, bk. 1, ch. 18. Leonardo da Vinci comments along similar lines, “Of several colors, [which] are equally white, that will look whitest against the darkest background. And black will look intensest against the whitest background.” The comment continues: “and the same is the case with other colors when surrounded by their strongest contrast.” *The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci*, pt. V, sect. 280. Quoted in Barasch, *Light and Color*, 176. See also Alberti, *De pictura*, bk. 2, ch. 49: in discussing the appropriate uses of gold paint, Alberti observes: “after you have placed gold on a flat table, the major parts of [those] surfaces that one needed to represent as bright and brilliant appear dark to the observers.”

⁸ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.1.2.

⁹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.1.2.

pattern right before our eyes, without the need for conscious thought: “When [God] shall bring forth his splendor and cause it to draw nearer,” Calvin promises, “the brightest thing will become darkness before it.”¹⁰ In the moment this passage describes,¹¹ a perceptual distortion that otherwise goes unrecognized is dramatically revealed when human self-perception is recalibrated.¹²

This diptych, which consists of an optical illusion and its rectification through visual contrast, is the *Institutio*’s first extended illustration of the human condition. The picture of humanity as spotted and soiled in comparison to the divine majesty rings familiar in light of Calvin’s infamous views on human depravity. What may be more surprising is the fact that the accent in these paragraphs is not on human imperfection itself, but on the distorted status of human *self-perception*—and worst of all, the likelihood that humans remain oblivious to this perceptual conditioning unless and until a dramatic perceptual shift alerts them to it. The urgent question these images raise is not only: do we see things as they are? but also, what if we only *imagine* we see things as they are? How can we be sure that our confident perceptions—both of

¹⁰ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.1.3. This image points to a method for accurately discerning the true character of the human condition when seen against divine majesty—namely, contrast through juxtaposition. I will return to the idea of contrast as a tool or heuristic for correcting perception in my Chapter Five discussion of antithesis as a feature of Calvin’s prose style.

¹¹ This passage has been superbly analyzed for its rhetorical construction—though without reference to its optical illustration—by Breen. Quirinus Breen, “John Calvin and the Rhetorical Tradition,” *Church History* 26, no. 1 (March 1957): 16-17.

¹² This image is comparable to a famous twentieth-century illusion known as the Gelb effect. At the climax of this illusion, the viewer realizes that a disk, which appeared white due to the way it was being illuminated, was actually black all along. The shocking moment of perceptual recalibration occurs when the performer places a white card behind the black disk. In other words, it is the provision of *contrast* that causes the viewer to realize that her initial lightness ascription was not just a little off, but actually was dead wrong. Hans Wallach, “Brightness Constancy and the Nature of Achromatic Colors,” *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 38, no. 3 (June 1948): 310-11. Wallach notes additionally that if the black target is presented alone, reducing the intensity of the illumination by small steps changes its perceived color from white through gray to black. With the white card in place, however, the same changes in illumination do not affect the perceived colors of the paper and target: they remain white and black throughout. This demonstration reveals both the importance of an appropriate standard and the inextricable relationship between lightness and brightness: where previously the observer perceived a change in color, with the standard of the white card available “It is rather a change in the perceived illumination which now accompanies the change in objective illumination.” Wallach, “Brightness Constancy,” 311.

self and, inextricably related, of God—are not actually illusions, perpetrated by the absence of a corrective “straightedge”?

1. Seeing the *Institutio* against a new straightedge

These illustrations, which underline the malleability of human perception, are far from anomalies in the *Institutio*. On the contrary, as this dissertation will document, they are simply the opening salvo in a text suffused with allusions to mal- and re-formed perception, its causes, and potential correctives. Indeed, the basic methodological wager of this dissertation is that a fresh reading of the *Institutio* will emerge if we take seriously the perceptual and epistemological resonances of Calvin’s imagery in its early modern European setting. To this end, this project brings the text’s striking perceptual motifs into conversation with a hitherto unexamined aspect of its historical context—namely, the contested status of vision and visual epistemology that are decisive if often unnamed stakes in the *Institutio*’s original, sixteenth-century milieu.¹³

Calvin’s opening references to mis- and re-calibrated lightness perception are a case in point. Although optical illusions were popular amusements for early modern European people as they are for audiences today, in the sixteenth century they *also* indexed urgent and widely felt epistemological issues. If today we enjoy being astonished by visual tricks that are born out of

¹³ Following an approach articulated by Gabrielle M. Spiegel, I attend to the way the *Institutio* “inscribes” salient aspects of its historical context through largely unmarked but significant choices of what aspects of social reality to include, exclude, distort, and stress. Specifically, I attend to the text’s distinctive emphasis on the contested status of vision and visual epistemology. By attending to how these aspects of the *Institutio*’s social reality are depicted within the text, we can glimpse something of the possibilities and limitations that characterized the particular historical environment from which *Institutio* emerged. Spiegel, *The Past as Text: The Theory and Practice of Medieval Historiography* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 26-27. In taking this approach, I have benefitted from Jacques Le Goff’s insistence that the distinctive way culturally embedded images and vocabularies are constellated *within* a text tells us something important about the unstated conditions—including a culturally available repertoire of resources—against which a text’s situated proposals and interventions become not only possible but also meaningful. Le Goff, *The Medieval Imagination*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 1-2, 5.

and thus implicitly underline how much we *know* about how the brain gives rise to visual experience, for sixteenth-century observers visual illusions were an unsettling reminder of what people knew they *didn't* know. In fact, as I will discuss below, such optical illusions were partially to blame for discrediting a long-dominant model of visual perception—a model for which, despite its known deficiencies, there was as yet no alternative.¹⁴ Thus, in the *Institutio*'s early modern milieu, which lacked a consensus view of even how the eye operates, references to the relativity of human perception and its susceptibility to manipulation raise troubling and unanswered questions about the reliability of visual perception—and, by extension, the security of all knowledge acquired through the senses.

It is crucial to appreciate then, that the *Institutio*'s allusions to perception and misperception arise out of and intervene in this distinctive moment in optical and epistemological history—in the period of visual uncertainty that *preceded* Kepler and Descartes' first 'modern' accounts of vision.¹⁵ That is, we misread the *Institutio* if we bring an implicitly Cartesian set of assumptions to the images of optical mis- and re-calibration I have previewed already—and which, as we will see, play a structuring and not merely incidental role in the text. If Calvin's claim at the beginning of the *Institutio* is that a dramatically revised *sensus* of self

¹⁴ “A cognitive model which assumed that visual appearance would normally correspond with objective reality was ill equipped to deal with serious and repeated breakdowns in this particular relationship... the collapse of the 'representational' model of vision based on *species* is exactly what happened in the 250 years between the early fifteenth and late seventeenth centuries, when visual anomalies and paradoxes multiplied to such a degree that they overwhelmed the cognitive theory that permitted them to occur.” Stuart Clark, *Vanities of the Eye: Vision in Early Modern European Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 20. As Clark demonstrates, from 1500-1700 developments in several areas of life undermined Europeans' confidence in visual certainty, with the result that vision came to be characterized by unreliability. On this trend, see Clark, *Vanities*, 1-7. For detailed discussions of late medieval debates over *species* theory, including objections to the existing model, see Robert Pasnau, *Theories of Cognition in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) and Katherine H. Tachau, *Vision and Certitude in the Age of Ockham: Optics, Epistemology and the Foundations of Semantics, 1250-1345* (Leiden: Brill, 1988).

¹⁵ For accounts of this paradigm shift, see David C. Lindberg, *Theories of Vision from al-Kindi to Kepler* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1976), 188, 200-202; A. Mark Smith, *From Sight to Light: The Passage from Ancient to Modern Optics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 354-72, 408-16; and Clark, *Vanities*, 329-64.

comes into view only when seen against the “straightedge” of divine majesty, the wager here is that the stakes of some of the *Institutio*’s most striking images and overarching motifs similarly come into view only when examined against the baseline of sixteenth-century visual culture.

What we find when we return the *Institutio* to the optical and epistemological milieu in which it was composed is that “perception”—in a sense I will define shortly—is a hitherto unrecognized but central organizing concern of the text. The *Institutio* is animated throughout by an emphasis on the conditions that make for either perception or its opposite, blindness. This realization—that the stakes of many of the text’s themes and motifs are *perceptual*—will reframe our understanding of several of the *Institutio*’s most basic doctrinal concepts, including what is often called the “knowledge of God,” “accommodation,” and “idolatry.” This argument is presented in the first four chapters of the dissertation. However, the *Institutio*’s concern with perception is on display not only in the text’s explicit teachings; perceptual concerns also illuminate its prose style. This suggests that the text’s formative purpose vis-à-vis its reader is to intervene in the habits of mind that fuel fallen blindness and, in this way, to contribute to the reformation of its reader’s perception. This argument is substantiated in the final three chapters of the dissertation.

2. Sixteenth-century resonances of Calvin’s visual vocabulary

Before elaborating on these claims, it will be helpful to sketch several salient features of the cultural backdrop against which, I am suggesting, we can see the *Institutio* with fresh eyes. Laying this historical groundwork will provide a foundation from which, in the following major section below, I can specify what I intend with the term “perception.”

The understandings of and concerns about vision I introduce here, as critical background for the analyses in the seven chapters of this dissertation, are not arbitrarily chosen. Rather, they form the unstated backdrop that emerges when we situate Calvin’s favored imagery for human sin—perceptual distortion even unto “blindness”—in terms of distinctively sixteenth-century understandings of visual perception and epistemology. By sounding the perceptual and epistemological stakes of this imagery for a sixteenth-century reader, this discussion will provide an indispensable foundation for the terminology and claims I elaborate in the remainder of this dissertation. It will also begin situating our reading of the *Institutio* in the visual culture which Calvin’s magnum opus partially reflects, in which it strategically intervenes, and against which it can come into focus for us anew.

2.1 The problem of “blindness.” The images of perceptual distortion with which the *Institutio* begins indicate that for Calvin, the defining problem of human life is malformed perception, even to the point of “blindness.” Fallen humans are “struck blind (*coecutit*)” in the theater of creation, “in viewing which (*quorum aspectu*) they who otherwise seem to be extremely acute (*videntur esse accutissimi*) profit nothing.”¹⁶ Ultimately, “the greatest geniuses are blinder than moles (*talpis sunt coeciores*).”¹⁷ The frequency and vehemence¹⁸ with which Calvin complains about “how horrible is the blindness of the human mind (*humanae mentis coecitas*)”¹⁹ suggest that this condition and its consequences are one of the central stakes of the text, and thus an interpretive key to it.

¹⁶ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.8.

¹⁷ Calvin, *Institutio*, 2.2.18.

¹⁸ See, for example, Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.4.1-2, 1.4.4, 1.5.8, 1.5.12, 1.6.2, 2.2.18-19, 2.3.1, 2.6.1, 2.8.1.

¹⁹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.12.

Theorists of visual culture often draw on twentieth-century psychoanalytic thinkers such as Freud and Lacan, who offer accounts of how blind spots result from fantasy or hysteria, the turning back of the ego upon itself, or the aggression of ‘the gaze’ upon others.²⁰ However, we need not look beyond the *Institutio*’s own historical setting for an etiology of “blindness.” Let us ask instead, what might these charges evoke for a sixteenth-century European?

Interpreters of the *Institutio* are tacitly agreed that Calvin is not accusing humans of an abnormality in their eyes’ capacity to form an impression of the material objects in the world around them.²¹ Indeed, in the passage quoted above, Calvin complains about a “viewing” that seems to be physically successful, but which “profit[s] nothing.”²² He makes the same point when he describes how, “with regard to the most beautiful structure and order of the universe,” though humans “lift up our eyes to heaven or cast them about through the various regions of earth,” nevertheless “we grow increasingly dull (*hebescimus*) toward so manifest testimonies, and they flow away without profiting us.”²³ These remarks suggest that the problem lies not in the reception of sense impressions as such, but in an observer’s ability to react to what she sees; sense experience offers a “profit” that her dullness prevents her from realizing. As Lee Palmer Wandel puts it, “Sin, for Calvin, has as its consequence an incapacity to see God where God is

²⁰ Teresa Brennan, “‘The Contexts of Vision’ from a Specific Standpoint,” in *Vision in Context: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Sight*, eds. Teresa Brennan and Martin Jay (New York: Routledge, 1996), 221-23. See Martin Jay’s measured critique of the field’s reliance on Lacan to illuminate vastly different historical contexts in Jay, “Vision in Context: Reflections and Refractions,” in Brennan and Jay, *Vision in Context*, 9-11.

²¹ Lee Palmer Wandel articulates the largely unstated scholarly consensus when she observes that “For Calvin, the problem [of blindness] is not mechanical.” However, she goes beyond other commentators when she makes the further point—an insight on which I build in this dissertation—that this condition is nevertheless “physically experienced.” Wandel, “John Calvin and Michel de Montaigne on the Eye,” in *Early Modern Eyes*, eds. Walter S. Melion and Lee Palmer Wandel (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 149 and 148, respectively.

²² “But because most people, immersed in their own errors, are struck blind in such a dazzling theater, he exclaims that to weigh these works of God wisely is a matter of rare and singular wisdom, in viewing which they who otherwise seem to be extremely acute profit nothing. And certainly however much the glory of God shines forth, scarcely one man in a hundred is a true spectator of it!” Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.8.

²³ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.11.

really present.”²⁴ “Blindness,” then, names a failure to react to something that is unmistakably and quite sensibly *there*,²⁵ but this failure is not caused by a problem with the eye itself.²⁶

It is tempting to therefore jump to the opposite conclusion—namely, that the “blindness” of which Calvin complains consists of conceptual errors perpetrated by fallen reason or understanding, in isolation from sense experience. However, this is *also* an implausible interpretation, for the historical reason that sixteenth-century visual culture was not premised on the clean separation between sensation and conception that, as modern readers, we tend to bring to the text. Rather, the text’s original visual culture offers another interpretive option—a third way, as it were, between the false alternatives of optical malfunction and mental misfire.

2.2 How to see in sixteenth-century Europe. Let me begin to describe this third interpretive option by sketching a baseline account of the visual process that would have been widely recognized by Latin-reading Europeans in the sixteenth century.²⁷ This will allow us to situate “blindness” and its cognates in light of historically specific assumptions about the process of visual perception—and especially what makes it vulnerable to subversion.

²⁴ Wandel, *The Eucharist in the Reformation: Incarnation and Liturgy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 151.

²⁵ “For Calvin, it is a question of being able to see a presence that is, in fact, there.” Wandel, *The Eucharist*, 150. Wandel underlines this point by pointing to Calvin’s description of God’s visibility in creation in terms of imprinted “marks”: “‘Marks’ denotes something which is in and of itself ontologically visible and yet is not, for some human beings, legible, or even ‘visible’.” Wandel, “John Calvin and Michel de Montaigne,” 147-48.

²⁶ A helpful contemporary analogy may be inattentional blindness, which helps to explain why it is possible for someone whose eyes function properly but whose mind is otherwise occupied to look at something—such as, in a famous study, a man wearing a gorilla costume—without seeing it. That is, in a condition like inattentional blindness, the mind’s preoccupation is such that perceptual experience is effectively falsified, with the result that the perceiver fails to react to what should be extremely salient features of her visual environment.

²⁷ The model I sketch here and elaborate in Chapters One and Three circulated in basic university textbooks of the sixteenth century, and thus could be widely assumed among the readership of the Latin *Institutio*. On Calvin’s personal acquaintance with and broad acceptance of Aristotelian natural philosophy, see Christopher B. Kaiser, “Calvin’s Understanding of Aristotelian Natural Philosophy: Its Extent and Possible Origins,” in *Calviniana: Ideas and Influence of Jean Calvin*, ed. Robert V. Schnucker (Kirksville, MO: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1988), 77-92.

For today's readers with an implicitly psychological understanding of visual experience, it is vital to recognize that in the sixteenth century, vision was still understood as a *material* process. Although there was no single, consensus model, the basic theory held that objects in the world gave off replicas of themselves called *species* which moved through the medium to physically impress themselves upon the eye.²⁸ From the impression made on the eye, these *species* were then recomposed into a second but equally material impression, this time by the imagination.²⁹ It is important to note—and I'll return to this below—that it is only *after* the imagination fashions this impression, a composite percept called a phantasm, that what early modern people considered the higher functions of the mind, conscious operations like those attributed to reason, understanding, or intellect, begin to operate. Furthermore, they do so entirely on the basis—we could say, at the mercy!—of what the imagination reflects to them.

The most common metaphor for the process whereby the imagination creates this mental impression was imprinting an image in a wax seal, as with a signet ring.³⁰ What this metaphor highlights is that the security of visual experience depends on the faithful transfer of the received form onto the eye, and again from the external senses onto what was often called the “mirror” of the imagination. The integrity of the process whereby external percepts are taken into the eye and then reproduced as mental impressions was a high-stakes issue because early modern

²⁸ This is the intromission model, on which vision occurs through an emission from an object to the eye. On the opposite view, extramission, vision occurs via emissions from the eye to the object. Although hybrid views also circulated (in which, for example, emissions from the eye meet emissions from the object), intromission was broadly accepted from the end of the 13th century. See Lindberg, *Theories of Vision*, 120-22. On the significance of the transition from extramission to intromission, see Michael Camille, “Before the Gaze: The Internal Senses and Late Medieval Practices of Seeing,” in *Visuality Before and Beyond the Renaissance: Seeing as Others Saw*, ed. Robert S. Nelson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 204-207.

²⁹ In the sixteenth century, commentators increasingly used the term “imagination” to refer to multiple operations that had earlier been understood as the combined work of several distinct powers known as the “interior senses.” I discuss both terminologies and their significance for our understanding of early modern perception in Chapter One.

³⁰ On this metaphor, see Camille, “Before the Gaze,” 209-10 and Clark, *Vanities*, 14-17. See the original source of the signet ring metaphor in Aristotle, *De anima*, II.12. *On the Soul. Parva Naturalia. On Breath*, trans. W. S. Hett, Loeb Classical Library 288 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957).

epistemology largely followed the Aristotelian dictum, “nothing is in the intellect that is not first in the senses.”³¹ On this view, in which visual experience was understood to directly, materially cause concept-formation, any threat to sense perception also and thereby threatens the foundedness of concepts upon extramental reality.³²

By the time Calvin was writing and re-writing the *Institutio*, the weakness of this account of visual perception had been recognized for decades, if not centuries.³³ In particular, a quantitative rise in attention to visual illusions and paradoxes made it increasingly difficult to ignore the fact that a material model of perception cannot account for visual experiences that occur in the absence of an extramental object capable of directly creating an impression on the eye by sending off *species*—as, for example, in the case of optical illusions.³⁴ There are at least two reasons that the vexed status of this model is significant for our reading of the *Institutio*. First, it underlines a point made earlier, that in this climate, questions about perceptual conditioning raise urgent concerns about how we can know our senses are operating properly—and thus, how we can know our knowledge is founded on a trustworthy perception of the external world. Second, it reminds us to interpret the text in this moment that is, so to speak, in-between consensus models of the visual process:³⁵ after the *species* model has accumulated too

³¹ *Nihil est in intellectu quod non prius fuerit in sensu*. This phrase, Aristotelian in sentiment though not in origin, has been traced at least to the thirteenth century, where it appears, among other places, in Aquinas’ *De veritate*. On this history, see Paul F. Cranefield, “On the Origin of the Phrase *Nihil est in intellectu quod non prius fuerit in sensu*,” *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 25, no. 1 (January 1970): 77-80.

³² We can glimpse the high stakes of this issue in Roger Bacon’s attempt to secure the relationship between objects and concepts. See Suzannah Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment in the Middle Ages* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 72-75.

³³ Late medieval commentators raised a host of questions about *species* theory, including why *species* in the medium are invisible, and why the presence of some *species* in the medium does not impede the receipt of others. For detailed discussions of these and other puzzles, see Tachau, *Vision and Certitude*.

³⁴ This was the case, for example, with optical illusions caused by mirrors, which enjoyed a major vogue in this period. Clark, *Vanities*, 3, 98.

³⁵ As Smith observes, the optical puzzles that accumulated over the course of the sixteenth century meant that the paradigm of vision inherited by Kepler was accepted “only *faute de mieux*.” Smith, *Sight to Light*, 371-72.

many anomalies to maintain its paradigmatic status, but before it is definitively replaced by the seventeenth-century work of Kepler³⁶ and Descartes.³⁷

In the light of this basic account, we can already appreciate something crucial about Calvin's "blindness"—namely, that if it is not reducible to a malfunctioning eye, *neither* is it reducible to mental operations like those of reason or the understanding operating in isolation from sense experience. This is a consequence of the prevailing conceptions of the mind just summarized: if the material reception of *species* is the basis for the formation of concepts, then the integrity of concepts is not neatly separable from the integrity of percepts.³⁸ In fact, the idea of a solely mechanical eye, neutrally taking in sense data which then becomes the object of something like pure thought, will not emerge until the seventeenth century, and it is *only* on the basis of this kind of model, which postdates the *Institutio*, that a definitive separation between perception and conception is intelligible.³⁹ What this means is that while Calvin's "blindness" may index conceptual problems, this possibility does not dissolve the physical connotations of

³⁶ Kepler discovered the retinal image and instated a firm distinction between the physiology of vision, restricted to the mechanism of the eye, and the psychology of vision, whereby the mind judges what the eye sees. On how Kepler's theory of the retinal image implies an "impermeable wall that separates the eye from the brain and thus, the objective cause from the subjective effects of vision," see Smith, *Sight to Light*, 369-72. From this point, as Robert S. Nelson observes, "the act of seeing... is on the way to becoming neutral, abstract, and positivistic." Nelson, "Introduction: Descartes's Cow and Other Domestications of the Visual," in Nelson, *Visuality*, 6.

³⁷ Descartes' theory of mental imaging substituted mechanical stimuli, "encoded traces," for the *species* that previously connected mental and extramental reality by way of resemblance. This view "precludes any meaningful, cause-effect correspondence between objective reality and its subjective portrayal in the rational soul." See Smith, *Sight to Light*, 410-14; quotations on 413 and 414 respectively. Indeed, as Martin Jay explains, in his *Discourse on Method* Descartes explicitly rejects the dictum, "nothing is in the intellect that was not first in the senses," thus challenging the longstanding priority of sensation in knowing and arguing instead for the primacy of understanding over sensation. This is the view expressed in Descartes' declaration in the *Optics* that "it is the mind which senses, not the body." Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 73 and 75, respectively.

³⁸ As Brennan pointedly observes in her discussion of extramission—one among several available versions of this material model of vision that operates through *species*—"The theory of extramission may have been a lousy theory. But... it was also a theory that did not split psychical and physical effects." Brennan, "Contexts of Vision," 219.

³⁹ See Clark, *Vanities*, 340-43. On this view, mental images become perceptual *judgments*, not material impressions of *species*. See Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, 79. Brennan notes that even if the notion that vision involves "perceptual modulation" survived the work of Kepler, such modulation was no longer understood as a *physical* part of the visual process. What was lost when Kepler and Descartes' psychological model replaced the long-dominant material model of vision was "any notion of *constructed* physicality." Brennan, "Contexts of Vision," 221 and 224, respectively.

his imagery. In fact, it underlines them, by raising the question of how a mind comes to recognize what the eye sees, and what might disrupt or distort this process.

2.3 Functioning eye, functional blindness. As Wandel observes, “blindness,” for Calvin, occurs in the “nexus of human eye and human mind.”⁴⁰ I will discuss sixteenth-century understandings of this “nexus” at length in Chapter One. The important point to make here is that the *Institutio*’s cultural milieu offered a widely recognized mechanism whereby the connection between extramental reality and mental concepts could be disrupted—namely, the imagination.⁴¹ Recall from above that in the sixteenth-century’s contested but still regnant model of visual perception, the imagination is responsible for recomposing the *species* the eye receives into a second material impression which then forms the starting point, the indispensable fodder, for the further operations of reason, understanding, and intellect.

In fact, the imagination, with its role of “reflecting” a mental impression for the benefit of reason and the understanding, was often compared to a mirror.⁴² Given that early modern mirrors little resembled our flat, clear mirrors but were typically curved and often spotted,⁴³ it will come as no surprise that the imagination was also known for its potential to act as a dirty or dysmorphic mirror, not reporting but distorting sense experience in the process of re-presenting it

⁴⁰ Wandel, “John Calvin and Michel de Montaigne,” 149. The full passage reads: “Blindness, for Calvin, resides in the nexus between human eye and human mind: the ignorant cannot see. It is not simply, they do not know what they are seeing. They cannot see. Their blindness, while not caused by the failure of the eye to function, is not purely mental or psychosomatic. Their eyes are not perceiving what is before them.” Although Wandel emphasizes that seeing is literally occluded by this condition, she also warns against reducing human blindness to “a narrow problem of physical ability—the human eye can ‘see’ [God’s marks] in a mechanical sense of the organ functioning... ‘Not-seeing’, for Calvin, is inseparable from not-knowing—eye and mind are not discrete entities.” Wandel, “John Calvin and Michel de Montaigne,” 147-48.

⁴¹ Clark, *Vanities*, 39-77.

⁴² On the sources and implications of the imagination as a “mirror,” see my discussion in Chapter Three.

⁴³ Despite the newly improved quality and availability of mirrors, continuing technological challenges left surfaces mottled and reflections murky. On this technology and its limitations, see Faye Tudor, “‘All in him selfe as in a glass he sees’: Mirrors and Vision in the Renaissance,” in *Renaissance Theories of Vision*, eds. John Shannon Hendrix and Charles H. Carman (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), 172, 175, 177.

as the basis for subsequent conceptual operations. The imagination's control over how sense experience is reflected to the conscious operations of the mind creates an opening for the act of "seeing" to be disrupted from within. Its intervention can render the conscious mind functionally "blind" to what the eye takes in, where such blindness is neatly attributable to neither pure sensation nor pure thought.

The *Institutio* invokes this very possibility in a variety of ways. One is by explicitly attacking excesses of imagination, references to which—as I will show at length in Chapter Three—consistently appear in connection with Calvin's rhetoric of blindness. Take, as a representative example, a telling passage in which Calvin attributes the human failure to "apprehend (*apprehendunt*) God as he offers himself" to imaginative overreach. Calvin complains that humans "imagine [God] as they have fashioned him (*fabricati sunt imaginantur*) in their own presumption" and so react not to an external reality, but rather to "a figment (*figmentum*) and a dream (*somnium*)⁴⁴ of their own heart."⁴⁵

Another, more subtle way Calvin alludes to internal sources of blindness is the way he depicts the "bleary-eyed" people who he says, in an oft-cited passage, would benefit from the "spectacles" of Scripture.⁴⁶ With terms like *lippus*, which indicates watery or inflamed eyes, and *caligo*, meaning to be misty or cloudy,⁴⁷ Calvin paints a picture that for sixteenth-century readers may evoke eyes afflicted with cataracts or clouded by melancholic vapors.⁴⁸ This imagery is

⁴⁴ Because the imagination is the faculty responsible for dreams, this is also a reference to its suspect products. On the function of the imagination in dreaming, see Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 73-74.

⁴⁵ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.4.1.

⁴⁶ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.6.1. For a brief overview of the projected incidence, available corrective measures, and probable salience of weak eyesight in sixteenth-century Europe, see Andrew Pettegree, *Reformation and the Culture of Persuasion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 107-110.

⁴⁷ Calvin compares them to "old (*senes*) or bleary-eyed men (*lippi*) and those with weak vision (*oculis caligant*)."
Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.6.1.

⁴⁸ I am grateful to James Clifton, who raised this possibility—that Calvin's language evokes the condition of cataracts—in conversation. Cataracts were associated with imaginative malfunction, and thus a problem of

significant because the visual distortions experienced by victims of such conditions were widely understood to be caused *not* by a problem with the eyes alone, but by a confusion in which internal conditions appear to the mind as if they were features of the external world.⁴⁹ In other words, the etiology of blindness this description evokes suggests not optical malfunction, but rather the distortion of visual experience by unconscious internal conditions of the perceiver.

Indeed, throughout the *Institutio* Calvin does not hesitate to depict human “blindness” as actually threatening to separate the mind from extramental reality. We see this, for example, in his depiction of sinners so gripped by a “blind urge (*coecus impetus*)” to insist on their own imaginations about God that they “struggle against their senses (*luctentur cum proprio sensu*).”⁵⁰ Calvin goes so far as to employ a vocabulary of delusion and hallucination to describe the ultimate consequences of this behavior.⁵¹ Taken in isolation, it might be possible to dismiss such rhetoric as hyperbole. However, against the backdrop of sixteenth-century visual culture and in concert with Calvin’s other complaints about fallen human blindness, these comments underline the possibility that a malfunctioning imagination might so mis-represent what the eye takes in

perception more than optical malfunction: “The unnatural humours and vapours which intruded between the corneal membrane and crystalline lens in the eye to cause this particular ‘falsifying’ of sight were interpreted as things in the external world simply because the mind was so used to seeing outward objects... The thinking mind, it seems, was more responsible for what was seen than the presence or absence of objects in the visual field.” Clark, *Vanities*, 41. It is notable, in this connection, that to describe human forgetfulness of God Calvin employs *oblivio*, with its overtly watery associations. On Calvin’s use of this term, see Michelle Chaplin Sanchez, *Calvin and the Resignification of the World: Creation, Incarnation, and the Problem of Political Theology in the 1559 Institutes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 73.

⁴⁹ Indeed, Clark has established that in the sixteenth century, most vision problems were attributed to this kind of confusion, in which internal conditions are taken as features of the external world. Of the three categories widely used to diagnose optical maladies in early modern Europe, *diminutio*, *privatio*, and *depravatio*, the third, *depravatio visus*, names the possibility of falsified sight, also called *hallucinatio*. Clark, *Vanities*, 40-41.

⁵⁰ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.4.2. Calvin goes on to say that they ultimately come to “repel all remembrance of God, although this is freely suggested to them inwardly from the feeling of nature (*sponte a naturae sensu intus suggeritur*).”

⁵¹ See, for example, Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.1.2, 1.4.3, 1.5.2, 1.5.4, 1.5.11-13, 2.1.1. Blindness and madness are associated in both classical literature and the Hebrew Bible. See, respectively, Moshe Barasch, *Blindness: The History of a Mental Image in Western Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 35 and Yael Avrahami, *The Senses of Scripture: Sensory Perception in the Hebrew Bible* (New York: T&T Clark, 2012), 265-66.

that reason, understanding, and intellect are left functionally “blind” to the external world—where, as the comments cited so far emphasize, God self-reveals.

Ultimately, it is possible to interpret Calvin’s remarks about imagination-fueled, hallucinatory blindness either as a functional analogy for the way that sin distorts human perception, or as allusions to mechanisms actually involved in that process.⁵² But in either case, this language indexes an etiology of blindness that is reducible to neither optical malfunction nor conceptual error. To say that even more clearly, Calvin’s “blindness” may be a metaphor, but it is not a metaphor for misunderstanding. Rather, it points to a possibility widely acknowledged in the *Institutio*’s original visual culture—namely, that internal or subjective conditions of a viewer can intervene in the process of sense perception, mal-forming the mind’s impression of the external world, and therefore mis-leading subsequent thought processes.

2.4 Sources of “spiritual” blindness. If these are the likely epistemological resonances of “blindness” in the text’s original milieu, what are its possible spiritual connotations? We can further situate the *Institutio*’s rhetoric of blindness by comparing it to two prominent but contrasting traditions in sixteenth-century visual culture: a Platonic and, during the Renaissance,

⁵² We should recall Biernoff’s important reminder that when treating a period in which vision involves a physical encounter between bodies, we should not automatically reduce all talk of vision to “the poetics or metaphors of sight.” As she points out, from a lascivious or poisonous gaze to spiritual benefits deriving from the contemplation of Christ’s wounds, “medieval theories of vision offered compelling physiological explanations for many of these optical effects.” Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment*, 4-5. I follow Biernoff in her determination to interpret references to optical processes literally, rather than jumping to a figurative reading. See, for example, Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment*, 138-39. Gail Kern Paster makes a similar point when she warns against the tendency, in approaching early modern discourses of the body, to “substitute figurative where literal meanings ought to remain.” We require an “interpretive literalism” if we wish to take early modern body-talk seriously. Paster, “Nervous Tension: Networks of Blood and Spirit in the Early Modern Body,” in *The Body in Parts: Fantasies of Corporeality in Early Modern Europe*, eds. David Hillman and Carla Mazzio (New York: Routledge, 1997), 110-11.

an artistic ideal in which physical blindness is correlated with spiritual or artistic insight, and a Pauline discourse in which blindness is a self-imposed punishment for sin.⁵³

The association between physical blindness—or at least suppressed external sensation—and spiritual insight is an ancient one. Homer is the classical archetype of this ideal; it flourished among Renaissance Neoplatonists, who associated it with artistic and philosophical genius.⁵⁴ Comparing Calvin’s criticisms of human blindness to this anti-sensory tradition highlights the fact that, perhaps against expectations,⁵⁵ Calvin does *not* advocate cutting oneself off from sense experience.⁵⁶ In fact, Calvin goes out of his way to reject the idea that sin originates primarily in the external senses and insists that it also—perhaps, he implies, more insidiously—issues from the rest of the mind.⁵⁷ Thus, whereas the Neoplatonic ideal of “blind” genius celebrates what the mind is able to achieve in its detachment from sense experience, it is exactly this tendency that Calvin’s “blindness” criticizes.⁵⁸

⁵³ On blindness as a gift, see Barasch, *Blindness*, 28-29, 133; on blindness as punishment, see Barasch, *Blindness*, 9, 25, 28. On blindness in the Hebrew Bible, see Avrahami, *Senses of Scripture*, 61-62, 82, 270-72, 276.

⁵⁴ “Since artistic creativity was imagined as the artist’s drawing from the depths of his own soul, metaphorical blindness could be taken as a sign of that inward-directed glance... Blindness, the condition of looking inward, is the sign both of the divinely inspired sage who contemplates the secrets of the gods and of the poet and the artists who are immersed in the process of creation.” Barasch, *Blindness*, 134-36. On Marsilio Ficino as an early modern proponent of this Neoplatonic ideal, see Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky, and Fritz Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy: Studies in the History of Natural Philosophy, Religion, and Art* (London, UK: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1964. Nendeln/Liechtenstein, The Netherlands: Kraus Reprint, 1979), 254-74. Citations refer to the Kraus edition.

⁵⁵ Calvin does not seem to share the conviction of many of his medieval predecessors that sight is necessarily sensual, that sin enters the self via the senses, or that the eye of the mind is at risk of being “blinded” by its bodily senses. On these views, see Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment*, 46-48, 55, 113.

⁵⁶ In fact, Calvin goes out of his way to reject the view that sin lies primarily in the body and its passions: “But Paul relieves us of any possible doubt on this matter. Having described the old man who, he had said, was ‘corrupted by deceptive desires’ [Eph. 4:22 p.], he bids us ‘be renewed in the spirit of our mind’ [Eph. 4:23 p.]. You see that he lodges unlawful and wicked desires not solely in the sensual part of the soul, but even in the mind itself, and for this reason he requires its renewal.” Calvin, *Institutio*, 2.3.1.

⁵⁷ See Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.15.7 and 2.3.1. Moreover, Calvin insists—in a rather Aristotelian vein—that *sensus* inclines not away from, but toward *intellectus*.

⁵⁸ Recall, in this connection, that in the *Institutio*’s opening image of optical miscalibration, the self’s misperception of its own condition is rooted in its self-absorption, whereby it fails to measure itself against the “straightedge” of divine glory as manifested in the externally sensible world. I will discuss this problem at length in Chapter Three.

Moreover, in several explicit and approving references to the contrasting Pauline tradition, Calvin casts obliviousness to the external world as sin's *punishment*.⁵⁹ Blindness is the natural outcome of allowing sinful ideas and desires⁶⁰ to subvert the mind's ability to faithfully take in the external world—to the extent that, as Calvin says, “their perceptions so vanished (*evanuerunt eorum sensus*) that whatever they had naturally sensed (*naturaliter senserunt*) concerning the sole God had no value beyond making them inexcusable.”⁶¹ As I will detail in Chapter Three, Calvin's references to the Pauline *topos* decry a self-reinforcing process, a vicious cycle by which sinners become “become more and more hardened in their insensibility (*stupore*).” This de-sensitization occurs when unrestrained imaginative processes⁶² render the self externally oblivious, incapable of assimilating new data, and therefore unable to self-correct.⁶³ Seen against the visual culture I have been sketching, Calvin's implicit criticism of the Platonic tradition and explicit embrace of the Pauline tradition reinforce our growing sense that in the *Institutio* “blindness” evokes the vulnerability of human perception to malignant conditioning, and raises the threat that through such conditioning, the fallen mind might render itself oblivious to salient aspects of external reality.

⁵⁹ On the Pauline passages that fund the interpretation of sin as blindness, see Barbara Pitkin, *What Pure Eyes Could See: Calvin's Doctrine of Faith in Its Exegetical Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 56-57 and 196-97. Note, however, that Pitkin consistently pairs, and appears to elide, “blindness” and “ignorance.”

⁶⁰ “Paul eloquently notes this wickedness: ‘Striving to be wise, they make fools of themselves’ [Rom. 1:22 p.]. He had said before that ‘they became futile in their thinking’ [Rom. 1:21]. In order, however, that no one might excuse their guilt, he adds that they are justly blinded. For not content with sobriety but claiming for themselves more than is right, they wantonly bring darkness upon themselves—in fact, they become fools in their empty and perverse haughtiness.” Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.4.1.

⁶¹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.10.3.

⁶² He indicates them by a range of terms, many of which are associated with the imagination and unrestrained thoughts that fail to discipline it, such as “fleeting unrealities (*evanidos fucos*)” (Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.2), “dreams and specters (*somnia et spectra*)” (1.5.15), “figment and dream (*figmentum et somnium*)” (1.4.1), and ideas that are “fashioned” (1.4.2, 1.5.12).

⁶³ For another passage that articulates this cycle, see Calvin, *Institutio*, 2.6.1: “For even if God wills to manifest his fatherly favor to us in many ways, yet we cannot by contemplating the universe infer that he is Father. Rather, conscience presses us within and shows in our sin just cause for his disowning us and not regarding or recognizing us as his sons. Dullness and ingratitude (*socordia et ingratitude*) follow, for our minds, as they have been blinded (*ut sunt excoecatae*), do not perceive (*cernunt*) what is true. And as all our senses have become perverted (*pravi sunt omnes sensus nostri*), we wickedly defraud God of his glory.”

3. The *Institutio* as a text about “perception”

It should be clear by now that the visual culture out of which the *Institutio* emerged was explicitly concerned with the ways that visual experience can be shaped by internal conditions of the perceiver—conditions that occur prior, and are not reducible, to a conscious act of thinking or understanding. Indeed, as Stuart Clark has argued, this visual milieu was marked by “the modern-sounding notion that human subjects ‘make’ the objects they perceive, fashioning them out of the qualities that belong intrinsically to perception, not to the objects themselves.”⁶⁴ It is this possibility of pre-conscious perceptual conditioning that is implicitly raised by Calvin’s image of sinful “blindness.” It is also the possibility that I mean to invoke when I say—as the broadest argument of this dissertation—that “perception” is a hitherto unrecognized but central organizing concern of not only the content but also the form of Calvin’s 1559 *Institutio*.

“Perception” comes from the Latin *percipere*, which has the primary sense of ‘to gather or receive’ and then, in a transferred sense, ‘to feel, experience, learn, or know.’ Although forms of *percipere* appear in the *Institutio*, it is not more prominent in either the text or its sixteenth-century milieu than other verbs that also indicate sensing and the knowledge potentially acquired through it.⁶⁵ I propose that we use “perception” not because of its Latin root and occasional appearance in the *Institutio*, but for its contemporary connotations: today, “perception” has as its primary meaning the process of becoming aware of something, especially through the senses, and as a secondary meaning, a mental product, insight, or other result of such a process.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Clark, *Vanities*, 4. “Early modern intellectuals, forced, almost, by a concurrence of visual instabilities, began systematically to consider the idea that visual experience had a cultural (that is, semiotic) foundation, not a natural one.” Clark, *Vanities*, 6.

⁶⁵ The term appears in the *Institutio*, for example, in a critical passage that I discuss at length in Chapter One: “And here again we ought to observe that we are called to a knowledge of God (*Dei notitiam*): not that knowledge which, content with empty speculation, merely flits in the brain, but that which will be sound and fruitful if we duly perceive it (*si rite percipiatur*), and if it takes root in the heart.” Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.9.

⁶⁶ *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*, s.v. “Perception,” accessed April 15, 2019, <http://www.oed.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/view/Entry/140560?redirectedFrom=perception#eid>.

Accordingly, throughout this dissertation, I employ “perception” as my single shorthand for the sixteenth-century process whereby visual experience is conditioned by the imagination even before it rises to the level of, and becomes the basis for, conscious thought. I will relate “perception” more precisely to sixteenth-century psychology in Chapter One, but for now suffice it to say that I prefer the term because it focuses attention on the same “nexus” between eye and mind⁶⁷ that I traced in the previous section, and where sixteenth-century people believed that the process connecting the mind to extramental reality could go astray. It is what occurs in this nexus—the possibility of malignant conditioning of which ‘higher’ functions such as reason and understanding may remain unaware—that I intend when I say that the *Institutio* is concerned with problems of “perception.”

My focus on *visual* perception will raise the question: why vision, specifically? What about the other senses? As the passages already cited have shown, the opening images of the *Institutio* casts the ‘problem’ of the human condition in overwhelmingly visual terms, as an issue of distorted visual perception to the point of blindness. The consequences are also described visually: humans remain oblivious to the “theater” of God’s glory that is the visible world. However, it is *not* the case that in the *Institutio* the ‘problem’ is described as exclusively visual, while other senses are exempt from the perceptual effects of the fall. On the contrary, while Calvin calls humans “blind,” he also calls us “deaf to all the voices of God that resound in the air”⁶⁸ and unable to “taste” God’s fatherly care.⁶⁹ Ultimately then, the *Institutio* depicts every mode of human perception it references as similarly dulled: if we have not the eyes to see God’s

⁶⁷ Wandel, “John Calvin and Michel de Montaigne,” 149.

⁶⁸ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.6.4. The reference is to Psalm 29:7-9.

⁶⁹ For representative examples of this less prominent but striking gustatory motif, see Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.16.1, 2.6.4, 3.2.34, 3.9.3. There is some imagery in the *Institutio* that might be called kinesthetic. See, for example, 1.13.13, 1.14.22, 2.12.1, 4.17.3. I have found no olfactory language.

splendor, neither do we have the ears to hear God's truth, nor the palate to taste the sweetness of God's love. The same goes for the text's depictions of corrective measures. Although there are prominent passages in which Calvin presents "hearing" the Word as an important corrective to fallen human blindness,⁷⁰ we cannot forget that what is perhaps the text's most striking image of perceptual correction, the lens or "spectacles" of Scripture, is strikingly *visual*,⁷¹ as are the primary objects Calvin emphasizes humans need to see, such as the "theater"⁷² of creation and the many other "mirrors"⁷³ in which God makes Godself accessible to human perception.

Calvin's willingness to mingle sensory modalities in describing both the human condition of blindness and its potential correctives brings us to another important aspect of the text's visual culture. What we tend to think of as well-defined, individual modes of perception were, in the sixteenth century, seen as moments in a single sensorium.⁷⁴ For example, as Katherine Tachau has emphasized, despite entering the body through different external organs, visible and aural *species* were understood to be repackaged into a mental phantasm by one and the same imaginative process.⁷⁵ This backdrop significantly attenuates the likelihood that a reference to "blindness" indicates a perceptual failure that does not overlap with "deafness." Thus, my focus

⁷⁰ "[Scripture], therefore, is a special gift, where God, to instruct the church, not merely uses mute teachers but also opens his own most hallowed lips." Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.6.1. "Therefore, however fitting it may be for man seriously to turn his eyes to contemplate God's works... it is fitting that he prick up his ears to the Word, the better to profit." Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.6.2. Note that in the same passages Calvin also refers to the Word in visual terms, for example as a "light" and a "mark." See Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.6.1.

⁷¹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.6.1.

⁷² Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.8 and 1.6.2.

⁷³ See, among many others, Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.1, 1.14.21, 2.7.7, 4.8.5, 4.14.6. I discuss the mirror motif at length in Chapter Two.

⁷⁴ "The Aristotelian mind [widely accepted among early modern Europeans]... does not really think through single sensations... but through images resulting from multiple sensory impressions." François Quiviger, *The Sensory World of Italian Renaissance Art* (London, UK: Reaktion Books, 2010), 17. Indeed, much contemporary research on vision assumes, as Sally M. Promey puts it, "the multisensory aspects and capacities of visuality itself." Promey, "Religion, Sensation, and Materiality: An Introduction," in *Sensational Religion: Sensory Cultures in Material Practice*, ed. Sally M. Promey (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 11.

⁷⁵ "Like every other entity, the uttered (or written) word is capable of generating species that, in turn, multiply through the sense of hearing (or sight) into the inner senses." Tachau, *Vision and Certitude*, 19.

on visual perception is not intended to exclude other sensory modalities, or to suggest that in the *Institutio* the problem of visual perception is entirely distinct.

It is, however, a way of taking seriously the fact that the number and force of the text's other sensory references pale in comparison to the *Institutio*'s striking and consistent visual motifs. The *Institutio*'s preponderance of visual imagery and vocabulary may reflect the view that God's original self-manifestation to unfallen humans was powerfully though not exclusively visual.⁷⁶ It likely also reflects the text's situatedness in a broader sensory culture in which fixation on the vulnerability of vision reflects its traditional status as the most powerful of the senses and the sense most closely associated with knowledge—and thus the most dangerous if and when subverted.⁷⁷ Indeed, it may be that the especially contested status of visual epistemology in sixteenth-century Europe offered Calvin a culturally salient and intuitively plausible way to depict and diagnose the perceptual effects of sin.

4. Literature review

Re-situating the *Institutio*'s perceptual vocabulary and imagery in its sixteenth-century milieu has given me cause, in the overview above, to invoke early modern European “visual culture.” Let me begin to trace this project's scholarly filiation with a brief discussion of the interdisciplinary conversation and topic of study that goes by this name. I refer to “visual culture” here in its widest possible sense, to indicate the culturally constructed dimensions of visual experience as distinct from the biological dimensions of vision.⁷⁸ At its best, the study of

⁷⁶ This is a possible reading of the *Institutio*'s opening emphasis on fallen sinfulness as blindness in relation specifically to the sensory, and notably though not exclusively visual, revelation that is creation.

⁷⁷ Clark, *Vanities*, 10-14.

⁷⁸ “Perhaps by analogy with the distinction between sex and sexuality, scholars have lately distinguished a visual that is natural from that which is social. They call the former vision and the latter visuality.” Nelson, “Descartes's Cow,” 2. Also Hal Foster: “...the difference between [vision and visuality] signals a difference within the visual—between the mechanism of sight and its historical techniques, between the datum of vision and its discursive

visual culture is based on the premise that the act of seeing is socialized, and therefore must be historicized.⁷⁹ The most capacious approach to visual culture, which I embrace here, is also based on the further premise that it is not only formally designated objects of vision, such as art, but also less rarified features of visual environments, as well as *discourses* about what vision is and is for, and *practices* that encourage or discourage certain ways of seeing, that shape what it means to “see” in a given time and place—in other words, that give rise to culturally and historically specific visual cultures.⁸⁰

Whereas attention to visual culture is well-established in fields such as art history and media studies, in which some of the seminal works appeared between the 70s and the 90s,⁸¹ its arrival in religious studies is somewhat more recent. It has gained momentum as part of the material turn, bolstered by object studies on the one hand and the anthropology of the senses⁸² on the other, both of which have brought increased attention to not only discourses, but also objects

determinations—a difference, many differences, among how we see, how we are able, allowed, or made to see, and how we see this seeing or the unseen therein.” Foster, “Preface,” in *Vision and Visuality*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1988), ix.

⁷⁹ “For human beings collectively to orchestrate their visual experience together it is required that each submit his or her retinal experience to the socially agreed description(s) of an intelligible world. Vision is socialized, and thereafter deviation from this social construction of visual reality can be measured and named, variously, as hallucination, misrecognition, or ‘visual disturbance.’” Norman Bryson, “The Gaze in the Expanded Field,” in Foster, *Vision and Visuality*, 91. On the need to study culturally and historically specific visualities, see Jay, “Vision,” 3-4 and Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, 9-10.

⁸⁰ Biernoff articulates several of these premises with admirable succinctness: “Visuality extends beyond the ordinary notion of vision as a physical (if psychologically ‘mediated’) phenomenon... visuality is implicated in social formations and ideologies... looking is a cultural practice as well as a physiological process... vision is always mediated by discourses about vision.” Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment*, 4.

⁸¹ Michael Baxandall’s *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy* and Svetlana Alpers’ *The Art of Describing* are among the seminal works in early modern art history which I have found especially useful. Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972). Alpers, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983). Influential works composed from a media or cultural studies orientation include Foster, *Vision and Visuality*; Brennan and Jay, *Vision in Context*; and Jay, *Downcast Eyes*.

⁸² See, for example, David Howes, ed., *The Varieties of Sensory Experience: A Sourcebook in the Anthropology of the Senses* (Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1991); Constance Classen, *Worlds of Sense: Exploring the Senses in History and Across Cultures* (New York: Routledge, 1993); and David Howes, *Sensual Relations: Engaging the Senses in Culture and Social Theory* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2003). For an overview of this movement in anthropology and a detailed bibliography, see Avrahami, *Senses of Scripture*, 11-17.

and practices of religious sensing.⁸³ This conversation, which now stretches across the humanities, is producing a growing archive regarding the sensory cultures of early modernity as well as a conversational framework that allows a different approach to an otherwise well-studied text like Calvin's *Institutio*.⁸⁴

Interpreting the *Institutio* as it resonates against the backdrop of sixteenth-century visual culture is thus newly possible today on the strength of growing interest in and a critical mass of scholarship on this far-reaching dimension of early modern European life. This is evidenced by a host of recent anthologies, such as *Early Modern Eyes, Religion and the Senses in Early Modern Europe*, and *Sensing the Sacred in Medieval and Early Modern Culture*.⁸⁵ I have already introduced the important work whereby Stuart Clark has suggested that sixteenth century visual culture was characterized by uncertainty. Clark shows how concerns about the security of visual experience, and thus sensory epistemology, cut across discourses as diverse as optics, painting, demonology—and of course, religion.⁸⁶ Clark's research has been particularly generative for my reading of Calvin because his focus on the instability of visual epistemology points to one promising way to take up the broader insight—articulated, for example, in work by Lee Palmer

⁸³ See, among others, Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000); Avrahami, *Senses of Scripture*; Susan Ashbrook Harvey, *Scenting Salvation: Ancient Christianity and the Olfactory Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); David Morgan, *The Embodied Eye: Religious Visual Culture and the Social Life of Feeling* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); Promey, *Sensational Religion*; Birgit Meyer, ed., *Aesthetic Formations: Media, Religion, and the Senses* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Paul L. Gavriluk and Sarah Coakley, eds., *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Spirituality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); and Birgit Meyer and Jojada Verrips, "Aesthetics," in *Key Words in Religion, Media and Culture*, ed. David Morgan (New York: Routledge, 2008), 20-30.

⁸⁴ See, among others, Melion and Wandel, *Early Modern Eyes*; Nelson, *Visuality*; Wietse de Boer and Christine Göttler, eds., *Religion and the Senses in Early Modern Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2013); Elizabeth D. Harvey, ed., *Sensible Flesh: On Touch in Early Modern Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003); Gail Kern Paster, *Humoring the Body: Emotions and the Shakespearean Stage* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004); Hillman and Mazzio, *The Body in Parts*; and Quiviger, *The Sensory World*.

⁸⁵ Melion and Wandel, *Early Modern Eyes*; de Boer and Göttler, *Religion and the Senses*; Robin Macdonald, Emilie K. M. Murphy, and Elizabeth L. Swann, eds., *Sensing the Sacred in Medieval and Early Modern Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

⁸⁶ Clark, *Vanities*.

Wandel and Brian Cummings⁸⁷—that the epistemological crises that rocked sixteenth-century Europe, with sources as diverse as new biblical translations and the Columbian Encounter, are a critical backdrop for interpreting Reformation theologies.⁸⁸

To foreground not only epistemological, but also sensory instability in early modern Europe is to reinvigorate a line of research on the role of the senses in religious change that goes back to Bob Scribner's seminal work on late medieval and early modern European visual pieties.⁸⁹ As Scribner emphasized, Protestantism attempted a radical change—but not a destruction—of modes of perceiving the sacred, of the “ways of seeing” practiced by lay Christians and encouraged by clergy in the Middle Ages.⁹⁰ Scribner's work laid critical groundwork for a new wave of scholarship which is today reexamining the legacy of the Reformation as a contestation over and transformation in sensory cultures.⁹¹ Recent titles that take up this line of argument include Matthew Milner's 2011 *The Senses and the English Reformation*, Jacob M. Baum's 2019 *Reformation of the Senses: The Paradox of Religious Belief*

⁸⁷ Lee Palmer Wandel, *The Reformation: Towards a New History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), especially 39-62 and 89-116; Brian Cummings, *The Literary Culture of the Reformation: Grammar and Grace* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

⁸⁸ Indeed, in different ways, earlier scholars such as William J. Bouwsma, Charles Trinkaus, and Merold Westphal have all suggested that the project of the *Institutio* comes into focus most clearly in the light of its epistemological context. See Bouwsma, “Calvinism as Renaissance Artifact,” in *John Calvin and the Church: A Prism of Reform*, ed. Timothy George (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990), 28-41; Trinkaus, “Renaissance Problems in Calvin's Theology,” *Studies in the Renaissance* 1 (1954), 59-80; and Westphal, “Taking St. Paul Seriously: Sin as an Epistemological Category,” in *Christian Philosophy*, ed. Thomas P. Flint (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 200-26.

⁸⁹ Scribner, “Perceptions of the Sacred in Germany at the End of the Middle Ages,” *Religion and Culture in Germany (1400-1800)*, by R. W. Scribner, ed. Lyndal Roper (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 85-103; Scribner, “Popular Piety and Modes of Visual Perception in Late-Medieval and Reformation Germany,” in Scribner, *Religion and Culture*, 104-28; and Scribner, “Ways of Seeing in the Age of Dürer,” in *Dürer and His Culture*, eds. Dagmar Eichberger and Charles Zika (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 93-117.

⁹⁰ Scribner, “Perceptions of the Sacred,” 102-103.

⁹¹ As Scribner presciently observed in 1989, scholars must attend to “the changing relationship [between popular piety and sense perception] over the period that saw the onset and institutionalization of religious reform.” Scribner, “Popular Piety,” 105. Originally published in *The Journal of Religious History* 15, no. 1 (December 1989), 448-69.

and Practice in Germany, and Anna Kvicalova's 2019 *Listening and Knowledge in Reformation Europe: Hearing, Speaking and Remembering in Calvin's Geneva*.⁹²

A growing body of research is also taking up Scribner's generative observation that visual pieties continued to inform Protestant practices, including those related to the Word.⁹³ These studies have given rise to the realization that Protestantism is not exclusively or flatly non-visual, but rather, has its own aesthetics and even a distinctive visual culture.⁹⁴ Despite these promising developments, the bulk of the new work on Protestant visual culture has focused on Lutheran artwork, an accent which tends to reinforce the ideas, first, that the production of images is the most significant contribution to or indicator of visual culture, and second and therefore, that Calvinism has no visual culture.⁹⁵ Both trends give the impression, if inadvertently, that Calvin has no role in a narrative about the development of visual culture except as a villain or detractor.⁹⁶

⁹² Milner, *The Senses and the English Reformation* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011); Baum, *Reformation of the Senses: The Paradox of Religious Belief and Practice in Germany* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019); Kvicalova, *Listening and Knowledge in Reformation Europe: Hearing, Speaking and Remembering in Calvin's Geneva* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019). For more general overviews of and introductions to this turn in scholarship, see Wandel, *The Reformation*, especially 10-13, 23-38, 201-64 and Wietse de Boer and Christine Göttler, "Introduction: The Sacred and the Senses in an Age of Reform," in de Boer and Göttler, *Religion and the Senses*, 1-13.

⁹³ Scribner, "Popular Piety," 120.

⁹⁴ See, for example, Promey, "Religion, Sensation, and Materiality," 14; Bridget Heal, "Introduction: Art and Religious Reform in Early Modern Europe," *Art History* 40, no. 2 (April 2017): 246-55; Bridget Heal, "The Catholic Eye and the Protestant Ear: The Reformation as a Non-Visual Event?" in *The Myth of the Reformation*, ed. Peter Opitz (Göttingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 321-55; Bridget Heal, "Visual and Material Culture," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Protestant Reformations*, ed. Ulinka Rublack (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 601-20; and William A. Dyrness, *The Origins of Protestant Aesthetics in Early Modern Europe: Calvin's Reformation Poetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

⁹⁵ This is the case with the work of Bridget Heal, cited above. Continued emphasis on Lutheranism may reflect the fact that Scribner's highly influential work focused on the German lands. It also reflects a relatively narrow approach to "visual culture," which focuses primarily on artwork and domestic décor to the neglect of non-imagistic or non-material techniques for cultivating distinctive ways of seeing. Indeed, David Morgan's important work theorizing religion as visual culture also focuses largely on images. See David Morgan, "The Look of the Sacred," in *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies*, ed. Robert A. Orsi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 296-318.

⁹⁶ The exception to this narrative proves the rule: while William A. Dyrness' *Reformed Theology and Visual Culture: The Protestant Imagination from Calvin to Edwards* makes the important claim that Protestantism has a distinctive "aesthetic sensibility" (67), it also depicts Calvin as approving only interior, mental imagery (5, 33-34, and especially 68-69), thereby reinforcing the impression that Reformed theology is relevant only to metaphorical

However, as Clark and Charles Zika have argued, even language that appears to cast vision negatively, as a source of potential danger, must be conceptualized *within* the discourse of early modern visuality, not simply and simplistically *against* it. As their work demonstrates, attacks on visual reliability index broad concerns about how perception works and what makes it vulnerable to subversion.⁹⁷ For my purposes, the implication of this insight is to suggest that the *Institutio*'s visual motifs—even and including, as we shall see in Chapters Three and Four, its charges of “idolatry”—can be powerfully illumined by reference to this distinctive visual culture, in which concerns about the dangers of vision are themselves indicators of its epistemological indispensability. As the first monograph-length project to situate the *Institutio* in its original early modern visual culture, this dissertation heeds Clark and Zika's call by explicitly approaching the *Institutio*—a text devoid of illustrations⁹⁸—as an artifact of and a contributor to early modern visual culture. Although, as Suzannah Biernoff has remarked, the dominant trend is to seek the history of vision in visible artifacts, it is also the case that “the imaging and imagining of vision occurs in texts.”⁹⁹ By reinterpreting a theological text explicitly from the perspective of visual

and not physical practices of vision. Dyrness, *Reformed Theology and Visual Culture: The Protestant Imagination from Calvin to Edwards* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

⁹⁷ Clark and Zika have made this point most forcefully in connection with charges of visual illusion perpetrated through witchcraft. See Clark, *Vanities*, 151 and Zika, *Exorcising Our Demons: Magic, Witchcraft and Visual Culture in Early Modern Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 334.

⁹⁸ The exception is its printer's mark—the device of Robert Estienne—which has gone largely unremarked in scholarship on the *Institutio* but whose epistemological connotations are consonant with my reading of the text. The mark shows an olive tree, around which a serpent is coiled, and from which branches are falling. A man is standing under the tree, and a banner contains a phrase from Romans 11:20, *NOLI ALTUM SAPERE*. The warning is often translated “Be not high-minded,” but it can also be rendered “Seek not after high things.” The line has been interpreted as a warning against curiosity or the wrong kind of knowledge-seeking behaviors; as such, it complements the view of idolatry I will propose in Chapter Three. On this prohibition, see Carlo Ginzburg, “High and Low: The Theme of Forbidden Knowledge in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries,” *Past & Present* 73 (November 1976): 28-41. The falling branches depicted in the image may be those described in Romans 11:17. It is notable that the chapter invoked by the image, Romans 11, describes blindness as a punishment for Israel's rejection of the covenant of grace. See Romans 11: 7b-10.

⁹⁹ Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment*, 3-4. Biernoff notes both the tendency to “overlook the religious elements and applications of theoretical optics” in discussions of medieval visuality (11) and the practice, in overviews of Western visual culture, of skipping from Plato straight to Descartes (93). Jay's *Downcast Eyes* is an example of the latter.

culture, this dissertation also begins to redress the relative absence of sustained theological analysis in studies of visual culture, whether in early modernity or beyond.¹⁰⁰

To do so, I capitalize on a turning tide in understandings of Calvin's relationship to the visual, which in recent decades have been complicated by a number of important studies. Notable work by Randall C. Zachman has shown that insofar as Calvin is a theologian of the word, he is also a theologian of the image, and in fact, that proclamation and manifestation are intertwined in Calvin's theology. Zachman has also drawn attention to Calvin's approval and use of vivid verbal imagery.¹⁰¹ Susan E. Schreiner and Serene Jones have emphasized Calvin's emphasis on natural beauty, particularly the way creation evokes wonder and invites contemplation.¹⁰² Barbara Pitkin has established the prominence of visual language in Calvin's doctrine of faith, even arguing that faith is "a kind of perception."¹⁰³ Most importantly, Lee Palmer Wandel has published several pathbreaking articles which establish the productivity of situating Calvin at the cusp of evolving late medieval and early modern visual cultures.¹⁰⁴ In fact, this project builds on one of Wandel's most far-reaching contributions, which is her refusal to water down or interpret metaphorically Calvin's trenchant insistence on God's visibility.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁰ Important articles by Wandel (see below) as well as Biernoff's *Sight and Embodiment* constitute notable exceptions to this rule. Indeed, Biernoff's *Sight and Embodiment* is the only monograph-length interpretation of individual theological texts from the perspective of visual culture of which I am aware. Wandel, "John Calvin and Michel de Montaigne"; Wandel, "Incarnation, Image, and Sign: John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* & Late Medieval Visual Culture" in *Image and Incarnation: The Early Modern Doctrine of the Pictorial Image*, eds. Walter S. Melion and Lee Palmer Wandel (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 187-202.

¹⁰¹ Zachman, *Image and Word in the Theology of John Calvin* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007).

¹⁰² Schreiner, *The Theater of His Glory: Nature and the Natural Order in the Thought of John Calvin* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1995), 28, 65, 120-22; Serene Jones, "Glorious Creation, Beautiful Law" in *Feminist and Womanist Essays in Reformed Dogmatics*, eds. Amy Plantinga Pauw and Serene Jones (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006). See also Randall C. Zachman, "The Universe as the Living Image of God: Calvin's Doctrine of Creation Reconsidered," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 61, no. 4 (October 1997): 299-312.

¹⁰³ Pitkin, *What Pure Eyes Could See*, 61.

¹⁰⁴ Wandel, "John Calvin and Michel de Montaigne"; Wandel, "Incarnation, Image, and Sign," 187-202.

¹⁰⁵ See Wandel, "John Calvin and Michel de Montaigne," 138 and Wandel, "Incarnation, Image, and Sign," 192-93.

My argument advances these lines of thought by reinterpreting some of the *Institutio*'s major concepts and motifs against the backdrop of vision's uncertain and contested status in sixteenth-century Europe. Drawing on a wealth of new visual culture studies from which previous scholarship was unable to benefit, this new reading of a well-studied text will enable us to extend existing lines of interpretation, to address several outstanding questions, and to connect hitherto unrelated dimensions of the *Institutio*.

As this Introduction has already suggested, returning the *Institutio* to its original visual milieu will allow me to bring added nuance to our understanding of Calvin's account of sin as blindness—an important characterization acknowledged, for example, in Bruce Gordon's observation that for Calvin "sin obscures reality"¹⁰⁶ and in Schreiner's description of sin as causing "perceptual breakdown."¹⁰⁷ Another, broader line of thought that this reading will allow me to extend and specify is the oft-raised but little elaborated possibility that Calvin and the other reformers are not eliminating but "reforming" the role of the eyes in religious life. We find gestures along these lines in several late twentieth-century scholars, such as Scribner,¹⁰⁸ Margaret R. Miles,¹⁰⁹ and Huston Diehl¹¹⁰—as well as a recent reprise in Clark associating Calvin with the cultivation of "reformed eyes"¹¹¹—but the specific contours of the perceptual reformation that the *Institutio* may be proposing and enacting have yet to be articulated. My

¹⁰⁶ Gordon, *John Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion: A Biography* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 21.

¹⁰⁷ Schreiner, *Theater of His Glory*, 121.

¹⁰⁸ Scribner, "Perceptions of the Sacred," 102-103; "Popular Piety," 123, 128; "Ways of Seeing," 103-104.

¹⁰⁹ Miles ponders using the eyes for reading as a way of reframing their use, redirecting them away from image-worship and ensuring that they follow along pre-given textualized paths. In this context, she refers suggestively to "the disciplined use of vision." Miles, *Image as Insight: Visual Understanding in Western Christianity and Secular Culture* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1985), 124.

¹¹⁰ Diehl proposes that English reformers used images to "guard against the idolatrous gaze and to inculcate a new, Protestant mode of seeing." Diehl, *Staging Reform, Reforming the Stage: Protestantism and Popular Theater in Early Modern England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 63. For this full argument, see 46-66.

¹¹¹ Clark, *Vanities*, 183.

reading will extend these gestures and offer an interpretation of the *Institutio* as instilling and disciplining not only ways of seeing, but also the mental and material habits related to them.

Ultimately, re-situating the *Institutio* in this aspect of its early modern setting will allow me to take up some of the most intriguing questions and observations that scholars have raised regarding the *Institutio* over the last two decades. It will provide purchase for addressing the puzzle Pitkin poses—“does the eye of faith actually *see*, or... [is it] only the case that it *trusts* in a hidden reality?”¹¹² It will also allow me to elaborate upon Zachman’s productively tentative formulation, that God becomes “somewhat visible” to human perceivers,¹¹³ and to explain the process whereby, as Schreiner says, a redeemed mind comes to “perceive more and more clearly.”¹¹⁴ It will offer a standpoint from which to tackle both John Bossy’s infamous puzzlement about the eloquence of Calvin’s prose,¹¹⁵ and John Slotemaker’s outstanding question regarding the relation between verbal and visual imagery.¹¹⁶ Finally, it will be possible to take up and extend Ernst van den Hemel’s observation that the *Institutio* trains its readers to “see the world as it really is”¹¹⁷ and to double down on Wandel’s compelling description of the *Institutio* as a text that teaches its readers to see God,¹¹⁸ indeed, that instills a “*modus percipiendae*.”¹¹⁹

¹¹² Pitkin, *Pure Eyes*, 162.

¹¹³ Zachman, *Image and Word*, 2.

¹¹⁴ Schreiner, *Theater of His Glory*, 105.

¹¹⁵ “[Calvin] wrote more eloquently than was decent for a theologian.” John Bossy, *Christianity in the West 1400-1700* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 102.

¹¹⁶ “The most significant methodological question that arises in [Zachman’s *Image and Word*] is how to interpret passages in scripture that discuss or rely on visual imagery, but are clearly textual (as written words themselves).” John Slotemaker, review of *Image and Word in the Theology of John Calvin*, by Randall Zachman, *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 40, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 623.

¹¹⁷ Ernst van den Hemel, “Things That Matter: The *Extra Calvinisticum*, the Eucharist, and John Calvin’s Unstable Materiality,” in *Things: Religion and the Question of Materiality*, eds. Dick Houtman and Birgit Meyer (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 66.

¹¹⁸ Wandel, *The Eucharist*, 148-49.

¹¹⁹ Wandel, *The Eucharist*, 152.

5. Methodology

This dissertation is based on the 1559 Latin text of Calvin's *Institutio Christianae Religionis*. The *Institutio* is the reformer's magnum opus and arguably the single most influential text to emerge from Europe's sixteenth-century religious reformations.¹²⁰ Re-edited and re-published over many years from its earliest edition in 1536, the text reached its final form only in 1559.¹²¹ I deal exclusively with the 1559 edition of the *Institutio* for several reasons. First, Calvin declared that he was at last satisfied with this, the final version.¹²² This editorial comment frames the work as a stand-alone product, no longer an evolving work in progress, and thus indicates that at least for some purposes it can be analyzed in isolation from its editorial history. A second reason to treat the 1559 edition is that it is the form of the text that was most frequently republished in succeeding decades, and arguably had the greatest impact on subsequent developments in Reformed theology.¹²³ Third and finally, comparative studies of the different editions of the text have revealed distinctive features of the 1559 *Institutio*'s prose style that are of particular interest in light of the impact of language upon perception¹²⁴—an issue to which Chapters Five through Seven are dedicated.

Calvin himself translated the work into French for a 1560 publication. However, I have resisted the temptation to illuminate the Latin text with reference to the French because it is by now well-established that Calvin's rather free translation introduces significant alterations into

¹²⁰ "No other major religious book of the Reformation apart from Melancthon's *Loci* was so heavily revised, went through so many editions, and reached so many people." Gordon, *John Calvin's Institutes*, 20.

¹²¹ For an overview of the successive editions of the *Institutio*, see John T. McNeill, "Introduction," in Calvin, *Institutes*, xxxiii-xxlviii and Jean-François Gilmont, *John Calvin and the Printed Book*, trans. Karin Maag (Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2005), 39-44.

¹²² "I was never satisfied until the work had been arranged in the order now set forth." John Calvin, "John Calvin to the Reader," in Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.

¹²³ The Latin text of the 1559 was the exclusive source of further reprintings, translations, and abridgements until 1863. McNeill, "Introduction," xxxvii.

¹²⁴ Olivier Millet, *Calvin et la dynamique de la parole: Étude de rhétorique réformée* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1992), 861-64, 867-70.

some passages, imbuing the entire work with a more expressive and explicit style as compared with the Latin.¹²⁵ These differences have been interpreted to reflect the French work's more popular audience as compared with the Latin edition—which seems to have been intended for a Europe-wide audience of humanistically educated Latin-reading men and some women.¹²⁶ For this reason, resorting to the French text to illuminate the Latin seems to raise more questions than it answers.¹²⁷

Indeed, this study's restriction to a single language of a single edition of a single text reflects one of the broadest methodological commitments of this project. Although studies of the 1559 *Institutio* are frequently justified by recourse to the truism that it reflects Calvin's mature thought, the goal of this dissertation is not to illuminate the mind or motivations of John Calvin, nor to contribute to an account of how his thought evolved, nor to build a portrait of Calvin's theology independent of his individual works. Rather, my interest lies in the *Institutio* as a literary artifact¹²⁸ of the sixteenth century, a complex textual object whose quirks, I believe, are best illumined by reference to its own claims, motifs, and stylistic qualities—and not those of other works written for other purposes and with other properties.¹²⁹ I hope to show, ultimately,

¹²⁵ Millet, *Calvin et la dynamique de la parole*, 829-70. Gordon calls the Latin and French editions “two distinct books.” Gordon, *John Calvin's Institutes*, xii.

¹²⁶ This category includes, prominently, trainees at the Genevan Academy. On the intended audience of the 1559 Latin *Institutio*, see Gilmont, *Printed Book*, 115 and Randall C. Zachman, *John Calvin as Teacher, Pastor, and Theologian: The Shape of His Writings and Thought* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 81-83.

¹²⁷ Nevertheless, the insights that emerge from this study are in principle applicable to the French edition as well—perhaps even more so, given the relatively more forceful and colorful character of Calvin's French prose. Needless to say, the perceptual concerns that I highlight by situating the text against a broadly shared, Europe-wide visual culture are not limited to the elite readership of the Latin edition. I leave it to other researchers to specify what other, more local connotations the text's perceptual themes may have elicited for its evangelical readership living in Catholic France.

¹²⁸ I take this phrase from Ernst van den Hemel, who advocates this approach to the *Institutio* in his dissertation, “Tracing Circles.” Van den Hemel, “Tracing Circles: Literary Dimensions in John Calvin's *Institutes*” (PhD diss., University of Amsterdam, 2011), 7. Van den Hemel is building upon work, especially that of Brian Cummings in *The Literary Culture of the Reformation: Grammar and Grace*, cited earlier, that foregrounds the literariness of Renaissance theological texts, and attends especially to the ways they grapple with issues related to the use of language and the nature of textuality.

¹²⁹ Richard A. Muller has leveled an important critique of the method of arriving at an account of Calvin's doctrinal views through harmonizing commentaries, sermons, and treatises with the *Institutio*. See Muller, *The*

that sixteenth-century visual culture is not an alien framework imposed from without, but a silent backdrop which the *Institutio*—in its explicit perceptual motifs and concerns—everywhere assumes and invites its readers to use as one “straightedge” to guide our interpretation. The founding methodological hypothesis of this reading, then, is that perceptual stakes fund and therefore illumine the *Institutio*’s literary strategies. If this is the case, then this work of writing can be understood as both a mirror and a motor¹³⁰ of its sixteenth-century visual culture.

One final methodological note is in order—not about Calvin’s language, but about my own. Writing about another time and place, with different gender hierarchies, poses a challenge to any scholar who wishes to use gender-inclusive language. Although Calvin notably maintained a correspondence with a large number of women, it is reasonable to expect that he imagined his readership in the *Institutio* as largely male. He was also writing in a time during which it was still acceptable to use male pronouns to indicate universality. It is important to note that there are interesting and well-documented gendered dimensions of early modern visual culture.¹³¹ However, I do not see any evidence that Calvin would consider the specific account of “perception” I unfold in this dissertation to differ based on the gender of the perceiver—sin is an equal-opportunity source of perceptual distortion—and so I will not pursue an account of gender-specific perception from the *Institutio*.

Throughout the dissertation, I use gender-neutral nouns, by speaking for example of the problems that beset “human” perception. The case of gendered pronouns is more difficult. I

Unaccommodated Calvin: Studies in the Foundation of a Theological Tradition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 6.

¹³⁰ According to Spiegel, because a text is an historically situated use of language, we can examine its language using the tools of the social historian—that is, we can see it as an instance of larger social discourses that govern it, but never reducible to them precisely because it is also an agent in the very environment from which it emerges: “texts both mirror and generate social realities.” Spiegel, *The Past as Text*, 24.

¹³¹ For one treatment of the complexity of gendered gazes in late medieval European visual culture, see Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment*, 41-59.

eschew the use of “he” as a universal pronoun to avoid silently perpetuating the pernicious assumption that maleness is a neutral condition from which other gender markers represent deviations. Although I considered the use of “he or she” or “s/he,” these approaches not only make for awkward prose, but also perpetuate binary thinking about gender. Switching between male and female pronouns from paragraph to paragraph has the same problem; perhaps more importantly, it makes for confusing reading and impossible editing. I fear that adopting the ungrammatical but increasingly accepted gender-neutral “they” would also make for confusing prose, especially when I speak of singular figures such as the “true spectator” and the “idoltrous mind.” I have thus elected to follow the practice, adopted by some feminists, of using exclusively feminine pronouns—not to indicate that the subject of Calvin’s reflections is exclusively female, but to underline that it is also not exclusively male. The approach is not perfect, but it combines the advantages of consciously disrupting traditional gender norms and stylistic simplicity.

6. Chapter summaries

The first four chapters of the dissertation establish the productivity of reading the *Institutio* in the light of sixteenth-century European visual culture by reinterpreting three of the text’s major themes—the “knowledge of God,” “accommodation,” and “idolatry”—in terms of perception. The knowledge of God and accommodation are both of paramount importance in the *Institutio*. In Chapters One and Two, I show how we can move beyond recent interpretive impasses by reinterpreting these topics in terms of the *Institutio*’s wider concern with perception. I argue first that the concept traditionally translated as “knowledge of God” is helpfully understood as an act of “perception,” and second that “accommodation” names God’s strategy

for rendering Godself perceptible to humans so that they can achieve the “perception of God” that is the goal of human life.

Chapters Three and Four continue establishing the text’s perceptual concerns through a reinterpretation of “idolatry” in its individual and social manifestations, respectively. In the process, these chapters establish a picture of the habits of mind that characterize idolatry and therefore induce the blindness that precludes the perception of God. Finally, Chapters Five through Seven extend my argument that perception is an organizing concern of the *Institutio* by turning from the content of the text to its form. Specifically, I show how Calvin’s distinctive prose style discourages the habits that preclude perception and encourages the habits that conduce to it. Together, these last three chapters of the dissertation establish that the *Institutio* is a text concerned with perception in more than one way—not only as regards its major doctrinal teachings, but also in terms of its formative project vis-à-vis its reader.

6.1 Chapter One. This chapter reinterprets one of the best-known themes of the *Institutio*, a condition that, though variably named in the text itself, is traditionally translated as the “knowledge of God.”¹³² This condition—what human beings could and would naturally attain were it not for their sin-induced blindness—is the goal of human life. As the connotations of “knowledge” suggest, this condition has largely been understood as belief in propositional statements about God.¹³³ Although it has become a commonplace to observe that Calvin’s

¹³² Although this phrase gives the impression that Calvin has a dedicated word for this capacity or attainment, Calvin actually moves easily among *cognitio* (becoming acquainted with, or knowledge through acquaintance), *agnitio* (recognition, acknowledgment), and most frequently, *notitia* (acquaintance with a person). All three of these terms have awareness or possession of an idea as a possible secondary meaning, but their primary sense is something that arises from a direct or personal encounter. In other words, the semantic center of this set of terms is the process of coming to know through experience, not the mastery of a set of concepts or justified true beliefs. Lewis and Short, *A Latin Dictionary*.

¹³³ See, for example, Paul Helm, *John Calvin’s Ideas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 225.

“knowledge” goes beyond the “noetic”¹³⁴ and the “epistemic”¹³⁵ to include affective, relational, moral, existential, and even perceptual¹³⁶ dimensions, the premise that this condition is at bedrock a matter of belief arrived at through an act of judgment has remained unshaken.

In Chapter One, I reexamine this concept by attending to the behavior of a figure Calvin calls the “true spectator,” a hypothetical or counterfactual perceiver capable of appreciating the “dazzling theater” that is the created world.¹³⁷ The behavior Calvin explicitly and implicitly attributes to a true spectator gives us a phenomenological account of what would be possible for a human perceiver not impaired by self-imposed blindness. With the behavior of this figure as my guide, I establish four key facts about the condition we have long called the “knowledge of God”: first, the origin of this condition lies in sense experience; second, it occurs in the absence of an inferential or interpretive second step made on the basis of such experience; third, it is inextricable from a posture of piety; and fourth, propositional claims about God are after-the-fact expressions of this condition, but neither pre-requisite for nor identifiable with it. Together, these observations point to a fresh understanding of the “knowledge of God”: this condition is attained through an act of sensory spectatorship that automatically throws the spectator into an orientation of piety, and which occurs without the need for her to draw an inference, form a judgment, or perform any other act of reason or intellect.

On the strength of this reading, I go on to propose that “perception” is a useful twenty-first century term to capture the experience that Calvin uses no one word to pinpoint, but which

¹³⁴ Edward A. Dowey, Jr., *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952), 4.

¹³⁵ Paul Helm, “John Calvin, the *sensus divinitatis*, and the Noetic Effects of Sin.” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 43, no. 2 (1998): 88.

¹³⁶ Helm, “John Calvin,” 91.

¹³⁷ “However much the glory of God shines forth [in God's works], scarcely one man in a hundred is a true spectator of it (*verus est eius spectator*)!” Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.8. “...fitting it may be for man seriously to turn his eyes to contemplate God's works, since he has been placed in this most glorious theater to be a spectator of them (*ut eorum esset spectator*),...” Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.6.2.

we see embodied by the true spectator. To provide historical warrant for this textual argument, I examine prevailing early modern ideas about the “interior senses,” a group of closely associated faculties—often grouped under the single heading of the “imagination”—that early modern Europeans understood to mediate between the five external senses, on the one hand, and the conscious rational and contemplative powers of the soul, on the other. By situating Calvin’s true spectator against this widely held account of sense perception, I show that sixteenth-century conceptions of the mind provide a material grounding for what we see in the ideal of the “true spectator”—namely, an encounter with sense experience that evokes an evaluative and affective orientation without requiring an act judgment upon neutral sense data.¹³⁸ It is this reaction that I mean to indicate when I conclude that the goal of human life—indeed, the opposite of sinful “blindness” and the condition we have long translated as the “knowledge of God”—is usefully understood as the “perception of God.”

6.2 Chapter Two. Chapter Two continues the work of rethinking major doctrinal themes in terms of perception through a fresh interpretation of Calvin’s doctrine of “accommodation.” The term “accommodation” typically names a hermeneutic strategy whereby patristic authors excuse anthropomorphic descriptions of God in Scripture. In this narrow, traditional sense, accommodation is a strategy for explaining those exceptional cases in which God is falsely portrayed in service of a larger point. However, for Calvin, the clarifying language of Scripture is only one among many ways God self-presents in formats that are tailored or “accommodated” to human capacities.¹³⁹ In fact, Calvin speaks of everything from the visual features of the material

¹³⁸ In the process, we see that any interpretation that would presume such an act of judgment is tacitly assuming an account of the mind that, as I have explained in this Introduction, would not emerge until the seventeenth century.

¹³⁹ A growing body of research has demonstrated the myriad ways that Calvin’s “accommodation” outstrips this relatively limited exegetical use of the concept. Balsarak shows that Calvin introduces accommodation into his

world to the chronological process of creation, from the incarnate Christ and the elements of the Lord's Supper to human institutions like civil government and parenthood, as accommodated to human capacities. That is to say, for Calvin "accommodation" appears to be not so much the exception, as the rule. As such, the motif runs throughout the *Institutio* and figures in practically every major doctrinal locus.

However, this very ubiquity has posed an interpretive problem for recent commentators: how can the single concept of "accommodation" bring coherence to such a diverse array of divine strategies?¹⁴⁰ In this chapter, I propose that accommodations are best understood in terms of their shared goal, which is to facilitate the "perception of God" that, as I argued in Chapter One, is the goal of human life.¹⁴¹ In other words, "accommodation" names God's strategy for bringing divine self-manifestation within the range of human perceptual capacities, both before and then after the fall. Different accommodations reveal the range of ways that God tailors divine self-manifestation to human perceptual tendencies and needs, frequently by making this manifestation physically perceptible, but also by making it otherwise noticeable or striking to minds whose sin disposes them to perceive anything but.

My discussion of accommodation proceeds in four parts. First, I trace Calvin's explicit and implicit remarks about the purpose of distinct accommodations. This analysis reveals a

reading of passages where previous commentators did not. He notes that, with the exception of Chrysostom, no theologian turns to accommodation as frequently as Calvin. Jon Balsarak, *Divinity Compromised: A Study of Divine Accommodation in the Thought of John Calvin* (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer, 2006), 20-32.

¹⁴⁰ See, for example, Jon Balsarak, "The God of Love and Weakness: Calvin's Understanding of God's Accommodating Relationship with His People," *The Westminster Theological Journal* 62, no. 2 (Fall 2000): 194 and Jon Balsarak, "'The Accommodating Act par Excellence?': An Inquiry into the Incarnation and Calvin's Understanding of Accommodation," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 55, no. 4 (2002): 421-23.

¹⁴¹ In this way, I address accommodation's lack of integration with other key ideas in Calvin's thought, a problem identified by recent commentators. See, for example, Arnold Huijgen, "Divine Accommodation and Divine Transcendence in John Calvin's Theology," in *Calvinus sacrarum literarum interpres: Papers of the International Congress on Calvin Research*, ed. Herman J. Selderhuis (Göttingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008), 120.

remarkable consistency in what he suggests about the aim of accommodation—specifically, that its intended effect is to enable humans to attain the perception of God. Second, I show that the language Calvin uses to describe accommodations suggests not only that they are perceptible but that what defines them *as* accommodations is precisely their capacity to be perceived by not only limited but even sinfully oblivious human observers. Third, I highlight an important feature of accommodations that surfaces when we appreciate their role in facilitating perception—namely, that accommodations are often linked in pairs or layers which reflect relationships of increasing clarity and clarification. Finally, I consider several cases that could be seen as counterexamples to this reading, showing that Calvin frames even apparently exceptional accommodations as effectively facilitating human perception of God.

If accommodations' intended effect and defining characteristics are both perceptual, then every one of the *Institutio*'s references to divine self-manifestation and its adaptation to human needs is, in fact, a reference to perception. Because allusions to accommodation suffuse the book, this chapter's reading of accommodation as the divine strategy for making-perceptible provides further evidence for my claim that the *Institutio* is centrally concerned with perception.

6.3 Chapters Three and Four. If Chapters One and Two describe God's intention for humans and God's chosen strategy for achieving it—namely, facilitating the perception of God at sites accommodated to this purpose—then Chapters Three and Four trace the processes whereby human sin disrupts both. I have been speaking about the perception of God as the opposite of sinful “blindness.” But what causes and maintains this blindness? Chapters Three and Four present my interpretation of “idolatry” as the condition of minds who disregard and disengage from the accommodations which ought to occupy their attention. I show how, contrary

to God's intentions for humans, idolatrous habits of mind lead to the misperception—or, more precisely, the delusive *non*-perception of God—that Calvin calls “blindness.”

These two chapters form a pair, as Chapter Three takes up the individual and Chapter Four the social dimensions of “idolatry.” Chapter Three, “The Idolatrous Mind,” explores how blindness is a result of a dynamic whereby fallen minds fixate upon figments of their own imagination to the exclusion of perceiving God at sites of divine accommodation. It traces a web of overlapping and mutually implicating vocabularies that appear in the first five chapters of the *Institutio*—curiosity, wandering, inventing, dreaming, delusion, substitution, and separation—and which, taken together, reveal that the idolatrous mind is caught in a vicious cycle between the self-made fictions about God it imagines and its resulting inability to perceive God in accommodations.

To shed further light on these dynamics, Chapter Three extends Chapter One's discussion of the role of the imagination in sixteenth-century accounts of sense perception. I focus on how the chain of events that ensures reliable perception and cognition can be derailed by the machinations of a rogue imagination—that is, exactly the condition with which Calvin associates the dreaming, wandering, and ultimately deluded idolatrous mind. When such a mind fixates on self-made ideas about what God is like, it allows these figments—which represent illusory human desires more than external realities—to condition and ultimately subvert its perception of the world where God self-manifests. The idolatrous mindset that results is as far as possible from true spectatorship, and therefore cannot lead to the perception of God.

By thus situating “idolatry” in direct relation to both the perception of God and accommodation, and by understanding all of these concepts as related to one another by the *Institutio*'s overriding concern with what conditions perception, I take a new approach to this

most traditional of Reformation themes. I show that for Calvin an “idol” is defined not by an idea’s visual and material instantiation in an image or statue,¹⁴² but by its source: “idols” are conceptions of God derived from the mind’s rogue, speculative imagination, rather than from accommodated sites of divine self-manifestation, on which ideas about God should be based. This means that when we first encounter the charge of “idolatry” in the opening chapters of the *Institutio*, it is as a habit of mind, and not primarily a set of problematic religious practices.¹⁴³

I turn to such practices in Chapter Four, “The Idolatrous Mass,” which traces how the mind’s delusive mental patterns can be extended and reinforced by practices that materially embody, and thus function to confirm, conceptions of God rooted in the human imagination rather than in perceptible accommodations. I illuminate this threat by analyzing the allusions to visual delusions produced by magic, witchcraft, and demonic intervention that appear in Calvin’s treatment of the Roman Mass. These accusations, which we might be tempted to dismiss as hyperbolic, come into focus against larger early modern debates about how perception’s vulnerability to subversion can be exacerbated by problematic ways of knowing.¹⁴⁴ Specifically, I show that Calvin’s strategic deployment of what has been called a “language of visual

¹⁴² Other interpreters have framed idolatry as an issue of material and visible representations, thereby situating it in a traditional narrative about the Reformers’ concerns regarding the relationship between the material and the spiritual. The most widely cited work in this tradition is Carlos M. N. Eire, *War Against the Idols: The Reformation of Worship from Erasmus to Calvin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 197–202, 217. See also Sergiusz Michalski, *The Reformation and the Visual Arts: The Protestant Image Question in Western and Eastern Europe* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 61–63.

¹⁴³ As I will show, for Calvin idolatrous practices are a “second sin” that arises after, and as a result of, the idolatrous mind’s delusive fixation on self-made notions of God. Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.4.4.

¹⁴⁴ For an account of how such language can and should be situated against such a backdrop, see Zika, *Exorcising Our Demons*, 334; Clark, *Vanities*, 151; Nancy E. Atkinson, “When Miracles Become Magic: Witchcraft and the Effort to Reform Religious Practice in Late Medieval and Early Modern England” (PhD diss., University of Pittsburgh, 1997), 117, 157.

deceit”¹⁴⁵ highlights the perceptual effect of participating in idolatrous practices, which is to compound the individual mind’s delusion through collective deception.

Chapter Four ends with a meditation that returns to the problem of “blindness,” which—as will now be abundantly clear—cannot be read as a synonym for “misunderstanding.” Rather, Calvin’s charge of “blindness” names how sinful humans project self-made delusions, and in so doing, cheat themselves of the ability to take in the world as it is. This discussion highlights the fact that the stakes of both social and individual “idolatry” are *perceptual*: what comes under threat through idolatrous habits of mind and idolatrous practices of worship alike is the ability to perceive God at accommodated sites of manifestation and thus, the possibility of attaining the perception of God.

6.4 Chapters Five through Seven. Whereas in the first four chapters of the dissertation, my analysis deals primarily with the *Institutio*’s explicit teachings, in the last three chapters I change tactics, showing how my interpretation of the *Institutio* as a text centrally concerned with problems of perception can also illuminate underappreciated or puzzling features of its prose style. These chapters go beyond existing work on the *Institutio*’s language in not simply highlighting Calvin’s rhetorical prowess, but by specifying how his language—when read in its sixteenth-century setting—could be understood to intervene in the habits of mind which characterize idolatry and thus perpetuate the sinful mind’s blindness. Specifically, I investigate how several of the text’s key stylistic features address the problematic habits of mind detailed in Chapters Three and Four, as well as how they conduce to the perceptual ideals outlined in

¹⁴⁵ Clark has documented the development of “an entire vocabulary of error, delusion, and imposture” deployed by evangelical polemicists that cast transubstantiation and other Catholic miracles as false perceptions. Clark, *Vanities*, 173–77, 183–84.

Chapters One and Two. This work begins in Chapter Five, where I establish that there is good reason to think that the *Institutio*'s reader would benefit from intervention in the sinful habits of mind that constitute "idolatry." I show, moreover, that the implicit theory of language we can derive from Calvin's account of Scripture suggests the feasibility of using language to intervene in the process of perception.

Following this, Chapters Six and Seven discuss key features of the text's language—representative though not exhaustive of its stylistic properties—and show how they serve the same functions that Calvin identifies with Scriptural language. Together, these two chapters reveal that the *Institutio* intervenes in its reader's mind to suppress idolatrous patterns and facilitate the perception of God in two broad ways. First, through a host of rhetorical techniques designed to restrict and direct thought, Calvin's language restrains the overactive mind from wandering where it ought not go—thus discouraging idolatrous ideas from supplanting external perceptions. Second, through uses of language known among sixteenth-century readers and writers to reproduce sensory and especially visual effects, Calvin's prose rivets the dulled mind, occupying it with unmissably vivid perceptions of *God-given* sites of focus. In this way, the *Institutio*'s prose style not only imposes the mental restraint but also stimulates the vivified perception that are otherwise difficult for an idolatrous mind to achieve.

As in the first half of the dissertation, here too I show that the interpretive framework of perception can address longstanding questions—in this case, puzzles about the *Institutio*'s form. My analysis establishes that both the largely unquestioned severe aspects of Calvin's prose style as well as its still-puzzling vivid dimensions can be better understood in light of their relevance to perception. By showing how the style of Calvin's prose—and especially its formative stakes—comes into focus against the issues I trace in this dissertation, these last three chapters complete

my argument that perception is a powerful framework for illuminating the *Institutio*. They also provide suggestive evidence for a second and further claim, which is that the ultimate formative purpose of the text is not just to name problems of perception, but also to address them through the interventions of its own language upon a reader's mind.

7. Seeing Calvin's *Institutio* anew

Do we really need another book about Calvin's *Institutio*? This project will show how recent research on visual culture allows us to approach this well-studied text from a new angle. The reality is that every interpretation of the *Institutio* implicitly assumes a particular visual culture as its backdrop. Deliberately situating the text in its sixteenth-century milieu suggests that previous readings, which downplayed or overlooked the text's prominent perceptual themes, may have been tacitly operating with a seventeenth or eighteenth-century visual culture as their interpretive ground.¹⁴⁶ Only in those later settings, as I noted earlier, will it become possible to neatly separate perception from conception, and thus arrive at an account of human blindness—and its opposite, successful perception—that is primarily conscious and conceptual, and not inescapably conditioned and embodied. The tendency to read later scientific and epistemological developments into the *Institutio* may have been reinforced by narratives that treat Calvin and the other reformers as forerunners of empiricism, 'rationalized' sight, modernity, and other Enlightenment ideals. As Calvin's opening image reminds us, figures appear differently against different grounds.

¹⁴⁶ "Cartesian perspectivalism" is a shorthand often used to describe one dominant form of modern visuality. See Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, 69-70 and Martin Jay, "Scopic Regimes of Modernity," in Foster, *Vision and Visuality*, 4-11. For an in-depth discussion of several specific and situated Enlightenment visualities, see Peter de Bolla, "The Visibility of Visuality," in Brennan and Jay, *Vision in Context*, 63-82.

In fact however, today’s visual culture may be closer to the sixteenth-century milieu out of which the *Institutio* emerged than at any time since. I noted above Clark’s striking observation that early modern intellectuals were considering the “modern-sounding notion” that the mind is active in perception, that it discursively filters and ultimately constructs the world it perceives, that, as he puts it, “visual experience had a cultural (that is, semiotic) foundation, not a natural one.”¹⁴⁷ If what Clark calls the “incipient visual relativism”¹⁴⁸ of early modern European visual culture bears some resemblance to our postmodern understanding of the cultural specificity and constructedness of vision, then it may be that we have the best chance yet of recognizing the *Institutio*’s urgent perceptual concerns. If we can appreciate the *Institutio*’s interventions in its own distinct—but not entirely unfamiliar—moment of epistemological uncertainty, we may find that Calvin has much to say to readers in 2020. This text—with its horror of the self-imposed “blindness” whereby we imprison ourselves into individual echo chambers, refusing new data and turning the world into a mirror of our own minds—speaks powerfully in an era in which the consequences of confirmation bias and polarization make the ability to distinguish real from imagined, perceived from projected, more salient than ever.

But, to quote Calvin himself, “because brevity is obscure, a longer discourse better illumines the meaning.”¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁷ Clark, *Vanities*, 4 and 6, respectively.

¹⁴⁸ Clark, *Vanities*, 95.

¹⁴⁹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.17.20.

Chapter One
The “Perception of God”

“Our sensory perception
of the powers of God
is to us a competent teacher
of godliness.”
– John Calvin

“Once in awhile,
someone asks me rather petulantly
‘Can’t you see what’s before you?’
Well, yes and no.”
– Nelson Goodman

One of the most important themes of the *Institutio* is a condition that Calvin names variously as *Dei cognitio*, *Dei notitia*, and *Dei agnitio*, among others. It is traditionally translated as the “knowledge of God,” and it is introduced in the very opening pages of the text.¹ It is this concept that is in view when William Bouwsma describes the *Institutio* as “a discourse about knowledge.”² Not only does discussion of the “knowledge of God” dominate the early chapters of the *Institutio*, but Calvin identifies it as the most urgent task of human life: “all men are born and live to the end that they may know God (*ut Deum cognoscant*).”³ “The final goal of the blessed life... rests in the knowledge of God (*Dei cognitione*).”⁴ Edward A. Dowey, one of the greatest interpreters of this theme in Calvin’s work, has said that knowledge “is the fundamental and central category of Calvin’s theological thought.”⁵

Epigraphs: John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.2.1 and Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*.

¹ This discussion is preceded only by a brief treatment of the intertwined nature of the knowledge of God and of ourselves (*Dei cognitio et nostri*). John Calvin, *Institutio Christianae Religionis* (Berolini: Gustavum Eichler, 1834). English translation from John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 1.1.1-2.

² William J. Bouwsma, “Calvin and the Renaissance Crisis of Knowing,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 17, no. 2 (November 1982): 202.

³ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.3.3. Calvin is referencing John 17.3. He goes on in this passage to say, “Plato meant nothing but this when he often taught that the highest good of the soul is likeness to God, where, when the soul has grasped the knowledge of God (*eius cognitione*), it is wholly transformed.”

⁴ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.1.

⁵ Edward A. Dowey, Jr., “The Structure of Calvin’s Theological Thought as Influenced by the Two-Fold Knowledge of God,” in *Calvinus ecclesiae Genevensis custos: die Referate des Congrès International des Recherches*

Through a close reading of the first five chapters of the *Institutio*, this chapter offers a fresh account of the original “knowledge of God” that was on offer before the fall. I am not the first commentator to remark upon the insufficiency of the contemporary connotations of “knowledge”—as indicating the possession of true, justified beliefs—to capture the *Institutio*’s vision of the end of human life, which Calvin himself uses no single term to indicate. However, I depart from the traditional response to this problem, which is to qualify the term “knowledge” with adjectives in order indicate that this phenomenon has affective, relational, moral, existential, and even perceptual dimensions.

Instead, I take my cues from a figure who offers a phenomenological account of this condition, a hypothetical or counterfactual character Calvin refers to as the “true spectator (*verus spectator*).” By tracing the behaviors that Calvin implicitly and explicitly attributes to the true spectator, I show that understanding the goal of human life as a condition of “perception” allows us to hew more closely to Calvin’s own words and to relate his remarks to one another more elegantly than has heretofore been possible. As discussed in the Introduction, I intend “perception” not as a synonym for understanding, but in its primary meaning of becoming aware of something through the senses.⁶ I also find this term to be a useful shorthand for the sixteenth-century process—previewed in the Introduction and discussed at length at the end of this chapter—whereby sensory experience is conditioned by the imagination even before it rises to the level of, and becomes the basis for, conscious thought.

Calviniennes, ed. Wilhelm H. Neuser (New York: Peter Lang, 1984), 138. For a comparison of Calvin’s account of the knowledge of God with that of several medieval theologians as well as some of his early modern contemporaries, see David C. Steinmetz, *Calvin in Context*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 25-31.

⁶ *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*, s.v. “Perception,” accessed April 15, 2019, <http://www.oed.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/view/Entry/140560?redirectedFrom=perception#eid>.

I lay out this reading across four sections. First, I establish that the condition traditionally called the “knowledge of God” begins in sense experience and has to do with what God is like toward humans—*not* as captured in a set of ideas about God’s nature, but as encountered directly through God’s sensible self-manifestation in created works. Next, I show that this condition is not achieved through a process of inference or any other secondary step, but is simultaneous with sense experience and realized in a moment when the mind’s active powers are in some way suspended. Third, I elucidate how attaining this “knowledge of God” does not lead to, but is actually defined by, a stance of worshipful admiration Calvin calls “piety.” Finally, I propose that propositional statements that might appear to be the “content” of this “knowledge” can be understood as after-the-fact expressions or transcriptions of an originally inarticulate perceptual attainment.

Taken together, these four close readings suggest that the original goal of human life as depicted by the *Institutio* is a condition of perceiving the way God acts toward humans from the sensible manifestations of this behavior in created works. Because this sensory achievement induces an answering orientation of piety without the need to form an inference or conscious belief, I prefer the term “perception of God” over the propositionally freighted “knowledge of God.” In the final part of the chapter, I will show that sixteenth-century understandings of the mind—in particular, a site of unconscious processing known to early modern people as the “interior senses” or, increasingly, simply the “imagination”—provides a material grounding for the processes that seem to characterize Calvin’s “true spectator.” I thus conclude that approaching the state that Calvin depicts as the goal of human life in terms of “perception” is both interpretively illuminating and historically plausible.

1. Complications that attend studying the “knowledge of God”

Before delving into my close readings, allow me to offer some framing remarks regarding how the “knowledge of God” has been studied in the past, including some challenges that complicate this study. The first challenge arises from the fact that the knowledge of God differs under unfallen versus fallen circumstances. According to Calvin, the fall dramatically altered the conditions for attaining the goal of human life. Before the fall, it was possible to arrive at the knowledge of God through encounter with creation alone.⁷ In this connection, Calvin sometimes calls it “the knowledge of God *the Creator*,” by which he refers to “the primal (*prima*) and simple knowledge (*illa [notitia]*) to which the very order of nature would have led us *if Adam had remained upright (si integer stetisset Adam)*.”⁸ However, as Karl Barth observed of the *Institutio*’s opening chapters, “between what is possible in principle and what is possible in fact there inexorably lies the fall. Hence this possibility [of a real knowledge by natural man of the true God] can only be discussed hypothetically.”⁹ In practice—in humans’ current, fallen state—

⁷ “The natural order was that the frame of the universe should be the school in which we were to learn piety, and from it pass over to eternal life and perfect felicity.” Calvin, *Institutio*, 2.6.1. This point is well established in the literature: “Were man in his normal state, he could not under this double revelation, internal and external, fail to know God as God would wish to be known.” Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, *Calvin and Calvinism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1931), 43. “For [an unfallen] soul and mind the *opera Dei* were a valid revelation of God... But such a soul and mind ceased to exist when Adam fell.” T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1959), 27. “...had the fall not taken place, natural revelation, *unsupplemented by word-revelation*, would have been sufficient to establish communion with God and secure the goal of human existence.” Edward Adams, “Calvin’s View of Natural Knowledge of God,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 3, no. 3 (November 2001): 291, emphasis in the original.

⁸ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.2.1, emphasis mine. Parker observes, “This conditional phrase... is definitive in the understanding of the early chapters of the *Institutio*.” Parker, *Calvin’s Doctrine*, 27. I follow McNeill in interpreting *Institutio* 1.2-5 under the sign of this past counterfactual condition. John T. McNeill, in *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, by John Calvin, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 40n2. The hypothetical character of Calvin’s opening discussion of knowledge was a pivotal issue in the Barth-Brunner controversy of the 1930s, waged over whether it is possible to derive a “natural theology” from the opening chapters of the *Institutio*. On this debate, see footnote 16.

⁹ Emil Brunner and Karl Barth. *Natural Theology: Comprising “Nature and Grace” by Professor Dr. Emil Brunner and the Reply “No!” by Dr. Karl Barth*, trans. Peter Fraenkel (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1946), 106.

this originally intended condition is inaccessible unless and until the mind realizes a second condition, which Calvin refers to as “the knowledge of God *the Redeemer*.”¹⁰

First in order came that kind of knowledge (*illa notitiae*) by which one is permitted to grasp who that God is who founded and governs the universe. Then that other inner knowledge (*altera interior*) was added, which alone quickens dead souls, whereby God is known (*cognoscitur*) not only as the Founder of the universe and the sole Author and Ruler of all that is made, but also in the person of the Mediator as the Redeemer.¹¹

Taken together, this original and this secondary condition make up the oft-cited *duplex cognitio Dei*,¹² or two-part “knowledge of God.”¹³

I note this distinction at the outset because I suspect that it is a major source of confusion in the literature exploring Calvin’s “knowledge of God.” Calvin draws an explicit distinction between the knowledge of God “the Creator” and the knowledge of God “the Redeemer” at the beginning of 1.2 and immediately notes that he will focus on the first: “First... the Lord shows himself to be simply the Creator. Then in the face of Christ he shows himself the Redeemer. Of the resulting twofold knowledge of God (*hinc duplex emergit eius cognitio*) we shall now discuss the first aspect.”¹⁴ Despite Calvin’s stated intention to focus only on the original knowledge of God on offer to unfallen humans, the following chapters are in fact peppered with references to the

¹⁰ After the fall, knowledge of God *the Redeemer*—made possible by Christ—is required to attain knowledge of God *the Creator*. “In this ruin of mankind no one now experiences (*sentiet*) God either as Father or as Author of salvation, or favorable in any way, until Christ the Mediator comes forward to reconcile him to us” (Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.2.1). For an account of the interrelation of these two knowledges, see Edward A. Dowey, Jr., *The Knowledge of God in Calvin’s Theology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952), 238-39.

¹¹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.6.1.

¹² As Muller notes, although useful, the phrase *duplex cognitio Dei* does not actually appear in Calvin’s Latin. Richard A. Muller, “*Ordo docendi*: Melancthon and the Organization of Calvin’s *Institutes*, 1536-1543,” in *Melancthon in Europe: His Work and Influence Beyond Wittenberg*, ed. Karin Maag (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 131n27.

¹³ Dowey’s 1952 *The Knowledge of God in Calvin’s Theology* is still the indispensable guide to this distinction and its implications for reading the *Institutio*. See especially Chapter Two. Dowey argues that this distinction is identical to that between general and special revelation. Dowey, *The Knowledge*, 43. For an overview of the twofold knowledge of God in Calvin’s contemporaries and inheritors, see Richard A. Muller, “‘*Duplex cognitio dei*’ in the Theology of Early Reformed Orthodoxy,” *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 10, no. 2 (Summer 1979).

¹⁴ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.2.2. Calvin repeats his determination to set the knowledge of God the Redeemer aside until later in the *Institutio* again at 1.6.1 and 1.10.1.

epistemological implications of the current, fallen condition of humanity. In practice, Calvin does not always flag whether he is speaking under pre-fall or post-fall conditions.¹⁵ This may forward Calvin's rhetorical aims by helping the reader recognize the enormity of what was lost in the fall, but it also makes it difficult to appreciate the critical distinctions between the "knowledge" on offer and the means of its realization in each state.

Another complicating factor is the question of how the condition that is the goal of human life relates to the sense (*sensus*) or seed (*semen*) of divinity that Calvin argues in 1.3 is implanted in all humans and corrupted but not eradicated by the fall. Conversations about the *sensus* have largely focused on whether and how a *fallen* mind might form a belief in the existence of God when its corrupted but not obliterated *sensus* is brought to bear on God's self-manifestation in creation.¹⁶ Because the fallen mind is not my concern in this chapter, I will set aside the challenge of defining the *sensus*, with the proviso that everything I say about the realization of the goal of human life under ideal, i.e. unfallen, circumstances assumes a properly functioning *sensus*, whatever it is. Nevertheless, it will be helpful to signal two ways that I depart from common approaches to this topic—first, by de-centering belief, and second, by focusing not

¹⁵ As Helm observes, "we shall find it difficult to keep... [our pristine condition and the effects of sin upon it] completely separate, as Calvin himself finds it difficult to do so." Paul Helm, *John Calvin's Ideas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 222. Armstrong makes the same point regarding Calvin's attempt to exclude "redemptive knowledge" while speaking of the revelation in scripture. Brian G. Armstrong, "Duplex cognitio Dei, Or? The Problem and Relation of Structure, Form, and Purpose in Calvin's Theology," in *Probing the Reformed Tradition: Historical Studies in Honor of Edward A. Dowey, Jr.*, eds. Elsie Anne McKee and Brian G. Armstrong (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989), 145. For an account of how Calvin's habit of continually shifting between perspectives bears on his account of the human condition, see Mary Potter Engel, *John Calvin's Perspectival Anthropology* (Atlanta: GA: Scholars Press, 1988).

¹⁶ This is the question of whether there is a "natural theology" in the first five chapters of the *Institutio*—an issue which sparked the fierce 1930s debate between Karl Barth and Emil Brunner (see Parker, *Calvin's Doctrine*, 30n2, and Brunner and Barth, *Natural Theology*) and which has more recently been a focus of Reformed epistemology as led by Alvin Plantinga. See Alvin Plantinga, "The Prospects for Natural Theology," in *Philosophy of Religion*, Philosophical Perspectives 5, ed. James E. Tomberlin (Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview Publishing, 1991) and the essays in Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, eds., *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983). For his argument that belief in God is "properly basic" and thus does not require argumentation, see Alvin Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," in Plantinga and Wolterstorff, *Faith and Rationality*, 71-91.

on the fallen mind, but on the hypothetical *unfallen* mind depicted in the opening chapters of the *Institutio*.

The literature on the *sensus divinitatis* reveals a range of views on how this capacity relates to the condition that is the goal of human life. At one end of the spectrum, there are those who understand it as an innate belief or conviction that there is a God.¹⁷ On this view, the *sensus* is a first step toward, perhaps even a version of, the “knowledge of God.”¹⁸ At the other extreme, there are those who see the *sensus* as an innate predisposition to form a belief, under the proper conditions.¹⁹ On this view, the *sensus* is a tendency or capacity that, functioning properly, leads one—in a second step—to form a belief in the existence of God upon encountering God’s self-manifestation in creation.²⁰

¹⁷ In his influential treatment, Warfield defines the *sensus* as “innate knowledge of God.” Warfield, *Calvin and Calvinism*, 32. More recently, Sudduth has defined the *sensus* as *a priori* knowledge of God, using language that clearly distinguishes this position from the alternative view: “The *sensus divinitatis* is not a mere disposition or belief-forming mechanism that is innate, but the knowledge itself is innate.” Michael L. Czapkay Sudduth, “The Prospects for ‘Mediate’ Natural Theology in John Calvin,” *Religious Studies* 31, no. 1 (March 1995): 60. Hoitenga, who identifies the *sensus* with the “awareness of God,” makes a similar remark, in which he quotes Calvin: “The content of the natural awareness of God is both definite and momentous: ‘that there is a God and that he is their Maker’ (I, iiiii, 1).” Dewey J. Hoitenga, Jr., *Faith and Reason from Plato to Plantinga: An Introduction to Reformed Epistemology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991): 153. Hoitenga notes that reason formulates this content into specific propositions about God. Hoitenga, *Faith and Reason*, 153-54.

¹⁸ Sudduth’s formulation of this position is exceptionally clear. “There are two distinct modes by which man has a natural knowledge of God, one internal, innate and *a priori* and another external, in the work of creation and *a posteriori*.” By the *a priori* mode, Sudduth intends the *sensus divinitatis*. Sudduth, “The Prospects,” 54. Sudduth also calls the *sensus*, on the one hand, and creation, on the other, two distinct “sources” of the knowledge of God. Sudduth, “The Prospects,” 53.

¹⁹ Alvin Plantinga is the major proponent of this position. Plantinga, “Reason and Belief,” 65-67.

²⁰ Sudduth articulates the implications of this view: “This... interpretation seems to avoid the difficulty of two-mode theories by reducing the mode to one consisting of (at least) two conditions, one of which is internal and the other which is external to the individual.” Sudduth, “The Prospects,” 54.

Helm takes a hybrid position. He recognizes two aspects of the knowledge of God, where the first is the *sensus* and the second, God’s manifestation in the external world, which in turn triggers the *sensus*. Thus, although he treats the *sensus* as comprising one part of the knowledge of God, he also flirts with the idea that the *sensus* is a predisposition by referring to it as something that needs to be “triggered.” “...whoever has a properly functioning *sensus* would, when brought to experience data of a certain kind, immediately, without the need for conscious ratiocination, form the belief that there is God.” Paul Helm, “John Calvin, the *sensus divinitatis*, and the Noetic Effects of Sin,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 43, no.2 (1998): 92. For an elaboration of his view that the *sensus* is a “human disposition to interpret certain data in certain ways,” and an explicit rejection of the view that the *sensus* is an innate idea of God, see also Helm, *John Calvin’s Ideas*, 225 and 229, respectively.

I incline toward the latter view, that the *sensus* is best understood as a predisposition than an already-formed position.²¹ However, as this chapter will detail, I take issue with the emphasis, at both ends of the spectrum, on belief. Whether the *sensus divinitatis* is understood as a partial achievement of or a preparation for the knowledge of God, to define the *sensus* in terms of belief has the effect of placing belief at the heart of this “knowledge.” As my analysis in the main sections of this chapter will show, I contend that the attainment possible for an unfallen mind—a mind which would have *ipso facto* possessed a properly functioning *sensus*—is primarily a matter of sense perception and only secondarily a matter of belief. On this reading, attaining the “knowledge of God” does not preclude the possession of beliefs, but beliefs are an outcome or articulation of this attainment and *not*—as interpreting the *sensus* in terms of belief implies—its *fons et origo*. I will elaborate upon this position in the fourth close reading below.

The second way my analysis departs from previous studies is that, rather than seeking to understand the “knowledge of God” as pursued by fallen humans, I build a picture of how Calvin suggests it was originally attained. In so doing, I take my cue from the *Institutio* itself—which, as Karl Barth noted in puzzlement, begins by setting aside revelation in Christ. Barth wondered, why would Calvin describe a pristine knowledge that no longer exists?²² Setting aside the question of authorial intention, I begin my reading from the fact that Calvin did just this. Thus, in what follows, I draw out the *Institutio*’s opening chapters’ implicit portrait of what the original, that is, *simplex*, knowledge of God “the Creator” looks like in the counterfactual case of an

²¹ Part of the reason for this is that Calvin does *not* treat belief in the existence of God as a promising first step toward, or a partial attainment of, the knowledge of God. On the contrary, he emphasizes that idolatry is perfectly compatible with belief in the existence of God. See my argument to this effect below. More broadly, I see no justification for treating the *sensus* as an aspect or component of the knowledge of God when a simpler interpretation is ready to hand—namely, that the *sensus divinitatis* is a capacity (as *sensus* implies) to sense God (as the objective genitive implies) which, functioning properly, results in the attainment of the knowledge of God.

²² On this point, see John Hesselink, “The Development and Purpose of Calvin’s Institutes,” *The Reformed Theological Review* 24, no. 3 (October 1965): 67-68.

unfallen mind.²³ It might be fair to say that these passages also offer a window onto how the pious mind can re-approximate the conditions of an unfallen mind.²⁴ However, the virtue of first reading these passages in terms of a possibility that is now lost to us, at least in its pristine form—or, in Calvin’s words, its “primal and simple” form²⁵—is that it allows us to construct a baseline understanding of this original knowledge that is not yet complicated by the hermeneutical and argumentative procedures that, as we will see in subsequent chapters of this dissertation, are only necessary for arriving at the knowledge of God *after* the fall.

With these distinction in place, I turn now to the main work of this chapter. In the Introduction, I described the vocabulary and imagery Calvin uses to describe humanity’s fallen “blindness.” By contrast, I begin this chapter by exploring the condition that Calvin represents as the opposite of such sinful blindness—namely, an attainment traditionally referred to as the “knowledge of God.” As this discussion will reveal, terminology alone is not a sufficient guide to understanding this capacity or condition. That is why I will turn, after the following brief review of Calvin’s use of specific Latin terms in connection with this theme, to the figure who offers a phenomenological account of this condition, a hypothetical or counterfactual character Calvin refers to as the “true spectator.”

²³ Armstrong similarly emphasizes the “hypothetical or conditional character” of the material in the early chapters of the *Institutio*. He sees this as a larger pattern in Calvin’s theology, which Armstrong calls its “hypothetical motif.” Armstrong, “*Duplex cognitio Dei*,” 143, 147.

²⁴ The precise relationship between these two minds—particularly how the fallen mind (or, as I will call it in Chapter Three, the idolatrous mind) *becomes* a pious mind so as to again attain the “knowledge of God”—is discussed in the Conclusion. There, I will relate all three of these figures—true spectator, idolatrous mind, and pious mind—to one another.

²⁵ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.2.1.

2. Calvin's vocabulary for the "knowledge of God"

Although the phrase "knowledge of God" gives the impression that Calvin has a dedicated word for this capacity or attainment that the *Institutio* represents as the goal of human life, Calvin actually moves easily in the opening chapters of the *Institutio* among *cognitio* (becoming acquainted with, or knowledge through acquaintance), *agnitio* (recognition, acknowledgment), and, most frequently *notitia* (acquaintance with a person).²⁶ All three of these terms have awareness or possession of an idea as a possible *secondary* meaning, but their primary sense is something that arises from a direct or personal encounter. In other words, the semantic center of this set of terms is the process of coming to know through experience, not the mastery of a set of concepts or justified true beliefs (as, for example, with terms Calvin might have used but did not, such as *scientia*, *doctrina*, or even *sapientia*).

It is difficult to discern from Calvin's usage what, if any, distinctions he means to imply among *cognitio*, *notitia*, and *agnitio*. John T. McNeill observes that Calvin uses *cognitio* and *notitia* interchangeably.²⁷ Calvin also combines these terms in sentences whose syntax implies they are synonymous.²⁸ A careful reading suggests that he tends to use *cognitio* or *notitia* when referring to the condition of having attained the "knowledge of God," and more often turns to *agnitio* when referring to the act or moment in which it is attained. For example, Calvin employs *cognitio* in identifying the knowledge of God as the end of human life, the goal of blessed life, and that to which God invites and attracts us.²⁹ *Notitia* appears in some of Calvin's most explicit

²⁶ Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary. Founded on Andrews' Edition of Freund's Latin Dictionary, revised, enlarged, and in great part rewritten* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879). Perseus Digital Library. Note that unless otherwise specified, definitions come from this text.

²⁷ McNeill also notes that Calvin translates both terms as *cognoissance* for the French 1541 edition of the *Institutio*. McNeill, ed., *Institutes*, 35n1. Helm observes that "Calvin uses the terms 'conceive' and 'perceive' seemingly interchangeably in order to highlight that this knowledge is direct," but does not specify the Latin he has in mind; perhaps he is construing *cognoscere* as "conceive" and *agnoscere* as "perceive." Helm, "John Calvin," 91.

²⁸ See Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.3.3, 1.5.9 and 1.6.1.

²⁹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.3.3, 1.5.1, and 1.5.10 and 14, respectively.

definitions of the concept, preeminently in 1.2.1, where he defines the “knowledge (*notitiam*) of God as I understand it,” and in 1.5.9-10, crucial passages discussed extensively below, in which Calvin is at pains to specify the defining qualities of this condition. In subtle contrast, Calvin uses *agnitio* for the indispensable act that defines the experience of a person who attains this knowledge—the act of recognizing God as Lord and Father, and as Creator.³⁰ He also uses it to name the opposite possibility, the *failure* to recognize the Creator,³¹ suggesting that Calvin uses *agnitio* to indicate this pivotal or defining possibility. In fact, he uses all of these nouns or their corresponding verbs not only positively, but *also negatively*—that is, he uses them to describe conditions that, in context, he clearly does *not* mean to equate with the knowledge of God.³² Perhaps more than anything, this is evidence that Calvin’s “knowledge of God” cannot be unlocked through terminological analysis alone.

Many scholars have noted ways in which we must qualify or even suppress the modern connotations of “knowledge” in order to render it a faithful translation for Calvin’s Latin terms, and especially his use of them. Paul Helm argues that “[Calvin’s] usage [of the word ‘knowledge’] is to be distinguished from the modern epistemological usage, according to which knowledge is justified true belief, or what warrant yields if what is warranted is true.”³³ In fact, his description of Calvin’s “knowledge,” explicitly “grants” that it is “like perception.”³⁴ In his own seminal work on the topic, Dowey cites a long tradition of specifying that the “knowledge”

³⁰ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.2.2 and 1.6.1, respectively. This is also the word Calvin uses to refer to the knowledge of *ourselves* in relation to God, which has come to be called the “correlative” knowledge of God. See 1.1.1 and 1.1.3.

³¹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.5.

³² See, for example, his use of *cognoscere* at 1.2.2, *agnoscere* at 1.4.2, and *notitia* at 1.4.4.

³³ Helm continues: “*Notitia* has a different set of criteria from *scientia*. For *scientia*, demonstrative knowledge, is knowledge which is gained by discursive proofs from indubitable premisses.” Helm, *John Calvin’s Ideas*, 257.

³⁴ Helm, “John Calvin,” 91.

of which the *Institutio* speaks is non-speculative and “practical.”³⁵ He calls it “existential” and “moral,” noting that it has “religious, ethical, and psychological colorings.”³⁶

Calvin’s Latin accommodates all of these qualifications. In fact, in some technical uses in the context of late medieval optics, *cognitio*—the term most frequently cited in connection with this concept in the *Institutio*—can refer exclusively to the act whereby the form (but not, as the Aristotelian dictum goes, the matter) of an external percept is received by an organ. On this view, “being cognitive is a matter of being (literally) informed” but not necessarily forming—or even being capable of forming³⁷—beliefs or rational judgments.³⁸ That is to say, *cognitio* should not necessarily be identified with an effort of conscious thought (it is not synonymous with our “cognition”), and it also has robust sensory associations. Even if the term accommodates intellectual connotations, it also, as Richard Muller has emphasized regarding the term’s medieval uses, relates to the will and affections.³⁹ Ultimately, as Calvin’s most recent editor McNeill concludes, “Knowledge, whatever the word employed, is for Calvin never ‘mere’ or ‘simple’ or purely objective knowledge.”⁴⁰

In addition to *cognitio*, *notitia*, and *agnitio*, Calvin also uses a wide range of verbs that indicate attentiveness to describe the condition or status that is the opposite of blindness and whereby the goal of human life is attained. He uses *perspicere* (to look through, look closely, or

³⁵ Dowey, *The Knowledge*, 25-26.

³⁶ Dowey, *The Knowledge*, 24.

³⁷ Aquinas entertains the possibility that cognition can occur in wholly corporeal entities. Robert Pasnau, *Theories of Cognition in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 35-36. Moreover, animals are clearly cognizers in the sense of receiving intentional forms, though we would not attribute to them the ability to form rational judgments. On this point, see Pasnau, *Theories of Cognition*, 53-54.

³⁸ Pasnau, *Theories of Cognition*, 50. This is Pasnau’s interpretation of Aquinas’ view. For a discussion of Aquinas’ use of three related, technical terms—cognition, intentionality, and immateriality—see Pasnau, *Theories of Cognition*, 31-62.

³⁹ Muller offers his remarks on *cognitio* in connection to Calvin’s notion of faith. Richard A. Muller, “*Fides* and *Cognitio* in Relation to the Problem of Intellect and Will in the Theology of John Calvin,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 25, no. 2 (November 1990): 211.

⁴⁰ McNeill, ed., *Institutes*, 35n1.

in a transferred sense to examine, inspect, or observe) for the condition of beholding God clearly.⁴¹ To describe one who attends to the one and only true God, he uses *intuetur* (to look upon, at, or towards, and in a transferred sense, of the mind, to regard or give attention to).⁴² The one who has attained the knowledge of God gazes (*conspicere*, to look attentively or admiringly, in a transferred sense to perceive mentally or understand)⁴³ and renders God honor in the very act of apprehending God (*apprehendere*, to seize, lay hold upon, or embrace, in a transferred sense to grasp with the mind or comprehend).⁴⁴ This person sees God, who is otherwise invisible, in the mirror of creation (*contemplor*, to survey, look at attentively with either physical or mental attention).⁴⁵ What is striking about these verbs is that they all have a *primary* sense of physical inspection, even as they accommodate the entire range from visual examination to mental reflection.

We should linger over the fact that the vocabulary Calvin uses to describe the knowledge of God in these opening chapters accommodates robustly sensory interpretations. It is an important point because whereas commentators have been eager to underline emotional connotations of Calvin's "knowledge,"⁴⁶ the idea's possible *sensory* dimensions have been admitted only as an analogy.⁴⁷ Consider however 1.2.1, the paragraph in which Calvin first defines the knowledge of God. Here Calvin makes three uses of *sentire*, a verb which can indicate the physical perception of the effects of something by the senses or the mental act of feeling or noticing. Speaking of the *absence* of the knowledge of God, Calvin complains that no

⁴¹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.2.2. See also 1.2.1 for another use of this verb.

⁴² Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.2.2.

⁴³ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.1.

⁴⁴ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.2.1, 1.5.3.

⁴⁵ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.1. See also 1.1.2.

⁴⁶ See, for example, Helm, *John Calvin's Ideas*, 222.

⁴⁷ See, for example, Randall C. Zachman, *John Calvin as Teacher, Pastor, and Theologian: The Shape of His Writings and Thought* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 236; Helm, "John Calvin," 91; and Hoitenga, *Faith and Reason*, 150.

one feels (*sentiet*) God as Father or Author, and then goes on almost immediately to gloss the attainment of the knowledge of God as feeling (*sentire*) God supporting, governing, and nourishing human life. The full knowledge of God, Calvin says, will not be attained until people feel (*sentiant*)⁴⁸ that they are nourished by God as Father and Author.⁴⁹ This terminology raises—and does not itself answer—the question: how sensory, emotional, or mental is the act of “feeling” that Calvin represents as indispensable to the knowledge of God?

This question is only sharpened if we turn to Calvin’s use of *sensus*, an even more pivotal term for understanding the “knowledge of God.” *Sensus* can mean the corporeal power of sensation and capacity for feeling, or it can indicate a mental feeling, disposition, or frame of mind. Only in a transferred sense does *sensus* indicate a thinking faculty or an idea entertained by one.⁵⁰ Perhaps because of this term’s association with the *sensus divinitatis*, it has been read primarily in terms of the latter, more intellectual end of this semantic spectrum. However, this obscures the fact that Calvin also uses *sensus* in contexts that unambiguously indicate physical perception. Unfortunately, translation contributes to the suppression of the term’s physical connotations. Consider, for example, Calvin’s remarks in the opening paragraph of the *Institutio*, which in the McNeill edition Battles translates, “no one can look upon himself without immediately turning his thoughts to the contemplation of God.” Where Battles renders

⁴⁸ *Donec enim sentiant homines, Deo se omnia debere, paterna se eius cura foveri, eum sibi omnium bonorum esse auctorem, ut nihil extra ipsum quaerendum sit, nunquani ei se voluntaria observantia subiiciunt.* Battles translates *sentiant* in this sentence as “recognize,” turning this moment of perception into an act of acknowledgment or judgment. McNeill, ed., *Institutes*, 41. This translation might have been appropriate if Calvin had used *agnoscant*, as he does elsewhere. It also obscures the notable fact that Calvin repeats this same, important verb three times in this paragraph. Given Calvin’s penchant for rhetorical *varietas*, the repetition is notable. For another, similar use of *sentire*, see Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.3.

⁴⁹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.2.1.

⁵⁰ In the Middle Ages, *sensus* was also employed to distinguish words or images from their meanings, as in the rhetorical convention of distinguishing *verba* from *sensus*. See Karl F. Morrison, “Anthropology and the Use of Religious Images in the *Opus Caroli Regis (Libri Carolini)*” in *The Mind’s Eye: Art and Theological Argument in the Middle Ages*, eds. Jeffrey F. Hamburger and Anne-Marie Bouché (Princeton, NJ: Department of Art and Archaeology, Princeton University, in association with Princeton University Press, 2006), 41.

“thoughts,” Calvin has “*sensus*.”⁵¹ A remark Calvin offers just a few lines later confirms that this vocabulary’s physical connotations deserve to be highlighted. Battles has, “The miserable ruin, into which the rebellion of the first man cast us, especially compels us to look upward,” a rendering which is highly susceptible of metaphorical interpretation. However, Calvin’s Latin actually says, *sursum oculos cogit attolere*, “compels our eyes to look up on high.”⁵² How physically or mentally we interpret Calvin’s references to human *sensus* has important consequences for our interpretation of his knowledge of God. For example, when Calvin describes the knowledge of God as a product of “this sense of the powers of God (*hic virtutum Dei sensus*),” it is crucial to know what kind of “sense” he is invoking.

Where does this discussion of Calvin’s vocabulary leave us? Calvin’s preferred nouns, *cognitio*, *agnitio*, and *notitia*, are conditions attained by way of direct acquaintance. They accommodate connotations of sensation, affect, and will. None of these terms narrowly indicate, or even foreground, mental inspection or the possession of propositional beliefs. Indeed, Calvin’s habit of describing the behavior proper to the “knowledge of God” in terms whose semantic range stretches from physical inspection to abstract contemplation raises the question: what kind of acquaintance issues in the “knowledge of God”? If Calvin’s many verbs that have a primary sense of attentive looking are his way of indicating the opposite of sinful blindness, then how literal is this blessed looking? Moreover, what important insights about this condition that is the goal of human life may be captured in Calvin’s use of verbs that encode such a broad semantic range?

⁵¹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.1.1.

⁵² Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.1.1.

3. Only the true spectator attains the “knowledge of God”

Calvin’s use of a variety of terms, each with a broad semantic range, paints a portrait of the vividness and experiential excess that is the opposite of dull, sinful blindness. It also suggests that Calvin does not take any one of these terms to capture—in the sense of satisfactorily delimiting—what this capacity or condition is like. We thus find ourselves in the situation described by Dowey, who observes, “no exact definition of [Calvin’s “knowledge of God”] can be found in his writings, nor can one be constructed. Rather, we must try to grasp what is meant by the knowledge of God through the part it plays in [Calvin’s] whole way of thinking.”⁵³ This is why I propose that the most promising way to understand this condition that is the opposite of blindness—and which I am proposing is helpfully called “perception”—is to attend to the fulsome phenomenological account Calvin gives us of the figure who embodies it.

Although Calvin lavishes most of his attention in the early chapters of the *Institutio* on describing the human condition of blindness that I discussed in the Introduction (the causes of which I will elaborate in Chapter Three), he also makes an important and largely overlooked gesture to a figure who embodies its opposite, the “true spectator.” Calvin resorts to the true spectator in discussing the behaviors of which the fallen mind is no longer capable, but which *would have* allowed it to attain the goal of human life “if Adam had remained upright.”⁵⁴ In other words, the true spectator embodies Calvin’s account of this originally intended condition.

3.1 The true spectator as hermeneutical key. The *Institutio*’s rich opening descriptions of how God shows himself “in the visible splendor of his apparel”⁵⁵ through the contents of the

⁵³ Dowey, *The Knowledge*, 3. Dowey goes on to propose four categories that “orient us in this pursuit,” naming this knowledge’s 1) accommodated, 2) correlative, 3) existential, and 4) clear and comprehensible nature.

⁵⁴ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.2.1.

⁵⁵ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.1.

universe—which are “so many burning lamps” that “shine for us”⁵⁶—climaxes in its justly famous portrayal of the world as a “dazzling theater (*tam illustri theatro*).”⁵⁷ The theater is arguably one of the most cited images in the *Institutio*, a centerpiece in discussions of Calvin’s views on the natural world. It should be distinguished from another *theatrum mundi* metaphor which would gain prominence in the second half of the sixteenth and the early seventeenth century, in which the world is a stage and humans are actors upon it. By contrast, in Calvin’s metaphor the world is God’s performance and humans are spectators of it.⁵⁸

In context, the rhetorical force of Calvin’s theater image is to lament the fact that the created world—which, Calvin says in 1.5.8, “was founded as a spectacle (*in spectaculum*) of God’s glory”⁵⁹—falls on blind eyes. As Calvin says, “most people, immersed in their own errors, are struck blind in such a dazzling theater.” Consider, however, the very next phrase in this oft-cited passage, Calvin’s glancing reference to the hypothetical figure capable of appreciating the show: “however much the glory of God shines forth [in created works], scarcely one man in a hundred is a *true spectator* of it (*verus est eius spectator*).”⁶⁰ Calvin references this figure again when he returns to the image of the theater in 1.6.2: “fitting it may be for man seriously to turn

⁵⁶ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.14.

⁵⁷ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.8 (emphasis mine).

⁵⁸ Theater metaphors were something of a fad in early modernity. On this trend, and the distinction between these two metaphors, see Ann Blair, *The Theater of Nature: Jean Bodin and Renaissance Science* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 153-54. Blair notes that the theater of nature in which humans are spectators is new in the sixteenth century, though it is based in related metaphors such as the book of nature and books entitled “mirror.” However, Blair finds that in the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, “the metaphor of the theater of nature especially conveyed the encyclopedic ideal of bringing a vast topic under a single, all-encompassing gaze”—an association that does not seem to be present in Calvin’s usage. Blair, *Theater of Nature*, 157. For a brief interpretation of Calvin’s use of this metaphor, which he notes is understudied given its prominent place in the *Institutio*, see Zachman, “The Universe,” 302.

⁵⁹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.5.

⁶⁰ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.8 (emphasis mine).

his eyes to contemplate God's works, since he has been placed in this most glorious theater (*in hoc splendidissimo theatro*) to be a spectator of them (*ut eorum esset spectator*)."⁶¹

Although typically omitted from discussions of Calvin's theater imagery, the true spectator embodies the condition that is the opposite of sinful blindness. Whereas fallen humans are unable to perceive God's self-presentation in creation—which should be experienced as the theater of divine glory—the *verus spectator*, or true spectator, *can*. With his complaint that “scarcely one man in a hundred” lives up to this ideal, Calvin presents true spectatorship as a rarity at best in a fallen world. By emphasizing that humans' *de facto* “immersion in errors” precludes spectatorship, Calvin implies that the condition would be universal under unfallen conditions.

I suggest that this hypothetical figure—with whom Calvin neither encourages the reader to identify, nor associates with any living human—is an invaluable key to understanding the capacity that is the opposite of blindness, and which I am calling “perception.” Although referenced by name only twice, the spectator's appearance in the two passages quoted above allows us mentally to aggregate all of the characteristics Calvin associates with the successful, pre-fall attainment of the knowledge of God and take them as a phenomenological guide to the behaviors that would allow an unfallen mind to attain this condition.⁶² The discussion that follows tests an interpretive wager based on this premise—namely, that we can use the behavior

⁶¹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.6.2. Calvin references “the works of God open and manifest in this most beautiful theater (*in hoc pulcerrimo theatro*)” again at 1.14.20, and “this magnificent theater of heaven and earth (*magnificum hoc theatrum coeli et terrae*)” at 2.6.1. Both of these paragraphs are hinges at which Calvin recaps the key points already established in prior sections of the *Institutio*.

⁶² The true spectator also gives us an embodied, personal locus for thinking about another subtle but critically important motif that appears in the text's opening chapters—namely, references to the “pious mind.” Like the true spectator, who is distinguished by the capacity to appreciate the divine spectacle that is the natural world, the pious mind is uniquely capable of perceiving God from God's works, and thus attaining the knowledge of God. In other words, the true spectator and the pious mind are two ways Calvin anthropomorphizes the behaviors and inclinations necessary to the knowledge of God. More will be said about the pious mind in the Conclusion.

implicitly and explicitly attributed to the true spectator to clarify, fill in the gaps of, and adjudicate among competing interpretive possibilities regarding exactly what this “knowledge” consists in. As we will see, with the true spectator as our guide, perennially difficult passages take on a new aspect; what emerges is a different account of the condition that the *Institutio* depicts as the goal of human life.

3.2 Early modern notions of spectatorship. Before delving into the true spectator’s characteristic behaviors, let us pause to examine the term Calvin uses to describe the role that is uniquely possible for an unfallen perceiver. What might the invocation of a *spectator* have brought to mind for a sixteenth-century reader?⁶³ A brief sketch of spectatorship as understood in sixteenth-century dramatic and artistic culture reveals that a spectator is the subject of a dramatic transformation, that a spectacle’s impact occurs first on the spectator’s imagination and only later rises to conscious articulation, and that the spectator’s expected perceptual task is to recognize the virtuosity in the sensory spectacle she⁶⁴ beholds.

Randall Zachman has addressed the theatrical dimensions of Calvin’s metaphor directly. Zachman observes, “As in any good theater, the actions on the stage are not meant to leave us coldly indifferent but rather are designed to move our minds and affections in a particular way.”⁶⁵ Similarly, William A. Dyrness has underlined the way that Calvin’s use of the theater

⁶³ For a salutary warning against the widespread assumption that the Reformers opposed theatricality *per se*, and a cogent reading of Calvin’s concerns regarding theatricality in worship, see Huston Diehl, *Staging Reform, Reforming the Stage: Protestantism and Popular Theater in Early Modern England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 104-109.

⁶⁴ For a discussion of the use of gendered pronouns in this dissertation, see the end of the methodology section in the Introduction.

⁶⁵ Zachman, *John Calvin as Teacher*, 234. “We should be attentive spectators in the theater of God’s glory, seeking to recognize the actor on the stage by means of the powers revealed in God’s actions.” Zachman, *John Calvin as Teacher*, 241.

metaphor emphasizes “the aesthetic dimension—the affective response of the viewer.”⁶⁶ In fact, the idea of spectatorship as transformative viewing is even more pronounced, in sixteenth-century theatrical settings, than these remarks suggest. In her work on the “discursive spectator”—that is, the “culturally constructed figure of the spectator” in early modern theater⁶⁷—Amy J. Rodgers has argued that the term “spectator” names a particularly subjective and dramatically transformative kind of beholding: the “spectator... suggests a viewing subject that is altered by what she or he sees, not gently or subtly, but suddenly or violently.”⁶⁸

We can add specificity to the idea that a spectator is the recipient of a transformative impact if we also take into account the fruitful exchange, in late medieval and early modern Europe, between the dramatic and visual arts. Indeed, Calvin exploits the relationship between theatrical and artistic spectatorship when, just two paragraphs after comparing the universe to a theater, he compares it to a painting—whereby, as Calvin says, “the whole of mankind is invited and attracted to recognition of [God] (*eius agnitionem*), and from this to true and complete happiness.”⁶⁹ Thus, Renaissance understandings of the ideal impact of a painting can clarify the nature and mechanism whereby a spectacle brings about a transformation in its spectator.

As with theater, Renaissance discussions of painting emphasize an instantaneous and powerful impact of the artistic spectacle upon the spectator. It is instructive to note which faculties such a spectacle was understood to engage. François Quiviger explains that Renaissance art was understood to address not primarily the five external senses, but to penetrate through the

⁶⁶ William A. Dyrness, *The Origins of Protestant Aesthetics in Early Modern Europe: Calvin’s Reformation Poetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 64.

⁶⁷ Amy J. Rodgers, *A Monster with a Thousand Hands: The Discursive Spectator in Early Modern England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 15.

⁶⁸ Rodgers, *A Monster*, 34.

⁶⁹ “We must therefore admit in God’s individual works—but especially in them as a whole—that God’s powers are actually represented as in a painting (*in tabulis depictas*). Thereby the whole of mankind is invited and attracted to recognition of him (*eius agnitionem*), and from this to true and complete happiness.” Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.10.

physical senses to engage the “interior senses”—preeminently, the viewer’s common sense and imagination. The interior senses are an important site of pre-conscious processing to which I will return in the final section of this chapter.⁷⁰ The important point to make here is that the ideal impact of an artistic spectacle—which has been described as a “state of suspension, of total absorption in the work of art”⁷¹—engages the interior senses, and not the ‘higher’ functions of reason or the understanding. Indeed, Renaissance artists aimed to induce a state of astonishment or wonder, described in artistic treatises as *stupore* (amazement) or *maraviglia* (marvel). In inducing such states, the work of art engages primarily a viewer’s imagination, and *not* her reason.⁷² Thought processes were understood to occur subsequent to this condition of wordless wonder, which was an indispensable prelude to a careful contemplation of the work, at which further stage a viewer might express verbal praise.⁷³

This brings us to early modern understandings of what cultured viewing entails. Calvin alludes to one widely shared cultural expectation when he emphasizes that it is not only in God’s “individual works—but especially in them as a whole—that God’s powers are actually represented as in a painting (*in tabulis depictas*).”⁷⁴ This comment reflects the idea that spectators are expected to attend to the whole order and composition of a work of art.⁷⁵ Calvin’s

⁷⁰ François Quiviger, “Art and the Senses: Representation and Reception of Renaissance Sensations,” in *A Cultural History of the Senses in the Renaissance*, ed. Herman Roodenburg (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 172-74. The Renaissance is, as Quiviger observes, “a period in which the imagination dominates the theory of the visual arts.” Quiviger, “Art and the Senses,” 199. On the idea that paintings directly engage a viewer’s imagination, see Norman E. Land, *The Viewer as Poet: The Renaissance Response to Art* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 13, 19-21.

⁷¹ Land, *Viewer as Poet*, 71. Dante’s description of his stance toward the *ekphraseis* he encounters in the *Purgatorio* is a case in point and influential treatment: he was *sospeso*. Land, *Viewer as Poet*, 59, 70.

⁷² Land, *Viewer as Poet*, 180. On the idea that the imagination primarily responds to art, see also 66.

⁷³ Land, *Viewer as Poet*, 143, 149. This state seems to hold not only for spectators of a painting, but also those in a theater. Ann Blair notes that the theater metaphor emphasizes “a visual, nonverbal form of contemplation: the ‘theater’—from its root in *theaomai*, ‘to look at,’—is first of all something that one watches, as sixteenth-century dictionaries indicate.” Blair, *Theater of Nature*, 154.

⁷⁴ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.10.

⁷⁵ This comment may reflect a view of art—given paradigmatic form in Alberti’s definition of beauty—that values “the assemblage of parts to form a coherent whole” so that a work of art’s beauty is closely related to the spectator’s

comparison of the universe to a painting also implies that the competent spectator is charged with a perceptual task—that of recognizing the artist in the art, the divine *Artifex* in the universe. This is similar to what, as Ann Blair observes, other sixteenth-century uses of the theater metaphor are used to indicate; they frame the world as “a vast ordered construction revealing a divine builder.”⁷⁶ Both the painting and theater metaphors, in other words, imply a spectator’s marveling encounter with a visible expression of virtuosity.

On this understanding, the competent, cultured spectator recognizes an invisible quality, “skill,” through what is visible to the eyes.⁷⁷ Calvin appears to be invoking this very ideal when, in a telling passage to which I will return, he notes that “this *skillful ordering* of the universe is for us a sort of mirror in which we can contemplate God.”⁷⁸ In fact, discerning artistic ability on the basis of a work of art was a matter of particular emphasis in the century leading up to the composition of the *Institutio*. Michael Baxandall has documented how, over the course of the fifteenth century, the European art market underwent a shift from the conspicuous consumption of precious pigments to the conspicuous consumption of painterly skill,⁷⁹ which was understood

perception of its order and compositional design. Steven F. H. Stowell, *The Spiritual Language of Art: Medieval Christian Themes in Writings on Art of the Italian Renaissance* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 107-108. These artistic values are themselves rooted in the Christian idea—influentially expressed by Augustine—that God created the world as a work whose beauty lies not in each of its parts taken in isolation, but in the order and relatedness of the whole. Stowell, *Spiritual Language of Art*, 109.

⁷⁶ Blair, *Theater of Nature*, 155.

⁷⁷ We could relate this to Jeffrey Hamburger’s remark that as medieval religious art negotiates the relationship between the visible and the invisible, “the work of art, artifice itself, comes to stand for what cannot be seen.” Hamburger, “The Medieval Work of Art,” 405.

⁷⁸ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.1 (emphasis mine).

⁷⁹ The opposition between skill and material corresponds roughly, in humanist discussions of painting, to that between matter and form. Michael Baxandall, *Giotto and the Orators: Humanist Observers of Painting in Italy and the Discovery of Pictorial Composition 1350-1450* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 61-62. The implication is that crude viewing appreciates only the matter or material of an artwork and not the form imposed by, and thus indicative of, the artist’s skill. Emphasis on viewing skill-imposed form and not mere matter has a long tradition in medieval art theory. Think, for example, of the famous inscription on doors of St. Denis: “marvel not at the gold and expense, but at the craftsmanship of the work.” Qtd. in Hamburger, “The Medieval Work of Art,” 374. This distinction may be in the background when Calvin complains, “For with regard to the most beautiful structure and order of the universe, how many of us are there who, when we lift up our eyes to heaven or cast them about through the various regions of earth, recall our minds to a remembrance of the Creator, and do not rather, disregarding their Author, sit idly in contemplation of his works?” Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.11.

as an entity that could be written into a contract and paid for by the commissioning patron.⁸⁰ Not surprisingly, this trend corresponded to an increasing sense that a cultured beholder should be able to make determinations of an artist's skill by looking.⁸¹

A related set of viewing expectations came from the Neoplatonic ideal of moving *per visibilia ad invisibilia*, or through what is visible to what is invisible.⁸² As Quiviger explains, Neoplatonic influences led Renaissance art theorists to develop “a vocabulary descriptive of incorporeal essences perceptible by sight alone.”⁸³ Although at first blush this discourse might seem to subordinate the visible to the invisible, in fact in the context of art production and appreciation, it implies that invisible qualities are actually visible to the right kind of spectator. Thus, at the heart of Renaissance aesthetics lies the idea that “sight can perceive incorporeal qualities”—such as the virtuosity and perhaps other characteristics of the artist—and that these perceived qualities serve as the spectator's basis for praising a work of art.⁸⁴

This backdrop gives us an historical baseline for interpreting Calvin's allusions to the unfallen human perceiver capable of being a true “spectator” in response to the “theater” or “painting” that is the created world. The spectator stands in an initially passive and highly

⁸⁰ Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 15-17, 23.

⁸¹ “...a fifteenth century man looking at a picture was curiously on his mettle. He was aware that the good picture embodied skill and he was frequently assured that it was the part of the cultivated beholder to make discriminations about that skill...” Baxandall, *Painting and Experience*, 34. See also 36. For a brief discussion of expectations concerning “cultured spectatorship” in Northern Renaissance art, see Margaret A. Sullivan, *Bruegel's Peasants: Art and Audience in the Northern Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 34-36.

⁸² As Scribner explains, a key assumption of medieval semiotics was the Neoplatonic idea that the “visible world was the symbol of an invisible one, and that the path to a knowledge of divine truth ran through a perception of the visible world.” Robert W. Scribner, “Perceptions of the Sacred in Germany at the End of the Middle Ages,” in *Religion and Culture in Germany (1400-1800)*, ed. Lyndal Roper (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 87. On this theme in Erasmus, see Carlos M. N. Eire, *War Against the Idols: The Reformation of Worship from Erasmus to Calvin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 32-35. See Baxandall, *Painting and Experience*, 42 on the relevance of this idea to expectations around cultured viewing.

⁸³ François Quiviger, *The Sensory World of Italian Renaissance Art* (London, UK: Reaktion Books, 2010), 101.

⁸⁴ François Quiviger, “Renaissance Art Theories,” in *A Companion to Art Theory*, eds. Paul Smith and Carolyn Wilde (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), 58.

vulnerable relation to what she views, which is understood to engage her interior senses—including the imagination—and to induce an initial posture of wordless wonder. After the initial state of marvel has passed, the spectator engages in a careful examination of the whole of the work, attending in particular to its order and composition insofar as they reveal skill—a task which may, finally, issue in verbal praise. Throughout, the spectator attends to incorporeal qualities of the work—understood to express attributes of their maker—through what is visible to the senses.

4. The “knowledge of God” as seen in the true spectator

With these connotations of early modern spectatorship in mind, the next four sub-sections pursue a new reading of Calvin’s “knowledge of God” by training the clarifying lens of the true spectator upon four questions. First, what is the starting point for or foundation of this “knowledge”? Second, what is the nature of the moment or process in which it is realized? Third, what characterizes or marks the condition of having attained it? Fourth, what is the role of propositional statements about God?⁸⁵ Following this analysis, I articulate a composite picture of the condition traditionally known as the “knowledge of God” that reflects the results of these four close readings. They will reveal, 1) the origin of this condition in sense experience, 2) the absence of an inferential or interpretive second step made on the basis of such experience, 3) the

⁸⁵ Where appropriate, comments in the footnotes contrast my interpretation with that of British Reformed philosopher and theologian Paul Helm, whose interpretation of the knowledge of God is representative of much of the existing scholarship on this topic but distinguished by its exceptional clarity. Although Helm frequently acknowledges the phenomenological dimensions of the spectator’s experience that I emphasize in this chapter, his method differs from mine in that he does not use this experience to build his understanding of the knowledge of God. He builds it, instead, by positing unconscious processes that Calvin does not mention, which he takes as the necessary implication or unstated basis of the experiences that Calvin does describe. This approach is evident in Helm’s habit of positing processes of reasoning or inference but specifying that these need not necessarily rise to the level of consciousness. See, for example, Helm, “John Calvin,” 92-93. By contrast, my method is to build an account of the knowledge of God from the experience of the spectator as Calvin explicitly narrates it.

inextricability of this condition from a posture of piety, and 4) the status of propositional claims about God as after-the-fact expressions of this condition, but neither pre-requisite for nor strictly identifiable with it.

4.1 What is the foundation of the “knowledge of God”? To explore the starting point or foundation, the indispensable first step or bedrock of this condition that is the goal of human life, let us begin by examining this “knowledge’s” object or focus of attention. In what sense is it proper to say that the “knowledge of God” has to do simply and without qualification with “God,” as the objective genitive (*Dei cognitio, Dei agnitio, Dei notitia*) seems to imply?

In 1.2.1, Calvin offers the *Institutio*’s first definition of this condition:

Now, the knowledge of God (*Dei notitiam*), as I understand it, is that by which we not only conceive (*concipimus*) that there is a God (*aliquem esse Deum*) but also grasp (*tenemus*) what befits us and is proper to his glory, in fine, what is to our advantage to know of him.⁸⁶

It is tempting to read this passage as saying that the conception that there *is* a God is a foundational aspect of the knowledge of God—as implied by the “not only... but also (*non modo... sed etiam*)” structure of the Latin.⁸⁷ One might argue that although not sufficient, belief in the existence of a God is nevertheless necessary and thus, an indispensable starting point for the knowledge of God.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.2.1.

⁸⁷ Indeed, this may be what has led so many commentators to read this passage as programmatically distinguishing two components of the knowledge of God, and then going on to associate the first with the *sensus divinitatis* and the second with God’s self-manifestation in created works.

⁸⁸ This is how Helm interprets Calvin. For Helm, there are “two points” in the knowledge of God: the first regards God’s existence, the second regards what God is like. The first is a necessary but not sufficient condition for attaining the full knowledge of God. Helm, *John Calvin’s Ideas*, 213-14. Later, Helm refers to the knowledge of God as having two aspects, which he maps onto the two parts of this passage: the first (conceiving that there is some God) is the “metaphysical-cognitive component,” while the second (worshipping and serving God) is the “moral-cognitive component.” Helm, *John Calvin’s Ideas*, 224. On Helm’s reading, point one renders partial knowledge of God, but point two must be added in order to attain the full knowledge of God.

However, this reading requires ignoring the indefinite denotation and dismissive connotations of *aliquem* in Calvin's reference to the conception that there is *aliquem... Deum*, which Battles translates as "a God," but which is perhaps better rendered "some God." In fact, in the next paragraph Calvin explicitly identifies "vague general veneration for God" as inadequate⁸⁹ and goes on later, in 1.4.2, to dismiss the recognition of the existence of "some God (*aliquem Deum*)" as not only insufficient for attaining the desired condition, but fully compatible with idolatry.⁹⁰ Far from treating the awareness of God's existence as a promising beginning, Calvin speaks in zero-sum terms, narrating how achieving the awareness of God's existence without also—to quote the second part of the key passage from 1.2.1—"grasp[ing] what befits us and is proper to his glory" leads only to condemnation.⁹¹ It is possible, Calvin warns, to "rashly grasp a conception of some sort of divinity (*temere divinitatis alicuius sensum concepimus*)" and

⁸⁹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.2.2.

⁹⁰ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.4.2. "Even though they are compelled to recognize some God (*coguntur aliquem Deum agnoscere*), they strip him of his glory by taking away his power... so they, by fashioning a dead and empty idol, are truly said to deny God (*Deum negare*)."

⁹¹ Helm recognizes how negatively Calvin portrays mere belief in the existence of a God, which is why he is actually forced to argue against Calvin to make his case: "It is hard to accept," Helm comments, "that Calvin is altogether consistent at this point." Helm, *John Calvin's Ideas*, 213. While acknowledging that Calvin flatly denies that people who know only the existence of God "have true knowledge of God," Helm nevertheless insists that those with belief regarding God's existence "must have *some* knowledge of God." Emphasis mine. Helm insists on this largely because Calvin considers those with only the knowledge of God's existence—such as the pagan philosophers Calvin references frequently in these opening chapters—responsible for their failure to acknowledge God as Creator, in reference to Paul's teaching in Romans 1 (see Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.4.1, 1.5.14-15). Helm reasons: "What are they responsible for? Presumably, for not responding appropriately to what they know. So they must have some knowledge of God." Helm, *John Calvin's Ideas*, 215. However, as Helm's charge of inconsistency illustrates, to satisfy Helm's premise that people could only be held responsible if they possess something that deserves to be called knowledge—not a Calvinian premise by any means—is to force Calvin to say what he will not say, that "knowledge of God" could exist where there is awareness *only* of God's existence, and not *also* of what God is like. Dowey seems to hold the same premise: "If sin implied utter ignorance of God, man would not be 'without excuse.'" Dowey, *The Knowledge*, 22. Warfield speaks more in the spirit of Calvin when he remarks that "if we speak of ignorance here, we must remember it is a guilty ignorance; an ignorance which rests on pride and vanity and contumacy (I.iv.1)." Warfield, *Calvin and Calvinism*, 46. As this example demonstrates, it is not possible both to maintain that the knowledge of God begins from and is built upon belief in God's existence *and* take Calvin at his word. Helm's interpretation depends upon conflating the *sensus divinitatis* and the knowledge of God, whereas I read the *sensus* as preparatory to, a capacity *for*, attaining the knowledge of God (see Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.15). Although Calvin identifies the *sensus* with the idea "that there is some sort of divinity (*aliquam esse divinitatem*)" (Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.4.4), we have seen already that Calvin does not think this qualifies as the knowledge of God.

then “straightaway... fall back into the ravings or evil imaginings of our flesh.”⁹² Ultimately, Calvin treats awareness of God’s existence not as partially sufficient, but as wholly insufficient.⁹³ Thus, the disadvantage of taking belief in the existence of God as the starting point for the condition we’re investigating is that it takes something that Calvin dismisses as inadequate, even damning,⁹⁴ and places it at the very foundation of the “knowledge of God.”

This is why I take a different tack, locating the crucial core of the “knowledge of God” where it seems to me that Calvin does—that is, not with the belief “that there is some God (*aliquem esse Deum*),”⁹⁵ but on what exceeds an awareness of God’s mere existence—namely, with “what befits us and is proper to his glory, in fine, what is to our advantage to know of him.”⁹⁶ Calvin clarifies this crucial phrase in the very next paragraph when he tells us what this awareness that is “to our advantage” is *not*:

What is God (*quid sit Deus*)? Men who pose this question are merely toying with idle speculations. It is more important for us to know of what sort he is and what is consistent with his nature (*qualis sit, et quid eius naturae conveniat*).⁹⁷

⁹² Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.11.

⁹³ As such, it serves only to condemn: “Since... men one and all perceive that there is a God and that he is their Maker, they are condemned by their own testimony because they have failed to honor him and to consecrate their lives to his will.” Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.3.1. In context, this remark draws some of its force from the fact that it follows a chapter in which Calvin emphasizes the indispensability of piety (to which we can refer honoring God and consecrating one’s life to God’s will). In other words, Calvin is describing here an awareness of God that excludes piety—exactly what he says, in 1.2.1, is *not* the true knowledge of God.

⁹⁴ It is common in the literature on the knowledge of God to understand this knowledge to be corrupted or rendered partial in the fallen mind. See, for example, Warfield, *Calvin and Calvinism*, 45. Although Calvin does at times speak to this effect—see 1.4.4, where Calvin speaks of how the “confused knowledge of God (*hac confusa Dei notitia*)” differs from piety—the overwhelming sense he gives is that this kind of confused or partial knowledge is as good, and perhaps worse, than none; we could say that, far from getting its possessor halfway to heaven, it leads her all the way to hell. Accordingly, Parker implies that this bare awareness is not simply inadequate, but disastrous: “The degree of knowledge which men actually attain through the *opera Dei* is ‘that there is some God’... They do not apprehend ‘His eternity, power, wisdom, goodness, truth, righteousness, and mercy.’ Without these attributes, He is not God, but an empty phantom; and they, not willing to be taught by God what He is, prefer to follow their own imaginations...” Parker, *Calvin’s Doctrine*, 37.

⁹⁵ Translation altered from Battles’ “that there is a God.” Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.2.1.

⁹⁶ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.2.1.

⁹⁷ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.2.2.

This remark evokes three basic inquiries in the medieval *ordo quaestionis*: *quid sit* (what it is), *an sit* (if it is), and *quale sit* (what kind it is).⁹⁸ In this passage, Calvin tells us that the “knowledge of God” is not directed toward what God is (or, presumably, whether God is), but rather concerns what God is like.

What, then, might be the starting point or source for *this* kind of “knowledge”? Commenting upon Calvin’s emphasis on *qualis sit Deus*, or what God is like, Dowey observes, “It is the work, power, activity, or will of God rather than his being or essence that we know, and then only in so far as it is directed toward us.”⁹⁹ By turning now to my method of tracking the behaviors attributed to the true spectator, I can specify this accurate statement even more precisely. Calvin’s emphasis in the *Institutio*’s opening chapters is on God’s sensible manifestation in the material works of creation. In them, Calvin says, “[God] is shown to us not as he is in himself (*non quis sit apud se*), but as he is toward us (*sed qualis erga nos*).”¹⁰⁰ Taking seriously the way this passage draws a connection between God’s sensible creations and the demonstration of what God is like (*qualis sit Deus*), I suggest that we interpret Dowey’s “as it is directed toward us” in terms of *physical perceptibility*. Indeed, following Calvin’s true spectator as she encounters *qualis sit Deus* in the works of creation shows us that what is at issue in phrases like “what sort [God] is” and “what is consistent with his nature” is not propositions

⁹⁸ On the Aristotelian backdrop of the question *quid sit Deus?* and a brief discussion of why Calvin rejects this line of inquiry, see Cornelis van der Kooi, *As in a Mirror: John Calvin and Karl Barth on Knowing God – A Diptych*, trans. Donald Mader (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 125-26. Torrance notes that between Aquinas and Duns Scotus, there was a trend to treat *quale sit* as primary. Elevating *quale sit* over the other questions makes it a “new kind of question which had to be asked for a posteriori empirical science to arise, the question as to *actuality*, namely, ‘*What have we here?*’” Thomas F. Torrance, “Intuitive and Abstractive Knowledge: From Duns Scotus to John Calvin,” in *De doctrina Ioannis Duns Scoti: acta Congressus Scotistici Internationalis Oxonii et Edimburgi 11-17 Sept. 1966 celebrati* 4 (1966): 302 (emphasis in original). Torrance argues that “Calvin took the final explicit step of making the primary question in theological knowledge, *Qualis sit*, in which we start with actuality and not with abstract essence and possibility.” Torrance, “Intuitive and Abstractive Knowledge,” 305.

⁹⁹ Dowey, *The Knowledge*, 6.

¹⁰⁰ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.10.2.

about what God is like, but sensory experiences in which the spectator experiences what God is like toward her in material practice.

We see this, first, in the fact that the spectator is defined by her encounter with God's sensible works in the creation and government of the world. The lyrical passage in which the true spectator is introduced leaves no doubt that the spectacle of which she is a capable observer is literally sensory. This, in turn, suggests that her attainment of the "knowledge of God" begins in sense experience. As Calvin says, God "daily discloses himself in the whole workmanship of the universe" so that "men cannot open their eyes without being compelled to see (*aspicere*) him."¹⁰¹ Calvin underlines the literal visibility of God's self-manifestation when he complains that it is preposterous "for a man to claim that he cannot see with his eyes what eyeless creatures point out to him."¹⁰² Thus, even while lamenting the rarity of such spectatorship, Calvin's image of would-be spectators struck blind before a dazzling theater emphasizes that there is something on offer to spectate: humans find themselves in the midst of a visible spectacle whether they perceive it or not. If the true spectator is distinguished from these other, blind theatergoers by the fact that she cannot open her eyes without seeing what is right before her, then we must look for the starting point of the knowledge of God in an equally concrete and sensory perception.

Calvin describes three categories of created works that the true spectator perceives.¹⁰³ First, there is the beauty and order of the universe, which Calvin describes having been "founded as a spectacle (*in spectaculum*) of God's glory."¹⁰⁴ Second, there is the "structure of the human

¹⁰¹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.1

¹⁰² Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.15.

¹⁰³ For a detailed discussion of these themes as they appear in Calvin's sermons, see Richard Stauffer, *Dieu, la création et la Providence dans la prédication de Calvin* (Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang, 1978). On the relationship between the sermons and the *Institutio*, see T. H. L. Parker, "Review of *Dieu, la création et la Providence dans la prédication de Calvin*," by R. Stauffer, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 33, no. 1 (1980).

¹⁰⁴ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.5. In a similar passage, Calvin observes, "[God] daily discloses himself in the whole workmanship of the universe" (1.5.1).

body” itself.¹⁰⁵ A final category of sensible spectacle is God’s governance of human events.¹⁰⁶ Compared with the “theater” of the universe and the “workshop” of the body, one might be inclined to think of the providential ordering of human affairs as something to be *understood* more than something to be *sensed*.¹⁰⁷ This is why it is telling that Calvin retains the same predominately visual vocabulary to speak of the clarity of this category of divine self-manifestation.¹⁰⁸ The degree of imagistic detail Calvin lavishes on his descriptions of divine control—for example, God does not merely conquer the impious, but leaves “their javelins and armor shattered”—suggests that Calvin understands divine governance to constitute just as much of a sensory spectacle as the beauty and order perceptible in creation.¹⁰⁹ It is significant in this regard that the famous “dazzling theater” passage—where Calvin first introduces the true spectator—appears directly after a lyrical account of God’s care for the poor and immediately before a vivid narration of how God chastises the impious.¹¹⁰ No less than nature and the human body, providential government is sensibly on display in this *theatrum mundi*. The fact that the spectator is distinguished by her ability to attain the “knowledge of God” through these three

¹⁰⁵ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.2-4. Calvin goes on to remark that because “each one undoubtedly feels within the heavenly grace that quickens him,” there is “no need to go outside ourselves to contemplate God” (1.5.3). In discussing this category of created works, Calvin departs from his usual focus on visual perception to emphasize that God’s self-manifestation in the works of the body is not only seen, but also touched. As a “workshop graced with God’s unnumbered works” (1.5.4), the human creation is an internal theater in which “the blind can find God by feeling after him” (1.5.3). In such passages, Calvin depicts humans as both spectators and spectacle. Making a same similar connection, Blair notes that “even if the role for humans in the natural-philosophical ‘theater of the world’ is not to act out a role, but to watch and contemplate, the spectator is still part of the scene, ambiguously both observer and participant in nature.” Blair, *Theater of Nature*, 154. See also 157.

¹⁰⁶ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.7. On Calvin’s view of providence, see Susan E. Schreiner, *The Theater of His Glory: Nature and the Natural Order in the Thought of John Calvin* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1995), 2-37.

¹⁰⁷ Blair finds an important precedent for sixteenth-century uses of the theater metaphor in Philo’s *On the Creation of the World*; she notes that in his usage, the theater of divine providence is described as a play humans watch as it unfolds over time. Blair, *Theater of Nature*, 155.

¹⁰⁸ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.7.

¹⁰⁹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.8.

¹¹⁰ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.8.

categories of sensible works suggest that *they* are its proximal referent, its indispensable starting point and foundation.

As further support for this reading, let me show how this claim illuminates and is, in turn, confirmed by three of Calvin's most important statements regarding this "knowledge." First, rooting this condition in physical perception makes sense of Calvin's warning not to confuse what is and is not available to the spectator. Calvin says in 1.5.1: "[God's] essence is incomprehensible; hence his divineness far escapes all human perception (*sensus*). But upon his individual works he has engraved unmistakable marks of his glory."¹¹¹ This passage confirms what we saw above, that the knowledge of God is not about "what" God is in essence (*quid sit Deus*). However, it goes beyond this to explain why: it is because the divine essence is not available to human *sensus*, which Calvin here seems to intend in its basic meaning of a bodily power of sensation or capacity for feeling. In this passage, then, Calvin discards one possible meaning of the "knowledge of God"—namely, that it is an account of God's essence—and he discards it precisely *because such an understanding could not be reached via sensory experience*. The fact that Calvin draws this contrast so carefully tells us that accessibility to sense perception is a defining feature of this "knowledge."

Placing sense perception at the origin of this condition also illuminates a second significant passage in which Calvin again employs *sensus*. Calvin writes, "this recognition (*agnitio*) [of God] consists more in living experience (*vivo sensu*) than in vain and high-flown speculation (*vacua et meteorica speculatione*)."¹¹² It is striking here that Calvin contrasts *sensus*

¹¹¹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.1.

¹¹² Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.10.2. I note that this passage actually comes from Calvin's description of sites where this knowledge is available in Scripture, which, he here specifies, re-describes the created works of God in even more easily perceptible terms. I elaborate upon the relationship between creation's perceptibility and Scripture's representation of it in both Chapters Two and Seven.

with *speculatio*. Speculation, as I will detail in Chapter Three, is a major accusation Calvin levels against the fallen mind. Crucially, *speculatio* indicates not simply mental exploration, but mental processes unmoored in—indeed, performed in deliberate isolation from—the external, sensory world. In this connection, *speculatio* was, depending on one’s perspective, an ideal or a vice associated with philosophical and artistic genius.¹¹³ What we have in this passage, then, is a contrast between our spectator’s *vivus sensus*, perhaps better translated “lively sense,” and the *vacua* or “empty” because literally unfounded thoughts of someone who voluntarily prescind from sense experience. Interpreted as the experience of the true spectator, Calvin’s statement that “this recognition (*agnitio*) [of God] consists more in lively sense (*vivo sensu*)”¹¹⁴ need not be taken as a figurative commentary on the vividness of spiritual experience; rather, it can be read as a literal description of the liveliness and undeniability of the spectator’s physical perception of created works.

Third and finally, my proposal that the object of the spectator’s attention is the sensible works of creation yields a fresh reading of what is arguably the single most important passage in the *Institutio* characterizing the knowledge of God.

We are called to a knowledge of God (*Dei notitiam*): not that knowledge which, content with empty speculation (*inani speculatione*), merely flits in the brain, but that which will be sound (*solida*) and fruitful if we duly perceive it (*si rite percipiatur*), and if it takes root in the heart.¹¹⁵

Previous readings of this passage have focused on the *outcome* it indicates—that is, on the affective orientation that marks the knowledge of God, as signaled by the “fruitfulness” of this

¹¹³ See Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl on the ideal of the speculative life in Italian humanism. Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky, and Fritz Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy: Studies in the History of Natural Philosophy, Religion, and Art* (London, UK: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1964. Nendeln/Liechtenstein, The Netherlands: Kraus Reprint, 1979), 243-54. Citations refer to the Kraus edition. Barasch shows that the inward vision that supposedly allowed Renaissance artists and poets to create came to be associated with blindness to the external world. Moshe Barasch, *Blindness: The History of a Mental Image in Western Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 134-35.

¹¹⁴ Translation altered from Battles’ “in living experience.” Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.10.2.

¹¹⁵ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.9.

knowledge that “takes root in the heart”—that, as Calvin goes on to say, “profoundly affects us,” and that “we feel within ourselves.”¹¹⁶ However, these readings overlook the fact that the defining characteristic Calvin uses to distinguish knowledge that he dismisses as “flitting” from the true knowledge of God is *where it begins*. Calvin’s point in this passage is that “knowledge” that is “sound and fruitful” does not begin with “empty speculation” that “merely flits in the brain”—phrases which, I specified above, characterize a way of knowing that prescind from the senses. By contrast, the condition we are investigating begins with sense perception: “that [knowledge] which will be sound and fruitful *if we duly perceive it*.”¹¹⁷ Thus, the knowledge of God requires “duly perceiving.”

If we continue with this critical passage, we find Calvin leaves no doubt that the “perception” referenced here is the sensory spectatorship that I have been describing. He immediately directs attention to the external works whereby God self-manifests—and of which, he emphasizes, we can have *sensus*:

For the Lord manifests himself by his powers (*suis enim virtutibus*¹¹⁸ *manifestatur*), the force of which we feel (*sentimus*) within ourselves and the benefits of which we enjoy. We must therefore be much more profoundly affected by this knowledge (*vividius multo hac cognitione nos affici*) than if we were to imagine a God of whom no perception came through to us (*nullus ad nos sensus perveniret*).¹¹⁹

In these lines, Calvin defines the true “knowledge of God” by naming the counterfactual possibility of a condition that does *not* begin with *sensus* (“a God of whom no perception came

¹¹⁶ Thus, Hoitenga: “Calvin describes speculation as *thinking* about God without being properly *affected* by the thoughts we have.” Hoitenga, *Faith and Reason*, 171. Similarly, Bouwsma: “Here, then, lies the significance of Calvin’s frequent attacks on *frigidity*; knowing, for Calvin, was frigid if it lacked that involvement of the affections which distinguishes really knowing from merely knowing” (emphasis in original). Bouwsma, “Crisis of Knowing,” 205.

¹¹⁷ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.9 (emphasis mine).

¹¹⁸ In its original Roman context, *virtus* is associated with qualities of character, not as abstract possessions, but as enacted abilities. As Cicero says, there is no virtue except “in practice (*in uso*)” (*Republic* 1.2) and “in action (*in actione*)” (*De officiis* 1.19). Qtd. in Alessandro Fontana, “Virtù,” in *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, ed. Barbara Cassin (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 1206.

¹¹⁹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.9.

through to us”). In so doing, Calvin dispels all doubt that he is using *sensus*, *sentire*, and *percipere* to indicate that knowledge of God is not built upon human belief—however basic—but is the direct result of a sensory encounter with God’s perceptible creations.

With these close readings in place, let me circle back to the issue of how to interpret what Calvin says this “knowledge of God” is and is not. Far from being belief *that* God is, or an understanding of *what* God is, Calvin says that this “knowledge” embraces “what sort [God] is, and what is consistent with [God’s] nature.”¹²⁰ Without the true spectator as our guide, we might be inclined to read these phrases as alluding to a set of unstated understandings about God—“insights about [God’s] character,”¹²¹ as one commentator puts it. However, if the true spectator’s distinguishing behavior is to perceive what God is like from God’s sensible works, then this “knowledge” must be understood to concern “what sort [God] is” *as sensed in* the spectacles of creation. Similarly, when Calvin says that created works show us God “as he is toward us,”¹²² this refers to the sensible acts of creation and preservation that a true spectator encounters all around her.¹²³ Finally, when Calvin says that the “pious mind” who attains the knowledge of God “is content to hold [God] to be as he manifests himself,” the phrase “as he manifests himself” need not be interpreted to indicate abstract “truths” about God’s nature. Rather, it refers to how and where God manifests Godself in the perceptible works of creation.¹²⁴

¹²⁰ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.2.2.

¹²¹ Egil Grislis, “Calvin’s Use of Cicero in the Institutes I: 1-5 – A Case Study in Theological Method,” in *The Organizational Structure of Calvin’s Theology*, ed. Richard C. Gamble (New York: Garland Publishing, 1992), 11.

¹²² Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.10.2.

¹²³ Parker makes a similar point in interpreting Calvin’s commentary upon Psalm 145, emphasizing that revelation does not concern “God’s attributes as they are within Himself” but rather “the exercise of God’s attributes towards men.” Parker, *Calvin’s Doctrine*, 54. However, he does not emphasize sense perception to the extent that I do here.

¹²⁴ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.2.2. I will say more about Calvin’s emphasis on the vividly perceptible quality of these sites of divine self-manifestation in Chapter Two. As we will see there, it is precisely their highly noticeable, sensory qualities that defines manifestations like the natural world and the human body as “accommodations,” which is to say, sites of divine self-presentation that are well-tailored, elegantly “accommodated” to human *perceptual* abilities.

I conclude that the “knowledge of God” is concerned first and foremost with the spectator’s sensory experience. This starting point, and not any belief about God’s existence, is its indispensable foundation.

4.2 What is the nature of the process by which this condition is attained? This analysis raises the question: granted that the “knowledge of God” *begins* in sense experience, does it not penetrate through or beyond sense experience so that what the spectator engages is sensory only initially and has something else more spiritual or divine as its ultimate target? As the passages already quoted make clear, the true spectator does not merely sense the existence or presence of created works: she senses them as created, as the manifestations of a Creator—much the way the spectator of a painting perceives the artist’s skill through what is visible to the eye.¹²⁵ In other words, although this condition may begin in sense experience, it is clearly irreducible to brute sensation alone. It is tempting, therefore, to conclude that because the spectator recognizes an invisible Creator on the basis of visible works, spectatorship must ultimately push beyond those material works in an act of inference or judgment drawn on the basis of received sense impressions.¹²⁶

This is the dominant line taken by interpreters of Calvin’s “knowledge of God,” who reason that the invisibility of God requires a logical inference or interpretive leap from visible works to invisible Creator.¹²⁷ As one commentator puts it, Calvin “clearly envisages a type of

¹²⁵ See Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.2.1-2, 1.5.1-2, 1.5.6, 1.5.11.

¹²⁶ The other interpretive option, which I will not pursue here because it has not been taken up in the literature, is that this occurs in a transition from physical to some kind of spiritual sensation.

¹²⁷ Helm gestures to the sensory spectacle detailed above when he observes that “for Calvin, the ‘manifestation’ [of God in creation] is not so much a formal proof proceeding from indubitable premises, but a display of power and skill, as when a weightlifter demonstrates his prowess by lifting great weights.” However, Helm goes on immediately to specify that, unlike in the case of a weightlifter, the literal invisibility of the Creator implies that the spectacle forms “the basis of an inference to the existence of God.” He goes so far as to suggest that Calvin is here thinking along the lines of “cosmological proofs of the existence of God.” Helm, *John Calvin’s Ideas*, 211. Shortly

argument” that “since the world has these features... then [God] must have such and such features.”¹²⁸ This line of interpretation posits that the goal of human life is attained when sense experience becomes the basis for a secondary process, an inferential move from what is seen to what must, therefore, be understood. Dowey articulates a seminal version of this reading when he argues that “it is nature, not God, that is given immediately, and from nature, the ‘work’ of God, man infers certain attributes of God himself.”¹²⁹ On this view, the spectator must become a philosopher before achieving—I use the verb advisedly—the “knowledge of God.”¹³⁰

It is difficult to accept this view for both historical and interpretive reasons. Historically, it depends on a model of visual cognition did not become widespread until the work of Kepler and Descartes in the seventeenth century.¹³¹ As discussed in the Introduction, in the sixteenth century when Calvin is writing, vision is still understood on a broadly Aristotelian model in which external objects give off *species* which impress their image directly onto the mind in a

after this, on 214, Helm retracts his vocabulary of proof and returns again to the language of manifestation, acknowledging that the latter is more appropriate to Calvin’s own way of speaking. After describing Calvin as offering a *demonstratio* of the being and nature of God, he immediately specifies that “he may not have in mind a discursive proof (or proofs) of God’s being, but rather an account of the manifestation of the existence and power of God, of what God is, in creation.” A related but distinct view takes Calvin’s knowledge of God to require an act, not so much of logical inference, as of interpretation: “[Man] saw, indeed, that the universe meant something, but he lacked the insight and sympathy with God and with the universe itself necessary to interpret its meaning, and therefore... he misinterpreted it. To have interpreted the creation, history, and experience aright would have brought him to the knowledge of the Creator.” Parker, *Calvin’s Doctrine*, 38.

¹²⁸ Helm, *John Calvin’s Ideas*, 220.

¹²⁹ Dowey, *The Knowledge*, 77n166. It is notable that, as we saw with Helm above, Dowey is forced to argue *against* Calvin, in this case by denying the self-evidence Calvin attributes to God’s self-manifestation in creation: “The arguments he introduces so quickly—“We see that there is no need of long and laborious argumentation... to produce testimonies of the divine majesty... which are so evident and obvious that they are easily distinguished with the eye or pointed to with the finger”—may not be so compelling as Calvin thinks.” Dowey, *The Knowledge*, 81. This is a case in which interpretation has been stymied by lack of clarity regarding whether we are speaking about pre-fall or post-fall conditions.

¹³⁰ Helm acknowledges that “there is a directness, an immediacy about the sort of knowledge of God that Calvin wishes to focus on” (Helm, *John Calvin’s Ideas*, 224)—even granting elsewhere that “this knowledge is like perception” (Helm, “John Calvin,” 91)—but nevertheless maintains that “this knowledge has the form of a judgment that there is a God.” Helm, *John Calvin’s Ideas*, 225. Adams codifies this idea further by arguing that Calvin draws an epistemological distinction between innate and inferred knowledge of God, and that the knowledge of God from God’s works is of the second kind; it does not come about “without ratiocination” but “through experience and rational reflection.” Adams, “Calvin’s View,” 287-88.

¹³¹ See Stuart Clark, *Vanities of the Eye: Vision in Early Modern European Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 329-64.

process compared to mirroring, painting, and wax sealing.¹³² On this model—about which more will be said in my discussion of the “interior senses” below—perception occurs when a more or less distorted impression of an external object forms upon the “mirror” of the mind. In the *Institutio*’s milieu, in other words, trustworthy visual experience depends on the resemblance between the image in the mind and the extramental object which it ought to reflect.

By contrast, to posit that Calvin’s spectator takes in neutral sense data and then performs an act of correct or incorrect judgment upon it—Dowey refers to sensory experience of creation as “the raw material or sense data on the basis of which the mind says ‘therefore’ about God”¹³³—belongs to a later understanding of visual cognition. As Stuart Clark explains, Descartes rejected the notion at the heart of species theory, that visual experience proceeds through resemblance.¹³⁴ Instead, he proposed a mechanistic account in which percepts automatically cause movements of particles on the senses which are transmitted to the nervous system *not* in the form of a more or less accurate image of what made it, but as the motion of particles upon the mind.¹³⁵ The crucial point for our purposes is that when sensation becomes mechanical, perception becomes *interpretive*.¹³⁶ On this later, Cartesian view, after the brain receives information conveyed neutrally through the interactions of particles, it performs a judgment

¹³² Clark, *Vanities*, 2, 338. For detailed discussions of debates over *species* theory in the late Middle Ages, see Pasnau, *Theories of Cognition*, and Katherine H. Tachau, *Vision and Certitude in the Age of Ockham: Optics, Epistemology and the Foundation of Semantics, 1250-1345* (Leiden: Brill, 1988).

¹³³ Dowey, *The Knowledge*, 74.

¹³⁴ Clark, *Vanities*, 335.

¹³⁵ Clark, *Vanities*, 338-39.

¹³⁶ Clark, *Vanities*, 6.

concerning their meaning.¹³⁷ Visual experience, in Descartes words, becomes a matter of “judgments which are occasioned by the movements of these bodily organs.”¹³⁸

My point in distinguishing between these two very distinct models of visual cognition is that it is only on a seventeenth-century understanding of vision that it makes sense to suggest that a spectator’s reaction to the natural world goes right or wrong when she draws an inference or makes a judgment regarding the meaning of neutral sense data.¹³⁹ More importantly, positing an additional step that comes temporally after and builds logically upon sense experience is interpretively problematic because it requires us to supply these actions to Calvin’s account of the true spectator. As the following paragraphs will spotlight, far from indicating the existence of such an additional step, Calvin’s account of the true spectator underlines the simultaneity of the realization of the knowledge of God with sensory spectatorship.

An initial class of evidence for this reading comes from Calvin’s mirror imagery, which Cornelis van der Kooi has called the “key to enter into Calvin’s concept of the knowledge of God.”¹⁴⁰ Calvin’s first reference to created works as mirrors follows directly upon a series of affirmations of their unmissability and ubiquity.¹⁴¹ He writes:

Wherever you cast your eyes, there is no spot in the universe wherein you cannot discern at least some sparks of [God’s] glory... The reason why the author of the Letter to the Hebrews elegantly calls the universe the appearance of things invisible is that this skillful

¹³⁷ “Descartes relied on a distinction between seeing and judging that enabled him to show that all supposed deceptions of sense involve an error of judgments concerning the appearances of external things.” In other words, not misrepresentation by the imagination, but poor judgment exercised upon neutral data, causes and explains deception or misperception. Clark, *Vanities*, 340.

¹³⁸ Quoted in Clark, *Vanities*, 343. These judgments are modeled on the act of reading or decoding signs. Clark, *Vanities*, 343. What replaces the sixteenth-century’s resemblance theory could thus be called a “semantic” account of cognition in which “visual reality was not so much something grasped by human sensory perception as construed by it.” Clark, *Vanities*, 349 and 356, respectively.

¹³⁹ Indeed, when Helm insists that although highly automatic, the processes Calvin is describing are nevertheless *judgments*, he sounds very like Descartes, who taught that many processes that are actually rational calculations are incorrectly attributed to the senses because they are made so habitually and at such speed! Helm, *John Calvin’s Ideas*, 225. Clark, *Vanities*, 340.

¹⁴⁰ Van der Kooi, *As in a Mirror*, 62.

¹⁴¹ Further uses of the mirror in connection with created works appear at Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.3 and 1.5.11.

ordering of the universe is for us a sort of mirror in which we can contemplate God, who is otherwise invisible.¹⁴²

Calvin goes on to point out that in these perceptible works shines “an attestation of divinity so apparent that it ought not to escape the gaze of even the most stupid tribe.” Finally, he quotes Romans: “The apostle declares this more clearly: ‘What men need to know concerning God has been disclosed to them... for one and all gaze upon his invisible nature, known from the creation of the world, even unto his eternal power and divinity.’”¹⁴³

One of the most important images in the opening chapters of the *Institutio*, the mirror¹⁴⁴ captures the tension between, on the one hand, the irreducibility of spectatorship and the “knowledge” that it achieves to mere sense perception, and, on the other, its perfect co-terminality with sense perception.¹⁴⁵ It is arguably the ideal figure to capture the simultaneity of seeing the created work (the mirrored surface) and also perceiving its Creator (what the mirror images). At the same time, it preserves creation’s irreducibility to the Creator, because a mirrored surface is *not* what it images.

What kind of “seeing” does Calvin imply when he refers to the sensible works of creation as “mirrors”? Calvin gives us an important clue when, in the same paragraph, he reminds the reader that God’s “divineness (*numen*) far escapes all human perception (*sensus*).”¹⁴⁶ This is another version of the point made above, that God’s essence (*quid sit Deus*) is not accessible to human *sensus*. The mirror of created works addresses precisely this physical limitation: God’s

¹⁴² Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.1.

¹⁴³ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.1.

¹⁴⁴ The mirror is a well-known though still underexplored figure of Calvin’s thought. For possible sources of Calvin’s mirror imagery, see Randall C. Zachman, *Image and Word in the Theology of John Calvin* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 9-14.

¹⁴⁵ Although in some places he resorts to speaking of the “meaning” of nature as a “representation” of God, Parker seems to grant this when he remarks that “not merely... does the creation speak to [a person] of God. It is the self-manifestation of God.” Parker, *Calvin’s Doctrine*, 16-8. A metaphor related to the mirror is creation as the “garment” of God. See the discussion of this imagery in Parker, *Calvin’s Doctrine*, 19.

¹⁴⁶ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.1.

sensory creations allow the spectator to look upon a God who is “otherwise invisible”—a phrase that can mean nothing other than that God *is* visible in them.¹⁴⁷ Calvin expands on this point later when he describes how it is in the things we can see, like “the fashioning of the universe” and “in all [God’s] creatures, as in mirrors” that we can perceive the otherwise invisible qualities of God, like his power, wisdom, justice, and goodness.¹⁴⁸ The crucial point here is that we do not see what a mirror images by making an inference from its surface to what is invisible; rather, the mirror renders immediately visible what is otherwise invisible. Thus, Calvin’s mirror imagery pushes against the idea of an additional step the spectator must take on the basis of sense experience.¹⁴⁹

Calvin conveys the same idea when he comments on what is, and what is not, required to recognize the Creator from sensible creations.

We see that no long or toilsome proof (*demonstratione*) is needed to elicit evidences (*testimonia*) that serve to illuminate and affirm the divine majesty; since from the few we have sampled at random, whithersoever you turn, it is clear that they are so very manifest and obvious (*adeo prompta et obvia*) that they can easily be observed with the eyes and pointed out with the finger.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁷ It is striking, in this connection, that in his 1537 Catechism Calvin offers an idiosyncratic translation of Hebrews 11:3 that emphasizes the visible status of God’s works: “Accordingly, we are to search out and trace God in his works, which are called in the Scriptures ‘the reflection of things invisible,’ because they represent to us what otherwise we could not see of the Lord.” Qtd. in Zachman, *Image and Word*, 27-28. As Zachman notes, The New Revised Standard Version translates this phrase “so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible” or “was not made out of visible things.” In other words, Calvin’s translation emphasizes the visibility of creation.

¹⁴⁸ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.14.21.

¹⁴⁹ “The [mirror] metaphor makes it clear that the image that is visible is there because of God, and is not the result of human thought. The image in a mirror is not the result of mental activity in man himself, or which he has arrived at by way of an abstract process.” Van der Kooi, *As in a Mirror*, 59. Calvin’s mirror imagery seems to preclude the mental distance posited by some accounts. See, for instance, Zachman on creation as an analogy for its Creator: “There must be a similarity or analogy between the image of God in the world and the God who is manifested therein... inasmuch as God is the invisible, spiritual Creator of the visible and earthly image, the analogy must be one that elevates us from the world to God by means of anagoge.” Zachman, “The Universe,” 236.

¹⁵⁰ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.9. Dowey dismisses this comment. Dowey, *The Knowledge*, 81. Adams interprets it as a rejection only of reasoning which is “abstract... divorced from sensory experience” and which requires special “intellectual skill,” “mental contrivance,” or “intellectual dexterity,” but not—as a literal reading of the passage would suggest—a declaration that reasoning processes are unnecessary *tout court*. Adams, “Calvin’s View,” 289.

This comment speaks to an implicit contrast between types of proof, setting aside those attained by a process of discursive reasoning and focusing instead on *testimonia* (evidence, attestation, that which serves as proof) that are self-evident to physical perception. In fact, the very next line in this paragraph is Calvin's criticism of "empty speculation" that "merely flits in the brain," suggesting that *this* is how he would dismiss the idea that the knowledge of God is arrived at by a process of logical or philosophical argumentation. As Michael Sudduth observes, "arguments involve a making of something evident which is not itself evident. But the external witness [of God in creation] is something quite evident... Calvin cites as a reason for not constructing convoluted syllogisms the fact that there is no *need* to do so."¹⁵¹ In other words, the force of Calvin's comment is not to preclude long, belabored processes of reasoning but leave open the possibility of brief, easy ones,¹⁵² nor is it to suggest that inferences are being formed beneath the spectator's level of consciousness.¹⁵³ Rather, the force of this passage is to entirely set aside judgment, however quick or unconscious, as the route to the "knowledge of God."

This brings me to another class of evidence that attaining the desired condition does not require a secondary step on the basis of sense experience—namely, descriptions which do not merely preclude reasoning or argumentation as the route to the "knowledge of God," but which actually preclude human *effort* altogether. Attending to the spectator's experience, we find that Calvin represents the arrow of causality flowing from the spectacle of created objects to the

¹⁵¹ Sudduth, "The Prospects," 56. Although Sudduth denies that a reasoning "process" is required to arrive at the knowledge of God, he insists that God's "external witness" is "an experiential basis for the formation of beliefs which in turn become reasons for believing the relevant theistic proposition." Sudduth, "The Prospects," 60.

¹⁵² This is what, for example, Helm suggests when he observes that the knowledge of God is arrived at in a "judgment of a highly un-self-conscious and automatic kind." Helm, *John Calvin's Ideas*, 227. Sudduth implies the same when he remarks, "some arguments are simple; others are complex." Sudduth, "The Prospects," 61.

¹⁵³ Helm argues, following Sudduth, that "there may be no awareness of an inference or inferences being drawn... and yet there may be inferences at work." Helm, *John Calvin's Ideas*, 226. As noted above, positing processes that Calvin does not mention and explaining this divergence by the fact that they are unconscious is a linchpin of Helm's interpretive method.

spectator, not the other way around. The created works that make up this spectacle “thrust themselves upon the sight” of all “so that they cannot open their eyes without being compelled to witness them.”¹⁵⁴ There is no need to expend human effort or intention in seeking out this spectacle because it is found “whenever and wherever we cast our gaze.”¹⁵⁵ The goal of human life is thus not the achievement of a mind that reasons its way backwards from created works to the existence of an invisible Creator. Rather, this condition is naturally elicited by the spectacle itself: “With what clear manifestations (*praeclaris speciminibus*) his might draws us to contemplate him (*in considerationem sui rapit*)!”¹⁵⁶ In this sentence, Calvin’s use of *rapio*—which has the sense snatching or seizing quickly and can even mean to pillage or carry off—emphasizes that far from the spectator having to exert special effort to perceive created works as divine manifestations, the spectacle itself *draws out* such recognition, in fact, forces it upon the observer.¹⁵⁷

Such descriptions indicate that, for Calvin, created works are not only physically unavoidable, but even, we might say, self-interpreting. God “discloses himself in the whole workmanship of the universe,”¹⁵⁸ where “sparks (*scintillas*)” “flash[ed] forth (*micabant*)”¹⁵⁹ and “the glory of God shines forth (*splendeat*).”¹⁶⁰ “Therein,” Calvin says, “lies an attestation of

¹⁵⁴ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.2.

¹⁵⁵ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.1.

¹⁵⁶ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.6.

¹⁵⁷ It is interesting to ponder whether the medieval optical association of light rays with the application of force (*vis, virtus*) may lie in the deep background of Calvin’s combined use of light imagery and a vocabulary that implies that the spectator is the subject of almost irresistible compulsion. On this association, see Katherine H. Tachau, “Seeing as Action and Passion in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries,” in *The Mind’s Eye: Art and Theological Argument in the Middle Ages*, eds. Jeffrey F. Hamburger and Anne-Marie Bouché (Princeton, NJ: Department of Art and Archaeology, Princeton University, in association with Princeton University Press, 2006), 339-40. Late medieval opticians Roger Bacon and Robert Grosseteste (drawing on the work of al-Kindi) understood the “universe as a vast network of radiating forces” which could become perceptible as light. Tachau, “Seeing as Action and Passion,” 349.

¹⁵⁸ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.1.

¹⁵⁹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.4.4.

¹⁶⁰ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.8.

divinity so apparent (*evidentior illic exstat divinitatis testificatio*) that it ought not to escape the gaze of even the most stupid tribe.”¹⁶¹ In passages like these, Calvin is not making the mundane point that the created world is itself perceptible, but the stronger claim that its divine origin is equally perceptible. It is not merely that their materiality thrusts itself upon the senses, but that their divine origin similarly shows itself. Many commentators have cited what Dowey memorably calls the “objective clarity” of God’s self-manifestation in creation.¹⁶² As the passages I have already quoted suggest, it is not simply that God’s self-presentations in created works are objectively *available* for interpretation; it is that they self-present so unmistakably that “even the common folk and the most untutored, who have been taught only by the aid of the eyes, *cannot be unaware* of the excellence of divine art, for it reveals *itself* (*se... exserentem*).” Thus, Calvin concludes, “there is no one to whom the Lord does not abundantly show (*abunde... patefaciat*) his wisdom” through the natural world.¹⁶³

The unstated corollary of these descriptions is that, for a true spectator, attaining the “knowledge of God” requires no human effort at all. It is actually inevitable when faced with the divine self-manifestation in created works. This is why we see Calvin repeating again and again that the spectacle is not just capable of being sensed, but that one cannot avoid being affected by it.¹⁶⁴ Far from needing to be judged divine, created works show themselves to be divine.¹⁶⁵ Far from having to make her way to such a conclusion under her own inferential steam, the spectacle forces this perception upon the spectator.

¹⁶¹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.1.

¹⁶² Dowey, *The Knowledge*, 32.

¹⁶³ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.2, emphases mine.

¹⁶⁴ Calvin does draw a distinction between what one can see immediately with the eyes and what requires study: for example, it is worthwhile to study the motion of the stars because God’s providence “shows itself more explicitly when one observes these.” To do so “the mind must rise to a somewhat higher level to look upon his glory.” However, this is immediately followed by the affirmation that even those who only use the “aid of the eyes” have plenty to spectate. Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.2.

¹⁶⁵ The human body, for example, “shows itself (*se fert*)” to be the product of a Creator. Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.2.

Calvin's frequent recourse to the vocabulary of compulsion underlines this point. Declarations of divinity "thrust themselves upon the sight of even the most untutored and ignorant persons, so that they cannot open their eyes without being compelled to witness it (*cogantur esse testes*)."¹⁶⁶ "They are compelled to know (*coguntur scire*)... that these are the signs of divinity."¹⁶⁷ Indeed, Calvin says that not only God's status as Creator, but also the "wisdom, power, and goodness of the author in accomplishing such handiwork" is "self-evident, and even force themselves upon the unwilling (*quae sponte sese proferunt et nolentibus etiam ingerunt*)."¹⁶⁸ In other words, the spectacle of created works cannot even be taken in by the senses without inducing the "knowledge of God." I will return to this point in Chapter Three when I show how the fallen mind does not simply fail to infer, but actively resists, the manifestation of God in creation.

Finally, not only does Calvin depict the spectacle as the active party¹⁶⁹—whose very force elicits the desired condition in and for the passive spectator—but the spectator's own mental processes may actually be rendered inoperative as she gazes appreciatively upon the spectacle of created works. In the passage that offers what is perhaps the most fulsome phenomenological account of spectatorship, Calvin specifies that it may "hold our mental powers suspended (*suspensum... ingenium teneat*)."¹⁷⁰ This phrase emphasizes that the human faculties are in some sense at rest, possibly even unable to operate, during spectatorship.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁶ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.2.

¹⁶⁷ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.4.

¹⁶⁸ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.16.1.

¹⁶⁹ This interpretation has the advantage that it respects Parker's important point that for Calvin "revelation can be no other than a movement from God to man... The movement is from God right down to man who has not moved a step towards God." Parker, *Calvin's Doctrine*, 12-3.

¹⁷⁰ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.9.

¹⁷¹ See my discussion of *ingenium* at the end of Chapter Three. The passage continues by invoking an Augustinian distinction between grasping and gazing which underlines the passivity of spectatorship: "And as Augustine teaches elsewhere, because... we cannot grasp (*capere*) him, we ought to gaze (*respicere*) upon his works." Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.9. In his exposition of Psalm 144.6, Augustine advocates admiring God's visible works as an

It is striking that the capacity that Calvin here identifies as “suspended,” the *ingenium*, is associated with the injection of personal idiosyncrasy into the reasoning or creative process. It is a term that is already during Calvin’s lifetime developing an association with the concept of Renaissance “genius,” making it a principle of differentiation among human minds. Most importantly, it is an active faculty whereby the mind imposes its creative interpretation upon the world around it.¹⁷² I will have more to say in Chapter Three about the *ingenium*—which, tellingly, is also the faculty that runs amok in idolatry. For now, the point is that the suspension of the *ingenium* suggests that the true spectator need inject nothing of her own powers of inference or interpretation—indeed, may be unable to inject them—into the act of sense perception by which she realizes the “knowledge of God.”¹⁷³

This phenomenological portrait of the true spectator reveals that it is difficult to support the interpretation that sense experience gives rise, in a secondary step, to an inference or judgment about the logical implication or interpretive credibility of a Creator behind each creation. On the contrary, our account of the knowledge of God must reckon with Calvin’s

alternative to trying to comprehend God: “If we could comprehend him, there would be a limit to his greatness... Since this is so, since we are weak and fall short of his grandeur, let us look to what he has made, so that we may be strengthened by his goodness. As we contemplate his works let us praise the worker, the maker for what is made, the creator for his creation, passing in review all the things known to us, things plain to see.” Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos, 121-150*, in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century, Expositions of the Psalms, 121-150*, ed. Boniface Ramsey, trans. Maria Boulding (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2004), 383.

¹⁷² The *ingenium* was sometimes associated with the rhetorical and artistic stage of *inventio* (invention), as in Augustine’s *De Trinitate*, 14.17. Summers cites early modern usage that associates *ingenium* with poetic license and notes that it can indicate a “principle of difference,” or what makes it possible to distinguish the work of one artist from another. David Summers, *The Judgment of Sense: Renaissance Naturalism and the Rise of Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 99-101.

¹⁷³ Despite the prominence of this passage in the *Institutio*, I have not come across a single treatment of Calvin’s knowledge of God which takes the phenomenological portrait it offers of a mind suspended in wonderment as in any way determinative for its reading of what the “knowledge of God” is and how it is attained. By contrast, for example, Adams takes Calvin’s comments about the *reasonability* of concluding God is eternal and good from creation as evidence that this is, in fact the process of “deductive reasoning” required to reach the knowledge of God. Adams, “Calvin’s View,” 290. I would argue, however, that the possibility of so reasoning—which Calvin does not deny—is not evidence that such a process of reasoning is necessary for, or a trustworthy guide to how, an unfallen mind attains the knowledge of God.

emphasis on the simultaneity of its realization with sense experience¹⁷⁴ and the absence of not only a process of inference, but of any human effort at all. For Calvin, created works impress themselves upon the spectator to sufficient effect; she need make no mental leap to an inferred or interpreted account of their significance.

4.3 What marks the condition of having attained the “knowledge of God”? I turn now to the third of four questions I posed about the knowledge of God, namely, what posture or disposition marks successful spectatorship? What happens to the spectator in the moment of spectatorship—that is, what does the actualization of the knowledge of God look like in practice? Keeping in mind what we have already established about this condition—namely, that begins from sense experience, is co-terminal with it, and requires no second step beyond or on the basis of it—allows us to pose this question even more precisely. The question is: what is realized already in spectating the mirror of created works that is not reducible to their ‘surface’—i.e., their physical appearance—but that is nevertheless in Dowey’s words “objectively” available in them in a way that, to extend this favored metaphor of Calvin’s, does not require diving into or reasoning past the mirror itself?

As I noted above, several of Calvin’s most important statements about the knowledge of God highlight its “fruitfulness”: they emphasize that it elicits something in and for the person who experiences it. We see this, for example, when he says: “We are called to a knowledge of

¹⁷⁴ Hoitenga emphasizes the immediacy of the knowledge of God from creation; indeed, he names “immediacy” and “vitality” as its two defining characteristics. Hoitenga, *Faith and Reason*, 143. However, whereas I emphasize the sense perception involved in perceiving God from God’s works, Hoitenga says that the immediacy of the knowledge of God is *analogous to* our sensation of physical objects. Hoitenga, *Faith and Reason*, 150. Moreover, whereas I name and explain this condition’s instantaneity by invoking “perception,” Hoitenga draws on Augustine’s notion of non-inferential signification: “signs can sometimes function *noninferentially* when we come to know from them what they signify. This theory opens the door to interpreting Calvin not as a natural theologian arguing (if only implicitly) from the order of the universe to the existence of God but as teaching that we come to know God, his universe, and their relationship immediately and simultaneously.” Hoitenga, *Faith and Reason*, 155.

God: not that knowledge which, content with empty speculation, merely flits in the brain, but *that which will be sound and fruitful* if we duly perceive it, and if it *takes root in the heart*.”¹⁷⁵ I have already explained how this passage locates the origin of spectatorship in sense perception in contrast to “speculation.” Let us now focus on the other characteristic identified in these lines, the fact that this “knowledge is “fruitful.” What is this fruit, how do we see it in the behavior of the spectator, and what does it tell us about the condition it marks?

Calvin has a specific name for the fruit of the knowledge of God: it is “piety (*pietas*).”¹⁷⁶ Calvin defines piety as “that reverence joined with the love of God which the knowledge of his benefits induces (*beneficiorum eius notitia conciliat*).”¹⁷⁷ What are these “benefits” that induce reverence and love for God? Calvin uses this concept as a shorthand for the many forms of material care and consideration humans experience in created works; thus, piety arises from the experience of created works’ beneficial qualities.¹⁷⁸ Calvin specifies that the spectator’s encounter with beneficial created works cannot be said to issue in knowledge of God unless piety results: “we shall not say that, properly speaking, God is known (*Deum... cognosci*) where there is no religion or piety (*nulla est religio nec pietas*).”¹⁷⁹ Thus, piety and the condition we call the “knowledge of God” are inextricably linked.

This could be taken to mean that the evaluative orientation Calvin calls piety is the product or outcome of the knowledge of God.¹⁸⁰ On such a view, piety would consist, as one

¹⁷⁵ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.9, emphases mine.

¹⁷⁶ For an overview of the Roman background of *pietas* and its transformations under Christianity, see Blandine Colot, “Pietas,” in Cassin, *Dictionary of Untranslatables*, 783-85.

¹⁷⁷ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.2.1.

¹⁷⁸ Calvin introduces this important concept already in 1.1.1. Speaking about the created works in the human body and soul, Calvin observes: “by these benefits (*ab his bonis*) shed like dew from heaven upon us, we are led as by rivulets to the spring itself.” Here again, in other words, Calvin uses “benefits” to refer to God’s perceptible works and identifies them as that by which we attain the knowledge of God.

¹⁷⁹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.2.1.

¹⁸⁰ That is how Helm interprets Calvin. This is in spite of the fact that Helm calls this “moral-cognitive” element of the knowledge of God one of its two “aspects” or “components” (the first is “metaphysical-cognitive”), implying

commentator puts it, in “the awareness of certain obligations *arising out of* the knowledge of God.”¹⁸¹ The feelings that Calvin associates with piety, in other words, become secondary effects of the “knowledge” itself: “This awareness, that oneself and all that one sees is the creation of God, *in turn triggers* beliefs and feelings of awe, respect, gratitude, and obligation to the benefactor.”¹⁸² However, treating piety as a possible effect that follows upon the “knowledge of God”¹⁸³ is a loose reading of Calvin’s insistence that God is not “known where there is no religion or piety.”¹⁸⁴ There is another way to interpret 1.2.1’s association of “knowledge” with piety: a more literal read of this line suggests that piety is *required for* the knowledge of God—not as an ideal outcome, but as the *sine qua non* of the condition.

Indeed, if we return now to the true spectator’s behavior, we will see that rather than being a consequence that follows upon the realization of the “knowledge of God,” piety is constitutive of this condition.¹⁸⁵ Admittedly, this can be difficult to see from some passages.

something closer to the position being argued here—namely, that this orientation is constitutive of and necessary to the knowledge of God, not something that can be said to follow upon it. Helm, *John Calvin’s Ideas*, 224.

¹⁸¹ Helm, *John Calvin’s Ideas*, 227 (emphasis mine).

¹⁸² Helm, *John Calvin’s Ideas*, 227 (emphasis mine). Although Helm gestures to the immediacy that we have seen is a hallmark of Calvin’s account of the true spectator—acknowledging that “the moral judgment that God is to be loved and obeyed may be automatically formed”—he nevertheless argues that the knower’s orientation toward God is the result of a process of moral reasoning based on a “moral principle such as: *Benefactors ought to be loved and respected.*” Helm, *John Calvin’s Ideas*, 228 (emphasis in original). On Helm’s reading, this process begins by acknowledging God as Creator and arrives at love and respect for God as a logically incurred obligation: “I ought to love and respect whoever has created and sustains me; therefore, I ought to love and respect God.” Helm, *John Calvin’s Ideas*, 228.

¹⁸³ Helm implies the potential separability of the moral judgment he associates with piety from the “knowledge” itself when he remarks that “the knowledge... of God leads us, *or ought to lead us*, to worship and serve him.” Helm, *John Calvin’s Ideas*, 224.

¹⁸⁴ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.2.1.

¹⁸⁵ This position is consonant with McNeill’s description of *pietas* as “prerequisite to any true knowledge of God” *if he means by this* not that piety is preparatory to knowledge of God, but that it is part and parcel with it. McNeill, ed., *Institutes*, 39n1. See this distinction in Hoitenga, *Faith and Reason*, 161. Armstrong notes that “it has often been recognized that *pietas* for Calvin is prerequisite to knowledge, but the implications of that recognition have not been developed.” Armstrong, “*Duplex cognitio Dei*,” 139-40. This chapter is partly an effort to develop these implications—not, as Armstrong advocates, for our understanding of *pietas*, but for our interpretation of “knowledge.” This is a way of making good on Dowey’s observations that “to know God disinterestedly is, for Calvin, a contradiction in terms” and “For [Calvin] the religious or existential response is not something that may or may not come in addition to knowledge of God, but is part of its very definition.” Dowey, *The Knowledge*, 28 and 26, respectively.

Consider a few lines from the paragraph that directly follows the definition of piety quoted above, where Calvin seems to imply that the “knowledge of God” comes first and only afterward gives rise to further behaviors that he associates with piety: “Our knowledge (*notitia*) should serve first to teach us fear and reverence; secondly, with it as our guide and teacher, we should learn to seek every good from him, and having received it, to credit it to his account.”¹⁸⁶ In this sentence, the anthropomorphic conceit of describing knowledge as “teaching” pious behaviors could be interpreted to suggest that knowledge precedes, and piety follows as a consequence.

However, Calvin undermines this sense of a linear chain of events that begins in knowledge and ends in piety when he immediately goes on to say:

For how can the thought of God penetrate your mind (*mentem tuam subire queat Dei cogitatio*) without your realizing immediately (*quin simul extemplo*) that, since you are his handiwork, you have been made over and bound to his command by right of creation, that you owe your life to him?—that whatever you undertake, whatever you do, ought to be ascribed to him?... Again, you cannot behold him clearly (*ad liquidum perspicere*) unless you acknowledge (*nisi ut... agnoscas*) him to be the fountainhead and source of every good.¹⁸⁷

Here we see a technique Calvin uses frequently when describing what constitutes the act of spectatorship. He emphasizes that a behavior which seems to follow upon a preceding behavior—realizing following upon penetrating, acknowledging following upon beholding—is actually inextricable from the first. In the first sentence above, Calvin’s use not only of *simul* (at the same time), but also *extemplo* (immediately), underlines this. In the second, Calvin uses a result clause (indicated by *nisi ut*) to portray the inextricability of the former from the latter. In this way, Calvin’s language qualifies itself retrospectively, undermining any attempt to ascribe, from the necessarily linear course of his words, a successive order to these behaviors. Far from “penetration” unidirectionally bringing about “realization,” one cannot actually be penetrated

¹⁸⁶ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.2.2.

¹⁸⁷ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.2.2.

without realizing; far from “beholding” bringing about “acknowledging,” one is not truly beholding without acknowledging. In this way, Calvin chips away at the false impression that the condition that is the goal of human life is separable from a stance of piety. Taken as a whole, the passage communicates that rather than giving rise to piety as an ideal consequence, true spectatorship is defined by this orientation. As Calvin says, “You *cannot* in one glance survey this most vast and beautiful system of the universe, in its wide expanse, *without* being completely overwhelmed by the boundless force of its brightness.”¹⁸⁸

Calvin’s emphasis on the inextricability of piety from the “knowledge of God” allows me to extend my earlier argument regarding the self-interpreting nature of created works. We have already seen that the spectacle actively—indeed, forcefully—impresses itself upon the spectator, obviating the need for her to draw inferences or impute meanings. Calvin’s descriptions of an affective posture that is both inextricable from and constitutive of the knowledge of God gives us a way to specify the “force” of created works even further: it tells us that the spectacle’s force is not primarily propositional, but orientational. Calvin communicates this by describing created works as drawing and attracting the spectator, again locating the agency with the spectacle, while depicting the spectator in relatively passive terms.¹⁸⁹ In this way, Calvin emphasizes that the spectacle is not the basis for a conclusion about God; rather, it induces an irresistible sense of

¹⁸⁸ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.1, emphases mine. In these chapters, Calvin consistently indexes brightness to the clear perception of God’s glory in contrast to the human condition. Thus, being overwhelmed by the universe’s brightness is metonymic for perceiving its divine source.

¹⁸⁹ God’s self-manifestation in the natural world is “more than sufficient to draw us to his love (*in amorem eius allciendos*).” Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.6. In God’s individual works and in them as a whole, “mankind is invited and attracted (*invitatur atque illicitur*) to recognition of him (*in eius agnitionem*) and from this to true and complete happiness.” Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.10. The end of this passage—“to true and complete happiness”—makes clear that this attraction brings about the knowledge of God since, as I noted at the outset, it is the source of human happiness. Van der Kooi helpfully observes that Calvin’s God “entices, draws, invites, and encourages man to acknowledge his Maker.” However, his characterization of this action as an “open invitation to the knowing of God” significantly softens an action that Calvin depicts as rather more forceful and irresistible. Van der Kooi, *As in a Mirror*, 26-27.

worshipful attraction toward the cause manifested in the effect, the Creator manifested in the created spectacle.

This tells us something crucial about how Calvin understands the moment in which the condition, the goal of human life, is attained. While the mind may be “suspended in wonderment (*suspensum admiratione*),” the spectator is not unaffected: Calvin goes on immediately to say, “as at the same time to stir us deeply (*ut efficaci sensu penitus simul afficiat*).”¹⁹⁰ Here again, with his use of *simul* Calvin emphasizes that the reaction he is describing is not a secondary effect of the knowledge of God, but part and parcel with it. Created works elicit this posture in the spectator such that, as Calvin insists—using the same rhetorical technique seen above—she “cannot apprehend God [in his works] *without* rendering some honor to him.”¹⁹¹ Later in the *Institutio*, when Calvin retrospectively summarizes “what is required for the true knowledge of God (*vera Dei notitia*),” he speaks in the same terms: “we have taught that we cannot conceive (*concipi*) him in his greatness *without* being immediately confronted (*quin statim occurrat*) by his majesty, and so compelled to worship him (*ad eius cultum astringat*).”¹⁹²

The critical point for our purposes is that the spectator’s stance of pious wonderment does not follow upon, but rather constitutes her attainment of the “knowledge of God.” The compulsion to worship that marks this condition is not a moral obligation following upon it. Rather, the compulsion to render honor to God is part of what the “knowledge of God” *names*.¹⁹³ A worshipful disposition just *is* the impact of created works upon a spectator who is not sinfully

¹⁹⁰ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.9. This affective orientation is not necessarily positive. See 1.1.3 for Calvin’s descriptions of the experience of being overwhelmed with the sense of one’s own sinfulness upon feeling the presence of God. In this paragraph, too, Calvin describes the spectator as being struck or thrown into this posture as by an external force.

¹⁹¹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.2.1, emphases mine.

¹⁹² Calvin, *Institutio*, 2.8.1, emphases mine.

¹⁹³ Ultimately, it is impossible to reconcile Calvin’s description of the spectator as irresistibly attracted to God, drawn and induced to worship him, with Helm’s language of morally reasoned “obligation.” See Helm, “John Calvin,” 92.

resisting: “[God’s powers] should captivate us with wonderment for him, and impel us to celebrate his praise.”¹⁹⁴ Simply “seeing... God’s workmanship in his creation (*artificii... pervideat in Dei operibus*)” should be sufficient to lead a spectator to “break forth in admiration of the Artificer.”¹⁹⁵ In the same way, when Calvin says of would-be spectators now blinded by sin, “They *ought*, then, to break forth into praises of him,”¹⁹⁶ he is obliquely affirming that the natural force of created works is not only to capture human attention but also to draw out or induce the affective stance of worshipful reverence he calls “piety.”

Let me now return to what all this means for our reading of the key phrases in which Calvin connects “piety” to the “knowledge of God.” In the light of the true spectator, we can see that when Calvin says “we shall not say that, properly speaking, God is known where there is no religion or piety,”¹⁹⁷ and that “the knowledge of God does not rest in cold speculation, but carries with it the honoring of him,”¹⁹⁸ Calvin is not saying that the knowledge of God *issues in* an act of worship. Rather, he is saying that the act of spectatorship in which the “knowledge of God” is realized is already a posture of honoring. In fact, when Calvin observes that “this sense of the powers of God (*virtutum Dei sensus*) is for us a fit teacher of piety,”¹⁹⁹ he draws a direct connection between the spectator’s encounter with God’s sensible works and her stance of piety. H.S. Simpson’s translation of this critical passage draws this out: “Our sensory perception of the powers of God is to us a competent teacher of godliness.”²⁰⁰ Piety, then, is simply the other side of the spectatorship in which the “knowledge of God” is realized; their relationships is not linear

¹⁹⁴ Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.10.41.

¹⁹⁵ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.2

¹⁹⁶ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.4.

¹⁹⁷ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.2.1.

¹⁹⁸ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.12.1.

¹⁹⁹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.2.1.

²⁰⁰ H. W. Simpson, “*Pietas* in the *Institutes* of Calvin,” in *Our Reformational Tradition: A Rich Heritage and Lasting Vocation* (Potchefstroom, Republic of South Africa: Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education, 1984), 187-88.

and consequential, but simultaneous and constitutive. To borrow Calvin's syntax, one cannot spectate without taking up the posture of worshipful wonderment that is piety, and this posture is not the consequence of the "knowledge of God," but constitutive of it.

4.4 What is the role of propositional statements about God? This brings us to the final question we must consider regarding the "knowledge of God," namely, how do conscious or propositional statements about God relate to it? As my interpretation has emphasized, the figure of the true spectator shows us that this condition is attained in an act of sense perception that induces and is defined by a worshipful orientation, yet during which the spectator is passive, even has her creative or interpretive faculties "suspended." However, Calvin sometimes describes the "knowledge of God" in terms that seem to be very propositional—indeed, that seem to require the conscious ascription of certain qualities to God. How can these observations be reconciled?

Consider several passages which could be taken to imply that the attainment of the desired condition requires the spectator mentally to form—and perhaps even linguistically to express—a set of concepts about God's relationship to humanity. For example, Calvin concludes the paragraph in which he first defines the knowledge of God by remarking, "For until men recognize (*sentiant*) that they owe everything to God, that they are nourished by his fatherly care, that he is the Author of their every good, that they should seek nothing beyond him—they will never yield him willing service."²⁰¹ I have already noted that Battles' translation of *sentiant* in this passage as "recognize," rather than the more literal "feel," shifts this remark toward the propositional end of the interpretive spectrum. Nevertheless, the question stands: what kind of

²⁰¹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.2.1.

feeling—how explicitly formulated as a belief or in language—is required? Calvin goes on in the next paragraph to remark that the mind who attains the knowledge of God

recognizes God (*Ita cognitum*) because it knows (*intelligit*) that he governs all things... trusts (*confidit*) that he is its guide and protector... understands (*intelligit*) [God] to be the Author of every good... is persuaded (*persuasa est*) that [God] is good and merciful... acknowledges (*agnoscit*) [God] as Lord and Father.²⁰²

In this passage, Calvin's favored terms for coming to acquaintance with God, *cognitio* and *agnitio*, appear in conjunction with verbs of understanding (*intelligere*) and persuasion (*persuadeo*). Does this imply that the condition under investigation rests on, reflects, or requires understandings about God? Can the "knowledge of God" be said to have been achieved if the spectator has not articulated a concept of God in these terms?—that is, as source of goodness, as Author, as Father, etcetera?

It is possible to interpret passages like this as evidence that the "knowledge of God" is fundamentally propositional.²⁰³ However, as I noted at the beginning of this chapter, I do not think it makes sense to take belief as the indispensable core or base of this condition. There is another interpretive option, which is not to deny that the person who attains the "knowledge of God" is able to make propositional claims about God—she certainly is—but to locate this ability as an outgrowth, not a prerequisite, of this condition. To combine this interpretive proposal with that offered in the preceding section, I suggest that rather than taking *beliefs* as constitutive of the "knowledge of God" and piety as its consequence,²⁰⁴ it is more faithful to the true spectator to

²⁰² Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.2.2.

²⁰³ Helm argues that the knowledge of God is "propositional in content rather than a person to person awareness of God." Helm, *John Calvin's Ideas*, 225.

²⁰⁴ Here I follow a principle articulated by Dowey: "It is as distorting to rearrange Calvin's theology making the rational elements preliminary and preparatory to God's miracle... as it is to deny altogether their subsequent and subsidiary, but nevertheless essential, place." Dowey, *The Knowledge*, 138. Note however, that I do not deploy this principle in quite the way that Dowey imagines.

take *piety* as constitutive of the “knowledge of God” and articulated *beliefs* about God as its consequence.

This interpretation has the advantage that it makes sense of the fact that Calvin offers both articulate and inarticulate versions of the “knowledge of God” at different moments in the *Institutio*. Although the passage just cited articulates the spectator’s orientation toward God into a series of concepts—God is “Author,” “Lord,” “Father,” etcetera—the passage that is arguably the most programmatic account of what the “knowledge of God” looks like in practice is clearly *inarticulate*. To review, in 1.5.9 when Calvin describes the spectator’s act of gazing upon God from God’s works, he specifies: “this particular search for God (*Dei investigationem*)... may so hold our mental powers suspended in wonderment (*quae sic suspensum admiratione ingenium teneat*) as at the same time to stir us deeply.”²⁰⁵ In this passage, Calvin explicitly describes a stance of “searching out (*investigatio*)”²⁰⁶ God that nevertheless holds the spectator’s creative—and therefore, presumably, expressive—capacities in a state of suspension.

This amazed and inarticulate suspension is not unlike the one that, as we saw at the outset of this chapter, characterizes a Renaissance spectator’s ideal response to a painting or a dramatic performance. There is no indication that the reader should supply an articulate belief that is the unstated content of this spectator’s experience, and yet this is clearly a phenomenological portrait of the attainment of the “knowledge of God.” This pivotal passage is evidence, then, that an unfallen mind’s encounter with the Creator through the spectacle of creation need not rise to conscious, propositional, or linguistic expression in order to qualify as the “knowledge of God.”

²⁰⁵ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.9.

²⁰⁶ This term is opposed to another kind of search mentioned earlier in the paragraph—for which Calvin uses the legal term *executio* (an accomplishing, prosecution, or complete treatment)—that seeks knowledge of God’s *essence*.

What, then, is the relationship between an inarticulate experience like this and the many conceptual distillations that Calvin also offers? Calvin gives us a useful way of relating them when he calls identifying God as “Father,” “as it were, the dictation of experience (*quasi dictante experientia*).”²⁰⁷ Recall that in the first section of this discussion I argued that for Calvin, the knowledge of God is not a set of propositions *about* what God is like, but an embodied experience of what God is like toward the spectator *in practice*—that is, as encountered in the sensory experience of created works. Keeping this in mind—and taking Calvin’s memorable phrase, *dictante experientia*—as our touchstone, I propose that we understand human propositions about God as after-the-fact transcriptions of the spectator’s originally passive encounter with the spectacle of created works. On this reading, the fact that the spectator’s experience can be transcribed in propositional form is not evidence that belief- or judgment-formation must occur in order for the knowledge of God to be attained.²⁰⁸ Though the spectator may articulate conclusions about God on the basis of her forceful encounter with created works, it is the pious posture elicited by this encounter—and not any particular conceptual content into which it can be formulated or expressed—that amounts to the “knowledge of God.”

This interpretation has the advantage of not overlooking or downplaying Calvin’s emphasis on sensation, instantaneity, and the spectator’s passivity. But it also explains why it has been so tricky to put our finger on the “knowledge of God.” The challenge lies in Calvin’s habit of mixing two ways of alluding to this condition—sometimes referring to the experience of spectatorship in which it is achieved, and at other times referring to the conscious ideas into

²⁰⁷ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.3.

²⁰⁸ Sudduth makes a similar point when he argues for the presence of an “episodically inferential natural theology” in these chapters, by which he means that Calvin leaves open the possibility that “upon due reflection,” one who has already achieved the knowledge of God might “actually go through a discursive process and reason out matters that were originally latent or implicit.” Sudduth, “The Prospects,” 61. Sudduth shows that Calvin explicitly describes a process like this regarding arguments for the credibility of scripture, which Calvin specifies play a role only *subsequent* to faith. Sudduth, “The Prospects,” 64.

which this experience can be transcribed. Ultimately, Calvin is willing to call *both* the “experience” and its “dictation” the “knowledge of God.” However, we can now see that, properly speaking, ideas about God’s stance toward humans are not the cause, but the product of the spectator’s pious orientation toward God. Indeed, they are the articulate dictation and intellectual working-out of a disposition which the spectacle has already evoked in her. Calvin’s “knowledge of God” is thus the crucial perceptual foundation and starting point for any subsequent understandings *about* God.

As the passages already canvassed reflect, Calvin has a number of “articulate” ways of expressing the experience that is the “knowledge of God.” We have seen him describe God as “Author of [humans’] every good,”²⁰⁹ “fountainhead and source of every good,”²¹⁰ and “Lord and Father,”²¹¹ among others.²¹² But the most encompassing of Calvin’s shorthands for the spectator’s experience of encountering God in created works is “Father.”²¹³ Indeed, just before the striking line regarding the “dictation of experience,” Calvin remarks, “we are God’s offspring, because by adorning us with such great excellence he testifies that he is our Father.” Calvin goes on in the same paragraph to link having “tasted [God’s] fatherly love” to the

²⁰⁹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.2.1. See similar phrasing at 1.2.2.

²¹⁰ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.2.2. See similar phrasing at 1.2.1. For a brief discussion of God as *fons omnium bonorum*, see Garret A. Wilterdink, *Tyrant or Father? A Study of Calvin’s Doctrine of God* (Bristol, IN: Wyndham Hall Press, 1985), 51-55.

²¹¹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.2.2.

²¹² For an extended discussion of the concepts Calvin uses to describe God’s interactions with humans, including Lord, Judge, and Father, see van der Kooi, *As in a Mirror*, 130-38.

²¹³ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.2.1, 1.2.2, 1.5.3, 1.5.7, 1.5.8, 1.10.1, 1.16.1, 1.14.2, 1.14.22. As Parker notes, “To know the Creator is to know Him as the One who exercises towards us His wisdom, power, goodness, etc.” Parker, *Calvin’s Doctrine*, 54. The title of “father” seems to capture how God behaves toward humans better than any other single label. For a sustained argument regarding the importance of divine fatherhood in Calvin’s thinking, see Wilterdink, *Tyrant or Father?*, especially Chapters Two, Three, and Seven. Wilterdink identifies four dimensions of divine fatherhood in Calvin’s work: generation, discipline, nurture, and responsiveness, 31-58. Gerrish notes that although there is no conflict between the images of God as fountain and father, nevertheless “as the *Institutes* unfolds, it is in fact the familial rather than the natural imagery that dominates.” B. A. Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude: The Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 27.

worshipful orientation that is piety.²¹⁴ Similarly, in a comment that directly precedes the theater passage, Calvin calls God’s created works “just so many proofs of heavenly providence, especially of fatherly kindness.”²¹⁵

Thus, we can say with Garret Wilterdink that “Calvin focuses in upon this fatherly love and care as the content of the true knowledge of God.”²¹⁶ Likewise, as Émile Doumergue put it before him, “*C’est la connaissance de cet amour paternel qui est la vraie cognoissance de Dieu.*”²¹⁷ Fatherliness, in other words, is perhaps the best “articulate” way of describing the relationship created works extend to the spectator. Their force, we might say, is fatherly care—which is why the mind’s ideal reaction to them is *pietas*, with its overtly filial connotations.²¹⁸ The concept of divine fatherliness elegantly answers the questions that, as we saw above, Calvin associates with the “knowledge of God”—namely, “what sort [God] is and what is consistent with his nature”²¹⁹ as well as “what befits us and is proper to his glory, in fine, what is to our advantage to know of him.”²²⁰ If the “knowledge of God” consists in an experience of what God

²¹⁴ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.3. Calvin’s reference to taste in connection with fatherly love—a conjunction that recurs at several points across the *Institutio*—emphasizes the indispensable experience of perceiving this directly for oneself. Calvin speaks later of the need to “taste God’s special care, by which alone his fatherly favor is known.” Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.16.1. Visual and gustatory language are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, Thomas Lentes has observed that late medieval viewing was a synesthetic experience: “the people who contemplated images reported that seeing was a gustatory experience, indeed, one of sweetness. The outer view had, by no means, only a visual effect; what was seen was intended to be tasted as well, at least by means of the inner senses.” Thomas Lentes, “‘As far as the eye can see...’: Rituals of Gazing in the Late Middle Ages,” in Hamburger and Bouché, *The Mind’s Eye*, 362.

²¹⁵ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.8.

²¹⁶ Garret A. Wilterdink, “The Fatherhood of God in Calvin’s Thought,” *Reformed Review* 30, no. 1 (October 1976): 12. For a review of the earlier literature on the notion of divine fatherhood in Calvin’s work, see Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude*, 22-24.

²¹⁷ E. Doumergue, *Jean Calvin: Les hommes et les choses de son temps*, vol. 4, *La pensée religieuse de Calvin* (Lausanne, Switzerland: Georges Bridel & C^{ie} Editeurs, 1910), 90-91.

²¹⁸ On the antecedents of Calvin’s use of *pietas* in Cicero, Lactantius, and Aquinas, see Simpson, “*Pietas*.”

²¹⁹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.2.2.

²²⁰ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.2.1.

is like toward humans in the spectacle of created works,²²¹ then a powerful way to express this conceptually is to say that God is a loving father, and the spectator a grateful child.²²²

4.5 The knowledge of God as “perception.” Let me now draw the threads of these four close readings together to articulate how the behavior of the true spectator leads us to understand Calvin’s “knowledge of God.” The spectator realizes this condition through sensory encounter with God’s self-manifestation in created works. She need not form an inference on the basis of this sensory experience. On the contrary, attainment of this “knowledge” is simultaneous with her encounter with the spectacle—it is more forced upon her, than reached by her, on its basis. Further, this condition consists in the pious disposition the spectacle draws forth from her, and not any propositions she may advance about what God is like—though she may articulate these after the fact, as a conceptual expression of the filial orientation the spectacle evoked in her.

I noted at the outset that comments regarding the uneasy fit between the modern connotations of “knowledge” and the condition Calvin is describing are commonplace in literature on the subject. I also noted that Calvin does not actually have a single Latin term for this condition. In the light of these challenges, I prefer to characterize this condition that the *Institutio* depicts as the end of human life not by qualifying the traditional translation “knowledge,” but by speaking instead of “perception.”

“Perception” comes from the Latin *percipere*, which has the primary sense of to gather or receive and then, in a transferred sense, to feel, experience, learn, or know. Although forms of

²²¹ Of all commentators on Calvin’s knowledge of God, it may be Cornelis van der Kooi who puts it best when he calls this condition “the perception of a source of good.” Van der Kooi, *As in a Mirror*, 24.

²²² Brian Gerrish has done more than any other commentator to draw attention to the place of gratitude in Calvin’s theology: “What kind of human race corresponds to God the bountiful parent? The answer is obvious enough: grateful sons and daughters... The heart of the matter can then be summed up if we say that the existence of humanity in God’s design is defined by thankfulness, the correlate of God’s goodness, and the existence of humanity in sin is defined by thanklessness, the antithesis of God’s goodness.” Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude*, 41.

percipere appear in the *Institutio*, it is not more prominent than the other verbs which Calvin uses to describe acts of spectating, which I canvassed at the beginning of the chapter.²²³ I propose “perception” not because of its Latin root and occasional appearance in the *Institutio*, but for the term’s current meaning. Its primary reference is to the process of becoming aware of something, especially through the senses. It indicates, secondarily, a mental product, insight, or other result of such a process.²²⁴

I see the term’s robust association with sense perception as a major advantage; as Michel Fichant observes, perception’s “corporeal basis of access to the world prevents it from being assimilated to a pure ‘mental inspection.’”²²⁵ At the same time, “perception” indicates more than mechanical sensation. It encompasses also the moment and immediate effects of the mind’s encounter with sense objects. Whereas the term “knowledge” is closely associated with *conception*, and thus indicates the static possession of ideas or understandings,²²⁶ the prefix of *perception* emphasizes the *process* of coming to form such understandings. It underlines, moreover, that this process is “an operation mediated by the senses and involving the body.”²²⁷

My use of “perception” respects both the term’s primary and secondary meanings. I have already noted that Calvin alternately references the inarticulate process of arriving at, and the conceptual expression, of the condition traditionally called the “knowledge of God.”

²²³ It appears in the critical passage from 1.5.9 discussed extensively above: “We are called to a knowledge of God (*Dei notitiam*): not that knowledge which, content with empty speculation, merely flits in the brain, but that which will be sound and fruitful if we duly perceive it (*si rite percipiatur*), and if it takes root in the heart.”

²²⁴ *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*, s.v. “Perception,” accessed April 15, 2019, <http://www.oed.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/view/Entry/140560?redirectedFrom=perception#eid>.

²²⁵ Michel Fichant, “Perception/Apperception,” in Cassin, *Dictionary of Untranslatables*, 767. For an overview of the transformations this term undergoes in the work of Descartes, Leibniz, Kant, Fichte, and Hegel, see Fichant, “Perception/Apperception,” 764-67.

²²⁶ “Concept” or *conceptus* comes from the Latin *concipere*, meaning to take entirely or contain. It denotes the product of a mental gestation and indicates the act of taking together (*con-capere*) multiple things in a single act. See Claude Panaccio, “Conceptus,” in Cassin, *Dictionary of Untranslatables*, 165.

²²⁷ Fichant, “Perception/Apperception,” 765.

“Perception” has the advantage of encoding this very ambiguity, while placing a greater emphasis on the process of coming to acquaintance, as do Calvin’s own preferred terms, *cognitio*, *agnitio*, and *notitia*.

It may be objected that it is dangerous to embrace an extra-Calvinian term to guide our reading of the *Institutio*. Let me answer this plausible concern in two opposing ways. First, I do not think this concept *is* absent from the *Institutes*. As discussed above, Calvin does not have a single, dedicated word that he treats as satisfactorily capturing this condition that is the goal of human life. This means that, as Dowey observes in his seminal *The Knowledge of God in Calvin’s Theology*, “we are speaking elliptically when we use the phrase ‘knowledge of God’ in reference to Calvin’s theology. The words are in fact an abbreviation for the whole complicated interrelation which we have been describing.”²²⁸ In this spirit, I propose that “perception” is a reasonable translation and useful shorthand for the capacity that Calvin alternately calls *Dei cognitio*, *Dei agnitio*, and *Dei notitia*, and which he obliquely references through an even broader range of verbs.

In fact, this proposal codifies an instinct expressed in many previous commentators’ habit of translating or referring to this capacity as an act of “recognition.”²²⁹ Although I find “recognition” preferable to “knowledge”—which is too static to capture Calvin’s emphasis on the process of coming to acquaintance through sense experience²³⁰—“recognition” lacks the sensory connotations of “perception.” It also has the disadvantage of repeating the root

²²⁸ Dowey, *The Knowledge*, 24.

²²⁹ For example, Battles uses forms of “recognize” in 1.2.2 for *sentiant*, in 1.2.2 for *cognitum*, and in 1.5.10 for *agnitionem*. Calvin, *Institutio*.

²³⁰ To my knowledge, the only commentator to have explored the dynamic, processual nature of this “knowledge” is Lee Palmer Wandel. See Wandel, *The Eucharist in the Reformation: Incarnation and Liturgy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 140-66.

“cognition,” a term whose modern connotations lie rather far from Calvin’s *cognitio*.²³¹ I propose, then, that “perception” is a highly useful term to name the experience that Calvin uses no single word to pinpoint, but which we see illustrated in the ideal of the true spectator.

Second—and to take the opposite tack—the resort to clarifying terminology is authentically Calvinian. As Calvin says in his own defense of the extra-Biblical term “Trinity,” terminology should be judged by its ability to clarify what is read, not by its derivation from the text itself:

If they call a foreign word one which cannot be shown to stand written syllable by syllable in Scripture, they are indeed imposing upon us an unjust law which condemns all interpretation not patched together from the fabric of Scripture... If anyone, then, finds fault with the novelty of the words, does he not deserve to be judged as bearing the light of truth unworthily, since he is finding fault only with what renders the truth plain and clear?²³²

I submit that “perception” is, in Calvin’s words, “a useful manner of speaking”²³³ because it clarifies what the word “knowledge” tends to obscure—namely, Calvin’s emphasis on the sensory nature of the spectator’s gaze, the simultaneity of her pious posture with her act of spectatorship, and the advent of this condition through the sheer force of the spectacle upon her, and not through any inferential work of her own in reaction to it. Thus, to quote T.H.L. Parker, in proposing that “perception” is a worthy way of naming what the true spectator alone is able to achieve, “I have argued ‘Calvinishly.’”²³⁴

²³¹ On this point, see Muller’s work on *cognitio* in connection with faith. Muller, “*Fides and Cognitio*,” 211. On the basis of *cognitio*’s early modern connotations, and in light of my argument that the “knowledge of God” can be achieved in the absence of an inferential or other conscious thought, I must dissent from Dowey’s hitherto unchallenged characterization of the “fundamentally cognitive character” of the knowledge of God.

²³² Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.13.3. Calvin’s defense of this term continues into 1.13.4-5.

²³³ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.13.5.

²³⁴ Parker, *Calvin’s Doctrine*, 3.

5. The “interior senses” as historical warrant

I have proposed that the “perception of God” is a useful way to describe what the true spectator is able to attain in relation to the sensible works of creation. But is this an historically plausible reading of this difficult-to-pinpoint ideal and the figure who embodies it? This final section of the chapter provides historical warrant for the interpretation I have offered by showing that available and prominent conceptions of the mind in sixteenth century Europe allow for what we see in the spectator—namely, an encounter with created works that evokes an affective orientation without requiring an act of inference or judgment upon sense experience.

As noted above, Cartesian accounts of the relationship between the mind and the sensory world tend to distinguish and relate two processes: the receipt of neutral sense data, on the one hand, and a judgment the mind passes upon it, on the other. In addition to the fact that this view significantly postdates the composition of the *Institutio*, we have just seen that Calvin’s phenomenological description of true spectatorship cannot be shoehorned into these two, distinct steps. The spectator’s receipt of sense data is far from neutral, and it evokes an orientation in her without the need for her to form an inference on its basis. Something happens in the spectator that is logically posterior to sensation but anterior to judgment. What kind of mental process or faculty could account for this?

To answer this question, I return to a topic broached in my Introduction—to distinctively sixteenth-century understandings of the process of perception. Elaborating on the basic model laid out there, the following section explores the “interior senses,” a group of closely associated faculties that early modern Europeans understood to mediate between the five external senses, on the one hand, and the highest rational and contemplative powers of the soul, on the other. As I will show, the operations attributed to the interior senses shed light on how a sixteenth century

reader might understand someone to form an affective and evaluative orientation toward what is sensed that is nevertheless *not* the product of conscious reasoning, understanding, or willing.

5.1 The interior senses. It has often been noted that Calvin approves a traditional division of the soul into intellect (*intellectus*) and will (*voluntas*).²³⁵ However, what has received less attention is that Calvin also makes brief but approving allusion to the more elaborate accounts of the mind in vogue and under debate among early modern intellectuals.²³⁶ In the brief description of the mind’s faculties Calvin offers in Book I of the *Institutio*, Calvin explicitly acknowledges a space in which sense impressions are processed *after* their receipt by the exterior senses and *before* their presentation to the intellect and will. After passing through the five senses, Calvin says, objects are deposited into the “common sense” (*sensus communis*). Next “phantasy” (*phantasia*) discerns or distinguishes (*diiudicet*) what the common sense has apprehended. After this comes “reason” (*ratio*), to which Calvin attributes judgment (*iudicium*), and finally “understanding” (*mens*), which Calvin places in the highest position.²³⁷ For our purposes, what is most interesting in this overview is Calvin’s acknowledgment of an

²³⁵ See, for example, Muller, “*Fides and Cognitio*,” 212 and Helm, *John Calvin’s Ideas*, 135.

²³⁶ A rare exception is the brief overview of the same passage I will discuss here in van der Kooi, *As in a Mirror*, 68.

²³⁷ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.15.6. Most interesting for our purposes is the way that Calvin’s comments reveal alliances and distinctions among these faculties that render the movement from sense impression to understanding not so much a transfer across two completely different kinds of faculty—as some of Pico’s language, cited below, suggests—but more as a transition across a spectrum of intimately related functions. Calvin places understanding and reason together in the highest portion of the soul—what he calls its directive part (τὸ ἡγεμονικόν). He distinguishes understanding and reason in two ways. Whereas reason ponders matters in a discursive (*discurro*) manner, understanding quietly contemplates (*contemplo*). Moreover, whereas reason distinguishes what is to be followed from what is to be avoided, understanding distinguishes good from evil, right from wrong. Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.15.8. This partnership between understanding and reason would seem decisively to set them apart from the rest of the chain, but Calvin introduces other, overlapping groupings that give these highest faculties a close relation with phantasy and, through their relation with phantasy, a connection as well with the exterior senses. First, he groups understanding, reason, and phantasy together as the “three cognitive faculties of the soul” (*tribus animae facultatibus cognitivis*). Second, whereas the will (*voluntas*) moves in response to the understanding, Calvin specifies that reason and phantasy *together* control the capacity for anger (*vim irascendi*). Finally, even while these groupings create a close association between phantasy and the intellectual faculties of understanding and reason, phantasy nevertheless retains an alliance with the exterior senses: phantasy and sense together elicit the capacity for desire (*vim concupiscendi*). Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.15.6.

intermediate stage in which a percept is processed *after* it is taken in by the five senses but *before* the operations of reason and understanding. Although in Calvin's account this stage is associated with the *sensus communis* and the *phantasia*,²³⁸ these two faculties perform the same work that in other early modern accounts is attributed collectively to the "interior senses."

Calvin offers this framework as a deliberately minimal account—one, moreover, that he does not hold too tightly: he presents it as "true, or at least probable" but expresses openness to other ways of dividing the powers of the soul. Although he describes such accounts as "not only enjoyable, but also profitable to learn," he is clearly uninterested in quarrels about them.²³⁹ It would thus be mistaking Calvin's interest in the faculties to insist on mapping his other remarks too closely to this framework. However, in this brief rehearsal of faculties, we glimpse Calvin's familiarity with the psychological models of his day, enabling us to read his ideal of spectatorship against the backdrop of a broadly accepted account of the mind in which the "interior senses" play a crucial role.

Indeed, early modern thinkers were largely agreed regarding the existence of this nexus, which intervenes and mediates between sense data taken into the body externally and the soul's

²³⁸ Calvin's language reflects a broader move away from the un-Aristotelian terminology of "interior senses," and an increasing preference to refer to these operations under the collective heading of *phantasia*. Katharine Park, "The Organic Soul," in *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Psychology*, eds. C. B. Schmitt, Quentin Skinner, Eckhard Kessler, and Jill Krayer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 481.

²³⁹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.15.6. One of Calvin's earliest writings, his *Psychopannychia*, was an intervention into a longstanding early Renaissance debate regarding the immortality of the soul. It is interesting that even in this work he avoids going into detail on the soul's faculties, although he cites approvingly comments by Augustine and agrees (as he affirms elsewhere in the *Institutio*) that the soul is made up of reason, intellect, and will. John Calvin, "Psychopannychia; Or, The Soul's Imaginary Sleep Between Death and Judgement," in *Tracts containing Antidote to the Council of Trent* [...], trans. Henry Beveridge (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1851), <https://archive.org/details/tractsre03calvuoft/page/n8/mode/2up>. The debate over the soul had been prominent in Renaissance literature for more than a century when Calvin wrote. As George H. Tavard explains: "It would have been the normal thing, for an aspiring humanist who wished to establish his credentials, to express his thoughts on the question of immortality in a scholarly and persuasive *De anima*." George H. Tavard, *The Starting Point of Calvin's Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), 20. Tavard argues that Calvin "could not have been unaware of the academic discussions that had agitated the philosophical world for over two centuries" (30), and notes that the topic was of interest in the intellectual circles in which Calvin moved, including the group of French humanists associated with Marguerite d'Angoulême (33).

highest acts of intellection and will. This intervening complex, often called the “interior senses” (*sensus interiores*),²⁴⁰ was charged with not only receiving but also processing sense impressions from the exterior organs of sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch.²⁴¹ German Carthusian monk Gregor Reisch’s 1503 *Margarita philosophica*, a university textbook that also enjoyed broad circulation outside philosophy classrooms, gives us a picture of the soul widely accepted by sixteenth-century thinkers.²⁴² Reisch, who refers to this complex as an “interior sensitive power” (*potentia sensitiva interior*),²⁴³ locates the interior senses at a crucial borderline position, superior to the exterior senses but subordinate to the highest powers of the soul.²⁴⁴ In an influential article on the interior senses, Harry Austryn Wolfson calls them “post sensationary faculties,” a label

²⁴⁰ The term “interior senses” developed to refer to the faculties of the soul that Aristotle treats in Book III of *De anima*, preeminently the common sense and the imagination, which Aristotle distinguishes from the five external senses. It is important to note, however, that the term is not native to Aristotle. In Wolfson’s comprehensive treatment, the first cited mention appears in Augustine, who speaks of it in the singular, as an “internal sense” (*interior sensus*) or internal faculty (*interior vis*), which he employs as synonymous with Aristotle’s “common sense.” Harry Austryn Wolfson, “The Internal Senses in Latin, Arabic, and Hebrew Philosophic Texts,” *Harvard Theological Review* 28, no. 2 (April 1935): 69.

²⁴¹ Wolfson, “The Internal Senses,” 69. For a discussion of evolving attitudes regarding the helpfulness of this terminology—and indeed, the very idea of a distinct set of faculties, see Park, “The Organic Soul.” Even thinkers who objected to the notion of a set of discrete faculties together called the “interior senses” as an unwarranted explanatory addition to *De anima* recognized the existence of faculties, like the common sense and imagination (both of which appear in *De anima*), that processed sense impressions into phantasms.

²⁴² Written as a series of conversations between master and student, the *Margarita philosophica* (*Philosophical Pearl*) covered the materials of a typical university philosophy course and was even in use in some northern European universities. It was also the first such text to be circulated widely outside university communities. Cunningham and Kusukawa observe that it was “probably the most widely used resource for educated young men in northern Europe for more than a generation. . . [It] is probably as central a work as we are ever going to find to understand the education and mind-set of sixteenth-century university-level, Latin-reading men.” Andrew Cunningham and Sachiko Kusukawa, “Introduction,” in *Natural Philosophy Epitomised: A translation of books 8-11 of Gregor Reisch’s Philosophical Pearl (1503)*, trans. and eds. Andrew Cunningham and Sachiko Kusukawa (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2010), xi-xii. According to Park, the text takes up “conciliatory positions” and a “lowest-common-denominator approach to Aristotelian psychology” on most points. Park, “Organic Soul,” 470-72.

²⁴³ Gregor Reisch, *Philosophical Pearl*, bk. 10, treatise 2, ch. 21. Latin text from Gregor Reisch, *Margarita philosophica* (Düsseldorf, Germany: Stern, 1973), 432.

²⁴⁴ Reisch, *Philosophical Pearl*, bk. 10, treatise 2, ch. 5. Pico stresses that imagination is distinct not only from sense but also from opinion, reason, and intellection. And yet it is not unconnected with these higher abilities, but rather resides on the border between intellect and sense: “It follows sense (*sensum*), by an act of which it is born; intellection (*intellectionem*) it precedes.” Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola, ch. II, *On the Imagination: The Latin Text with an Introduction, an English Translation, and Notes*, trans. and ed. Harry Caplan (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1930).

which emphasizes their distinction from the external senses.²⁴⁵ But perhaps we should equally call them “pre-intellectual faculties” to emphasize, as does Reisch, that they are also distinct from the ‘higher’ faculties of intellect and will.²⁴⁶ In fact, Wolfson emphasizes that the interior senses are not to be confused with the “knowing, thinking, or rational faculty of the soul.”²⁴⁷

Different thinkers distinguished the faculties that make up this mediating nexus differently.²⁴⁸ For example, in his 1503 textbook, Reisch names five interior senses, whereas in his 1553 *Liber de anima*, Philip Melanchthon acknowledges three.²⁴⁹ While the number, names, and relationships among these powers differ from thinker to thinker—and sometimes even across different works in a single thinker’s corpus—the faculties frequently associated with this nexus include common sense, phantasy or imagination, a cogitative or estimative faculty, and memory. Together, they direct us to the important work that goes into forming a percept logically posterior to sensation but temporally prior to understanding.

²⁴⁵ Wolfson, “The Internal Senses,” 69.

²⁴⁶ In passages thick with references to Augustine, Reisch divides the intellective soul into intellect, will, and memory. Reisch, *Philosophical Pearl*, bk. 11, ch. 1-3. He makes the same division in his later discussion of the distinction between intellect (*intellectus*) and reason (*ratio*). Reisch, *Philosophical Pearl*, bk. 11, ch. 10; Latin from Reisch, *Margarita*, 450-51. In his 1553 *Liber de anima*, Melanchthon similarly distinguishes the inner senses from the bodily senses, on the one hand, and the intellect and the will, on the other. Melanchthon defines the intellect as “the power that recognizes, records, judges and thinks about individual and universal things, according to certain innate awarenesses in us, or about the principles of great arts, having a reflexive action by which it discerns and judges its own actions, and is able to correct errors.” Philip Melanchthon, *A Melanchthon Reader*, trans. Ralph Keen (New York: Peter Lang, 1988), 258.

²⁴⁷ Wolfson, “The Internal Senses,” 85.

²⁴⁸ Wolfson’s comparative survey of two, three, five, and seven-power schemes from Aristotle to Kant illustrates this fluidity. “The Internal Senses,” 86-129. Note, however, Carruthers’ warning that drawing overly precise distinctions among different commentators’ accounts can obscure the fact that these same writers were neither entirely precise nor unchanging in the way they related these faculties to one another. Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*. 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 57-58.

²⁴⁹ Reisch names five: the common sense (*sensus cōis*), the imagination (*imaginativa*), the estimation (*estimativa*), the phantasy (*fātasia*), and the memory (*memorativa*). He notes while giving this list that the *fātasia* is also called the *vis imaginative*. Reisch, *Philosophical Pearl*, bk. 10, treatise 2, ch. 21; Latin from Reisch, *Margarita*, 434. Although he dismisses the problem of their exact enumeration as unimportant, Melanchthon names three: common sense (*phantastic*), thought or composition (*dianoetic*), and memory (*mnemonetic*). The first “perceives the images offered by the external senses, and discerns the objects of the individual senses” while the second, “another force, that of composing and dividing, draws one thing from another as it thinks and judges.” The third records the memories of objects. Melanchthon, *A Melanchthon Reader*, 240.

Over the course of the sixteenth century, it became increasingly common²⁵⁰ to subsume all the functions of the interior senses under the single name “imagination.”²⁵¹ In the passage cited above, Calvin adopts a typically hybrid position, distinguishing the common sense from the imagination, but implicitly eliding the roles of estimation and memory when he refers to the phantasy’s work of discerning or distinguishing (*diudicet*) the data presented by the common sense *before* it is submitted to the work of reason. It is in this vaguely defined work of ‘processing’—acknowledged in Calvin’s remarks and widely accepted among his contemporaries—that we find the basis for a reaction that is irreducible to brute sensation but is also not the outcome of conscious reasoning.

The interior senses are defined by their mediating position in the chain of cognition. In his 1501 tract dedicated to the topic, Italian philosopher Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola,²⁵² makes much of this connective or translational role which allows the interior senses (or the imagination, as he calls it) to bridge the extremes of physical sensation and disembodied intellect²⁵³—in Pico’s words, “midway between incorporeal and corporeal nature, and... the medium through which they are joined.”²⁵⁴ Pico reasons: “Since man is constituted of the rational soul and body... What communication would the rational part have with the irrational, if there were not *phantasia* intermediate, somehow to prepare for reason the inferior nature, and to set up this nature to be cognized?”²⁵⁵ As Pico’s references to preparation emphasize, the work of

²⁵⁰ Park, “The Organic Soul,” 480-81. Park describes how what was previously divided among several powers ultimately come to be conflated into single function, usually called the imagination.

²⁵¹ Pico, *On the Imagination*, ch. V. Pico uses “imagination” interchangeably with “phantasy” (ch. I). He explicitly rejects Avicenna’s distinction between the phantasy and the imagination (ch. IV).

²⁵² Not to be confused with his uncle, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, the author of *De hominis dignitate*.

²⁵³ Park makes a similar point when she observes that the interior senses “bridge the gap between external sensation, limited to knowledge of particulars, and the highest cognitive operation of intellection, which dealt with universals.” Park, “The Organic Soul,” 470-71.

²⁵⁴ Pico, *On the Imagination*, ch. VI.

²⁵⁵ Pico, *On the Imagination*, ch. VI.

the interior senses is to reformulate and thus somehow ready what is taken by the senses in such a way that it can be submitted to reason.

What is crucial for our purposes is to appreciate that this “preparation” entails important compositional and interpretive work that early modern readers would have understood to occur after a sense impression is taken in through the five exterior senses and before it is submitted to the mind’s ‘higher’ functions—such as, in Calvin’s account, reason (*ratio*) and understanding (*mens*). What might this processing entail? First, similarities and differences among sense impressions must be distinguished so that sensations taken in by discrete organs, such as sight and taste, or hearing and touch, can be compiled into what Wolfson calls a “unified percept.”²⁵⁶ Impressions taken in by the external senses must also be combined with stored impressions so as to create connections between current and past perceptions.²⁵⁷

Moreover, long before any deliberate act of the will, this percept must undergo an initial critical or evaluative process that yields a perceiver’s pre-conscious attraction to or revulsion from, trust for or suspicion of, what it has perceived.²⁵⁸ Reisch compares this to the unconscious act of discernment whereby a sheep instinctively responds with aversion to the sense impression

²⁵⁶ Wolfson, “The Internal Senses,” 78. This function is traditionally assigned to the common sense. Reisch, *Philosophical Pearl*, bk. 10, treatise 2, ch. 22.

²⁵⁷ In Reisch’s scheme, the common sense then transmits this percept to the imagination, whose modest role is to receive and store the impression. Reisch, *Philosophical Pearl*, bk. 10, treatise 2, ch. 22. However, the common sense is frequently conflated with the imagination, so that the imagination is understood to participate in not only image storage but also image compilation—i.e., acts of separation and combination. Wolfson, “The Internal Senses,” 77. As Wolfson explains, Augustine and Gregory the Great combine the common sense and the imagination under the internal sense in general. Wolfson, “The Internal Senses,” 95. In this way, the imagination, while executing roles sometimes associated with the common sense, *also* comes to be conflated with the phantasy, which—for example, in Reisch—creates entirely new images that are not based directly on sense experience by combining stored species from past sensations. Reisch, *Philosophical Pearl*, bk. 10, treatise 2, ch. 23. Thus we see frequent exchanges among the labels and functions of the common sense, the imagination, and the phantasy.

²⁵⁸ This function is sometimes attributed to the cogitative or estimative faculty, sometimes called the sensible or particular reason. Reisch says: “If reason has adorned this sense (as in men) then we usually call it not the estimative but the cogitative sense, or the particular reason.” Reisch, *Philosophical Pearl*, bk. 10, treatise 2, ch. 22. As Wolfson explains, cogitation or estimation can execute the functions of combination and separation, but it can also take on the work of distinguishing true from false or engaging in other acts of discernment and interpretation. Wolfson, “The Internal Senses,” 78, 83. See Wolfson, “The Internal Senses,” 113 on the history of the conflation of the cogitative and the estimative powers.

of a wolf on the horizon.²⁵⁹ This illustration is a commonplace in discussions of the interior senses. Robert Pasnau analyzes Aquinas' use of the comparison in the following terms:

The estimative power apprehends the individual as something to be fled (for instance) or something to be desired... [it] can be impressed by something like a sense of danger... this sense of danger is not a general classificatory judgment; presumably, then, it is more like a nonconceptual urge.²⁶⁰

As Katherine Tachau observes of the process illustrated by the sheep's unconscious aversion to a wolf, it must be possible to "make sense" of what one sees without the operation of the intellect, because animals do not have one!²⁶¹ Thinkers differ as to how far this estimative function as it operates in humans goes beyond animal instinct. Nevertheless, even those who describe this as a kind of cogitation or a lower form of reason emphasize that it occurs both *instantly and prior to* the presentation of the processed percept to the understanding and the will.²⁶² It is an ability, as Tachau says, "to make perceptual distinctions before we think about them."²⁶³

The work of the interior senses thus goes beyond reflecting or even recomposing images on the basis of sense impressions. It includes a form of pre-intellectual response that not only combines impressions taken in simultaneously through different senses and associates them with

²⁵⁹ Reisch also notes that this discerning power is not restricted to natural instinct but can equally draw on past experience to produce an orientation toward or away. He is consciously drawing on Avicenna for this illustration. Reisch, *Philosophical Pearl*, bk. 10, treatise 2, ch. 22. See Wolfson, "The Internal Senses," 87-91 for a hypothesis regarding origin of *aestimatio* or *vis aestimativa* in Arabic commentaries on Aristotle's remarks about the things animals do by natural instinct. He emphasizes that the heart of this concept is that the sheep need draw on no prior experience in order to feel instinctive hostility and fear at the perception of a wolf. Again, just as imagination comes to be conflated with common sense and phantasy, so the functions of imagination and estimation are frequently and indeed increasingly conflated. Wolfson, "The Internal Senses," 97, 107. This may be due in part to increasing skepticism regarding the faculty of cogitation or estimation, which do not appear in Aristotle's *De anima*. Park, "The Organic Soul," 480-81.

²⁶⁰ Pasnau, *Theories of Cognition*, 53-54. Note that, in a passage Pasnau quotes here, Aquinas describes the animal's interior senses as apprehending *intentiones* of either friendliness or hostility. Avicenna defined the estimative sense as the faculty that takes into account such *intentiones*, understood as properties of a perceived object not reducible to its impressed form. Tachau, "Seeing as Action and Passion," 343.

²⁶¹ Tachau, "Seeing as Action and Passion," 341.

²⁶² Bauerschmidt describes this faculty as providing "a kind of non-rational cognition." Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt, "Imagination and Theology in Thomas Aquinas," *Louvain Studies* 34 (2009-2010): 170.

²⁶³ Tachau, "Seeing as Action and Passion," 341.

what it finds in the storehouse of memory,²⁶⁴ but even involves taking up an evaluative orientation toward what is perceived. The final product of these pre-conscious distinguishing, compositional, and evaluative processes is a mental creation called a phantasm (*phantasma*) or image (*imago, species*). As I will detail further in Chapter Three, thinking occurs only subsequent to the creation of this composite percept, because the ‘higher’ mental faculties require a phantasm to operate at all.²⁶⁵

The percept that serves as the basis of the thinking process is thus not a neutral packet of data prepared to be judged by the higher functions of the mind. Rather, it already encodes an initial response to what is sensed. As Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt explains,

This is particularly true if we take into account the evaluative faculties, which encode our sense perceptions with a fundamental “attitude” toward that which is perceived, an attitude that is in a sense “prior” to thought and akin to the instinctual responses of other animals. The inner senses, as Timothy McDermott puts it, “presents the animal not with a picture to look at, but with a three-dimensional world to walk into, to occupy, and in which to take a stance.”²⁶⁶

This passage underlines the fact that the phantasms which the interior senses present to the ‘higher’ part of the soul are not only composed, but indeed evaluatively colored by the work that occurs in this mediating zone.²⁶⁷ Because acts of judgment or understanding begin from this not-so-raw data, they are inescapably conditioned by—in a sense, at the mercy of—the work of the interior senses.

²⁶⁴ See Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*, 56-76 on the relationship of memory to the other interior senses. Against the assumption that it functions only as a static receptacle, she emphasizes the creative functions of memory, 1-4.

²⁶⁵ Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*, 67-68.

²⁶⁶ Bauerschmidt, “Imagination and Theology,” 173.

²⁶⁷ Corneanu and Vermeir cite Francis Bacon’s concern that the imagination can be colored by old prejudices: “Discoveries are not conceived possible before they are made because the imagination is ‘informed and coloured’ (*praecepta et inquinata*) by the old familiar doctrines... When philosophers become attached to their doctrines, they will ‘distort and corrupt’ all their cogitations ‘in line with their former fantasies.’” Sorana Corneanu and Koen Vermeir, “Idols of the Imagination: Francis Bacon on the Imagination and the Medicine of the Mind,” *Perspectives on Science* 20, no. 2 (Summer 2012): 193.

Whether conceived as the work of several faculties working in tandem (“the interior senses”) or a single multi-functional faculty (“the imagination”), the mental functions that occur after the receipt of sense data but before the operations of judgment constitute a pre-conscious and pre-intellectual yet informed and evaluative response to sense experience. The processing work that occurs in this mediating nexus not only generates a perceiver’s instantaneous orientation toward a sensation, but also conditions subsequent acts of judgment or understanding. This is important because it indicates that Calvin’s intellectual milieu offered a way to conceive of a perceptual response that involves the evocation of an evaluative stance toward sense experience *without yet being* a product of the judgment or the understanding. In other words, this perceptual model supports precisely the processes that Calvin’s narration of spectatorship seems to assume and require.²⁶⁸

5.2 The work of the interior senses as “perception.” The interior senses thus provide a material grounding for a pre-intellectual and pre-conscious processing of sense experience which already encodes an implicitly evaluative orientation toward what is sensed. It is this reaction—in which sense data are refracted by memory and evaluation but not yet submitted to reason—that I mean to indicate when I speak of “perception” in contradistinction to brute sensation, on the one hand, and conscious mental operations like reasoning, understanding, and willing, on the other. Thus, when I say—as the largest argument of this dissertation—that the *Institutio* is primarily

²⁶⁸ This discussion could be expanded in another direction by considering Scotist views of the mind, apropos of Torrance’s suggestion that Calvin is working on the basis of Scotist distinctions between intuitive and abstractive knowledge. See Torrance, “Intuitive and Abstractive Knowledge,” and Thomas F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1965). As Muller points out, in a Scotist view of the will, the will stands between reason and sense. Muller, “*Fides and Cognitio*,” 215. In other words, on this view, the will is responding to sense experience even before reason begins its operations upon what us received. This is simply another way to make the point that Calvin’s intellectual milieu offered resources for thinking about how a mind might react evaluatively to sense experience before and without yet performing an act of judgment upon it.

concerned with problems of “perception,” I mean to indicate neither the process of physical sensation alone *nor* the act of forming conscious judgments and understandings. Rather, with “perception,” I intend the work that in the sixteenth century was attributed to the “interior senses” or the “imagination,” which give rise to an unconscious, evaluative stance even before sense data is presented to the ‘higher’ faculties as the basis of a subsequent reasoning process.

Let me be clear that I am not suggesting that Calvin means deliberately to identify the interior senses as the mental locus of the “perception of God.” As noted above, Calvin is overtly uninterested in precise accounts of the workings of the mind. My point is, rather, that the widespread acknowledgement of this processing nexus among early modern thinkers makes the reading I have offered on the strength of Calvin’s “true spectator” not only interpretively, but also historically plausible. Any conversation among contemporaries has as its implicit backdrop a set of shared cultural assumptions about how the world and the mind works. These background ideas need not be flagged explicitly to be part of the discursive ‘water,’ so to speak, against which explicit proposals make sense. I am simply suggesting that we should read Calvin’s account of the “perception of God” against this backdrop and not unconsciously supply a Cartesian model in which the mind passes judgment upon neutral sense data—a view which, as noted above, would not become a live or widespread option for conceiving of the operations of the mind until well into the seventeenth century.

In fact, this backdrop provides a ground against which Calvin’s descriptions of the true spectator appear more plausible than they otherwise might. For example, consider the important point that, in this broadly accepted account of the mind, the higher and more conscious operations of intellect and will are performed *on the basis of* the phantasm composed and colored by the interior senses. This gives us a schema that can accommodate Calvin’s references to both

articulate and inarticulate versions of the “perception of God.” Given that a phantasm already includes a pre-conscious evaluative coloring, there is no contradiction in Calvin’s insisting that the spectator’s pious orientation occurs simultaneous with sense experience and without any exertion on the part of her reason. This gives us an inarticulate version of the “perception of God.” However, subsequent reasoning performed on the basis of this phantasm will, by definition, translate the orientation embedded in it into conceptual and linguistic expressions that reflect its normative coloring; this gives us articulate versions of the “perception of God.”

The interior senses thus offer an historical heuristic for understanding the behavior of the true spectator as Calvin describes it. I argued above that the ‘force’ of created works upon the spectator is not propositional, but orientational: as we saw, this spectacle naturally induces a posture of worshipful admiration that Calvin calls piety. Against the historical backdrop I have sketched here, it is plausible to read Calvin as implying that before the fall, the “perception of God” was achieved through the activity not only of the exterior senses, but also the interior senses—so that that a spectator could attain the normative orientation to sense experience induced by created works *without* engaging her reason or judgment. The most memorable illustration of this kind of unconscious, evaluative response is Reisch’s example of the sheep’s instantaneous, pre-rational aversion to a wolf on the horizon. In a parallel way, the “perception of God” is the instantaneous orientation of piety that would be the natural effect of God’s created works upon a mind capable of true spectatorship.

6. Conclusion: What would be possible for a true spectator

This chapter has proceeded on the interpretive wager that the “true spectator” is the surest guide to what Calvin understands by the capacity long called the “knowledge of God.” I have

argued that a close reading of the spectator's behavior suggests that this condition is usefully understood as a matter of "perception," and that there is historical warrant for preferring this fresh interpretation and updated terminology. Along the way, this chapter has laid out what I mean to indicate by "perception"—a word I prefer for its intimacy with but irreducibility to sense experience, and which I use to indicate the sensory encounter with created works through which humans become acquainted what God is like toward them.

This reading is susceptible of two reductions I would like to address preemptively. First, my proposal is not intended to 'reduce' the perception of God to the work of the interior senses. Rather, my purpose in situating Calvin's description of the true spectator against sixteenth-century understandings of the mind has been to show that there is an interpretive alternative to the two extremes of sensation, on the one hand, and judgment, on the other. Our interpretation of the "perception of God" is impoverished without a sense of this fertile middle ground that was widely accepted among educated, Latin-reading people in the sixteenth century. Indeed, it may be that in Calvin's account of how this condition was achieved before the fall—that is, pre-reflectively and without special effort—he is playing on the work of unconscious response that happens in this pivotal zone midway between sensation and judgment. Certainly, there is every reason to think that it was this basic conception of the mind that formed the implicit backdrop against which his contemporaries would have read his description of true spectatorship.

Second, the reader may worry that my emphasis on the sensory status of this spectacle—and the corresponding naturalness, even inevitability, of a true spectator's reaction to it—threatens a 'reduction' of the goal of human life to mere sense perception. On the contrary, what I am proposing is an enrichment of our understanding of what Calvin understands sense

perception—properly functioning, for a mind who does not reject or deny it—to offer.²⁶⁹ As Paul Helm observes, in the opening chapters of the *Institutio* Calvin gives us a portrait of “properly functioning capacities common (i.e. natural) to all people, which when brought to bear on the common world of sense experience, the natural world, yield a grasp that there is one God and creator of this entire world who is to be worshipped and served.” Helm emphasizes that this “natural” capacity is “the proper endowment of any normal human being.”²⁷⁰

Helm’s remark raises the point that for Calvin, the world does not have the function of revealing the Creator only subjectively, as a meaning that must be interpretively drawn out or inferred. Rather, the manifestation of God’s fatherly concern for humanity *is* the world’s objective and undeniable structure, so that to see created works “normally,” is to see their Creator.²⁷¹ Adams makes an important observation to this effect when he points out that

The universally available knowledge of God... is for Calvin a ‘natural’ knowledge... but if the universal knowledge of God is fully ‘natural’, it is at the same time entirely ‘revealed.’ There is no dichotomy in Calvin’s thinking here between the categories of ‘nature’ and ‘revelation.’²⁷²

To rephrase Adam’s final point, there is no contradiction in saying that the original “perception of God” is a naturally elicited reaction based in sense experience *and* that this is how divine self-manifestation was intended to function.

There is thus every reason to think that an unfallen perceiver—with, presumably, her interior senses functioning properly—would find herself instantaneously disposed in a pious

²⁶⁹ I would relate this to an important observation of Margaret Miles’ regarding Calvin’s view of the body. Miles notes that “the body in the original created state was spontaneously integrated in the whole human being.” Margaret R. Miles, “Theology, Anthropology, and the Human Body in Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 74, no. 3 (July 1981): 318. In other words, it should be no surprise if in its ideal condition, bodily sensation is an integral part of attaining the perception of God.

²⁷⁰ Helm, *John Calvin’s Ideas*, 228-29.

²⁷¹ “The world and human life are objectively given to the human mind that seeks knowledge of both; the world... has a structure that is both intelligible and good... Here Calvin shows his agreement with... the classical realist philosophical tradition.” Hoitenga, *Faith and Reason*, 150-51.

²⁷² Adams, “Calvin’s View,” 281.

manner toward the spectacle of created works. Such a spectator would not, that is, need to reason her way to a recognition of God’s fatherliness, or to a corresponding obligation of piety. On the contrary, Calvin is clear that it is only *after* the fall that sense experience is an inadequate starting point for the perception of God—and then, not because of any defect in the manifestation,²⁷³ but because of a defect in the fallen mind’s capacity for reception, or, as I am calling it, perception. In fact, as we will see in Chapter Three, the instinct to reason our way to a “knowledge of God” may actually be a hallmark of the fallen or “idolatrous” mind.²⁷⁴ Before we take up this issue, however, Chapter Two will expand on the theme of God’s literal perceptibility—specifically, as seen in the “accommodated” sites at which God intends humans to achieve the perception of God, both before and after the fall.

²⁷³ The seminal statement to this effect is Dowey, *The Knowledge*, 32. Calvin makes this point forcefully at 2.6.1.

²⁷⁴ In Chapter Three, I will extend my hypothesis that the interior senses offer an heuristic understanding of what goes *right* for the true spectator but *wrong* for a fallen mind, whose sin renders it incapable of spectatorship. I will show that Calvin’s vocabulary of idolatry as an affliction of the imagination capitalizes on what can go wrong with the mind’s pre-conscious evaluative coloring of the percepts it presents to the reason and understanding. If, as I will argue there, the idolatrous impulses that prevent us from achieving the perception of God are rooted in the interior senses or imagination, then this is further support for my claim that attaining this condition depends on the normal, i.e. non-sinful, functioning of one’s interior senses.

Chapter Two Accommodation Facilitates Perception

“Accommodation would seem...
[Calvin’s] fundamental way of explaining
how the secret, hidden God reveals
himself to us. Everything of which
our senses bring knowledge to us,
from our puny bodies to the stars,
microcosm and macrocosm, is the work
of a beneficent Creator who for our sakes
shows himself in these ways,
varied, faceted, yet altogether a unity.”
– F. L. Battles

Recent research on the motif of divine “accommodation” in Calvin’s works has established that—despite a lack of consistent terminology and the absence of a single discussion devoted to the topic in Calvin’s *Institutio*—this far-reaching theme touches on almost every aspect of the reformer’s thought.¹ In theological parlance, “accommodation” typically names a hermeneutic tool employed by patristic authors to excuse the use of anthropomorphic descriptions of God in Scripture, which are explained as rhetorical “accommodations” to human sensibilities.² In this narrow, traditional sense, “accommodation” is a strategy for explaining those exceptional cases in which God is falsely portrayed in service of a larger point—as, for example, when Scripture says God has “repented” or become “angry.”³

Epigraph: Ford Lewis Battles, “God Was Accommodating Himself to Human Capacity.”

¹ Jon Balsarak, for instance, has emphasized that accommodation pertains not just to revelation strictly understood, but to many aspects of God’s behavior and relationship to humans. Jon Balsarak, “The God of Love and Weakness: Calvin’s Understanding of God’s Accommodating Relationship with His People,” *The Westminster Theological Journal* 62, no. 2 (Fall 2000): 179.

² Huijgen has documented accommodation as a patristic commonplace in texts from the second to the fifth centuries. Arnold Huijgen, *Divine Accommodation in John Calvin’s Theology: Analysis and Assessment* (Göttingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), 89-92, 103-105. He argues that it is more likely that Calvin’s concept of accommodation is influenced by patristic usage than classical rhetoric, in which *accommodare* is a minor term, subsidiary to the broader concept of *apte dicere* (49-57). Note, however, that *accommodare* does play an important role in the rhetorical theory of Erasmus (101-103), much of whose language Calvin follows (128-31).

³ “What, therefore, does the word ‘repentance’ mean? Surely its meaning is like that of all other modes of speaking that describe God for us in human terms... Now the mode of accommodation (*submittendi ratio*) is for him to represent himself to us not as he is in himself, but as he seems to us (*non qualis in se est, sed qualis a nobis sentitur*)... Therefore whenever we hear that God is angered, we ought not to imagine any emotion in him, but rather

However, for Calvin, the clarifying rhetoric of Scripture is just one among many ways God self-presents in formats that are tailored or “accommodated” to human capacities. Many accommodations—including those Calvin considers most powerful and effective—are not rhetorical at all, but material. As Ford Lewis Battles, a great early interpreter of this theme in Calvin’s work observed, “everything of which our senses bring knowledge to us... is the work of a beneficent Creator who for our sakes thus shows himself in these ways.”⁴ Accordingly, in the *Institutio*, Calvin identifies everything from the natural world and the capacities of the human body to the incarnate Christ and the elements of the Supper—even human institutions like civil government and parenthood—as material accommodations. In light of the magnificent diversity of phenomena Calvin locates under this concept, it makes more sense to understand accommodation not as a rhetorical exception, but as the rule of created reality.⁵

A simple definition of accommodation that takes into account the motif’s relevance beyond exegetical contexts is to say that accommodation is the strategy whereby God interacts with humans “in a manner informed by and adapted to their capacity.”⁶ In this chapter, I show how we can specify this definition even further by understanding accommodation in terms of the *Institutio*’s overarching concern with perception.⁷ Moving beyond still-dominant rhetorical

to consider that this expression has been taken from our own human experience...” John Calvin, *Institutio Christianae Religionis* (Berolini: Gustavum Eichler, 1834), 1.17.13. English translation from John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960).

⁴ Ford Lewis Battles, “God Was Accommodating Himself to Human Capacity,” *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 31, no. 1 (January 1977): 33.

⁵ In the *Institutio*, as Battles observes, “[accommodation] is everywhere assumed as a working principle.” Battles, “God Was Accommodating,” 19n1. “...when laying out his conception of the fundamental basis upon which God relates with the world, Calvin finds accommodation there.” Jon Balsarak, *Divinity Compromised: A Study of Divine Accommodation in the Thought of John Calvin* (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer, 2006), 162.

⁶ Balsarak, *Divinity Compromised*, 14.

⁷ This claim is deliberately limited to the text under discussion here. See Wright’s now-classic reminder that accommodation may function differently beyond the pages of the *Institutio*. David F. Wright, “Accommodation and Barbarity in John Calvin’s Old Testament Commentaries,” in *Understanding Poets and Prophets: Essays in Honour of George Wishart Anderson*, ed. A. Graeme Auld (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press Ltd, 1993), 415-16.

models of the motif,⁸ the following analysis proposes that we understand accommodation to name God's strategy⁹ of self-presenting in formats tailored not simply to general human capacities, but to human *perceptual* needs—and, in so doing, facilitating the “perception of God” which we saw in Chapter One is the goal of human life.¹⁰

To say that something is “accommodated,” on this view, is to draw attention to divine self-manifestations *qua* perceptible, and especially to explain what it is about certain sites of manifestation that makes them perceptible for humans, in light of our distinctive perceptual tendencies. Thus, when we speak of “divine accommodation,” we are characterizing the “how” of God's engagement with humans: we are naming the fact that God renders Godself perceptible to humans—as we shall see, both before and after the fall—in a variety of sites specially tailored to their perceptual capacities. Perhaps the best image the text offers to connect accommodation

⁸ See Ernst van den Hemel, “Things That Matter: The *Extra Calvinisticum*, the Eucharist, and John Calvin's Unstable Materiality,” in *Things: Religion and the Question of Materiality*, eds. Dick Houtman and Birgit Meyer (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 4, which assesses even non-linguistic accommodations in a semiotic framework. However, the majority of divine accommodations do not fit easily within this rhetorical model of accommodation—popularized by Ford Lewis Battles and then E. David Willis—in which a literally false “statement” is used to convey a deeper truth. See Ernst van den Hemel, “God Lisped: Divine Accommodation and Cracks in Calvin's Scriptural Voice,” in *Words: Religious Language Matters*, eds. Ernst van den Hemel and Asja Szafraniec (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 245; E. David Willis, “Rhetoric and Responsibility in Calvin's Theology,” in *The Context of Contemporary Theology: Essays in Honor of Paul Lehmann*, eds. Alexander J. McKelway and E. David Willis (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1974).

⁹ It is obvious that accommodations have been tailored *to* human perceptual capacities. However, it is more difficult to specify what this tailoring means for the God who accomplishes it. Battles placed subsequent scholarship on this path when he famously insisted that we should forego the use of the noun “accommodation” and employ only the verb “accommodating” as a way to emphasize that it refers to a mode of divine action (Battles, “God Was Accommodating,” 19). However, interrogating accommodation from the side of divine activity raises logical difficulties: if accommodation addresses limited human capacities, how can those same humans gauge the difference between the accommodated revelation we possess and some putative un-accommodated revelation? If in accommodation God lowers either Godself or God's self-revelation (as is suggested by the most common Greek equivalent, *συγκαταβαίνω*), does that mean that God is thereby *lowered* or that revelation is distorted? If so, what are humans missing when we receive accommodated revelations? Huijgen raises these questions in *Divine Accommodation*, 319-73.

This chapter sets these debates about the divine dynamics of accommodation aside and focuses, instead, where Calvin focuses in the *Institutio*: on the positive effects of accommodations for their human perceivers. This is why I find it useful to place the accent on the past participle, speaking not of “accommodation” or of God's “accommodating” action but of sites of divine self-manifestation whose status is “accommodated.”

¹⁰ For another argument that emphasizes the perceptual dimensions of accommodation, see Michael H. Keefer's fascinating account of accommodation displaced into secular drama, “Accommodation and Synecdoche: Calvin's God in *King Lear*,” *Shakespeare Studies* 20 (January 1988): 147-68.

to perception is the justly famous comparison of Scripture to a pair of “spectacles” which help fallen humans “read distinctly” what they could not otherwise make out.¹¹ Because Scripture is a preeminent instance of divine accommodation, this image elegantly captures accommodation’s perceptual effects: like lenses, sites of accommodation orient, focus, correct, and ultimately enable humans’ otherwise indistinct perception of God.

In proposing that accommodation is best understood as God’s strategy for facilitating the “perception of God” as I articulated it in Chapter One, this chapter offers a fresh interpretation of this concept as it operates in the *Institutio*. At the same time, because references to accommodation suffuse the book, the following analysis provides further evidence for my claim that the *Institutio* is centrally concerned with perception.¹²

The four main sections of this chapter each explore a different side of my claim that accommodation is the divine *modus operandi* of making-perceptible, of presenting Godself in formats that facilitate the perception of God. The first section highlights Calvin’s comments regarding the ideal effect or outcome of accommodation, which is to enable humans to attain the perception of God. The second shows that sites of accommodation are distinguished—indeed, defined—by their perceptibility. The third analyzes how accommodations are sometimes linked in pairs or layers which reflect relationships of increasing perceptual clarity and clarification. In the final section of the chapter, I consider a subset of accommodations that might be interpreted as yielding a false or misleading appearance. If these limit cases require humans to disregard or

¹¹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.6.1.

¹² Accommodation has increasingly been recognized as a motif that, as David F. Wright put it in the 1990s, “takes us to the heart of Calvin’s theology.” David F. Wright, “Calvin’s Accommodating God,” in Calvinus Sincerioris Religionis Vindex: *Calvin as Protector of the Purer Religion*, eds. Wilhelm H. Neuser and Brian G. Armstrong (Kirksville, MO: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1997), 18. For an overview of the history of scholarship on this motif in Calvin and its role in Reformed systematics, see Huijgen, *Divine Accommodation*, 12-43. For an analysis of accommodation in Jewish thought, see Stephen D. Benin, *The Footprints of God: Divine Accommodation in Jewish and Christian Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 127-76.

distrust their perception, they could call into question my claim that accommodations facilitate the perception of God. I will show, however, that Calvin precludes this interpretation. Even these apparently exceptional cases have the same salutary perceptual effects as textbook instances of accommodation.

1. History of scholarship on accommodation

Before launching into the four main sections of this chapter, let me situate my approach within the recent history of scholarship on Calvin's "accommodation." Since the flowering of research into the subject in the 1980s, there has been widespread recognition that Calvin's deployment of the motif outstrips that of his theological predecessors. Not only does Calvin frequently invoke accommodation in interpreting passages where previous commentators did not, but he also deploys accommodation outside of its traditional exegetical contexts.¹³

Researchers are now more-or-less agreed that it is not a stretch to say—as Battles suggested only tentatively in his 1977 article—that for Calvin, accommodation touches “every avenue of relationship between God and man.”¹⁴ As such, the motif of accommodation runs throughout the *Institutio* and figures in practically every major doctrinal locus. Even when Calvin does not use *accommodare* (to adjust or adapt) or the less common *attemperare* (to make fit), he makes continual reference to the motif through references to the limited capacity (*captus*) or measure

¹³ Balserak has shown Calvin's tendency to introduce accommodation into his reading of passages where previous commentators did not. He notes that, with the exception of Chrysostom, no theologian turns to accommodation as frequently as Calvin. Balserak, *Divinity Compromised*, 20-32. Huijgen argues that Chrysostom is the most likely patristic influence on Calvin's deployment of the motif. Huijgen, *Divine Accommodation*, 131-32.

¹⁴ Battles, “God Was Accommodating,” 20. “It may be that we have succumbed to the temptation of putting the concept of accommodation too much at the center of Calvin's thought and of trying to organize everything around this notion. Yet, if this be a faithful interpretation, accommodation would seem... [Calvin's] fundamental way of explaining how the secret, hidden God reveals himself to us...” Battles, “God Was Accommodating,” 33. We can say this confidently because accommodation explains what makes things like natural beauty, Scripture, Christ, and the sacraments effective avenues of relationship with God. They have been “accommodated,” that is, designed the way they are so as to make the perception of God appealing and accessible to humans.

(*modulus*) and the human characteristics—sluggishness (*hebetudo, socordia*), numbness (*torpor, stupor*), and weakness (*infirmetas, tenuitas, imbecillitas*), among others¹⁵—which occasion this divine strategy.

For many years, scholarship on accommodation has been a story of competing classifications. In 1952, Edward A. Dowey distinguished between accommodations to humans as finite creatures and accommodations to humans as sinners.¹⁶ In 1977, Battles distinguished God’s accommodation to humans as children, as students, and as invalids.¹⁷ In 1993-1995, David F. Wright added the category of God’s accommodation to “Israel as a primitive ethnos.”¹⁸ More recently in 2006, Jon Balsarak added yet another category, God’s accommodation to “human beings as the wicked and the godly.”¹⁹ The proliferation of types of accommodation has drawn attention to the breadth of this motif in Calvin’s thought and across his corpus.

This chapter moves beyond a classificatory approach in two ways. First, rather than adding to our already rich appreciation of the diversity of human qualities and quandaries which accommodation addresses, I look for the shared purpose that unites otherwise disparate instances of accommodation. Whether conceived as a deficiency in maturity, education, health, sophistication, or holiness, what all the many forms of human limitation catalogued in previous scholarship have in common is that they all stymie humans’ ability to achieve the perception of God. While Calvin never lacks for new ways to describe human deficiency, his account of

¹⁵ For a survey of terms associated with accommodation and limited human capacities in the Latin tradition, see Balsarak, *Divinity Compromised*, 15-16, 43-54. See also Reinhold Hedtke, *Erziehung durch die Kirche bei Calvin* [...] (Heidelberg, Germany: Quelle & Meyer, 1969), 33-39. For a discussion of related terms in the Greek fathers, see Huijgen, *Divine Accommodation*, 62-71.

¹⁶ Edward A. Dowey, Jr., *The Knowledge of God in Calvin’s Theology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952), 4.

¹⁷ Battles, “God Was Accommodating,” 20.

¹⁸ Wright, “Accommodation and Barbarity,” 423. David F. Wright, “Calvin’s ‘Accommodation’ Revisited,” in *Calvin as Exegete: Papers and Responses Presented at the Ninth Colloquium on Calvin & Calvin Studies*, ed. Peter De Klerk (Grand Rapids, MI: Calvin Studies Society, 1995): 178.

¹⁹ Balsarak, *Divinity Compromised*, 54-57.

accommodation as a strategy to facilitate the otherwise unattainable goal of human life is—as I show in the first major section below—remarkably consistent. While the original accommodation of creation preceded the fall and others, like Scripture and the Incarnation, followed it, all pursue the single goal of facilitating the perception of God, and thus can be fruitfully compared with reference to this ideal outcome.

This is why, second, I set aside the method of juxtaposing and classifying instances from diverse texts and instead articulate how accommodation functions in the ecosystem of an individual work. This is the only way to answer the call, articulated by several recent scholars, for an integrated portrait of how accommodation relates to other concepts in Calvin’s work.²⁰ In this chapter, I take up this task in the context of the *Institutio* by specifying the precise relationship of accommodation to “perception of God” as I defined it in Chapter One. In Chapters Three and Four, I will go on to show how accommodation relates to idolatry. As we will see there, one of the most damaging outcomes of idolatry is the *neglect* of designated accommodations, without the use of which, humans cannot attain the perception of God. This chapter’s new approach to accommodation thus contributes to the largest project of this dissertation by showing how these major themes of the *Institutio*—the concept traditionally known as the “knowledge of God,” as well as the motifs of “accommodation” and “idolatry”—can be more precisely related to one another if and when we appreciate their shared concern with perception.

²⁰ Wright issued a call for an integrated portrait of the role of accommodation in Calvin’s theology in “Calvin’s Accommodating God,” 19. Balsarak and Huijgen have each taken steps in this direction. See Balsarak, *Divinity Compromised*, 137-62 and Arnold Huijgen, “Divine Accommodation and Divine Transcendence in John Calvin’s Theology,” in *Calvinus Sacrarum Literatum Interpres: Papers of the International Congress on Calvin Research*, ed. Herman J. Selderhuis (Göttingen, Germany: Vanderhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008).

2. Accommodations facilitate the “perception of God”

When Calvin discusses how individual instances of accommodation function, he places the accent on their positive effects for human recipients.²¹ Balsarak gestures in this direction when he emphasizes that Calvin’s God is situational and highly purposeful, that accommodation proceeds in pursuit of a “desired outcome.”²² But what exactly *is* the outcome God pursues via accommodation, insofar as that outcome is described in the *Institutio*? Calvin does not always name God’s goals when he identifies an instance of accommodation.²³ However, if we survey what Calvin does say about God’s purposes in accommodating, we find a remarkable consistency in these aims.

Simply put, the intended outcome of accommodation is to enable humans to attain the condition that, in Chapter One, I defined as the “perception of God.”²⁴ As we saw there, not simply knowing that God exists, or knowing anything about God’s nature, but rather perceiving what God is like toward humans from direct acquaintance with the perceptible sites where God self-manifests—and adopting a stance of piety in response—is the goal of human life. In Chapter One, I discussed this goal as Calvin suggests it was intended to operate under unfallen conditions, when all humans were capable of being “true spectators” and thus of perceiving the way God acts toward humans in the original accommodation of created works. In this chapter, I

²¹ Van den Hemel, “God Lisperd,” 241.

²² Balsarak, *Divinity Compromised*, 113-14 and Balsarak, “The God of Love and Weakness,” 190. Balsarak canvasses several categories of reasons given for God’s accommodating behavior but does not emphasize its effects for humans. Balsarak, *Divinity Compromised*, 101-106.

²³ This may be because Calvin takes this to be obvious or implied by context; there is no reason to think these represent exceptions. Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.14.3, 3.13.2, 3.19.12, 3.24.9, 4.19.21.

²⁴ For a reading that, by contrast, takes the effect of accommodation to be veiling and curtailing the “knowledge of God,” see Wright, “Calvin’s Accommodating God,” 18-19. Balsarak extends this interpretation to argue that accommodation reduces and simplifies the knowledge of God. Balsarak, *Divinity Compromised*, 57-58, 62, 72-73. However, see Huijgen’s important point that, “in Calvin’s theology, not the knowledge of God itself, but God’s revelation and deeds are accommodated to human capacity. Human knowledge of God is limited rather than accommodated.” Huijgen, *Divine Accommodation*, 15.

discuss the divine strategy of accommodation as it operates under not only pre-fall, but also fallen conditions. What we find, when we cast a wider net to include all accommodations, is that while God provides new and different sites of accommodation to address the perceptual impairments characteristic of fallen humans, these later accommodations continue to pursue the same goal as the original accommodation of creation—namely, to facilitate the perception of God.

2.1 Accommodations’ shared purpose. We can see this in a host of passages in which Calvin explicitly describes the purpose of individual accommodations as making possible the condition that in Chapter One I dubbed the “perception of God.” Creation, Scripture, and the Incarnation are three of the most prominent instances of accommodation treated in the *Institutio*, and Calvin describes the perception of God as the intended effect of all three.

Chapter One dealt exclusively with the accommodation of creation, and there we consistently saw Calvin connect the perceptibility of God’s self-manifestations in the visible universe and its government to the final goal of the blessed life, namely, the perception of God.²⁵ In the same way, Calvin describes Scripture as God’s chosen means for both the patriarchs and contemporary Christians to attain the perception of God.²⁶ Indeed, Calvin goes on explicitly to connect the accommodations of creation and Scripture by the fact that they pursue the same effect: “the knowledge of God (*Dei notitia*) set forth for us in Scripture is destined for *the very same goal* as the knowledge whose imprint shines in his creatures (*in creaturis impressa*

²⁵ See for example, Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.2.1, 2.6.1.

²⁶ Scripture is the means by which God “holds us... in the pure knowledge of himself (*in pura sui notitia*).” By the same means, the patriarchs also “penetrated to the intimate knowledge of him (*ad familiarem notitiam*).” Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.6.1.

nitet).”²⁷ What is arguably the greatest single accommodation, the Incarnation, also pursues this goal. When Calvin observes that “The Father, himself infinite, becomes finite in the Son, for he has accommodated himself to our little measure (*se ad modulum nostrum accommodavit*),” he prefaces this critical statement with references to the goal of attaining the perception of God: “apart from Christ the saving knowledge of God (*salvificam Dei cognitionem*) does not stand.” Similarly, those without Christ as their head possess “only a fleeting knowledge of God (*Dei cognitio*).”²⁸

2.2 Related terminology. I noted in Chapter One that one challenge that attends studying what I have called the “perception of God” is that Calvin does not use a single, consistent terminology to refer to this condition. Not only does he move variably among *Dei cognitio*, *Dei notitia*, and *Dei agnitio*, but he also refers to the condition obliquely through a host of other terms. If this makes it difficult to pin down Calvin’s understanding of this condition, it also makes it tricky to identify passages in which Calvin is explicitly connecting accommodation to this goal that he names so variably. Nevertheless, even where Calvin does not employ an objective genitive, we can clearly see him referring to this same outcome.

In fact, we often find Calvin employing the verb *agnoscere* (to recognize, to identify, to know or perceive by or through something) in connection with accommodation. I mentioned in passing in Chapter One that, if it is possible to make fine distinctions among Calvin’s three favored terms for the perception of God, the best we can say is that Calvin tends to use *agnitio*

²⁷ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.10.2 (emphasis mine). The previous section opens with the same claim: “the knowledge of God (*Dei notitiam*), otherwise quite clearly set forth in the system of the universe and in all creatures, is nonetheless more intimately and also more vividly (*familiarius tamen etiamnum et clarius*) revealed in his Word.” Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.10.1.

²⁸ Calvin, *Institutio*, 2.6.4. See also 4.8.5.

when speaking of the pivotal act or moment in which a person attains this perception.²⁹ Indeed, Calvin seems to lean consistently on this verb to describe the kind of interaction with a site of accommodation that facilitates the desired perceptual condition. In other words, forms of *agnoscere* are frequently used to indicate the inarticulate experience on the basis of which a person is able consciously to articulate an understanding of God’s stance toward humans in conceptual terms—as “Lord,” “Author,” “Father,” etcetera.³⁰ For example, Calvin describes how, through the individual works of creation, “mankind is invited and attracted to recognition of [God] (*eius agnitionem*), and from this to true and complete happiness.”³¹ Similarly, in describing God’s creation across six days as a deliberate accommodation, Calvin notes that it serves the goal of helping God to be “recognized (*agnosci*).”³² Just after this, in introducing angels as an accommodation, Calvin explicitly notes how they function as sites for the perception of God: “For if we desire to recognize God from his works (*Deum ex operibus suis agnoscere*), we ought by no means to overlook such an illustrious and noble example.”³³

Another way Calvin identifies the effects of accommodation with the perception of God is through references to divine fatherliness. As discussed in Chapter One, when Calvin wants to

²⁹ See Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.2.2, 1.5.5, 1.6.1.

³⁰ Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary. Founded on Andrews’ Edition of Freund’s Latin Dictionary, revised, enlarged, and in great part rewritten*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879. Perseus Digital Library. Note that unless otherwise specified, definitions come from this text.

³¹ “We must therefore admit in God’s individual works (*in singulis Dei operibus*)—but especially in them as a whole—that God’s powers are actually represented as in a painting (*in tabulis depictas*). Thereby the whole of mankind is invited and attracted to recognition of him (*eius agnitionem*), and from this to true and complete happiness.” Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.10. Recall that, as discussed at the beginning of Chapter One, Calvin locates human happiness in the achievement of the perception of God, meaning that the “recognition” at issue in this passage is related to this condition. See Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.1.

³² Arguably when Calvin speaks here of God’s desire to be “recognized in that clear image,” the image could be interpreted as the depiction of God’s fatherly care in the narrative of God’s temporally extended work of creation, which is the subject of the entire paragraph. Or, perhaps more likely, it could refer to God’s eternal Wisdom, referenced in the sentence directly before. Either way, the reference is to the possibility of perceiving God in an accommodation. Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.14.2.

³³ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.14.3. I proposed in Chapter One that when Calvin speaks of “recognizing” God, this means more than believing that God exists, but rather perceiving God as having a particular stance toward humans. Thus, it is not surprising that in other places Calvin describes the effect of accommodation as helping humans recognize God—not just as existing, but specifically as the source of all the benefits humans experience.

distill the experience of the perception of God—and the orientation of filial piety that is inextricable from it—he often resorts to a language of fatherly care. The fact that Calvin frequently leans on terms like God’s “fatherly favor”³⁴ or “fatherly love”³⁵ as conceptual shorthands for the perception of God reminds us that this perception consists not in a set of abstract understandings about God, but in an embodied experience of God’s practical acts of solicitous care for humans.

The idiom of divine fatherhood³⁶ appears frequently in Calvin’s discussions of the three most prominent accommodations referenced above—creation, Scripture, and the Incarnation. Speaking of how humans can sense God’s positive disposition toward them in the creations of their own bodies, Calvin explains that “by adorning us with such great excellence [God] testifies that he is our Father.”³⁷ Again, in the same place where Calvin affirms that perception of God is the intended result of both creation and Scripture, he describes Scripture’s function as manifesting “[God’s] fatherly goodness and his beneficently inclined will.”³⁸ Finally, when Calvin explains that without Christ humans attain only a “fleeting knowledge of God (*Dei*

³⁴ As in 1.16.1, where Calvin laments the condition of those who do not taste “God’s special care, by which alone his fatherly favor is known (*specialem Dei curam, ex qua demum cognoscitur paternus eius favor*).” This passage clearly connects the recognition of God’s fatherliness to an experience of God’s active provision of care for humans. Similar phrases appear in Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.17.1, 2.2.18, 2.6.1, 2.7.16, 2.9.2, 3.1.2, 3.3.2, 4.1.4, and 4.16.4.

³⁵ As in 1.5.3, where Calvin draws the same kind of connection between the perception that God is disposed toward humans as a father toward his children and the experience of divine care: “Indeed, no one gives himself freely and willingly to God’s service unless, having tasted his fatherly love (*nisi qui gustato paterno eius amore*), he is drawn to love and worship him in return.” Similar phrases appear in Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.14.2, 3.2.12, 3.11.6, 3.20.14, and 3.22.10.

³⁶ For a sustained discussion of the importance of divine fatherhood in Calvin’s thinking, see Garret A. Wilterdink, *Tyrant or Father? A Study of Calvin’s Doctrine of God* (Bristol, IN: Wyndham Hall Press, 1985), especially Chapters Two, Three, and Seven. See also Garret A. Wilterdink, “The Fatherhood of God in Calvin’s Thought,” *Reformed Review* 30, no. 1 (October 1976). For a review of the earlier literature on the notion of divine fatherhood in Calvin’s work, see B. A. Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude: The Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993).

³⁷ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.3.

³⁸ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.10.1. Calvin also references “examples of [God’s] severity.” This seems to form the other side of Calvin’s conception of fatherliness, balancing his emphasis on the fatherly provision of benefits. Gerrish has compellingly argued that the theme of “the father’s liberality and his children’s answering gratitude... is not only the theme of the Lord’s Supper but a fundamental theme, perhaps the most fundamental theme, of [Calvin’s] entire system of theology.” Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude*, 20.

cognitio),” he specifies that this is because in the absence of Christ humans are unable to perceive God as “Father.”³⁹

Although the vocabulary of divine fatherliness runs throughout the *Institutio*, Calvin places particular emphasis on the way that accommodations facilitate an experience of God’s fatherly care in two instances of accommodation. First, Calvin describes God’s creation of the world over the course of six days as an accommodation which enables humans to perceive God’s stance toward them in the way God carefully provides for human needs: “But we ought in the very order of things diligently to contemplate God’s fatherly love (*paternus Dei amor*) toward mankind, in that he did not create Adam until he had lavished upon the universe all manner of good things.” In deliberately filling the earth with things for human use and sustenance before creating humankind itself, God assumed “the responsibility of a foreseeing and diligent father of the family.”⁴⁰ Calvin places the same emphasis on fatherliness when he turns to the sacraments, whose general function he says is to commend “God’s fatherly kindness.”⁴¹ This theme is especially prominent in Calvin’s comments on the Supper, where the nourishment of bread and wine replays in another key the idea that, as a good father, God provides for human needs: “to fulfill the duties of a most excellent Father concerned for his offspring, he undertakes also to

³⁹ “Let the first step toward godliness be to recognize that God is our Father (*agnoscere, Deum esse nobis Patrem*) to watch over us, govern and nourish us, until he gather us unto the eternal inheritance of his Kingdom. Hence, what we have recently said becomes clear, that apart from Christ the saving knowledge of God (*salvificam Dei cognitionem*) does not stand... For even if many men once boasted that they worshiped the Supreme Majesty, the Maker of heaven and earth, yet because they had no Mediator it was not possible for them truly to taste God’s mercy, and thus be persuaded that he was their Father (*atque ita persuasi essent sibi patrem esse*). Accordingly, because they did not hold Christ as their Head, they possessed only a fleeting knowledge of God (*evanida fuit apud eos Dei cognitio*).” Calvin, *Institutio*, 2.6.4.

⁴⁰ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.14.2. When he returns to this topic again several paragraphs later, Calvin emphasizes that it was not necessary for God to create things successively—since God could create “in one moment the whole work together in all its details”—but that God did so in order “to commend his providence and fatherly solicitude toward us.” Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.14.20. He goes on to explain: “Before [God] fashioned man, he prepared everything he foresaw would be useful and salutary for him” so that humans should realize that “the dispensation of all those things which [God] has made is in his own hand and power and that we are indeed his children, whom he has received into his faithful protection to nourish and educate.” Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.14.22.

⁴¹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.14.26.

nourish us throughout the course of our life.”⁴² Both of these cases highlight how accommodations conduce to the perception of God—and the stance of piety—which for Calvin is best expressed in the notion of divine fatherliness.

3. Accommodations are defined by their perceptibility

If we survey the language associated with accommodation across the course of the *Institutio*, we find that when Calvin describes what makes something a site of accommodation, he emphasizes its perceptibility. In Chapter One’s discussion of how a true spectator attains the perception of God through the accommodation of creation, I emphasized the literally sensory nature of the spectator’s perception. This also holds for a range of other material accommodations that appeal to human sense organs—preeminently the sacraments, but also, for example, the incarnate Christ.

This does not exhaust the ways that God brings divine self-manifestation within a wavelength, so to speak, that enables humans to achieve the perception of God. Calvin also celebrates accommodations that are perceptible in a less physical register, highlighting qualities that make linguistic accommodations, for example, attention-capturing and unmistakable. However, it is important not to fall into the trap of assuming that a verbal accommodation like the language of Scripture is exclusively intellectual, and thereby miss the ways that the vivid language and imagery Calvin most celebrates in Scripture also engage physical perception. It is critical to remember, in this connection, that in a sixteenth-century context, language is not taken in by a disembodied mind, but assimilated through the same process as physical sense

⁴² Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.17.1.

objects⁴³—a topic to which I will return in Chapter Seven. In grouping media as diverse as creation and Scripture, the incarnate Christ and the human act of preaching, under the rubric of perceptible “accommodations,” we respect not only the overlap between early modern optics and semantics, but also the consistent way that Calvin identifies and praises all of these accommodations on the basis of their perceptibility to perceptually impaired humans.

3.1 Creation. As we saw in Chapter One, the first major accommodation introduced in the *Institutio*, and the instance of accommodation that predates the fall, is the created universe.⁴⁴ It is defined primarily by its physical visibility. As Lee Palmer Wandel emphasizes, “God, for Calvin, was visible—not only or primarily audible, but visible.”⁴⁵ God “revealed himself and daily discloses himself in the whole workmanship of the universe,” and for Calvin this self-manifestation is literally—although, as we will see, not exclusively—visual.⁴⁶ Speaking of the many “testimonies (*testimonia*)” of divine majesty, he insists, “they are so very manifest and obvious that they can easily be observed with the eyes and pointed out (*notari*) with the finger.”⁴⁷ This visual manifestation is everywhere we might look, a true theater in the round:

⁴³ “Like every other entity, the uttered (or written) word is capable of generating species that, in turn, multiply through the sense of hearing (or sight) into the inner senses.” Tachau, *Vision and Certitude*, 19.

⁴⁴ The seminal work on Calvin’s view of creation is undoubtedly Susan E. Schreiner, *The Theater of His Glory: Nature and the Natural Order in the Thought of John Calvin* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1995).

⁴⁵ Wandel’s discussion of “the visibility of God” draws attention to Calvin’s preference for terms, like “brightness,” that emphasize God’s perceptibility while precluding comprehensibility. Lee Palmer Wandel, “Incarnation, Image, and Sign: John Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion* & Late Medieval Visual Culture,” in *Image and Incarnation: The Early Modern Doctrine of the Pictorial Image*, eds. Walter S. Melion and Lee Palmer Wandel (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 193-94.

⁴⁶ Although fallen humans struggle to see, this does not decrease the fundamental visibility of creation as an accommodation. Even when he acknowledges our blindness to this sensory spectacle, Calvin continues to underline its objective visibility, which only renders humans inexcusable: “It is therefore in vain that so many burning lamps (*lampades*) shine for us in the workmanship of the universe to show forth the glory of its Author. Although they bathe us wholly in their radiance, yet they can of themselves in no way lead us into the right path. Surely they strike some sparks (*scintillas*), but before their fuller light shines these are smothered.” Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.14.

⁴⁷ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.9. Note that I have changed Battles’ translation to respect the difference between *testimonia* and *documenta*, both of which Calvin employs in describing created works as accommodations.

“wherever you cast your eyes, there is no spot in the universe wherein you cannot discern at least some sparks (*scintillae*) of his glory.”⁴⁸

Over and over, Calvin emphasizes that God’s self-manifestation in the accommodation of creation is not only actually visual, but that it dominates the human visual landscape: “those insignia (*insignia*) whereby he shows his glory to us” are evident “wherever and whenever we cast our gaze.”⁴⁹ As examples of such “clear manifestations (*speciminibus*),” he references thunderbolts, lighting, and storms—sensory spectacles that are both literally visible and highly noticeable, indeed, impossible to miss.⁵⁰ The visual effect of these accommodations is such that, as Calvin explains, “men cannot open their eyes without being compelled to see [God].”⁵¹ The combined force of these comments is to suggest that failing to attain the perception of God through the accommodations of creation would require suppressing visual experience itself.

In fact, Calvin goes out of his way to forestall the misreading that the clarity of these manifestations is metaphorical—as if creation made God manifest to the understanding and not literally to the eyes. Acknowledging that “There are innumerable evidences (*documenta*) both in heaven and on earth that declare his wonderful wisdom,” Calvin notes that although some only become evident through learning, there are “also those which thrust themselves upon the sight of even the most untutored and ignorant persons, so that they cannot open their eyes without being compelled to witness them.”⁵²

Calvin uses similar language to speak of the perceptibility of created works that are not primarily *visible* but still physically perceptible. He describes both the material features of the

⁴⁸ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.1.

⁴⁹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.1.

⁵⁰ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.6.

⁵¹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.1.

⁵² Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.2. He goes on to explain that the implication of this is that “even the common folk and the most untutored, who have been taught only by the aid of the eyes, cannot be unaware of the excellence of divine art, for it reveals itself in this innumerable and yet distinct and well-ordered variety of the heavenly host.”

human body—he famously references the toenails—and the faculties of the human soul as “signs of divinity (*divinitatis signa*)”⁵³ and “insignia of divinity (*divinitatis insignia*).”⁵⁴ The justification for extending this language to seemingly invisible human abilities—for example, the capacity for astronomy—seems to be Calvin’s conviction that they are just as empirically sensed within as the visible glories of creation are sensed without.⁵⁵ In using their many gifts, Calvin insists, “[People] feel (*sentiant*) in many wonderful ways that God works in them.”⁵⁶ Similarly, he argues that “the Lord manifests himself by his powers, the force (*vim*) of which we feel within ourselves (*sentimus intra nos*).”⁵⁷ These internal experiences of divine self-manifestation may register to human perception by way of different mechanisms than those taken in with the eye and pointed out with the finger,⁵⁸ but Calvin attributes to them the same empirical perceptibility he underlines in God’s visual accommodations.

The language Calvin uses to describe the accommodations of creation suggests not only that they are perceptible but that what defines them as accommodations is exactly this capacity to be perceived. Sometimes Calvin uses words with an unmistakably visual sense, such as when he speaks of “burning lamps (*accensae lampades*)”⁵⁹ and “sparks (*scintillae*).”⁶⁰ Even terms like *testimonia* (testimony, evidence, witness) and *documenta* (evidence, example, proof) acquire a

⁵³ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.4.

⁵⁴ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.5. Note that I have modified this translation to respect the difference between *signa* and *insignia*, both of which Calvin uses in this passage. Here Calvin makes a direct connection between perceiving such signs of divinity and perceiving God as their benevolent giver: “now what reason would there be to believe that man is divine and not to recognize (*agnoscat*) his Creator?”

⁵⁵ For example, “Each one undoubtedly feels within the heavenly grace that quickens him.” Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.3.

⁵⁶ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.4. Calvin refers to the awareness of having been graced with such endowments by a fatherly God as the “dictation of experience (*experientia*).” Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.3. In this passage, Calvin explicitly links this empirical experience to the perception of God’s fatherly favor toward humankind: “Paul quotes from Aratus, that we are God’s offspring, because by adorning us with such great excellence he testifies that he is our Father (*se Patrem nobis esse testatus est*). In the same way the secular poets, out of a common feeling (*ex communi sensu*) and, as it were, at the dictation of experience (*et quasi dictante experientia*), called him ‘the Father of men.’”

⁵⁷ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.9.

⁵⁸ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.9.

⁵⁹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.14.

⁶⁰ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.1 and 1.5.14.

visual connotation when Calvin uses them—as in the passages seen above—to refer to visible created works. But the language Calvin most often uses to refer to the perceptibility of such accommodations is the vocabulary of “marks (*notae*)” and “insignia (*insignia*),” as when he observes that “upon his individual works [God] has engraved unmistakable marks of his glory (*certas gloriae suae notas insculpsit*)”⁶¹ and when he speaks of the “insignia (*insignia*) whereby [God] shows his glory to us.”⁶²

Although the vocabulary of “marks” brings to mind Calvin’s oft cited two “marks” of the true church,⁶³ this association may function to obscure just how material this imagery is. *Nota* can be translated simply as sign, but it should bring to mind the material that renders something recognizable, like written characters or distinguishing marks upon a surface.⁶⁴ That is to say, this is a term that puts the emphasis not on what is signified, but on the material perceptibility of the signifier. As Wandel observes, “‘marks’ denotes something which is in and of itself ontologically visible.”⁶⁵ The same goes for *insigne*, which brings to mind a visibly distinctive mark, like a badge of office. When they appear in the early chapters of the *Institutio* in connection with creation as an accommodation, these terms seem to indicate perceptibility in an explicitly visual mode.

3.2 Scripture. If we turn now to Calvin’s discussion of Scripture, the accommodation he treats immediately following creation, we find the same vocabulary of perceptible “marks.”

⁶¹ Calvin goes on to specify that these marks are “so clear and prominent (*claras et insignes*) that even unlettered and stupid folk cannot plead the excuse of ignorance.” Note that, as in this passage, Calvin also makes frequent use of the adjective *insignis*, *insigne* (conspicuous, manifest).

⁶² Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.1.

⁶³ Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.1.8-11.

⁶⁴ Lewis and Short, *A Latin Dictionary*.

⁶⁵ Lee Palmer Wandel, “John Calvin and Michel de Montaigne on the Eye,” in *Early Modern Eyes*, eds. Walter S. Melion and Lee Palmer Wandel (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 147-48.

Wandel has pointed out that Calvin’s vocabulary of “marks” evokes the visuality of the printed page.⁶⁶ This helpful reminder of the visibility of the written word itself reminds us not to dismiss the sensory connotations of this vocabulary simply because it appears in connection with an accommodation that is also linguistic. Indeed, when Calvin transitions in 1.6 from discussing the pre-fall accommodation of creation to introducing the post-fall accommodation of Scripture, he continues to use the language of physical perceptibility. Most prominently, Calvin describes the Word as “a more direct and more certain mark (*nota*) whereby [God] is to be recognized (*ad ipsum dignoscendum*).”⁶⁷ Although the vocabulary of “marks” is particularly concentrated in these paragraphs, Calvin also carries over other, related terminology—for example, when he says that Scripture is full of “testimonies (*testimonia*)” through which God can be “by sure marks distinguished (*certis notis... discerni*)”⁶⁸ and that Scripture adorns God with “unmistakable marks and tokens (*certis notis et insignibus*).”⁶⁹

Whereas in his discussion of creation, Calvin was eager to emphasize the visual unmissability of God’s self-manifestation in creation, the use of verbs like *dignoscere* (discern, distinguish, be able to separate) and *discernere* (see, distinguish, separate) in Calvin’s discussion of Scripture emphasize its un-mistakeability.⁷⁰ Despite this difference in emphasis, it is significant that Calvin uses the same set of terms to describe the largely visible and empirically sensible accommodation that is creation *and* the linguistic and conceptual accommodation that is Scripture. Indeed, this striking similarity in language suggests that whatever else distinguishes

⁶⁶ Wandel, “John Calvin and Michel de Montaigne,” 139.

⁶⁷ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.6.1 The comparison is with the accommodation of creation, which Calvin references directly—“[God’s] presence portrayed in his creatures”—in introducing Scripture as a relatively clearer “mark.”

⁶⁸ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.6.1.

⁶⁹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.6.2.

⁷⁰ In Chapter Three, I offer an interpretation of this emphasis on distinguishing, which as we will see reflects Calvin’s understanding of the distinctive perceptual challenges that beset fallen mind.

them, these two accommodations share a certain quality of perceptibility. Both accommodations function as perceptible “marks,” even if they are played in different perceptual keys.

Another perceptual vocabulary that appears in Calvin’s discussion of Scripture is notable for its departure from this web of predominately visual imagery. The auditory language that Calvin uses to describe the special clarity of Scripture over against the accommodation of creation actually stands out against the predominately visual language of the rest of the *Institutio*. In Scripture, Calvin explains, God “opens his own most hallowed lips.”⁷¹ “Therefore, however fitting it may be for man seriously to turn his eyes to contemplate God’s works, since he has been placed in this most glorious theater to be a spectator of them, it is fitting that he prick up his ears to the Word (*ures tamen praecipue arrigere convenit ad verbum*), the better to profit.”⁷² Although this passage might be interpreted as introducing a contrast between the visual and the auditory, Calvin actually mixes these two vocabularies in his discussion of Scripture. The word is an improvement over the “mute teachers” of creation, but it is also a light,⁷³ enlightening eyes,⁷⁴ and, in a metaphor I have referenced already, functioning like “spectacles” that allow humans to “read distinctly” what they otherwise could not discern.⁷⁵ Auditory language thus complements—but does not supplant—the visual language Calvin uses to celebrate the perceptibility of God’s designated accommodations.

3.3 Sacraments. When Calvin turns to ceremonies old and new, the overwhelmingly visual language we have seen him use in connection with creation resurfaces. Calvin describes

⁷¹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.6.1.

⁷² Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.6.2.

⁷³ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.6.1.

⁷⁴ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.6.4. The reference is to Psalm 19:8.

⁷⁵ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.6.1. It is also relevant to note that Calvin does not restrict himself to describing creation in exclusively visual terms: Scripture is necessary to rouse us precisely because we remain “deaf to all the *voices* of God that resound in the air.” Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.6.4 (emphasis mine).

the now-abandoned rites and signs that were accommodations to the Israelites as ways of “testifying (*testando*) [God’s] benevolence” but also giving “proofs (*documenta*) of [God’s] judgment.”⁷⁶ He explicitly emphasizes that by being displayed “in earthly things (*in rebus terrenis*),” both of these two sides of God’s fatherliness were made “more conspicuous (*magis conspicua*).”⁷⁷ Here again, we see Calvin underlining that what makes certain accommodations so effective is their literal—in this case, their material, “earthly”—perceptibility.

The sacraments of the contemporary church, Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, are no different. In fact, Calvin explains that their usefulness derives from the fact that “they represent [God’s promises] for us as painted in a picture from life (*in tabula depictas nobis ad vivum repraesentant*).”⁷⁸ It would be a mistake, however, to take the sacraments’ representational powers as primarily conceptual. Rather, Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are notable for the way they capture the physical attention of the senses; Calvin specifies that this is what makes them accommodated to human perceptual needs: “For if we were incorporeal (as Chrysostom says), [God] would give us these very things naked and incorporeal. Now, because we have souls engrafted in bodies, he imparts spiritual things under visible ones.”⁷⁹ Although the accommodation of human preaching also sets forth God’s promises, it is striking that Calvin considers God’s fatherly stance toward humans to be most easily perceptible from these material

⁷⁶ Calvin, *Institutio*, 2.11.3.

⁷⁷ Calvin, *Institutio*, 2.11.3. Later in this chapter Calvin returns to the vocabulary of *notae* in defending God’s provision of different ceremonies at different times as a function of God’s accommodating goals: “[God] has with apt and fitting marks (*aptis et congruentibus notis*) distinguished (*distinxerit*) a diversity of times.” Calvin, *Institutio*, 2.11.13.

⁷⁸ Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.14.5. Calvin’s concern with the sacraments’ clarity is directly connected to his account of their intended effect: “For the clearer anything is, the fitter it is to support faith. But the sacraments bring the clearest promises.”

⁷⁹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.14.3.

sites that can be the object of literal vision.⁸⁰ The sacraments are thus another instance of accommodation whose defining feature is their physical perceptibility.

Perhaps the most important way Calvin highlights the character of perceptibility that makes the sacraments such effective accommodations is through the imagery of “seals (*sigilla*).” Although he also employs this term in speaking of Israelite circumcision⁸¹ and baptism,⁸² it receives most emphasis in Calvin’s discussion of the Supper, which he explicitly compares to the seals affixed to government documents.⁸³ The wax seal holds powerful visual connotations in early modernity, not least due to Aristotle’s influential use of the image to describe the process of visual perception. Indeed, Michael Camille has argued that the metaphor of stamping was “fundamental to medieval visuality.”⁸⁴ That is to say, the wax seal is not simply a visual metaphor; it is arguably early modern Europe’s most widespread metaphor for vision itself.

The image of the seal highlights another one of the important ways Calvin speaks about accommodations in terms that emphasize their perceptibility, and that is to describe accommodations as having been made through an act of impressing or engraving.⁸⁵ For example,

⁸⁰ Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.14.5. On Calvin’s emphasis on the indispensability of vision in the reception of the Lord’s Supper, see AnnMarie M. Bridges, “‘In the flesh a mirror of spiritual blessings’: Calvin’s Defence of the Lord’s Supper as a Visual Accommodation” in “Quid est sacramentum?”: *Visual Representation of Sacred Mysteries in Early Modern Europe, 1400-1700*, eds. Walter S. Melion, Elizabeth Carson Pastan, and Lee Palmer Wandel (Leiden: Brill, 2019).

⁸¹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.14.5, 4.16.5.

⁸² Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.25.8, 4.19.17.

⁸³ Note that these paragraphs contain numerous references to the accommodated character of the sacraments, such as references to our fleshly status, which leads God to self-manifest in such material entities. The passage concludes: “For by [the sacraments] he manifests himself to us... as far as our dullness is given to perceive (*agnoscere*), and attests (*testatur*) his good will and love toward us.” Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.14.6.

⁸⁴ Michael Camille, “Before the Gaze: The Internal Senses and Late Medieval Practices of Seeing,” in *Visuality Before and Beyond the Renaissance: Seeing as Others Saw*, ed. Robert S. Nelson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 208-209. A *locus classicus* is from Aristotle’s *De memoria et reminiscencia* in *Parva naturalia* 450a. *On the Soul. Parva Naturalia. On Breath*, trans. W. S. Hett, Loeb Classical Library 288 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957), 294-95. The metaphor was prominent not only in Aristotelian commentaries but also circulated in Platonic and Augustinian traditions through similar metaphors in *Theaetetus* and *De Trinitate*. Stuart Clark, *Vanities of the Eye: Vision in Early Modern European Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 14-15.

⁸⁵ Wandel connects this vocabulary of “marks” to both print technology and early modern understandings of the visual process. Wandel, “John Calvin and Michel de Montaigne,” 147-48, 152-53.

Calvin explains that it is this status—not just of being a mark, but of having been *marked*—that makes something a sacrament: “they had a mark (*notam*) engraved (*in sculptam*) upon them by God’s Word, so that they were proofs (*documenta*) and seals (*sigilla*) of his covenants.”⁸⁶ He compares this act of engraving to what happens when crude silver is coined (*signatum*): when “stamped with an official mark (*forma publica*), it becomes a coin and receives a new valuation.”⁸⁷ For our purposes, what is striking about this vocabulary—which also appears in the several loci of accommodation I have already addressed⁸⁸—is that Calvin uses it to emphasize how the act of marking renders an entity newly or especially notable or recognizable. The significance of a seal impression—in Aristotelian philosophy as in practical usage—is that its material takes on, rendering tactile and thus visible, the form of the now-absent matrix or stamp that created it. As such, Calvin’s references to seals underline the fact that accommodations are shaped precisely *so as to be* perceptible—and therefore to render their Maker perceptible.

3.4 Accommodations as “mirrors.” The figure of the impressed seal leads us to another prominent early modern metaphor for the visual process—the mirror.⁸⁹ The mirror motif appears

⁸⁶ Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.14.18.

⁸⁷ Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.14.18. Elsewhere, Calvin describes the elements of the Supper in the same terms: “the gifts set before us in the sacraments... have been marked (*signatae sunt*) with this signification (*significationem*) by God,” where the “signification” is that the elements have been made “a mirror of spiritual blessings” by which “[God] condescends to lead us to himself even by these earthly elements.” Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.14.3.

⁸⁸ Of the visible universe, Calvin observes: “Upon his individual works [God] has engraved unmistakable marks of his glory (*certas gloriae suae notas inculpsit*), so clear and so prominent (*adeo claras et insignes*).” Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.1. In speaking of the human faculties, he says that such “signs of immortality (*immortalitatis signa*) which have been imprinted in man (*impressa sunt*) cannot be effaced” (1.5.5, my translation). He uses related language to describe the “marks of divine grace (*gratiae suae lineamenta*)” that God “imprinted (*impresserat*)” on the accommodations given to the Israelites. Calvin, *Institutio*, 2.11.3.

⁸⁹ On the salience of mirrors in early modern culture, see Nancy M. Frelick, “Introduction,” in *The Mirror in Medieval and Early Modern Culture: Specular Reflections*, ed. Nancy M. Frelick (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2016); and Faye Tudor, “‘All in him selfe as in a glass he sees’: Mirrors and Vision in the Renaissance,” in *Renaissance Theories of Vision*, eds. John Shannon Hendrix and Charles H. Carman (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010). For mirrors in the late antique sources that were receiving renewed attention in the Renaissance, see Shadi Bartsch, *The Mirror of the Self: Sexuality, Self-Knowledge, and the Gaze in the Early Roman Empire* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006).

more consistently than any other in Calvin's references to accommodation.⁹⁰ This image sheds great light on how Calvin understands accommodations to work: it draws attention to three overlapping ways that accommodations are defined by perceptibility.

The mirror motif draws attention, first, to the way that accommodations enable the human beneficiary to perceive what she cannot otherwise. When he first introduces the works of creation as accommodations, Calvin begins with the reminder that God's "divineness (*numen*) far escapes all human perception (*sensus*)."⁹¹ God's invisibility is the perceptual limitation that the "mirror" of created works addresses: "this skillful ordering of the universe is for us a sort of mirror in which we can contemplate God, *who is otherwise invisible*."⁹² Thus, perceptible creation is a "mirror" in allowing humans to perceive what is otherwise imperceptible.⁹³ But this model also holds for accommodations that are very different from creation. For example, Calvin invokes the mirror to describe the function of the law: "in it we contemplate our weakness, then the iniquity arising from this, and finally the curse coming from both—just as a mirror shows us the spots on our face."⁹⁴ In this use of the mirror imagery, Calvin implies that the mirror is held up to the viewing self. By contrast, the case of creation evokes something more like using a mirror to see around a corner—using it to see something else, which cannot be approached

⁹⁰ References to creation, scripture, and Christ as mirrors are widespread in the literature of the Middle Ages. See Herbert Grabes, *The Mutable Glass: Mirror-Imagery in Titles and Texts of the Middle Ages and English Renaissance*, trans. Gordon Collier (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 121. See also Grabes, *The Mutable Glass*, 75n34, 76nn41-42, and 95n124.

⁹¹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.1.

⁹² Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.1 (emphasis mine).

⁹³ Recall, in this connection, that the ideal spectator of a painting—a related image which Calvin also uses for the accommodation of creation—perceives the invisible quality of "skill" from the visible organization of the work of art. See my discussion of early modern notions of artistic spectatorship in Chapter One.

⁹⁴ Calvin, *Institutio*, 2.7.7.

directly. Nevertheless, both images make the same point, that accommodations show humans what is otherwise imperceptible to them—like and including their very own faces.⁹⁵

A second aspect of accommodation the mirror motif illuminates is an extension of the first: a mirror is used to perceive what one cannot otherwise—in something one *can*. Calvin draws attention to this theme when he describes how the invisible qualities of God such as power, wisdom, justice, and goodness can only be perceived in sensible accommodations—in “the fashioning of the universe” and “in all [God’s] creatures, as in mirrors.”⁹⁶ Calvin makes the same point when he describes how the perception of God as “Father” can only come about by “beholding [God] in his Son as in a mirror.”⁹⁷ Finally, we see this with special clarity in the case of the sacraments: they are “in the flesh a mirror of spiritual blessings” because their visual and material qualities render them perceptible to materially inclined perceivers.⁹⁸

The third way Calvin uses the mirror motif is a logical extension of the first two. I noted just above that it is because mirrors are perceptible that they help humans to see what they otherwise cannot. For the same reason, however, they also define perception’s limits. This is exactly Calvin’s point when he says, “we might call [the sacraments] mirrors in which we may contemplate the riches of God’s grace... for by them [God] manifests himself to us... as far as our dullness is given to perceive.”⁹⁹ Calvin describes accommodations as mirrors precisely when he wants to remind us to accept accommodations without trying to penetrate into what the mirror does not reflect. For example, Calvin’s comment that “the invisible God, whose wisdom, power,

⁹⁵ See Jonathan Miller’s poignant musings on the fact that the one thing we can *only* see in a mirrored surface is our own face. Jonathan Miller, *On Reflection* (London, UK: National Gallery Publications, 1998), 12.

⁹⁶ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.14.21.

⁹⁷ Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.8.5.

⁹⁸ Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.14.3. He makes a similar remark about God’s accommodation to the Israelites, for whom God displayed the “heavenly heritage” “to see and, so to speak, taste, under earthly benefits.” “We contend... that, in the earthly possession they enjoyed, they looked, as in a mirror, upon the future inheritance they believed to have been prepared for them in heaven.” Calvin, *Institutio*, 2.11.1.

⁹⁹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.14.6.

and righteousness are incomprehensible, sets before us Moses' history as a mirror in which his living likeness glows" comes after a series of explicit reminders not to speculate about the qualities of God.¹⁰⁰ Similarly, Calvin's warning not to reject the "mirror" of preaching carries the clear implication that outside of such mirrors, there can be no perception of God.¹⁰¹ Thus, accommodations facilitate the perception of God—but they are the *only* such facilitators, which means that human perceptual capacities are limited by and to the extent of accommodated "mirrors." I will have more to say about accommodation's role in defining the limits of perception at the end of Chapter Three.

In drawing attention to how the designated sites at which God self-manifests function to facilitate perception, the *Institutio*'s mirror imagery powerfully illustrates Calvin's understanding of accommodation. As mirrors, accommodations are sensible, highly noticeable sites that channel human attention, allowing the perception of what is otherwise not accessible. As these three subtly different emphases of the mirror motif draw out, insofar as it is a "mirror," an accommodation enables perception while also strictly marking its limits. Together with the other vocabularies I have discussed, the mirror shows us that perceptibility is the defining characteristic of accommodations.

4. Accommodations as clarifying lenses for one another

As I noted at the outset, previous scholarship has focused on distinguishing and categorizing the different types of accommodation that Calvin discusses. However, this approach can give the impression that different instances of accommodation are strictly parallel, so that each has the same relationship to all the others. In fact, Calvin depicts accommodations as

¹⁰⁰ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.14.1.

¹⁰¹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.1.5.

occurring in distinctive, chronological relationships, with the result that they can be sequenced into successive layers.¹⁰² First, Calvin explicitly compares successive eras or layers of accommodation on the basis of clarity or ease of perceptibility for humans. Second, temporally later accommodations function as lenses to help humans see earlier and relatively obscurer accommodations more clearly. Elucidating the relationships among distinct accommodations will provide further support for the view of accommodation I have been laying out across in this chapter—that is, that accommodation is not simply a way that God adapts to human capacities in general, but a dedicated strategy for increasing divine perceptibility.

4.1 Creation and Scripture. The first pair of accommodations that the *Institutio* relates in this way is creation and Scripture. Calvin’s major discussions of these two avenues of divine self-manifestation appear back-to-back in *Institutio* 1.5 and 1.6. Recall that Calvin links these two accommodations by the fact that they pursue the same effect, which I have argued is the intended outcome of all accommodations—the perception of God.¹⁰³ As we have seen, the created world is full of perceptible “marks (*notae*)” whose defining characteristic is their perceptibility to humans.¹⁰⁴ In the same way, “Scripture adorns with unmistakable marks and tokens (*notis et insignibus*) the one true God.”¹⁰⁵ In so doing, it is a powerful means whereby God “holds us... in the pure knowledge of himself (*in pura sui notitia*).”¹⁰⁶

¹⁰² Although the image is not Calvinian, Huijgen helpfully suggests that we can think of distinct accommodations as arranged in concentric circles, starting, at the outside, with the universe and moving through Scripture to Christ at the center. Huijgen, *Divine Accommodation*, 305-16.

¹⁰³ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.10.1.

¹⁰⁴ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.1.

¹⁰⁵ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.6.2.

¹⁰⁶ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.6.1.

Although these two accommodations manifest the same attributes of the same God— Calvin specifies that “nothing is set down there that cannot be beheld in [God’s] creatures”¹⁰⁷— they are distinguished by relative degrees of clarity, or ease of perceptibility. Specifically, the perception of God is attainable for fallen humans in Scripture in a way that it is not in creation. Compared with creation, Calvin calls Scripture “a more direct and more certain mark (*rectior est et certior... nota*) whereby [God] is to be recognized (*dignoscendum*).”¹⁰⁸ Although the same perception of God is on offer in both sites of accommodation, “the knowledge of God (*Dei notitiam*)... is nonetheless *more* intimately and also *more* vividly revealed (*familiarius... et clarius... explicari*) in his Word.”¹⁰⁹ Scripture’s heightened perceptibility is crucial, because this accommodation was given to fallen humans to address their inability to attain the perception of God on the basis of creation alone: “God has provided the assistance of the Word... because he foresaw that his likeness (*effigiem*) imprinted (*impressam*) upon the most beautiful form of the universe would be insufficiently effective.”¹¹⁰ In other words, the latter accommodation was given in explicit reference to the functional inadequacy of the former.

It is notable, however, that the later and relatively easier-to-perceive accommodation does not supplant the earlier. Rather, Scripture functions as a clarifying or amplifying lens that brings the original accommodation of creation into focus. This is exactly the image Calvin uses to describe the layering of these successive accommodations in the telling image that casts Scripture as a set of “spectacles” trained upon creation:

Just as old or bleary-eyed men (*senes, vel lippi*) and those with weak vision (*oculis caligant*), if you thrust before them a most beautiful volume, even if they recognize (*agnoscant*) it to be some sort of writing, yet can scarcely construe two words, but with the aid of spectacles (*specillis*) will begin to read distinctly; so Scripture, gathering up the

¹⁰⁷ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.10.1.

¹⁰⁸ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.6.1.

¹⁰⁹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.10.1 (emphases mine).

¹¹⁰ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.6.3.

otherwise confused knowledge of God (*Dei notitiam*) in our minds, having dispersed our dullness (*caligine*), clearly (*liquido*) shows us the true God.¹¹¹

To gloss this passage in the vocabulary of Chapter One, fallen humans are not the true spectators they should be; sin has rendered them perceptually impaired. For this reason, humans cannot attain the perception of God in the face of creation alone. Scripture's advantage is that it is perceptually remedial: like a lens, it focuses humans' diffuse perception of God and, in this way, helps them perceive what was always and is still manifest in the mirror of creation.¹¹²

What is it about Scripture that makes it relatively easier to attain the perception of God through it? Calvin hints that its special clarity derives at least partly from its use of verbal language. He contrasts Scripture to the nonverbal manifestation of creation when he says that in Scripture, God “not merely uses mute teachers but also opens his own most hallowed lips.”¹¹³ But it is not just that Scripture uses language: it works by providing a linguistic re-articulation of what is already depicted in created works.¹¹⁴ In Scripture, Calvin explains, “God is truly and vividly described to us *from his works*, while *these very works are appraised* not by our depraved judgment but by the rule of eternal truth.”¹¹⁵ In other words, Scripture displays the same accommodated works that are also on offer in creation, but it does so in a way that filters out the distortions introduced by the perceptual effects of human sinfulness, about which I will say more in Chapter Three. We will also return to the greater clarity afforded by verbal communication when we turn, in Chapter Five, to the question of Calvin's own use of language.

¹¹¹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.6.1.

¹¹² Parker puts it well: “Since the one revelation, however, is frustrated by our blindness, it remains for God, in His grace, to give us another that shall be sufficiently bright to pierce that blindness—or rather, that shall, with the revelation it sets before us, give us also the eyes to behold both it and the former revelation as well.” T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1959), 41.

¹¹³ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.6.1.

¹¹⁴ For example, while explaining that the same powers of God are displayed in creation as extolled in Scripture, Calvin specifies that in Scripture, God's powers are expressed under titles such as *Elohim*. Calvin, *Institutio* 1.10.2.

¹¹⁵ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.6.3 (emphasis mine).

4.2 Old and new ceremonies. A different set of paired accommodations appears in the ceremonies given to the Israelites, on the one hand, and the ceremonies provided for the contemporary church, on the other. Whereas God prescribed circumcision, purifications, and sacrifices for the patriarchs, these were abrogated with the coming of Christ. Baptism and the Supper were instituted in their place.¹¹⁶ As with the pair creation-Scripture, here too both accommodations conduce to the same end: “those ancient sacraments looked to the same purpose to which ours now tend: to direct and almost lead men by the hand to Christ, or rather, as images, to represent him and show him forth to be known.”¹¹⁷ Although this passage’s reference to Christ may seem to indicate a distinct goal, recall that the incarnate Christ is the indispensable accommodation, the mirror which allows fallen humans to see God as “Father.” Thus, both sets of sacraments facilitate the perception of God in the mirror of the Incarnation, much the way that Scripture facilitates perception of God in the mirror of creation.

While old and new ceremonies alike enable the perception of God in Christ, they do so in different ways.¹¹⁸ The old and new ceremonies differ according to the manner of Christ’s manifestation: “the former foreshadowed Christ promised while he was as yet awaited; the latter attest him as already given and revealed.”¹¹⁹ This temporal distinction issues in different modes of manifestation: today’s ceremonies “show Christ present” whereas Israelite ceremonies are

¹¹⁶ Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.14.20.

¹¹⁷ Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.14.20.

¹¹⁸ The differences reflect the fact that accommodations provided for different eras address the different needs proper to each. Sacraments are diverse “in keeping with the times.” Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.14.20, also 4.8.5. Calvin describes this difference developmentally: “We are like adults who, freed of tutelage and custody, have no need of childish rudiments... under Moses the spiritual worship of God was figured and, so to speak, enwrapped in many ceremonies; but now that these are abolished, he is worshipped more simply” (4.10.14, also 2.11.5). In providing different ceremonies for the church than he provided for the Israelites, God has “accommodated diverse forms to different ages, as he knew would be expedient for each... in the fact that [God] has changed the outward form and manner, he does not show himself subject to change. Rather, he has accommodated himself to men’s capacity, which is varied and changeable.” Calvin, *Institutio*, 2.11.13.

¹¹⁹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.14.20. See also 2.11.14.

“images of Christ absent.”¹²⁰ What is important for our purposes is that Calvin describes this distinction in mode or manner of manifestation as issuing in a further difference in ease of perceptibility or clarity. Calvin frequently employs light imagery—which we have also seen him use to underline the objective clarity of God’s self-presentation in creation—to underline the distinction between the two sets of ceremonies. We see this, for instance, when Calvin casts the difference in terms of the “brightness of the manifestation.”¹²¹ He explains, “since Christ, the Sun of Righteousness, has shone, while before there was only dim light, we have the perfect radiance of divine truth, like the wonted brilliance of midday.”¹²² By contrast to the well-illuminated situation of today’s church, Calvin describes the patriarchs’ context as one marked by relative darkness: “no one then possessed discernment (*perspicientia*) so clear as to be unaffected by the obscurity of the time.”¹²³

What is striking is that this difference in relative clarity does not reflect a difference in efficacy. Despite the relative obscurity of the accommodations available to them, the patriarchs’ ceremonies also facilitated perception of God in Christ, and so share with us the “same blessing unto eternal salvation.”¹²⁴ With this insistence, Calvin de-links efficacy from clarity. Given that Calvin is at pains to insist that the effects of the two sets of ceremonies—and indeed the testaments, which are related accommodations—are not different, it is even more notable that he

¹²⁰ Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.10.14. See also 2.11.4.

¹²¹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.14.20. See also 2.11.10.

¹²² Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.8.7. Calvin uses similar language to describe the perceptual differences between the manifestation of Christ in the Law and Prophets and the manifestation of Christ in the Gospel. Calvin, *Institutio*, 2.11.5.

¹²³ Calvin, *Institutio*, 2.11.6. Interestingly, the “obscurity of the time” was at least partly a function of the relative obscurity of other, contemporary accommodations. For example, Calvin contrasts “the clarity of the gospel and the obscurer dispensation of the Word that had preceded it.” Calvin, *Institutio*, 2.11.10. That is, although Christ is manifested in the Old Testament, he is manifested there with relatively less clarity than in the Gospel. Thus, the patriarchs operated in an ecosystem of less clear accommodations than we enjoy today: “The Lord... so meted out the light of his Word to them that they still saw it afar off and darkly.” The Law and the Prophets pointed to Christ “twinkling afar off.” Calvin, *Institutio*, 2.11.5. Calvin goes on to say of the prophets: “even their preaching is both obscure, like something far off, and is embodied in types.” Calvin, *Institutio*, 2.11.6.

¹²⁴ Calvin, *Institutio*, 12.11.10.

nevertheless insists on preserving a distinction in terms of clarity or ease of perceptibility.¹²⁵ Moreover, much the same way that the lens of Scripture can be trained upon the mirror of creation, the relatively greater perceptibility of the new ceremonies can be used to illumine the old. In Calvin's long interpretation of Israelite accommodations in terms of Christ's later advent, we can see that the "clarity of the gospel" functions as a lens to retrospectively illumine "the obscurer dispensation of the Word that had preceded it."¹²⁶

4.3 Other kinds of relationships. The pairs creation-Scripture and old ceremonies-new ceremonies are both cases in which successive accommodations are arrayed in relationships of increasing clarity. Before concluding this discussion of the relationships among distinct accommodations, let me quickly gesture to two other sets of accommodations where the chronological relationship is less significant, but the perceptual dynamics remain paramount.

First, among the accommodations proper to the contemporary church, we find another pair that Calvin emphasizes in his discussion of the Supper: preached Word and visible sacrament. Although Calvin frames human preaching as a distinct accommodation,¹²⁷ he emphasizes that in the ceremony of the Supper, it works together with another accommodation, the visible, material elements of bread and wine.¹²⁸ Preaching and the elements are not like the old and new ceremonies, each of which is sufficient to itself. Rather, this pair is more like creation-Scripture, where one accommodation, creation, is actually ineffective (after the fall)

¹²⁵ One distinction that follows from and indexes this difference in clarity is the number of ceremonies prescribed for each. Calvin says that "more [ceremonies] were given as images of Christ absent," implying that the higher number somehow addressed the relatively obscurer quality of images that show Christ absent as opposed to present. He implies the same thing when he argues concerning today's ceremonies that "it is necessary to keep *fewness in number*, ease in observance, dignity in representation, which also includes *clarity*." Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.10.14 (emphasis mine).

¹²⁶ Calvin, *Institutio*, 2.11.10.

¹²⁷ Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.1.5.

¹²⁸ They are "in the flesh a mirror of spiritual blessings." Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.14.1. See also 4.14.6.

without the other, Scripture. While preaching alone communicates Christ,¹²⁹ the visible elements cannot function as accommodations without the accompaniment of the preached Word.¹³⁰

Despite the fact that they are exquisitely tailored to our visual tendencies, the bread and the wine do no good on their own. However, when paired with preaching, the visible elements become an accommodation—and in fact, they actually *amplify* the Word’s effectiveness precisely because of the way they appeal to human visual inclinations.¹³¹

Second, several important accommodations operate through their relationship with what has been called the “accommodation *par excellence*”¹³²—namely, the manifestation of God in the incarnate Christ.¹³³ As we saw above, after the fall the only way to perceive God as “Father” is through the perception of God in Christ.¹³⁴ But this accommodation is not limited to the historical span of Christ’s life on earth. It is also re-presented through other, distinct accommodations—which it, in turn, renders effective. For example, it is partly Scripture’s presentation of Christ that makes it such an effective accommodation. Whereas creation alone can only manifest God as Creator, Scripture reveals God as Redeemer in the person of Christ.¹³⁵

¹²⁹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.14.14.

¹³⁰ Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.14.4. Properly speaking, the elements are only sacraments when appended to a promise, meaning that the elements are not sacraments taken in isolation. Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.14.3.

¹³¹ The elements of the bread and the wine “bring[s] the clearest promises” precisely because “they represent [the promises] for us as painted in a picture from life.” In the ideal presentation of the Supper, “each confirms the other.” Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.14.5.

¹³² Balserak has questioned this terminology but not the basic sentiment. Jon Balserak, “‘The Accommodating Act par Excellence?’: An Inquiry into the Incarnation and Calvin’s Understanding of Accommodation,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 55, no. 4 (2002): 412-13, 421-22.

¹³³ Battles, “God Was Accommodating,” 28, 30. Calvin explicitly calls Christ the final word on divine teaching: “[God] has so fulfilled all functions of teaching in his Son that we must regard this as the final eternal testimony from him.” Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.8.7.

¹³⁴ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.6.1-2, 2.6.4.

¹³⁵ “Contemplating [this magnificent theater of heaven and earth], we ought to have known God (*Deum cognoscere*). But because we have profited so little by it, he calls us to the faith of Christ.” Calvin, *Institutio*, 2.6.1. This is exactly what Calvin illustrates by way of an otherwise puzzling reference to “the Turks.” Because they possess the accommodation of creation but not that of Scripture, they can only perceive God as Creator, not as Redeemer. Calvin, *Institutio*, 2.6.4.

In a similar way, Christ is also implicated in the sacraments. As we saw above, both old and new ceremonies function to show forth Christ.¹³⁶ It is difficult to describe these as simple cases of successive or layered accommodations. Rather, the accommodation that is the Incarnation appears to be the animating center or beating heart of these other accommodations.¹³⁷ It may even be accurate to say that, for Calvin, after the fall, no accommodation can bring about the intended effect of enabling the perception of God unless *it is also* a way of manifesting God *in Christ*.¹³⁸ Here again, accommodations function in tandem, mutually supporting one another, but always to the same end of facilitating the perception of God.

5. Accommodated appearances do not mislead

5.1 Accommodation is a matter of how God appears. As we have seen across this chapter, accommodations are perceptible avenues of divine self-manifestation designed to help humans perceive God’s favorable, indeed “fatherly,” stance toward them, and so attain the goal of human life. We could say, then, that accommodation is fundamentally about how God causes things to *appear* to humans—that is, it is about how God designs the media of revelation so that what is sensible and noticeable to humans facilitates the perception of God. Calvin himself emphasizes that accommodation has to do with how God appears when he draws a distinction between how God manifests and what God is in Godself. In accommodations, Calvin notes, “[God] is shown to us, not as he is in himself (*non quis sit apud se*), but as he is toward us (*sed qualis erga nos*).”¹³⁹ This is reminiscent of a crucial distinction we encountered in Chapter

¹³⁶ Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.8.5.

¹³⁷ Huijgen calls Christ the “pivot” and “high point” of accommodation. Huijgen, *Divine Accommodation*, 237-38.

¹³⁸ “Unless God confronts us in Christ, we cannot come to know that we are saved. . . apart from Christ, the saving knowledge of God does not stand.” Notice that Calvin goes on to use explicitly perceptual imagery for this exigency when he observes: “because they had no Mediator it was not possible for them to taste God’s mercy, and thus be persuaded that he was their Father.” Calvin, *Institutio*, 2.6.4.

¹³⁹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.10.2.

One—namely, that the perception of God has to do *not* with what God is (*quid sit Deus*), but with what God is like toward humans (*qualis sit Deus*).¹⁴⁰ The perception of how God appears toward humans in perceptible accommodations, Calvin notes, “consists more in living experience (*vivo sensu*)”—perhaps better translated, lively perception or sensation—than in vain and high-flown speculation (*speculatione*).”¹⁴¹

The fact that accommodation deals exclusively with how God self-presents to humans raises the question: are accommodated appearances ever false? Calvin frequently employs the verb *manuducere*, to lead by the hand, in describing how accommodations directly facilitate the perception of God.¹⁴² But could an accommodation actually yield a false perception of God, and thus threaten to *mislead*?¹⁴³

5.2 “Accommodated” does not mean “false.” In several of the instances of accommodation discussed so far, the relationship between the perceptible accommodation and what is perceived by way of it is extremely close. God’s provision for human needs in creation and the Supper, for example, are concrete instances of care that facilitate human perception of God’s broader stance of fatherly care toward humanity. In these cases, accommodated appearances—the beauties of creation, for example, or the nourishment of bread and wine—seem unproblematically consonant with the divine disposition they manifest.

However, not all accommodations follow this pattern. In fact, there is a class of accommodations—largely cases which do not receive a fulsome discussion in the *Institutio* but

¹⁴⁰ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.2.2.

¹⁴¹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.10.2.

¹⁴² See, for example, Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.12.12, 3.7.5, 4.14.4.

¹⁴³ For a reading that emphasizes this possibility, see Balsarak, *Divinity Compromised*, 124 and Balsarak, ““The Accommodating Act,”” 415.

are rather referenced in brief asides—where there may seem to be a contradiction between the accommodated appearance and the actual characteristics of the God whose perception it is designed to facilitate. The most obvious example of this possibility is also the textbook case from patristic exegesis, Scriptural descriptions in which God is said to possess physical features like eyes, ears, and mouth. In this case, the rhetorical accommodation (the anthropomorphic description) seems to give a false impression of God—who, as Calvin says, is actually spiritual and does not possess a body.¹⁴⁴ Thus, expressions which ascribe to God physical features—or human emotions, as when Scripture says God “repented” and thus changed his mind¹⁴⁵—may seem to give a false impression of God.

Cases such as these have led some commentators to frame accommodation as a process of falsification. This is how Battles treats these cases in the influential article referenced at the beginning of this chapter. He distinguishes Scripture’s accommodating use of anthropomorphism, which he calls the “apparent teaching of Scripture,” from the “true teaching” in each case—namely, that God’s essence is infinite and spiritual and that God’s plan is unchangeable from eternity.¹⁴⁶ In Battles’ view, the successful receipt of the accommodated teaching requires knowing its *appearance* to be false and instead grasping the “true teaching” which *does not* appear.

However, this way of construing accommodation ignores a crucial issue explored earlier in this chapter—namely, Calvin’s emphasis on the positive effects God intends to bring about through the strategy of accommodation. It ignores how, in each case, accommodated descriptions *as such* successfully manifest God’s stance toward humans. Regarding divine “repentance,” for

¹⁴⁴ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.13.1.

¹⁴⁵ Discussed in Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.17.12-13.

¹⁴⁶ Battles, “God Was Accommodating,” 20-21.

example, Calvin explains that in representing God “not as he is in himself (*non qualis in se est*), but as he seems to us (*qualis a nobis sentitur*),” this language helps humans accurately perceive God’s very real judgment, which is a crucial aspect of divine fatherliness.¹⁴⁷ Arguably, if it makes sense to designate any “true teaching” in the case of Scripture’s references to divine “repentance,” it is the effect achieved when an anthropomorphic description helps a reader perceive—in a way she otherwise could not—this aspect of God’s stance toward humans.¹⁴⁸

Setting aside this specific case, there is a deeper methodological problem in seeking a “true teaching” behind or beyond accommodated appearances. This approach does not only obscure the purpose of accommodation; it actively subverts it. As detailed above, accommodation pertains to how humans *perceive* God: it is about God “as he is toward us (*qualis erga nos*),” and this is explicitly opposed to how “[God] is in himself (*quis sit apud se*).”¹⁴⁹ To say that reaching the “true teaching” of an anthropomorphic description is an accurate account of God’s spiritual or eternal essence makes its teaching something that Calvin explicitly says is *not* on offer in accommodation. It suggests, moreover, that the proper response to divine revelation is to disregard the accommodated appearances God presents and attempt to reverse engineer an *un*-accommodated account of God.¹⁵⁰ Not only does this undermine God’s purposes in accommodation—Calvin is clear that humans should not attempt to penetrate beyond the perceptible self-manifestations that God provides¹⁵¹—but, as I will show in Chapter Three, it is a characteristic behavior of a sinful mind that accommodation is expressly designed to stymie.

¹⁴⁷ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.17.13.

¹⁴⁸ As Van den Hemel puts it, “for Calvin the truth of the accommodated element lies on the surface, not hidden away like a puzzle waiting for a scholar to solve it.” Van den Hemel, “God Lisperd,” 248. Van den Hemel affirms the “truth” of accommodated expressions at Van den Hemel, “God Lisperd,” 242-43 and 247.

¹⁴⁹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.10.2.

¹⁵⁰ This would entail the questionable premise that there could be a description or manifestation of God that would be accessible to human perception without, however, being accommodated. One of the virtues of defining accommodation in terms of human perceptual capacities, as I have done, is that it clearly excludes this possibility.

¹⁵¹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.11.1-2, 1.13.3-5, 1.13.13, 1.1.4.1, 3.23.4-5.

In fact, to construe accommodations as giving false appearances that must be overcome to grasp a contrasting truth will only fit a small subset of accommodations. Would we want to say that when God self-manifests as “Father” in Christ, God is giving a false appearance that must be dismissed in favor of an alternative “true teaching”? Not only is this approach ill-fitted to anything but the most rhetorical of accommodations,¹⁵² but in several cases of anthropomorphic speech where this reading may be tempting, Calvin expressly dismisses the idea that accommodations give a false appearance. We can see this in his treatments of two of the most puzzling instances of accommodation in the entire *Institutio*.

The first difficult case appears in the course of Calvin’s discussion of the atonement. Calvin raises the question of whether God was really humankind’s enemy until Christ’s intervention: “For how could he have given in his only-begotten Son a singular pledge of his love to us if he had not already embraced us with his free favor?... Some sort of contradiction arises here.” To resolve the temporal contradiction, Calvin invokes accommodation and explains that this way of framing Christ’s intercession helps humans accurately gauge the benefit conferred in Christ. Without such framing, “we would scarcely have recognized (*minus agnosceremus*) how miserable we would have been without God’s mercy.”¹⁵³ This case fits elegantly within the account of accommodation I am advocating in this chapter: by dramatizing

¹⁵² Even in such cases, this approach has the disadvantage that it assumes extreme human credulity. Despite his robust criticisms of the fallen mind, even Calvin does not think humans actually mistake anthropomorphic statements for literal claims about God’s nature: anyone “of even slight intelligence,” he insists, understands that God does not have facial features! Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.13.1.

¹⁵³ Calvin, *Institutio*, 2.16.2. He goes on to say: “Since our hearts cannot, in God’s mercy, either seize upon life ardently enough or accept it with the gratefulness we owe, unless our minds are first struck and overwhelmed by fear of God’s wrath and by dread of eternal death, we are taught by Scripture to perceive (*cernamus*) that apart from Christ, God is, so to speak, hostile to us, and his hand is armed for our destruction; to embrace his benevolence and fatherly love in Christ alone.”

the disaster from which divine mercy rescues humanity, the accommodation in question facilitates humans perception of God's disposition toward them.¹⁵⁴

What is crucial for our purposes is that Calvin goes on to insist that we must not dismiss the appearance of God's enmity toward humans, even while we understand its perceptual purpose. He begins the very next paragraph with an unambiguous warning: "Although this statement is tempered to our feeble comprehension (*pro captus nostri infirmitate dicitur*), it is not said falsely (*falso*)."¹⁵⁵ After going on to wrestle with the paradox whereby human reconciliation with God both precedes *and* results from Christ's intervention, Calvin leaves the reader with a quotation from Augustine that holds both truths together: "Thus in a marvelous and divine way he loved us even when he hated us."¹⁵⁵ This is a striking case in which Calvin is explicit about the existence of an apparent contradiction between an accommodated appearance and the actual mechanics of salvation. Nevertheless, he opts for paradox rather than dismiss the accommodation as a false appearance.

Calvin makes a similar move in regard to an equally tricky case of accommodation that arises in his chapter on prayer. He explains that in order to lead sluggish minds to the perception that "everything men desire and account conducive to their own profit comes from [God]"—yet another way of glossing the fact of fatherly provision—God takes steps to induce humans to pray. God does this through a remarkable accommodation whereby "[God] gives the impression

¹⁵⁴ Paul Helm puts it well when he observes of this puzzle that "The truth about atonement, about reconciliation to God, has to be represented to us as if it implied a change in God... But in fact there is no change in God; he loves us from eternity." The real change—I would say, which accommodation facilitates—is not in God, but in humans, as Helm notes: "Such a change, from believing that we are objects of God's wrath to believing that he loves us in Christ, is a real change in us, but not in God." Paul Helm, *John Calvin's Ideas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 395 and 399, respectively. Michelle Chaplin Sanchez has recently offered an excellent reading of this passage which attends especially to the affects that render it an effective accommodation. See Sanchez, *Calvin and the Resignification of the World: Creation, Incarnation, and the Problem of Political Theology in the 1559 Institutes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 222-24.

¹⁵⁵ Calvin, *Institutio*, 2.16.4.

of one sleeping or idling in order that he may thus train us, otherwise idle and lazy, to seek, ask, and entreat him to our great good.” Crucially, Calvin is not willing to concede that God gives a false impression when God appears to withhold attention and aid in the absence of explicit entreaties. Instead, Calvin concludes that “both are true (*ulrumque verum est*)”—namely, “‘that the keeper of Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps,’ and yet that [God] is inactive, as if forgetting us, when he sees us idle and mute.”¹⁵⁶ Here again, the purpose of the accommodation in question is to induce the perception of God as the source of care, indeed of all goodness humans experience. And here again, Calvin will not concede that the accommodation that facilitates this perception—the appearance of divine sluggishness—is false.

5.3 Appearances only mislead *sinful* perception. We have seen that even in extreme cases, Calvin explicitly forecloses the option of dismissing accommodated appearances as false. Nevertheless, let us seriously consider in what sense accommodated appearances may pose a challenge or pitfall for perception. The cases of the atonement and prayer discussed above are dramatic moments that stand out in the course of the *Institutio*. But there are a host of less striking instances sprinkled across the text that Calvin also seems to suggest are genuinely difficult.

These fall into two camps. First, Calvin identifies several situations where the accommodator—God, Christ, or Paul, depending on the example—is enacting diverse teachings, each tailored to a different situation or audience. For example, Calvin references the fact that

¹⁵⁶ Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.20.3. The reference is to Psalm 121: 4. A similar case appears in Calvin’s discussion of fate and providence in 1.16.9. In this case, it appears that things are decided by fate, when in fact God’s providence is always in control. Here again Calvin gives a both/and answer. “*Quid hic sentiet Christianus?*” Calvin asks, and he answers that we should regard events as fortuitous, just as they appear, while *also* believing that providence directs their ends. Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.16.9.

Paul circumcised Timothy but refused to circumcise Titus.¹⁵⁷ Calvin acknowledges that these diverse teachings could be taken to suggest a diversity of purposes in God, when in fact they are different ways of enacting a single, united purpose.¹⁵⁸ Second, Calvin identifies several accommodations whereby God teaches and helps humans, such as angels,¹⁵⁹ ministers of the church,¹⁶⁰ and the sacraments.¹⁶¹ These aids could be misconstrued as independent sources of aid, when in fact they are instrumental causes behind which God stands as the efficient cause of all goodness that humans experience.

In both kinds of cases, the appearance given—what humans perceive—is not false. Angels really do protect humans, and, unfortunately, Paul did not merely give the appearance of circumcising Timothy. Moreover, here as above, these accommodations render visible important aspects of God’s approach to humans: God interacts with humans in a way that is pedagogically diversified, and God makes use of concrete, proximal causes which humans find familiar and comforting.¹⁶² Thus, the actions in question only mislead if they are interpreted as singular declarations regarding the absolute nature and ways of God—as opposed to the strategic, contingent, perceptually tailored strategies that accommodations are. In other words, these accommodations only threaten to mislead if they are misused as sources of information about God, when they are instead vehicles designed to facilitate the perception of God.

The possibility that accommodations might be misused is not limited to what I have identified as the “difficult” cases. For example, the Lord’s Supper is highly vulnerable to

¹⁵⁷ Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.19.12.

¹⁵⁸ In his discussion of the circumcision of Timothy, Calvin goes on to say “Here was a diversity of acts but no change of purpose or mind.” Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.19.12. For other examples, see 1.18.3-4, 2.11.3, 2.11.13, 3.8.5-6, 3.19.12, 4.8.5-6, 4.14.20.

¹⁵⁹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.14.10-11.

¹⁶⁰ Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.1.1, 4.1.5.

¹⁶¹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.14.12, 4.14.17, 4.17.35.

¹⁶² Calvin is especially explicit about this in his discussion of God’s use of angels. Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.14.11.

subversion, as Calvin's many comments about how to benefit from it suggest. For example, recipients who inappropriately fixate on the elements—treating them as God in Godself, rather than a vehicle for the perception of God—subvert God's intended aim in instituting the accommodation of bread and wine.¹⁶³ We glimpse another form of misuse in Calvin's description of how, after the fall, humans fail to treat creation as a means of perceiving God. Sinful perception sees only created works; it remains oblivious to the reflection of God's fatherly stance in them:

But although the Lord represents both himself and his everlasting Kingdom in the mirror of his works with very great clarity (*claritate*), such is our stupidity (*stupor*) that we grow increasingly dull (*hebecimus*) toward so many manifest testimonies (*ad tam perspicuas testificationes*), and they flow away without profiting us. For with regard to the most beautiful structure and order of the universe, how many of us are there who, when we lift up our eyes to heaven or cast them about through the various regions of earth, recall our minds to a remembrance of the Creator, and do not rather, disregarding their Author, sit idly in contemplation of his works?¹⁶⁴

If accommodations mislead, this is not because the appearances they give are false, or because humans fail to dismiss them in favor of a different, "true teaching." It is because fallen perceivers struggle to treat accommodations as the mirrors that they are—that is, as sites for the perception of what is otherwise invisible. Ultimately, the concern that accommodations may yield a misleading impression of God dissolves into the mundane observation that this divine strategy fails to achieve its desired effect if humans misuse or ignore accommodations, and so preclude or suppress the perception of God they are designed to facilitate.

¹⁶³ Calvin makes it clear that humans should never equate accommodations with God or God's nature or essence—God is neither creation (Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.5), nor the bread and the wine (4.17.12-14). In fact, Calvin's insistence that God was not restricted to the person of the incarnate Christ even during Christ's lifetime (2.13.4), a position sometimes called the *extra calvinisticum*, means that God is not even fully identifiable with (in the sense of reducible to) the incarnate Christ.

¹⁶⁴ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.11.

6. Conclusion: The ultimate accommodation

This chapter has engaged examples from all across the *Institutio*, from Calvin's opening discussion of creation and Scripture in Book I to his discussion of the sacraments in Book IV. In so doing, it has established that accommodation's intended outcome is to facilitate the perception of God. It makes sense, then, that the defining characteristic of accommodations is their perceptibility. Moreover, different accommodations relate to one another in terms of their relative perceptibility, and even apparently exceptional accommodations effectively facilitate perception of God's stance toward humanity. If accommodation is linked to the theme of perception in all these respects, then every one of the *Institutio*'s references to divine self-manifestation and its adaptation to human capacities is, in fact, an oblique reference to perception—and to what facilitates or hinders it. The fact that accommodation pervades the *Institutio* thus provides further evidence that perceptual concerns are at issue throughout the text.

There are at least two different ways to think about accommodation. We can think about it, first, as the chosen strategy whereby Calvin's God helps humans achieve the goal of life. However, once we recognize that this is how Calvin's God operates—that God has shaped key aspects of the human environment so as to facilitate the perception of God—then we can also treat accommodation as a kind of latent aesthetic theory, as Calvin's account of how the most salient aspects of human life are designed so as to stimulate a particular perceptual experience—made the way they are, that is, so that in encountering them, humans perceive God's favorable stance toward them.

This raises the issue of the relationship between attaining the perception of God with the help of accommodations, on the one hand, and understanding the *fact of* divine accommodation, on the other. It is feasible to think that someone could perceive God's fatherly care for her in the

Supper's visible bread and wine, yet not be able to give an account of the elements as an "accommodation." The latter requires the conscious realization that God has designed the human perceptual environment—and especially church practices—with the express goal of helping humans attain the perception of God. This realization is by no means required for accommodations to function effectively. Nevertheless, the fact that Calvin's God has adopted perceptual accommodation as a coherent and more or less comprehensive strategy is itself a remarkable act of divine condescension to human needs.

Indeed, we might say that one of the most striking ways that Calvin's God manifests a favorable stance toward humans is through the extreme graciousness of such accommodation. This offers a different way to conceive the "true teaching" of individual accommodations. We could say that the "true teaching" is neither that, for instance, angels help humans nor that God causes everything, but instead that God employs angels because it is easier for humans to perceive divine care in them—and this is an unnecessary act of generous accommodation to human perceptual inclinations. In the same way, the "true teaching" is neither that God could create the world in a moment, nor that God created the world in six days. It is that although God could create the world in an instant, God chose to create it successively in order to display God's careful provision for human needs in the fact that our food sources appeared on earth before we did. Thus, when it comes to accommodation, the highest achievement of perception may be not merely to sense God's fatherly care in creation, Scripture, or the sacraments. It may be to perceive God's stance toward humans in the remarkable fact that God makes perceiving God so easy—that is, in the fact that God accommodates.

Unfortunately, as the next two chapters will detail, the perceptual effects of sin cause humans to subvert God's chosen strategy for facilitating the perception of God. As we will see in

Chapter Three, the condition of “idolatry” leads to the diametric opposite of this intended condition. Chapter Four will show, furthermore, that if attaining the perception of God depends on the perceptual facilitation provided by God-given sites of accommodation, then idolatry is defined precisely by its rejection and misuse of such accommodations.

Chapter Three The Idolatrous Mind

*quanto ergo longe es
a phantasmatis illis meis*

“How far then is the reality of You
from those empty imaginings of mine.”
– Augustine

Chapter Two argued that the motif of divine accommodation, which runs throughout the *Institutio*, is one of places where we see the text’s consistent engagement with the theme of perception. There I connected accommodation to one of the most famous ideas in the *Institutio*, what I have called the perception of God, and argued that accommodation is God’s strategy for helping humans attain this condition. In Chapters Three and Four I specify how both of these ideas are related to another prominent concept in the *Institutio*, idolatry. If the perception of God’s favorable stance toward humans at designated sites of accommodation is the proper end and goal of human life, then “idolatry” names its diametric opposite. Specifically, as I will argue here and in the next chapter, for Calvin idolatry is the condition of delusive non-perception of God that occurs when a sinful mind prescind from the accommodations where God self-manifests, and which ought to monopolize its attention.

Chapter Three, “The Idolatrous Mind,” explores the internal causes of this condition, the problematic mental habits whereby the delusive projection of humanly made ideas comes to supplant and ultimately preclude the perception of God at external sites of accommodation. Chapter Four, “The Idolatrous Mass,” shows how this process is extended and reinforced by religious practices that deceive worshippers about God and thereby exacerbate their inability to attain the perception of God. At the end of these two chapters, we will have a portrait of the causes and stakes of the sin-induced “blindness” that I introduced in the Introduction. By

situating idolatry in direct relation to these other two concepts—the perception of God and accommodation—and understanding all of them as related to one another by the text’s overriding concern with perception, I take a new approach to this most traditional of Reformation themes.¹ In so doing, I also present another class of evidence that the *Institutio* is concerned with perception—not only what enables it, but also what precludes it.

I begin the first of this chapter’s two major sections by briefly introducing what I am calling the “idolatrous mind,” a composite figure who allows us mentally to aggregate all of the problematic behaviors that Calvin associates with idolatry, and to which he attributes sinful humans’ difficulty attaining the perception of God. Much the way the “true spectator” embodies the behaviors that enable humans to attain the perception of God before the fall, the “idolatrous mind” embodies the behaviors that preclude this condition. By attending to the way Calvin connects idolatry to problematic acts of imaginative creativity, I trace the origin of the idolatrous mind’s perceptual problems to this very nexus where, as discussed in Chapter One, the imagination filters—and thus, can suppress or distort—sense experience even before it rises to the level of conscious thought.

The second half of the chapter traces a web of overlapping and mutually implicating vocabularies that Calvin uses to describe the idolatrous mind. Taken together, these motifs reveal that the idolatrous mind is caught in a vicious cycle wherein the self-made fictions about God that it imagines come to condition what it takes in from the external world. The more the idolatrous mind allows the imagination to indulge its own creations, the more mis-informed its

Epigraph: Augustine, *Confessions*, III.6.

¹ Previous interpreters have framed idolatry as an issue of physical and visible representations, situating it in a traditional narrative about the Reformers’ concerns regarding the relationship between the material and the spiritual. The most widely cited work in this tradition is Carlos M. N. Eire, *War Against the Idols: The Reformation of Worship from Erasmus to Calvin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 197-202, 217. See also Sergiusz Michalski, *The Reformation and the Visual Arts: The Protestant Image Question in Western and Eastern Europe* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 61-63.

perception becomes, to the point that it actually stops taking in the external world—and thus God’s perceptible self-manifestations in it—as it really is. In the end, we will see how this condition of active and literal self-delusion not only begins from the mind’s neglect of accommodations, but further exacerbates this disastrous inclination. The result is that, rather than perceiving God, this mind projects “idols”—mental constructs with no basis in the perceptible world—that are entirely of its own making. I conclude the chapter by reinterpreting Calvin’s infamous description of the human mind as a “perpetual factory of idols” and by situating idolatry explicitly in relationship to both the perception of God and accommodation.

1. Idolatry and imagination

Recall that in Chapter One I discussed a hypothetical or counterfactual figure, the apparently unfallen “true spectator,” who is alone capable of taking in the spectacle of created works as God intended, and thus attaining the perception of God that is the goal of human life. The true spectator is a figure of some pathos in the *Institutio*; she embodies an ideal of human response to divine self-manifestation that the fallen mind now struggles to fulfill. Her spectatorship—that is, her embodied receptivity to the perceptible sites of God’s self-manifestation—issues unconsciously and indeed naturally in the orientation of pious amazement and gratitude that, I argued in Chapter One, is constitutive of the perception of God.

1.1 The idolatrous mind. While in Chapter One I focused on the behavior that characterizes the true spectator and that enables her to attain the perception of God, here I explore the opposite—the behavior that, by contrast, characterizes a fallen mind and which

prevents it from being a true spectator. We glimpse several such behaviors in a telling passage where Calvin enumerates the habits which are *incompatible* with pious spectatorship:

The pious mind (*pia mens*) does not dream up (*somniat*) for itself any god it pleases, but contemplates (*intuetur*) the one and only true God. And it does not attach (*affingit*) to him whatever it pleases, but is content to hold him to be as he manifests (*manifestat*) himself; furthermore, the mind always exercises the utmost diligence and care not to wander astray (*perperam vagetur*), or rashly and boldly to go beyond his will (*ultra voluntatem eius egressa*).²

In this passage, Calvin distinguishes pious behavior through contrasts with other habits of mind that he considers problematic—habits like dreaming, attaching, wandering, and transgressing.³

As I will show in this chapter, these are the very same behaviors that Calvin associates with idolatry. Echoing Calvin’s notorious description of the human mind as a “perpetual factory of idols,” I will refer to the figure defined by these problematic behaviors as the “idolatrous mind.”⁴

The work of this chapter is to clarify the habits of mind that characterize this figure, and especially to trace how its behaviors subvert the perception of God and issue in the condition of delusion that Calvin calls “idolatry.”

1.2 Calvin on the imagination. As a point of entry to the idolatrous mind’s defining behaviors, let us return to the discussion of the “interior senses” or—as this nexus of pre-conscious processing came increasingly to be called—the “imagination,” with which I concluded Chapter One. There, I described the imagination’s ability not only to re-compose sense data with

² John Calvin, *Institutio Christianae Religionis* (Berolini: Gustavum Eichler, 1834), 1.2.2. English translation from John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960).

³ Indeed, despite the fact that in the opening sections of the text Calvin is ostensibly discussing the perception that *would have been* on offer if Adam had not fallen, he actually devotes far more space to descriptions of how human minds *currently* function—or malfunction, as it were.

⁴ *Hominis ingenium perpetuam, ut ita loquar, esse idolorum fabricam*. Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.11.8. Although in this famous passage, Calvin refers to the “*hominis ingenium*” (emphasis mine), elsewhere in this paragraph, he speaks of the “*mens hominis*” (emphasis mine). See my discussions of *ingenium* at the end of this chapter.

stored memories but also to give it an evaluative coloring, and to do this all before sense experience rises to the level of consciousness where acts of subsequent reasoning, understanding, or willing occur. I suggested that it is this view of the mind—in which conscious thought processes occur only on the basis, indeed, at the mercy, of the composite percept or “phantasm” the imagination produces—that is the appropriate historical backdrop for our reading of Calvin’s “true spectator” and the “perception of God” she is able to attain.

I recall this discussion here because this is also the part of the mind to which Calvin implicitly traces the behaviors that lead to idolatry. Let me repeat a caveat I offered there, which is that in invoking the models of the mind broadly in consensus among Calvin’s sixteenth-century contemporaries, I do not mean to identify Calvin’s remarks too closely with any single psychological model. Nevertheless, here as in Chapter One, understanding what kind of mental processes Calvin’s descriptions might evoke for an early modern reader helps us recognize that his concerns primarily target not conscious thought processes, but the pre-conscious work of the imagination that crucially precedes and founds them.

In the Introduction’s discussion of “blindness” as the *Institutio*’s most prominent idiom for describing the effects of sin, I invoked Lee Palmer Wandel’s highly clarifying insight that “blindness, for Calvin, resides in the nexus between human eye and human mind.”⁵ As Wandel’s analysis underlines, Calvin makes it impossible for us to identify the fallen mind’s “miserable

⁵ Lee Palmer Wandel, “John Calvin and Michel de Montaigne on the Eye,” in *Early Modern Eyes*, eds. Walter S. Melion and Lee Palmer Wandel (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 147-48. The full passage reads: “Blindness, for Calvin, resides in the nexus between human eye and human mind: the ignorant cannot see. It is not simply, they do not know what they are seeing. They cannot see. Their blindness, while not caused by the failure of the eye to function, is not purely mental or psychosomatic. Their eyes are not perceiving what is before them” (149). Although in this passage Wandel emphasizes that seeing is literally occluded by this condition, she also warns against reducing human blindness to “a narrow problem of physical ability—the human eye can ‘see’ [God’s marks] in a mechanical sense of the organ functioning... ‘Not-seeing’, for Calvin, is inseparable from not-knowing—eye and mind are not discrete entities. ‘Marks’ denotes something which is in and of itself ontologically visible and yet is not, for some human beings, legible, or even ‘visible.’”

blindness” with either a failure of physical perception or a failure of reason and understanding.⁶ On the one hand, Calvin prevents us from reducing blindness to a straightforward matter of intellectual confusion when he says that idolatrous minds “struggle against their own senses (*luctentur cum proprio sensu*).”⁷ This mind actively repels the natural force of sense experience, giving the language of blindness a literal robustness that we must take seriously. On the other hand, the problem is also not reducible to malfunctioning physical perception, because the idolatrous mind sees without perceiving: Calvin depicts it as “idly” gazing on created works while failing—or refusing—to perceive the God who self-manifests in them.⁸ Taken together, Calvin’s language tells us that something inside the idolatrous mind is preventing it from having the embodied reaction to God’s many external sites of self-manifestation that it ought to have—indeed, for which it was created.

I suggest that the best way to integrate both kinds of remarks, both the physical and the mental dimensions of sinful “blindness,” is to look for the source of the idolatrous mind’s problems in the same nexus of pre-conscious evaluative response where I have argued that true spectatorship also occurs. This nexus is located, as Wandel says, between eye and mind, or more specifically, in the pre-conscious activities of composition and evaluation that early modern people attributed to the imagination, which functioned as an indispensable bridge between the external reception of sense impressions and the ‘higher’ activities of conscious thinking. Indeed, some of the clearest contrasts that Calvin draws between the idolatrous mind and a mind capable of true spectatorship explicitly blame problematic acts of imagination. Recall that the true spectator is defined by her receptivity to sense experience; in contrast, the idolatrous mind is

⁶ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.12.

⁷ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.4.2.

⁸ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.1.

defined by the way it prescind from sense data. When, for example, Calvin complains that people “imagine [God] as they have fashioned him in their own presumption (*pro sua temeritate fabricati sunt imaginantur*),” he attributes this to a failure to take in the divine self-manifestation on offer in the sensible world. This happens, he says, to minds who “do not... apprehend God as he offers himself (*non apprehendunt qualem se offert*).”⁹ Calvin draws the same contrast between the perception of God attained through sense experience and an approach that dispenses with it in favor of imaginative fancies when he says:

The Lord manifests himself by his powers (*a suis... virtutibus manifestatur Dominus*)... We must therefore be much more profoundly affected by this knowledge (*vividius multo hac cognitione nos affici*) than if we were to imagine (*imaginaremur*) a God of whom no perception came through to us (*cuius nullus ad nos sensus perveniret*).¹⁰

In these passages, Calvin not only invokes the imagination, but explicitly contrasts the faithfulness to sense experience that characterizes the true spectator to the behavior of an overactive imagination. A true spectator apprehends God “as [God] offers himself.” By contrast, a mind that indulges a willful imagination refuses to hew to the data of the senses. In so doing, it threatens its own capacity to perceive God in the accommodated sites designated for and tailored to human perception.

1.3 How perception becomes disordered. How might, as Calvin suggests in these passages, an overactive imagination come to threaten perception? In this section, I add detail to the sixteenth-century accounts of the mind already broached in the Introduction and Chapter One. Here, however, I focus special attention on the way in which a rogue imagination might hold the mind hostage to its own creations.

⁹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.4.1.

¹⁰ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.9.

To review, in a person whose external and internal senses are functioning properly, the imagination faithfully receives sense impressions from each of the exterior senses, like wax receives the imprint of a signet ring. It then distinguishes, combines, and compares these external sensations with what is stored in memory in order to create a composite representation of what the different sense organs have received. It also gives this composite percept an initial evaluative coloring, so that what results is not a neutral packet of data, but already reflects a pre-conscious orientation, such as aversion or attraction, toward what is perceived. This highly processed phantasm is then presented to the reason and understanding as the not-so-raw material on the basis of which the mind forms judgments and exercises the will.

In this model, the ‘highest’ activities of the soul lie entirely at the mercy of the chain of custody that precedes them.¹¹ In the 1501 treatise introduced in Chapter One, Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola emphasizes reason and understanding’s dependence on the imagination’s mediating function. He observes, “the [rational soul (*rationalis anima*)] cognizes (*cognoscat*) nothing out of itself, but acquires all its knowledge and science (*notitiam scientiamque*) from the senses through the medium of phantasy.”¹² The result is that the soul could not “opine, know, or comprehend at all, if phantasy were not constantly to supply it with the images (*species*) themselves.”¹³

¹¹ “Intellection cannot occur without an intelligible species. But this intelligible species draws its origin from a phantasm, a phantasm draws its origin from the [sensible] species received through the organs of the body.” Gregor Reisch, *Philosophical Pearl*, bk. 11, treatise X, ch. 34. *Natural Philosophy Epitomised: A translation of books 8-11 of Gregor Reisch’s Philosophical Pearl (1503)*, trans. and eds. Andrew Cunningham and Sachiko Kusukawa (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2010). For the Latin text, see Gregor Reisch, *Margarita philosophica* (Düsseldorf, Germany: Stern, 1973), 476. As Swan emphasizes, the Aristotelian model of thinking that informs this account depends on sense experience being converted into phantasms with which the mind can think. Thus, the interior senses produce the images without which the mind cannot do its work. Claudia Swan, “Eyes Wide Shut: Early Modern Imagination, Demonology, and the Visual Arts,” *Zeitsprünge: Forschungen zur Frühen Neuzeit*, 7, no. 4 (2003): 562-63.

¹² Pico, *On the Imagination*, ch. VI. *On the Imagination: The Latin Text with an Introduction, an English Translation, and Notes*, trans. and ed. Harry Caplan (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1930).

¹³ Pico, *On the Imagination*, ch. III.

There are two things to emphasize about the imagination as a point of vulnerability in the process whereby a mind takes in the external world. First, thinking is only as reliable as the phantasms it has to work with, meaning that an untrustworthy imagination makes for poorly founded thinking.¹⁴ Early modern discussions of the imagination frequently refer to this faculty as a “mirror.”¹⁵ The comparison illustrates how the imagination ought to act: it should faithfully reflect what is received from the external senses to reason and the intellect. A few oft-quoted lines by Elizabethan poet and statesman Fulke Greville name both this ideal and its vulnerability to sabotage:

Knowledges next organ is *Imagination*;
A glasse, wherein the object of our Sense
Ought to reflect true height, or declination,
For understandings cleare intelligence:¹⁶

The emphasis here is on the “ought.” The imagination is supposed to function as a clean mirror, accurately re-presenting external experience to the higher faculties of the soul.

However, the mirror is an ambivalent figure in early modern visual culture, an emblem of distortion and deception as much as an ideal of representational accuracy.¹⁷ As this suggests, the

¹⁴ “...a sound, healthy imagination is one which reflects to higher powers only accurate images of reality, else, in the instrumental scheme, sound knowledge, proper thought and action become impossible.” William Rossky, “Imagination in the English Renaissance: Psychology and Poetic,” *Studies in the Renaissance* 5 (1958): 51.

¹⁵ In his discussion of Renaissance views of the imagination, Rossky finds the comparison in “writer after writer.” Rossky, “Imagination,” 54. He observes, “...it was common opinion that injured minds—for example, those of idiots or madmen—could reason as well as those of ordinary men, but were misled by the faulty reporting of faulty imagination. Reason would only be as accurate as the images presented to it. As an instrument for correct reason, then, imagination should present accurate, mirror-like images.” Rossky, “Imagination,” 52.

¹⁶ Fulke Greville, “A treatie of humane learning,” in *Poems and Dramas of Fulke Greville First Lord Brooke, Vol. 1*, ed. Geoffrey Bullough (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1939), 156.

¹⁷ The mirror’s salience as an emblem of representational accuracy existed in tension with its equally powerful connotations of “specular deceit.” Stuart Clark, *Vanities of the Eye: Vision in Early Modern European Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 22. The Renaissance popularity of the legend of Narcissus in particular constellated the problems of vanity and pride with the idea of dangerous self-perceptions, giving rise to an entire genre of moral paintings depicting women vainly gazing upon themselves in mirrors. Clark, *Vanities*, 22. Simultaneously, improved mirror and lens technology and availability gave rise to new developments in mirror-based illusions. Clark, *Vanities*, 98. As Tudor explains, in the sixteenth century the Venetians solved the major technical problems standing in the way of large-scale manufacture of glass mirrors. Faye Tudor. “‘All in him selfe as in a glass he sees’: Mirrors and Vision in the Renaissance,” in *Renaissance Theories of Vision*, eds. John Shannon Hendrix and Charles H. Carman (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), 172. These advancements made visual deception

imagination has an equal potential to function as a dirty or distorted mirror.¹⁸ Not only is the imagination sometimes misled by external sensation and vulnerable to control by good or bad angels, it also has an inherently rogue nature that is its own explanation for the faculty's proneness to error. The poem continues:

But this power also hath her variation,
Fixed in some, in some with difference;
In all, so shadowed with selfe application
As makes her pictures still too foule, or faire;
Not like the life in lineament, or ayre.¹⁹

Greville's reference to "selfe application" names the threat that the imagination might not neutrally reflect external experience, as it ought, but distort it according to its own idiosyncrasies. As a result, the images the imagination presents to the conscious part of the mind, though represented as a faithful record of the external world, may be heavily filtered by the imagination's own priorities or perspectives.

Suspicion that the imagination will depart from its role of reflecting extramental reality and instead construct substitutes for it goes back to Aristotle's seminal remarks in *De anima*, where he observes that "All sensations are true, but most imaginations (φαντασίαι) are false."²⁰ The core problem with the imagination was its ability to operate in the absence of sense objects.²¹ It drew constant suspicion due to its capacity to recombine stored images and present the mind with phantasms of things not actually present to the exterior senses. This capacity is

a major theme in the popular magic of the period. Clark, *Vanities*, 3. And despite the newly improved quality and availability of mirrors, continuing technological limitations meant that the object's mottled surface, murky reflections, and limited size lent it to, in Tudor's words, "the dual notions of truth and the counterfeit." Tudor, "All in him selfe," 175.

¹⁸ Rossky, "Imagination," 54-55. Clark, *Vanities*, 59.

¹⁹ Greville, "A treatie," 156.

²⁰ Aristotle, *De anima* III.3.428a12-13. On *the Soul, Parva Naturalia. On Breath*, trans. W. S. Hett, Loeb Classical Library 288 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957), 158-59.

²¹ "Imagination... performs its function when the sensible object is rejected and even removed (*abdicata etiam et remota*)." Pico, *On the Imagination*, ch. II. For elaboration on this danger, see Clark, *Vanities*, 45.

exemplified in dreaming, when the imagination disengages from exterior sensations and re-presents absent phantasms to the mind's eye. While relatively innocent during sleep, this ability raises the specter that the imagination might turn waking life into a dream—which is to say, a hallucination.

The imagination is therefore an indispensable player, but also a point of extreme vulnerability, in the chain of custody on which reliable perception of the external world depends. As Stuart Clark observes, “when divorced from natural reality and done at the mind's pleasure [this power] was arbitrary and scientifically misleading.”²² Indeed, we see in Pico the coexistence of a resigned acceptance of the imagination's indispensability with an unconcealed mistrust for its wayward tendencies: “But granted that imagination is necessary; nevertheless it is irrational and devoid of correct judgment, unless aided by the guidance of a superior power. Harkening to this, imagination beatifies man; disobedient to it, imagination dooms him.”²³

1.4 Controlling the imagination. Pico's ominous remarks raise the question: how can the imagination be controlled? What, under ideal circumstances, prevents it from presenting its own, counterfeit products as a faithful reflection of the external world? This brings me to the second point that needs to be underlined regarding the imagination's capacity to derail the process of perception, which is that the imagination only adheres to external sense impressions

²² Clark, *Vanities*, 45.

²³ Pico, *On the Imagination*, ch. VI. Indeed, the uncontrolled exercise of the imagination is exactly what was understood to occur in dreams, when the faculty creates phantasms *as though* they came from outside the body. The crucial point for our purposes is that such operations produce the same degree of certainty as when the imagination is faithfully reproducing sense experience, because in both cases, what the intellect receives from the imagination has passed through the same processing mechanism as external sense impressions. Dream-images concocted by the imagination could be presented to the common sense—which, in the absence of external sense data, accepts the phantasm as though received from without. Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*. 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 74. This phenomenon underlines the imagination's inbuilt capacity to deceive the rational mind about the world around it.

insofar as it is held in check by the ‘higher’ function of reason. As Robert Burton would observe in an early seventeenth-century discussion of the “inward senses,” “in men [the imagination] is subject and governed by reason, or at least should be.”²⁴ This “at least should be” indexes a fear that reverberates through the preceding century’s discussions of the imagination.

We see the same concern in Pico, writing over a hundred years before Burton, who leans on the subjunctive to describe the imagination’s healthy functioning: “Were we to proceed with the light native to us as our guide, we should accumulate no evil from the faults of phantasy... we should suppress phantasy, if it errs (*compesceremus errantem*), and not urge it on, if it is hasty (*non praecipitem impelleremus*).”²⁵ On Pico’s telling, nothing less than the dignity of human life is at stake in reason’s ability to bridle the imagination: “He who strives to dominate phantasy persists in that dignity in which he was created and placed... But he who obeys the dictates of the perverted sense (*incurvi sensus*) and deceitful imagination (*fallacisque imaginationis*), at once loses his dignity, and degenerates to the brute.”²⁶ The onus is on reason, then, to discipline and direct the imagination.

This poses a problem, however, because as noted above, reason and the other ‘higher’ functions of the mind such as understanding and will are also at the imagination’s mercy, dependent upon it for the images that are the basis of any thought process. Thus we can see the potential for a vicious cycle already built into the relationship between these two parts of the mind. Allowed to operate unchecked, the imagination can mislead reason regarding the external world. In this way, reason’s total reliance on imagination renders it vulnerable to sabotage by the

²⁴ Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, ed. Holbrook Jackson (New York: New York Review Books, 2001), 1.1.2.7.

²⁵ Pico, *On the Imagination*, ch. VII.

²⁶ Pico, *On the Imagination*, ch. VII.

very faculty it ought to regulate.²⁷ In the absence of reliable data regarding external reality, reason has scant basis for controlling the imagination's products, and so the imagination is able to spiral further and further out of control.²⁸ At stake in a reliable imagination, then, is not only the foundation of all thinking processes, but also the ability to trust that reason is not being systematically deceived about what the body takes in through the senses.

To conclude this discussion about the nature of the threat posed by an unruly imagination, let me underline how common and salient such concerns were in the *Institutio*'s original milieu. One of the most prominent places we see early modern people grappling with the implications of an undisciplined imagination is in the condition of melancholia.²⁹ Not to be confused with modern understandings of depression,³⁰ melancholia is a condition defined by the unrestrained behavior of the mind's image-forming faculties. Although discussions of the malady appear in medical literature as early as the fourth century BCE, the early modern period saw a dramatic increase in interest and discussion.³¹ Indeed, the sixteenth century has been called the "great era of melancholia."³²

Humoral imbalance was considered an important causal factor for melancholia well into the seventeenth century. Nevertheless, the condition could also be caused by almost anything

²⁷ "For, as a man is disposed by sense and imagination, so is his judgment on natural and moral matters disposed, unless it be controlled by reason." Pico, *On the Imagination*, ch. VII.

²⁸ Burton describes the potential for disaster in vivid terms: "This strong conceit or imagination is *astrum hominis*, and the rudder of this our ship, which reason should steer, but, overborne by phantasy, cannot manage, and so suffers itself and this whole vessel of ours to be overruled, and often overturned." Burton, *Anatomy*, 1.2.3.2.

²⁹ "Melancholia" is named for the "black bile" (μέλαινα χολή, *atra bilis*) thought to be one of its causes.

³⁰ Clark, *Vanities*, 50-51.

³¹ Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl discuss the idea's origins in ancient humoralism and describe the most important early written accounts of the condition, including those by Pseudo-Hippocrates and Pseudo-Aristotle. Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky, and Fritz Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy: Studies in the History of Natural Philosophy, Religion, and Art* (London, UK: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1964. Nendeln/Liechtenstein, The Netherlands: Kraus Reprint, 1979), 3-41. Citations refer to the Kraus edition.

³² The entire period between Ficino and Burton experienced a surge in interest in the condition. Clark, *Vanities*, 51. Diagnoses of melancholia especially increased in the decades following 1580. H. C. Erik Midelfort, *A History of Madness in Sixteenth-Century Germany* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 377.

from diet, to temperament, to the influence of angels or witches, to sin or a guilty conscience.³³ Whatever its origin, however, melancholia's defining characteristic was a malfunctioning imagination. The purpose of recalling the widespread preoccupation with melancholia among Calvin's contemporaries is to remind us that the possibility that a rogue imagination might sever reason's connection with the external world was, for early modern people, a credible threat. The result of such imaginative disorder was, in Clark's words, "a total failure in accurate perceptions of the external world"—an accusation which, as we will see, Calvin levies against the "blindness" of the idolatrous mind.³⁴

2. The idolatrous mind's defining behaviors

Both Calvin's ideal of true spectatorship and his remarks about the idolatrous mind's unruly imagination direct us to the possibility of disorder in this nexus where sense experience is unconsciously processed, and even evaluated, prior to conscious thought. By coloring or slanting the phantasms it produces, a rogue imagination can distort the images on which the higher operations of reasoning and willing depend. With no recourse to a version of reality other than that supplied by the imagination, the conscious, thinking parts of the mind may fixate on what are mere figments, to the neglect of what is perceptibly on offer in the external world.

As I will show in this section, this is precisely how Calvin describes the vicious process that ensnares the idolatrous mind in cycles of literal self-delusion. Calvin levels a rhetorically

³³ Clark, *Vanities*, 51-53. See Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl, *Saturn*, 75-81 on a tragic conception of melancholia in relation to sin in medieval Christian theology. See Pico, *On the Imagination*, ch. VIII on the wide range of factors that can cause imaginative dysfunction.

³⁴ "Melancholia was, after all, a disease specifically of the imagination, even if, secondarily, of the reason and memory, too, and in the medical textbooks was invariably considered under afflictions of the inner senses... Melancholia's primary psychological malfunctions were thus to do with image-making, which became chaotic under its impact. The result was a total failure in accurate perceptions of the external world—a capacity to construct completely convincing mental replicas of utterly non-existent things." Clark, *Vanities*, 53.

overwhelming barrage of complaints against the idolatrous mind. In its “blind” wickedness³⁵ it “dreams up” any God it pleases³⁶ and “flies off” into “empty speculations.”³⁷ Ultimately, it “substitute[s] demons in place of God.”³⁸ Carving an interpretive path through these descriptions is made difficult by the fact that the habits of thought Calvin describes are not linear. As the notion of a vicious cycle suggests, this is precisely the problem with them. His vocabulary traces an overlapping set of feedback loops in which each problematic habit of the mind is both cause and effect of other problematic behaviors.

In what follows, I build a picture of these mental patterns by isolating several mutually informing but distinct vocabularies that appear in the first five chapters of *Institutio* Book I. They are: curiosity, wandering, inventing, dreaming, delusion, substitution, and separation.³⁹ Each one of these motifs points to a different aspect of, or a different moment in, the delusive feedback between imagining things about God that are not rooted in external reality, and failing to be receptive to the divine self-manifestation that is actually perceptible there. Each helps us appreciate a subtly different dimension of this vicious cycle, while also implying the whole.

It is worth noting that without exception, every one of the vocabularies that Calvin uses to describe the idolatrous mind is also used by early modern writers to describe that quintessential case of imaginative delusion, melancholia. Although I do not intend to draw a one-to-one correspondence between the melancholic and idolatrous minds, Calvin’s habits of language are telling and would resonate powerfully for an early modern reader steeped in a

³⁵ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.4.

³⁶ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.2.1.

³⁷ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.1.

³⁸ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.13.

³⁹ Although the following discussion treats each motif in turn, relating them to one another so as to bring out their mutual implication, I do not mean to suggest that they constitute a linear sequence leading from one to the next. Indeed, if these behaviors could be disciplined into a tidy pathway, they would not describe the disorder that characterizes the idolatrous mind!

culture increasingly concerned about the capacity of the imagination to delude the rest of the mind. Indeed, Calvin’s own robust vocabulary of “delusion” directs us to just such a condition—not as a medical reduction, but as a functional analogy with powerful cultural resonances.⁴⁰

Indeed, the analysis that follows will show the very literal sense in which Calvin takes the idolatrous mind to be deluded about the reality of the world where God self-reveals, and of which it ought to be a true spectator.⁴¹ As we will see, when the idolatrous mind indulges in its own, human fictions about what God is like, it allows these ideas—which represent illusory human desires more than actual realities—to color and ultimately distort the way the imagination reflects the world to the understanding. In so doing, the ‘higher’ functions of the mind give the imagination reign to function like a sycophantic mirror, showing them only what they wish to see. These self-reinforcing patterns of thought and imagination ultimately preclude the healthy functioning of the process of perception, and therefore, the possibility of the kind of true spectatorship that would lead to the perception of God.

2.1 Curiosity. Calvin frequently uses the vocabulary of curiosity to describe what is problematic, and ultimately self-defeating, about the way the idolatrous mind attempts to approach God.⁴² *Curiositas* is associated with a search for knowledge, but specifically—as we

⁴⁰ My argument parallels Corneanu and Vermeir’s claim that “idols of the mind” play a key role in Francis Bacon’s epistemological project and that there is “more than mere metaphor to this vocabulary.” Sorana Corneanu and Koen Vermeir, “Idols of the Imagination: Francis Bacon on the Imagination and the Medicine of the Mind,” *Perspectives on Science* 20, no. 2 (Summer 2012): 184 and 185 respectively.

⁴¹ To dismiss Calvin’s references to the hallucinatory “ravings” of the idolatrous mind as hyperbole or metaphor is the less interpretively rich option—and one that, moreover, implies that Calvin is not master of his own rhetoric. This seems unlikely, given his extremely sensitive ear for language—as demonstrated, for example, in studies by Léon Wencelius and Francis Higman. Léon Wencelius, *L’esthétique de Calvin* (Geneva, Switzerland: Slatkine Reprints, 1979). Francis M. Higman, *The Style of John Calvin in His French Polemical Treatises* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967). Such a reading also threatens to take Calvin out of his sixteenth century milieu, in which his language has recognizable referents. See my discussion of Calvin’s use of the rhetoric of madness below.

⁴² Kenny notes that the terms *curiosus*, *curiositas*, and their cognates have “carried a bewildering variety of meanings” from Roman times to the present day. Neil Kenny, *Curiosity in Early Modern Europe: Word Histories* (Wiesbaden, Germany: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1998), 33. Although generally considered a negative

see in Augustine’s influential use of it—an endeavor fueled by a kind of excessive desire.⁴³

Augustine confesses to suffering the “disease of curiosity,” in which the mind seeks “to know simply for the sake of knowing.”⁴⁴ In the *Institutio*, “curiosity” is, similarly, a critique of the epistemological ambitions of the idolatrous mind, which seeks what—and especially *where*—it has no business knowing.

Rather than pursuing God in God’s sensible creations, the idolatrous mind “attempt[s] with bold curiosity to penetrate (*audaci curiositate penetrare*) to the investigation of [God’s] essence.”⁴⁵ In other words, this curious mindset embodies the opposite of the true spectator.

Refusing to rest content with God’s visible self-manifestation in creation and other perceptible accommodations, it insists on penetrating beyond these designated sites. Calvin contrasts its impertinent form of “searching out (*scrupulosius disquirenda*)” to what should be a pious posture of contentment with the sensible manifestation on offer in created works, in which “the Lord manifests himself by his powers.”⁴⁶

evaluation in antiquity and the Middle Ages, Kenny describes “an overall (but by no means total) reversal” of their pejorative denotations and connotations in the sixteenth and, especially, the seventeenth centuries. Kenny, *Curiosity*, 44. The *Catholicon*, a dictionary of medieval Latin printed in 1506 constructs “the *curiosus* wholly pejoratively,” whereas the “humanistic agenda” of the new Latin dictionaries published by Robert Estienne in the 1530s and 1540s constructs *curiosus* as a label which can be either positive or pejorative. Kenny, *Curiosity*, 53.

⁴³ In the *Institutio* we see the wholly negative, and recognizably Augustinian, association of *curiositas* with disordered desire. This connotation of *curiositas* is discussed in Kenny, *Curiosity*, 36.

⁴⁴ Augustine, *Confessions*, bk. 10, ch. 35. Translation from Augustine, *Confessions*, ed. Michael P. Foley, trans. F. J. Sheed, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 2006). In a related passage, Augustine describes people who have sought their own ways as becoming deluded. Augustine, *Confessions*, bk. 10, ch. 42.

⁴⁵ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.9. The divine essence is not the only inappropriate object of knowledge. In his discussion of the futility and unlawfulness of speculation beyond God’s act of creation, Calvin complains about how the “human mind strives to penetrate thus far (*penetrare contendat mens humana*).” He references Augustine’s quip about what God was doing before the creation of the world—that is, building hell for the curious. Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.14.1. Calvin is similarly indignant at speculation regarding whether God should have prevented Adam’s fall: “pious minds ought to loathe this objection, because it manifests inordinate curiosity (*audacem curiositatem*).” Calvin, *Institutio*, 2.1.10.

⁴⁶ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.9.

With this motif, Calvin draws on a long tradition of rebuking “*vana curiositas* in those who seek wisdom beyond what God has revealed plainly.”⁴⁷ He is, nevertheless, turning this *topos* to his own ends by using it to distinguish how the sinful mind disregards God’s strategy of accommodation. Accordingly, it is not only the audacity of a curious posture that Calvin rebukes; he is especially concerned with the way curiosity leads to the neglect of God’s perceptible self-manifestations. To attempt to learn more or other than what God’s accommodations reveal is necessarily to disregard the perception of God that *is* on offer in them—it is to “neglect sound investigation,” which, like spectatorship, begins from sensation. When Calvin complains, “out of curiosity they fly off into empty speculations (*vanas speculationes curiose transvolant*),” he emphasizes the way that curious behaviors draw the mind *away from* its proper objects.⁴⁸

Sixty years later, in speaking of what he calls the “idols of the mind,” Francis Bacon will level the same complaint about the “flight” of the imagination that pulls the mind from the “true order of experience” which is the only sound basis for knowledge.⁴⁹ Indeed, Renaissance emblems of the imagination often represent it as a figure with wings—a reference to its flighty tendency to squirm away from the sense impressions to which it ought to be anchored.⁵⁰ For Calvin, the mind’s curious flight is an inversion of “the most perfect way of seeking God, and the most suitable order,” which begins with the created works and other accommodations available for human perception.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Katherine H. Tachau, “God’s Compass and *Vana Curiositas*: Scientific Study in the Old French *Bible Moralisée*,” *The Art Bulletin* 80, no. 1 (March 1998): 17.

⁴⁸ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.4.1. This language also appears in 1.5.9, near the passage quoted just above, where Calvin distinguishes piously attained knowledge from “that knowledge which, content with empty speculation, merely flits in the brain (*inani speculatione contenta in cerebro tantum volitet*).”

⁴⁹ Corneanu and Vermeir, “Idols of the Imagination,” 189, 190, 193.

⁵⁰ See, for example, a 1976 reprint of the 1644 Paris edition of Cesare Ripa’s *Iconologia* (first edition 1593), in Corneanu and Vermeir, “Idols of the Imagination,” 192.

⁵¹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.9.

The idolatrous mind's "blindness" is the result of its departure from this epistemological ideal. Calvin makes this point by connecting curiosity to the condition that Paul describes in

Romans 1:19-22:

Paul eloquently notes this wickedness: "Striving to be wise, they make fools of themselves." He had said before that "they became futile in their thinking (*evanuisse in suis cogitationibus*)." In order, however, that no one might excuse their guilt, he adds that they are justly blinded... their stupidity is not excusable, since it is caused not only by vain curiosity (*non vana modo curiositas*) but by an inordinate desire to know more than is fitting, joined with a false confidence (*libido plus sciendi quam par sit, cum falsa confidentia*).⁵²

In this passage, Calvin subtly reworks Paul's comments⁵³ by making the attempt to achieve an inappropriate kind or degree of understanding that appears at the *end* of Paul's comments, in Romans 1:22 ("claiming to be wise"), *the cause* of the disordered condition ("futile in their thinking... their senseless minds were darkened") described earlier in verse 21. In this way, Calvin depicts curiosity as actually causing the blindness, the "senselessness," that Paul condemns. Already in this first motif we glimpse the connection between the mind's perverted epistemological instincts and how these instincts render it unable to perceive.

2.2 Wandering, inventing. Like curiosity, "wandering" describes minds that approach God the wrong way—that "wander in their search after God (*in Dei investigatione sic errant*)."⁵⁴

Rather than adhering to God's created works, wanderers are led by their own invented ideas and

⁵² Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.4.1 (emphasis mine). Calvin repeats this sentiment later when he says "men vainly and foolishly bring torments upon themselves when they seek for a god that is not." Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.12.

⁵³ Paul says, "For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse; for though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools." Romans 1: 19-22 (NRSV).

⁵⁴ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.12.

expectations. Wandering can occur simply due to lack of discipline,⁵⁵ but such behavior is especially related to the mind's reliance on its own, humanly made ideas about God. Calvin links wandering and human-made ideas when he remarks, "each one, in wandering about with too much license (*licentiose vagando*), wrongly invents (*perperam comminiscitur*) this or that about God himself."⁵⁶ Again and again, Calvin contrasts "humanly conceived (*humanitus concepta*)" opinions with God's self-witness in designated accommodations.⁵⁷ For example, when Calvin complains, "we stray off as wanderers and vagrants (*vagi et palantes aberramus*)," his language highlights how fixation on human opinions draws the mind away from God's accommodations—despite the fact that "everything points out the right way (*omnia rectam viam demonstrent*)."⁵⁸ This vocabulary thus dramatizes not only what the idolatrous mind does, but also what it fails to do—namely, to follow the *via* of God's created works as a true spectator should.

Calvin draws on the same family of terms to describe both the act of wandering from created works (*vagor*,⁵⁹ *erro*⁶⁰) and the ideas about God that the wandering mind subsequently invents (*error*,⁶¹ *vaga et erratica opinio*⁶²). This language may reflect a prevalent early modern distinction between two different sources of cognitive mistakes, concisely summarized by Burton: "By ignorance we know not things necessary, by error we know them falsely. Ignorance is a privation, error a positive act. From ignorance comes vice, from error heresy."⁶³ Burton attributes error specifically to the imagination. In this respect he is the inheritor of a long

⁵⁵ By contrast to the idolatrous mind, the pious mind "exercises the utmost diligence and care not to wander astray (*perperam vagetur*)." Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.2.2.

⁵⁶ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.12.

⁵⁷ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.13.

⁵⁸ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.15.

⁵⁹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.2.2.

⁶⁰ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.12, 1.5.13.

⁶¹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.13.

⁶² Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.4.3.

⁶³ Burton, "Democritus to the Reader," in *Anatomy*, 47.

tradition of attributing cognitive error to this faculty.⁶⁴ Pico, too, writing at the end of the fifteenth century, locates erroneous opinions specifically in the soul's image-producing faculty: "the variety of opinions, the faults of opinion, and all the defects of the rational soul, cannot come from reason itself and the intellect... but proceed from the defect of the imagination (*ab imaginationis vitio derivari*)."⁶⁵

In the light of this widespread distinction, we notice that Calvin says very little in these chapters about ignorance or corrupted *reasoning*, but consistently accuses the idolatrous mind of false *imaginings*. His vocabulary of "error" thus directs attention to a specific subset of confusions that arise from mental images unmoored in external perception. As Mary Carruthers notes, the vocabulary of "wandering" underlines the absence of a way or a route precisely where the mind *should have one* to follow.⁶⁶ Perceptible accommodations constitute such a path but, in its curious flight, the idolatrous mind instead strikes out on its own: "Although the Lord does not want for testimony while he sweetly attracts men to the knowledge of himself with many and varied kindnesses, they do not cease on this account to follow their own ways (*vias suas*), that is, their fatal errors (*exitiales errors*)."⁶⁷ By relying on its own imaginative inventions, the mind blazes its own path, necessarily straying from the spectator's approach to the perception of God.

⁶⁴ We see the same move in Burton's contemporary Francis Bacon. Corneanu and Vermeir, "Idols of the Imagination," 185.

⁶⁵ Pico, *On the Imagination*, ch. VIII. And similarly, elsewhere, "Nor is it hard to prove that universal errors (*errata universa*) which occur as much in civil life as in the philosophic and Christian life, take their beginnings from the defect of the imagination" (ch. VII).

⁶⁶ Mary Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images, 400-1200* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 82-83 (emphasis mine).

⁶⁷ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.14. Here again, Augustine is a reliable guide to the behaviors Calvin seems to be invoking: "I wandered in my arrogance, going ever further from You, loving my way and not Your ways, in love with my runaway liberty." Augustine, *Confessions*, bk. 3, ch. 3.

2.3 Dreaming. The accusation of wandering climaxes in the vocabulary of dreaming, which is an even more extreme case of the imagination’s unmoored behavior.⁶⁸ Indeed, dreaming is the quintessential case of the imagination’s capacity to call up images of things even in the absence of corresponding sense impressions.⁶⁹ This is precisely what Calvin uses the vocabulary of dreaming to emphasize, as when he contrasts the idolatrous mind to an ideal spectator who does not “dream up for itself any god it pleases (*quemlibet sibi somniat*), but contemplates (*intuetur*) the one and only true God,” thus remaining “content to hold [God] to be as he manifests himself.”⁷⁰ Burton will later say that the rogue imagination builds “castles in the air.”⁷¹ In a parallel way, Calvin says that the idolatrous mind “raise[es] up in [God’s] stead dreams and specters of our own brains (*somnia et spectra cerebri nostri erigimus*).”⁷²

In several places, Calvin even pairs the vocabulary of dreaming with a second term that reinforces and escalates this language’s sense of being out of contact with reality—and perhaps, beyond this, conjures the threat of the mind’s inability to distinguish between reality and its own flights of fancy. We saw this above in Calvin’s reference to “dreams and specters (*somnia et spectra*)” and it occurs again where he complains about people worshipping “not God but a figment and dream (*figmentum et somnium*) of their own heart.”⁷³ These pairings—dreams with specters, figment with dream—underline the mind’s dangerous tendency to concern itself with

⁶⁸ “In essence, dreams were explained in terms of a change in the balance of power among the faculties and senses; the imagination, more or less free from the controlling influence of reason, was able to present images to the ‘common sense,’ which, unoccupied with any impressions from the outside world, had no option but to ‘see’ them.” Clark, *Vanities*, 302.

⁶⁹ A crucial point about the dream-images produced by the imagination is that they arise spontaneously. In this respect they differ from memory-images, which arise in response to the controlled process of recollection. Carruthers says of dream-images: “They are in the same class as after images, hallucinations, and other irrational images, the product of aroused, imbalanced emotions (as perception is distorted by anger or lust) or of raw sense-data unformed by judgment.” Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*, 73-74.

⁷⁰ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.2.2.

⁷¹ Burton, *Anatomy*, 1.2.3.2.

⁷² Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.15. Calvin specifies that this occurs precisely when the mind has neglected the true God.

⁷³ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.4.1. In the sentences preceding this passage, Calvin describes problematic approaches to the perception of God. He thus presents dreaming as a direct result of curiosity.

fantasies that reflect its own willful desires more than the world around it.⁷⁴ Calvin makes this point explicitly—using language that reminds us of the indispensable yet fundamentally suspect process whereby the imagination constructs phantasms—when he complains that “God ever remains like himself, and is not a specter or phantasm (*spectrum aut phantasma*) to be transformed according to anyone’s whim.”⁷⁵ The idolatrous mind prefers to fixate on what is merely a dream, preferring its own corrupted phantasms to the trustworthy percepts faithfully relayed from the external world where God self-manifests.

2.4 Delusion. Terms like dream, specter, and figment are all ways of referring to fancies that occupy the mind despite not being founded on external reality. Calvin’s references to the “insanity” and in particular the “delusion” of the idolatrous imagination simply name the logical conclusion of this behavior, which is for the mind to fall out of touch with the real world.⁷⁶ Admittedly, it is common enough to find polemicists on all sides of early modern religious debates accusing one another of madness. But the widespread use of such vocabulary in polemical writing does not take away from its pointed appearance in the *Institutio*.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ These phrases could be seen as instances of the rhetorical figure of hendiadys, in which a conjunction is used in place of one word modifying another, thus using two nouns together in place of a noun-and-adjective combination.

⁷⁵ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.4.3.

⁷⁶ For example, Calvin complains about minds “deluded by vain error (*vano errore delusos*).” Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.12. He uses similar language later in the *Institutio* when he complains about religious images and the Sophists’ views of the divine. See Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.11.9 and 3.17.3 respectively. In addition to *deludo* and related terms like *ludo*, Calvin also uses *vesania* (1.5.4), *insania* (1.5.11), and *insanire* (1.5.13) in these chapters.

⁷⁷ We can compare Calvin’s deployment of the rhetoric of madness to that of Luther. Midelfort offers a salutary warning against dismissing Luther’s use of this vocabulary as mere rhetoric: “[Luther’s] violent language was not just a crude or superficial symptom of his time, and a closer analysis reveals that even Luther’s loose language, his broadside blasts, make more sense than scholars have seen.” Midelfort, *A History of Madness*, 83. Midelfort draws an illuminating comparison between Luther and Paracelsus’ remarks on madness, observing that “Both Paracelsus and Luther recognized that the rhetoric of madness, the act of calling another person insane or mad, was essentially connected with deeper questions involving the very definition of what it was to be human.” Midelfort, *A History of Madness*, 82. Midelfort also describes Luther’s use of the specific charge of melancholia in his biblical commentaries. In one striking example, Luther explains Joseph’s brothers’ inability to recognize him in terms of melancholia. Midelfort, *A History of Madness*, 89.

In fact, all of the language that Calvin uses to accuse the idolatrous mind of having fallen out of contact with the real world names the specific kind of madness caused by the mind's fixation on figments of its own imagination. As we saw above, early modern people attributed ignorance to a failure of reasoning or understanding, but error to a rogue imagination. A similar distinction is at play here. As Clark explains, early modern medical discussions typically acknowledged two types of madness, "fancy," or imaginative disorders like melancholia, and "frenzy," used for forms of insanity that did *not* involve imaginative malfunction.⁷⁸ Whereas frenzy encompassed forms of "hot" madness like furor and mania, "fancy" was understood as a kind of "cold" madness and came to be particularly associated with the speculative behaviors of mystics and intellectuals.⁷⁹ While a person driven into "frenzy" sees properly but cannot form sound judgments about what she sees, someone deluded by "fancy" cannot even perceive what is before her because her imagination has run riot.⁸⁰

My point in citing these widely credited early modern distinctions is that Calvin's association of the idolatrous mind with imaginative disorder, while undeniably polemical, is also precise and consistent: his comments locate the idolatrous mind firmly in the second camp. When, for example, Calvin links the threat of human invention—"each one wrongly invents this or that about God himself"—to "fleeting unrealities (*evanidos fucos*)" and then refers to this

⁷⁸ This understanding of frenzy should be distinguished from the Platonic tradition of "divine frenzy," which Renaissance Neoplatonists did associate with imagination-fueled melancholia as a trait of intellectual and creative geniuses. See Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl, *Saturn*, 40-41, 249-50.

⁷⁹ Clark, *Vanities*, 55. "Hot" and "cold" reflect the presumed humoral bases for these conditions. It is striking that Calvin describes the idolatrous mind's speculations as "cold": *frigidis tantum speculationibus ludunt*. Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.2.2. In *De vita* Ficino associates melancholia with both coldness and dullness as when he says it brings "sluggishness and torpor (*segnitiem atque torporem*)" and makes one "dull and forgetful (*hebetes obliososque*)."⁸⁰ Ficino, *De vita*, bk. 1, ch. 5 and bk. 1, ch. 15, respectively. *Marsilio Ficino; Three Books on Life: A Critical Edition and Translation with Introduction and Notes*, trans. and eds. Carol V. Kaske and John R. Clark (Binghamton: Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies, State University of New York at Binghamton, 1989). Calvin uses the same vocabulary of human dullness and slowness to refer to the idolatrous mind.

⁸⁰ Clark, *Vanities*, 55.

condition as “deluded (*delusos*),” his vocabulary indexes the relatively precise complex of concerns and their mechanisms proper to “fancy.”⁸¹ That is, his vocabulary evokes not poor reasoning or misunderstanding, but an undisciplined imagination whose preoccupation with its own inventions precludes its perception of external reality.

Such a condition was, for an early modern reader, a live possibility and a very real threat. In melancholia, the most extreme case of “cold” madness or “fancy,” the deluded mind might see witches, monsters, and golden mountains that are not actually there.⁸² The ideas the idolatrous mind entertains are less fantastic, but as the vocabulary we have surveyed suggests, no less unmoored in external reality. In fact, there is a functional analogy between melancholia and the idolatrous mind insofar as both conditions are perpetuated by the mind’s fixation on products of its own making. The verbs Calvin employs to speak of the mind’s behaviors underline the idolatrous mind’s tendency to create for itself where it should attend to God’s creations. “Scarcely a single person has ever been found,” he insists, “who did not fashion (*fabricaret*) for himself” conceptions of God.⁸³ Calvin emphasizes the mind’s capacity to mold or shape its own objects when he complains about those who have “fashioned (*finxissent*) a God”⁸⁴ and “attach to (*affingit*) [God] whatever [they] please[s].”⁸⁵ As this language suggests, the idolatrous mind is projective and creative where it should be receptive.

What are the distinctive creations of the idolatrous mind? As we have seen, true spectatorship perceives God in the “mirror” of accommodations, preeminent among which are

⁸¹ Calvin, *Institutio* 1.5.2.

⁸² Rossky, “Imagination,” 59. “Golden mountains” is a classical example of what the imagination can produce that was cited by later writers like Burton as part of a set of stock visions associated with melancholia—“How many chimeras, antics, golden mountains, and castles in the air do they build unto themselves!” Burton, *Anatomy*, 1.2.3.2.

⁸³ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.12.

⁸⁴ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.4.3. He uses the same verb, *fingo*, again when he complains: “they, by fashioning (*fungendo*) a dead and empty idol (*mortuum et inane idolum*), are truly said to deny (*negare*) God.” Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.4.4.

⁸⁵ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.2.2. Note the relationship between *affingo*, used here, and *fingo* in the preceding citation.

created works. It makes sense, then, that the imaginative products Calvin most decries are ideas that deny God's role as Creator. He complains, for example, about views that treat an impersonal "nature" as the cause of everything that humans perceive with the senses.⁸⁶ Similarly, after citing a passage from the *Aeneid* in which Virgil describes an "interior spirit (*spiritus intus*)" that nourishes the world, Calvin exclaims in frustration: "As if the universe, which was founded as a spectacle of God's glory, were its own creator!"⁸⁷ He likewise rejects "that jejune speculation about the universal mind which animates and quickens the world," a view which he calls "making a shadow deity (*umbratile numen facere*)."⁸⁸

Calvin goes so far as to claim that humanly created fictions like these actually represent a "denial" of God. We should linger over this characterization; is not entirely intuitive because the ideas Calvin frames this way are not denials of God's *existence*; rather, they are projections of a God *imagined as* humans might like God to be. For example, one way the idolatrous mind "denies that there is a God" is by acting as though God does not see human wickedness.⁸⁹ Another conception that for Calvin counts as "flatly denying God's existence" is the view that depicts God "idle in heaven" and so denies God's constant providential involvement in human events.⁹⁰ What makes such ideas "dead and empty (*inane*) idol[s]" is that they reflect the wishful projections of a sinful mind, in direct resistance to the overwhelming evidence provided by sensible accommodations.⁹¹

⁸⁶ "Yet they set God aside, the while using 'nature,' which for them is the artificer of all things, as a cloak. They see such exquisite workmanship in their individual members, from mouth and eyes even to their very toenails. Here also they substitute nature for God." Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.4.

⁸⁷ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.5.

⁸⁸ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.5 (emphasis mine).

⁸⁹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.4.2.

⁹⁰ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.4.2.

⁹¹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.4.2.

It is striking that in offering examples of human conceptions that preoccupy the idolatrous mind, Calvin does not take aim at either popular or characteristically Roman ‘superstitions,’ but rather targets celebrated philosophers and poets like Virgil, Aristotle, and Lucretius.⁹² Calvin even draws the reader’s attention to this approach when Calvin observes that he deliberately passes over the “rude and untutored crowd.”⁹³ Calvin expresses respect for the intelligence of classical philosophers in several places,⁹⁴ so seems unlikely that he would go out of his way to accuse them of invalid reasoning. He may, however, wish to paint them as guilty of *unsound* reasoning—that is, reasoning on the basis of conceptions of God that are not rooted in true spectatorship, but on desire-fueled flights of fancy. This is suggested by a phrase like “fleeting unrealities,” which he uses in a reference to the Stoics.⁹⁵ In other words, the effect of Calvin’s invective against the great thinkers of antiquity is to emphasize that the problem is not so much ignorant or superstitious notions about God, and certainly not poor reasoning, but rather humanly conceived ideas *tout court*.⁹⁶ The operative distinction is not between pure and

⁹² Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.5.

⁹³ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.12.

⁹⁴ See, for example, Calvin’s acknowledgment of Plato’s view of the external senses. Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.15.6. See also his positive comments about both Plato and Aristotle in his *Psychopannychia*: “Plato, in some passages, talks nobly of the faculties of the soul; and Aristotle, in discoursing of it, has surpassed all in acuteness.” John Calvin, “Psychopannychia; Or, The Soul’s Imaginary Sleep Between Death and Judgement,” in *Tracts containing Antidote to the Council of Trent* [...], trans. Henry Beveridge (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1851), <https://archive.org/details/tractsre03calvuoft/page/n8/mode/2up>.

⁹⁵ “I pass over the rude and untutored crowd. But among the philosophers who have tried with reason and learning to penetrate (*penetrare*) into heaven, how shameful is the diversity! As each was furnished with higher wit (*ingenio*), graced with art and knowledge, so did he seem to camouflage his utterances; yet if you look more closely upon all these, you will find them all to be fleeting unrealities (*evanidos fucos*).” Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.12.

⁹⁶ Indeed, something like melancholia is a very useful explanatory framework to make sense of how such brilliant thinkers could be ultimately blind to the truth about the Creator God. Calvin’s passionate rejection of Lucretius is particularly interesting in this respect. Both Calvin’s *Institutio* and Lucretius’ *De Rerum Natura* emphasize that knowledge comes through sense experience. The difference is that Lucretius thinks that sense experience shows that the gods did not cause and do not control the world, whereas Calvin thinks that is precisely what it shows. Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, trans. W. H. D. Rouse. Loeb Classical Library 181 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

corrupted reasoning, or between higher and lower understandings of God, but rather between what comes from inside the human mind and what comes from outside it.⁹⁷

Calvin's choice to direct his most pointed criticism against celebrated philosophical figures is especially significant because of the increasingly common Renaissance association of imaginative disorders with genius. This association appears already in the pseudo-Aristotelian *Problemata Physica*,⁹⁸ but it is retrieved and popularized in the early modern period in the works of Italian Neoplatonist Marsilio Ficino.⁹⁹ Although Ficino contributes to the increasingly positive association of melancholia with artists, the link between imaginative disorders and genius remained ambivalent. Indeed, Ficino's influential *De vita* is both a celebration of melancholic genius and a handbook for managing a very difficult condition.¹⁰⁰ *De vita* is especially interesting for our purposes because it describes philosophical genius as a result of melancholia's fundamentally inward-turning posture.¹⁰¹ While Ficino celebrates what the mind is able to

⁹⁷ Calvin is not alone in attributing false philosophical and religious opinions to imaginative disorder. For example, we read in Pico: "As, then, we have proved that the vain opinions (*vanas opiniones*) of philosophers have come from false phantasies (*ab imaginationibus falsis*), so also we immediately conclude that the very heresies, that is, perverse opinions in Christian faith, have arisen from this source" Pico, *On the Imagination*, ch. VIII.

⁹⁸ Problem XXX opens: "Why is it that all those who have become eminent in poetry or the arts are clearly melancholics, and some of them to such an extent as to be affected by diseases caused by black bile?" Pseudo-Aristotle, *Problemata Physica*, reprinted in full in Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl, *Saturn*, 18-29.

⁹⁹ Ficino explicitly cites the *Problemata*'s observation that all renowned men have been melancholics. Ficino, *De vita*, bk. 1, ch. 5. Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl observe that Ficino shaped the idea of the melancholic man of genius in sixteenth and seventeenth centuries through what they call "the magic chiaroscuro of Christian neoplatonic mysticism." Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl, *Saturn*, 255.

¹⁰⁰ Kaske and Clark call Ficino's *De vita* the "first treatise on the health of intellectuals." They note that it was also the first Renaissance text to emphasize the positive intellectual value of melancholia. Carol V. Kaske and John R. Clark, "Introduction," in *Marsilio Ficino; Three Books on Life*, 23.

¹⁰¹ For Ficino, melancholic introversion is the very condition of intellectual achievement: "for the pursuit of the sciences, especially the difficult ones, the soul must draw in upon itself from external things to internal (*ab externis ad interna*) as from the circumference to the center." Ficino, *De vita*, bk. 1, ch. 4. Note that this does not preclude a humoral basis for the disorder. Ficino observes that black bile "continually incites the soul both to collect itself together into one (*colligat in unum*) and to dwell on itself (*sistat in uno*) and to contemplate itself (*contempletur*)." Ficino, *De vita*, bk. 1, ch. 4. Ficino's Neoplatonic commitments are evident here, as they are his emphasis on the necessity of removing the mind from the body and from sensation in order to direct it to incorporeal truths: "But of all learned people, those especially are oppressed by black bile, who, being sedulously devoted to the study of philosophy, recall their mind from the body and corporeal things and apply it to incorporeal things." Ficino, *De vita*, bk. 1, ch. 4. Indeed, Ficino's defining contribution to the Renaissance discourse about melancholia is the link he draws between the *Problemata*'s claim that melancholia is found in all outstanding men and Plato's account of

conceive in its self-absorption and the separation from sense experience this entails, it is exactly this tendency that Calvin criticizes in the idolatrous mind.¹⁰²

Recall from the Introduction that in the *Institutio*'s opening image of optical miscalibration, the self's misperception of its condition is fundamentally rooted in its self-centered absorption, which causes it to look only at itself, failing to measure its status by the "straightedge" of the glory of God as manifested in the created world.¹⁰³ If—by invoking the ideas of philosophical luminaries in connection with idolatry—Calvin is tacitly engaging the Renaissance association of creative self-absorption with genius, it is to insist that we should censure and not celebrate such behavior and its products. Indeed, it is telling in this respect that "speculation" is a term specifically associated with melancholic genius,¹⁰⁴ and that for Calvin, as we have seen in several passages, it is a favorite term of censure. The speculation that, for a Ficino, issues in creative genius is exactly what, for Calvin, leads to a delusive disregard for God's self-manifestation through perceptible accommodations.¹⁰⁵

"divine frenzy." Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl, *Saturn*, 255-60. See also 16-18, 40-41, 255, and 271. In this way, Ficino comes to be the patron saint of a distinctively Neoplatonic melancholic mysticism.

¹⁰² Calvin's fundamental suspicion of any approach to human knowledge that does not begin in the senses illuminates a brief aside that appears in his discussion of the soul, where he takes uncharacteristic care to insist on a particular view of the relations among the faculties: "we include sense under understanding (*sensum sub intellectu*). The philosophers, on the other hand, make this distinction: that sense inclines to pleasure, while understanding follows the good." Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.15.7. The portrait of the idolatrous mind sketched in this chapter helps us appreciate why it is so important to Calvin to reject any view that encourages the mind to pull away from sense experience, and thus why Calvin goes out of his way to insist that *sensus* inclines to *intellectus*.

¹⁰³ Amy Hollywood discusses melancholia in terms of the self's overestimation of its object. Hollywood, *Acute Melancholia and Other Essays: Mysticism, History, and the Study of Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 72. Calvin's idolatrous mind takes itself as its own object—or perhaps better, takes its own ideas about God (which enshrine its sinful desires), as its object.

¹⁰⁴ See Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl, *Saturn*, 243-54 on the ideal of the speculative life in Italian humanism. Moshe Barasch shows that the inward vision that supposedly allowed Renaissance artists and poets to create came to be associated with blindness to the external world. Barasch, *Blindness: The History of a Mental Image* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 134-35.

¹⁰⁵ Calvin's insistence on this inversion between what comes from within and what should come from without is especially striking in light of Clark's argument that the fundamental definition of melancholic delusion is a state in which products of the imagination are experienced by the sufferer as though they are accurate reflections of the world around them. Clark, *Vanities*, 59-60. "The melancholic man was thus caught in a cognitive nightmare, at once stubbornly confused of the truth of his mental images and yet totally misled as to their objective accuracy." Clark, *Vanities*, 54.

2.5 Substitution, separation. Recall that in ordered perception, reason ensures that the imagination hews to external sensations. However, as the passages we have been examining emphasize, when it fixates on human conceptions of God, reason gives free rein to the imagination's already flighty, creative inclinations. To understand why Calvin considers unmoored speculation so dangerous, we must attend to his description of its effects—namely, how ideas developed in imaginative self-absorption condition subsequent perception.

We have already seen how Calvin describes the Aristotelian notion of universal mind as “making a shadow deity (*umbratile numen facere*).” Calvin takes this line of criticism even further when he goes on to say that this kind of fiction functions “to drive away the true God.”¹⁰⁶ Indeed, Calvin repeatedly describes human concepts as “substitutes,” as when he complains that philosophers “substitute (*substituunt*) nature for God (*in locum Dei*).”¹⁰⁷ The idolatrous mind forges idols, specters, and demons “in place of God (*Dei loco*,¹⁰⁸ *in Dei locum*).”¹⁰⁹ These comments indicate that there is, for Calvin, a zero-sum relationship between idolatrous imagining and actually perceiving.¹¹⁰

Ultimately, Calvin narrates how the mind's substitution of its own ideas for what sense experience suggests to it inevitably begets separation from God. This makes sense because, as discussed in Chapter Two, the perceptible works Calvin calls accommodations *are* the sites

¹⁰⁶ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.5.

¹⁰⁷ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.4.

¹⁰⁸ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.12.

¹⁰⁹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.13.

¹¹⁰ Calvin emphasizes that developing such ideas in the first place requires ignoring the many “signs of divinity” in the human body and soul. He insists that idolatrous minds not only “conceal them within” but go so far as to “bury in the earth that which enlightens their minds to see God clearly.” Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.5. Similarly, humanly conceived ideas that deny God as the source of the created world are attempts to efface gifts that “bear upon the face of them a divinity that does not allow itself readily to be hidden.” Idolatrous minds hide the signs of divine creation, as under a “cloak,” when for example they substitute the human concept of “nature” for the knowledge of God as Creator. Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.4.

where God self-manifests to humans.¹¹¹ Calvin uses a spatial image to emphasize the divide that opens up between the idolatrous mind and the accommodation-filled world where it ought to encounter God: “When this gulf opens, in whatever direction they move their feet, they cannot but plunge headlong into ruin.” Such minds find themselves “worshipping not God but a figment and a dream of their own heart.”¹¹² As this reference to figments and dreams underlines, indulging the imagination’s fictions leads to the mind’s delusive self-separation from the perceptible world, which the images that occupy the mind should faithfully mirror.

Calvin names the consequences for perception when he says of “heathens” enamored by such “false inventions” that their “perceptions... vanished (*evanuerunt... sensus*).”¹¹³ Idolatrous minds “deliberately befuddle themselves (*consulto se ipsos obstupefaciunt*)” and “struggle against their own senses (*luctentur cum proprio sensu*).”¹¹⁴ With these descriptions, Calvin suggests that the result of actively suppressing what perceptible accommodations naturally suggest to the mind about God¹¹⁵ has devastating consequences for the mind’s subsequent ability to perceive at all. Thus, when Calvin says that “the world... tries as far as it is able to cast away (*excudere*) all knowledge of God (*omnem Dei notitiam*),” we can read this not a general

¹¹¹ Those who “substitute” humanly conceived ideas for what created works suggest ultimately “separate themselves from the one and only God (*discessionem facere ab uno Deo*).” Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.13.

¹¹² Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.4.1.

¹¹³ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.10.3.

¹¹⁴ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.4.2.

¹¹⁵ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.3. We should consider the possibility that willful rejection of sense experience is, in context, a compelling explanation for behavior that is otherwise inexplicable. Midelfort makes a suggestion along these lines regarding Luther’s deployment of the rhetoric of madness. Midelfort explains: “Since it seemed blasphemous to think that the Bible was obscure on important points, Luther was understandably attracted to the second conclusion—that his opponents refused to allow Scripture to engage their reason because they were fanatical visionaries and stubborn, sinful, autistic madmen. When the sophists (as he called the scholastics) debated whether God was in this or that category, they were simply ‘hallucinating.’” Midelfort, *A History of Madness*, 84. For both writers, some form of madness—or something closely analogous with it—may actually be the most likely explanation for behavior that appears completely to reject what they believe should be obvious to perception.

complaint about sinful recalcitrance, but as a precise allusion to habits of mind that block the process of spectatorship whereby the perception of God can and should be attained.¹¹⁶

2.6 Summary: idolatrous habits of mind. Wherever we pick up the thread of these mutually implicating motifs, they indicate that the idolatrous mind is defined and ultimately doomed by what its imagination entertains about God—which bears directly upon its ability to perceive God in the spectacle of created works. In the worst case, self-directed forms of seeking God (curiosity) or making up ideas about God (invention) draw the mind out of contact with the external world (wandering). By indulging in such humanly conceived ideas about God, a rogue imagination reinforces the mind’s disconnection from the world where God sensibly self-manifests (substitution, separation). Ultimately, such a mind’s perception becomes so conditioned by self-made fictions about God that it has no hope of achieving true spectatorship, but rather resembles a person who suffers from an imaginative disorder (dreaming, delusion).¹¹⁷

In order to grasp the full implications of this condition, it is helpful to think of the idolatrous mind’s behavior not merely in terms of fictional ideas, but in terms of a vicious cycle between fictional ideas and deluded perception. What I wish to underline is that human inventions about God are not simply problematic in themselves; what makes them truly pernicious is their effects on subsequent perception. We see this in the way that the imagination’s products function as “substitutes” and active “denials” that actually block the perception of God in perceptible accommodations—perception of which might otherwise *correct* wayward ideas. Thus, the most dangerous thing about allowing one’s reason seriously to entertain imaginative

¹¹⁶ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.3.3.

¹¹⁷ Compare Clark on melancholia: “Melancholia’s primary psychological malfunctions... had to do with image-making, which became chaotic under its impact. The result was a total failure in accurate perceptions of the external world.” Clark, *Vanities*, 53.

figments about God is that doing so encourages the imagination to continue its flighty behavior in what becomes a closed loop. This, in turn, thwarts the kind of spectatorship that could offer a mechanism of self-correction. It is easy to see how a condition justly called “delusion” results.¹¹⁸

3. Conclusion: How idolatry bears upon perception

3.1 “A perpetual factory of idols.” This portrait of the idolatrous mind allows me to offer a fresh reading of one of Calvin’s most quoted but perhaps least precisely understood descriptions of the human condition. It appears later in Book I, where Calvin discusses idolatry as both ancient and widespread: “From this we may gather that man’s nature (*hominis ingenium*), so to speak, is a perpetual factory of idols (*perpetuam, ut ita loquar, esse idolorum fabricam*).”¹¹⁹ This infamous description takes on new significance in light of this chapter’s examination of the habits of mind that preclude the perception of God.

As Margaret Aston astutely observes, “Discussions of idolatry raise very basic questions about the nature of perception and the mind’s image-forming processes.”¹²⁰ Interpreted against the backdrop of these processes and their vulnerability to subversion from within, Calvin’s famous comment emerges as more than a scathing criticism of the human condition. In fact, we can see it as a relatively precise description of the mind whose process for taking in the outside world has become fundamentally disordered. As I have emphasized, even well-ordered minds

¹¹⁸ This portrait of sinful blindness as issuing in a misperception of the external world so great it can be called a delusive resistance to reality codifies and extends an important intuition expressed in Paul Helm’s description of the “noetic consequences of the fall.” Helm underlines the possibility that humans will be led to “different interpretations of the facts, and even to a denial of facts.” Similarly, he describes how a sinful mind “misinterprets relevant evidence... suppresses evidence... and so on.” While I do not follow Helm in understanding ideal perception as an act of evidence-assessment, his emphasis on the way the fall leads perceivers to deny or suppress what is right before them resonates with the view I have laid out here. Paul Helm, *John Calvin’s Ideas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 238.

¹¹⁹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.11.8.

¹²⁰ Margaret Aston, *England’s Iconoclasts*, Vol. 1, *Laws Against Images* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 436.

think with images: the reason and understanding can only do their work on the basis of the composite percepts that the imagination presents to them. These critical products of the imagination are most often called *phantasmata*, *imagines*, or *species*, but *idola* appears among this family of terms as well.¹²¹ Although *idolum* is sometimes used in a neutral sense, it can also connote a *corrupted* phantasm, a percept which has been distorted or falsified during the compositional and evaluative work that occurs after the receipt of external sense data but before the completed percept is presented to the reason and understanding.¹²²

The imagination is, literally, a perpetual factory of phantasms. When it is allowed to operate unchecked, it becomes a perpetual factory of idols. What the idolatrous mind produces are “idols” because they are not faithful reflections of divine self-manifestation taken in through the senses, but human fabrications that have their origin nowhere but the imagination itself.¹²³

Before moving on, let me comment on a part of this phrase that, to my knowledge, has yet to receive dedicated analysis. When Calvin says, “man’s nature is,” the term typically

¹²¹ For example, in Roger Bacon’s thirteenth-century treatise *De multiplicatione specierum*, Bacon includes “idol” among the many synonyms for species: “It is called ‘similitude’ and ‘image’ with respect to the thing generating it, to which it is similar and which it imitates. It is called ‘species’ with respect to sense and intellect... It is called ‘idol’ with respect to mirrors... It is called ‘phantasm’ and ‘simulacrum’ in the apparitions of dreams... It is called ‘form’ by Alhazen... It is called ‘intention’ by the multitude of naturalists... It is called ‘impression’ because it resembles impressions... It is called ‘passion’ because the medium and sense, in receiving species, undergo a transmutation in their substance.” Quoted in Mary Quinlan-McGrath, *Influences: Art, Optics, and Astrology in the Italian Renaissance* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 52.

¹²² As Corneanu and Vermeir explain, such “corruption is largely due to the disturbed functioning of the various faculties or operations of the mind. The problem lies not so much with the senses as with the internal workings of the imagination and reason.” Corneanu and Vermeir, “Idols of the Imagination,” 186.

¹²³ Clark points out that in evangelical critiques, “The human imagination became not only the inspiration for outward idolatry but an idolater itself... In effect, Protestant arguments depended on forcing a distinction between what was admitted to be an indispensable function of the brain and its outcome in one particular area of human experience... Mental imaging—and the *phantasia* in general—had to be relied on in every other context but not in religious worship, where they became not just imperfect but highly dangerous.” Clark, *Vanities*, 168. My interpretation of Calvin’s “factory of idols” remark resonates with this general observation. Both Clark and Margaret Aston, on whose account Clark builds, emphasize the imagination’s imaging and visual capacities. Aston, *England’s Iconoclasts*, 452-57. I argue that Calvin places the accent, rather, on the imagination’s tendency to become preoccupied with ideas that have their source nowhere but in the mind. As we will see in Chapter Four, the imagistic and visual form conferred upon these ideas—first in the imagination and thereafter in material representations—is a secondary problem that exacerbates the fundamental issue of the ideas’ origin in the mind, rather than in perceptible accommodations.

translated as “nature,” is the Latin *ingenium*. Sometimes translated as “mental powers” or “wit,” or perhaps better, “ingenuity,” *ingenium* is notoriously difficult to define. In classical Latin it refers to one’s natural talents as distinct from what can be acquired through art or experience—hence the antithesis, *ars et ingenium*.¹²⁴ However, the term’s meaning evolved over the course of the Middle Ages, when—significantly—it was sometimes included among the interior senses. Indeed, *ingenium* was closely linked to the imagination and, like the imagination, was considered a faculty prone to “flying” from particulars—which is to say, prone to neglecting the sense data it ought faithfully to relay.¹²⁵ In humanist discourse of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, *ingenium* retained its classical association with rhetorical invention, but also acquired further associations which linked it to an artist’s creative or imaginative genius.¹²⁶

This choice of language is striking for two reasons. First, as my comments on the early modern connotations of *ingenium* already suggest, Calvin’s choice of terminology in this critical line reinforces my argument that the idolatrous mind suffers the effects of a rogue imagination. Even more interesting, however, is the fact that *ingenium* is also the word that Calvin uses for the human capacity that is specifically “suspended” in the act of true spectatorship.¹²⁷ That is, the faculty that runs amok in the idolatrous mind is precisely the same capacity that, as we saw in Chapter One, is inoperative or at least restrained during the moment a true spectator attains the perception of God.

¹²⁴ Summers cites early modern usage that associates *ingenium* with poetic license and notes that it can indicate a “principle of difference,” or what makes it possible to distinguish the work of one artist from another. David Summers, *The Judgment of Sense: Renaissance Naturalism and the Rise of Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 99-101. This is an illuminating possibility because, as I will discuss in Chapter Four, Calvin associates with idolatry with idiosyncrasy. He takes idiosyncratic conceptions of God as evidence of a wayward imagination because, by definition, accurate perception of a common world should yield common ideas. Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.11-13.

¹²⁵ Corneanu and Vermeir. “Idols of the Imagination,” 190.

¹²⁶ Michael Baxandall, *Giotto and the Orators: Humanist Observers of Painting in Italy and the Discovery of Pictorial Composition 1350-1450* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 15-17.

¹²⁷ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.9. I discuss this passage extensively in Chapter One.

3.2 Idolatry and the “perception of God.” This chapter’s examination of the behaviors that characterize the idolatrous mind has continually brought us back to God’s designated accommodations and the perception of God they ought to facilitate. As we conclude Chapter Three, let me clarify the relationships among the three concepts explored so far in this dissertation—the perception of God, accommodation, and idolatry.

I argued in Chapter One that the goal of life traditionally referred to as the “knowledge of God” is helpfully understood as a condition of perception. A “true spectator” is able to attain this goal because she adheres to “the most perfect way of seeking God, and the most suitable order,” which is “for us to contemplate [God] in his works whereby he renders himself near and familiar to us, and in some manner communicates himself.”¹²⁸ Through receptivity to the external world where God self-manifests, the true spectator arrives at the perception of the invisible God “through the things that God has made.”¹²⁹

At every point of this discussion, we have seen how the idolatrous mind subverts this epistemological ideal. It makes sense, then, that “idolatry”—as the condition which precludes this attainment and is diametrically opposed to perception of God—is not a neutral or passive absence of knowledge. Idolatry is no mere ignorance, but rather an actively delusive condition perpetuated by a vicious feedback between what the mind imagines about God and how it is therefore conditioned to perceive (or misperceive) God in the world. Even where Calvin does speak of “ignorance of God (*Dei esse ignorantiam*),” it is clear from context that he means to indicate not the mere absence of understanding, but a blinding fixation on human inventions.¹³⁰

¹²⁸ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.9.

¹²⁹ Romans 1:20 (NRSV).

¹³⁰ He compares this state to the Galatians’ enslavement to what is not God: “The apostle accordingly characterizes that vague and erroneous opinion of the divine as ignorance of God. ‘When you did not know God,’ he says, ‘you were in bondage to beings that by nature were no gods.’” Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.4.3. Gal 4:8 (NRSV): “Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to beings that by nature are not gods.”

Such human inventions are dangerous, as we've seen, not simply because they are inaccurate, but because they lead the idolatrous mind to deny the God who self-manifests in favor of the god—in fact, the *idolum*—that it dreams up.¹³¹ Calvin equates idolatry with an active state of unknowing God when he references Jesus' words to the Samaritan woman in John 4: “we hear from Christ's mouth that [the Samaritans] knew not what they worshiped (*nescisse quod colerent*). From this it follows that they were deluded by vain error (*vano errore fuisse delusos*).”¹³² As this passage's equation among idolatry, not knowing one's ostensible object, and a state of delusion suggests, the idolatrous mind reverses the chain of custody that ensures healthy perception. Where the true spectator perceives God in external reality, the idolatrous mind projects idols of its own making—delusions which further preclude its ability to perceive God at designated accommodations.

3.3 The origins of the idolatrous mind. The question arises, however: what initiates this delusive process? In speaking of the “idolatrous mind” as an individual, we cannot forget that this heuristic figure exemplifies the basic condition of *all* minds after the fall—allowing, of course, for variations of degree. Although my focus here, and in what follows in Chapter Four, is on the defining behaviors of this mind, and not its origin, it is worth pausing briefly to situate this

¹³¹ See, for example, Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.5, where Calvin links false ideas with both denying God and worshipping an “idol.”

¹³² Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.13. John 4: 22: “You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews.” In another place Calvin makes a similar remark, this time regarding the state of *all* fallen minds, which are “so tied (*affixos*) to confused principles as to worship an unknown god (*ut Deum incognitum adorent*).” Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.12. This glancing reference to Paul preaching to the Athenians in Acts 17 is highly suggestive. Rather than treating the Athenians' statue dedicated to an unknown God—as Paul does—as *praeparatio evangelii*, Calvin unflinchingly equates honoring an unknown God with idolatry. When Calvin returns to this reference again in the following paragraph, it is in the context of decrying “opinion humanly conceived.” To underline its danger, he insists that even when human ideas do not lead to full-blown liturgical idolatry, “to worship an unknown god by chance (*fortuito adorare Deum incognitum*) is no light fault.” Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.13. Thus, to Calvin, mere indulgence in human ideas is *already* worshipping an unknown God.

discussion in relation to Calvin's understanding of the fall. Calvin traces the fall to unfaithfulness, which he says issued in disobedience.¹³³ The resulting damage to the image of God in Adam—Calvin says that “blindness, impotence, impurity, vanity, and injustice” replaced original humanity's “wisdom, virtue, holiness, truth, and justice”—was inherited by all of Adam's descendants¹³⁴ in the form of original sin, which affects every part of each person.¹³⁵

How does the wide-ranging damage to human nature caused by the fall relate to the specifically perceptual concerns at issue in “idolatry”? To answer this question, we must return to the earliest passages of the *Institutio* that I discussed in the first few paragraphs of my Introduction. Calvin opens Book I by noting the essential links between perception of God and perception of self (*Dei cognitio et nostri*).¹³⁶ However, as Calvin's opening images of optical miscalibration dramatize, a dangerous distortion threatens the self-perception that should facilitate the perception of God. Recall that Calvin attributes the distortion to something like sliding baseline syndrome:

Because nothing appears within or around us that has not been contaminated by great immorality, what is a little less vile pleases us as a thing most pure—so long as we confine our minds within the limits of human corruption.¹³⁷

As I emphasized in the Introduction, Calvin describes the result of this perceptual conditioning by invoking an optical illusion in which local color cues trick the eye into perceiving a shade that is really quite dark, as pure white. In other words, humans' failure to calibrate their self-

¹³³ Calvin, *Institutio*, 2.1.4.

¹³⁴ Calvin, *Institutio*, 2.1.5.

¹³⁵ Calvin, *Institutio*, 2.1.8. In speaking of the scope of this infection, Calvin goes out of his way to emphasize that it lies not only or primarily in the senses or the sensual part of human nature, but also affects the mind. Indeed, he takes Paul's calls for the “renewal” of the mind as evidence that it is an important locus of sin. Calvin, *Institutio*, 2.1.9.

¹³⁶ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.1.1.

¹³⁷ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.1.2.

evaluation according to a divine “straightedge”¹³⁸ results in a consistently distorted self-perception.

It is here—in the active rejection of conditions that would ensure accurate perception—that original sin seems to do its work. As Calvin says, “because all of us are inclined by nature to hypocrisy, a kind of empty image of righteousness in place of righteousness itself abundantly satisfies us.” He goes on shortly after: “As long as we do not look beyond the earth, being quite content with our own righteousness, wisdom, and virtue, we flatter ourselves sweetly, and fancy ourselves all but demigods.”¹³⁹ These passages locate a hypocritical self-flattery at the root of human perceptual problems. Here we see one of the major—though not the only—forms that, for Calvin, sin takes on in practice. It manifests as an unconscious but culpable desire for self-delusion. What begins as an inclination to self-deception ultimately develops, as we have seen, into a fulsome functional blindness, even to the point of delusion.

When Calvin returns to the issue of sin at the opening of Book II, he refers to “our ignorance of ourselves, by which... we miserably deceive and even blind ourselves (*hallucinemur, atque adeo coecutiamus*).”¹⁴⁰ Although, as he goes on to say, human self-perception depends on scrutinizing the self by the “standard of divine judgment,”¹⁴¹ this is the last thing fallen humans want: “There is, indeed, nothing that man’s nature seeks more eagerly than to be flattered... since blind self-love is innate in all mortals.”¹⁴² These charges reaffirm the implication, in Calvin’s opening images of optical self-delusion, that the consequence of the sinful desire *not* to see the self as it really is—fallen and vitiated in every part—is that the self is

¹³⁸ Calvin uses the term in Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.1.2.

¹³⁹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.1.2.

¹⁴⁰ Calvin, *Institutio*, 2.1.1.

¹⁴¹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 2.1.3.

¹⁴² Calvin, *Institutio*, 2.1.2.

blinded to more than just its own sinfulness. Because the two perceptual desiderata are linked,¹⁴³ willfully deluded self-perception issues inevitably in the inability to perceive God.

More could be said about the relationship of self-perception to the perception of God. For our purposes, what is important to appreciate is that Calvin traces human perceptual problems to original sin *specifically* insofar as humans' "blind self-love" leads them to prefer an illusion in which they *seem* righteousness over the accurate perception which would force them to confront their sin. We see the ultimate consequences of this inclination—of a self-indulgent hypocrisy so comprehensive it becomes self-delusion—play out in blindness of the idolatrous mind.

3.4 Idolatry and accommodation. The perceptual consequences of idolatry help us understand why an idolatrous mind has no hope of attaining the perception of God. It is because the curious wandering and inventive dreaming whereby such a mind separates itself from the real world and substitutes delusions for perceptions lead it to ignore God's perceptible sites of self-manifestation—the very accommodations which, we saw in Chapter Two, alone facilitate the perception of God. Thus, one pithy way to articulate the result of having an idolatrous mind is to say that it leads to the neglect of God's designated accommodations.

There is another way that idolatry and accommodation are mutually illuminating, however, and it goes back to the telling word that Calvin uses to characterize the locus of the mind's idol-making activities. I noted above that it is the *ingenium* which Calvin calls "a perpetual factory of idols." If we track Calvin's use of this term across the *Institutio*, we notice

¹⁴³ As noted in Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.1.1.

that Calvin consistently invokes accommodation as a protective measure which God designed to target and restrain precisely human *ingenium*.¹⁴⁴

Calvin frequently uses *ingenium* when referencing humans' curious, speculative, and otherwise transgressive inclinations. For example, Calvin says that what propels the mind into the self-deluding cycle of idolatrous behaviors is that people "contrive by their own wit (*ingenio*)," rather than deriving conceptions of God from sites of accommodated revelation.¹⁴⁵ Indeed, it is because of "man's rude and stupid wit (*ingenio*)" and each person's inclination to "cling[s] to his own speculations," that an accommodation like Scripture is needed to deliberately preclude "all the divinity that men fashion for themselves out of their own opinion."¹⁴⁶ In the same way, the accommodated signs that God gave the Israelites "restrained the minds of all, like a bridle placed on them, from attempting to penetrate too deeply." In other words, such accommodations discourage exactly the behaviors that characterize the idolatrous mind. Humans need such accommodations because of, as Calvin remarks in the same place, "how greatly our wit (*ingenii*) inclines toward idolatry."¹⁴⁷

As these quotations suggest, Calvin's references to *ingenium* in connection with accommodation emphasize that accommodations are designed to preempt exactly those habits that characterize the idolatrous mind. To take another example, consider Calvin's remarks regarding the history of creation given in Genesis. This accommodation addresses the "slowness and dullness of our wit (*ingenii*)"—which, left to its own devices, Calvin says would embrace

¹⁴⁴ Much ink has been spilled to document and categorize the terms Calvin uses to describe the human characteristics that necessitate accommodation. Jon Balsarak provides the most exhaustive catalog. See Balsarak, *Divinity Compromised: A Study of Divine Accommodation in the Thought of John Calvin* (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer, 2006), 15-16, 43-54. However, *ingenium* has not, to my knowledge, been identified or substantively discussed as central to Calvin's explanation of the mind that requires—and, as we see here, dooms itself by disregarding—accommodation.

¹⁴⁵ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.11.11.

¹⁴⁶ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.11.1.

¹⁴⁷ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.11.3, my translation.

the “fabrications (*figmenta*) of the heathen.” By unmistakably identifying God as Creator, the accommodated “mirror” of sacred history “restrains the wantonness that tickles many and even drives them to wicked and hurtful speculations (*speculationes*).”¹⁴⁸ Notice how, in discussing this accommodation, Calvin explicitly complains about curiosity and exhorts the reader to “willingly remain enclosed within these bounds”—that is, the bounds of accommodated divine self-manifestations—“that God has willed to confine us.” In this way, Calvin depicts limiting oneself to accommodations as the behavior directly opposed to, and designed as a check on, the wandering instincts of the idolatrous mind.¹⁴⁹

Indeed, as we saw in one of the passages quoted above, Calvin depicts accommodations as “bridles” that are perfectly tailored to restrain the instincts of the idolatrous mind. This insight allows us to elaborate upon the account of accommodation offered in Chapter Two. If accommodation’s active effect is to enable the perception of God, then its passive effect is to restrain the behaviors that lead to this condition’s opposite, idolatry.¹⁵⁰ This offers a twist on

¹⁴⁸ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.14.1. As we saw in Chapter Two, this accommodation has a clarifying and focusing effect on human perception: “just as eyes... unless aided by spectacles, discern nothing distinctly; so, such is our feebleness, unless Scripture guides us in seeking God, we are immediately confused.” Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.14.1. This is a reprise of the famous spectacles passage at 1.6.1, when Scripture is first introduced as the accommodation that supplements and re-activates the accommodation of creation. In that discussion Calvin remarks that having doctrine in written form was necessary because of “how slippery the fall of the human mind into forgetfulness of God, how great the tendency to every kind of error, how great the lust to fashion constantly new and artificial religions.” Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.6.3.

¹⁴⁹ Rather than attempting to penetrate beyond God-given accommodations, Calvin calls his readers to “pen up our minds, that they may not, through their very freedom to wander, go astray.” Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.14.1. For another passage where Calvin complains explicitly about human *ingenium* and its tendency to lead humans into characteristically idolatrous habits of mind—in this case, “dreaming”—see Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.16.16. The antidote to a wandering mind is to acquiesce to the “bridle” of accommodations.

¹⁵⁰ This explains why Calvin often describes accommodations as means of distinguishing the true God from invented idols: without the clarifying and focusing effect accommodations have on perception, we would be inclined to seek God via speculation and thus fall into idolatry. This emphasis on the distinguishing and pinpointing effects of accommodation emerges with particular clarity at Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.6.1-3, 1.10.1-2, 1.11.1-2, 1.13.1, 1.13.3-5, and 1.14.1. The definitive “mark” whereby the accommodation of Scripture distinguishes the real God from humanly devised idols is the name “Father.” “Under the name ‘Father’ is set before us that God who appeared to us in his own image that we should call upon him with assured faith. And not only does the intimate name ‘Father’ engender trust but it is effective also to keep our minds from being drawn away to doubtful and false gods.” Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.20.40.

David Wright's important observation that "the revealed God is always still for Calvin the partly hidden God."¹⁵¹ Wright's remark about concealment reflects the prevalent view that accommodation entails a lowered or simplified version of a potentially more complex or fulsome revelation of God. However, his insight can be reframed by seeing accommodation as a salutary check on idolatrous habits of mind. On this view, accommodation's concealing function protectively restrains the mind from penetrating *not* into a forbidden, fuller account of God, but into the speculative imaginings that will plunge it into delusion and, therefore, *preclude* the perception of God. Seen in this light, accommodations' concealing and revealing functions are one: only by preventing the mind's self-destructive wandering beyond the bounds of God-given manifestations—beyond themselves—can accommodations facilitate the perception of God, as they are intended to do.

3.5 What makes an "idol"? I have dubbed the mind embroiled in self-delusion the "idolatrous mind"—which, we must recall, is the condition of every mind after the fall. As we have seen, Calvin does not hesitate to call the humanly constructed ideas of God on which the fallen mind fixates "idols," as for example when he complains, "scarcely a single person has ever been found who did not fashion (*fabricaret*) for himself an idol or specter (*idolum vel spectrum*) in place of God."¹⁵² The idolatrous conceptions that the mind substitutes for the perception of God in created works effectively separate the mind from the sites where God is recognizable as

¹⁵¹ David F. Wright, "Calvin's Accommodating God," in *Calvinus Sincerioris Religionis Vindex: Calvin as Protector of the Purer Religion*, eds. Wilhelm H. Neuser and Brian G. Armstrong (Kirksville, MO: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1997), 19.

¹⁵² Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.12.

Creator: “you continually depart from the true God and forsake him, and, having left him, you have nothing left except an accursed idol.”¹⁵³

Passages like this suggest that what makes an “idol” is not primarily an idea’s content—and certainly not its material embodiment in an image or statue—but its source: “idols” are conceptions of God derived from the mind’s rogue, speculative imagination, rather than from accommodated sites of divine self-manifestation. We can literally think of them as corrupted phantasms, mental constructs with an imaginative rather than a perceptual foundation. If this is the case, then when we first encounter the charge of “idolatry” in the opening chapters of the *Institutio*, it is as a habit of mind, and not primarily a set of problematic worship practices.

As we will see next in Chapter Four, such practices are a “second sin” that arises after, and as a result of, the sinful mind’s delusive fixation on human fictions about God.¹⁵⁴ The present chapter has traced an internal cycle in which the mind’s self-separation from the real world where God self-manifests plunges it ever deeper into imaginative delusion. In the next, we will see what happens when external factors reinforce this process, adding “deception” on top of “delusion” and thereby further aggravating the “blindness” of the idolatrous mind. This analysis will illumine the distinctive threat posed by idolatrous habits of worship.

¹⁵³ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.4.3.

¹⁵⁴ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.4.4. Elsewhere Calvin echoes Augustine in distinguishing mental from liturgical idolatry: “To these evils a new wickedness joins itself, that man tries to express in his work the sort of God he has inwardly conceived. Therefore the mind begets an idol; the hand gives it birth.” Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.11.9.

Chapter Four The Idolatrous Mass

“Our faith teacheth us to believe
things that we see not,
but it doth not bid us,
that we shall not believe
[what] we see daily with our eyes.”
– Thomas Cranmer

“In all probability those common juggling words
of *Hocus-pocus* are nothing else but a corruption
of *Hoc est corpus*, by way of ridiculous imitation
of the Priests of the Church of Rome
in their Trick of Transubstantiation.”
– John Tillotson

This chapter builds on Chapter Three’s portrait of the “idolatrous mind”—that is, a mind whose imaginative excess has compromised its perception—through a case study of the perceptual consequences of the idolatrous Mass, the preeminent instance of imagination-fueled worship. If in Chapter Three we focused on the internal dynamics that characterize idolatry as a condition of mind, here we trace the external dynamics whereby mental idolatry extends into the social and material world in the form of problematic religious objects and practices.

In the first section of this chapter, I explore how, contrary to a narrative in which idolatrous practices are defined by their material or visual qualities, for Calvin “idols” are defined first by their original source in the human imagination. Indeed, Calvin understands idolatrous objects and practices as material embodiments of just such “idols of the mind.” By giving imaginative fictions a material basis in the social world, the liturgical practices that Calvin condemns present delusive ideas about God as external reality, thus compounding the individual mind’s “delusion” through collective “deception.” Worship that Calvin condemns as idolatrous, then, performs a circular movement that is ultimately a vicious cycle. It deceptively presents what are originally figments of the human imaginative as perceptible aspects of the outside

world—and, in so doing, appears to confer authority upon what are mere fictions. The result is to further exacerbate the idolatrous mind’s characteristic delusions, but on a mass scale.

In the second section of the chapter, I turn to Calvin’s remarks on the Catholic Mass, which he frames as just such a deceptive practice, one that functions to compound idolatrous delusion among participants. I show how, through references to the visual delusions produced by magic, witchcraft, and demonic powers, Calvin’s language draws the reader’s attention to the visual discrepancy at the heart of the Mass, which asks viewers to disbelieve their own eyes by taking bread for body.¹ Ultimately, Calvin recasts the sight of the consecrated Host as a visual delusion perpetrated by a magician or the devil. This rhetoric of visual deceit highlights the perceptual effect of participating in idolatrous practices, which is deepening “blindness.”

To what does idolatrous practice render worshippers blind? I take up this question in the final section of the chapter, where I argue that the most urgent problem with the visual discrepancy at the heart of the Mass is the way it undermines the Lord’s Supper as a visual accommodation. Disregarding the visual experience of bread and affirming that what is seen is actually body is the epitome of an idolatrous practice because it both conceptually denies and perceptually precludes God’s strategy of accommodation, which depends on humans’ use of their perceptual capacities. If, as we saw at the end of Chapter Three, disciplining the mind to remain focused on accommodations is the best way to avoid idolatrous habits of mind, then exposure to the Mass and related practices has the opposite effect; it exacerbates idolatrous habits and thus amplifies their tendency to occlude perception. At the end of this chapter, we will

Epigraphs: Thomas Cranmer, *A Defence of the True and Catholic Doctrine of the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Our Savior Christ*, Book II, Ch IV, and John Tillotson, Sermon XXVI, *A Discourse Against Transubstantiation*.

¹ Stuart Clark has highlighted the intersections between accusations of false sights in religious contexts and related discourses of demonological, magical, and imaginative deception. As Clark points out, the visual paradox at the heart of the Mass made it a flashpoint for accusations of visual deceit. Clark, *Vanities of the Eye: Vision in Early Modern European Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 183-84. I follow Clark in situating Calvin’s remarks about the Supper against this backdrop, 189-90.

have a fulsome picture of the mutually reinforcing cycles of mental delusion and material deception that define, cause, and perpetuate the “blindness” that afflicts a fallen mind.

1. What is idolatry?

Before turning to Calvin’s rhetoric of deception in the Mass, let us address the question implicitly raised by Chapter Three’s focus on the idolatrous *mind*: what is Calvin’s account of “idolatry” itself, and how does it relate to images and other objects of perception? As the parallel titles of Chapters Three (“The Idolatrous Mind”) and Four (“The Idolatrous Mass”) suggest, idolatry must be understood at two levels: first, as a mental condition, and second, as a set of public behaviors that give social and material form to idolatrous ideas.

1.1 A matter of source. As a condition of mind, idolatry is fixation on fictions about God created by the imagination rather than derived from the external world where God self-manifests. We see this from the fact that Calvin consistently indexes idolatry to human invention. Idols are conceptions of God “that men fashion for themselves out of their own opinion.”² In complaining about Catholic practices that are falsely attributed to the apostolic church, Calvin repeats the charge of “invention” over and over.³ This language questions the Catholic claim to preserve the teaching of the early church, but it also draws attention to the distinction examined in detail in Chapter Three, between what comes to us from the world outside the mind and what a rogue imagination dreams up wholly from within. When Calvin asks, “whence came the

² John Calvin, *Institutio Christianae Religionis* (Berolini: Gustavum Eichler, 1834), 1.11.1. English translation from John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960).

³ Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.10.18. “[The papists]... contrive by their own wit, and fashion with their own hands, the symbols to represent God for themselves.” Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.11.11.

beginning of idols but from the opinion of men?” he is tracing idolatry to the process whereby the mind constructs its own objects.⁴

Thus, when Calvin rejects “all self-made religion, that is all feigned worship which men have devised for themselves or received from others,” the origin of these practices, and the ultimate referent of Calvin’s censure, is the problematic creativity of the human mind.⁵ Idolatry is an issue, in other words, of a practice’s source or directionality. We can see this from the way Calvin consistently uses metaphors of outward motion to describe idolatry: “surely, just as waters boil up from a vast, full spring, so does an immense crowd of idols flow forth from the human mind.”⁶ And again: they “seek out idols for themselves as waters from a great wellspring gush out with violent force.”⁷ By contrast, Calvin images God as a fountain and wellspring, a source from which humans are supposed to *receive*.⁸ The projective imagery that describes the idolatrous mind thus signals the reversal of humans’ proper relationship to God; it depicts a mind that is projective where it should be receptive. Idolatrous ideas and, as we will see, the practices that give them material existence in the social world, are sourced from the self, when they ought to flow from God’s own self-manifestations.⁹

1.2 Idolatry as isolating. A particularly striking class of evidence that Calvin locates the origin of idolatry in the mind’s imaginative projections—and its consequent neglect of the real world where God self-manifests—is the way he hints at the social consequences of idolatry. For Calvin, idolatry is characterized by each person’s indulgence in fancies of her own making: “In

⁴ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.11.4.

⁵ Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.10.8. See also 4.13.2. Calvin approves Paul’s description of human traditions as “ἐθελοθρησκεία, that is, ‘will worship,’ devised by man apart from God’s teaching.” Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.10.24.

⁶ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.4.12.

⁷ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.11.3.

⁸ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.2.1, 1.13.18, 3.2.28, 3.21.1.

⁹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.4.1.

one respect we are indeed unlike, because each one of us privately forges his own particular error; yet we are very much alike in that, one and all, we forsake the one true God for prodigious trifles.”¹⁰ The trifles that distract the idolatrous mind are necessarily idiosyncratic, because they are rooted nowhere but in its own imagination. Recall, in this connection, that Calvin often cites the human *ingenium* in connection with idolatry, which is significant because the *ingenium* is a source of personal variation among minds, what gives each one its peculiar cast.¹¹ This projection of personal creativity into what should be an act of reception is what, Calvin suggests, gives rise to religious diversity: “each man’s mind is like a labyrinth, so that it is no wonder that individual nations were drawn aside into various falsehoods; and not only this—but individual men, almost, had their own gods.”¹²

Calvin takes religious diversity as evidence that idolatrous minds have separated themselves from the external world where God self-manifests. He reasons that if human ideas about God were rooted in a shared perception of the sensible world, they would yield a “common understanding.”¹³ The fact that “individual men, almost, had their own gods”¹⁴ therefore demonstrates that the human conceptions of God that he decries as “idols” have no basis in external reality, which should offer the same perception to each. In other words, these ideas about God are “delusions” in the sense explored in Chapter Three: they are presented as coming from outside, but in fact they are internal products of each person’s rogue imagination.

Thus, when Calvin exhorts humans to “apprehend God as he offers himself,” rather than “imagin[ing] [God] as they have fashioned him,” he is calling them back to the external world

¹⁰ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.1.

¹¹ See my discussion of the *ingenium* at the end of Chapter Three.

¹² Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.12.

¹³ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.13. This explains why their very multiplicity so disturbs Calvin, as we see when he complains, “how shameful is the diversity [of ideas about God].” Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.12.

¹⁴ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.12.

with its perceptible accommodations—and therefore to the *shared* world, where each individual should encounter the same divine self-manifestation. There is special pathos in Calvin’s references to religious idiosyncrasy; it reflects his sense that, in cutting itself off from the real world where God perceptibly self-manifests, the idolatrous mind has not only separated itself from God. It has also separated itself from other humans, by rejecting the shared perception of God which forms the very basis of religious community.¹⁵

1.3 Imagination materialized. Calvin is clear that idolatrous practices and artifacts are a secondary effect of mental idolatry that occurs when the productive tendencies of the human mind are translated outside itself into formats perceptible by others: “To these evils a *new* wickedness joins itself, that man tries to express in his work the sort of God he has inwardly conceived. Therefore the mind begets an idol; the hand gives it birth.”¹⁶ Thus, as a social and liturgical condition, “idolatry” names not only material objects but practices and even elaborated ideas, like doctrines, that embody and thus confirm conceptions of God sourced from the human imagination rather than the perceptible world. This means that problematic worship practices are always evidence of a prior mental idolatry—evidence that worshippers have “first fashioned (*finxissent*) a God to match the absurdity of their trifling (*nugarum suarum ineptiis*)” and only then “set up their own false rites to God” in order to “worship and adore their own ravings (*deliria*).”¹⁷ Calvin’s use of the rhetoric of madness here is quite precise: insofar as religious practices are based on human ideas, they honor only the delusive products of the human mind.

¹⁵ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.4.3, 1.5.13.

¹⁶ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.11.8 (emphasis mine).

¹⁷ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.4.3.

Here, however, is the key point for our purposes: in addition to *reflecting* imaginative delusion, the externalization of idolatrous ideas in the form of material objects and communal practices actually extends and exacerbates this condition. Artifacts or ceremonies rooted in mental idolatry reinforce the mind's imaginative fixation on its own products by re-presenting them as though they were legitimate and independent features of the world.¹⁸ The fallen mind's existing tendency to idolatrous projection is vulnerable to reinforcement because worshippers are so credulous about what they take in through their senses: "Men are so stupid that they fasten God wherever they fashion him."¹⁹ This is why, although "the first errors concerning God in which men were entangled did not begin from images... once this new element was added, errors multiplied."²⁰ By channeling human perception to—and conferring the appearance of legitimacy upon—objects and practices that are actually embodiments of mental delusions, idolatrous practices further separate the mind from what should be its proper objects.

What, then, is idolatry? An idolatrous idea, object, or practice is not defined by its materiality or visibility.²¹ Indeed, Chapter Two's discussion of accommodation should make it clear that materiality and perceptibility are not problematic in themselves, because God makes

¹⁸ "Wicked conceptions of the mind" truly become the tools of Satan "when they are so thrust before our eyes that we are drawn away or turn aside from God." Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.20.46.

¹⁹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.11.9.

²⁰ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.11.6. Similarly: "those who have devised this adoration of the sacrament have... dreamed it by themselves apart from Scripture... But now (as superstition, once past the proper bounds, makes no end of sinning), they fell much further. For they devised rites utterly alien to the institution of the Supper..." Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.17.36-37.

²¹ The most influential twentieth-century account takes the charge of idolatry to reflect the reformers' conviction in the incommensurability of material and spiritual. Carlos M. N. Eire, *War Against the Idols: The Reformation of Worship from Erasmus to Calvin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). Representative interpretations of idolatry as a problem of materiality and visibility appear in Sergiusz Michalski, *The Reformation and the Visual Arts: The Protestant Image Question in Western and Eastern Europe* (New York: Routledge, 1993), and Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Reformation* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005). See Ernst van den Hemel's thoughtful discussion of the persistence of the idea that Calvin hates materiality. Ernst van den Hemel, "Things that Matter: The *Extra Calvinisticum*, the Eucharist, and John Calvin's Unstable Materiality," in *Things: Religion and the Question of Materiality*, eds. Dick Houtman and Birgit Meyer (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 67.

active use of human sensory tendencies in accommodated sites of divine self-manifestation! Moreover, Calvin never condemns images or the use of visual representations as such.

Rather, the decisive factor is an idea, object, or practice's *source*—whether it is based in the perceptible sites of God's self-manifestation or flows from the human imagination.²² In Calvin's words, "Man's mind, full as it is of pride and boldness, dares to imagine a god according to its own capacity... it conceives an unreality and an empty appearance as god."²³

Lee Palmer Wandel gestures to the key issue of an idol's *source* when she observes, "The problem with images... Calvin made clear, was not their materiality or their visuality—Creation was both material and physical. It was epistemological and ontological: they claimed to represent God when, as Calvin argued, they *visualized human imagination*."²⁴ Thus, Calvin calls certain things—whether images, ceremonies, or even false doctrines—"idolatrous" not because they are material or visual, but because they are materializations or visualizations of the human mind's projections.

Thus, for Calvin, idolatry is an issue of epistemology long before it becomes an issue in liturgy. We saw in Chapters Two and Three, respectively, that the perception of God is accessible in accommodations and that its opposite, idolatry, comes about precisely when humans ignore God's designated accommodations. It makes sense, then, that Calvin explicitly frames idolatry as a confusion regarding how to approach God: "whatever men learn of God from images is futile, indeed false... For the prophets set images over against the true God as contraries that can never agree... all who seek the knowledge of God from [visible figures

²² Even when referencing the idols that Psalms 115 and 135 specify are made of silver and gold, Calvin places the accent less on their materiality than on the fact that "all we conceive concerning God in our own minds is an insipid fiction." Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.11.4.

²³ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.11.8.

²⁴ Lee Palmer Wandel, "Incarnation, Image, and Sign: John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* & Late Medieval Visual Culture," in *Image and Incarnation: The Early Modern Doctrine of the Pictorial Image*, eds. Walter S. Melion and Lee Palmer Wandel (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 198 (emphasis mine).

fashioned to represent God] are miserably deluded.”²⁵ This passage makes it clear that it is not an image’s material or visual status that prevents it from being a site for the perception of God. On the contrary, an image only becomes an “idol” when it gives visual form to an idea about God that does not come from God.²⁶ When Calvin says that “images” and “the true God” are “contraries,” he is not setting the spiritual and the material up as contraries. Instead, he is making the tautological point that what is delusional (that which issues from the human imagination) is the contrary of what is real (that which is available for humans to perceive in the external world). When Calvin says, “Whoever... desires to be rightly taught must learn what he should know of God from some other source than images,”²⁷ he is saying that humans must look beyond the products of the human imagination to the perceptible sites where God self-manifests.

1.4 Deception compounds delusion. We thus have a second vicious cycle that parallels the insidiously self-reinforcing dynamics explored in Chapter Three. Left to its own devices, the idolatrous mind engages in imaginative self-delusion. However, when idolatrous ideas are given perceptible form in social practices and works of art, they become even harder to disrupt. On this point, Calvin narrates how, after the Israelites initially gave form to their idolatrous conceptions, the cycle only gained momentum: “they never stopped until, deluded by new tricks, they presently supposed that God manifested his power in images.”²⁸ When the hand gives physical

²⁵ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.11.5. He goes on: “In short, if it were not true that whatever knowledge of God is sought from images is fallacious and counterfeit, the prophets would not so generally have condemned it.”

²⁶ God is contrasted with “all the divinity that men fashion for themselves out of their own opinion: for God himself is the sole and proper witness of himself.” Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.11.1.

²⁷ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.11.6. See also 1.11.12.

²⁸ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.11.9. He continues: “all men, having fixed their minds and eyes upon [images of God], began to grow more brutish and be overwhelmed with admiration for them” (1.11.9). Elsewhere Calvin cites Augustine’s description of how the humanoid appearance of images “affect[s] infirm minds, so that they seem to live and breathe” with the result that that the “idol’s bodily members makes and in a sense compels the mind dwelling in a body to suppose that the idol’s body too has feeling.” Calvin, *Institutio* 1.11.13.

embodiment to was originally a mental idol, that idol gains power through being confirmed by the eyes, practiced by the body, and reinforced through the visible acquiescence of other members of the community. Individual delusion, in other words, is extended by public deception, which in turn compounds the mind's already-idolatrous instincts.

This cycle sheds light on Calvin's insistence that images are dangerous even if they are not worshipped, because "men's folly cannot restrain itself from falling headlong into superstitious rites."²⁹ Calvin does not seem seriously to worry that worshippers might mistake images for God or confer worship upon something that is not God.³⁰ Humans are not actually that gullible. However, they *are* vulnerable to having idolatrous ideas confirmed and encouraged when they see idolatrous fictions embodied in external practice. In fact, Calvin argues that Israelite laws against making idols were *not* designed to prevent worshipping material objects as or in place of God. Rather, their purpose was to prevent this second step in which giving human ideas material form extends and exacerbates the idolatrous mind's delusive cycle. "So inclined are we to lapse into this error"³¹ that the prohibition against image-making functions as a "bridle... to prevent [people from] sinking into vicious rites."³² Thus, when Calvin says that the prohibition against images "restrains our waywardness," he seems less worried about humans worshipping images in place of God than he is about the human tendency to mistake what is human-made and delusive for what is God-given and real.³³

²⁹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.11.13.

³⁰ Calvin warns, "We must not think the heathen so stupid that they did not understand God to be something other than stocks and stones... they were not worshipping that visible object but a presence that dwelt there invisibly." Worship of images is thus caused not by the belief that images are gods, but by the conviction "that some power of divinity dwells there." Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.11.9.

³¹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.12.3.

³² Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.12.1.

³³ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.11.1. See also 1.12.3.

Thus, material and visual objects of perception *do* play an important role in Calvin's account of idolatry, but they enter only at what I have called its 'second cycle.' Their special danger is that by giving physical form and social reality to idolatrous ideas, they appear to confer legitimacy upon them. It is not that the material and the visual are themselves problematic or incapable of manifesting what is spiritual,³⁴ but rather that the evidence of the senses persuades humans so powerfully that it can trick them into taking delusions for reality.

We saw above how Calvin associates idolatrous ideas with each person's idiosyncratic retreat from the real—and thus shared—world. His view reflects the commonsense premise that shared perceptions can be credited with reality. It is exactly this rule that idolatrous objects and practices exploit when they give social reality to imaginative delusions. Ironically then, humans' extreme vulnerability to having their idolatrous ideas confirmed by perceptible objects only underlines the perceptual tendencies that, as we saw in Chapter Two, God acknowledges and addresses by self-manifesting in perceptible formats. Perhaps the most insidious effect of idolatrous religious practices is the way they co-opt the very faculties that humans *should* be using to perceive God's designated accommodations.

1.5 Non-idolatrous objects of perception. If practices and artifacts that take their origin from the human mind are idolatrous, what objects of perception are licit and beneficial? The answer is, the ones that come from God. Calvin remarks, "God, indeed, from time to time showed the presence of his divine majesty by definite signs so that he might be said to be looked upon face to face."³⁵ Licit objects of perception include all the accommodated ways God self-

³⁴ For an interpretation that takes materiality as the base problem with idols, see Eire's widely cited work, which casts Calvin as insisting on a shift away from images to words and argues that he allows for no "intrusion of the divine, spiritual sphere into the material." Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 316.

³⁵ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.11.3.

manifests, as in creation and Scripture, but preeminent among them are the sacraments, which God has expressly designated as highly visible sites of divine self-manifestation.³⁶ Such accommodations are intended to be so captivating that humans are not tempted to stray beyond them: humans should not use “images *other than* those living and symbolical ones which the Lord has consecrated by his Word.”³⁷ This is especially the case with Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, “by which our eyes must be too intensely gripped and too sharply affected to seek other images forged by human ingenuity.”³⁸

Why is it so important that humans employ only God-given sites of perception? Calvin encourages humans to restrict themselves to God-given images because “all the signs that [God] ever gave forth *aptly conformed to his plan of teaching*.”³⁹ Calvin does not specify God’s “plan” in this passage, but the reader will ultimately learn—and we know from Chapter Two—that God’s “plan” is to self-manifest through objects that have been accommodated to human perceptual needs. Recall that at the end of Chapter Three, I explained how accommodations function as “bridles” that restrain the idolatrous mind’s impulses. The restriction to God-given accommodations, then, is a matter of protecting humans from their worst impulses; accommodations are like child-safe objects for idolatry-prone human minds.

Accommodations protect their users by making God vividly perceptible, but in a way that restrains the human inclination to penetrate curiously beyond God’s designated self-manifestations. Calvin cites the clouds, smoke, and flame whereby God manifested to the

³⁶ Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.17.1.

³⁷ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.11.13 (emphasis mine).

³⁸ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.11.13. See also 1.11.7, where Calvin explains that in the preached Word and the sacraments “a common doctrine” is “set forth for all. But those whose eyes rove about in contemplating idols betray that their minds are not diligently intent upon this doctrine.” Here Calvin emphasizes the way that human images compete with God-given accommodations and monopolize human attention: “the covetous fix their minds and eyes more tenaciously upon gold and silver than upon any word of god.”

³⁹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.11.3 (emphasis mine).

Israelites as examples of just such images.⁴⁰ These entities all have visually indeterminate boundaries. That Calvin offers them as the preeminent examples of God-given images reflects his preference for describing God’s visibility in terms that resist comprehensibility in the sense of enclosure. In the same vein, Wandel has drawn attention to Calvin’s celebration of God’s “brightness”—an image that is unmistakably visual and yet “eludes any form.”⁴¹ This virtue enables such accommodations to render God visible while signaling the way that God exceeds them. Similarly, the mercy seat—partially covered by the wings of cherubim, shrouded from view by a veil—was constructed so that even in manifesting God’s presence it might “correct men’s rashness.” Thus, while manifestly accessible to human perceptual capacities, God-given representations actively restrain the mind’s inclination to speculation. In Calvin’s words, these “symbols of heavenly glory, restrained the minds of all, like a bridle placed on them, from attempting to penetrate too deeply.”⁴²

Does confining themselves to God-given accommodations mean that humans can never create images? On the contrary, Calvin calls sculpture and painting gifts of God and approves what he calls their “pure and legitimate use” for teaching or pleasure. He gives only one criterion for such art, which is that “only those things are to be sculptured or painted which the eyes are capable of seeing.”⁴³ When we consider that, for Calvin, idolatry is at base a condition in which the mind indulges its private fancies and so departs from perception of the external world, the requirement that art be limited to what is literally visible makes perfect sense.

Proper objects of perception—and therefore artistic imitation—are real, actually perceptible, and not merely imagined. Calvin warns that we should not try to put into visible

⁴⁰ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.11.3.

⁴¹ Wandel, “Incarnation, Image, and Sign,” 194.

⁴² Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.11.3.

⁴³ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.11.12.

form anything—like God’s nature or attributes—that is “above the perception of the eyes (*oculorum sensu longe superior est*).” This single restriction gives humans the freedom to depict “histories and events” and even “images and forms of bodies without any depicting of past events.”⁴⁴ Effectively, this means that artists are welcome to imitate the already-visible accommodations God provides. In requiring that artists hew to the visible world, Calvin ensures that even human-made images redirect perception back to the shared world of sense experience, where humans encounter God’s actual self-manifestations and which should function as a constant check on their imaginative activities.

2. The deceptive Mass and imaginative delusion

So far, this chapter has established that, if mental idolatry produces delusion, then its materialization in religious practices and artifacts deceives by presenting what was originally a suspect product of the human imagination as a perceptible reality. This deception affirms and exacerbates the idolatrous mind’s existing inclination to self-delusion. As we will see in this section—which examines the vocabulary of visual deception that suffuses Calvin’s discussion of Catholic practices—Calvin implicitly presents the Mass as the preeminent example⁴⁵ of just such a deception.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.11.12.

⁴⁵ Evangelical critics commonly placed the Host at the center of a broader condemnation of idols. As Aston observes, “the greatest idol of all was the abused element of the host. The ‘idol of the altar,’ the papist ‘god of bread’ was the worst pagan perversion of the Christian faith. If the ‘cake idol’ of the eucharist received the lion’s share of iconoclastic invective, it was part of the closely knit case against the misuse of all visible symbols.” Margaret Aston, *England’s Iconoclasts*, Vol. 1, *Laws Against Images* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 8.

⁴⁶ This brings us to a different section of the *Institutio*. The references to mental idolatry as imaginative delusion that we explored in Chapter Three and above appear primarily at the beginning in Book I. When Calvin turns to idolatrous practices in Book IV, we find a related but distinct vocabulary of visual deception.

There is nothing especially unique about associating Catholic practices with deception, which was a widespread technique among evangelical polemicists.⁴⁷ What is striking, however, is the way this rhetoric allows Calvin elegantly to extend his account of the idolatrous mind into the realm of communal religious practice. The language Calvin uses to describe the Mass—a ceremony he calls a “trumped-up illusion (*fictitiam illusionem*)”⁴⁸ full of “lifeless and theatrical trifles (*nugis*)” that “serve no other purpose than to deceive the sense of a people stupefied (*ut stupentis populi sensum fallant*)”⁴⁹—has rich resonances in early modern visual culture. With such accusations, Calvin draws on what Stuart Clark has called a broadly evangelical “language of visual deceit—an entire vocabulary of error, delusion, and imposture” that casts Catholic miracles, including transubstantiation, as false perceptions.⁵⁰

Calvin’s mutually implicating references to magical and demonic illusion place pressure on an existing point of vulnerability in the late medieval Mass: namely, the visual discrepancy between the Host’s appearance, as bread, and its supposed substance, as body.⁵¹ Calvin deftly wields these resonant discourses to argue that this discrepancy exists only in worshippers’ minds; in actuality, the bread remains exactly what it appears to be. On Calvin’s telling, as we will see, to credit the visual discrepancy posited by transubstantiation can only be the result of imaginative delusion. Calvin thus recasts the pious belief—and also, if it were to occur, the miraculous perception—that the bread is not what it looks like, as a delusion fueled by Catholic

⁴⁷ For a discussion of similar language in Luther, see Gary K. Waite, *Heresy, Magic, and Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 87, 93, 107.

⁴⁸ Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.17.15.

⁴⁹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.17.43.

⁵⁰ Clark, *Vanities*, 173-77.

⁵¹ Parish notes that this discrepancy formed the basis of much evangelical criticism. “The doctrine of transubstantiation required a willing acceptance of a miraculous transformation which was both unseen and unfelt, and it was at this intersection of visible and invisible, clerical and divine power, that the pressure of its critics was felt most strongly.” Helen L. Parish, *Monks, Miracles and Magic: Reformation Representations of the Medieval Church* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 61. See also 65, 69.

deceptions. By tracing the way Calvin connects the visual deceit that marks the idolatrous Mass to the imaginative delusion that characterizes the idolatrous mind, we will see that what is at stake in Calvin's rhetoric of deception is the deleterious perceptual effects that result when humans give material form to their idolatrous ideas through religious practices.

2.1 The problem of visual discrepancy. Calvin's references to deception in Catholic worship are remarkably targeted. His language pointedly raises what is, for an early modern reader, a delicate web of associations emanating out from what has been called "the most important sensory experience for Christians"—namely, the Mass, and within it, the moment of consecration when the bread becomes body without undergoing a visible change.⁵²

In the centuries leading up to the Reformation, the Mass had become an increasingly visual spectacle. By the mid-thirteenth century, as Charles Zika explains, the rite had been restructured into a "visual theophany" so that to hear Mass was "to see God." Ringing bells, carefully staged lighting and color-contrasting backdrops, and of course the gesture of elevation, widely adopted by the late medieval period, directed visual attention to the moment of consecration.⁵³ Calvin's references to "outward shows, this empty glitter which blinds the eyes (*oculi perstringuntur*) of the simple"⁵⁴ and his complaints about how "they consecrate the host,

⁵² Michael Camille, "Before the Gaze: The Internal Senses and Late Medieval Practices of Seeing," in *Visuality Before and Beyond the Renaissance: Seeing as Others Saw*, ed. Robert S. Nelson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 209.

⁵³ Charles Zika, *Exorcising Our Demons: Magic, Witchcraft and Visual Culture in Early Modern Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2003) 161-62 and Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 55-58. Rubin describes efforts to further enhance the moment through the use of special effects such as a mechanism by which angels descended from the roof of the church at the elevation. Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 62. For a discussion of late medieval "sacramental seeing" at the moment of elevation, see Robert W. Scribner, "Popular Piety and Modes of Visual Perception in Late-Medieval and Reformation Germany," in *Religion and Culture in Germany (1400-1800)*, by Robert W. Scribner, edited by Lyndal Roper (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 116-17 and the foundational discussion of this theme in Anton L. Mayer, "Die heilbringende Schau in Sitte und Kult," in *Heilige Überlieferung. Ausschnitte aus der Geschichte des Mönchtums und des heiligen Kultes. Festschrift für Ildefons Herwegen*, ed. Odo Casel (Münster, Germany: Aschendorf, 1938), 234-62.

⁵⁴ Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.2.4. See a similar remark about the ceremony of ordination at Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.5.5.

as they call it, to carry it about in procession, to display it in a solemn spectacle (*sollenni spectaculo exhibeant*) that it may be seen, worshipped, and called upon”⁵⁵ direct us to precisely this focal point at the heart of the Mass. Calvin even names the custom of using flat wafers instead of table bread, which he criticizes as a stunt “to draw the eyes of the common people to wonderment by a new spectacle (*novo spectaculo in admirationem traheret*).”⁵⁶

In emphasizing what is *seen* in the Mass, Calvin places his rhetorical finger on a dilemma that had already for centuries been a point of explicit reflection. As Aden Kumler reminds us, although the bread was supposed to be transformed into body, this change was usually not visible to the eyes: “in churches throughout Europe, the body of Christ did not visibly appear upon the altar.”⁵⁷ References to the Mass’ visual discrepancy in popular late medieval ballads and poems suggest that this paradox was not reserved for elite theological discussions, but was in fact a subject of popular reflection. Consider the following lines that describe the visual experience of the Host in mid-fifteenth century England:

It seems white and is red
It is living and seems dead
It is flesh and seems bread
It is one and seems two
It is God’s body and no more.⁵⁸

This poem names what Kumler calls the “central paradox of the Eucharist and the profound disjunction between appearance and reality that it introduced at the very center of the medieval

⁵⁵ Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.17.37.

⁵⁶ Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.17.43. Images were frequently impressed upon such wafers. For a discussion of their visual qualities and production process, see Aden Kumler, “The Multiplication of the Species: Eucharistic Morphology in the Middle Ages,” *Anthropology and Aesthetics* 59/60 (Spring/Autumn 2011): 184-87.

⁵⁷ Kumler, “The Multiplication of the Species,” 179.

⁵⁸ “Hyt semes quite [white], and is red/Hyt is quike, and semes dede:/Hyt is flesche and seemes brede/Hyt is on and semes too;/Hyt is God body and no more.” Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, c.1400 – c.1580*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 102. Translation from Kumler, “The Multiplication of the Species, 179. Rubin notes that this poem appears widely in a variety of contexts, from poem and carol collections to an astronomical calendar and Latin treatise. Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 146.

Christian world.”⁵⁹ It teaches that pious apprehension of the Host will affirm that what is real cannot be seen, and that what is seen cannot be credited as real.⁶⁰ Thus, far from uncritically accepting the claim of an invisible miracle, late medieval popular piety overtly wrestled with the challenging visual implications of transubstantiation.

In fact, the many Eucharistic miracle tales in which the change *does* become visible⁶¹—often in the form of bloody flesh or an infant⁶²—reflect a tension between the miracle’s visual disconfirmation under ordinary conditions and its visual confirmation in exceptional ones. As Miri Rubin observes, “So used did the eye become, so trained was the mind, to think of the transubstantiated host as the real Christ... that horrific tales of a bleeding child Christ in the host were tolerated within the culture, and could circulate widely.”⁶³ On the other hand, the fact that many such tales begin with a case of Eucharistic doubt that is transformed into fervent belief through a miraculous vision suggests that these stories’ purpose was partly to address skepticism in the face of unmitigated visual discrepancy.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ Kumler, “The Multiplication of the Species,” 179.

⁶⁰ For another contemporary poem that explores the same paradox, see “Of the sacrament of the Altare,” in *Twenty-Six Political and Other Poems*, ed. J. Kail (London, UK: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co, 1904), 103-107.

⁶¹ The *locus classicus* for the study of Eucharistic miracles is Peter Browe, *Die eucharistischen Wunder des Mittelalters* (Breslau: Verlag Müller & Seiffert, 1938). Browe discusses the theological puzzles such wonders raised, both in theory and in practice, in Browe, “Die scholastische Theorie der eucharistischen Verwandlungswunder,” *Theologische Quartalschrift* 110 (January 1929): 305-32. See also Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 113-29. Rubin has identified 46 miracle collections associated with the Eucharist in the three centuries leading up to the Reformation. She divides Eucharistic tales into three categories: 1) “A vision of the real substance,” 2) “Some unusual behavior of natural elements... arising from awe of the eucharist or sheer proximity to it” and 3) “The appearance of eucharistic properties, usually flesh, blood, or the Man of Sorrows, to a knowing abuser... and the ensuing punishment.” Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 118.

⁶² In the most common miraculous transformations, flesh and blood became visible at the moment of consecration or an infant appeared on the altar. Parish, *Monks, Miracles and Magic*, 61.

⁶³ Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 137. For a discussion of the violent and visceral nature of many Eucharistic visions, see Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, 103-107.

⁶⁴ Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 128. Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt offer particularly poignant reflections on the tension between ocular proof and Eucharistic doctrine. “Orthodoxy obliged the faithful to believe that what they saw... was not what it manifestly appeared to be; that their direct experience was at the utmost remove from the truth. The distance between the sense experience and higher reality could be transcended by the faith that bound individual and community to God, but, judging from the widespread stories of miraculously bleeding Hosts, this transcendence left an intense residual desire for confirmation.” Gallagher and Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 98.

The visual emphasis in the late medieval Mass and attendant rituals, such as increasingly prominent Corpus Christi processions, as well as Eucharistic miracle tales, can thus be understood as compensatory for the stubborn *invisibilty* of the miracle at their heart.⁶⁵ Indeed, Clark interprets the late fifteenth-century proliferation of images of the Mass of St. Gregory—a story which has been called the “quintessential Eucharistic tale”—as reflecting precisely this sensitivity about visual paradox.⁶⁶ Thus, when Reformers criticized the Mass for asking worshippers to disbelieve the evidence of their eyes, they were not raising a new concern.

Calvin’s comments about the transubstantiated Host invoke this tradition of criticism by directly attacking the same point of vulnerability. The bread’s invisible transformation is an event that, he says, “no sane man will grant them as a fact.”⁶⁷ He explicitly ridicules the notion that the *species* of bread could remain intact after its substance has changed:

[Their position] boils down to this: that Christ is to be sought in what they call species of bread (*ut Christus in specie panis, quam vocant, quaeratur*). What is this? When they say that the substance of the bread (*substantiam panis*) is turned into Christ, do they not attach the substance to the whiteness (*albedini*) which they represent as remaining there?⁶⁸

This complaint draws its power from the fact that in the Aristotelian model of vision laid out in my Introduction and widely credited until well into the seventeenth century, visual reliability is secured by a correspondence between a material substance and the *species* it emits. In other words, the regnant visual model assumes that the *species* of bread—the “whiteness” transmitted

⁶⁵ Cheryl Petreman, “Host Desecration Narratives: Confirming Christ’s Physical Presence,” in *Mediating Religious Cultures in Early Modern Europe*, eds. Torrance Kirby and Matthew Milner (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), 65-66, 81.

⁶⁶ In the original story, a woman’s doubts are quelled when the Host turns into a bloody finger while Gregory performs the Mass. Later versions have the Host turning into an infant or the Man of Sorrows. Clark, *Vanities*, 185.

⁶⁷ Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.17.29.

⁶⁸ Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.17.13.

to the eyes—could not exist apart from the substance of bread whose visual aspect it is.⁶⁹ “These were the sorts of things,” as Clark says, “the reformers never tired of insisting, that everybody studying elementary philosophy was taught.”⁷⁰

Calvin draws attention to the same physical paradox when he complains, “They are compelled to confess that the body of Christ, visible in itself, lies invisibly concealed under the symbol of bread”⁷¹ with the implication that the “figure of bread (*figura panis*) is nothing but a mask (*larva*) to prevent our eyes from seeing the flesh.”⁷² These comments direct the reader’s attention to the fact that transubstantiation entails the claim that the elements are *not* what they *appear* to be. In so doing, they contribute to what Clark has called a broad evangelical campaign to reassert sensory realism against a doctrine that seemed to undermine it.⁷³

2.2 The threat of visual delusion. However, Calvin’s criticism is more complicated than it may first appear. If Calvin’s only line of attack against transubstantiation were to reinforce sensory realism by challenging the visual discrepancy claimed in the Mass, then it is hard to explain why Calvin *also* goes on to reference cases of *actual* visual discrepancy, including

⁶⁹ Clark, *Vanities*, 14-17, 184. For an overview of European understandings of vision at the end of the Middle Ages, see David C. Lindberg, *Theories of Vision from Al-Kindi to Kepler* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1976), 122.

⁷⁰ Clark, *Vanities*, 184.

⁷¹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.17.17.

⁷² Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.17.13. See also 4.17.14. Calvin’s language of “masks” indexes contemporary criticisms of false appearances in the theater: “Since they put so much confidence in this subterfuge (*latebra*) of an invisible presence, come, let us see how well they hide themselves in it. First, they cannot show a syllable from the Scriptures by which to prove that Christ is invisible. But they take what no sane man (*quod nemo sanus*) will grant them as a fact, that the body of Christ cannot be given in the Supper unless hidden (*opertum*) under the mask (*larva*) of bread.” Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.17.29. On the relationship between concerns about visual reliability and early modern theater, see Michael O’Connell, *The Idolatrous Eye: Iconoclasm and Theater in Early-Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 58-61 and Huston Diehl, *Staging Reform, Reforming the Stage: Protestantism and Popular Theater in Early Modern England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997). Atkinson has demonstrated the discursive resonances between theatrical, demonological, and liturgical deception in evangelical literature. Nancy E. Atkinson, “When Miracles Become Magic: Witchcraft and the Effort to Reform Religious Practice in Late Medieval and Early Modern England” (PhD diss., University of Pittsburgh, 1997), 112-16.

⁷³ Clark, *Vanities*, 187.

magicians' sleight-of-hand and actors' role playing. To take an important example that I will explore below: if Calvin's entire strategy were to point out that transubstantiation is not credible *because the transformation being claimed is not visible*, then why would he introduce the Exodus 7 story in which Egyptian magician *visibly* transformed their rods into serpents? If Calvin's goal were merely to insist that humans must always and only credit what is *visible*, then comparing the Host to the Egyptian magicians' visibly transformed rods, as Calvin does, would hardly be an effective way to discredit transubstantiation. In fact, as we will see, Calvin's magical and demonological allusions reveal a subtle but ultimately more aggressive line of attack than even his highly direct complaints about the invisible transformation of the Host cited above.

I noted in the Introduction that Clark's work on early modern visual culture has demonstrated how, during the period in which the *Institutio* was composed, a constellation of factors—from the breakdown of the Aristotelian model of vision to increased awareness of optical illusions—encouraged widespread concern about untrustworthy appearances.⁷⁴ Rather than suppressing anxieties about the falsification of visual experience that were already calling into question Catholic miracles, including transubstantiation,⁷⁵ Calvin capitalizes on this credible threat and uses it to cast the Mass as an engine of deception. As I will show in what follows, Calvin's references to visual discrepancies caused by magical and demonic illusions exploit widespread early modern concerns about the potential of such deceptions to overtake the mind's

⁷⁴ Although Protestant critiques of images both arose out of and fueled early modern visual anxieties, debates about vision were not restricted to theology. Developments in both scholarly and popular thought led early modern people to view vision with suspicion and to associate it with unreliability. See Clark, *Vanities*. For an overview of changing understandings of the mechanics of vision in the late medieval and early modern periods, see, in addition to Clark, Lindberg, *Theories of Vision* and Katherine H. Tachau, *Vision and Certitude in the Age of Ockham: Optics, Epistemology and the Foundations of Semantics, 1250-1345* (Leiden: Brill, 1988).

⁷⁵ Parish, *Monks, Miracles and Magic*, 60-63. Parish notes that "Opposition to the Mass provided the dominant theme in the literature of 1548 and 1549, as anti-Mass tracts flooded from the presses... Transubstantiation, the moment of elevation and the miracles attributed to the Mass were recast as evidence of false religion and the illusory and delusory nature of Catholic theology and its conjuring clergy." Parish, *Monks, Miracles and Magic*, 63.

imaginative apparatus and to cause visual delusions. By affirming the mind's vulnerability to magical and demonic deception, Calvin opens up a rhetorical space in which visual experiences like that described in the account of the Egyptian magicians' serpents—and posited in the Mass—can be conceptually located, but then summarily discredited as imaginative delusions. In other words, in Calvin's hands, the vision of the Host is assimilated to these other untrustworthy visual experiences and then dismissed along with them.

2.3 Magical deception. One of the vocabularies Calvin uses to press on the urgent question of how visual discrepancies are caused, and when they can be credited, is the discourse of magical illusion. Calvin calls “that fictitious transubstantiation (*fictitia illa transsubstantiatio*)”⁷⁶ “a trumped-up illusion (*fictitiam illusionem*)”⁷⁷ and draws an implicit comparison between the priests' actions and those of “sleight-of-hand artists (*praestigiatores*).”⁷⁸ This is not a new line of attack; indeed, longstanding associations between magic⁷⁹ and the sacraments made this a ready-made critique by the sixteenth century. The Host's status as an object with protective powers meant that consecrated wafers were sometimes smuggled out of the Mass for use in magical activities.⁸⁰ The evangelical comparison of priests to magicians capitalized on the association between the manipulation of the Host in the elevation and the miraculous properties that made it a powerful ingredient in protective and healing charms. As Helen Parish explains, “the central role of the priest, and the *sotto voce* recitation of the Latin

⁷⁶ Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.17.14.

⁷⁷ Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.17.15.

⁷⁸ Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.17.15.

⁷⁹ For a thoughtful discussion of the difficulties of defining and studying early modern “magic,” see Stuart Clark, “Witchcraft and Magic in Early Modern Culture” in *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: The Period of the Witch Trials*, eds. Bengt Ankarloo, Stuart Clark, and William Monter, Vol. 4, *The Athlone History of Witchcraft and Magic in Europe*, eds. Bengt Ankarloo and Stuart Clark (London, UK: The Athlone Press, 2002), 105-11.

⁸⁰ Waite, *Heresy*, 17. Petreman, “Host Desecration Narratives,” 67-68. Rubin notes that consecrated Hosts were prescribed as cures for fever and used as amulets and fertility charms. Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 338, 341.

words of consecration, encouraged this use of vocabulary from the realm of popular magic to describe the sacrament and to identify the celebrant as a conjurer.”⁸¹

With his allusions to magic, Calvin exploits this popular association between priests and magicians. Indeed, as Clark points out, visual illusion was the heart of sixteenth-century magic, so a comparison between the Mass the work of a magician attacks “not just the... spurious claim to transform substance but the manipulation of appearances.”⁸² We can visualize the magical-deceptive connotations of Calvin’s complaints about “sleight-of-hand” by reference to Hieronymus Bosch’s *The Conjurer*, produced around 1502. The painting depicts a magician standing behind a table with the wand, cups, and balls commonly employed by street entertainers. Jeffrey Hamburger has argued that the positioning of the magician behind the table and the figure’s hand gesture are reminiscent of a Mass, with the priest at the altar table holding the Host at the moment of consecration.⁸³

Calvin’s reference to priestly legerdemain may conjure the ill-intentioned distractions of street performers—in the painting, one stupefied onlooker is having her purse stolen⁸⁴—but it also brings to mind widely circulating reports of actual sleight-of-hand performed in the Mass. For example, in one iconic incident from the 1540s, a Surrey priest named Nicholas Germes pricked his own hand at the moment of consecration to simulate the vision of a bleeding Host.⁸⁵ This story and similar reports of trickery, widely publicized by evangelical polemicists,⁸⁶

⁸¹ Parish, *Monks, Miracles and Magic*, 68.

⁸² Clark, *Vanities*, 186.

⁸³ Jeffrey F. Hamburger, “Bosch’s *Conjurer*: An Attack on Magic and Sacramental Heresy.” *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art*, 14, no. 1 (1984): 8, 16-17. Hamburger identifies the magician’s gesture as the *iunctio digitis*, the gesture prescribed for priests at the moment of consecration. Hamburger, “Bosch’s *Conjurer*,” 17.

⁸⁴ Hamburger, “Bosch’s *Conjurer*,” 6.

⁸⁵ Parish, *Monks, Miracles and Magic*, 66.

⁸⁶ Probably the most famous such incident, and one of the most widely published, is that involving the mechanical contrivance which animated the eyes and lips of the Boxley “Rood of Grace.” J. Brownbill, “Boxley Abbey and the Rood of Grace. Part I,” *The Antiquary*, 7, no. 40 (April 1883): 162-4 and J. Brownbill, “Boxley Abbey and the Rood of Grace. Part II,” *The Antiquary*, 7, no. 41 (May 1883): 210-13. For a discussion of the way the Boxley incident

reinforced the association between visual illusion and priestly deception. It also cast pious attendees at Catholic ceremonies as dupes at a magical performance.⁸⁷

In the *Institutio*'s comments about the Mass as a site of deception, Calvin pushes the notion of magical trickery even further. Rather than limiting his account to external deceptions created by physical illusions, he conjures the more intimate threat of delusions internal to the mind. This brings me to Calvin's surprising rhetorical deployment of the case of the Egyptian magicians. Just after complaining about the optical indefensibility of the claim that "Christ lies hidden under the color of bread," Calvin launches into a long discussion of Moses' rod-transforming contest from Exodus 7.⁸⁸ This incident, a common source text for early modern discussions of magic,⁸⁹ is an apt choice for a discussion of transubstantiation, because the contest allows Calvin to compare side-by-side transformations.

Whereas the transformation of Moses' rod was a "glorious miracle (*illustre miraculum*)," what transpired with the magicians' rods was merely an "illusion (*illusionem*)." The feigned transformation was a case of visual deception: "Magicians by playing tricks (*praestigiis luserant*) persuaded the Egyptians that they were able [...] to change the creatures."⁹⁰ The term Calvin uses to indicate this effect, *praestigium*, referred—according to a widely cited etymology from Isidore of Seville⁹¹—to a binding of the pupils that prevents the eyes from functioning properly.

was mobilized in propaganda and turned to political purposes, see Peter Marshall, "The Rood of Boxley, the Blood of Hailes and the Defence of the Henrician Church," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 46, no. 4 (October 1995): 692-94. See also Clark, *Vanities*, 174-77 for a discussion of the Boxley incident and several related cases.

⁸⁷ Clark, *Vanities*, 177.

⁸⁸ Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.17.13-15 (translation mine).

⁸⁹ In addition to the Witch of Endor and Simon Magus, evangelical writers drew on the example of Pharaoh's magicians to affirm the reality of magic and to posit a distinction between holy miracles and deceptive or demonic magic. Helen L. Parish, "'Lying Histories Feigning False Miracles': Magic, Miracles and Mediaeval History in Reformation Polemic," *Reformation & Renaissance Review* 4, no. 2 (December 2002): 230-40.

⁹⁰ Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.17.15.

⁹¹ *Isidori Hispalensis episcopi Etymologiarum sive Originum libri xx*, ed. W. M. Lindsay (Oxford: E. typographeo Clarendoniano, 1911), I, unpaginated (viii, ch. 9, 'De magis,' sect 33). Cited in Clark, *Vanities*, 79.

The word was widely associated with ocular magic—indeed, a performer of visually deceptive magic was called a *praestigiatrix*⁹²—and in this connection the language was applied polemically to Catholic priests, as in John Bale’s widely echoed 1546 complaint about “prestygyouse Papystes.”⁹³ This terminology’s range includes the relatively innocent close-up magic performed by street magicians, but also extends to the mental delusion caused by demonically powered witchcraft.⁹⁴ Indeed, in the *Malleus maleficarum*, the most infamous medieval treatment of witchcraft, Isidore’s etymology is the basis for distinguishing five types of demonic delusion.⁹⁵ Although some proceed through the “artificial trickery” also employed by human jugglers and tricksters, others occur through more intimate means, such humoral disturbances and manipulations of the imagination.⁹⁶

Calvin’s use of *praestigium*⁹⁷ thus evokes more than sleight-of-hand magic. In fact, it brings to mind a range of activities linked less by a single cause than by their shared effect, which is to subvert visual perception. In using *praestigium* to describe the activities of the Egyptian magicians, Calvin is drawing on a venerable exegetical tradition that casts these biblical figures as practitioners of *magia praestigiatrix*.⁹⁸ Early modern participants in this discussion were preoccupied, above all, with the nature and causes of the transformation

⁹² Johann Heinrich Alsted, *Encyclopaedia* (Herborn, 1630. Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, c1989-c1990). Hathi Trust.

⁹³ John Bale, *The actes of Englysh votaryes: comprehending their unchast practyses and examples by all ages, from the worldes begynnyng to thys present yeare. 1st Pt. f. 48^v* (Antwerp: S Mierdman, 1546).

⁹⁴ For the association of demons with illusion, see Clark, *Vanities*, 123-25 and P. G. Maxwell-Stuart, “Rational Superstition: The Writings of Protestant Demonologists,” in *Religion and Superstition in Reformation Europe*, eds. Helen Parish and William G. Naphy (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2002), 176-77. Evangelical writers frequently drew on demonological vocabulary in order to portray Catholic objects of devotion as deceptive. Clifford Davidson, “‘The Devil’s Guts’: Allegations of Superstition and Fraud in Religious Drama and Art during the Reformation,” in *Iconoclasm vs. Art and Drama*, eds. Clifford Davidson and Ann Eljenholm Nichols (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University, 1989).

⁹⁵ On the distinctive features and influence of the *Malleus*, see Hans Peter Broedel, *The Malleus Maleficarum and the Construction of Witchcraft: Theology and Popular Belief* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2003).

⁹⁶ Clark, *Vanities*, 131.

⁹⁷ See similar uses of this language at Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.11.9, 2.4.1, 3.5.10, 3.20.46, 4.1.11, 4.14.25, 4.18.3.

⁹⁸ Clark, *Vanities*, 81.

attributed to the Egyptian conjurers: “Endless debates over whether they substituted real serpents for real rods by sleight of hand, or made non-real serpents appear by ocular delusion, turned a biblical episode into a series of perceptual and epistemological puzzles.”⁹⁹

Indeed, Calvin’s own commentary on the relevant verses from Exodus 7 references these very questions. After he affirms unequivocally that the change of Moses’ was “true and substantial,” he remarks that “there is more reason for doubt respecting the rods of the magicians, since it is probable that the eyes of the wicked king were deceived by their illusions.”¹⁰⁰ Calvin’s discussion of the same incident in the *Institutio* thus implicitly raises these widely debated questions about visual illusion: Were the rods actually transformed? If so, by whose power? If they were not really transformed, why did they appear transformed to the eyes of the spectators? What combination of demonic and imaginative delusion gave rise to this false visual experience?

In discussing Exodus 7 in both his Exodus commentary and in the *Institutio*, Calvin emphasizes the criterion of visibility. In so doing, he pursues the line of attack we saw above, which prioritizes sensory realism. The transformation of Moses’ rod is credible because it was visible. As such, it has no bearing on the case of transubstantiation, because, as Calvin says, “that”—meaning Moses’—“conversion was visible (*ocularis fuit illa conversio*).” This precludes a comparison with the transubstantiated Host, of which Calvin says, “no eye on earth is witness.”¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ Clark, *Vanities*, 81. The possibilities were discussed, for example, in Lutheran Jacob Heerbrand’s two disputations on the topic as well as in a treatise by Thomas Erastus. Clark, *Vanities*, 127-28

¹⁰⁰ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Last Four Books of Moses: Arranged in the Form of a Harmony*, trans. Charles William Bingham (Edinburgh: Printed for the Calvin Translation Society, 1852; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2003), 146-47. Citations refer to the Baker edition.

¹⁰¹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.17.15.

By contrast, Calvin aligns transubstantiation with the case of the *Egyptians*' rods. However, this poses a problem for Calvin's argument, because the transformation of the Egyptians' rods was *also* visible to onlookers! Calvin deals with this difficulty by changing his line of attack: he now casts the magicians' rods as cases of an apparent but actually feigned transformation. That is to say, in making this claim Calvin departs from the sensory realist strategy. Instead, he questions the reliability of the onlookers' visual experience. Although the Egyptians *believed* they saw their magicians turn rods into serpents, in fact, the magicians "had done nothing but blind the eyes of the spectators (*nihil aliud quam tenebras spectantium oculis offuderant*)."¹⁰² In one case, we have a genuine transformation, confirmed by trustworthy visual experience. In the other, spectators suffer falsified visual experience of a transformation that never occurred.¹⁰³ If there is any transformation, Calvin implies, it was not in the rods (which merely *looked* transformed)—nor, certainly, is it in the bread (which does not)—but, in both cases, only in the minds of naïve onlookers.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.17.15. In his commentary on II Thessalonians 2:9, Calvin remarks, similarly, that the Egyptian magicians are an example of how Satan "deceives by means of enchantments." John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*, trans. John Pringle (Edinburgh: Printed for the Calvin Translation Society, 1851), 337. <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/011987274>.

¹⁰³ In drawing this contrast, Calvin deftly evokes a venerable patristic distinction between *mira*, the "lying wonders" performed by witches and demonic powers, and *miracula*, divinely powered miracles performed by legitimate representatives of the Church. Clark, *Vanities*, 124-25 and Stuart Clark, *Thinking with Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 165. For Augustine's influential formulation of this distinction, see Edward Peters, "The Medieval Church and State on Superstition, Magic and Witchcraft: From Augustine to the Sixteenth Century," in *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: The Middle Ages*, eds. Karen Jolly, Catharina Raudvere, and Edward Peters, Vol. 3, *The Athlone History of Witchcraft and Magic in Europe*, eds. Bengt Ankarloo and Stuart Clark (London, UK: The Athlone Press, 2002), 36. The Eucharist was consistently presented as just such a false miracle or feigned wonder. Atkinson, "When Miracles Become Magic," 41-42, 74, 91.

¹⁰⁴ Note that in his commentary on Exodus 7, Calvin goes on to acknowledge that the Egyptian magicians' rods' change could have been actual. However, in this case it would represent a miracle performed by God as a means of punishing Pharaoh through allowing him to be "deceived by the juggles of his own magicians." Calvin, *Commentaries on the Last Four Books*, 147. See also 146, 149. It is striking, however, that even in allowing that the Egyptians' rods may actually have been transformed, Calvin places the accent on the willful blindness of Pharaoh who, Calvin, emphasizes, wished not to see, so that when God gave "efficacy to the delusion" God was only confirming and extending the deprivation of the senses begun by Pharaoh's initial wickedness. Calvin, *Commentaries on the Last Four Books*, 149.

2.4 Demonic deception. Calvin’s account of the Egyptian magicians opens onto a second, related source of visual discrepancy which Calvin also evokes to cast the Mass as a site of deception—namely, demonic deception and its early modern correlate, witchcraft.¹⁰⁵ Calvin’s references to magical illusion cross into these overlapping and mutually implicated vocabularies when he references deceptions enacted by means of both the devil and magical incantations.¹⁰⁶ For example, Calvin describes worshippers having been “fouly deluded by Satan’s tricks (*praestigiis*)” using the same vocabulary of optical illusion he employs for the Egyptian magicians.¹⁰⁷ The only reason, he insists, that people accept the Catholic account of an invisible transubstantiation is because “they are blinded by a spell from the devil (*excoecavit diaboli incantatio*).”¹⁰⁸

In the sixteenth century, the devil’s reputation as the ultimate deceiver—recall that in 2 Thessalonians, he causes “powerful delusions”¹⁰⁹—was increasingly linked to the idea that he deceived primarily through optical manipulation.¹¹⁰ Most relevant for our purposes is the fact that the devil’s visual deceptions were often considered to be fraudulent or hoax transformations,

¹⁰⁵ For a discussion of methodological difficulties involved in studying these early modern phenomena, see Clark, “Witchcraft and Magic,” 134-35, 144. In situating Calvin’s subtle references to magic, witchcraft, and demonology against the larger backdrop of early modern concerns about visual reliability and the vulnerability of the imagination to delusion, I echo Clark’s reminder that “educated beliefs about witchcraft were not held in isolation but were dependent on other intellectual commitments, as well as on a whole series of social and institutional practices.” Clark, “Witchcraft and Magic,” 134.

¹⁰⁶ Beginning in the fifteenth century, a range of practices that included everything from healing and charming to necromancy and divination came to be grouped, for theological and juridical purposes, under the single crime of witchcraft. Witchcraft was increasingly defined by the idea of an alliance between the practitioner and the devil, creating an overlapping web of resonances between magic and demonology. Peters, “The Medieval Church and State,” 231.

¹⁰⁷ Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.17.15.

¹⁰⁸ Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.17.23. See representative examples of references to Satan’s deceptions in connection with other Catholic practices at Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.18.1, 4.18.4, and 4.19.8.

¹⁰⁹ “⁹The coming of the lawless one is apparent in the working of Satan, who uses all power, signs, lying wonders, ¹⁰and every kind of wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. ¹¹For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion, leading them to believe what is false, ¹²so that all who have not believed the truth but took pleasure in unrighteousness will be condemned.” 2 Thess. 2: 9-12 (NRSV).

¹¹⁰ Clark, *Vanities*, 123.

rather than substantial ones. This means that one of the most insidious ways the devil deceived was by making people credit magical transformations where there were none.¹¹¹ Calvin's apparently casual references to the devil in connection with the Mass thus raise not only the possibility of general deception, but of specifically *hoax transformations* brought about through delusion.¹¹²

Calvin makes direct reference to the stock and trade of popular magic practitioners when he compares the words of consecration to magicians' "incantations."¹¹³ Catholic worshippers are only "bewitched (*fascinati*) by this error, that Christ's body, enclosed in bread, is transmitted by the mouth to the stomach" because "among them consecration was virtually equivalent to magic incantation (*magica incantatio*)."¹¹⁴ Here again, Calvin makes deft use of a widespread association: magical formulae were closely associated with not only witchcraft, but also the Mass, because most were actually taken from the liturgy.¹¹⁵ Thus, when Calvin implicitly compares the priest muttering the words of consecration to a magician murmuring an incantation, this is already a well-established link: if village magicians transpose the liturgy into a magical setting, Calvin implies, the priests have transposed witchcraft into the liturgy.

As Karen Jolly points out, although to modern ears the term *incantatio* sounds magical rather than religious, in context it evokes the Scripture and prayers recited during the liturgy.¹¹⁶ Calvin's comparison of the words of consecration to magical mutterings thus connects these two contexts—liturgical and magical—by their parallel attempts to use language to transform

¹¹¹ Waite, *Heresy*, 130.

¹¹² Atkinson has analyzed the intersecting vocabularies of demonology, eschatology, and theatricality in the English translations of Calvin's 1540 *Treatise on the Sacrament*. Atkinson, "When Miracles Become Magic," 112-16.

¹¹³ Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.17.15.

¹¹⁴ Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.17.15

¹¹⁵ Karen Jolly, "Medieval Magic: Definitions, Beliefs, Practices" in *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: The Middle Ages*, eds. Karen Jolly, Catharina Raudvere, and Edward Peters, Vol. 3, *The Athlone History of Witchcraft and Magic in Europe*, eds. Bengt Ankarloo and Stuart Clark (London, UK: The Athlone Press, 2002), 36.

¹¹⁶ Jolly, "Medieval Magic," 36-37.

substance. In fact, Calvin highlights the possibility of an incantation's efficacy by claiming that language is an instrument of deception in the Mass, just as it was in the Egyptians' trick with the rods, where the people's "eyes were only deceived by the incantation of the magicians (*incantatione magorum*)."¹¹⁷ Thus, in his glancing allusions to both the devil and incantations, Calvin places the accent on their potential to manipulate visual experience.

2.5 Imaginative delusion. The point of drawing out these subtle but pointed allusions is not to revive the long-discredited portrait of Calvin as a zealous witch prosecutor.¹¹⁸ It is to show, rather, how Calvin wields these resonant discourses so as to dramatize the mind's vulnerability to deception.¹¹⁹ As Clark observes, "witchcraft was the area where the demonology of the senses produced the most dramatic and perplexing results, making it... a topic fundamentally concerned with the nature of vision."¹²⁰ By evoking several credible sources of visual deception, Calvin raises the possibility that Mass might cause or exacerbate idolatrous delusion among worshippers. In so doing, he raises a social version of the same threat we saw in Chapter Three—namely, that the idolatrous mind the mind might take illusion for reality, and ultimately lose the ability to distinguish between the two.

¹¹⁷ Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.17.15.

¹¹⁸ For an overview of this tradition, see Peter F. Jensen, "Calvin and Witchcraft," *The Reformed Theological Review* 34 (1975). The portrait of Calvin as a witch hunter has been definitively discredited by William Monter, who establishes that although there is every reason to believe that Calvin shared the sentiments of his fellow reformers in viewing witchcraft as a serious threat, his personal role in prosecuting Genevan witches was negligible. E. William Monter, "Witchcraft in Geneva, 1537 – 1662," *The Journal of Modern History* 43, no. 2 (June 1971). As Jensen observes, Calvin showed little interest in "the exoticia which was integral to most of the demonology of his day." Jensen, "Calvin and Witchcraft," 79. When Calvin does remark on witchcraft his comments are usually directed at popular magicians and their lay clientele. Clark, *Thinking with Demons*, 461.

¹¹⁹ Calvin's references to delusion—including his suggestion (both here and in his commentary on Simon Magus) that incantations are either the cause of or at least a factor in mental delusion—raise questions about the *source* of visual experience which underlines what I argued above, about Calvin's insistence that idolatry is primarily a matter of an idea's origin in the human mind.

¹²⁰ Clark, *Vanities*, 137.

References to demonic deception and witchcraft are a particularly effective way for Calvin to evoke concerns about perceptual reliability, because there was an urgent sixteenth century debate regarding whether magical phenomena were best explained as a product of mental delusion. One position followed an oft referenced ninth-century canon *Episcopi* in attributing magical phenomena to demonic delusion perpetrated on gullible imaginations.¹²¹ The alternative view took a realist stance toward such phenomena, affirming that, through demonic agency or divine permission, magicians and witches were able to perform genuine transformations.¹²²

This debate is an illuminating backdrop to Calvin's account of the idolatrous mind because it rests on the same vulnerable faculty whose subversion we know he takes very seriously, the imagination.¹²³ As we saw in Chapter Three, Calvin describes the self-delusion of the idolatrous mind in terms strikingly similar to the imaginative disorder known as melancholia. This quintessentially early modern malady resurfaces here because melancholic delusion presented a ready-made mechanism for explaining the means by which demonic forces might

¹²¹ As quoted in Clark, "Witchcraft and Magic," 123: "Some wicked women, perverted by the Devil, seduced by illusions and phantasms of demons, believe and profess themselves, in the hours of the night, to ride upon certain beasts with Diana, the goddess of pagans..." The canon attributes the imaginative delusion to a malignant spirit who self-transforms into diverse "species and similitudes" and presents these to the mind during sleep.

¹²² Waite, *Heresy*, 33. With the precipitous rise in witchcraft prosecutions at the end of the century, these positions came to be epitomized by Johann Weyer and Jean Bodin, respectively. In general, Protestants were more likely to emphasize demonic influence upon the mind (Waite, *Heresy*, 33), although Teall's treatment of the diverse positions on the problem of witchcraft among three of Calvin's English followers demonstrates that Calvinism did not lead to one single position on the subject. John L. Teall, "Witchcraft and Calvinism in Elizabethan England: Divine Power and Human Agency," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 23, no. 1 (1962): 21-36.

¹²³ Although the imagination is sometimes misled by external sensation and is also vulnerable to control by good or bad spirits, it has an inherently rogue nature that is its own explanation for the faculty's proneness to error. Suspicion of this faculty goes back to Aristotle's seminal remarks in *De anima*: "All sensations are true, but most imaginations (φαντασίαι) are false." Aristotle, *De anima* III.3.428a12-13. *On the Soul, Parva Naturalia, On Breath*, trans. W. S. Hett, Loeb Classical Library 288 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957), 158-59. As this observation underlines, the problem with the imagination is its ability to operate in the absence of sense objects—in particular, its capacity to recombine stored images and present the mind with phantasms of things not actually present to the exterior senses. Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*. 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 74. For a discussion of how the imagination poses a threat to its host, and of the visual dimensions of this threat, see Clark, *Vanities*, 45-49.

manipulate the visual experience of witches and their victims.¹²⁴ The view that witches are simply melancholics would gain favor at the end of the century—most famously, in Johann Weyer’s 1563 *De Praestigiis Daemonum*.¹²⁵ However, the association was in place already between 1528 and 1533, when Lucas Cranach was creating his famed *Melancholia* series. Most of these paintings place a flying horde of witches in the distance behind the melancholic sufferer.¹²⁶ Indeed, an anecdote about one of Calvin’s legal professors, Andrea Alciati, confirms that this view was live in the educated circles close to Calvin. When asked for his opinion on the burning of witches, Alciati responded that witchcraft should be purged not with fire, but with hellebore—a common remedy for imaginative delusion.¹²⁷

Against this backdrop, Calvin’s repeated insistence that the Catholic miracle of bread becoming body is a mere “imagination (*imaginatio*)”¹²⁸ is much more than a complaint of doctrinal inaccuracy. When, for example, he calls the Host’s invisible transformation a pure *figmentum*,¹²⁹ Calvin is identifying it as a product fashioned entirely out of the human mind, with no anchor in what is real—literally, a figment of the imagination. Accompanied by continual references to fabricating, devising, and dreaming¹³⁰—habits that, as we saw in Chapter Three, Calvin associates with the delusive imaginings of the idolatrous mind—the force of this language is not just to suggest that transubstantiation is a false belief with an untrustworthy provenance.

¹²⁴ “Melancholia was the favored medium, the devil amplifying the natural condition by using his own physical control over the body to add the additional and more extravagant symptoms that would account for witches sensing—above all, seeing—impossible things.” Clark, *Vanities*, 143.

¹²⁵ Clark remarks that Weyer’s comprehensive melancholia explanation for witchcraft ultimately “engulfed the very phenomena that it was supposed to warrant.” *Vanities*, 143-44. Maggi observes that not all melancholics were possessed by demons, but all the possessed were melancholic. Armando Maggi, *Satan’s Rhetoric: A Study of Renaissance Demonology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), 12.

¹²⁶ Zika, *Exorcising Our Demons*, 333-74.

¹²⁷ Cited in Clark, “Witchcraft and Magic,” 124.

¹²⁸ Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.17.14, 4.17.15, 4.17.33.

¹²⁹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.17.14.

¹³⁰ Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.17.12-14. See also 4.17.25 and 4.17.29.

On the contrary, Calvin's direct references to the rogue activities of the human imagination derive their urgency from a broader, early modern preoccupation with the many ways that visual experience can be falsified. In capitalizing on the overlapping web of associations that linked witchcraft, false miracles, and imaginative delusions,¹³¹ Calvin casts the Mass as an insidious deception with the potential to undermine visual experience.

2.6 Perceptual stakes. Stuart Clark and Charles Zika have persuasively argued that what is actually at stake in the early modern discourses of visual illusion and imaginative delusion I have canvassed here is how perception works, and especially and how it becomes vulnerable to subversion.¹³² Nancy Elaine Atkinson argues along similar lines that early modern attacks on magic are part of a larger epistemological battle against ways of knowing deemed theologically problematic.¹³³ That is also, I argue, what is at stake in Calvin's use of these vocabularies.¹³⁴

Both explicitly, in his repeated insistence that the Host cannot possibly be what it does not look like, and implicitly, in his allusions to untrustworthy perceptions caused by magical or demonic deceptions, Calvin casts the Mass as hallucination incarnate. To take bread for body is, he suggests, to allow what is merely a Catholic deception to perpetuate an imaginative delusion. The priest who asks worshippers to credit a transformation they do not see finds its parallel in the

¹³¹ Atkinson explores these links in English cycle plays. Atkinson, "When Miracles Become Magic," 71ff.

¹³² "This broad philosophical and theological discourse about the status of 'the visible' drew upon popular, folkloric beliefs about invisibility and meshed with the demonological beliefs about diabolic illusion which underpinned many sixteenth-century theories of witchcraft." Zika, *Exorcising Our Demons*, 334. "Those who conducted the witchcraft debate confronted some of the most fundamental questions to do with the workings of the human mind and of human perception—especially concerning the power of the imagination, the force and effects of mental disturbances like 'melancholia,' the difference between the sleeping and waking states, the operation of the senses, and the possibility of sensory delusion in the form of visual paradoxes." Clark, *Vanities*, 151.

¹³³ Atkinson, "When Miracles Become Magic," 117, 157.

¹³⁴ Jensen has observed that Calvin "widened the concept of witchcraft and magic to include much more than could be named wizardry." Jensen, "Calvin and Witchcraft," 83. In this chapter I have tried to bring to light Calvin's investment in the largest questions—about the nature of perception and the vulnerability of the imagination—that these discourses raise.

magician or witch attempting to penetrate beyond the sensible realm and manipulate invisible forces¹³⁵—in each case, an inversion of proper epistemological method issues in delusion.¹³⁶ Calvin’s rhetoric thus places attendees at the Mass—and, by extension, all participants in practices that give form to idolatrous ideas—in a situation comparable to a magician’s dupe or a demon’s victim. Whether magical or liturgical, deceptive performances undermine their audience’s perceptual capacities.

This is what, I suggest, most disturbs Calvin about this process whereby “bread came to be taken (*haberetur*) for God”¹³⁷—that is, its perceptual consequences. All of Calvin’s allusions converge in the point that idolatrous practices cause “blindness.” The effect of magical legerdemain is literally to “bind” and thus control the eye. The devil is a consummate deceiver whose capacity to manipulate appearances can cause us to credit what are ultimately hoax transformations.¹³⁸ And the result of demonically manipulated melancholic delusion is that “the real world is the one invisible to the witch and her observers.”¹³⁹

¹³⁵ Jensen has argued that Calvin’s primary criticism of witches is that they try to penetrate God’s secrets. Jensen, “Calvin and Witchcraft,” 80. This observation fits within the broader argument offered here, which is that Calvin is opposed to any practice that encourages humans to prescind from or penetrate beyond the perceptible sites of God’s accommodated self-manifestation.

¹³⁶ Rites ascribed to witches were often inversions of Christian rituals, which makes Calvin’s use of magical language to characterize idolatry—the opposite of the perception of God—quite apt. Atkinson, “When Miracles Become Magic,” 176. See also the discussion of witchcraft as the inverted member in a dual classification system in Clark, *Thinking with Demons*, 9. Following Eire, Scribner observes that “The real division [between iconophobes and iconodules] was epistemological, between those who believed that humans could attain knowledge of the divine reality through fleshly means such as images and those who believed that they could not.” Scribner, “Popular Piety,” 119-20. My analysis affirms that the stakes of the disagreement are epistemological, but shows that Calvin construes the divide differently. Calvin draws the line between those who believe that humans can attain knowledge of the divine through the process of sense experience itself (that is, via accommodation), and those who believe that the data of the senses must be disregarded in the process of attaining the perception of God.

¹³⁷ Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.17.13.

¹³⁸ Zika draws particular attention to the devil’s ability to separate his dupes from the real world. Charles Zika, “The Devil’s Hoodwink: Seeing and Believing in the World of Sixteenth-Century Witchcraft,” in *No Gods Except Me: Orthodoxy and Religious Practice in Europe 1200 – 1600*, ed. Charles Zika (Melbourne, Australia: Department of History, University of Melbourne, 1991), 152-98.

¹³⁹ Zika, “The Devil’s Hoodwink,” 162.

Calvin draws these conclusions explicitly in his complaints about the effects of the Mass on attendees. The ceremony's dynamics are "theatrical trifles which serve no other purpose than to deceive the sense of a people stupefied (*nisi stupentis populi sensum fallant*).” Its effect is to leave worshippers “dulled and befooled (*stolidus et infatuatus*).”¹⁴⁰ Through the deceptions of the Mass, the devil has “blinded (*obcoecavit*) nearly the whole world.”¹⁴¹ Such ceremonies are “tricks (*praestigias*) because they delude (*deludant*) the eyes of the spectators with empty pomp,” and their effect is “to benumb (*obstupefaciant*) the people.”¹⁴² With terms like dulled, stupefied, benumbed—not to mention “bewitched (*fascinati*),”¹⁴³ “inebriated” and “struck with drowsiness and dizziness (*sopore ac vertigine*)”¹⁴⁴—Calvin contends that that the Mass actively undermines its viewers' perceptual capacities. It renders them blind, unable to discern the reality of what is before them.

3. To what does the Mass render spectators blind?

Calvin's emphasis on perceptual incapacity raises the question: what is obscured by the deception of the Mass? What is the reality to which it renders worshippers blind? We have just explored the negative references to the visual in Calvin's complaints about the Mass.¹⁴⁵ Whereas previous interpretations of “idolatry” might have led us to expect that Calvin would target the

¹⁴⁰ Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.17.43. The paragraph goes on to attribute this to “inventions” caused by the “stubborn boldness of men, which cannot restrain itself from always trifling and wantoning in God's mysteries.”

¹⁴¹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.18.1.

¹⁴² Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.10.12.

¹⁴³ Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.17.15.

¹⁴⁴ Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.18.18.

¹⁴⁵ Comparable language appears in Calvin's remarks on other religious practices, including processions and displays (Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.17.36) that “draw the eyes of the common people to wonderment.” Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.17.43.

visuality and materiality of Catholic worship itself,¹⁴⁶ we have seen that his accent is rather on visual deception and, ultimately, visual delusion.

Indeed, in a telling passage, Calvin denies that the Mass is the Pauline “milk”—which is to say, the properly tailored accommodation—it ought to be.¹⁴⁷ Instead, he calls it a *dissimulatio*.¹⁴⁸ This contrast between the intended *accomodatio* of the Lord’s Supper as it should be performed and the effective *dissimulatio* of the Catholic Mass hints at the ultimate stakes of idolatrous practice. Although Calvin does not say so directly, I propose that what is threatened by the Mass—and the full range of idolatrous practices he takes it to epitomize—is accommodation itself. That is, the most urgent problem with practices that embody idolatrous ideas is that their effect is to blind participants to God-given accommodations. In the case of the Mass, the ritualized fiction of transubstantiation blinds worshippers to the accommodation that is the Lord’s Supper.

3.1 The Supper as an accommodation. Calvin’s problem with the Mass is not that it is visual. Indeed, as argued in Chapter Two, the defining characteristic of an accommodation like the Supper—what makes it well-tailored to help humans attain the perception of God—is

¹⁴⁶ Calvin does name the problem of “halt[ing] at the symbol” to the neglect of the sacrament’s spiritual significance and effects. Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.17.29. In this vein, he warns against overvaluation of the Catholics’ “solemn spectacle,” reminding his reader that “the only lawful adoration is that which does not rest in the sign but is directed to Christ seated in heaven.” Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.17.37. However, these remarks are not the heart of his complaints and do not carry anything near the rhetorical force of the vocabulary of deception and delusion discussed above. Likewise, to say that Calvin’s attack on transubstantiation is motivated by bad Christology is not inaccurate; it is simply insufficient to account for Calvin’s relentless focus on the untenable *visual* implications of the claim that Christ’s body is disguised under the Eucharistic bread.

¹⁴⁷ Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.19.13.

¹⁴⁸ Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.19.13.

precisely its perceptibility.¹⁴⁹ In the opening paragraph of his discussion of the Supper,¹⁵⁰ Calvin explains that what makes the ceremony so well accommodated to human perceptual needs is its use of “visible signs,” which he calls “best adapted to our small capacity.”¹⁵¹ The Supper’s efficacy comes from the vividness of its specifically visual presentation of Christ. The elements “set [God’s] promises before our eyes to be looked upon”¹⁵² just “as if Christ here present were himself set before our eyes.”¹⁵³

Accordingly, Calvin’s criticism of the Mass targets not the ceremony’s visibility in general, but the visual *discrepancy* posited by not only Catholic, but also Lutheran accounts of the sacrament.¹⁵⁴ In Catholic transubstantiation, what participants see is *other* than it appears (body instead of bread), while in the Lutheran consubstantiation, it is *more* than it appears (body

¹⁴⁹ “Because we are flesh, they are shown us under things of flesh, to instruct us according to our dull capacity and to lead us by the hand (*manuducant*) as tutors lead children.” Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.14.6. The reference to our fleshly needs, our “dull capacity,” to a teacher adapting his pedagogy to his students’ immaturity, and even the verb *manuducere* (“to lead by the hand”), are some of the most common tags Calvin uses to indicate accommodation wherever it surfaces across the *Institutio*.

¹⁵⁰ For two concise readings of Calvin’s account of the Supper, see the chapter “The Reformed Eucharist” in Lee Palmer Wandel, *The Eucharist in the Reformation: Incarnation and Liturgy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 139-72, and Nicholas Wolterstorff, “John Calvin,” in *A Companion to the Eucharist in the Reformation*, ed. Lee Palmer Wandel (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 97-113. For an analysis of how the chapters on the sacraments and the Supper evolved across the editions from 1536 to 1559, see François Wendel, *Calvin: Origins and Development of His Religious Thought*, trans. Philip Mairet (Durham, NC: The Labyrinth Press, 1987), 330-35.

¹⁵¹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.17.1. In fact, the sacraments “bring the clearest promises” *because of* their vividly pictorial quality, which Calvin contrasts to the invisibility of the preached Word: “[the sacraments] have this characteristic over the word,” he says, “because they represent [God’s promises] for us as painted in a picture from life,” (4.14.5). It is important to note that Calvin also describes the preached Word as an accommodation. See Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.1.5.

¹⁵² Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.14.20.

¹⁵³ Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.17.3. Similar passages occur at 4.14.6, 4.17.2, and 4.18.11. This theme also emerges in frequent descriptions of the sacraments as “showing” Christ. See Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.14.20, 4.17.8, and 4.17.10.

¹⁵⁴ This is, of course, only one of Calvin’s many criticisms of the Mass. He also accuses his opponents of denying the truly human status of Christ’s incarnate body (Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.17.12, 4.17.19), of blurring the distinction between his human and divine natures (4.17.29-30), of undermining hope in the resurrection of the body (4.17.29), of hermeneutical inconsistency (4.17.20), and of positing a physical impossibility (4.17.13). Although the nature and location of Christ’s post-resurrection body has been seen as the major stakes of Calvin’s critique of Lutheran views, even when Calvin complains that they attribute to Christ’s body a “ubiquity contrary to its nature,” he places the accent on the criticism that comes next: “They would therefore like to have the body of Christ considered *invisible and immeasurable*, so as to *lie hidden* under the bread.” Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.17.16 (emphasis mine).

along with bread).¹⁵⁵ Calvin's language relentlessly draws his reader's attention to the visual disjuncture—assumed by both accounts—between what the elements appear to be and what they are claimed to be. When, for example, Calvin ridicules the suggestion that Christ “lies hidden invisible on earth under innumerable crumbs of bread,” his sarcasm is aimed squarely at the posited discrepancy between visible body and invisible bread.¹⁵⁶

Why does visual discrepancy, in particular, draw Calvin's ire? Calvin worries that any suggestion that the bread is not exactly what it appears to be disrupts an identity between appearance and reality that is indispensable to the Supper's operation as a visual accommodation. Just before initiating his discussion of the Egyptian magicians, Calvin warns that the sacrament would be rendered ineffective “if only the appearance of bread (*spectrum panis*), and not rather the true nature of bread, remained.”¹⁵⁷ Likewise, he concludes the discussion by insisting, “the flesh of Christ is not truly and fittingly promised to us to be truly food unless the true substance of the outward symbol presents it (*respondeat*).”¹⁵⁸

At first blush, these remarks seem to express a concern about subverted signification. Indeed, Calvin stresses the agreement between the physical nourishment on offer in bread and the spiritual nourishment on offer in Christ's flesh. He warns, in this connection, that “the nature of the sacrament is cancelled, unless... the earthly sign presents (*respondeat*) the heavenly

¹⁵⁵ Nevertheless, Calvin's full account of the Eucharist retains more similarities with that of Luther than it does that of Zwingli. On this point, see Wendel, *Calvin*, 329-30. Calvin registers his disagreement with Zwingli by rejecting the view that the sacrament is “only a mark of outward profession” and that what it means to receive Christ in the sacrament is to receive him only by imagination or understanding. Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.17.6, 4.17.11, 4.17.19.

¹⁵⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.25. See also 4.17.33.

¹⁵⁷ Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.17.14.

¹⁵⁸ Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.17.15. I have deviated from Battles' choice of ‘correspond’ (with its modern connotations of a ‘correspondence theory of truth’) for *respondeat*, which has the literal sense of promising, offering, or presenting a thing in return for something else. *Respondeo* has the sense of ‘meet’ or ‘correspond with’ only as one of its less common transferred meanings. See Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary. Founded on Andrews' Edition of Freund's Latin Dictionary, revised, enlarged, and in great part rewritten* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879). Perseus Digital Library.

thing.”¹⁵⁹ However, Calvin places an even greater emphasis on the danger of subverted visual identification:

Christ’s purpose was to witness by the outward symbol that the flesh is food; if he had put forward only the empty appearance of bread (*inane duntaxat panis spectrum*) and not true bread, where would be the analogy or comparison (*analogia vel similitudo*) needed to lead us from the visible thing to the invisible?¹⁶⁰

Although the analogy between physical and spiritual nourishment has received much attention,¹⁶¹ the most striking thing about this passage is Calvin’s insistence that the mere appearance of bread is not sufficient to support the intended resemblance. This suggests that the participant’s visual identification of the bread *as bread* is more than a mere handmaiden to the element’s conceptual or symbolic significance—if that were the case, then presumably the visible impression of bread would be sufficient to suggest the connection!¹⁶² Instead, securing the relationship between the visible and the invisible requires first ensuring that participants can trust the evidence of their eyes—that the bread before them is actually, and only, bread.

Calvin reiterates the importance of visual reliability when he compares the Supper to the second of the two sacraments he acknowledges:

If in baptism the figure of water were to deceive our eyes, we would have no sure pledge of our washing; indeed, that false show (*fallaci illo spectaculo*) would give us occasion to hesitate... Since the supper is nothing but a *visible witnessing* of that promise (*conspicua eius promissionis testificatio*)... *visible bread* must serve as an intermediary to represent that spiritual bread—unless we are willing to lose all the benefit.¹⁶³

¹⁵⁹ Calvin, *Institutio* 4.17.14 (translation modified as above).

¹⁶⁰ Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.17.14. He goes on to conclude, “The nature of the sacrament is therefore canceled, unless, in the mode of signifying, the earthly sign corresponds to the heavenly thing” Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.17.14. See restatements of the same analogy in 4.17.5 and 4.17.10. Gerrish argues that this analogy is the best “point of entry” to Calvin’s Eucharistic theology. B. A. Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude: The Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 14, 19.

¹⁶¹ Randall C. Zachman, “Calvin as Analogical Theologian,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 51, no. 2 (May 1998): 162-64 and Joachim Rogge, *Virtus und Res: Um die Abendmahlswirklichkeit bei Calvin* (Stuttgart, Germany: Calwer Verlag, 1965), 39-42.

¹⁶² Calvin anticipates and rejects this objection in *Institutio* 4.17.14: “For, to be perfectly consistent, the signification extends no farther than that we are fed by the form of Christ’s flesh.”

¹⁶³ Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.17.14. Calvin continues, “Now by what reason would Paul infer that we are all one bread and one body who partake together of one bread, if only the appearance of bread (*spectrum panis*) and not rather the true nature (*naturalis veritas*) of bread, remained?” Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.17.14.

Thus, both sacraments turn on their visibility, but particularly on their *visual reliability*.¹⁶⁴ The bread and the water must not only make humans think of, but also be accurately perceptible as, the material substances that effect nourishment, in the Supper, and cleansing, in Baptism. For Calvin, the Supper operates through an act of trustworthy divine manifestation and an answering perception on the part of human witnesses. In the provision of what is visibly nourishment, humans can easily perceive God's fatherly stance toward them—which, as we saw in Chapter Two, is the intended effect of all accommodations.¹⁶⁵ Any teaching which suggests that the senses are not reliable guides—that God's sacrament gives a deceptive appearance—thereby undermines the intended effect of the Supper.

3.2 Accommodation subverted at two levels. In teaching participants that the bread is either less (body, not bread) or more (bread, plus body) than appears to the eye, not only Catholics but even Lutherans subvert the divine strategy of perceptual accommodation.

Since it is God's plan (as I often reiterate) to lift us to himself, by appropriate means, those who call us... to Christ hidden invisibly under bread, wickedly frustrate his plan by their obstinacy.¹⁶⁶

Calvin's reference to "God's plan... to lift us to himself, by appropriate means" is a reference to accommodation, God's self-manifestation in easily perceptible formats. In proposing an account

¹⁶⁴ While I follow Clark's view that, for Calvin, "in order to represent something else... the elements had to first *be* themselves," I cannot agree that "there was no necessity for [the analogy] to be visual in nature." Clark, *Vanities*, 190-91.

¹⁶⁵ As a source of literal nourishment, the bread and wine manifest God specifically *as* a caring father who provides for his children's needs. Calvin makes this connection in the opening line of his chapter on the Supper: "God has received us, once for all, into his family, to hold us not only as servants but as sons. Thereafter, to fulfill the duties of a most excellent Father concerned for his offspring, he undertakes also to nourish us throughout the course of our life." Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.17.1. Gerrish has compellingly argued that the theme of "the father's liberality and his children's answering gratitude... is not only the theme of the Lord's Supper but a fundamental theme, perhaps the most fundamental theme, of [Calvin's] entire system of theology." Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude*, 130-31, 176.

¹⁶⁶ Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.17.15. The passage concludes, "so that by remaining on earth we may need no heavenly nearness of Christ. Here, then, is the necessity that compelled them to transmute Christ's body." Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.17.15. He goes on in the next paragraph to complain, "they do not understand the manner of descent by which he lifts us up to himself." Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.17.16.

of the sacrament that requires a miraculous transformation (or supplementation) of the physical bread—and a corresponding discrepancy between visual appearance and underlying reality—Calvin’s Catholic and Lutheran opponents alike “wickedly frustrate” this plan.¹⁶⁷

The claim that the bread and wine are not precisely what they appear to be undermines the accommodation that is the Supper on two distinct levels. Recall from the end of Chapter Two that I distinguished between the perception of God by means of accommodations, on the one hand, and the meta-awareness that God self-manifests by way of accommodations, on the other. In Calvin’s view, the visual discrepancy posited in the Mass subverts both.

At the perceptual level, asking participants to disbelieve their eyes undermines the very sensory capacities humans are supposed to use to perceive God by means of perceptible accommodations. If the Supper’s efficacy as an accommodation flows from its arresting visual qualities, then its successful operation depends, in turn, on human perceivers using—and trusting—their senses. Insofar as the Mass asks viewers to reject the evidence of their senses, it habituates them into the *opposite* perceptual instincts as those assumed and required by God’s strategy of accommodation.

Perhaps even more insidiously, at the conceptual level, the Mass makes a false claim about how God self-manifests. By teaching that the bread is not what it appears to be, the Mass posits that God does not work through perceptible media (like the bread) but through what is imperceptible (Christ’s body hidden under the bread). By claiming that the bread must undergo a

¹⁶⁷ Calvin thus casts Catholic and Lutheran accounts of Christ’s physical presence in the elements as impertinent human solutions to a dilemma that God has already solved—by accommodation. “To them,” Calvin says, “Christ does not seem present unless he comes down to us. As though, if he should lift us to himself, we should not just as much enjoy his presence!” He continues: “...away with that calumny that Christ is removed from his Supper unless he lies hidden under the covering of bread! For since the mystery is heavenly, there is no need to draw Christ to earth that he may be joined to us.” Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.17.31. Here again Calvin contrasts his opponents’ approach, which he casts as pulling Christ down into the material elements, to accommodation, which instead uses material elements to lift recipients up to spiritual realities.

transformation into something more than merely material and earthly, transubstantiation violates what Calvin calls “the surest rule of the sacraments: that we should see spiritual things *in physical* as if set before our very eyes.”¹⁶⁸ That is, in place of the meta-awareness that God graciously tailors divine self-manifestation so that humans can achieve the perception of God through sensible aspects of earthly life, the Mass teaches the opposite: that the material and visible realities of the world must be transformed (or, in the Lutheran case, supplemented) in order for God to become manifest to human perception.

Margaret Aston has described reformed critiques of images as attempts to sunder “religious learning and religious seeing.”¹⁶⁹ This discussion confirms that Calvin is concerned with precisely this relationship. However, rather than sundering it, Calvin’s intervention should be understood as an attempt to reinstate seeing’s ability to facilitate learning—in the face of a ceremony, and a related doctrine, he takes to undermine it.

3.3 Perpetuating idolatry. Thus, what makes a practice or artifact “idolatrous” is not its materiality or visibility—on the contrary, it is exactly these qualities Calvin celebrates, and fights to preserve, in the Supper. As we saw in the first section of this chapter, idolatrous practices are defined by the fact that they not only flow from, but then function to reinforce, human fictions about God. The Mass’ subversion of accommodation follows precisely this pattern. At the heart of not only transubstantiation but also consubstantiation is an idolatrous idea about God—what I have called the “conceptual” subversion of the Supper through the claim that the bread must be transformed or supplemented in order facilitate the perception of Gd. This embodies a false

¹⁶⁸ Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.15.14 (emphasis mine).

¹⁶⁹ Aston, *England’s Iconoclasts*, 464.

lesson about God's plan of self-manifestation, one that reflects human ideas about material transformation rather than God's chosen strategy of perceptual accommodation.

In enshrining this idolatrous idea, the Mass gives material form and social authority to what is no more than a delusion. In so doing, it deceives worshippers—not only by the false claim that the bread becomes body, but also by the false meta-claim that perceivers must reject the data of their senses in order to approach God. This is the point at which deceptive social practices intersect with and reinforce each worshipper's existing inclination to imaginative delusion. By teaching that pious spectators prescind from what is perceptible and attempt to penetrate beyond it, the Mass baptizes the worst tendencies of the idolatrous mind—which always prefers to create and then fixate on objects that give material form to its own projections, rather than to perceive God's self-manifestation in what is right there before its eyes. What the Supper, as a safe accommodation—as good “Pauline milk”—should bridle, the *dissimulatio* of the Mass encourages.

In this way, the Mass reinforces the delusive process that separates the mind from what should be its proper—because accommodated—objects of perception. “Taught to seek God's gifts where they cannot be found, ...[people] are gradually drawn away from God to embrace mere vanity rather than this truth.”¹⁷⁰ It is important to note, however, that the worshippers deceived by such teachings are not innocent dupes. Calvin casts them, rather, as willing collaborators. Idolatrous worship holds a certain attraction for fallen minds, who embrace it all the more readily for being a product of a human mind—whether their own or someone else's:

Human traditions, [Paul] says, deceive under the appearance of wisdom. Whence this deceptive hue? From the fact that they have been feigned by men. Human wit

¹⁷⁰ Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.14.14.

(*ingenium*)¹⁷¹ recognizes there what is its own, and embraces it, once recognized, more willingly than something truly excellent but less in accord with its vanity.¹⁷²

Enamored of the products of their own minds, humans welcome the deceptions that confirm idolatrous delusions. In this way, “the most important of all sensory experiences for Christians”¹⁷³ perpetuates an extant process of individual self-delusion and expands it to the level of the entire community.

Although Calvin directs the bulk of his complaints toward the Mass, this effect is not limited to the performance of the Eucharist. The same goes for all liturgical and ecclesiastical practices which embody human ideas about God, and which therefore distract human perception from designated accommodations. For example, Calvin repeatedly accuses Catholic priests of failing to fulfill the pastoral office of teaching.¹⁷⁴ Given that Calvin considers pastoral education an essential accommodation, this failure represents another subversion of God’s strategy for facilitating the perception of God. It is, he says, “like blotting out the face of God which shines upon us in teaching.”¹⁷⁵

The same is true of the humanly-devised practice of confirmation, which Calvin calls a “malicious and dangerous fraud,” a “false promise of the devil, which draws us away from God’s truth” and which “deceives and plunges the simple-minded into darkness.”¹⁷⁶ Why does confirmation merit these extreme accusations? It is because it distracts attention from another designated accommodation: it “obscures, indeed, abolishes [baptism’s] function.”¹⁷⁷ In both of

¹⁷¹ See my discussion of this term at the end of Chapter Three. Calvin uses it in several important passages that deal with humans’ inclination to the speculation and imaginative indulgence that issues in the condition of delusive projection that is idolatry. See, for example, Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.11.3 and 1.11.8.

¹⁷² Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.10.11. He concludes with an exhortation to suspicion: “the more [counterfeit worship] delights human nature the more it is suspected by believers.”

¹⁷³ Camille, “Before the Gaze,” 209.

¹⁷⁴ For example, in Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.5.13.

¹⁷⁵ Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.1.5.

¹⁷⁶ Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.19.5.

¹⁷⁷ Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.19.9.

these examples, what defines something as an idolatrous practice—and what is really at stake in this characterization—is that it functions to subvert God-given sites of accommodation. Whereas pious religious exercises restrain the idolatrous mind by channeling its attention *to* sites of accommodation, idolatrous ceremonies give the mind practice ignoring them.

4. Conclusion: Idolatry leads to blindness

Chapters Three and Four have together interrogated the two sides of idolatry and its perceptual consequences. As a habit of mind, “idolatry” means projecting one’s imaginative delusions rather than taking in the world as it is. As a social and material condition, “idolatry” means the use of practices and artifacts that embody and thus perpetuate the worst impulses of the idolatrous mind. Whereas the first is primarily an issue of self-delusion, the second introduces the possibility of deceiving and being deceived by the imaginative products of others.¹⁷⁸

4.1 “Blindness.” The effect of these mutually reinforcing phenomena is “blindness,” the term that Calvin consistently uses to characterize the idolatrous mind’s relationship to God’s dedicated sites of self-manifestation.¹⁷⁹ Peter Jensen returns to this term at the end of his discussion of what might be at stake for Calvin in witchcraft. He concludes uncertainly, “it is really Satan’s work in blinding men, *whatever that means*, which is in view.”¹⁸⁰ This chapter’s

¹⁷⁸ See Calvin’s warning against blindly following blind leaders at Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.9.12.

¹⁷⁹ Barasch has traced the image of the blind person in Renaissance art and literature. Moshe Barasch, *Blindness: The History of a Mental Image in Western Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 115-36. Due to dietary deficiencies, poor eyesight was probably more common among early modern people than it is today, and there is no doubt that it was less frequently treated. It also became a subject of increased concern in the sixteenth century, perhaps due to printing and the increasing proportion of readers and writers in the populace. Andrew Pettegree, *Reformation and the Culture of Persuasion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 107-10.

¹⁸⁰ Jensen, “Calvin and Witchcraft,” 84 (emphasis mine).

account of the deleterious perceptual effects of the idolatrous Mass has offered some purchase on how Calvin understands this threat.

Although idolatrous worshippers have not lost all physical ability to see their surroundings, this does not mean that their “blindness” is metaphorical. Neither is “blindness” a stand-in for “misunderstanding.” The problem is not that humans fail to comprehend what is before their eyes. The organ of the eye takes in what is real, but the idolatrous mind’s imaginative projection so deforms or distorts what it relays to reason and the understanding, that such a mind has, in a robust sense, broken with reality.¹⁸¹ Recall from Chapter Two that God has constructed the elements of the physical world so as *to be* accommodations, so that their natural force is to elicit the stance of pious gratitude proper to the perception of God.¹⁸² This means that to miss God’s self-manifestation in perceptible accommodations is to be blind to salient aspects of the real world. Indeed, Chapter One’s true spectator reminds us that if human perception were not subverted by idolatry, it *would* perceive God there.

4.2 Blind idolaters. Let me conclude this analysis of the mutually implicating causes of “blindness” by considering the figure of the “blind idolater.”¹⁸³ This term is only an oxymoron if we misinterpret idolatry as an overreliance on sensory stimuli. The argument I have made in

¹⁸¹ As Diehl observes in a different context: “Eyesight is for Calvin both a metaphor for an interior and spiritual kind of seeing—one of his favorite figures of speech—and a *physical act* utterly dependent on that inner, divinely given sight.” Diehl, *Staging Reform*, 142 (emphasis mine). Diehl gestures to the perceptual processes at work in human “blindness” in the face of a putative miracle when she explains, “Calvin suggests that people who believe in the magical efficacy of relics and images are *blinded by their own a priori assumptions*... He asserts that a false belief in the magical efficacy of images *impedes visual perception*, preventing people from performing any kind of empirical examination of a relic.” Diehl, *Staging Reform*, 131-32 (emphases mine).

¹⁸² The sacrament is a seal, “but it could not be sealed with physical things and the elements of this world unless it were shaped and designed for this by God’s power. Therefore man cannot establish a sacrament, because it is not in man’s power to cause such great mysteries of God to be concealed under such humble things.” Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.19.2.

¹⁸³ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.11.2. This phrase may evoke the association of Jews with idolatry and the pictorial tradition of blindfolded *Synagoga*. See Zika’s discussion of the motif of Jewish blindness in Zika, “The Devil’s Hoodwink,” 181.

Chapters Three and Four actually suggests the opposite, that idolatry is rooted in a *rejection* of sense experience. Humans become idolaters because they are driven by a desire not to see the world as it is, but to see it as they are. This wish is granted when idolaters render themselves oblivious to God’s accommodated self-manifestations. The resulting condition is, for Calvin, the classic case of a crime that is its own punishment: “For whenever this superstition creeps in, that men wish to worship God with their fictions... [God] will strike with blindness and amazement those who worship him with the doctrines of men.”¹⁸⁴

Thus, to say that worshippers have been deluded and bewitched by Catholic ceremonies is not a clever way of saying that they have been taught extremely poor doctrine—even if, as we have seen, there are real conceptual problems with what transubstantiation teaches about how God self-manifests. Rather, the idolater’s “blindness” names how the liturgy makes concrete and venerable the process whereby the human mind cuts itself off from the common, sensible world—and, in the process, from God. “Blindness” names this strong sense in which the idolatrous mind has ceased to gather data from the perceptible world. Taking bread for Christ’s body, attendees at the Mass project more than is before them—this is delusion. Failing to recognize God’s accommodated self-manifestation in mere bread, they perceive less than is before them—this is the resulting blindness.

The paired discussions of the “idolatrous mind” and the “idolatrous Mass” in Chapters Three and Four have provided abundant evidence that perceptual concerns animate large sections of *Institutio* Books I and IV, respectively. By elucidating the perceptual dynamics that link the perception of God, accommodation, and idolatry, the first four chapters of this dissertation have

¹⁸⁴ Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.10.16. He continues: “This blinding continually causes those who despise so many warnings of God and willfully entangle themselves in these deadly snares, to embrace every kind of absurdity.” See also Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.18.2.

established that perception is a central concern of the 1559 *Institutio*. They have also provided a detailed account of how human perception goes wrong. With this in place, we are now in a position to turn—in the next three chapters—to my second major claim in this dissertation, which is that language of the *Institutio* actively intervenes to halt and reverse the dynamics that perpetuate idolatrous blindness and thus preclude the perception of God.

Chapter Five
Language and the *Institutio*

“Any language,
not only humanist Latin,
is a conspiracy against experience
in the sense of being an attempt
to simplify and arrange experience
into manageable parcels.”
– Michael Baxandall

In the first four chapters of this dissertation, I have established the productivity of reading the *Institutio* in the light of sixteenth-century European visual culture. To do so, I have reinterpreted three major themes against this backdrop: the perception of God, accommodation, and idolatry. This analysis has shown that, for Calvin, sin causes human perception to be distorted from within by mental idolatry (Chapter Three) and from without by material idolatry (Chapter Four), with the result that humans do not treat accommodations as the sites of divine self-manifestation that they are (Chapter Two) and thereby fail to attain the perception of God (Chapter One). Along the way, I have elaborated a portrait of the “idolatrous mind,” whose perception is so subverted by imaginative projection that the perceptual achievement that is the purpose of human life is closed to it.

Whereas in Chapters One through Four, we have been concerned primarily with the *Institutio*'s explicit teachings, Chapters Five through Seven extend my argument that perception is an organizing concern of the *Institutio* by turning from the content of the text to its form. As we will see, the *Institutio* is a text concerned with perception in more than one way—not only as regards its major doctrinal teachings, but also in terms of its formative project vis-à-vis its reader. That is, the *Institutio* does not only describe problems of perception, but also begins to address them through the interventions of its own language upon a reader's mind. This argument culminates in Chapters Six and Seven, which illuminate how several of the text's key stylistic

features address the problematic habits of mind detailed in Chapters Three and Four, while also conducing to the perceptual ideals outlined in Chapters One and Two.

The present chapter lays critical groundwork for this analysis by examining the *Institutio*'s implicit theory of how language can bear upon a reader's perception. The first section of the chapter establishes that there is good reason to think that the *Institutio*'s reader would benefit from an intervention into her more-or-less idolatrous habits of mind. The second introduces a case study in which I trace Calvin's remarks regarding the uses of Scriptural language. This study reveals two broad ways that language can intervene in a reader's mind in a way that is relevant to "perception" as we have been defining it; these will be presented in the third and fourth sections of this chapter. In the third, I show how language can restrain the mental wandering that, as we have seen, causes imaginations to overtake perceptions. In this way, by controlling unruly habits of *thought*, certain uses of language clear the way for *perception*. In the fourth, I highlight how language can provide a clearer and more vivid perception of what the mind needs to perceive. Calvin claims both of these effects for Scriptural language, and in the course of this discussion we will see that he also implicitly styles the language of the *Institutio* on the same model.

At the end of this chapter, we will have derived an account of language's capacities and uses vis-à-vis perception that comes from directly from the *Institutio* itself. This is the basis from which, in Chapters Six and Seven, I will go on to show that the *Institutio*'s prose style not only imposes the mental restraint, but also stimulates the vivified perception, that is otherwise difficult for an idolatrous mind to achieve.

1. The reader's mind

Before exploring how language might address the perceptual needs of its reader, let us first ask, is there reason to think that the *Institutio*'s reader requires or would benefit from interventions into idolatrous habits of mind as I have defined them in the previous two chapters?

1.1. Intended readership. In the first of the *Institutio*'s two prefaces, "John Calvin to the Reader," dated 1559, Calvin describes his primary audience as "candidates in sacred theology," for whom the text is intended as a preparation and instruction "for the reading of the divine Word, in order that they may be able both to have easy access to it and to advance in it without stumbling (*inoffenso in ea gradu pergere*)."¹ Thus, the *Institutio* is addressed not only to Christian readers, but to readers training to serve as evangelical leaders, perhaps by ministering to underground communities in Catholic France.² A few lines later, Calvin describes the completed *Institutio* as offering these same Christian leaders a "path": "This road has, as it were, been paved (*hac veluti strata via*)."³ I will say more below about the *Institutio* as a path, but for now the important point about the text's imagined readership is that even the putative commitment of a future pastor does not preclude such a reader from requiring guidance in recognizing, adhering to, and moving along designated mental and interpretive paths, and doing so without being derailed by obstacles.

Epigraph: Michael Baxandall, *Giotto and the Orators: Humanist Observers of Painting in Italy and the Discovery of Pictorial Composition 1350-1450*

¹ John Calvin, "John Calvin to the Reader" in John Calvin, *Institutio Christianae Religionis* (Berolini: Gustavum Eichler, 1834). English translation from John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 3-5.

² On the *Institutio*'s relevance to the work of training pastors, see Jon Balsarak, "Examining the Myth of Calvin as a Lover of Order," in *The Myth of the Reformation*, ed. Peter Opitz (Göttingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 164-65.

³ Calvin, "John Calvin to the Reader," 5. This imagery is significant in light of the fact that the idolatrous mind is defined precisely by its tendency to wander from designated paths. On "wandering" as a defining characteristic of the idolatrous mind, see my discussion in Chapter Three.

The *Institutio*'s second preface, addressed to Francis I, implies a broader readership. Drafted in 1536 but retained by Calvin in later editions, the letter to Francis presents the *Institutio* as performing two tasks simultaneously: it is both instruction for “those touched with any zeal for religion” and a confession of evangelical commitments before a king whose impression of this movement has, Calvin suggests, been distorted by false reports. The perceptual language Calvin uses to describe the text’s intended effect is striking: Francis’ “eyes and mind” have been so filled with slanderous reports,⁴ his ears so crowded with malicious accusations,⁵ that Calvin fears Francis will be unable to receive the text in an unbiased manner. Calvin even invokes the problem of sliding baseline syndrome as a factor in the king’s former misperception of the evangelical cause.⁶ Given this obstacle, Calvin’s remarks must “dispose your mind (*animum tuum praemollire*) to give a hearing to the actual presentation of our case.”⁷ In other words, this preface imagines a skeptical or resistant mind—one, as Calvin says, “turned away and estranged from us, even inflamed (*aversum quidem nunc et alienatum a nobis, addo etiam inflammatum*)”⁸—which must be coaxed back toward receptivity: “it will then be for you, most serene King, not to close your ears or your mind to such a just defense.”⁹

It is worth noting that Calvin retains this second preface not only after Francis I’s passing, but also after subsequent decades have decisively transformed the relationship between Calvin’s community and the French monarchy. Retaining this discussion, with its heavy perceptual motifs—from allusions to open and closed minds, to the possibility that preconceptions might doom Francis’ perception of what is to come—implies that removing

⁴ John Calvin, “Prefatory Address to King Francis I of France,” in Calvin, *Institutio*, 9.

⁵ Calvin, “Prefatory Address,” 31.

⁶ Calvin, “Prefatory Address,” 11. I noted in the Introduction that this perceptual effect is an important motif which appears in the first major image of the first chapter of the *Institutio* proper.

⁷ Calvin, “Prefatory Address,” 31.

⁸ Calvin, “Prefatory Address,” 31.

⁹ Calvin, “Prefatory Address,” 23.

sources of perceptual distortion remains a relevant way to describe the text's work long after Francis himself is no longer a feasible target of such formation.

1.2 Kinds of readers. The *Institutio*'s intended reader, then, is explicitly Christian, though this does not prevent her from requiring the aid of a path or the rectification of mal-conditioned perception. Given this, we might additionally ask how the text implicitly understands where this reader falls on the spectrum between what I have called the “idolatrous mind” and what we might call the rehabilitated or “pious mind (*pia mens*)”—a fallen mind whose perception, though it will never equal that of the hypothetical unfallen “true spectator,” is nevertheless being progressively corrected through accommodations such as Scripture, Christ, preaching, and the sacraments.¹⁰

A typology that Calvin provides at the beginning of his discussion of justification in *Institutio* 3.14 is telling in this respect. Calvin initially divides people into four categories, which he notes can be stages a person undergoes across “the whole course of his life”:

For men are either (1) endowed with no knowledge of God and immersed in idolatry, or (2) initiated into the sacraments, yet by impurity of life denying God in their actions while they confess him with their lips, they belong to Christ only in name; or (3) they are hypocrites who conceal with empty pretenses their wickedness of heart, or (4) regenerated by God's Spirit, they make true holiness their concern.¹¹

Commenting on this typology, Calvin notes that his insistence that humans must claim no righteousness for themselves (a major doctrinal theme of the *Institutio*) is addressed particularly to the second and third classes of people—people who, in the course of his subsequent discussion, Calvin refers to collectively as “hypocrites.”¹² The sheer quantity of words Calvin

¹⁰ I discuss this figure at some length in the Conclusion.

¹¹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.14.1.

¹² “Under this condition are included those who are listed as the second and third classes in the above-mentioned division... All ungodly men, and especially all hypocrites, are puffed with this stupid assurance because, however

directs against the “pernicious error” of these “puffed up” sinners¹³ suggests that hypocrisy may be a salient issue for Calvin’s intended reader, and thus provides at least initial evidence that she shares some of the behaviors that mark these two classes of people.

Even more telling, however, is that Calvin actually blurs the seemingly clear boundary between his first category—the idolater—and the two “hypocrite” categories, when he states unequivocally that although ostensibly pious, hypocrites have been neither regenerated by the Spirit nor reconciled to the Father.¹⁴ This bold pronouncement implies that the second and third categories of people are distinguished from outright idolaters¹⁵ only by the added sin of deception. Idolaters and hypocrites, in other words, are more alike than they are different, linked by a shared failure to achieve the perception of God, a failure that we know from previous chapters can be traced to a host of problematic mental and material habits.¹⁶

If the first three categories blend, does this suggest that Calvin’s reader can *only* be a member of the fourth category, that of the regenerate or redeemed? This is a possibility, but, crucially, not one that makes a significant difference to our understanding of the implied reader’s mind. This is because a few sections later, Calvin reminds us that even one who is reconciled to

much they recognize that their hearts teem with impurities, still if they bring forth any well-seeming works, they think these worthy not to be despised by God. Hence arises the pernicious error that, convicted of a wicked and evil mind, they still cannot be compelled to confess themselves empty of righteousness. Even when they acknowledge themselves unrighteous, because they cannot deny it, they still claim for themselves some righteousness,” Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.14.7. Hypocrisy, as a practice of deception directed not only against others, but also against oneself, is a major sub-theme of the *Institutio*, introduced already in passages at 1.1.2 and 1.5.4. See other significant discussions of hypocrisy at Calvin, *Institutio*, 2.5.19, 3.2.11, 3.8.2, 3.12.4, 3.14.7.

¹³ Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.14.7. The full description goes on to complain that these people, though “convicted of a wicked and evil mind... still cannot be compelled to confess themselves empty of righteousness.”

¹⁴ Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.14.7.

¹⁵ Recall from Chapters Three and Four that for Calvin, idolatry is more about habits of mind than it is about worshipping false or material gods. For this reason, “idolaters” are not necessarily non-Christians.

¹⁶ Calvin explicitly mentions their lack of faith: “For impurity of conscience proves that both classes have not yet been regenerated by the Spirit of God. On the other hand, the absence of regeneration in them shows their lack of faith. From this it is clear that they have not yet been reconciled to God, not yet been justified in his sight, inasmuch as men attain these benefits only by faith,” Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.14.7. It must be mentioned, however, that this condition is partially attributable to the absence of illumination by the Holy Spirit which enables faith.

God and increasingly sanctified by the Spirit never finally escapes the condition of sin.¹⁷ What this means is that even readers who fall into the fourth category are nevertheless vulnerable to the delusive habits of mind that characterize idolatry and its Christian counterpart, hypocrisy. Not only do Calvin's four categories of people resolve into just *two* groups when defined by their relationship to justification and sanctification (categories one-through-three versus category four¹⁸), but they collapse into only *one* when defined by their condition of mind. At most then, these categories name a difference in the *degree* to which sin continues to subvert perception. No matter where Calvin's reader falls along the spectrum of these four categories, it is inevitable that she has a mind in which some perceptual effects of sin persist—a mind that I have and will continue to call, "idolatrous."

1.3 The reader's idolatrous mind. Ultimately then, we can think of the *Institutio's* reader as either a Christian hypocrite or a regenerate Christian, but in either case we can assume that she struggles with the same perception-subverting mental habits that characterize those individuals whom Calvin explicitly identifies as idolatrous, and which we catalogued at length in Chapter Three.¹⁹ These characteristics include, on the one hand, unmoored and delusive patterns of thought and imagination, and on the other, blindness and unresponsiveness to God's accommodated self-manifestations in the external world.²⁰ At best, Calvin's reader requires

¹⁷ Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.14.9. Elsewhere, Calvin explicitly distinguishes his view on the continuing existence of sin among the regenerate from that of Augustine, whose view he takes to downplay the reality that, as Calvin says, "there is always sin." See Calvin, *Institutio* 3.3.10.

¹⁸ The possession of faith is the distinguishing difference between the two. See my footnote on this above and Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.14.7. As faith is entirely a gift of the Holy Spirit, this is not a distinction that Calvin's prose can address except as a secondary or instrumental cause.

¹⁹ If, as Calvin argues, categories 1-3 lack the condition of faith, then the *Institutio* cannot do much for them. In this respect, it is not entirely accurate to say that the book does the same work on categories one through three as it does on category four.

²⁰ It might be objected that Calvin's references to a *pius lector* (as in Calvin, "John Calvin to the Reader" and also at Calvin, *Institutio* 1.13.24, 1.14.29, 1.16.8) imply a reader whose mind is not idolatrous, but "pious." This is the tack

focus and guidance to keep her incorrigibly unruly mind from wandering away from God's designated sites of attention and to aid her indistinct perception of them. At worst, she requires mental discipline to counteract the effects of her resistance and imaginative license, and to break through her self-imposed obliviousness.²¹

2. Case study: Language's functions vis-à-vis perception

Having established that the *Institutio*'s reader might benefit from an intervention into her more-or-less idolatrous habits of mind—habits that, at worst utterly preclude perception and at best render it difficult—we now turn to the question of how language might mount such an intervention in the first place. What is the implicit theory of language according to which prose could affect a reader's ability to attain the perception of God? I will answer this question through a case study of the functions of Scriptural language. The results of the case study will be laid out in the third and fourth sections below. Here, I offer some situating caveats and background for this analysis.

Let me be clear at the outset about what I am *not* doing: many previous studies have ably gathered and assessed Calvin's comments on the style of biblical rhetoric,²² and it is not my

Randall Zachman takes when he argues that Calvin "assumes" his readers will be pious, submissive, sober, content, and non-hallucinating—among other behaviors that pose a challenge for the fallen mind. Zachman arrives at this interpretation by taking Calvin's urgings that his reader act in these ways as descriptions of how Calvin assumes she actually *will* act. In contrast, I take such references as exhortations that function to tame and chastise the mind of a reader who will find achieving such behaviors not only difficult, but often out of reach. Randall C. Zachman, *John Calvin as Teacher, Pastor, and Theologian: The Shape of His Writings and Thought* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 79-80.

²¹ In the imagined and implied reader of the *Institutio*, we thus have a species of "the guilty reader"—a reader who is implicated in the guilt of the evil narrated in the text she reads. For this figure, the course of reading forces her to recognize and judge her involvement in the sin the text describes. For discussions of this idea, see Joseph H. Summers, *The Muse's Method: An Introduction to Paradise Lost* (London, UK: Chatto & Windus, 1962), 30-31 and Stanley Fish, *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost*, 2nd ed. (London, UK: Macmillan Press, 1997), 142. I borrow this concept to name one of the restraining functions of Calvin's prose style discussed in Chapter Six.

²² See, most importantly, Léon Wencelius, *L'esthétique de Calvin* (Geneva, Switzerland: Slatkine Reprints, 1979), 344-50.

intention to re-tread this ground. Rather, my purpose here is to gather and assess Calvin's remarks on a related but different issue—namely, how Calvin understands Scriptural language to bear upon its reader's perception.

2.1 Caveat: The indispensability of the Holy Spirit. The reader might object that the important differences between the language of Scripture and the language of the *Institutio*²³ make it questionable to use Scripture as a case study for what Calvin's language can do. It is well-established that Calvin treats Scripture as a model for human teaching. Nevertheless, previous studies of the effects of Calvin's language have met with the criticism that language *itself* can have no impact on a reader separate from the enabling illumination of the Holy Spirit.²⁴ There is no doubt that for Calvin, language can at best serve as an instrumental cause in a mind's rehabilitation. However, there are two points to be made in response to the attempt to wield this undeniable fact as an objection.

First, for Calvin, *anything* other than the action of the Holy Spirit is at best an instrumental cause of rehabilitation, because the final cause of a mind's return to God is always God. That is to say, this limitation is in no way unique to language. Granted that language cannot play an independent role in a mind's rehabilitation, nevertheless Calvin's account of

²³ It goes without saying that the *Institutio* is distinguished from Scripture in that it is not the Word of God; there is no claim that its author was directly inspired by the Holy Spirit. Calvin explicitly presents the *Institutio* as subordinate to and in the service of Scripture; if reading the *Institutio* comes first in the *ordo docendi*, this is because the *Institutio* is designated as a companion and guide—a “path,” as I will detail below—to the reading of Scripture. What interests us here is not so much this obvious and firm distinction in the inspired status of the two texts, but the question of the degree of overlap in how certain distinctive uses of language may function vis-à-vis the idolatrous mind of a reader. Calvin distinguishes the style and function of the language of the *Institutio* from that of Scripture in three major ways. First, the *Institutio* employs techniques of rhetorical elegance which Calvin considers largely absent from and unnecessary in Scripture, with its ruder style. Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.8.1. Second, the *Institutio* offers a different order of teaching than that found in Scripture. Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.6.1. Finally, the *Institutio* proposes new, non-Scriptural language with fresh distinctions that further clarify Scriptural accounts. Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.13.3.

²⁴ See Zachman's criticism of Serene Jones on this point. Zachman, *John Calvin as Teacher*, 78, 98-99.

accommodation shows that the instrumental causes God uses to facilitate human perception—such as physical creation and the language of Scripture—can nevertheless be analyzed in terms of their usefulness for a fallen mind.

Second, the indispensability of the Holy Spirit in facilitating a reader's positive response to human language was an issue well-known and thoroughly considered among sixteenth-century writers.²⁵ The caveat that illumination is a necessary and ultimately uncontrollable condition for the effective use of rhetoric did not prevent them from attending to how language could enact salutary effects for a sinful mind, and so it should not prevent us. Accordingly, everything that follows in this chapter proceeds under this broad caveat that none of *either* Scripture or Calvin's techniques of language will be able to bring about salutary effects upon an idolatrous mind's perception unless the Holy Spirit first renders this mind receptive. As Francis Higman aptly observes: "Calvin's rhetoric is the instrument that can open the way, in the heart of the reader, to the conviction, the conversion,"—I would add, the perceptual recalibration—"which is the work of God alone."²⁶

2.2 Scripture and perception. Before turning to the evidence that Calvin attributes two specific functions—restraining, and vivifying, respectively—to Scriptural language, let me first put in place some situating remarks about how Calvin frames Scripture vis-à-vis the problem of perception. Recall that before the fall, humans were intended to achieve the perception of God by way of the created works whereby God self-manifests; this process was traced in detail in

²⁵ Indeed, Erasmus reflected explicitly upon this problem in his *Ecclesiastes*.

²⁶ Francis M. Higman, "I Came Not to Send Peace, but a Sword," in *Calvinus Sincerioris Religionis Vindex: Calvin as Protector of the Purer Religion*, eds. Wilhelm H. Neuser and Brian G. Armstrong (Kirksville, MO: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1997), 135.

Chapter One. Moreover, as we saw in Chapter Two, Scripture was the accommodation given to address fallen humans' inability to attain the perception of God from creation alone.

It is relevant to note that Calvin does not consider Scripture to be a fresh communication of new realities or new truths as compared with the originally nonverbal manifestation of creation.²⁷ Instead, Scripture is a re-presentation in more accessible form—"another and better help," Calvin calls it²⁸—of what is *already manifest* in the three categories of created works through which God self-reveals: the universe, humanity, and the providential governance of both. In Scripture, Calvin says, "we hear the same powers enumerated... that we have noted as shining in heaven and earth" (this is a reference to the work of creation)²⁹ and we learn that God "watches over the ways of the saints with such great diligence that they don't even stumble over a stone" (this is a reference to the work of divine governance).³⁰ In other words, Scripture re-renders those very same material aspects of the created world, as well as the divine care that is perceptible in God's governance, by which humans were originally intended to achieve the perception of God.

Thus, on Calvin's account, Scripture pursues the same goal as created works—and indeed, as all accommodations, which is to facilitate the perception of God. However, rather than describing Scripture as independently pursuing this aim, Calvin speaks of it as a second layer of accommodation which, as discussed in Chapter Two, re-presents that which is already available in the first.³¹ This image of one site of manifestation (Scripture) layered over, so as to enable

²⁷ "And yet nothing is set down there that cannot be beheld in his creatures." Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.10.2.

²⁸ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.6.1.

²⁹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.10.2.

³⁰ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.17.6. The reference is to Psalm 91:12.

³¹ See my discussion of this point in Chapter Two.

perception of another such site (created works) is depicted with remarkable precision by Calvin's comparison of Scripture to a corrective lens trained on creation. Just as

with the aid of spectacles (*specillis*) [otherwise bleary-eyed people (*lippi*)] will begin to read distinctly; so Scripture, gathering up the otherwise confused knowledge of God in our minds, having dispersed our dullness (*caligine*), clearly shows us the true God.³²

Thus, Scripture offers a kind of perceptual framing, focusing, or correcting which enables fallen minds to more clearly see the divine self-manifestation already apparent in created works. The question is, how does it do this?

2.3 Scripture as a *verbal* accommodation. What makes Scripture effective where created works are not? Here is where what Calvin says about the relationship of Scripture to the nonverbal manifestation of creation bears directly on language's ability to condition perception. Calvin explains Scripture's usefulness by noting that it re-presents the sites of God's accommodated self-manifestations in *verbal* form. We see this when, in speaking of what makes Scripture "another and better help," Calvin favorably contrasts Scripture to the nonverbal manifestation of creation: in Scripture, God "not merely uses mute teachers but also opens his own most hallowed lips."³³ This comment offers an important clue regarding the advantages of Scripture for addressing an idolatrous mind: Scripture describes *in language* what an unfallen spectator would have perceived directly, without the aid of language or concepts.³⁴

Even more significantly, Calvin ties the verbal form of God's self-manifestation in Scripture to the defining challenges that threaten the perception of a fallen mind. God provided

³² Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.6.1.

³³ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.6.1.

³⁴ This is the case even if, as detailed in Chapter One, conceptual articulations of God's stance toward humans followed after, as an outgrowth or expression of, an originally inarticulate perception of God.

Scripture, Calvin says “because [God] saw the minds of all men tossed and agitated.”³⁵ The provision of this verbal manifestation reflects “how slippery is the fall of the human mind into forgetfulness of God, how great the tendency to every kind of error.”³⁶ To address the constitutive misperception of its readers, Scripture re-describes created works *as they appear to* someone whose perception is *not* distorted by the habits of the idolatrous mind. In Scripture, “God is truly and vividly (*probe, et ad vivum*) described to us from his works (*a suis operibus*), while these very works are appraised (*aestimantur*) not by our depraved judgment (*ex iudicii nostri pravitate*) but by the rule of eternal truth.”³⁷ In the face of the perceptual distortion that makes sinful minds unable to perceive created works accurately, this written manifestation is God’s chosen means to “hold us... in the pure knowledge of himself (*in pura sui notitia continet*).”³⁸ Scripture is thus a verbal re-description of what a “true spectator”—the hypothetical *unfallen* perceiver described in Chapter One—would have perceived from creation, without the aid of the further accommodation of Scripture.

If Scripture is effective after the fall because it re-presents the original manifestation of created works in a verbal format that is accessible to a more-or-less idolatrous reader, what is it about *language* which enables it to have this effect?³⁹ If we canvass what Calvin says regarding the effect of Scripture upon its fallen readership, we find that it is not just Scripture’s use of language as such, but the distinctive functions of Scriptural language which enable it to facilitate the perception of an idolatrous mind where the nonverbal manifestation of creation could not. As

³⁵ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.6.1.

³⁶ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.6.2.

³⁷ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.6.3.

³⁸ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.6.1. The passage continues: “since otherwise even those who seem to stand firm before all others would soon melt away.”

³⁹ Certainly, part of the answer is the effect Scriptural language has when accompanied by the inner illumination of the Holy Spirit, as Calvin suggests in *Institutio*, 1.8.1. However, this does not preclude there being a critical usefulness to language itself.

we will see in the two sections that follow, Scripture's language acts on the idolatrous mind both negatively, by suppressing the worst impulses that cause it to indulge its imaginations and thus prescind from perception, and positively, by enabling perception of what it otherwise cannot appreciate.

3. Language restrains the wandering mind

Together, this section and the next will show that Scriptural language intervenes in the perception of fallen minds in two broad ways: by restraining the mental wandering that precludes perception, and by vivifying what needs to be perceived. In the process of laying out these two functions of Scriptural language, I will also make reference to the implicit and explicit hints Calvin offers about his *own* language in the *Institutio*. These asides will show that Calvin seems to understand and frame his own prose on this Scriptural model, in which language both restrains the idolatrous habits of its reader and vivifies her otherwise blinded perception.

Let us consider language's restraining function first. Recall from Chapter Three that the idolatrous mind suffers from an incorrigible instinct to speculate regarding God. This habit leads the mind to invent its own mental objects, rather than contenting itself with what is manifest to sense perception. "Such is our inclination to vanity joined with rash boldness," Calvin complains, "that, as soon as God's name is mentioned, our mind is unable to refrain from lapsing into some absurd invention."⁴⁰ The idolatrous mind is also a wanderer by nature, easily "called or led away from right and pure contemplation of God" by "carnal cares and thoughts," liable to

⁴⁰ Calvin, *Institutio*, 2.8.15.

be “borne about hither and thither,”⁴¹ seduced down “some winding bypath” until its concentration is utterly dissipated.⁴²

As we saw in Chapter Three, such undisciplined wanderings lead the idolatrous mind to indulge imaginative fictions and therefore ignore God’s designated accommodations. If this is the case, then one powerful way that that perception can be improved is by *reducing* the mind’s speculative flights of fancy. It makes sense, then, that Calvin attributes the efficacy of Scripture partially to the way its language corrals wayward patterns of thought. As the language of ceaseless movement in the passages above suggests, the mind must be held still; to this end it should be occupied with practices that “exercise the mind and keep it attentive—unstable and variable as it is, and readily relaxed and diverted in different directions.”⁴³ On Calvin’s telling, Scriptural language is one such “help”⁴⁴: it has distinctive qualities which, in different ways, restrain the mind from lines of thought or flights of imagination which otherwise distract it from the accommodations that should monopolize its attention.

3.1 Scriptural titles as restraining. What are some of the ways that Scriptural language addresses the mind’s need for bridling?⁴⁵ We find one example in what Calvin says about Scripture’s use of divine titles to identify and describe God. Calvin calls this use of language a deliberate “remedy for this evil [of mental invention],” pointing out that designations like “the God of Abraham” or “the God of Israel” “adorn[s] [God’s] divinity with sure titles and so

⁴¹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.20.4. See also 3.20.5.

⁴² Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.20.5.

⁴³ Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.20.31.

⁴⁴ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.6.1.

⁴⁵ On the idolatrous mind’s need for “bridles,” a term Calvin consistently applies to accommodations—a category that would include distinctive features of Scriptural language—see my discussion at the end of Chapter Three.

fence[s] us in (*veluti cancellis circumscribit*), as it were, that we may not wander hither and thither and rashly contrive for ourselves some new God.”⁴⁶

As this language of fencing or circumscribing suggests, Calvin understands these uses of highly targeted language to curb the mind’s unmoored thought processes, presumably by pinning it to the limited conceptual or semantic fields such titles provide.⁴⁷ Such language functions as a “pattern (*idea*)” to “keep the thoughts of the pious upon that God (*ut cogitationes piorum in illo Deo sistant*)” who self-manifests in Scripture, and to prevent it from flying to an imagined idol.⁴⁸ These comments suggest that one way language can help suppress the worst instincts of an idolatrous mind is through a conceptually pinpointing or limiting function that restricts the mind’s room for mental movement—which, if given, the mind would inevitably use to wander off on some mental byway of its own making.

3.2 Conceptual divisions as restraining. Another similarly restrictive function of language is to lay down and police clear conceptual divisions that limit the mind’s interpretive response to what it is reading. To this end, Calvin explains, Scripture employs stylistic features like contrast and exclusion, not simply in deference to human slowness, but also and especially to expose and so discourage the mind’s inclination to invent its own ideas about God.⁴⁹ Carefully phrased distinctions are designed to avoid the kind of not-so-innocent confusion into which the mind’s instinct to invent or wander can lead.

⁴⁶ Calvin, *Institutio*, 2.8.15.

⁴⁷ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.10.2. Of *Elohim*, for example, Calvin says, “power and might are contained under (*sub titulo Elohim continetur*)” this title.

⁴⁸ Calvin, *Institutio*, 2.8.15.

⁴⁹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.10.3 and 1.11.1.

For example, Christ's words encode distinctions that are targeted preemptions of human thought which, "with slackened reins... begins to go even a little wanton and wild!"⁵⁰ Similarly, Paul's questions remind the reader of critical distinctions without which her mind will go astray.⁵¹ In another context, warning against the "impious boldness" that leads people to seek more information about Christ than is given, Calvin commends Paul's words to the Ephesians as a way of "purposefully setting bars about our minds (*acsi data opera cancellos mentibus nostris circumdaret*)."⁵² Thus, through stylistic techniques that actively limit possible interpretations, Scripture constrains the range of mental or imaginative responses available to its reader.

3.3 Restraining language in the *Institutio*. Let me note here that we find these same themes of keeping interpretation within designated bounds, precluding imaginative license, and otherwise restricting the mind, in oblique comments peppered across the *Institutio*, in which Calvin describes the function of his own language. Like Scripture, Calvin implies, the *Institutio* anticipates a wandering mind and acts to preempt its worst instincts. A characteristic example appears when Calvin concludes his discussion about devils—a topic, he is clear, that is rife for imaginative temptation—by explaining that he has "accomplished what I meant to do, namely, to equip godly minds against such delusions" lest, as he goes on to say, they become entangled in error.⁵³ Similarly, Calvin states that he intends to write about sin in such a way that way "that we may cut off every shift" whereby the mind attempts to exempt itself from blame.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.17.47.

⁵¹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.24.12.

⁵² Calvin, *Institutio*, 2.12.5.

⁵³ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.14.19.

⁵⁴ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.15.1.

Indeed, on Calvin's telling, the minds which language needs to address always attempt to evade direction: as Calvin says, they are like "meddlesome horses," who not only need bridles but resist them at every turn.⁵⁵ As such descriptions suggest, restraining the worst tendencies of an idolatrous mind is partly a matter of restricting its available movements. Thus, it comes as no surprise when, in one striking aside, Calvin describes his reason for heaping yet more evidence upon his reader as a means "by which these wriggling snakes may be so held fast that after this, they will be unable to coil up even the tip of their tail."⁵⁶ This kind of language used in connection with his own prose suggests that Calvin shares the goal of limiting the reader's unauthorized mental movements—in this case, by holding it conceptually in a vice-like grip—and raises the possibility that the language of the *Institutio* echoes Scripture's own efforts to discourage the idolatrous mind's tendency to fly, or squirm, off course.

This brings me to a host of images that Calvin uses to characterize the nature of the encounter between a mind in need of correction and the act of language required to intervene in it. They suggest an extension or application of Scripture's characteristic restraining work in a particularly forceful or even violent key. For example, in one striking passage describing sin, Calvin refers to "how many heads this hydra [bears]."⁵⁷ Consonant with this image, restraining the fallen mind is depicted as a matter of beating back, or beating down, something that keeps rearing perpetually new and ugly heads: "There is" in the idolatrous mind, "an obstinacy that must be beaten down as if with hammers."⁵⁸ If addressing such a mind is a kind of whack-a-mole endeavor, then it makes sense that Calvin sometimes describes his own rhetorical behavior in the *Institutio* as an act of vigorously, even violently, stemming an onslaught. For example, in

⁵⁵ Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.8.4-5.

⁵⁶ Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.4.29.

⁵⁷ Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.4.16.

⁵⁸ Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.3.7.

response to arguments against justification by faith, he declares, “because... they assail us with still other devices, come, let us keep beating them back!”⁵⁹ In response to two distinct arguments for free will, he announces “We shall beat back both siege engines in turn.”⁶⁰ Thus, Calvin’s vocabulary of battle suggests that restraining the lines of thought sprouted by an idolatrous mind is partly a matter of subduing or limiting by force. It also suggests that he is taking up this fight through his own prose.

3.4 Scriptural language provides a “path.” Returning now to what Calvin says about Scriptural language, consider an image which Calvin uses repeatedly to describe the way it imposes linearity, guardrails, and direction upon its reader’s characteristically wayward mind: Scripture as a “path.” Next to the lens image, which we discussed above, the path may be the single most telling image for the effects of Scriptural language upon a fallen mind. The path made an oblique appearance in Chapter Three’s discussion of the incorrigible wandering of the idolatrous mind—which is always straying from the “path (via)” of created works or the other accommodations that should occupy its attention.

Immediately after noting how necessary Scripture is to such minds, Calvin continues: “we must strive onward by this straight path (*recta via*) if we seriously aspire to the pure contemplation of God... If we turn aside (*si deflectimus*) from the Word... since we have got off the track (*extra viam cursus erit*), we shall never reach the goal (*metam*).”⁶¹ Here, Scripture is described as offering a path along which the mind can move and from which the mind must not wander or stray, to its peril. Calvin goes on to describe the task of perceiving God—of learning

⁵⁹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.17.1.

⁶⁰ Calvin, *Institutio*, 2.5.1.

⁶¹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.6.3.

to see “the splendor of the divine countenance”—as an “inextricable labyrinth (*inexplicabilis labyrinthi*) unless we are conducted into it by the thread of the Word (*Verbi linea in ipsum dirigamur*).”⁶² As William J. Bouwsma observes, for Calvin the labyrinth evokes “the powerlessness of human beings to extricate themselves” from their self-imposed wandering.⁶³ As the image of the thread leading Theseus through the Minotaur’s labyrinth suggests, Calvin’s use of this figure also and therefore frames the accommodation of Scriptural language as, in Richard Muller’s words, “a way of moving past delusion toward clarity.”⁶⁴

Scripture, therefore, lays a conceptual path through human reflections which otherwise form a maze of uncertainty and danger. It is, Calvin says, “a way in which we ought to walk in safety (*sed via, in qua tuto ambulandum est*)”⁶⁵ and in the absence of which one will “stagger about in vanity and error (*in vanitate atque errore versari*).”⁶⁶ The image of the path, especially as contrasted to a labyrinth, emphasizes that Scripture’s language limits a reader’s room for interpretive or imaginative movement, not only preventing aimless wandering, but also stabilizing and channeling its reader’s mind along designated mental tracks which ensure its safe passage toward the perception of God.

3.5 The *Institutio*’s language as a “path.” It cannot be an accident that the pivotal image of the path also recurs in Calvin’s own references to the work of the *Institutio*. As we already saw, in his first preface, Calvin articulates the goal of helping his reader move forward without stumbling or wandering when he describes what he has accomplished in the *Institutio* as

⁶² Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.6.3.

⁶³ William J. Bouwsma, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth Century Portrait* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 46-47.

⁶⁴ Richard Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin: Studies in the Foundation of a Theological Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 83.

⁶⁵ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.17.2.

⁶⁶ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.6.4.

a “paved path (*strata via*).”⁶⁷ Not only the text as a whole, but also individual discussions within it are described as prepared routes: for example, Calvin concludes his discussion of the prophets’ witness to immortality by saying “I have, I believe, blazed a trail (*viam me stravisse*) for the moderately discerning reader through this forest whereby he may go forward without stumbling (*inoffenso cursu pergere*).”⁶⁸ Similarly, Calvin names his ambition to “pave the way (*via sternatur*)” through careful provision of precise and limited, but—or, and thereby!—clarifying examples.⁶⁹ This language clearly parallels Calvin’s description of how Paul “pave[s] the way (*viam sternat*) for us to worship God truly” by removing obstacles and “extricat[ing] our minds from all snares.”⁷⁰

The fact that Calvin uses the path to describe *both* Scriptural language and his own suggests that the *Institutio* has as a major intended effect both to direct the wayward mind along the route that it should go and also to smooth that route so as to minimize the possibility that the reader will be sidetracked or derailed by the fixations of her more-or-less idolatrous mind. In fact, we might say that Calvin’s use of path imagery ultimately frames the *Institutio* as a path to the path of Scripture. As we have already seen, adhering to the “straight path” of Scripture is necessary if we “seriously aspire to the pure contemplation of God.”⁷¹ In service to that goal, the “paved path” of the *Institutio* offers a regenerate reader easy access to the pathway of Scripture.⁷² At the same time, the path of the *Institutio* may discipline a hypocritical reader—who, as Calvin says in a related image, treads “twisting paths (*flexuosos circuitus*) so as to seem to approach the God from whom they flee”⁷³—to walk *straight* along the divinely designated path rather than

⁶⁷ Calvin, “John Calvin to the Reader,” 5.

⁶⁸ Calvin, *Institutio*, 2.10.20.

⁶⁹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 2.3.8.

⁷⁰ Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.7.3.

⁷¹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.6.3.

⁷² Calvin, “John Calvin to the Reader,” 4.

⁷³ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.4.4.

carving her own, serpentine one. The force of this imagery is ultimately to suggest that no matter the degree of idolatrous wandering that besets its reader's mind, the language of the *Institutio* imitates the function of Scripture in helping to restrain and channel it.

4. Language vivifies what must be perceived

In the section above, I established that Calvin identifies restraining the idolatrous mind as a major function of Scriptural language. I showed, moreover, that there is good reason to think that Calvin understands his own language to function in the same constraining and directive manner. I turn now to a second and very different function of language, which I derive from Calvin's suggestion that Scriptural language can generate a more vivid and more impactful perception for a reader whose idolatrous mind has rendered her blind to the externally perceptible sites of God's self-manifestation.

The telling passages appear in Calvin's opening discussion of Scripture's advantages over created works. Calvin explains that "the knowledge of God, otherwise quite clearly set forth in the system of the universe and in all creatures, is nonetheless more intimately (*familiarius*) and also more vividly (*clarius*) revealed in his Word."⁷⁴ Later, Calvin remarks along similar lines that Scripture depicts God "more distinctly (*expressius*)" so that we may know him "more intimately (*familiarius*)."⁷⁵ The comparatives Calvin uses in these passages—*more* intimately, *more* vividly, *more* distinctly—suggest that one defining advantage of Scriptural language is that it re-presents God's existing self-manifestations in an especially vivid and affecting medium, one

⁷⁴ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.10.1.

⁷⁵ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.14.1. Calvin specifies that Scripture must do this in order to address the "slowness and dullness of our wit (*ingenii*)."⁷⁵ Note that the human faculty here described as the target of Scriptural language, the *ingenium*, is also the capacity that runs amok in idolatry. See my discussion of this term and Calvin's use of it at the end of Chapter Three.

whose added clarity and heightened impact is capable of penetrating the fog and capturing the attention of a mind oblivious to the same manifestation in created works. Thus, if Scripture's *restraining* function limits the mind's brash overactivity, its *vivifying* function works to shock and supplement the mind's equally characteristic dullness and unresponsiveness.

Let me open up several dimensions of what I am calling the "vivifying" function of Scriptural language: its special clarity and distinctness, its notably imagistic quality, and its increased emotional impact. Note that I am using the term "vivify," not in the sense of "to give life," but rather "to make vivid." I have chosen it as an umbrella term for these diverse characteristics in order to draw out—as Calvin's language does—the way they break through the self-imposed dullness and obliviousness of the idolatrous mind. Along the way, I will indicate where Calvin's comments about his own prose suggest that he intends the *Institutio* to fulfill a similar function for its reader.

4.1 Increased distinctness. One quality of Scriptural language whereby it vivifies its reader's dulled perception is through its increased distinctness as compared with creation. For example, Scripture's effect in the spectacles image discussed above is to convert a vague or blurry awareness into distinct recognition. Without the aid of Scripture, Calvin says, humans were like "old or bleary-eyed men and those with weak vision." They might see that "a beautiful volume" has been thrust before their faces, but they cannot "read [it] distinctly (*distincte legere*)." Scripture addresses such hazy perception by functioning as a focusing and correcting lens: "Gathering up the otherwise confused knowledge of God (*confusam alioqui Dei notitiam*) in our minds, having dispersed our dullness (*discussa caligine*), [Scripture] clearly shows us the

true God (*liquido nobis verum Deum ostendit*).⁷⁶ Calvin notes that this is an advantage of Scripture as a specifically *written* law. “Because it is necessary both for our dullness and for our arrogance,” Calvin says, God provided the written law to “give[s] us a clearer (*certius*) witness of what was too obscure (*nimis obscurum*) in the natural law.”⁷⁷ The implication of both passages is that although the divine manifestations re-described in Scripture may themselves be clear, Scripture’s linguistic precision in describing them offers greater focus—greater “gathering” power for a fallen mind—as compared with their originally non-verbal form.

4.2 Imagistic quality. Another way Scriptural language vivifies or animates the otherwise bleary perception of the fallen mind is through its imagistic quality. Calvin compares Scripture not only to spectacles, with their ability to improve distinctness, but also to a reflective mirror, with its ability to re-present images in a new medium.⁷⁸ According to Calvin, Scripture’s efficacy as an accommodation comes in part from this representational or pictorial quality of its language. Throughout the *Institutio*, Calvin describes the clearest Scriptural descriptions as those in which “[God’s] true appearance is exhibited to be seen (*visenda exhibetur*) as in an image (*εικονικῶς*),” or, perhaps better rendered, “iconically.”⁷⁹ In this vein, Calvin praises the skillful way “Paul several times paints (*depingit*) a living image (*vivam imaginem*) of the church for us”⁸⁰ and calls the law and prophets a “living image of God (*viva Dei imago*).”⁸¹ In such

⁷⁶ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.6.1.

⁷⁷ Calvin, *Institutio*, 2.8.1.

⁷⁸ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.14.1.

⁷⁹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.10.2.

⁸⁰ Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.6.10.

⁸¹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.1.5. In the same place, Calvin goes on to argue that in Paul’s preaching “the glory of God shines in the face of Christ.” On the distinction between the dead images that issue from the imagination and the “living images” provided by God as sites of focus, see Randall C. Zachman, *Image and Word in the Theology of John Calvin* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 8-9.

passages, Calvin praises Scripture's language specifically for its ability to simulate a kind of visual encounter with what it describes.

Indeed, Calvin seems particularly appreciative of uses of Scriptural language that simulate or stimulate sensory effects in the reader. In several places, Calvin praises verbal stories by comparing them to or even suggesting that they *are* visual media. For example, speaking of Luke's comparison of the publican and the pharisee, Calvin says, "our most excellent Master, not content with words, in a parable represents to us, as in a picture (*in parabola velut in tabula*), the image of proper humility."⁸² He likewise praises Isaiah's writing style, in which "the power of God, which can do all things, confront[s] our eyes (*oculis nostris occurrat*)."⁸³ Similarly, Calvin calls Jacob and Esau's divergent fates an *hypotyposis* (*ὑποτύπωσις*) of election. This rhetorical term, to which we will return in Chapter Seven, indicates a visual sketch or outline.⁸⁴

Importantly, Calvin suggests that these visual dimensions of Scriptural language are able to facilitate a kind of sensory confrontation with the created works they describe. When, for example, Calvin says that reading Scripture is "just as if we were gazing on the majesty of God himself,"⁸⁵ he suggests that the language of Scripture does not simply convey *concepts about* what was originally available to sensory perception, but that it re-presents these originally sensible experiences in verbal form, and with equivalent sensory impact to the original creations.

⁸² Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.12.7.

⁸³ Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.2.31. The beginning of this passage indicates that this is what the prophet may be doing when he appears to break off one topic and "turns to something else and wanders through long and superfluous mazes (*alio digredi et vagari per longas supervacuas ambages*)."⁸⁴ This comment may have significant implications for the functions of non-sequitur and length vis-à-vis an idolatrous mind.

⁸⁴ Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.22.5. These passages could be read as commending Scripture's ability to render exceptionally clear *understandings*, but they acquire greater force and significance when read against the backdrop of Calvin's insistence that fallen minds can only re-gain their ability to perceive God's sensible accommodations through their verbal re-presentation in Scripture.

⁸⁵ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.7.5.

4.3 Emotional impact. A third dimension of Scripture’s vivifying function vis-à-vis a mind dulled by sin is its increased emotional impact as compared with the original manifestation of created works. Calvin insists throughout the *Institutio* that the fallen mind’s insensitivity can only be addressed by communication specially calibrated to its condition. He credits Scriptural language with the ability to capture the mind’s attention and to dispel its emotional unresponsiveness.⁸⁶ For example, Calvin notes Scripture’s effective use of exhortations and threats to “shake off their sluggishness” and “pinch them awake to their imperfection.”⁸⁷ Similarly, he remarks upon the way Scripture supplies a sinful mind’s need for teachings that are “palpable.” Its language is effective because of the way it makes the senses “shudder”⁸⁸ and gives images to be “imprint[ed] upon... minds”⁸⁹ Anything less, Calvin is clear “would not... suffice[d] against [the mind’s] dullness and blockishness.”⁹⁰

Ultimately, Scriptural language is able to have an emotional impact even upon a reader who prefers to remain aloof from it: speaking of John’s Gospel, as well as of the writing of Peter and Paul, Calvin observes, “whether they want to or not, there [readers] shall find a thousand sayings to arouse, at least, their dull minds (*quae saltem eorum socordiam expergeficiant*)—nay, I should rather say, to burn a dreadful brand upon their consciences.”⁹¹ Scriptural language is powerful enough to make an impression on even the most willfully oblivious mind: “so deeply will it affect you, so penetrate your heart, so fix itself in your very marrow,”⁹² Calvin promises, that even the dullness of an idolatrous mind cannot withstand it.

⁸⁶ On the emotional sluggishness of the idolatrous mind, see Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.3.2.

⁸⁷ Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.7.14.

⁸⁸ Calvin, *Institutio*, 2.8.10.

⁸⁹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 2.8.10.

⁹⁰ Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.3.7. See also 3.2.12.

⁹¹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.8.11.

⁹² Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.8.1.

4.4 Vivifying language in the *Institutio*. Let me conclude this survey of what Calvin says about Scripture’s vivifying function by again noting that the ability to produce especially vivid depictions is a value that Calvin also celebrates in human language, and with which he implicitly identifies his work in the *Institutio*. When Calvin says, “Paul testifies that by the true preaching of the gospel, ‘Christ is depicted before our eyes as crucified,’” Calvin implies that this visual standard of Scriptural teaching is also the model for human verbal teaching.⁹³ Moreover, Calvin’s methodological remarks about his own work suggest that he understands the clarity the *Institutio* aims to provide in terms of similarly sensory and imagistic portrayal. For example, Calvin explains that he chooses to follow the exposition of the Apostle’s Creed in his own teaching because it “may serve as a tablet (*tabulae*) for us on which we see distinctly and point-by-point (*distincte et sigillatim perspicimus*) the things in Christ that we ought to heed.”⁹⁴ Likewise, Calvin describes his discussion of the life of the Christian as a way of “setting before my readers’ eyes (*lectorum oculis*) a table (*tabulam*)⁹⁵ of this matter.”⁹⁶ In both of these passages, Calvin links the notion of a clarifying teaching to the image of a tool that presents language in a distinctively visual form, suggesting that he embraces the goal of clarification in a visual register as a function of his own prose.

⁹³ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.11.7. Similarly, when Calvin says of the sacraments that “the sacrifice of Christ is so shown to us there that the spectacle of the cross is almost set before our eyes—just as the apostle says that Christ was crucified before the eyes of the Galatians when the preaching of the cross was set before them,” Calvin suggests that human ministry can and should be characterized by representational techniques that create the same kind of vivid, sensory encounter that, as we saw above, is a defining virtue of Scriptural language. Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.18.11.

⁹⁴ Calvin, *Institutio*, 2.16.18.

⁹⁵ Note that *tabula* does not indicate a columned tool for the display of facts and figures, but rather a writing tablet upon which words are visualized or a painted panel. Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary. Founded on Andrews’ Edition of Freund’s Latin Dictionary, revised, enlarged, and in great part rewritten* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879). Perseus Digital Library.

⁹⁶ Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.3.16.

4.5 Scripture as so many “marks.” As a final point of evidence to capture the vivifying function of Scripture as Calvin understands it, let me return to a prominent motif that we have already seen from previous chapters. Calvin uses the image of “marks”—often *notae*, but also near-synonyms like *insignia* which similarly denote a means of recognition—to indicate Scripture’s role in both drawing attention to and vivifying the points of focus upon which the mind’s perceptual efforts should be trained (and from which it should be prevented from wandering). As we saw in Chapter Two, “marks” is one of the terms Calvin uses to indicate the sites of accommodation at which God renders Godself easily perceptible to humans. As one such accommodation, Scripture is a “more direct and more certain (*rectior est et certior*) mark (*nota*) whereby [God] is to be recognized (*dignoscendum*)” as compared with created works.⁹⁷ Significantly, it is not only Scripture as a whole that Calvin describes using this term. Definitions or descriptions found *within* Scripture also function as “marks” that help the reader perceive God: “Scripture adorns with unmistakable marks and tokens (*certis notis et insignibus*) the one true God.”⁹⁸ These passages underline the capacity of not only an entire text, but also individual uses of language, to offer the mind unmistakable signposts or targets on which to focus.

4.6 The *Institutio* and “marks.” It is striking that Calvin uses related terms to describe the designating or focusing work of the *Institutio*. As Calvin says at the beginning of his discussion of the way Scripture re-presents God as Creator, “I shall be content to have provided pious minds (*piae mentes*) with a sort of index (*velut indicem*) to what they should particularly

⁹⁷ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.6.1.

⁹⁸ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.6.2.

look for in Scripture concerning God.”⁹⁹ The term *index* indicates a mark or other sign designed to facilitate recognition, suggesting that—like Scripture—Calvin’s language focuses or otherwise facilitates his reader’s perception of existing manifestations.

Indeed, *index* is just one among a host of semantically related terms Calvin uses to suggest that his prose re-presents the divine “marks” already present in both created works and Scripture. For example, Calvin suggests that his role is to highlight and clarify select examples from among the many sites of divine perceptibility: “these few examples make sufficiently clear what it is to recognize (*recognoscere*) God’s powers... for there are as many miracles (*miracula*) of divine power, as many tokens (*insignia*) of goodness, and as many proofs (*documenta*) of wisdom, as there are kinds of things in the universe.”¹⁰⁰ Such comments imply that the language of the *Institutio* functions to train its reader’s attention on representative examples that will function as especially clear points of reference from among the innumerable potential marks already designated by God. In other words, it suggests that the *Institutio* emulates Scripture’s uses of clarifying, attention-capturing language to draw attention to, and then focus the mind’s perception upon, the sites where God has already made Godself perceptible to humans.

Let me now draw together the two functions of Scriptural language—and, as my asides throughout have shown, Calvin’s own language—into an image that encompasses both the restraining and the vivifying help from which an idolatrous mind would benefit. If Scriptural language is both a “path” and so many “marks,” then we can say that it lays down mental tracks that both restrain imaginative flight and designate unambiguously, like bright blazes along a trail, the sites to which a mind must hew if it is to move toward the perception of God. In the same

⁹⁹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.10.1. Note that I have departed from McNeil in translating *piae* as “pious” rather than “godly” to preserve the connection between this reference and the figure of the *pia mens*, or “pious mind,” on which I elaborate in the Conclusion.

¹⁰⁰ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.14.21. I will return to this important passage in Chapter Seven.

way, the *Institutio* is not only a “paved” path that will help the reader’s wayward mind proceed along the path of Scripture without stumbling; it is equally a “marked” path that provides vivified focal points for her dulled perception.

5. Conclusion: Language’s restraining and vivifying potential

This chapter has sought the *Institutio*’s own implicit theory of language in relation to perception by surveying what Calvin suggests about the potential functions of Scriptural language vis-à-vis an idolatrous mind.¹⁰¹ It has revealed two broad ways that language can discourage the habits that preclude perception and encourage the habits that conduce to it. First, language can restrain the distinctive patterns of thought and imagination—that is, the incorrigible wandering and speculation—that preclude the mind’s perception of God in designated accommodations. In this way, even while acting explicitly upon *ideas or interpretations*, language ultimately comes to bear upon *perception*—by stilling the impulses that impede it. Second, verbal re-presentation of the accommodations that an idolatrous mind otherwise tends to ignore can generate a more vivid and impactful perception for a mind whose imaginative wandering has dulled her receptivity to these externally perceptible sites of God’s self-manifestation. As we will see when we turn in the next two chapters to a dedicated analysis of the *Institutio*’s prose style, Calvin’s language capitalizes on both language’s restraining and its vivifying potential.

¹⁰¹ This is a way of further specifying William A. Dyrness’ suggestive recent comment that “Scripture’s particular use of language... Calvin believed, embodied the only efficacious language possible in the desperate situation in which humans find themselves. The nature of this situation, in Calvin’s mind, was the characteristic blindness that keeps humans from recognizing their true status before God. Human language was limited not because of its inherent inability to express the ineffable but because of the human tendency to distort and resist God’s approaches.” William A. Dyrness, *The Origins of Protestant Aesthetics in Early Modern Europe: Calvin’s Reformation Poetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 95.

Chapter Six
Restraining Idolatrous Habits of Mind

“*Le style de Calvin est plus triste
que celui de Luther.*”
– Jacques Bossuet

“[Calvin] wrote more eloquently than
was decent for a theologian.”
– John Bossy

Chapter Five established that, to whatever degree, all of the *Institutio*'s potential readers struggle with the habits that characterize what I have called the “idolatrous mind” and which conspire to preclude the perception of God. It further established that Calvin describes the language of Scripture as working to address the needs of this mind in two ways: by restraining the patterns of thought that subvert perception, and by vivifying its perception of God's external self-manifestations. To restate these two, complementary functions in some of Calvin's favored imagery, we might say that language provides a constraining and guiding “path” to keep thought and imagination from wandering, while simultaneously channeling attention toward clarifying and enhancing “marks” or focal points for the perception of God. We have also seen, in each case, that Calvin's oblique remarks about the intended purpose or effect of his own language map onto these same functions.

Against this backdrop of how Scriptural language addresses the needs of an idolatrous mind, and on the strength of these indications that Calvin implicitly frames the work of the *Institutio*'s language along similar lines, let us turn finally from theory to practice—that is, to an analysis of the distinctive stylistics of the prose whereby Calvin addresses his reader's perceptual deficits in these two, complementary ways.¹ Here in Chapter Six, I show how several distinctive

Epigraphs: Jacques Bossuet, *Histoire des variations des eglises protestantes*, and John Bossy, *Christianity in the West 1400-1700*.

features of the *Institutio*'s style can be understood in terms of the “restraining” function of language. Following this, in Chapter Seven, I consider the complementary but distinctive “vivifying” effects of Calvin’s prose.

1. Questions about Calvin’s prose style

Before exploring various “restraining” effects of the *Institutio*'s language, let me situate this analysis in the broader study of Calvin’s prose. Calvin’s rhetorical prowess has been the subject of many excellent studies going back to the work of Ford Lewis Battles and Quirinius Breen in the mid-20th century, followed more recently by important work by Léon Wencelius, Francis Higman, and Olivier Millet, among others.² These studies have established that Calvin was well-read in classical literature and that he both received and advocated training in classical rhetoric.³ They have established that his Latin prose style—broadly, though not slavishly, Ciceronian⁴—would have been considered elegant by contemporaries and was probably

¹ This approach is homologous but not identical to Deborah Shuger’s observation that Melancthon’s prose style seems to fall into two broad functions which map onto the law-gospel dichotomy or dialectic which is central to his thinking. See Debora K. Shuger, *Sacred Rhetoric: The Christian Grand Style in the English Renaissance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 68. Note that the law-gospel distinction, while not absent from the *Institutio*, does not play as large of a structuring role in this text as it does in the writing of some of the other reformers.

² Ford Lewis Battles, “The Theologian as Poet: Some Remarks about the ‘Found’ Poetry of John Calvin,” in *The Organizational Structure of Calvin’s Theology*, ed. Richard C. Gamble (New York: Garland Publishing, 1992), 333-71. Quirinus Breen, “John Calvin and the Rhetorical Tradition,” *Church History* 26, no. 1 (March 1957): 3-21. Léon Wencelius, *L’esthétique de Calvin* (Geneva, Switzerland: Slatkine Reprints, 1979), 344-50. Francis M. Higman, *The Style of John Calvin in his French Polemical Treatises* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967). Olivier Millet, *Calvin et la dynamique de la parole: Étude de rhétorique réformée* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1992). There is also a large body of research, upon which I will not be drawing here, that considers the influence of Calvin’s French prose upon the development of modern French. For an overview of these studies, see Higman, *The Style*, 2-5. On the stylistic differences between Calvin’s French and Latin writings, see Francis M. Higman, “I Came Not to Send Peace, but a Sword,” in *Calvinus Sincerioris Religionis Vindex: Calvin as Protector of the Purer Religion*, eds. Wilhelm H. Neuser and Brian G. Armstrong (Kirksville, MO: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1997), 127-30.

³ On the role of poetry in Calvin’s education and that envisioned at the Genevan Academy, see Battles, “Theologian as Poet,” 342-43.

⁴ Breen, “Rhetorical Tradition,” 6-7.

influenced by Erasmus and Melanchthon.⁵ They have also demonstrated Calvin's mastery of a range of particular rhetorical techniques and styles.

1.1 Calvin's severe and vivid style. Seventeenth-century bishop and theologian Jacques Bossuet memorably observed that "*le style de Calvin est plus triste que celui de Luther.*"⁶ To appreciate the import of the well-known stylist's observation, it is crucial to understand that in early modern French, "triste" means not "sad," but austere or severe.⁷ In general, the severe dimensions of Calvin's style⁸ have been referred to his psychology or the context of his polemical engagement with opposing groups.⁹ If not totally taken for granted, these aspects of Calvin's language nevertheless have been seen as unproblematically consonant with, for example, the reformer's robust doctrine of sin.

At the same time, the vibrant and especially the imagistic dimensions of Calvin's style have given rise to several as-yet unanswered questions about the *Institutio*. Calvin celebrates the fact that the Bible is largely free of rhetorical artifice,¹⁰ so what is the function of such techniques in his own writing? If Calvin deserves his reputation for having a bias against sense

⁵ Regarding Melanchthon's influence, see Breen, "Rhetorical Tradition," 7.

⁶ Jacques Bossuet, *Histoire des variations des églises protestantes* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 1688), 2:52.

⁷ On this point, see Jean Plattard, "Le 'beau' style de Calvin," *Bulletin de l'Association Guillaume Budé* 62, no. 1 (January 1939), 28. For other French writers' assessment of Calvin's style as bitter, incisive, even violent, see Francis M. Higman, *The Style*, 3n2.

⁸ Two terms that have long been associated with this aspect of Calvin's style are "*tristesse*" and "*véhémence*." The first comes from Bossuet, as noted above. The second comes from a contemporary of Calvin's, Conrad Badius, who used the term in the preface to his second published collection of Calvin's sermons. On *vehementia* as a rhetorical quality indicating intensity and severity, see Arjen Terlouw, "'Naturally More Vehement and Intense': Vehemence in Calvin's Sermons on the Lord's Supper," *Reformation and Renaissance Review* 20, no. 1 (January 2018): 73-74.

⁹ The first move appears already in Beza's biography of Calvin, in which Beza describes vehemence as a feature of his mentor's character. See Theodore Beza, *Vie de J. Calvin* (Paris: J. Cherbuliez, 1869), 39-40. A recent example of the second move appears in Terlouw, "'Naturally More Vehement,'" 74.

¹⁰ Wencelius, *L'esthétique de Calvin*, 347.

perception, why is his prose so visual?¹¹ Moreover, why are words implicitly considered to be preferable to images—even when those words are themselves highly imagistic?¹² Specifically, what accounts for the lesser threat of deception that words pose?¹³

These puzzles are about more than the relationship between form and content. They probe the implications of the *Institutio*'s style for its potential impact upon a reader. This is also the question implicitly raised by John Bossy's infamous quip, "[Calvin] wrote more eloquently than was decent for a theologian."¹⁴ The unarticulated question that hovers in the background of all these lines of thinking is: how do the distinctive qualities of the *Institutio*'s prose relates to its formative purposes vis-à-vis its reader? That is, how would reading a text *with these features* forward Calvin's goal for his reader? In taking up this question in this chapter and the next, I depart from previous research on Calvin's style in at least two ways.

1.2 Foregrounding an idolatrous mind's perception. Although preceding studies have offered helpful remarks about how Calvin's writing pursues the traditional goals of rhetoric as taught and practiced in sixteenth-century Europe,¹⁵ these accounts of Calvin's prose effects have remained general and, in particular, have not addressed its implications for a reader with a

¹¹ As in Pitkin, who assumes Calvin's "bias against physical sense perception" and then is led to wonder about his repeated resort to "visual terminology and images." Barbara Pitkin, *What Pure Eyes Could See: Calvin's Doctrine of Faith in Its Exegetical Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 61 and 162, respectively.

¹² "The most significant methodological question that arises in [Zachman's *Image and Word*] is how to interpret passages in scripture that discuss or rely on visual imagery, but are clearly textual (as written words themselves)." John Slotemaker, review of *Image and Word in the Theology of John Calvin*, by Randall Zachman, *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 40, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 623.

¹³ Joseph Leo Koerner, *The Reformation of the Image* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 148, 150.

¹⁴ John Bossy, *Christianity in the West 1400-1700* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 102.

¹⁵ Several commentators, for example, have concurred that Calvin's writing displays the three offices of Ciceronian rhetoric, namely, to teach, to delight, and to move. See Breen, "Rhetorical Tradition," 16 and, echoing him, William J. Bouwsma, "Calvinism as *Theologia Rhetorica*," in *Protocol of the Fifty-Fourth Colloquy: Calvinism as Theologia Rhetorica*, ed. Wilhelm Wuellner (Berkeley, CA: The Center for Hermeneutical Studies in Hellenistic and Modern Culture, 1987), 11. This approach has been reiterated, more recently, in William A. Dyrness, *The Origins of Protestant Aesthetics in Early Modern Europe: Calvin's Reformation Poetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 94.

distinctive set of capacities and needs. That is why, rather than augmenting the already rich catalog of rhetorical tropes and argumentative structures scholars have identified among Calvin's writings, I instead foreground a question which so far has not been a central focus of research on Calvin's rhetoric—namely, how it might bear upon a reader with the characteristics specific to the idolatrous mind.

This brings me to a second way this analysis breaks new ground. Although complementary with previous studies, the argument here is animated by a different guiding question. Whereas earlier examinations of Calvin's prose style have explored its distinctive features primarily as they relate to "persuasion,"¹⁶ this discussion considers how the text's language comes to bear upon a reader's *perception*, as we have seen this exigency defined by the *Institutio* itself. Accordingly, in this chapter and the next, I pursue a highly specific account of the potential effects of Calvin's prose by reexamining both the largely unquestioned severe aspects as well as the still-puzzling vivid dimensions of the *Institutio*'s style against the backdrop of the text's overarching concern with what occludes and what facilitates perception.

Taken together, this chapter and the next will show that we encounter new and coherent answers to longstanding questions about Calvin's prose style if we pursue them in light of the problematic perceptual habits that lead the idolatrous mind astray and thus preclude its perception of God. In other words, what prior analyses have treated as anomalous, ad hoc features of the *Institutio*'s style, or as general niceties of Renaissance writing, this analysis shows are integrally related to theme of perception—and thus can be better understood in light of this central and organizing concern.

¹⁶ As in Breen, "Rhetorical Tradition," 8-10 and Higman, *The Style*, 46.

1.3 Persuasion conduces to perception. Several of the stylistic features I discuss under the umbrella of prose’s “restraining” effects have been previously studied in terms of Calvin’s polemical stylistics. In particular, my thinking has benefitted from comparing Calvin’s Latin in the 1559 *Institutio* to the analyses in Francis Higman’s excellent 1967 study, *The Style of John Calvin in his French Polemical Treatises*. As Higman explicitly notes, the *Institutio*—even in its original, Latin form—is not free of polemics.¹⁷ Moreover, as Higman’s readings implicitly demonstrate, the language of Calvin’s polemical writings is not deployed only or even primarily against his opponents, but also targets any lingering disagreement in an ostensibly favorable reader. In what follows, I take this idea a step further by interpreting the relevance of these stylistic features *not* for an uncommitted or uncertain reader, but for a reader whose projected reactions reflect the specifically wandering and resistant inclinations of the idolatrous mind.¹⁸

This brings me back to the distinction I introduced above, between approaching Calvin’s rhetoric in terms of “persuasion” versus approaching it in terms of “perception.” The sections that follow consider three defining features of Calvin’s prose style which exemplify his restraining use of language: antithesis, strategies for constraining readerly response, and what I am calling techniques that address a “guilty reader.” There is no doubt that these are “persuasive” techniques whereby the style of Calvin’s very prose shapes a reader’s patterns of thought and interpretation. My point in re-situating them in terms of “perception” is not to deny that they do persuasive work, facilitating assent to Calvin’s conceptual claims. It is to highlight

¹⁷ See Higman, *The Style*, 11. Higman has analyzed Calvin’s polemical treatises in French, where he notes that the stylistic effects he describes are more concentrated. However, he observes that these techniques are also present in Calvin’s Latin writings. See Higman, “I Came Not,” 130.

¹⁸ As discussed in Chapter Five, Calvin insists that the effects of sin continue in even justified Christians undergoing the lifelong process of sanctification. This means that there is no contradiction in seeing the *Institutio* as aimed primarily at a sympathetic Christian readership, and at the same time presuming that such readers continue to struggle with the inclinations we have identified with the idolatrous mind. Recall, in this connection, that Calvin’s letter to Francis frames the reader of the *Institutio*—even long after Francis’ own death—as one whom he hopes will give a fair hearing, but whose perception he suspects has been mal-conditioned!

how—against the backdrop of the text’s concern with perception—these persuasive means also and perhaps most importantly conduce toward a *perceptual* end. That is, these distinctive features of the *Institutio*’s style are helpfully understood not as general tools for bringing about persuasion in a reader imagined neutrally, but as targeted strategies that attempt to disrupt or chasten the habits of mind that prevent an idolatrous mind from perceiving as it ought.

2. Restraining Effects: Antithesis

We saw in Chapter Five that Calvin’s scattered remarks on the functions of Scripture as a verbal re-presentation of divine manifestations celebrate qualities of language that limit the mind—whether by fencing it in with circumscribed concepts and precise titles, or keeping it honest through interpretive exclusions, deliberate contrasts, and careful distinctions. We have seen as well that Calvin identifies these very same functions as one goal of his writing in the *Institutio*. I now turn from such metareflective comments to a consideration of Calvin’s actual practice, beginning with his well-studied predilection for antithesis.

Calvin’s prose is often described as highly “structured,” which is to say that through extensive use of subordinated clauses, parallel constructions, and clear logical transitions, his syntax leaves no doubt as to the relationships of ideas to one another.¹⁹ In particular, Higman has drawn attention to the “binary rhythm” of Calvin’s syntax, which directly juxtaposes questions with their answers, facts with their inferences, and illustrations with their interpretations.²⁰ The most prominent expression of this binary pattern, and perhaps the most extensively studied

¹⁹ Higman, *The Style*, 85, 100. This feature is especially notable in Calvin’s French prose, which reflects the structural affordances of Latin syntax, and in this respect is strikingly different from contemporaneous writers in French such as Pierre Viret or Sebastian Castellio. On this aspect of Calvin’s French and these differences, see Higman, *The Style*, 84-5, 119-20.

²⁰ Higman, *The Style*, 87.

feature of Calvin’s prose style to date, is his penchant for antithesis. The most comprehensive study of antithesis in Calvin’s writing appears in Olivier Millet’s 1992 *Calvin et la dynamique de la parole*. Millet calls antithesis “*une figure privilégiée dans le style de Calvin*” and concurs with Higman in emphasizing “*la fonction structurante de l’antithèse, comme figure ‘macrostructurale,’ sur le plan de la phrase, de la période, voire de la page tout entière.*”²¹ As I will show, in the *Institutio* antithesis functions as an effective tool for combating some of the worst habits of the idolatrous mind—first by preventing the reader’s mind from eking out a false middle ground between extremes, and second by focusing the mind on what should be the exclusive objects of its attention.

2.1 Antithesis’ baselining function. A first effect of Calvin’s antitheses is to present key contrasts that the idolatrous mind must come to see—but also, as the idea of a perceptual baseline suggests, *by which* she can come to perceive accurately. We have already discussed the *Institutio*’s opening illustration of how the sinful mind’s self-perception is distorted by its inability or refusal to measure itself against divine purity—which, through the application of the proper perceptual baseline, would allow it to perceive its own “rather darkly mottled” condition clearly.²² As this image dramatizes, the fallen mind shies away from the stark contrasts that could recalibrate its distorted self-perception. In fact, the idolatrous mind suffers from an incorrigible inclination to qualify or to see in shades of gray what is actually black and white.²³

²¹ Millet, *Calvin et la dynamique*, 700. Millet takes the description of antithesis as a “*macrostructurale*” feature from Molinié; see 661 n8. Millet builds on Higman’s observations about Calvin’s “binary” rhythm by situating this characteristic in terms of evolving tastes for the periodic style among sixteenth-century humanists. See Millet, *Calvin et la dynamique*, 694-706.

²² John Calvin, *Institutio Christianae Religionis* (Berolini: Gustavum Eichler, 1834). English translation from John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 1.1.2.

²³ “Clear and simple [Calvin’s] style may be; but it is not colorful (references to ‘black and white’ are innumerable in Calvin; there are rarely mentions of colors).” Higman, “I Came Not,” 133.

As this discussion will show, Calvin's antitheses not only restrain his reader's inclination to rest in a comfortable gray-area or middle ground between extremes, but also constrain the reader to contemplate—through stark juxtapositions—those realities the mind most wishes to avoid.

Calvin takes on the fallen mind's most cherished delusion when he attacks the "fiction of partial righteousness"—namely, the idolatrous mind's attempt to split the difference between human sin and divine righteousness by insisting on a gray-area of partial human goodness. "What perversity is it for us," Calvin complains, gesturing expansively to include both himself and his reader in the criticism, "when we lack righteousness, in order not to seem deprived of all glory... to boast of some little bits of a few works..."²⁴ It is no surprise that many of Calvin's most striking uses of antithesis underline the absolute division of goodness between God and humans. In so doing, they reinforce a contrast that is a reality, if not *the* reality, that a sinful mind most resists.

Consider a representative passage in which Calvin links together three parallel antitheses to police the distinction between God (as the source of salvation) and the self (as the source of nothing salvific):

Quum tuam in se uno salutem Deus statuatur, cur ad te ipsum descendes? Quum tuam tibi suam misericordiam assignet, cur ad propria merita decurres? Quum tuam cogitationem in sua miseratione contineat, cur ad operum tuorum intuitum partem reflectes?

Inasmuch as God establishes your salvation in himself alone, why do you descend to yourself? Since he appoints for you his mercy alone, why do you have recourse to your own merits? Seeing that he confines your thought within his mercy alone, why do you turn your attention in part to your own works?²⁵

This passage displays many of Calvin's characteristic techniques for highlighting a contrast. It is typical of Calvin, for example, not to stop at a single antithesis but to use parallel phrases to

²⁴ Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.14.13.

²⁵ Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.22.6.

reiterate with slight variation and so elaborate upon and intensify an essential antithesis. It is also typical for Calvin to punctuate his parallel antitheses by rhythmic devices such as the repetition of the same opening word (anaphora) and approximate end-rhymes (homeoteleuton), both of which are unfortunately lost in McNeill's translation.

For our purposes however, what is most pertinent is how Calvin uses antithesis not simply to highlight a contrast between humans and God, but to pinpoint and chastise the mind who desperately seeks a gray area between human impotence and divine goodness. Calvin even uses the second-person interrogative to compound the already accusatory impact of his antitheses; in this way, Calvin convicts his reader of any instinct she may harbor to seek even a crumb of her salvation in her own goodness when she should seek it entirely in God alone.²⁶

Seeing this aspect of Calvin's prose as directed not just to any reader, but specifically against the tendencies of an idolatrous mind, can reframe our understanding of Calvin's many divine-human antitheses. It is often remarked that Calvin's antitheses pit God and humanity against one another. Millet, for his part, refers to this relationship as a "war" and observes that "*L'antithèse de l'homme et de Dieu est première, c'est sur elle que se fondent les autres, c'est elle que les autres répercutent en écho et orchestrent.*"²⁷

Granting the prominence of such antitheses in Calvin's prose, what is crucial for our analysis is to appreciate that in the context of the *Institutio*, what is at stake is not the distance of God from, or the animosity of God toward, humans. What is at issue is the mutually exclusive relationship between human self-congratulation and the receipt of divine goodness. As Calvin says, "The heart cannot be opened to receive [God's] mercy unless it be utterly empty of all

²⁶ Calvin finds this teaching expressed in Scriptural and patristic antitheses. See Calvin, *Institutio*, 2.2.27-2.3.1. On the classical and patristic models behind Calvin's use of antithesis, see Millet, *Calvin et la dynamique*, 662-65.

²⁷ Millet, *Calvin et la dynamique*, 678.

opinion of its own worth. When it has been occupied with these things it closes the entry to [God].”²⁸ In this passage, the empty-full antithesis nested chiasmically inside the open-closed antithesis names the dynamics of the mind’s receptivity to God: not open / unless empty – if occupied / then closed. This telling line offers an implicit rationale for Calvin’s antithetical prose style, which traces and enforces these dynamics, presenting not just crucial contrasts that the mind must see, but contrasts *by which* the mind can appreciate and avoid the threat posed by its own gray-area thinking.

In other words, what is at stake in many of the antitheses that appear to pit humans against the divine is actually the conditions of possibility of relationship between them. We can see this if we go on to the very next paragraph: just after alluding to the drunk, dazed, and drowsy condition of a sinful mind that persists in willful denial of its own condition, Calvin calls for a dramatic shift in this mind’s relative perception of God and self. Here, Calvin employs a series of parallel antitheses to indicate both the content and the stakes of the required transformation:

Nunquam enim illi satis confidemus, nisi de nobis penitus diffisi: nunquam in nobis satis animos erigemus, nisi prius in nobis deiectos: nunquam in ipso satis solabimur, nisi in nobis desolate.

For we will never have enough confidence in him unless we become deeply distrustful of ourselves; we will never lift up our hearts enough in him unless they be previously cast down in us; we will never have consolation enough in him unless we have already experienced desolation in ourselves.²⁹

This passage does not merely contrast two antithetical ways of viewing the self in relation to God. It also, through the anaphoric repetition of *nunquam... nisi* (never... unless) clauses, places the accent subtly on the second term of each antithesis. This is a characteristic example of

²⁸ *Non pateat suscipiendae eius misericordiae pectus, nisi omni propriae dignitatis opinione prorsus vacuum. Haec ubi occupavit, illi claudit aditum.* Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.12.7.

²⁹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.12.8.

Calvin's tendency to weight one term of an antithesis: as Higman observes, while rhythmically balanced, Calvin's sentences are almost always semantically weighted toward the view he wishes the reader to adopt.³⁰ In this case, the weighting encourages the mind to adopt the accurate view of its own lack of goodness—and the correspondingly more accurate view of God's relation to us—that (as this passage explains) is the *sine qua non* of receiving God's goodness.

2.2 Antithesis directs attention. Another way antithesis addresses the more-or-less idolatrous mind of the *Institutio*'s reader is that it capitalizes on and directs the mind's zero-sum focus. Ironically, although the sinful mind always tries to eke out a middle ground between extremes, Calvin frequently describes the same mind in terms that suggest that it has a highly limited, ultimately zero-sum capacity for attention.

Calvin is particularly explicit about these dynamics in a passage from *Institutio* 2.8 occasioned by his rejection of the distinction between mortal and venial sins. There is no such thing as a venial sin, Calvin explains, because any sin reflects the mind's distraction from what should be its utter absorption with perceiving God as the source of all goodness: "When the mind... looks around elsewhere; when it is assailed by a sudden desire to transfer its blessedness to another place," it has already lost. "Unless... all the powers of the soul are intent on loving God, we have already abandoned obedience to the law."³¹ Not only is the mind constitutively unable to divide its attention—so that the slightest waver constitutes a complete abandonment of

³⁰ Higman, *The Style*, 102-103.

³¹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 2.8.58. Calvin explicitly connects immoral behavior with the fantasizing tendencies of the idolatrous mind at 2.8.50. See a similar remark regarding the zero-sum nature of the mind's attention at Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.3.11.

its focus—but, moreover, if the mind is not entirely absorbed in the sites of divine self-manifestation that should occupy it, it is drawn inexorably in the opposite direction.

If this is the case—if the mind’s ability to focus on what should be the objects of its attention is so delicate that the slightest distraction is practically irrecoverable—then Calvin’s use of antithesis can be seen as a way of leveraging, even capitalizing on in order to monopolize, his reader’s zero-sum attention. Seen in this light, antithetical sentence and paragraph structures function to mark off what should, from what should not, be objects of the mind’s attention. As we know from previous chapters, the idolatrous mind is defined partially by its tendency to fixate on figments of its own making and thus disregard designated accommodations. Channeling the attention of such a mind therefore supports perception by precluding the distraction—the perception-clouding preoccupation with its own fictions—to which it is especially prone.

Consider a representative passage occasioned by the fallen mind’s failure accurately to gauge the far greater worth of the life to come in comparison to the present life.³² Calvin says, “Let the aim of believers in judging (*aestimanda*) mortal life, then, be that while they understand it to be of itself nothing but misery, they may with greater eagerness and dispatch betake themselves wholly to meditate upon that eternal life to come.”³³ This statement contains an implicit theory of change: it suggests that accurate perception of the miserable status of what the mind should *not* attend (mortal life) will help it instead to focus its attention where it should (eternal life). In this case, the imposition of contrast is not only a technique for recalibrating the mind’s perception, but also for channeling its attention toward the member of the antithesis that deserves its exclusive focus.

³² The distorted perception of human life that results is directly parallel to the distorted self-perception that results from resisting the baseline of divine purity, in light of which “what masquerading earlier as righteousness was pleasing in us will soon grow filthy in its consummate wickedness.” Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.1.2.

³³ Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.9.4.

Notice how, in the lines that immediately follow, Calvin’s prose aids the reader in the act of comparative focus he has just described. I have introduced line breaks and spacing not present in the original in order to clarify the rhythm of the passage, and I have bolded key words to aid comparison of the Latin with the translation below:

Ubi ad eam comparationem ventum est, tum vero illa non modo secure negligi potest, sed prae hac penitus contemnenda est ac fastidienda.
Nam *si coelum patria est, **quid aliud** terra **quam** exsilium?*
***Si** migratio e mundo est in vitam ingressus, **quid aliud** mundus **quam** sepulcrum? in ipso manere **quid aliud quam** in morte demersum esse?*
***Si** liberari a corpore, est asseri in solidam libertatem, **quid aliud** est corpus **quam** carcer?*
***Si** Dei praesentia frui suprema felicitatis summa est, nonne ea carere miserum?*
Atqui *donec e mundo evaserimus, peregrinamur a Domino (2 Cor. 5:6).*
Ergo *si cum coelesti vita terrena comparetur, **non dubium quin facile** et contemnenda et proculcanda sit.*

When it comes to a comparison with the life to come, the present life can only be despised and loathed.

For, **if** heaven is our homeland, **what else** is the earth **but** our place of exile?
If departure from the world is entry into life, **what else** is the world **but** a sepulcher? And **what else** is it for us to remain in this life **but** to be immersed in death?
If to be freed from the body is to be released into perfect freedom, **what else** is the body **but** a prison?
If to enjoy the presence of God is the summit of happiness, **is not to be** without this, misery?
But until we leave the world ‘we are away from the Lord’ (2 Cor 5:6).
Therefore, **if** the earthly life be compared with the heavenly, **it is doubtless** to be at once despised and trampled under foot.”³⁴

This is a complex passage in which Calvin amplifies a basic contrast (between this life and the next) through a series of antitheses.

At the same time, he also varies his opening conjunctions (*Nam*,³⁵ *Atqui*, *Ergo*) to create a passage-long syllogism: if being in this world entails absence from God, but absence from God is

³⁴ Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.9.4.

³⁵ As a conjunction with a meaning of “for” or “because,” and compared to a similar conjunction like *enim*, *nam* indicates that what follows is an objective reason and not a subjective one. Karl Gottlob Zumpt, *A Grammar of the Latin Language*, 4th ed. (London, UK: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1855).

misery, then being in this world is misery. The series of conditionals, each beginning with *si* (anaphora), is bookended with similar but not identical gerundives (*contemnenda est ac fastidienda, contemnenda et proculcanda sit*) which articulate the necessity of despising this world, and so indicate to the reader which member of the antithesis she should embrace and which shun. In fact, by prefacing the closing gerundive with *non dubium quin facile* (it is not doubtful but unquestionable), Calvin emphasizes that preference for the future life can be affirmed with even greater certainty at the end of the passage than it could at the beginning.

For our purposes, what is crucial to note in this example is how Calvin offers a series of evolving antitheses which paint a progressively starker contrast—underlined by the repetition of *quid aliud quam* (what else but)—between what should and should not form the object of the mind’s attention. Thus, although the passage as a whole is animated by a single antithesis, the intervening clauses explore several distinct dimensions of this opposition. Over the course of the passage, the contrasts intensify³⁶ into increasingly harsh polarities; for example, the relative softness of heaven as homeland versus earth as exile gives way to the far more absolute contrast of death as life versus life as death. In this way, Calvin clarifies for the reader not only the distinction between the two terms, but also *why one and not the other* deserves her exclusive focus. This use of antithesis to characterize one term over against the other—in this case, showing how the present life is misery as *compared with* the future—is typical of Calvin’s style. In this way, Calvin never leaves it to his reader to decide which term of the antithesis should be

³⁶ Battles has suggested that some of Calvin’s poetic language reflects the influence of Hebrew poetry. Battles, “Theologian as Poet,” 362. It may be possible to think about this aspect of Calvin’s style on the model of Hebrew poetry’s tendency to intensification in semantic parallelisms.

credited or embraced; the language not only sets a clear decision for the reader, but practically makes it for her.³⁷

2.3 Antithesis addresses an idolatrous mind. Antithesis is frequently described as a defining feature not only of Calvin's prose, but also of his thought.³⁸ It is not uncommon to see Calvin's use of contrast referred to his psychology or personal worldview.³⁹ Setting aside how this feature of Calvin's prose may speak to his own mind, it is clear that Calvin's antithetical style speaks directly to the tendencies and needs of *an idolatrous mind* as the *Institutio* depicts it.

The passage just analyzed could be read as an example of Calvin's oft-remarked tendency to divide the world into two distinct realms.⁴⁰ What I would like to emphasize, however, is how well this kind of black-and-white division serves the idolatrous mind of *Calvin's reader* by narrowing the objects of her attention to a single binary, simplifying her conceptual landscape so as unambiguously to indicate what line of thought is, so to speak, on the path, and which veers from it. To quote Millet again, a reader of Calvin's antitheses is faced with "*la parfait symétrie d'un choix ineluctable.*"⁴¹ This, I suggest, is exactly what she needs—a discourse which leaves no quarter for intermediate positions by which her idolatrous mind might

³⁷ This effect is reminiscent of what Aristotle says about this figure in the *Rhetoric*: "antithesis resembles a syllogism; for refutation is a bringing together of contraries." Aristotle, *Art of Rhetoric*, III.ix.8-9, translated by J. H. Freese. Loeb Classical Library 193 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

³⁸ Higman observes that antitheses "illustrate... one of the most basic qualities of Calvin's mode of thought: the opposition of good and bad, drawn in violently contrasting tones." Higman, *The Style*, 88.

³⁹ See Higman, *The Style*, 9-10, 157. Millet critiques this tendency in the literature, which he thinks neither takes into account the diversity of antithesis in the rhetorical tradition nor reflects its distinctive role in Calvin's prose. He insists that "*L'antithèse est en elle-même une figure rhétorique à la fois trop simple et trop riche, chez notre auteur comme dans toute la tradition rhétorique, pour être réduite à l'expression d'une "Weltanschauung," d'un univers mental (tragiquement?) dramatique et polémique.*" Millet, *Calvin et la dynamique*, 662. See also 660.

⁴⁰ Millet calls it "*un discours manichéen.*" Millet, *Calvin et la dynamique*, 674.

⁴¹ Millet, *Calvin et la dynamique*, 674.

divert its focus, but rather channels her mind safely to the sites of focus and the lines of thought appointed for its exclusive attention.

There is no doubt that there is a mimetic dimension to Calvin's antitheses; the division of goodness between God and humans really is absolute and the syntax of Calvin's prose reflects this reality. However, as a prose feature, the effect of these sentences is to impress this reality upon a mind dedicated to seeing anything but. In this way, Calvin's language does not simply *reflect* "a framework of thought which is rigid and absolute,"⁴² but actually *creates one* in order to address itself to a mind reached only by absolutes.⁴³ If, as the *Institutio's* opening image suggests, perception of the relative shades of divine and human goodness can be recalibrated through the provision of contrast, then Calvin's frequent recourse to antithesis can be understood as a strategy that meets this aspect of his reader's perceptual needs.

3. Restraining Effects: Constraining response

We move now to a second feature of the *Institutio's* prose style, a feature which similarly restrains behaviors that typify the idolatrous mind. I noted above how Calvin's oppositional language simplifies conditions which the mind prefers to see in terms of shades-of-gray into constrained, black-and-white alternatives, thereby offering the reader limited choices in which, moreover, the prose is weighted toward the view or object on which Calvin wishes his reader's mind to remain trained. This technique is but one among a broader set of strategies Calvin uses for conditioning, channeling, and ultimately attempting to control readerly response.

⁴² Higman, *The Style*, 72.

⁴³ On Luther's somewhat different use of polarities, see Peter Matheson, *The Rhetoric of the Reformation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 194-5, 209, 212.

In his study of Calvin's French polemical writings, Higman highlights Calvin's "many techniques of orientating the reader and guiding his judgment"⁴⁴ through the "systematic presentation of vocabulary, syntax, and imagery designed to... orientate [the reader] towards the 'right' attitude in the debate."⁴⁵ In what follows, I elaborate two such techniques that figure prominently in the Latin *Institutio*—what Higman calls "evaluative framing," and what I am calling "logical chaining." In the context of the *Institutio* these techniques do not simply indicate the right attitude in a debate, but actually work to constrain the interpretive space allowed the reader by rendering alternatives either untenable or non-existent. Thus, if antithesis functions to direct the idolatrous mind's zero-sum patterns of attention and to prevent it from eking out a false middle ground between extremes, then evaluative framing and logical chaining are techniques for disallowing Calvin's reader any possible interpretive space within which to wander off the "path" or invent its own, imaginative sources of interest.

3.1 Evaluative framing. Higman has drawn attention to the extensive use of evaluative framing in Calvin's French polemical treatises—in which, as Higman says, Calvin's word choice and syntax enact a "relentless orientation of the reader," leaving no doubt as to the correct evaluation of the views under discussion.⁴⁶ We see a similar strategy for pre-determining readerly evaluation at work in the *Institutio*.

Consider, as a representative example, the following passage in which, in a patently dismissive voice, Calvin discusses objections to the teaching that Adam's fall occurred according

⁴⁴ Higman, "I Came Not," 135.

⁴⁵ Higman, "I Came Not," 131.

⁴⁶ Higman, "I Came Not," 132-33.

to God's decree. I have bolded key phrases to assist the reader in comparing the Latin passage to its translation below.

*Disertis verbis hoc exstare **negant**... Liberi arbitrii fuisse **dicunt**... **Tam frigidum commentum** si recipitur, ubi erit illa Dei omnipotentia... omnia moderatur? Atqui praedestinatio, **velint nolint** in posteris **se profert**... **Quid eos prohibet fateri...? Quid enim tergiversando luderent operam?** Cunctos mortales in unius hominis persona morti aeternae mancipatos fuisse **Scriptura clamat**. Hoc quum naturae ascribi nequeat, ab admirabili Dei consilio profectum esse **minime obscurum est**. Bonos istos iustitiae Dei patronos **perplexos haerere in festuca**, altas vero trabes superare **nimis absurdum est**.*

They deny that it is stated in so many words... **They say** that [Adam] had free choice... if such a **barren invention** is accepted, where will be that omnipotence of God whereby he regulates all things...? Yet predestination, **whether they will or not, manifests itself** in Adam's posterity... **What prevents them from admitting...? For why should they fritter away their effort in such evasions? Scripture proclaims** that all mortals were bound over to eternal death in the person of one man. Since this cannot be ascribed to nature, **it is perfectly clear that** it has come forth from the wonderful plan of God. **It is utterly absurd** that these good defenders of God's righteousness hang **perplexed upon a straw** yet leap over high roofs!⁴⁷

In this passage, Calvin does not simply relate, but scoffs at the opposing view, undermining its credibility by implying that its partisans are equivocal (*velint nolint*), cagey or noncommittal (*Quid eos prohibet?*), unserious and evasive (*tergiversando luderent*). His sarcasm in the last line is unmistakable, reinforced by the pronoun *iste*, which is used to convey scorn or contempt: although they arrogantly present themselves as “good defenders of God's righteousness (*Bonos istos iustitiae Dei*),” they are actually embarrassingly out of their depth (*perplexos haerere in festuca*). By contrast, the view which the reader should approve is that which “manifests itself (*se profert*)” and which “Scripture proclaims (*Scriptura clamat*).” Through such evaluative cues, the prose itself encodes the dividing line between what is trustworthy and what is not, what should be taken seriously and what should be summarily dismissed.

⁴⁷ Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.23.7. Note I have altered Battles' translation, rendering “They deny” for *negant* where he has “They say it is not.”

Although these kinds of evaluative cues may be effective in bringing along any reader, they are particularly noteworthy as deployed against an idolatrous mind. I have argued that the fallen mind struggles to gauge realities accurately—not only the relative division of righteousness between itself and God, but also what is externally creditable versus what is a delusive product of its own mind. If the idolatrous mind issues in distorted judgments, then the kind of framing we see in the passage above preempts this problem by offering the mind no invitation to exercise its untrustworthy evaluative faculties. Instead, the prose itself imposes an evaluative commentary upon what it describes. Indeed, at the end of the passage Calvin capitalizes on Latin’s flexible word order to conclude successive sentences with parallel verb phrases, in each case giving the reader her evaluative takeaway. He tells her both what “is perfectly clear (*minime obscurum est*)” and what “is utterly absurd (*nimis absurdum est*).” This is a fitting conclusion to a passage in which nothing is presented neutrally. It is also a representative example of how in Calvin’s prose, as Higman says, “all ideas are ‘processed’ and emotionally prejudged.”⁴⁸

While I agree with Higman, when he points out how this technique inclines the reader toward what Calvin considers the ‘right’ view, I would add that as addressed to the idolatrous mind, this language does much more: it actually leaves no interpretive opening for the reader to draw an inference, perform a value judgment, or otherwise exercise her own, compromised estimative abilities.

⁴⁸ Higman, *The Style*, 156. Higman emphasizes how, in the French, this is performed primarily through weighted introductions so that the reader knows how she ought to respond to an idea even before she knows what it is. On this point, see 95. However, the word order of Calvin’s Latin means that evaluative framings are just as often found at the ends of sentences, as in the last three sentences of this passage.

3.2 Logical chaining. If the evaluative framing in the example above renders the alternative view unappealing and dismissible because it has been pre-judged as ridiculous, then the second technique to be discussed here—the linking of successive ideas into logical chains—leaves no alternative at all. We have already noted that Calvin’s syntax characteristically leaves no doubt as to the relationships of ideas to one another. This is a particular affordance of neo-Latin itself, which—with its extensive use of subordinate constructions and its highly subtle distinctions among conjunctions—offers rich resources for indicating hierarchical and logical relations among ideas, even and especially among many ideas linked in a single, complex sentence. One of the ways Calvin turns these resources to his advantage in his efforts to limit the mental movement of the idolatrous mind is through the construction of tightly woven sequences in which the consequential relationship between ideas is not simply clarified, but actually rendered rhetorically necessary.

Consider how, in the following passage, Calvin establishes the relations among sin, vengeance, and remission through a closely constructed series of conditionals. I have introduced line breaks and spacing to clarify the rhythm:

Certe
si punit Deus peccata, imputat:
si vindicat, recordatur:
si ad iudicium vocat, tecta non habet:
si examinat, post tergum non proiecit:
si inspicit, non obliteravit instar nebulae:
si ventilat, non proiecit in profundum maris.

Surely,
if God punishes sins, he charges them to our account;
 if he takes vengeance, he remembers them;
if he calls to judgment, he does not hide them;
 if he weighs them, he has not cast them behind his back;
if he scrutinizes them, he has not blotted them out like a cloud;
 if he airs them, he has not cast them into the depths of the sea.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.4.29.

This passage consists of six conditionals, divided rhythmically into three sets of phrases of roughly equal length (isocolon) that are conceptually paired (punishing and vindicating, judging and weighing, scrutinizing and airing). The necessity of the logical connection between protasis and apodosis is emphasized, in each case, by the use of present indicative verbs and the lack of conjunctions between statements (parataxis); the effect is to suggest that there is no escaping the conceptual relationships this passage establishes among these divine behaviors. This impression arises partly from the fact that Calvin presents the apodosis of each conditional as naming a premise of its protasis (punishing implies a prior charging, vengeance implies a prior remembering), thereby creating the impression that the conceptual relationships are rooted in the words themselves. It is as though no interpretation were necessary—and none other possible.

Following this series, Calvin plunges immediately into another—this time quoting from Augustine—in which the connections between phrases are even more tightly woven:

*Si texit peccata Deus, noluit advertere:
si noluit advertere, noluit animadvertere:
si noluit animadvertere, noluit punire:
noluit agnoscere, maluit ignoscere.*

If God has covered sins, he has willed not to look upon them;
if he has willed not to look upon them, he has willed not to acknowledge the wrong;
if he has willed not to acknowledge the wrong, he has willed not to punish them;
he has willed not to acknowledge them, preferring to overlook them.⁵⁰

Setting aside the added authority these lines receive as a quotation of Augustine, in selecting this passage for extended citation Calvin has doubled down on the commonsensical effect of the series of short conditionals in the first half of the passage.⁵¹ This second series exploits a

⁵⁰ Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.4.29. Battles renders in three phrases what Calvin articulates in four, removing some of the repetition that makes this passage so striking. He also removes the repetition of the same words at the end of each phrase and the beginning of the next. I have altered the translation to restore these effects. The quotation is from Augustine, *Psalms*, Ps 32 (Latin, Ps. 31) ii.9. See McNeill, 656n61.

⁵¹ On Calvin's use of common sense for persuasion, see Higman, *The Style*, 20-21.

different form of logical connection between ideas: in addition to the conditional structure of each sentence and the syntactic density created by the absence of coordinating conjunctions, the four lines are bound even more intricately by the repetition of the previous line's apodosis as the beginning of the next protasis.⁵² Through this technique, the ideas are woven together without a single seam at which a mind could escape the cascading series of consequences. The rhythm of the passage, which rolls inexorably from one line into the next, itself suggests the irresistibility of the connections among the ideas Calvin is tracing.

3.3 Addressing the response of an idolatrous mind. In another context, Higman has remarked upon Calvin's penchant for explicit—indeed, inescapable—connectives between ideas, noting that “each is a deduction from the preceding move” in “a closely woven mesh which leaves no gaps, no pauses, no opportunity for the opponent to take a breath and reply.”⁵³ In the case of the *Institutio*, I would specify that the relevance of this style is that it leaves no space for a recalcitrant mind to demur, no opportunity for a speculative, obstinate, or even a simply wandering mind to hijack the line of thought and take it in another direction. This technique is representative of the ways Calvin's very prose accomplishes an exigency he names explicitly in the *Institutio*—namely, that “the thoughts of our mind be so controlled to the same end that none of them may become depraved or twisted and thus drive the mind in the opposite direction.”⁵⁴

⁵² Calvin does something similar in his own prose at Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.8.3, a passage that draws out the positive effects of undergoing tribulations. *Neque enim parvi momenti est coecum tui amorem abstergi, ut imbecillitatis tuae conscius probe fias. Imbecillitatis propriae sensu affici, ut diffidere tibi discas. Diffidere tibi, ut fiduciam in Deum transferas. Cordis fiducia in Deum recumbere...* “And it is of no slight importance for you to be cleansed of your blind love of self that you may be made more nearly aware of your incapacity; to feel your own incapacity that you may learn to distrust yourself; to distrust yourself that you may transfer your trust to God; to rest with a trustful heart in God...”

⁵³ Higman, *The Style*, 99.

⁵⁴ Calvin, *Institutio*, 2.8.49.

The result is that—to again quote Calvin in describing his own goals—there is “no cranny left open for bold and wicked minds.”⁵⁵

If Calvin’s antithetical rhetoric unambiguously divides the orderly path from the wild thicket, then his logical chaining is monistic: for the reader trapped within these logical series, there is nothing outside this line of thought, this chain of consequences. Indeed, the metaphors of linearity to which we must resort to describe this aspect of Calvin’s prose are perfectly to the point: when ideas are linked to one another so firmly, the reader is absolved not only of the responsibility but also the opportunity to undertake interpretive or logical steps herself.⁵⁶ As we saw in Chapter Five, laying down conceptual and interpretive tracks to be followed is one of the ways that language can restrict a wandering-prone mind. Calvin’s verbal chains leave no room for his reader to step off the path.⁵⁷

This experience of being constrained to the linear course of Calvin’s prose—not only because of the absence of interpretive alternatives but also because of the inexorable pacing of these swift, consequential connections that sweep the mind along with them—brings to mind Calvin’s reputation for trapping his reader within an “iron logic.”⁵⁸ In recent decades, scholars of Calvin’s language have begun to question the formerly widespread idea that Calvin’s arguments succeed due to their logical coherence.⁵⁹ The contested question of how far Calvin’s persuasive

⁵⁵ Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.25.8.

⁵⁶ “The reader can follow each step in the argument—indeed it is hard for him not to follow.” Higman, *The Style*, 100.

⁵⁷ “In such a structure, the thought cannot lose itself in vaguely defined ambiguous terms, imprecisely related to one another.” Higman, *The Style*, 156.

⁵⁸ “We are led to think that Calvin has caught the reader in a net from which escape is impossible. A favorite figure is that his logic is an iron logic, which can suggest that it holds the mind as in a vice from which there is no release.” Breen, “Rhetorical Tradition,” 13.

⁵⁹ For an overview of several positions in this debate, see Higman, *The Style*, 43–44. Breen somewhat infamously argued that the *Institutio* is animated by “rhetorical logic,” by which he means that it relies primarily on example and enthymeme, as opposed to syllogisms. Breen, “Rhetorical Tradition,” 13. More recently, Higman has observed that “Far from being a rational construction of unique perfection, as is sometimes claimed, Calvin’s argumentation is often less logical than that of his opponents.” Higman, *The Style*, 129–30. He notes, for example, Calvin’s habit of presenting a biblical citation rather than a logical argument in response to rational objections, 31. Higman concludes

success depends on logical argumentation need not concern us here; for our purposes, and in light of the evidence this dissertation provides that idolatrous delusion is partially generated by imaginative wandering, the point is that Calvin's prose style *itself* generates a sense of being constrained to the conceptual space he stakes out and approves. In other words, we can describe *the sense of an iron logic* as an effect of certain features of his language, including the techniques for weaving tight connections between ideas just examined.⁶⁰

3.4 Repetition. Before closing this section, it is worth noting in passing one more privileged strategy whereby Calvin's prose gives the impression of evaluative or logical inescapability—namely, his use of repetition. This is another feature of the *Institutio's* language that corresponds directly to the text's portrait of the idolatrous mind; at several points Calvin suggests that the recalcitrance or self-imposed dullness of such minds is what forces him to resort to elaboration or repetition in order to, as he says, “drive home (*inculcari*) something that ought to have been thoroughly known of itself.”⁶¹ Calvin rarely makes a point just once; indeed, almost all of the passages canvassed so far have contained parallel structure created by the repetition of grammatical patterns.

We have also encountered the repetition of identical and similar-sounding words. Anaphora, the repetition of identical words or phrases at the beginning of successive clauses or sentences, renders a particularly relentless rhythm, which is perhaps what leads Millet to refer to

that “the place of logic is indeed a subsidiary one in [Calvin's] presentation of theological questions... if the truth appears unreasonable, then reason must be sacrificed.” Higman, *The Style*, 44.

⁶⁰ At the end of a chapter in which he details the “highly consequential” patterns of Calvin's language, which give the reader a sense of being “led inevitably” toward Calvin's conclusions, Higman suggests that although Calvin's logical connectives convey a sense of “strict coherence,” his major task is less to provide intellectually acceptable proof than to instill an attitude of persuasion. See Higman, *The Style*, 104 and 120, respectively. The use of copious connectives is a feature of Ciceronian Latin. Higman, *The Style*, 98.

⁶¹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.20.42. See also 3.20.43, in which Calvin implicitly attributes this strategy to God in the provision of the third petition in the Lord's Prayer.

Calvin's use of this rhetorical figure as an act of "hammering."⁶² Recall from Chapter Five that Calvin describes the work of addressing an idolatrous mind as a matter of stemming an endless onslaught by return force. In light of this characterization, the figures of repetition in the *Institutio* can be understood as one more strategy for preemptively overpowering the resistance the text expects to encounter in its reader's idolatrous mind.

4. Restraining Effects: The guilty reader

I now turn to a final stylistic feature which contributes to the restraining effects of the *Institutio*'s prose. We saw above how aspects of Calvin's style leave the reader's more-or-less idolatrous mind no quarter for either interpretive resistance or imaginative wandering. Here I would like to point to a category of related but distinct techniques whereby Calvin sets up the terms of his discussion so as to imply that there is no such thing as innocent or principled dissent. The result is to suggest that any diversion from the perspective being advocated can only be the result of a reader's sinful preference for wandering invention over obedient adherence to the designated path of divine accommodations. I am calling this the "guilty reader" technique, an allusion to a term that has been used to describe one of Henry James' "favorite and most successful devices for involving the reader directly in the moral action of his stories," a device in which the reader is not only implicated in the evil the text describes, but is also brought to recognize and judge her involvement in it.⁶³

⁶² Millet, *Calvin et la dynamique*, 690, 691.

⁶³ As discussed by Joseph H. Summers, *The Muse's Method: An Introduction to Paradise Lost* (London, UK: Chatto & Windus, 1962), 30-31 and Stanley Fish, *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost*, 2nd ed. (London, UK: Macmillan Press, 1997), 142.

4.1 Anticipating pushback. Perhaps the most obvious way Calvin’s prose casts his reader as guilty—not, I would specify, of sin in general but of the specific expressions of sin I have identified with the idolatrous mind—is by beginning paragraphs with dramatic statements that anticipate and either convict or implicitly caution against readerly resistance.

This stylistic habit appears with particular frequency in the chapters on election. For example, *Institutio* 3.23, a key chapter in Calvin’s treatment of the doctrine of predestination, begins by anticipating objections. The first line is: “Now when human understanding (*ingenium*) hears these things, its insolence is so irrepressible that it breaks forth into random and immoderate tumult as if at the blast of a battle trumpet.”⁶⁴ The second paragraph begins with slightly less vehemence, but is no less stern in its reference to possible resistance: “To the pious and moderate and those who are mindful that they are men, these statements should be quite sufficient.”⁶⁵ Both of these sentences seem better suited to end a discussion than to begin one; by instead using them abruptly to initiate new paragraphs, Calvin pointedly foregrounds the likelihood of his reader’s internal resistance to the teaching under discussion.

At the same time, he also frames possible resistance as reflecting the kind of disorderly (“immoderate tumult”) boundary-testing (“mindful that they are men”) that is characteristic of an idolatrous mind. On occasion, Calvin even employs this kind of comment in the middle of a paragraph—as, for example, when he interrupts a passage on justification to muse out loud, “It is truly wonderful that man, condemned to such disgrace, dares still assume that he has anything left.”⁶⁶ This kind of not-so-subtle interjection has the same effect as its more dramatic

⁶⁴ Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.23.1.

⁶⁵ Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.23.2.

⁶⁶ Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.14.5.

counterparts—namely, of drawing attention to and instantly convicting any instinct in the reader that matches the idolatrous inclination that Calvin has named.

Such overheard admonitions, though not directed explicitly at the reader, prospectively frame what, upon reflection, the reader may find when she queries her own response to the *Institutio*. They implicitly ask: are you insolently rebelling at this idea? Is that because you credit yourself with more than is your due? Are you accepting this teaching with a meekness that reflects an accurate assessment of the fallen self’s abilities? We might call this the “mirror” function of Calvin’s prose style. It reflects the reader’s condition back at her in much the way Calvin says that the written law helps humans who are “blind and drunk with self-love” come to perceive their true condition:⁶⁷ “just as a mirror shows us the spots on our face.”⁶⁸ That is, these interjections reflect any possible internal resistance back at the reader *as the product* of the kind of inflated self-assessment that typically issues from an idolatrous mind.

4.2 Accusatory questions. A related stylistic feature, Calvin’s use of accusatory questions aimed at the reader, heightens this effect.⁶⁹ We saw it above in one of the passages examined in connection with antithesis, in which the second half of each parallel construction consists of a direct question: “why do you descend to yourself?... why do you have recourse to your own merits?... why do you turn your attention in part to your own works?”⁷⁰ In these lines, Calvin calls out patterns of thought that—as implied by the unflinching directness of the interrogatives—may be at work in his reader.

⁶⁷ Calvin, *Institutio*, 2.7.6.

⁶⁸ Calvin, *Institutio*, 2.7.7. Elsewhere, Calvin says: “I require only that, laying aside the disease of self-love and ambition, by which [a person] is blinded and thinks more highly of himself than he ought, he rightly recognize himself (*se ipsum probe recognoscat*) in the faithful mirror of Scripture.” Calvin, *Institutio*, 2.2.11.

⁶⁹ In another context, Higman has noted that such questions demand a reaction and so involve the reader in what is under discussion, with the result “that the reader can at no point ‘opt-out.’” Higman, *The Style*, 107.

⁷⁰ Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.22.6.

The same effect results when, at the beginning of a chapter on justification, Calvin goes on the offensive to convict any lingering desire to retain a sense of self-righteousness: “Do you see that the righteousness of God is not sufficiently set forth unless he alone be esteemed righteous...?” Against these zero-sum stakes, Calvin’s next question can only be answered in guilty silence: “Why do we attempt, to our great harm, to filch from the Lord even a particle of the thanks we owe his free kindness?”⁷¹ If in his exclamations about general recalcitrance Calvin addresses himself implicitly to his reader’s resistance, with these questions he names it explicitly—at once teaching his reader to recognize her idolatrous mind’s patterns and indicting her for indulging in them.

4.3 Framing resistance as insult. Another, less obvious way Calvin’s prose performs this kind of reflexive commentary upon his reader’s guilty condition is through a strategy that frames resistance as a direct insult against an authority *other* than Calvin. The procedure is as follows: first, cite an authoritative precedent; second, notice in a mock-innocent tone what is omitted; and finally, imply that to insist on what is omitted will entail an impertinent absurdity such as accusing an apostle of forgetfulness, a church father of unskillfulness, or worst of all, the Holy Spirit of negligence.⁷²

Calvin often uses this pattern to reframe Roman liturgical practices as products of an inventive mind⁷³—a mind which he, in turn, presents as rebelling against biblical and patristic

⁷¹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.13.1.

⁷² Another representative instance of the technique appears at Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.1.18. Calvin points to the example of the prophets who did not schism or refuse to perform rituals in the company of the wicked even when they saw the church corrupted. The critical logical turn in this discussion is the implicit reasoning that if the prophets had thought it best to refuse participation, they should have done just that: “Surely, if they had thought they would become contaminated from these rites, they would have died a hundred times rather than allow themselves to be dragged thither...”

⁷³ On how liturgical inventions issue from and reflect mental inventiveness, see Chapter Four.

precedent. Consider how Calvin addresses the authority of the Bishop of Rome. Recounting Paul's discussion of spiritual hierarchy in Ephesians, Calvin adopts an exaggeratedly innocent tone to ask, "Why does Paul not say that Christ has set one over all to act as his viceregent? For that the occasion especially demanded, and it ought in no way to have been omitted, if it had been true."⁷⁴ A few pages later, now making the same point in connection with Jerome's writings on church hierarchy, Calvin repeats the move: "Why does [Jerome] not mention that one head is, as it were, the bond that unites all the churches together? For nothing would have better served the immediate argument. Nor can it be said that he overlooked the point out of forgetfulness, for he would have used nothing more willingly if the facts had allowed it."⁷⁵ These passages silence opposition partly due to their eminently commonsensical nature: if such-and-such were the case, why didn't the apostolic or patristic authority just say so?

This three-step pattern has an even more convicting effect—and the implied contrast between Calvin's mock-innocence and the reader's projected impertinence is even more dramatic—when Calvin uses it to answer anticipated objections or pushbacks on the part of an individual reader. These instances occur especially in cases where Calvin anticipates that readerly resistance will take the form of either a bid for more information from God or skepticism of (what Calvin takes to be) Scriptural teaching.

We find several such remarks in Calvin's discussion of predestination. After asking why Paul does not identify election with good works, Calvin reminds the reader: "For the Holy Spirit speaking through his mouth did not suffer from the fault of forgetfulness."⁷⁶ Similarly, in

⁷⁴ Not content to make the point once, Calvin continues in the same paragraph, "Why did [Paul]... not immediately also add, one supreme pontiff, to keep the church in unity? For nothing more appropriate could have been said, if indeed it had been actual fact." Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.6.10.

⁷⁵ Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.6.17. This joke may succeed partly due to Jerome's reputation among church fathers as being a particularly ruthless aggregator of power. The implication is that if this opportunity to consolidate more power had been available to Jerome, nothing would have stopped him from capitalizing on it!

⁷⁶ Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.22.8.

addressing the objection that God unfairly holds humans accountable if they are predestined to condemnation, Calvin notes that “The apostle did not look for loopholes of escape as though he were embarrassed in his argument.”⁷⁷ These apparently mild statements of the obvious preemptively frame further questioning on the reader’s part as an implicit criticism of the Holy Spirit or the Apostle’s competence.

Elsewhere however, Calvin dispenses with this tone of mock innocence in favor of overt indignation. In anticipating the protest that predestination is a dangerous doctrine that should not be taught, he thunders: “with what color will they cloak their arrogance when they accuse God indirectly of stupid thoughtlessness, as if he had not foreseen the peril that they feel they have wisely met?” He goes on to accuse objectors of having “openly reproache[d] God... as if he had unadvisedly let slip something hurtful to the church.”⁷⁸ By setting possible resistance against the authority of patristic, apostolic, or divine teaching, Calvin preemptively frames and shames resistance as an act of the arrogant, transgressive behavior of an idolatrous mind that refuses to know its place.

4.4 The guilty reader as an idolatrous mind. The way Calvin frames resistance as a predictable product of the idolatrous mind evokes Calvin’s reputation for identifying his own view with divine truth.⁷⁹ Here again however, the interesting question for our purposes is not how these techniques may or may not reflect *Calvin’s* self-understanding, but how they redound back upon and implicitly frame his reader’s condition—specifically, by pointedly raising the

⁷⁷ Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.23.4. See also a similar remark at Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.22.11 about wronging the apostle by implying that he has misunderstood something about election.

⁷⁸ Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.21.4.

⁷⁹ Higman notes how, for example, by setting up the terms of the debate with opening biblical quotations, “the position of Calvin not as an autonomous individual but as the representative of God’s Word is emphasized.” Higman, *The Style*, 16. He also highlights Calvin’s tendency to frame contradictory doctrines as inspired by the devil, 19.

possibility that the recalcitrance of an idolatrous mind is operative in her response to the *Institutio*.

Given the sinful mind's penchant for speculation and its resistance to assessing itself accurately against the standard of divine righteousness, Calvin's warnings not to speculate or to demand more information about God's will—as well as his constant reminders not to locate any independent goodness in the self—imply that resistance to the teaching under discussion could only be rooted in one of these characteristic behaviors of the idolatrous mind. In other words, it is not primarily Calvin's rhetorical alignment of his own view with that of God or Scripture that creates the sense that there is no such thing as innocent dissent, but rather, the framing of disagreement *as emerging from* specific sinful behaviors of the idolatrous mind itself.

Similarly, Calvin's techniques for eliciting and indicting a "guilty reader" may preemptively chasten a reader's pre-existing or brewing resistance. However, even if they do not, they nevertheless succeed in naming readerly resistance as a function of the mind's characteristic recalcitrance—whether in the form of its speculative instincts, its stubborn insistence on its own goodness, or its arrogant instinct to question God. In this way, these stylistic features draw even a potentially dissenting response into the *Institutio*'s model of the idolatrous mind and its tendencies.⁸⁰ Whether Calvin anticipates and successfully forestalls, or catches and identifies in action, any of the behaviors he proactively frames as sinful responses, these features effectively direct the reader's attention to the flighty or focused, skeptical or submissive, movements of her own mind. Through such reflexive techniques, the *Institutio* provides feedback to its reader about her own condition, tracking it *for her* through the course of her own reading, and continually

⁸⁰ See Jean-François Gilmont, *John Calvin and the Printed Book*, trans. Karin Maag (Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2005), 96.

challenging any response from her that may signal her own indulgence in the behaviors it associates with an idolatrous mind.

5. Conclusion: Restraining what precludes perception

In an essay on Calvin’s polemical writings, Higman observes, “The historical context of all Calvin’s work is that of battle: battle to impose the ‘correct’ understanding of the Word of God on limited, corrupt human beings, battle to oppose, fight down, destroy the forces of evil, under whatever guise.”⁸¹ Higman has in mind primarily the opponents Calvin addresses in his occasional treatises, which are often directed to an individual opponent or an adversarial group. Nevertheless, the metaphor of battle is—as we saw in Chapter Five in connection with the forceful imagery Calvin uses to describe what is required to address an idolatrous mind—equally appropriate to describe key aspects of his language’s encounter with a reader of the *Institutio*.

In this chapter, I have gathered several features previously identified in the context of Calvin’s polemical writings, along with a few effects I note here for the first time, under the broad heading of the “restraining” function of language. I have argued that these stylistic features can be interpreted as strategies for targeting and suppressing the problematic behaviors that are characteristic of the idolatrous mind. In so doing, I have shown one major way that the *Institutio*’s prose style reflects the text’s broader concern with perception.

5.1 The opposite of hermeneutic openness. Ultimately, the combined effect of the features I have grouped under language’s “restraining” function is to offer the *Institutio*’s reader the opposite of hermeneutic openness. Let me explain what I mean by that. Reader-response-

⁸¹ Higman, “I Came Not,” 134-35.

inflected literary readings frequently emphasize the provision of interpretive freedom as one of the important ways that a text engages its reader actively in the reading process.⁸² Much of this literature has drawn attention to ways texts withdraw evaluative authority or leave interpretive lacunae so as to invite the reader to engage her imagination or interpretive abilities.⁸³ By contrast, the restraining features of Calvin's prose style which we have explored aim to close such gaps, to constrain the reader safely within a narrow conceptual space, and to give her mind no quarter for unauthorized movement.

To use Calvin's own imagery, these stylistic features operate to keep the reader on a designated path and to preclude wandering.⁸⁴ This is the diametric opposite of the effects typically spotlighted by reader-response analyses, but this does not mean that it is not an equally significant way for a text to engage and condition its reader's response. Indeed, the experience of having one's imaginative or interpretive instincts restrained is exactly what the idolatrous mind needs to practice. Thus, to the extent that a reader of the *Institutio* has been boxed-in by the zero-sum dynamics of Calvin's antitheses, felt the conceptual constraint of his strategies for restricting her evaluations and interpretations, and recognized her own idolatrous instincts in the mirror of his accusatory techniques, the time spent reading the *Institutio* has been passed practicing the kind of discipline that is a necessary corrective for any idolatrous mind.

5.2 Facilitating perception in two ways. This chapter has laid out an initial class of evidence that not only the explicit teachings, but also the prose style of the *Institutio* reflects a

⁸² See, as a representative example, Aaron Peltari, *The Space that Remains: Reading Latin Poetry in Late Antiquity* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014), 74, 91, 99-103, 158, 161.

⁸³ See on this Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 98, 235.

⁸⁴ This is the diametric opposite, for example, of texts that invite readers to wander in a narrative "woods," taking "inferential walks" beyond what the text says explicitly. See Umberto Eco, *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 6-7, 50.

concern with perception. Facilitating a reader's perception of God has two sides, which correspond to the active and passive characteristics of the idolatrous mind.⁸⁵ In the first place, the idolatrous mind is overactive, continuously indulging in speculative, unmoored, inventive patterns of thought—habits that, as we saw in Chapter Three, ultimately preclude its attaining perception of God.⁸⁶ It is this active dimension that the techniques we have seen in this chapter address: through uses of language that restrain its reader's undisciplined thought and consequently overactive imagination, the *Institutio's* prose discourages the behaviors that conspire to preclude perception.

In the next chapter, we turn to uses of language that address the passive consequence of idolatrous blindness—namely, inattention and obliviousness to the perceptible accommodations whereby God self-manifests.⁸⁷ As we will see, the prose that addresses this related but distinct dilemma has very different qualities.

⁸⁵ Corneanu and Vermeir find a similar constitutive tension between a problematic activity and a problematic passivity in Bacon's account of the idols of the mind: "The imagination is central not only in Bacon's representation of the mind's 'flight' but also in the explanation of the mind's 'preoccupation,' whereby it rests in (false) notions and no longer pursues inquiry. This is because the imagination and the understanding are 'struck' by and 'filled' with (or 'colored' or 'infected' by) those notions and the images on which they are based, with the effect that the mind stagnates and is incapable of engaging in examination." Sorana Corneanu and Koen Vermeir, "Idols of the Imagination: Francis Bacon on the Imagination and the Medicine of the Mind," *Perspectives on Science* 20, no. 2 (Summer 2012): 193.

⁸⁶ See a description of this problem, for example, in Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.4.1.

⁸⁷ See a description of this problem, for example, in Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.11.

Chapter Seven
Vivifying the Perception of God

“You were radiant and resplendent,
you put to flight my blindness.”
– Augustine

Recall from Chapters Three and Four that, in the context of the *Institutio*, “idolatry” names a condition of functional blindness that results when the mind disregards the many sites of divine self-manifestation which ought to occupy human perception. Only in attending to these accommodated manifestations can the mind “contemplate God, who is otherwise invisible.”¹ In other words, it is not enough that an idolatrous mind be restrained from the wayward and resistant habits of mind we considered in Chapter Six. The inattention and emotional sluggishness that prevents the idolatrous mind from attaining the perception of God must also be addressed and, if possible, reversed, so that this mind’s defining blindness can be replaced with the perception for which it was created.

Accordingly, I turn in this chapter to the second of two major ways that the very language of the *Institutio* intervenes in its reader’s more-or-less idolatrous mind. I show how, through uses of language known among sixteenth-century writers and readers to reproduce sensory and especially visual effects, Calvin’s prose rivets the dulled mind and occupies it with unmissably vivid perceptions of *God-given* sites of attention. When combined, the restraining and vivifying functions² laid out in this and the previous chapter are such that during the act of reading, the reader has her thoughts constrained and her imagination fired in a way that is conducive to the

Epigraph: Augustine, *Confessions*, X.27.

¹ John Calvin, *Institutio Christianae Religionis* (Berolini: Gustavum Eichler, 1834). English translation from John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 1.5.1.

² It would be interesting to explore the possibility that these two functions bear some resemblance to the two parts of repentance, mortification and vivification. See Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.3.8.

perception of God. In this way, the language of the *Institutio* renders controlled conditions for an experience—indeed, a kind of simulation—of successful perception.

As with Chapter Six, the analysis that follows goes beyond existing work on the *Institutio*'s language in not simply highlighting Calvin's rhetorical prowess, but by specifying how his language—when read in its sixteenth-century setting—could be understood to intervene in the habits of mind which characterize idolatry and thus perpetuate the sinful mind's blindness. By showing how the style of Calvin's prose comes into focus against the perceptual exigencies of the idolatrous mind, this chapter completes my argument that perception is a powerful framework for illuminating the *Institutio*.

1. Vivifying the perception of God

As noted at the beginning of Chapter Six, a major puzzle about the *Institutio*'s language is why the text is suffused with such vivid, imagination-engaging verbal prose. This question derives its force from the premise, only recently and partially abandoned, that Calvin is in some sense an enemy of the visual.³ However, recall from Chapter Four that Calvin does *not* disapprove of all visual images—only those that depict an original product of the human imagination. In fact, he overtly approves of images that imitate what the eyes can see, such as the natural world.⁴ He also encourages humans to be constantly occupied with the other perceptible accommodations God provides—preeminently, the sacraments, whose visual virtues he praises.⁵

³ On the persistence of the idea that Calvin hates matter, see Ernst van den Hemel, "Things That Matter: The *Extra Calvinisticum*, the Eucharist, and John Calvin's Unstable Materiality," in *Things: Religion and the Question of Materiality*, eds. Dick Houtman and Birgit Meyer (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 67. For an interpretation that contests the portrait of Calvin as an enemy of the visual, see Lee Palmer Wandel, "Incarnation, Image, and Sign: John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* & Late Medieval Visual Culture," in *Image and Incarnation: The Early Modern Doctrine of the Pictorial Image*, eds. Walter S. Melion and Lee Palmer Wandel (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 187–202.

⁴ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.11.12.

⁵ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.11.13. On the powerfully visual dimensions of the Lord's Supper, see 4.14.5, 4.14.12.

This nuance forces us to rephrase our question, the core of which is still salient: why would a text which identifies idolatry with imaginative invention and names as a major goal bridling its reader's imaginative impulses, nevertheless be permeated by vivid, image-conjuring, imagination-firing language?

1.1 Vivifying prose. Recall from our discussion of the vivifying effects of Scriptural language in Chapter Five that one of Scripture's defining advantages over the originally non-verbal manifestation of creation is that in Scripture

God is truly and vividly (*probe, et ad vivum*) described to us from his works (*a suis operibus*), while these very works are appraised (*aestimantur*) not by our depraved judgment (*ex iudicii nostri pravitate*) but by the rule of eternal truth.⁶

Scriptural language, in other words, re-presents the divine manifestation perceptible in created works, but in a way that is especially vivid—Calvin uses the phrase *ad vivus*, meaning painted from life⁷—and that filters out the distortions introduced by the idolatrous mind. In the following sections, we will see how the vivid qualities of Calvin's style echo this function of Scriptural language by re-presenting in verbal form the divine self-manifestations that the idolatrous mind needs to perceive but struggles, due to its self-imposed dullness, to assess accurately and reciprocate appropriately.

Before turning to *Institutio*'s prose, it is important to specify what I mean by the “vivid” or “vivifying” dimensions of Calvin's style. A pioneering early scholar of Calvin's rhetoric, Quirinus Breen, observed: “Were one to name the most constant excellence of Calvin, it could

⁶ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.6.3.

⁷ Kusukawa explains that “The image ‘ad vivum’ should provoke in the beholder the same responses as the ones a person would have when looking at an actual, living object itself.” Sachiko Kusukawa, “Conrad Gessner on an ‘Ad Vivum’ Image,” in *Ways of Making and Knowing: The Material Culture of Empirical Knowledge*, eds. Pamela H. Smith, Amy R. W. Meyers, and Harold J. Cook (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2014): 336.

well be that of vividness; he tries his utmost to keep the reader awake.”⁸ Given what we have established about the idolatrous mind’s self-induced obliviousness, we can specify Breen’s point about keeping the reader “awake” even further: Calvin’s reader must be prevented from drifting sleepily into inattention or slipping dreamily into imaginative invention, and—crucially—must be helped to direct her mind attentively and appreciatively upon the sites where God self-manifests and at which she is intended to attain the perception of God. It is this meaning of “vivify”—to make vivid, to make vividly arresting—and not the more literal meaning of “to give life,” that I mean when I speak of the “vivifying” function of Calvin’s style.

What techniques or uses of language yield the literary quality of vividness? Breen’s remark alludes to a complex of techniques that in Renaissance rhetoric were understood to render prose more striking or impactful for a reader, often though not always by rendering it visual. It is helpful to distinguish two broad effects of language under this category, which we can demarcate by means of two related but not identical terms, *enargeia* and *energeia*. *Enargeia* (from the Greek ἐναργής, meaning visible, palpable, manifest; Latin *evidentia* or *illustratio*) refers to uses of language that render prose more impactful through descriptions that are so vivid that they produce visual effects for a reader. Terrence Cave defines it as “the evocation of a visual scene... as if the reader were present as a spectator.”⁹ Indeed, Quintilian defines *enargeia* as the quality “which makes us seem not so much to narrate as to exhibit the actual scene.”¹⁰ The key idea implied in both the Greek and Latin terminology is that of “bringing [things] into the field of visual perception” through the use of language.¹¹ I highlight *enargeia* because it is the most

⁸ Quirinus Breen, “John Calvin and the Rhetorical Tradition,” *Church History* 26, no. 1 (March 1957): 8.

⁹ Terence Cave, “*Enargeia*: Erasmus and the Rhetoric of Presence in the Sixteenth Century,” *L’Esprit Créateur* 16, no. 4 (Winter 1976): 6.

¹⁰ Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, Vol. II, VI.ii.32. *The Orator’s Education. In twelve books*. Edited and translated by Donald A. Russell. Loeb Classical Library 124-27 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

¹¹ Cave, “*Enargeia*,” 6.

common and broadest member of a set of overlapping terms used by Renaissance rhetoricians to indicate uses of language that render the subject under discussion more vividly present for a reader; others include, sometimes interchangeably, *ekphrasis*, *demonstratio*, *descriptio*, and *hypotyposis*.¹²

It is important to specify, however, that techniques that render prose especially “vivid” are not restricted to methods for rendering it visual. This brings us to a second rhetorical term, related but not reducible to the first.¹³ *Energeia* (ἐνέργεια, meaning activity, operation, or actuality) refers to the vigor, vitality or liveliness of language. Vividness in *this* key arises not from prose’s imagistic quality, but from a sense of energetic movement which can be generated by techniques such as balanced antithetical and parallel constructions, figures of repetition, clever interrelationships among words, and other figures that give prose a striking rhythm.¹⁴ If *enargeia* refers to a “vivid pictorial style,” then *energeia* names a “dynamic motional style.”¹⁵ Thus, when I refer to the “vivifying” dimensions of Calvin’s prose, I intend both visual and non-visual techniques for presenting his subject matter such that it makes a particularly striking impact on the reader.

1.2 Language and the imagination. Before moving on to my argument about the appearance of such vivid prose in the *Institutio*, let me linger over the “impact on the reader” I have just invoked. To understand not only why these uses of language were valued among

¹² Cave, “*Enargeia*,” 5.

¹³ Note that by the time of the Renaissance, *enargeia* and *energeia* were not always distinguished in practice. On this point, and the classical distinctions between them, see Monica Westin, “Aristotle’s Rhetorical *Energeia*: An Extended Note,” *Advances in the History of Rhetoric* 20, no. 3 (September 2017): 252-61. I have differentiated between the terms above in order to emphasize that there is more to vivid prose than verbal imagery.

¹⁴ Chris Ingraham, “Energy: Rhetoric’s Vitality,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 48, no. 3 (May 2018): 260-68.

¹⁵ Quoted in Walter Bernhart, “Functions of Description in Poetry,” in *Description in Literature and Other Media*, eds. Werner Wolf and Walter Bernhart (New York: Rodopi, 2007), 134.

Calvin's contemporaries, but especially how they might be relevant to the challenges that beset an idolatrous mind, it is crucial to appreciate where and how—in the sixteenth-century models of the mind I have been drawing on across this dissertation—such language has its effect.

Briefly put, early modern understandings of the mind do not draw a firm line between seeing and reading.¹⁶ There are two ways for a mental image to end up on the “mirror” of the imagination, where it can become the basis of a subsequent thought process. The first is by being deposited there through a sensory process—entering via the exterior senses and then being processed by the combinatory and evaluative functions of the imagination I traced in Chapter One. The second way, and the one that concerns us here, is through language's direct creation of verbal images upon the imagination. The crucial point for our purposes is that, in principle, there is nothing to distinguish a phantasm produced by sense perception from one produced through vivid language. In this respect, the phantasms induced by language have a status similar to those experienced during dreams—both occupy the imagination despite having *not* first entering the mind through the five exterior senses.¹⁷

Early modern writers and readers valued vivid language precisely for its ability to deposit images directly into a reader's imagination. Appreciating this mechanism gives a literal cast to Erasmus' description of *enargeia* as a technique whereby “we have painted, not narrated, and... the reader has seen, not read.”¹⁸ Indeed, Quintilian explicitly refers to such “experiences... whereby things absent are presented to our imagination with such extreme vividness that they

¹⁶ Michael Camille, “Seeing and Reading: Some Visual Implications of Medieval Literacy and Illiteracy,” *Art History* 8, no. 1 (March 1985), 28.

¹⁷ Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*. 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 74. For the sake of simplicity, this summary sets aside the important fact that the visual species taken in during visual reading and the aural species taken in during aural ‘reading’ or listening are just as sensory as anything else taken in through the external senses.

¹⁸ Quoted in Cave, “Enargeia,” 7.

seem actually to be before our eyes” as a form of “hallucination (*animi vitium*)” that the skillful rhetorician ought to exploit.¹⁹

As these remarks suggest, the end result was understood to be no less sensory for being produced by language. After all, the ‘higher’ processes of reason and understanding operate entirely at the mercy of the imagination’s products, and thus cannot distinguish between what appears there after entering through the senses, and what appears there by other means. By offering a rich, fully formed image to the imagination, vivid language literally bypasses the combinatory and evaluative processing that is under ordinary circumstances reserved for the imagination and which, as I have suggested in earlier chapters, can go horribly wrong. Vivid prose is, in other words, a way to produce in a reader’s mind exactly the composite, colored percept one wishes a perceiver could derive from the external world but which, for whatever reason, she cannot.

1.3 Three techniques. Studies of what Calvin says about other writers have established that he values the stylistic traits understood by Renaissance rhetoricians to address the imagination in this way.²⁰ In what follows, I show how the “vivid” dimensions of the *Institutio*’s own language are marshaled toward the function of vivifying—by which I mean, rendering more

¹⁹ Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, Vol. II, VI.ii.29-31.

²⁰ Indeed, Randall Zachman has noted that “the power that language has when it can portray something so vividly that it places it before our eyes... became [Calvin’s] ideal as a teacher.” Randall C. Zachman, *Image and Word in the Theology of John Calvin* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 10. See also Zachman, *Image and Word*, 13, 244-45. Calvin also indicates appreciation for other techniques that give prose a certain animation and impact without necessarily rendering it visual. For example, Calvin celebrates figurative language as having more “force and address. Hence figures are called the eyes of speech... because they win attention by their propriety, arouse the mind by their luster, and by their lively similitude so represent what is said that it enters more effectively into the heart.” Qtd. in William J. Bouwsma, “Calvinism as *Theologia Rhetorica*,” in *Protocol of the Fifty-Fourth Colloquy: Calvinism as Theologia Rhetorica*, ed. Wilhelm Wuellner (Berkeley, CA: The Center for Hermeneutical Studies in Hellenistic and Modern Culture, 1987), 3. For an extended discussion of prose traits that Calvin approves and disapproves, see Léon Wencelius, *L’esthétique de Calvin* (Geneva, Switzerland: Slatkine Reprints, 1979), 353-59.

unmissable and affecting—his reader’s perception of discrete sites of divine self-manifestation, as well as encouraging the appropriate mental and emotional response thereto.

The first three sections below interpret distinctive aspects of Calvin’s prose in terms of three genres or techniques common in early modern writing: *ekphrasis*, *amplificatio*, and *hypotyposis*. Although the uses of language I discuss in these sections are in practice overlapping and mutually reinforcing, the purpose of distinguishing them and identifying them with discrete literary figures that were widely recognized in early modern European writing is to highlight how the *Institutio* helps its reader perceive *through language*—or more accurately, through the phantasms language deposits into the imagination—what would be difficult for a fallen mind to perceive in the absence of such aid. I conclude my analysis of these vivifying techniques with a discussion of how, in addition to re-presenting in verbal form what the mind otherwise struggles to perceive, Calvin’s prose style also conditions his reader’s potentially deficient emotional response to the perceptions his language has vivified.

2. Ekphrases of created works

Let us begin with the early sections of the *Institutio*, where we find the passages that have received the most attention in scholarly discussions of Calvin’s prose style.²¹ The opening chapters of the text are filled with rhetorically rich descriptions of how God shows himself “in the visible splendor of his apparel”²² through the contents of the universe, which are “so many burning lamps” that “shine for us”²³ in what Calvin ultimately calls a “dazzling theater” of divine

²¹ In a seminal treatment, Breen illustrates the three functions of rhetoric in the *Institutio*—to teach, to move, and to delight—entirely by way of examples taken from chapter five of Book I. Breen, “John Calvin,” 16-19. These chapters are also the focus of Serene Jones, *Calvin and the Rhetoric of Piety* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995).

²² Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.1.

²³ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.14.

glory.²⁴ Although the rhetorical beauty of such passages has received much attention, previous studies have not considered how these re-descriptions of created works function, given the pivotal fact that Calvin frames the divine manifestations that he is describing so vividly as *perceptions which the idolatrous mind can no longer, of itself, attain*. In this and succeeding sections I specify the effects of Calvin's most vivid prose passages in light of the perceptual impairment that, I have argued, characterizes the idolatrous mind.

2.1 Verbal descriptions of creation. I begin, in this section, by suggesting that it is helpful to see Calvin's re-descriptions of God's self-manifestation in created work as *ekphrases*—that is, as verbal portrayals of an originally non-verbal artistic product intended for a readership that does not necessarily enjoy direct access to the original.

We can see the appropriateness of this label if we consider how Calvin's vivid representations of the divine manifestation in created works are unfailingly defined by their reference to this independently existing original. As discussed in Chapter One, Calvin identifies three categories of created works which are intended to function as sites at which humans can attain the perception of God: the physical universe, humans themselves, and the governance of both. Consider the following passages from *Institutio* 1.5 in which Calvin vividly re-describes divine governance of the natural world and human affairs, respectively:

With what clear manifestations (*praeclaris speciminibus*) [God's] might draws us to contemplate him! Unless perchance it be unknown to us in whose power it is to sustain this infinite mass of heaven and earth by his Word: by his nod alone sometimes to shake heaven with thunderbolts, to burn everything with lightnings, to kindle the air with flashes; sometimes to disturb it with various sorts of storms, and then at his pleasure to clear them away in a moment; to compel the sea, which by its height seems to threaten the earth with continual destruction, to hang as if in mid-air; sometimes to arouse it in a

²⁴ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.8 (emphasis mine).

dreadful way with the tumultuous force of winds; sometimes, with waves quieted, to make it calm again!²⁵

[God] clearly shows himself (*se... demonstrat*) the protector and vindicator of innocence, while he prospers the life of good men with his blessing, relieves their need, soothes and mitigates their pain, and alleviates their calamities; and in all these things he provides for their salvation... In no greater degree is his power or his wisdom hidden in darkness. His power shows itself clearly (*praeclare emergit*) when the ferocity of the impious, in everyone's opinion unconquerable, is overcome in a moment, their arrogance vanished, their strongest defenses destroyed, their javelins and armor shattered, their strength broken, their machinations overturned, and themselves fallen of their own weight...²⁶

It is not without cause that these kinds of passages have led commentators to remark on the vividness of Calvin's prose. From thunderbolts and lightning flashes to shattered javelins and armor, both of these passages are suffused with arresting imagery. Moreover, not only the language's visual features, but also its quick tempo—enhanced by the accumulation of short phrases and the absence of coordinating conjunctions—give the descriptions a lively rhythm that is another dimension of what, for Renaissance rhetoricians, lends the prose its vividness. In context, the function of these devices is to convey the sense that there are innumerable phenomena Calvin might describe to illustrate God's governance, indeed, that the countless ways God self-manifests in the governance of the world outstrips the ability of Calvin's pen to name them all.

²⁵ *Iam potentia quam praeclaris speciminibus nos in considerationem sui rapit? nisi forte latere nos potest, cuius sit virtutis, infinitam hanc coeli ac terrae molem suo verbo sustentare: solo nutu, nunc fragore tonitruum coelum concutere, fulminibus quidlibet exurere, fulgetris aërem accendere: nunc variis tempestatum formis conturbare, eundem ipsum statim ubi libuit, uno momento serenare: mare, quod assiduam terrae vastationem minari sua altitudine videtur, quasi in aëre suspensum, coercere, et nunc horrendum in modum tumultuoso ventorum impetu concitare, nunc sedatis undis pacatum reddere.* Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.6.

²⁶ *Quemadmodum non obscure tutorem, ac etiam vindicem se innocentiae esse demonstrat, dum bonorum vitam sua benedictione prosperat, necessitati opitulatur, dolores lenit ac solatur, calamitates sublevat, saluti per omnia consulit... Nihil magis aut potentia, aut sapientia in tenebris latent, quarum altera praeclare emergit, dum impiorum ferocia omnium opinione insuperabilis momento uno retunditur, arrogantia domatur, diruuntur validissima praesidia, tela et arma comminuuntur, vires infringuntur, machinationes evertuntur, et sua ipsarum mole concidunt... Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.7-8. The second half of this passage, in particular, consists of several allusions to Psalm 107. Beyond the features I discuss here, the overt Scriptural basis for this description makes it a good example of the technique of *amplificatio* I discuss below.*

2.2 Rendering clear what is already clear. However—and this is the feature of these descriptions which I would like to foreground—there is a counterfactual quality to these descriptions that, I suggest, cannot be separated from their rhetorical richness. Let me explain what I mean by that. At the same time that the passages that recount these works are suffused with lush verbal imagery, they also offer lyrical, sometimes lamenting, allusions to how much a true spectator²⁷ would see to which fallen minds are blind. We cannot interpret such vividly imagistic lines in isolation from the fact that Calvin never lets his reader forget the reality that sinful minds struggle to see what he is describing²⁸—in this case, God’s unmissably clear governance of creation and human events.

One of the ways Calvin keeps this fact always before the reader’s mind is by layering, we could say, showing and telling: vivid images presented as though to speak for themselves—Storms! Winds! Waves!—are nevertheless framed by commentary that remarks upon the clarity of what is under depiction. Note, for example, how Calvin exclaims over these “clear manifestations,” emphasizing how God “shows himself,” “not hiding” even in darkness. In these and similar passages, we see Calvin’s constant emphasis on what has been called the “objective clarity”²⁹ of what he is *nevertheless* at significant pains to describe. These descriptions, then, are defined by a tension which they do not attempt to resolve. On the one hand, Calvin’s prose is *rendering* something clear; on the other hand, it declares that what it is rendering clear is already *manifestly* clear. In the *Institutio*’s opening chapters, what we are told needs no commentary receives ample commentary.

²⁷ This figure is described at length in Chapter One.

²⁸ This raises the question: from what condition of mind is the *Institutio* itself composed, that it can depict what the idolatrous mind struggles to perceive? I consider this question in the Conclusion.

²⁹ Edward A. Dowey, Jr., *The Knowledge of God in Calvin’s Theology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952), 32.

If the positive side of this insistence shows itself in this kind of relentless meta-reflective commentary on the objective clarity of divine self-manifestation, the negative side appears in Calvin's continual allusions to human blindness. These allusions are often uttered in the very same breath in which Calvin celebrates the self-evidence of divine self-manifestations. For example, Calvin memorably describes the workmanship of the universe as a "brightness" to which human eyes are blind, ironically darkened in the face of glaring exhibitions.³⁰ Similarly, the human body is a "workshop" or "storehouse" overflowing with not only numerous but also varied divine testimonies—humans "feel (*sentiant*)" God's self-manifestation in them, they "are taught (*docentur*)" it in any number of ways, indeed, "they are compelled to know—whether they will or not (*coguntur scire velint nolint*)."³¹ And yet "they conceal (*supprimunt*)" or suppress these evidences even from themselves.³¹

As we see in these examples, it is characteristic of Calvin to interweave references to brightness and blindness, obviousness and obliviousness, so as to suggest that these are two sides of the same coin. The result is to give even Calvin's most full-throated praise of God's self-manifestations a rueful edge. Following the passages quoted just above, Calvin goes on: "Manifold indeed is the nimbleness of the soul... Manifold also is the skill with which [the soul] devises things incredible... These are unfailing signs of divinity in man..."³² In context, even these celebratory exclamations read a bit like laments. As long as humans are not the spectators they ought to be, every allusion to created works' clarity includes a denunciatory reference back to the fallen mind's inexcusable blindness.³³

³⁰ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.14, 1.6.1.

³¹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.4.

³² Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.5.

³³ What kind of rhetoric is this? Passages in which Calvin re-describes the glories of created works have been identified as instances of Calvin's use of the epideictic mode. Epideictic is a discourse of praise or blame, encomium or vituperation. Breen points to *Institutio* 1.5.1-8—the source for the passages we have been considering—as prime examples of Calvin's epideictic in a positive or praising key. Typically, he notes, Calvin's praise occurs in

2.3 Describing divine art. With these observations in place, let us ask, what function do such double-edged descriptions serve? The *Institutio* offers a highly telling clue that, to my knowledge, has not figured prominently in any accounts of the uses and effects of Calvin’s language. This clue appears in 1.5.10, following a series of vivid passages that describe God’s self-manifestation in created works. Calvin goes on to observe that, taken together, the whole assemblage of divine manifestation he has reviewed is like a work of visual art:

We must therefore admit in God’s individual works—but especially in them as a whole—that God’s powers are actually represented as in a painting (*non secus atque in tabulis depictas esse Dei virtutes*).³⁴ Thereby the whole of mankind is invited and attracted to recognition (*agnitionem*) of [God], and from this to true and complete happiness.³⁵

This passage retroactively encompasses all of the vivid depictions Calvin has offered thus far, framing them as so many evocations of a single, if internally diverse, divine painting that *is* created works. His language’s point of reference, in other words, is this larger work of divine artistry which discrete passages excerpt and partially re-present.

If this is the case, then it is helpful to think of the vivid passages in which Calvin re-describes God’s works as so many verbal renditions of an originally non-verbal work of art—in other words, *ekphrases* of this divine painting.³⁶ As I emphasized above, Calvin never lets the reader forget that he is describing something with an independent existence that is itself

connection with “such themes as the praise of God’s majesty in creation and providence, and of this self-disclosure in Scripture.” Breen, “Rhetorical Tradition,” 8. The important nuance that my analysis reveals is that in practice, the two modes of epideictic, praising and blaming, are not separate.

³⁴ Battles’ translation of *tabula* (board, writing tablet, painted panel or painting) as “painting” appears justified by its proximity to *depingo*, which means to depict—and can, in a classical usage, be used to indicate depicting specifically *by painting*—but which in any case indicates first pictorial depiction, and only in a transferred sense, verbal depiction. Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary. Founded on Andrews’ Edition of Freund’s Latin Dictionary, revised, enlarged, and in great part rewritten* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879). Perseus Digital Library.

³⁵ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.10.

³⁶ Ruth Webb has stressed that, as an ancient and early modern technique, *ekphrasis* was not limited to verbal descriptions of works of art. For Webb, the defining quality of *ekphrasis* lies not in its subject matter, but in its impact on a reader—namely, the production of *enargeia*, which is to say, bringing the subject matter before the eyes or turning a listener or reader into a spectator. See Webb, *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), 5-8.

objectively clear. Thus, this vivid writing that embodies the rhetorical virtue of *enargeia* is *not* being used to render images whose origin lies in the human imagination. On the contrary, Calvin’s prose has an overtly world-referential character. The reference to an independently existing divine “painting” that is on display for all to see is critical to what Calvin is using language to do in these passages; thinking about them on the model of *ekphrasis* captures this function.

2.4 Language represents what the idolatrous mind cannot see. This leads me to an important point that will be an animating premise of my interpretations in subsequent sections. I argued in Chapter Five’s case study of Scriptural language that Calvin credits language with the ability to re-present in vivified form what the idolatrous mind perceives only indistinctly. If this is the case, then it can hardly be an accident that Calvin lavishes his most vivid language upon what an idolatrous mind cannot see (in the illustrative passages quoted above, created works) and the intimately related fact of the mind’s not-seeing.³⁷ Understanding at least one of Calvin’s uses of vivid language on the model of *ekphrasis* has the advantage of emphasizing—as does Calvin—both the independent clarity of the divine artwork and the lamentable fact that it needs to be re-presented in yet other media.

³⁷ Indeed, in discussing what he calls the “found poetry” within Calvin’s writings—that is, passages that have a “hymnic” character due to their use of especially striking rhetorical figures and vivid verbal imagery—Battles has noted that these features tend to recur in connection with the themes of “the clarity of God’s self-disclosure in nature” and “our inexcusable blindness to those evidences,” as well as the divine provisions that address this condition. Ford Lewis Battles, “The Theologian as Poet: Some Remarks about the ‘Found’ Poetry of John Calvin,” in *The Organizational Structure of Calvin’s Theology*, ed. Richard C. Gamble (New York: Garland Publishing, 1992), 348-49. Battles goes on to recap and extend the list of themes which receive this kind of treatment: “the clear evidence of God in the theatre of the universe and in the theatre of human history and of society and church, the consequent inexcusability of human blindness, the mystery of God’s merciful condescension summed up in the incarnation of Christ, the great ring of the going forth from God and return to him of physical creation, the ineffable mysteries of God before which we must stand in mute adoration.” Battles, “Theologian as Poet,” 368-69. Similarly: “One of the commonest themes in Calvin’s writings is the ‘most beautiful theatre’ of the created universe which, were we not so perverse in our fallenness, would offer ample proofs of God. Calvin expresses this theme in many and varied ways...” Battles, “Theologian as Poet,” 362.

This proposal is a twist on, and transposition to the *Institutio* of, an argument that Randall Zachman has offered—not in connection with Calvin’s prose, but regarding Calvin’s attitude toward the vivid verbal representation that, according to Calvin, characterizes prophetic speech. Zachman observes that Calvin understands the prophets’ language to “reveal to the people realities that are otherwise hidden from their view.”³⁸ In the case of Calvin’s views on prophetic language and Zachman’s analysis of them, the hidden realities that language brings to vision are indiscernible because they refer to future states which are literally absent in space and time and thus could never be perceived.

By contrast, in the case of the *Institutio* and my analysis of its prose, the hidden realities that language brings to vision are indiscernible because of constitutive deficiencies in fallen human perception that make the idolatrous mind unable to appreciate them *except* in verbal form. Calvin’s *ekphrases*, we might say, are not necessary because the original artwork is absent from us, but because in some sense *we* have absented ourselves from *it*. However, by capturing the reader’s attention through a vivid verbal re-description of God’s originally nonverbal manifestations, Calvin’s prose brings the divine art back into focus—through the medium of his own prose.

3. Amplifications of Scripture

With this proposal in place—namely, that we should interpret Calvin’s use of vivid prose as a way of re-presenting in language what the idolatrous mind struggles to see, so to speak, in life—let us turn in this section and the next to two other uses of language which are similarly illuminated by comparison to techniques valued by early modern readers and writers.

³⁸ Zachman, *Image and Word*, 232-33.

The idea of a verbal re-presentation of a divine manifestation originally available to the senses should bring to mind the work of Scripture. Recall that Calvin describes Scripture as re-presenting what the fallen mind cannot perceive of God in created works, and that it does so by way of clarifying or filtering effects that Calvin likens to a lens. In my discussion of *ekphrasis* just above, I considered the relationship between Calvin's prose and the original artwork of creation. Here I turn to a different question: what is the relationship between Calvin's vivid re-presentations of God's self-manifestations *and those of Scripture?*

3.1 Verbal re-renderings of a verbal accommodation. It is often observed that the *Institutio* is a guide to the reading of Scripture; as Calvin says in his preface, it is a "necessary tool" that will help a reader "determine what he ought especially to seek in Scripture, and to what end he ought to relate its contents."³⁹ This is often taken to mean that the contents of the *Institutio* provide *loci* for the interpretation of Scripture.⁴⁰ Here, however, I want to explore a different way the *Institutio* offers a path to Scripture—namely, how its prose amplifies what the reader can expect or should strive to perceive as she looks, so to speak, through the clarifying "spectacles" of Scripture.

This line of thinking begins from the highly suggestive fact that Calvin does not stop at re-presenting created works in his prose, but also re-presents *Scripture's own re-presentations* of created works. We saw above that Calvin's *ekphrases* embrace the tension inherent in *rendering* clear what he claims is already *objectively* clear. Here too, Calvin has no problem relating with

³⁹ John Calvin, "John Calvin to the Reader," in Calvin, *Institutio*, 4.

⁴⁰ See Richard A. Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin: Studies in the Foundation of a Theological Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 28-30. This view is supported by Calvin's remark in the same preface that the *Institutio* obviates the need for him to "digress into commonplaces" in his commentaries. Calvin, "John Calvin to the Reader," 5.

added clarity what he claims, in the very same breath, is independently available in Scripture. The difference is that whereas above we were considering Calvin's re-presentation of divine manifestations that took an originally physical and frequently visual form, we are now considering how Calvin re-presents manifestations that are originally verbal.

Consider the following extended passage in which Calvin commends the value of reading about the creation of universe "as it has been set forth briefly (*breviter exposita*) by Moses, and then has been more fully illustrated (*copiosius illustrata*) by saintly men, especially by Basil and Ambrose."⁴¹ From this recommendation, Calvin launches immediately into a vivid preview of what the reader will find in these accounts:

By this history we shall learn that God by the power of his Word and Spirit created (*creasse*) heaven and earth out of nothing; that thereupon he brought forth (*produxisse*) living beings and inanimate things of every kind, that in a wonderful series he distinguished (*distinxisse*) an innumerable variety of things, that he endowed (*indidisse*) each kind with its own nature, assigned (*assignasse*) functions, appointed (*attribuisse*) places and stations; and that, although all were subject to corruption, he nevertheless provided (*providisse*) for the preservation of each species until the Last Day. We shall likewise learn that he nourishes some in secret ways, and, as it were, from time to time instills new vigor into them; on others he has conferred (*contulisse*) the power of propagating, lest by their death the entire species perish; that he has so wonderfully adorned heaven and earth with an unlimited abundance, variety, and beauty of all things (*absolutissima rerum omnium copia, varietate, pulcritudine*) as could possibly be, quite like a spacious and splendid house, provided and filled (*exornasse*) with the most exquisite and at the same time abundant (*exquisitissima simul et copiosissima*) furnishings.⁴²

⁴¹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.14.20 (translation altered to remove Scriptural references not present in the Latin). Calvin echoes the pairing of Scripture and theology again at the end of the passage when he encourages his reader "to seek a fuller understanding of this passage from Moses and from those others who have faithfully and diligently recorded the narrative of Creation."

⁴² *Ex ea discemus, Deum Verbi ac Spiritus sui potentia ex nihilo creasse coelum et terram: hinc omne genus animalia resque inanimatas produxisse, mirabili serie distinxisse innumeram rerum varietatem, suam unicuique generi naturam indidisse, assignasse officia, loca attribuisse et stationes: et, quum omnia sint corruptioni obnoxia, providisse tamen ut singulae species ad diem extremum salvae conserventur. Proinde alias fovere arcanis modis, et novum subinde vigorem illis quasi instillare: aliis vim propagandi contulisse, ne suo interitu prorsus intereant. Itaque coelum et terram, quam fieri potuit absolutissima rerum omnium copia, varietate, pulcritudine, non secus atque amplam ac splendidam domum, exquisitissima simul et copiosissima suppellectile instructam ac refertam, mirabiliter exornasse.* Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.14.20.

This passage has a lyrical quality which comes from its cascading paratactic clauses linked by a powerful series of rhyming perfect active infinitive verbs (*produxisse, distinxisse, indidisse*, and so on). This piling-on of similar-sounding but different verbs in clause after clause suggests something of the abundance and variety of the divine gifts that the passage is describing, so that the language both names and *constitutes* an “innumerable variety of things (*innumeram rerum varietatem*).” Indeed, to underline and again perform this sense of excess, in the final period Calvin indulges in several otherwise uncharacteristic—and again, rhyming—superlatives (*absolutissima, exquisitissima, copiosissima*).

3.2 “More copious” illustrations. What is the purpose of lavishing this degree of rhetorical detail to render a vision of divine governance that Calvin insists that the reader will already find Scripture? Battles has remarked, in another context, that Calvin’s language “amplif[ies] the ubiquity of the divine witness.”⁴³ This phrase is well-suited to describe Calvin’s prose in relation to the language of Scripture. The passage above shows signs of construction through the rhetorical technique of *amplificatio*. *Amplificatio* is a way of elaborating a basic idea by breaking it down into its constituents and then building these out into a layered series of clauses exploring the idea in more detail and offering enriching comparisons (such as the house comparison in the passage above).⁴⁴ When successfully executed, the stylistic effect of this strategy is to create a pleasing sense of verbal abundance called *copia*.

I note this vocabulary because it appears in Calvin’s opening distinction between Scripture’s brevity and the *copiosius* (“more copious”) illustrations offered by patristic

⁴³ Battles, “Theologian as Poet,” 349.

⁴⁴ For an instructive demonstration of how a Renaissance humanist might amplify a basic idea into a much longer and textured period, see Michael Baxandall, *Giotto and the Orators: Humanist Observers of Painting in Italy and the Discovery of Pictorial Composition 1350-1450* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 24-27.

theologians. Indeed, the passage that follows this distinction is nothing if not a demonstration of the semantic abundance that is *copia*. Thus, by distinguishing theological writing from Scriptural language partly by its greater copiousness, and then launching into a passage that describes divine abundance using conspicuous verbal abundance, Calvin implies that his own language, like that of Basil and Ambrose, offers “more fully illustrated (*copiosius illustrata*)” access to the divine manifestations catalogued in Scripture. Given that *amplificatio* is performed not, like *ekphrasis*, upon a physical or visual object, but upon originally denser or simpler text that can be expanded through adding successive layers of detail and illustration, this seems a fitting description for what Calvin is doing in such passages—amplifying the verbal manifestation of Scripture. Of course, insofar as Scripture *itself* re-presents created works, Calvin’s prose ultimately vivifies *both* layers of divine self-manifestation.

Thus, when Calvin goes on in the next paragraph to portray God’s control over heavenly bodies, the fact that he is continuing his amplification of Genesis 1-2 does not prevent him from *also* exhorting his reader to attend to God’s self-manifestations in created works directly.

Wherever she looks, the reader is encouraged to train her attention upon the Artificer who

stationed, arranged, and fitted together the starry host of heaven in such wonderful order that nothing more beautiful in appearance can be imagined; who so set and fixed some in their stations that they cannot move; who granted to others a freer course, but so as not to wander outside their appointed course; who so adjusted the motion of all that days and nights, months, years, and seasons of the year are measured off; who so proportioned the inequality of days, which we daily observe, that no confusion occurs.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ *Hanc stellarum multitudinem quae in coelo est, tam disposita serie ordinare et aptare, ut nihil excogitari possit aspectu speciosius: alias ita inserere et affigere suis stationibus, ut moveri nequeant: aliis liberiore cursum concedere, sed ita ut errando non ultra spatium vagentur: omnium motum ita temperare, ut dies et noctes, menses, annos et anni tempora metiatur: et hanc quoque, quam quotidie cernimus, inaequalitatem dierum ad tale temperamentum redigere, ut nihil confusionis habeat.* Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.14.21.

In this passage again, techniques of amplification expand a relatively limited sentiment—that God governs the heavens—into an abundance of divine actions conveyed in a lively rhythm that suggests both variety and innumerability.

The scope of divine control is elaborated through a distributive clause (*alias... alii*) that gestures in diverse directions—some heavenly bodies are disposed this way, some that—which is followed immediately with a global statement of divine sway over *omnium motum* (“all motion”). Through a series of verbs, all of which are variations on the idea of control—God arranges and adjusts, inserts and fixes, tempers and measures—the passage communicates a sense of varied but continual and universal divine direction. Such control is rendered especially impressive against the apparent chaos suggested by the passage’s implicit image of so many uncoordinated patterns—heavenly bodies do not all move to the same extent, time is parceled out in variable quantities, even days are not all the same length—that God nevertheless draws into regulated alignment. Through such techniques, Calvin’s elaborations draw out and give detail to—amplify, we might say for short—ideas that are present in Scripture in more schematic form. In so doing, they become a site at which Calvin’s reader can glimpse in rich detail what—to quote Calvin’s prefatory description of the work of the *Institutio*—“he ought especially to seek in Scripture”⁴⁶—*as well as* what accurate perception of the natural world would show.

3.3 Tokens to ponder. Calvin follows both of these passages with remarks that flag the deliberately limited nature of his amplified re-descriptions. After the first, he says, “But since it is not my purpose to recount the creation of the universe, let it be enough for me to have touched upon these few matters again in passing.”⁴⁷ After the second, he explains:

⁴⁶ Calvin, “John Calvin to the Reader,” 4.

⁴⁷ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.14.20.

For these few examples make sufficiently clear... if I decide to set forth the whole matter in my discourse, there will be no end. For there are as many miracles (*miracula*) of divine power, as many tokens (*insignia*) of goodness, and as many proofs (*documenta*) of wisdom, as there are kinds of things in the universe, indeed, as there are things either great or small.⁴⁸

Both of these comments, but especially the second, raise the possibility of a writing that never ends because it never runs out of divine manifestations to re-present and amplify. In implicit contrast to this possibility, however, these comments also frame Calvin's bounteous but bounded amplifications as textual touchstones which, through their representative quality, prime and direct the reader's attention toward the larger, potentially infinite number of "tokens" or "marks"⁴⁹ upon which the mind is intended to focus.

Calvin hints at how his most copious passages function when he describes, in the same pages, how a mind ought to be disposed toward the expressions of God's power he is describing—presumably, whether she finds them in Scripture or in creation. The mind should

not merely run over them cursorily and, so to speak, with a fleeting glance (*non tantum eas fugiente oculo percurramus, et evanido [ut sic loquar] intuitu*); but we should ponder them at length (*in ea cogitatione diu immoremur*), turn them over (*revolvamus*) in our minds seriously and faithfully, and recollect them repeatedly (*memoriaque identidem repetamus*).⁵⁰

What could better describe the passages in which Calvin's own language performs this act of reflective extension and pondering by drawing out basic ideas about divine Creatorship into a series of highly textured layers? Thus, Calvin's amplifications do not simply re-present what is already on offer both in created works and Scripture's verbal rendition of them. Their amplified quality actually mimics and perhaps supplements the process of extended reflection to which these perceptions should ideally give rise, with the result that the reader is made to linger over

⁴⁸ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.14.21.

⁴⁹ Recall that Calvin uses *insignia* interchangeably with *nota* in speaking God's designated "marks."

⁵⁰ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.14.21.

the implications, explore the details, and imagine the consequences of what creation manifests mutely and Scripture briefly—all while she is looking at the *Institutio*.⁵¹

4. *Hypotyposis*

If the passages I have just analyzed offer the reader a textual re-presentation of what the idolatrous mind struggles to perceive in the original manifestation of created works and the secondary provision of Scripture, other passages address further deficits of an idolatrous mind. I proposed in Chapter Six that the idolatrous mind is best addressed through forceful language that captures its wandering attention and cuts through its self-imposed obliviousness. As Calvin says, “we need to have a representation made to us which is fitted to impress our minds, and to arouse us to consider the judgments of God, which otherwise we despise.”⁵² *Hypotyposis*, the rhetorical device that Calvin most often attributes to the prophets, seems to do just this.

4.1 What the mind would prefer to ignore. In this use of language, Calvin says, “the thing itself is not only set forth in words, but is also placed, as it were, before their eyes in a visible form.”⁵³ As Zachman notes, Calvin understands *hypotyposis* as a privileged means of supplying not simply what an audience cannot see, but also what their recalcitrant minds “would much prefer to ignore.”⁵⁴ There is something about especially visual language, in other words, that gives the mind no choice but to take notice.

⁵¹ The usefulness of such exercises for an idolatrous mind is hinted at by Millet’s remark that “*l’amplification oratoire... produit des effets d’insistance non seulement pédagogiques, mais aussi pathétiques, puisque ces effets s’adressent à la nonchalance humaine pour la secouer de sa torpeur.*” Olivier Millet, *Calvin et la dynamique de la parole: Étude de rhétorique réformée* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1992), 321.

⁵² Quoted in Zachman, *Image and Word*, 346.

⁵³ Quoted in Zachman, *Image and Word*, 244.

⁵⁴ Zachman, *Image and Word*, 245. See also 250.

Indeed, if we consider Calvin's own use of such language in the *Institutio*, we find that in his hands *hypotyposis* yields not just any delightful or striking image, but especially functions to vivify those perceptions which the mind's sinful instincts most tend to resist. A first perceptual desideratum for an idolatrous mind is to perceive its own sinful condition, which is to blame for its blindness to God's designated sites of self-manifestation. Calvin keeps this always before the reader's mind through his constant complaints about human obliviousness, as detailed in the discussion of *ekphrasis* above.

However, what the idolatrous mind requires is not simply—as might be thought—to *understand* that it is sinful and, therefore, blind. It needs, rather, to *perceive* its own condition of misperception. Recall in this connection that not seeing one's own not-seeing is the perceptual problem dramatized in the opening image of the *Institutio*, which illustrates how, in the absence of a divine “straightedge (*amussim*),” the self is not only happy to misperceive itself as gleaming white when it is really quite mottled, but does so while all the time thinking that it is seeing its condition accurately.⁵⁵ What this mind needs is to undergo an abrupt perceptual shift, induced by the application of a perceptual baseline that will recalibrate the mind's self-perception—and, in the process, show it, by contrast, just how distorted its prior perception was.

4.2 Seeing blindness. One way that Calvin uses visual language to address the mind's deluded self-perception is by giving his reader ways of visualizing not simply her sin, but the *perceptual implications* of her sin. These images not infrequently entail the use of antithesis in a visual key: that is, they juxtapose two opposite cases in order to draw attention to what makes the

⁵⁵ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.1.2.

difference between them.⁵⁶ As a representative example, consider 1.5.14, a passage which caps off a series of reminders to the reader that she is not accurately perceiving God’s self-manifestations in created works. In what we might call his “straightedge” technique, Calvin brings the sinful mind’s condition of not-perceiving to vivid illustration by counterposing it to an account of what a true spectator *would* see:

It is therefore in vain that so many burning lamps shine for us in the workmanship of the universe to show forth the glory of its Author. Although they bathe us wholly in their radiance, yet they can of themselves in no way lead us into the right path. Surely they strike some sparks, but before their fuller light shines forth these are smothered.⁵⁷

This passage offers a visual illustration of the reader’s blindness: she stands on a path bathed in light, illumined by a host of blazing lamps, and yet cannot see a thing. It is constructed around a visual antithesis between, on the one hand, the shining lamps and sparks of God’s self-manifestations, and on the other, the blindness and darkness—everywhere implied without needing to be named—that result from the idolatrous mind’s sight-smothering behaviors.⁵⁸

Calvin offers a parallel illustration of the mind’s condition in another passage that similarly juxtaposes seeing and not-seeing. In describing how, when it comes to the perception of God, “the greatest geniuses are blinder than moles,” Calvin notes that this is due partly to indulgence in “giddy imagination (*vertiginosam imaginationem*)”—that is, the projective or hallucinatory behavior of an idolatrous mind. The result is “[seeing] things in such a way that their seeing did not lead to the truth.” Calvin illustrates this condition in the following image:

They are like a traveler (*viator*) passing through a field at night who in a momentary lighting flash sees far and wide, but the sight vanishes so swiftly that he is plunged again

⁵⁶ This is also how the image of Jacob and Esau that Calvin explicitly calls *hypotyposis* works. See Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.22.5.

⁵⁷ *Ergo frustra nobis in mundi opificio collucent tot accensae lampades ad illustrandam auctoris gloriam: quae sic nos undique irradiant, ut tamen in rectam viam per se nequaquam possint perducere. Et scintillas certe quasdam excitant: sed quae ante praefocantur, quam pleniorum effundant fulgorem.* Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.14.

⁵⁸ The final line suggests that the wayfarer’s inability to profit from the lamps ultimately renders them ineffective, reducing blazing torches to stifled sparks.

into the darkness of the night before he can take even a step—let alone be directed on his way by its help.⁵⁹

This vivid image skillfully unites the theme of the *viator*⁶⁰ with the motif of the wandering mind. It uses the visuality of the light/dark antithesis—and also, as in the image above, an implicit on-path/off-path antithesis—to explain what leads the traveler to wander: it is her inability to perceive. In these complementary examples, Calvin contrasts darkness and light not, as might be expected, simply to distinguish humans from divine or even sin from righteousness, but more pointedly to contrast the human condition of not-seeing against the unmissable brightness of the divine self-manifestation. *Hypotyposes* animated by such clarifying contrasts offer Calvin’s reader a vivid illustration of her own blindness.⁶¹

4.3 Seeing divine righteousness. A second perceptual desideratum for a sinful mind, closely related to the first—ideally, following upon it—is accurately perceiving God’s relationship to the self once it has been accurately perceived as sinful. In a textbook example of *hypotyposis*, Calvin facilitates this perceptual shift by helping the reader gauge her own condition against the “straightedge” of divine righteousness. Characteristically, Calvin frames the passage with reminders of how what he is about to illustrate should already be clear: “Even though all these things are by shining testimonies (*luculentis testimoniis*) shown to be perfectly true, still, how necessary they are will not be clear to us (*non prius nobis clare constiterit*) until we set before our eyes (*ob oculos posuerimus*) what ought to be the basis of this whole

⁵⁹ *Qualiter nocturni fulgetri coruscationem, qui in medio agro est viator, longe lateque ad momentum videt, sed adeo evanido aspectu, ut ante noctis caligine resorbeat, quam pedem movere queat: tantum abest ut in viam tali subsidio deducatur.* Calvin, *Institutio*, 2.2.18.

⁶⁰ Calvin also references this theme at Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.7.3.

⁶¹ Thus, we see that antithesis, this oft-remarked feature of Calvin’s prose, can also have a vivifying effect—again, one that addresses the perceptual deficiencies of an idolatrous mind.

discussion.”⁶² Calvin then proceeds to this task of setting before the reader’s eyes how she ought to perceive God in relation to herself:

How shall we reply to the Heavenly Judge when he calls us to account? Let us envisage for ourselves that Judge, not as our minds naturally imagine him, but as he is depicted for us in Scripture [see for example the book of Job]: by whose brightness the stars are darkened; by whose strength the mountains are melted; by whose wrath the earth is shaken; whose wisdom catches the wise in their craftiness; beside whose purity all things are defiled; whose righteousness not even the angels can bear; who makes not the guilty man innocent; whose vengeance when once kindled penetrates to the depths of hell. Exod. 34:7. Nahum. 1:3. Deut. 32:22. Let us behold him, I say, sitting in judgment to examine the deeds of men (the prophet Isaiah says in 33:14): Who will stand confident before his throne? “Who... can dwell with the devouring fire?” asks the prophet. “Who... can dwell with everlasting burnings? He who walks righteously and speaks the truth,” etc. But let such a one, whoever he is, come forward. Nay, that response causes no one to come forward.⁶³

This passage invites the reader to visualize God as Judge, but also to discipline this visualization (“not as our minds naturally imagine him”) with the help of Scriptural descriptions. The contrast the passage evokes between rejecting how God is imagined (*imaginantur*) in favor of how God is depicted (*depingitur*) names the conditions of possibility for perceiving God. That is, as discussed in Chapter Three, if it is to perceive God, the idolatrous mind must first be restrained from inventing its own version of God. The passage ends with a series of convicting rhetorical questions and then—characteristically, leaving nothing to chance, no opening for rogue interpretation—Calvin answers his own invitation: “Nay, that response causes no one to come forward.”

⁶² Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.12.1.

⁶³ *Quomodo coelesti iudici respondeamus, quum nos ad rationem vocaverit. Statuamus nobis iudicem illum, non qualem intellectus nostri sponte imaginantur, sed qui depingitur nobis in Scriptura [vid. praecip. lib. Iobi]: cuius scilicet fulgore obtenebrantur stellae, cuius robore liquefiunt montes, cuius ira terra concutitur, cuius sapientiaprehenduntur in astutia sua prudentes, cuius puritate inquinantur omnia, cuius ferendae iustitiae nec angeli pares sunt, qui nocentem non facit innocentem, cuius vindicta, quum semel accensa est, penetrat usque ad inferninovissima. Exod. 34:7. Nahum. 1:3. Deut. 32:22. Sedeat, inquam, ille ad examinanda hominum facta: quis securus ad eius thronum se sistet? “Quis habitabit cum igne devorante? (inquit Propheta Ies. 33:14.): quis manebit cum ardoribus sempiternis? Qui ambulat in iustitiis, et loquitur veritatem” etc. Sed prodeat ille quisquis est. Imovero facit illa responsio, ne quis prodeat. Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.12.1 (translation altered so that the Scriptural references in the English match the Latin).*

These lines, in which Calvin stitches a series of allusions to the book of Job into a portrait of divine glory, could easily be cited as an example of Calvin's technique of amplifying Scripture. However, what is especially notable about the passage, and what makes it a good example of Calvin's characteristic use of *hypotyposis*, is the way Calvin draws together a series of vivid verbal images—mountains melting, earth shaking, trembling before the divine throne, dwelling in fire—to build up a larger contrast between the human condition and its heavenly Judge. The main part of the passage consists of a series of anaphoric clauses each beginning with *cuius*, each of which offers an imagistic contrast between divine and earthly versions of various attributes (brightness, strength, wrath, etcetera). Finally, with these clarifying juxtapositions in place, the reader is challenged to imagine herself standing before the throne and—in a manner reminiscent of Loyola's interactive exercises of imaginative dialogue with biblical figures—challenged to assess herself against the divine “brightness” the passage has imaged.

4.4 Perceptual straightedges. What is the purpose of such an exercise? If we consider the framing remarks that precede and succeed this excerpt, we find that this *hypotyposis* is being deployed to very pointed effect. Before the passage, Calvin references the self-absorption that prevents the mind from accurately gauging divine righteousness.⁶⁴ After the passage—as if to confirm that his vivid portrayal addresses itself to this very condition—Calvin offers a different image that depicts the relativity of perception: “For keenness of sight, so long as it confines itself to examining nearby objects, is convinced of its discernment. But directed toward the sun, stricken and numbed by excessive brightness, our vision feels as weak as it did strong in gazing

⁶⁴ In this connection, Calvin warns “lest we measure by our own small measure the integrity of works needed to satisfy the divine judgment.” Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.12.1.

at objects below.”⁶⁵ These telling remarks which bookend the passage suggest that the function of this *hypotyposis* and others like it is to supply the missing perceptual standard, the “straightedge”—or, in this illustration, the baselining “brightness”—that the mind requires to perceive self and God accurately in relation to one another.

As Calvin says elsewhere of the idolatrous mind, “unless our feebleness be shown, as it were, to our eyes—we readily esteem our virtue above its true measure.”⁶⁶ Thus, Calvin brings the reality of human feebleness into stark relief through prose that mimics the effect of staring at the sun. By confronting the reader with an image of divine power so vivid that it gives the lie to the sinful mind’s false confidence in its own perception, this language seeks to force a perceptual adjustment, an abrupt shift in the reader’s relative perception of God and self.⁶⁷

These few examples already show how the themes that other commentators have consistently identified with Calvin’s most vivid language—in particular, divine glory and its contrast to the human condition⁶⁸—have direct relevance to the perceptual issues I have been tracing in this dissertation. Such vivid illustrations do more than simply convey understanding about the human condition; they actually intervene in the reader’s perception to vivify and so

⁶⁵ Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.12.2. The first appearance of the illustration, in 1.1.2, reads: “For if in broad daylight we either look down upon the ground or survey whatever meets our view round about, we seem to ourselves endowed with the strongest and keenest sight; yet when we look up to the sun and gaze straight at it, that power of sight which was particularly strong on earth is at once blunted and confused by a great brilliance, and thus we are compelled to admit that our keenness in looking upon things earthly is sheer dullness when it comes to the sun.” It is significant that this image also appears at the beginning of the *Institutio* in connection with the image of the lightness contrast (discussed in the Introduction) that I have been referencing by way of the “straightedge” notion.

⁶⁶ Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.8.2.

⁶⁷ This may remind the reader of what is often called the “correlative” knowledge of God and self, and which is described in Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.1.1. Already in this opening passage, Calvin hints at the way that accurate self-perception (what I called a first perceptual desideratum above) helps the mind attain accurate perception of God (what I called a second perceptual desideratum): “Each of us must, then, be so stung by the consciousness of his own unhappiness as to attain at least some knowledge of God (*ut in aliquam saltem Dei notitiam veniat*). Thus, from the feeling of our own (*propriae sensu*) ignorance, vanity, poverty, infirmity, and—what is more—depravity and corruption, we recognize (*recognoscimus*) that the true light of wisdom, sound virtue, full abundance of every good, and purity of righteousness rest in the Lord alone. To this extent we are prompted by our own ills to contemplate (*ad consideranda*) the good things of God; and we cannot seriously aspire to him before we begin to become displeased with ourselves.”

⁶⁸ Battles, “Theologian as Poet,” 349, 369.

facilitate these two perceptual shifts: seeing the self accurately, and then seeing God accurately in relation to the self.

In fact, this principle could be used to illuminate any number of Calvin's vivid images. Another category of powerful illustrations, for example, dramatize a third perceptual shift, which is seeing the self anew in light of its union with Christ.⁶⁹ Still others re-present the vanity of this life as compared with the next⁷⁰ and God's providential care, both of which Calvin says are difficult for a fallen mind to perceive. All across the *Institutio*, the vivifying quality of Calvin's language is directed toward the pointed end of addressing the idolatrous mind's perceptual deficits by supplying unmissably vivid illustrations of what the mind's dullness and resistance to correction causes it to overlook.

5. Vivifying emotional response

In the three sections above, I have interpreted key aspects of Calvin's "vivid" prose style by comparing them to the rhetorical techniques of *ekphrasis*, *amplificatio*, and *hypotyposis*. In so doing, I have highlighted how the function of such language is to render a vivid perception *through language* of those divine manifestations that the idolatrous mind struggles to perceive—

⁶⁹ Calvin refers to this shift when he describes Christ's effect of "chang[ing] the throne of dreadful glory into the throne of grace." Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.20.17. How does this change occur? It takes the form of coming to see oneself as united to Christ—which Calvin most frequently describes as seeing oneself with Christ as Head; see Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.20.21 for Calvin's use of an image quoted from Ambrose. The result is "a wonderful consolation: that we perceive judgment to be in the hands of him who has already destined us to share with him the honor of judging." Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.16.18. Another vocabulary Calvin uses for this shift is familial; he describes how Christ helps humans see "the kindness of God who manifests himself to them as the Father. For he is not Father to them unless they recognize (*agnoscant*) Christ to be their brother." Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.20.21.

⁷⁰ In the idolatrous mind's blockish and dazzled condition, it does not recognize the vanity of earthly existence. Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.9.1. It thus needs to be "awakened to weigh the misery of this life." Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.9.2. As if to facilitate this, Calvin offers a vivid description of all the bad things God lets happen to humans. Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.9.1. Calvin goes on in the next paragraph to amplify Scripture's accounts of human self-denial regarding the nature of this life and to reiterate the need for sinful minds to be shaken out of their sluggishness so that they can hold earthly existence in contempt and meditate on the life to come. Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.9.2. Note especially a striking chiasmic comparison of this life to the life to come in Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.9.4.

sometimes, resists perceiving. Let me conclude my discussion of the vivifying functions of Calvin's prose by showing how the *Institutio's* language does not stop at re-presenting what the mind needs to perceive, but additionally conditions its reader's potentially deficient emotional response to the perceptions it renders.

Commentators on the emotional impact of Calvin's prose typically point to particularly soaring or vehement passages that we might characterize as instances of the "Christian grand style" as analyzed by Deborah Shuger.⁷¹ In its Renaissance form, this style emphasized exactly those techniques for creating verbal vividness that we have been analyzing—wielding them in order to increase emotional intensity and, where appropriate, agonistic force.⁷² Although views of its intended usage vary from thinker to thinker, the grand style could be expected to evoke both negative feelings like fear, anger, or pity, and positive feelings like wonder or awe.⁷³ Scholarly commentary on the function of such language in Calvin's writing tends to be general, often evoking only the broadly shared, Ciceronian goal of moving (*movere*) the reader.⁷⁴ In this section I show how, by querying the emotional effects of Calvin's style against the patterns and deficiencies of the idolatrous mind, we can specify the function of these moving dimensions of Calvin's prose even further.

Calvin's complaints about the fallen mind suggest that one of the ways its sin manifests is through a failure to react to God's self-manifestations with an instantaneous orientation of awe

⁷¹ This is in contrast to what Shuger calls "the passionate plain style," which eschews the tools of eloquence for producing emotion in listeners or readers. On this distinction, see Debora K. Shuger, *Sacred Rhetoric: The Christian Grand Style in the English Renaissance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 108-110.

⁷² Shuger, *Sacred Rhetoric*, 28, 72, 109.

⁷³ Shuger, *Sacred Rhetoric*, 37-39.

⁷⁴ Higman echoes Millet in citing the categories of *movere* and *docere*: "Calvin is doing both. The aim is the conviction of heart and mind." Francis M. Higman, "I Came Not to Send Peace, but a Sword," in Calvinus Sincerioris Religionis Vindex: *Calvin as Protector of the Purer Religion*, eds. Wilhelm H. Neuser and Brian G. Armstrong (Kirksville, MO: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1997), 135.

and gratitude—with the piety befitting a true spectator.⁷⁵ At best, the idolatrous mind ignores divine manifestations;⁷⁶ at worst, it takes them as opportunities to feed an inflated self-image, and so to deepen its obliviousness to God as the source of all goodness.⁷⁷ In what follows, I show how Calvin’s prose anticipates and acts to preclude or redirect these problematic or deficient responses. As if anticipating that his reader will react to his vivid re-presentations of divine manifestations with the dullness characteristic of an idolatrous mind, Calvin gives cues that prompt the appropriate response. In this section I touch on three features of the *Institutio*’s language that provide this kind of guidance: explicit narration, preemptive correction, and tonal contrasts.

5.1 Narrating emotional response. We have already seen in Chapter Six’s treatment of the restraining features of Calvin’s prose that Calvin characteristically leaves nothing of his reader’s interpretation to chance. It is no different regarding the reader’s projected emotional response. In much the same way we have seen Calvin drawing conclusions for the reader and answering his own rhetorical questions so as to give the idolatrous mind no quarter in which unruly thoughts might unleash a rogue imagination, so Calvin explicitly scripts his reader’s emotional responses.

We see this technique at work in two of the passages discussed above. Following his *hypotyposis* of God as Judge, Calvin spotlights and commends the model of Job, who is “stricken dumb with astonishment” at the unmatched righteousness of God. Characteristically, Calvin does not trust his vivid image to do the work of convicting his reader, but rather goes on to

⁷⁵ On piety as the appropriate response to divine self-manifestations, see Chapter One.

⁷⁶ See Calvin’s lamenting discussion of this reaction at Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.11.

⁷⁷ See Calvin’s indignant discussion of this reaction at Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.4.

explicitly narrate the proper response by exhorting the reader to “admit his guilt before the Heavenly Judge, and concerned about his own acquittal, willingly cast himself down and confess his nothingness.”⁷⁸

Calvin similarly scripts the reader’s response to the *Institutio*’s re-presentation of divine manifestations in 1.14.22, a paragraph that follows the amplification of divine governance analyzed above. In it, Calvin retrospectively frames all the tokens of divine self-manifestation he has mentioned as ways that God “commend[s] his providence and fatherly solicitude toward us.” Recall from Chapter One that the perception of God is best captured in the language of divine fatherliness, and that Calvin names the ideal response to God’s perceptible tokens “piety,” with its overtly filial connotations. With this phrase, in other words, Calvin subtly reminds his reader to perceive the divine manifestations under discussion as expressions of fatherly care. Then, in a gesture that takes in all of this preceding material, Calvin immediately goes on to name and exclude a possible deficient reaction: “How great ingratitude would it be now to doubt whether this most gracious Father has us in his care...! How impious would it be to tremble for fear that his kindness might at any time fail in our need...!”⁷⁹ Although couched as theoretical condemnations of a sinful mind’s ungrateful and distrustful response, these exclamations indicate to the reader how, by contrast, she should respond to the manifestations Calvin has just re-presented—that is, with the piety that reflects her appreciation of the divine fatherliness on display in all these perceptible avenues of divine care.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.12.2.

⁷⁹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.14.22.

⁸⁰ This is the second half of a two-part rule Calvin lays out in Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.14.21-22, but it seems clear that this is only a two-step process after the fall. Before the fall, perception and response are bound up together. On this point, see my account of the true spectator’s posture of piety in Chapter One.

5.2 Preemptive correction. Some of Calvin’s interventions in his reader’s self-absorbed or oblivious emotional response take the form of not only naming right and wrong reactions, as in the examples above, but even of anticipating and preemptively correcting a deficient response. Consider a passage whose rhetorical elegance has been superbly analyzed by Battles, but whose deliberate strategy for entrapping and then recalibrating the mind’s emotional dullness has gone unremarked. I have introduced line breaks to clarify the passage’s rhythm:

No creature has a force more wondrous or glorious than that of the sun.
 For besides lighting the whole earth with its brightness, how great a thing is it that
 (*quantum istud est quod*) by its heat it nourishes and quickens all living things!
 That with its rays it breathes fruitfulness into the earth!
 That it warms the seeds in the bosom of the earth, draws them forth with budding
 greenness, increases and strengthens them, nourishes them anew, until they rise
 up into stalks!
 That (*quod*) it feeds the plant with continual warmth, until it grows into a flower (*in
 flore*), and from flower into fruit (*ex flore in frugem*)!
 That then also (*quod tunc etiam*), with baking heat it brings the fruit to maturity!
 That (*quod*) in like manner trees and vines warmed by the sun first put forth buds and
 leaves, then put forth a flower (*flore*), and from the flower produce fruit (*ex
 flore fructum*)!⁸¹

This passage could be used to illustrate any of the vivifying dimensions of Calvin’s prose discussed so far. Insofar as it is a textual re-description of the original manifestation of God in creation that Calvin calls a divine “painting,” it can be seen as a kind of *ekphrasis*. Moreover, its elaboration of a basic idea—that the sun is responsible for earth’s vegetation—in a series of clauses which breaks this idea down into a myriad of vivid details, shows the telltale signs of construction through *amplificatio*. The sheer quantity of vivid images in this passage, as well as

⁸¹ *Nullius creaturae mirabilior vel illustrior vis est quam solis. Praeterquam enim quod totum orbem illuminat suo fulgore, quantum istud est quod animalia omnia suo calore fovet ac vegetat terrae foecunditatem suis radiis inspirat? seminibus in eius gremio tepefactis, herbescentem inde viriditatem elicit, quam novis alimentis suffultam auget ac confirmat, donec in culmos assurgat? quod perpetuo vapore pascit, donec in florem et ex flore in frugem adolescat? quod tunc etiam excoquendo ad maturitatem perducit? quod arbores similiter et vites ab eo tepefactae gemmant primum ac frondescunt, deinde florem emittunt et ex flore fructum generant?* Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.16.2.

the way they each contribute to a larger illustration that confronts the reader's eyes, could be related to *hypotyposis*.

Battles' own analysis of this passage highlights several other elegant features, such as the chiasmic arrangement of the anaphoric series from the fruitfulness of the sun's rays, through the life of the plant from seed to flower, and then back to the sun's ultimate production of fruit at the end.⁸² He also detects a strophic character in the passage—he calls it a “hymn”—that is reinforced by the repetition of *quod* and alliteration from the use of several forms of *flos* (flower).⁸³

For our purposes, however, what is especially interesting about this passage is not simply these pleasing and attention-riveting aspects of its composition. Rather, it is the way that Calvin captures the reader's attention with this vivid language and then turns a spotlight on where she should direct the feelings of admiration and gratitude his language evokes. This occurs when, directly following the lines quoted above, the passage takes an abrupt turn:

Yet the Lord (*Ac Dominus*), to claim the whole credit for all these things, willed that, before he created the sun, light should come to be and earth be filled with all manner of herbs and fruits. Therefore a godly (*pious*) man will not make the sun either the principal or the necessary cause of these things which existed before the creation of the sun, but merely the instrument that God uses because he so wills; for with no more difficulty he might abandon it, and act through himself.⁸⁴

⁸² Battles, “Theologian as Poet,” 364.

⁸³ Battles, “Theologian as Poet,” 364.

⁸⁴ *Ac Dominus, ut solidam horum omnium laudem sibi vindicaret, ante et lucem exstare voluit et terram omni herbarum et fructuum genere refertam esse, quam solem crearet. Non ergo solem faciet pius homo vel principalem vel necessariam eorum causam, quae ante solis creationem exstiterunt, sed instrumentum duntaxat quo utitur Deus, quia ita vult: quum possit, eo praeterito, per se ipsum nihil difficilius agere.* Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.16.2 (translation modified to remove Scriptural references not present in the Latin). Note that in Battles' analysis he notes that this stanza marks a “stark contrast” with the first but offers no account of the significance or effect of this. Battles, “Theologian as Poet,” 364-65. In fact, Battles' final word on the passage implicitly interprets it as a syllogism, as suggested by the following summary he offers: “1) the sun seems the highest creation of all, for all life and growth and fruitfulness depend on it; 2) yet in the order of creation, the sun is subordinated; 3) in consequence, the sun is not to be considered the principal cause of existence by godly man, for God could just as well abandon the structures of nature and act directly through God himself.” Battles, “Theologian as Poet,” 364-65.

This passage radically reframes the preceding lines by identifying the bounty just described as products of the *sun's* power, as a direct consequence of God's will. It is possible to read this admonition as a correction of the reader's possible misunderstanding of how God wields the instrumental causality of the sun to do God's own will. However, this interpretation does not take into account the surreptitious way Calvin's poetic prose lures the reader into unqualified admiration of the sun and only then takes the abrupt pivot to recast this praise for the sun—in which the reader is now complicit—as an act of ungrateful obliviousness toward its Creator.

The danger Calvin evokes in this second passage seems to be the very same one mentioned at the beginning of the *Institutio*, where Calvin complains about the idolatrous mind's penchant for gazing at the art of created works without perceiving their Creator.⁸⁵ Against this backdrop, the entrapping structure of the passage suggests that Calvin is using the opening “hymn” as an opportunity to test his reader's susceptibility to this pitfall. Insofar as Calvin's language engages the reader's marveling attention for the work of the sun and then chastises her failure to perceive the governing power of the Creator reflected in it, it can also be seen as a species of what in Chapter Six I called the “guilty reader” technique.

What I want to underline, however, is that here we see this otherwise “restraining” strategy turned to a new use. Vivid language is deployed to stimulate the reader's projected deficient emotional reaction to the perception of the sun as rendered in Calvin's prose. Calvin harnesses the power of his own language to evoke admiration—and the emotions implied by it, like awe and gratitude—and then, in a deft rhetorical sleight-of-hand, re-directs these feelings toward the sun's Creator. In this way, Calvin's prose guides his reader's emotional reaction by

⁸⁵ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.11.

naming and reinforcing—or perhaps inducing and replacing if it is absent—the properly pious response to the vivid perception his text has just rendered.

5.3 Tonal contrasts. In addition to narrating and correcting readerly responses to his own re-presentations of divine power, a third technique whereby Calvin’s writing conditions its reader’s potentially wayward response is through tonal contrasts. I noted in Chapter Six that allusions to the severity of Calvin’s prose are standard fare in treatments of his rhetoric. Indeed, it is commonplace to note that Calvin uses this tone to impress the gravity of sin upon his reader. This stylistic feature could be referred to what I am calling the “restraining” function of Calvin’s prose. However, there is a complexity to Calvin’s harsh tones as they function in the *Institutio* which gives them a vivifying function, as well, and that is what I want to bring out here. Calvin’s vehemence does not function simply to subdue or suppress his reader’s emotions, but to illuminate *by contrast to negative feelings* those positive emotions that are part and parcel with the perception of God.

The strongest warrant for interpreting the function of Calvin’s severe tones in this light is the fact that the use of harshness to induce appropriately positive reactions is an effect that Calvin attributes directly to God in Scripture. *Institutio* 2.16, dedicated to Christ’s redeeming work, begins by re-stating what we have seen is a characteristic antithesis—*not* between humans and God *tout court*, but between what is available in humans versus what is available in God: “condemned, dead, and lost in ourselves, we should seek righteousness, liberation, life, and salvation in [God].”⁸⁶ This antithesis hints at how Calvin understands the perception of one side of this perennial contrast—human emptiness—to impel a mind to embrace the divine bounty that

⁸⁶ *Ut in nobis damnati, mortui et perdit, iustitiam in ipso, liberationem, vitam et salutem quaeramus.* Calvin, *Institutio*, 2.16.1.

is its opposite. Indeed, this is exactly how Calvin explains the function of Scriptural statements which declare God's animosity toward sinful humans:

Expressions of this sort have been accommodated to our capacity (*ad sensum nostrum sunt accommodatae*) that we may better understand how miserable and ruinous our condition is apart from Christ. For if it had not been clearly stated that the wrath and vengeance of God and eternal death rested upon us, we would scarcely have recognized (*agnosceremus*) how miserable we would have been without God's mercy, and we would have underestimated (*minoris aestimaremus*) the benefit of liberation.⁸⁷

This passage is animated by the premise—familiar from Chapter Six—that the idolatrous mind's dulled powers of perception, not to mention its fondness for taking refuge in self-flattering shades-of-gray, are best addressed through the provision of inescapable contrasts.

However, what I wish to underline here is the way Calvin interprets these antithetical dynamics in an *emotional* key. He goes on to argue that “unless our minds are first struck and overwhelmed by fear of God's wrath,” “we cannot... accept [God's mercy] with the gratefulness we owe.”⁸⁸ The operative antithesis here, in other words, is that between negative and positive *feelings*—in this case, fear and gratitude—which are inversely linked in such a way that the positive emotion can only be induced by conjuring the negative.

In fact, in a striking passage in which Calvin shows how amplified prose can be used to exactly these ends, he goes so far as to claim that the harsher the specter of divine wrath—and, implicitly, the harsher the use of language—the greater the feelings of awe and gratitude which

⁸⁷ *Huius generis loquutiones ad sensum nostrum sunt accommodatae, ut melius intelligamus, quam misera sit, et calamitosa extra Christum nostra conditio. Nisi enim claris verbis diceretur, iram ac vindictam Dei mortemque aeternam nobis incubuisse, minus agnosceremus quam miseri essemus sine Dei misericordia, et beneficium liberationis minoris aestimaremus.* Calvin, *Institutio*, 2.16.2.

⁸⁸ Calvin, *Institutio*, 2.16.2. Note that, although I have quoted around it, Battles' translation introduces a distinction between heart (accepting mercy) and mind (being struck by fear) that is not present in the Latin, where the only word Calvin uses in connection with the feelings under description is *animus*.

result.⁸⁹ I have introduced line breaks and bolded key phrases in order to highlight the development of the passage:

For example, suppose someone is told: “If God hated you while you were still a sinner, and cast you off, as you deserved, a terrible destruction would have awaited you. But because he kept you in grace voluntarily, and of his own free favor, and did not allow you to be estranged from him, he thus delivered you from that peril.” **This man then will surely experience and feel (*afficietur quidem et sentiet*) something of what he owes to God’s mercy.**

On the other hand, suppose he learns, as Scripture teaches, that
he was estranged from God through sin,
is an heir of wrath,
subject to the curse of eternal death,
excluded from all hope of salvation,
beyond every blessing of God,
the slave of Satan,
captive under the yoke of sin,
destined finally for a dreadful
destruction and already
involved in it;

and that at this point Christ interceded as his advocate,
took upon himself and suffered the punishment that, from God’s righteous
judgment, threatened all sinners;
that he purged with his blood those evils which had rendered sinners
hateful to God;
that by this expiation he made satisfaction and sacrifice duly to
God the Father;
that as intercessor he has appeased God’s wrath;
that on this foundation rests the peace of God with
men;
that by this bond his benevolence is
maintained toward them.

Will the man not then be even more moved (*permovebitur*) by all these things which so vividly portray (*quo melius ad vivum repraesentatur*) the greatness of the calamity from which he has been rescued?⁹⁰

⁸⁹ It is no accident, of course, that these are the very same feelings that should issue from a true spectator’s perception of God. On these feelings and Calvin’s use of the term “piety” to capture them, see Chapter One.

⁹⁰ *Exempli gratia: audiat aliquis, Si te, quo tempore adhuc peccator eras, odisset Deus et te abiecisset, ut eras meritis, horribile exitium te manebat: sed quia sponte ac gratuita sua indulgentia te in gratia retinuit, nec alienari a se passus est, eo periculo sic te liberavit: afficietur quidem et sentiet aliqua ex parte, quantum debeat misericordiae Dei. Verum audiat rursum quod Scriptura docet, se alienatum fuisse a Deo per peccatum, haeredem irae, mortis aeternae maledictioni obnoxium, exclusum ab omni spe salutis, extraneum ab omni benedictione Dei, Satanae mancipium, sub peccati iugo captivum, horribili denique exitio destinatum et iam implicitum: hic Christum deprecatorem intercessisse, poenam in se recepisse ac luisse, quae ex iusto Dei iudicio peccatoribus omnibus*

In this passage, Calvin compares the emotional impact of two ways of narrating redemption. One salient difference between them is, of course, the theoretical and counterfactual status of condemnation in the first (“if God hated you... would have awaited you”) versus the actual past status of it in the second (“he was estranged... destined finally... already involved”). However, if this were the only distinction under consideration, then the rhetorical embellishment of the second passage would be quite unnecessary. What would be the purpose of its length, of the ominous rhythm created by the series of short anaphoric clauses, of the sense of inevitability conveyed through the absence of coordinating conjunctions (parataxis)?

These features actually give the passage a climactic structure, with the two parallel series elaborating the central antithesis without Christ/with Christ, or perhaps human accomplishments/Christ’s accomplishments. After a crescendo of threatening phrases describing the human condition apart from Christ that culminate in the idea of destruction, the pivotal intervention of Christ issues in a series of phrases that describe—not the condition of a human united with Christ, but the work of Christ to rescue humanity from divine wrath. Thus, the first series of phrases—as Calvin himself says—“vividly portray”⁹¹ the “calamity” and the second the “rescue.” In his closing remarks, Calvin contends that this kind of portrayal, which draws the threat of divine wrath out to its breaking point before turning back to a depiction of redemption, is what will most effectively bring about the feeling of gratitude that is the appropriate response to God’s self-manifestation in Christ’s redeeming work.

imminebat: mala, quae Deo exosos illos reddebant sanguine suo expiasset: hoc piaculo satisfactum ac rite litatum Deo Patri esse: hoc intercessore iram eius fuisse placatam: hoc fundamento pacem Dei cum hominibus esse subnixam: hoc vinculo benevolentiam illius erga ipsos contineri: his nonne eo magis permovebitur, quo melius ad vivum repraesentatur, quanta e calamitate ereptus fuerit? Calvin, Institutio, 2.16.2.

⁹¹ Recall that *ad vivum* can mean according to life, as painted from life, or indicate something that cuts deep. Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary. Founded on Andrews’ Edition of Freund’s Latin Dictionary, revised, enlarged, and in great part rewritten* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879). Perseus Digital Library. See my discussion of this phrase above.

This careful parsing of the interaction between negative and positive emotions—and especially their production through language—gives us warrant to interpret Calvin’s own harsh tones not as an effort to induce negative feelings alone, but as a technique for breaking through his reader’s emotional dullness to trigger the contrasting positive feelings that should accompany her perception of God. Indeed, this is how we can understand the abrupt tonal shifts that characterize the antitheses discussed at length in Chapter Six. Many of them pair severe with soaring notes and, as we saw there, function not only to draw a contrast, but also to orient the reader toward the appropriate term of each antithesis. Thus, when Calvin speaks harshly of human blindness, the effect is to dramatize the clarity of the divine witness. When he speaks severely of human emptiness, the point is to vivify the bounty available in God. When he denigrates earthly life, the result is to illuminate the value of the life to come. In all these cases, the production of negative feelings—about the effects of sin, about the human condition, about earthly life—is clearly marshaled to the production of contrasting positive feelings, such as admiration for divine self-manifestations, gratitude for the goods on offer in God, and hope for the future life.

Managing the reader’s emotions through contrast is thus the tonal equivalent and dimension of Calvin’s oft-remarked penchant for antithesis, which I explored at length in Chapter Six. His severe tones are the darkness, so to speak, against which a reader can feel the light of divine favor. The *Institutio*’s moments of harshness are not sledgehammers designed to subdue, but “straightedges” that recalibrate the reader’s deficient emotions through inverse dynamics—inducing negative feelings for the purpose of generating their positive counterparts even more forcefully. In so doing, Calvin’s prose adapts itself to the emotional dullness of the idolatrous mind, which not only fails to perceive God’s many self-offerings but responds to them

with sleepy, sluggish indifference.⁹² As Calvin says of the contrast between earthly and heavenly life, “the mind is never seriously aroused to desire and ponder the life to come unless it be previously imbued with contempt for the present life.”⁹³ We see now that this passage articulates the structure of *all* the idolatrous mind’s responses: it is never seriously aroused to *any* positive feeling unless and until assaulted by a related negative one. Through the “severe” tones of his prose, Calvin obliges.

Thus, Calvin not only re-presents what his reader cannot easily perceive elsewhere but—leaving nothing to chance for the slippery, evasive idolatrous mind!—also guides that reader’s emotional response to the perceptions his text renders in language. By scripting the proper reaction through explicit narrations about how a mind ought to respond, by anticipating and correcting failures of response, and by inducing positive feelings through tonal contrasts, Calvin addresses and supplements the emotional sluggishness he expects to encounter in the more-or-less idolatrous mind of his reader.⁹⁴

6. Conclusions: Simulating perception through language

I have argued in this chapter that the vivid dimensions of Calvin’s prose address the self-imposed blindness of the idolatrous mind. Through verbal re-presentations of the divine manifestations a fallen mind struggles to perceive, the *Institutio* vivifies perceptions that would otherwise remain indistinct, easy to overlook, or otherwise unaffacting.

⁹² See, for example, Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.7.14.

⁹³ Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.9.2.

⁹⁴ We might link Calvin’s habit of specifying how readers should feel about and in connection with his verbal images to the medieval and early modern idea that images stored in the mind, such as those acquired during reading, are stored with a certain *intentio*, an attitude or emotional coloring we have toward the image. On this idea, see Mary Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images, 400-1200* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 14-16, 116-17.

I suggested at the end Chapter Six's discussion of the "restraining" function of Calvin's language that during the time spent reading such prose, the reader is forced to practice the mental constraint that is key to suppressing the mind's idolatrous instincts. A parallel observation can be made regarding the "vivifying" dimensions of Calvin's style. Having admired the divine artistry of created works through Calvin's ekphrastic re-presentations, having lingered over Calvin's amplified re-statements of Scriptural teachings, having perceived in Calvin's vivid imagery the recalibrating contrasts her mind otherwise resists, and having received cues, all along, about how she ought to be responding to these perceptions—in so doing, the *Institutio*'s reader has glimpsed the divine manifestations that Calvin insists are otherwise on offer, but *not* otherwise easy for her to perceive. During the time the reader has spent having her imagination fired by Calvin's verbal re-descriptions, her mind has not only been occupied with the divine manifestations that should always be her focus, but she has encountered them with a degree of vividness and emotional impact that is not easy for her dulled mind to achieve on its own.

6.1 Substitute phantasms. This reference to the reader's imagination—and the idea that during the time spent reading the *Institutio*, it has been partly occupied by Calvin's vivid verbal imagery—returns me to a point I made near the beginning of this chapter, about how an early modern audience might have understood the *Institutio*'s language to impact the mind of its reader. I noted there that, among both classical and Renaissance rhetoricians, vivid language was credited with the ability to deposit a fully processed phantasm directly into a reader's imagination.

Recalling this key premise of early modern theories of language is a way of backing into a question that may have been in the reader's mind all along: I have been arguing that Calvin's

vivid imagery supplements his reader's compromised perception, but in what sense can language render a "perception"? The answer depends on appreciating the definition of "perception" I have been elaborating across this dissertation, which is not reducible to external sensation, but also does not rise to (yet forms the indispensable basis of) conscious understandings and judgments. The kind of "perception" language can offer corresponds to the imagination's creation of a composite percept on the basis of sense experience—a process that is instantaneous and pre-conscious, yet always informed and colored by the imagination's distinctive cast, which in turn reflects the degree to which it is held in check by reason.⁹⁵ Thus, situated in its early modern context—in which vivid language is credited with this ability to fill a reader's mind with phantasms that are in principle indistinguishable from the results of physical sensations—Calvin's verbal imagery could be understood to replace his reader's functional blindness with a textually-induced perception of the divine manifestations she otherwise struggles to see.

Here, then, is a special virtue of Calvin's language, as well as its direct relevance to his concerns about human blindness. Insofar as language can render phantasms that accurately reflect divine manifestations—and, moreover, encode a pious response to them (recall that phantasms always have an emotional coloring⁹⁶)—it has the potential to simulate the effects of non-idolatrous perception. Thus, there may be a literal sense in which Calvin's prose allows his reader to see—not only to understand, but actually to *perceive*—God's many self-manifestations. His language offers a substitute site of perception at which a fallen mind can experience them as they would be perceived by a mind capable of true spectatorship—if not directly, through her

⁹⁵ That cast, as we saw in Chapter Three, is itself informed by the conscious thoughts—and potentially, the fictions—that reason allows the imagination to entertain and in this way condition subsequent perception. On how reason ought ideally to restrict the imagination's productive activity, see my discussion in Chapter Three.

⁹⁶ On this point, see my discussion of the work of the "interior senses" or "imagination" in Chapter One.

exterior senses, then through the effects of Calvin's prose upon her mind's image-making faculty.

6.2 Controlled conditions. My method in Chapters Six and Seven has been to situate and elucidate some of the *Institutio*'s most striking stylistic features in terms of the text's overarching concern with the perception of God. Against this backdrop, we can understand the features I have grouped under the "restraining" function of Calvin's prose without either taking them for granted as a natural outgrowth of Calvin's stern views or referring them to his psychology. We also have a paradigm against which to make sense of the imagistic characteristics of his writing—characteristics that have raised questions about the prominence of verbal images in a text whose primary target is "idolatry." From its rhetorical embellishments to its visual imagery, what Breen called the "vividness" of Calvin's prose can now be seen as a strategy for using language to re-present in the reader's imagination what a fallen mind struggles to perceive under less controlled conditions. Finally, these two restraining and vivifying functions of Calvin's prose—which might otherwise appear to be at odds—are now intelligibly related to one another as complementary operations that in different ways address the tendencies and needs of its reader's more-or-less idolatrous mind.

My proposal that Calvin's language creates "controlled conditions" for his reader to entertain perceptions of the divine manifestations to which sin renders her dull and unresponsive raises the question of whether and how language brings a reader into contact with what it represents. Literary scholar Terrence Cave has reflected that the wealth of sixteenth-century terms for re-presenting things through words suggests "both the fascination and the futility of the

attempt to display the world in language.” He points out that such mimesis “necessarily entails the absence of that which it purports to represent.”⁹⁷

Crucially however, Calvin’s mimetic language addresses not an absence, but a *blindness*, an inability to perceive that which is, nevertheless, still objectively present. God’s self-manifestations are never, Calvin emphasizes, absent from human perceivers—if anything, humans absent themselves from God’s perceptible accommodations through the patterns of mind Calvin calls “idolatrous.” This withdrawal of the mind from the world where God self-reveals—the loss of the original true spectatorship which, recall from Chapter One, required neither language nor concepts—gives Calvin’s prose a pathos that reflects not the inevitable failure of representation, but a contingent failure of perception.⁹⁸ Calvin uses language to bring humans into contact with what it represents not by conjuring what is absent, but by preventing the reader from absenting herself.

6.3 How can language address perception? We are now in a position to answer the most overarching of the questions about Calvin’s language posed at the beginning of Chapter Five—namely, how is the *Institutio*’s prose style relevant to the issues of perception I have been tracing in this dissertation? How, that is, how can the text’s very language function as a tool to help rehabilitate a mind whose defining problem is not misunderstanding, but misperception unto blindness? I have answered this question by directly connecting key features of the *Institutio*’s

⁹⁷ Cave, “*Enargeia*,” 5.

⁹⁸ Cave goes on to remark that “words... always interpose their opacity between the reader-listener and any conceivable experience of things seen” because they can only operate “within the constraints of language” (Cave, “*Enargeia*,” 5). For Cave, this means that *enargeia* and related rhetorical techniques are tragically marked by their failure, in the end, truly to bring things to presence in language. Cave, “*Enargeia*,” 18-19. However, what Cave calls the “secondary or feigned presence” of linguistic representation *and its constraints* is exactly what Calvin seems to be capitalizing on in his deployment of visual language to re-vivify what the fallen mind can no longer see, unaided. Indeed, the “constraints of language,” may be *usefully* restrictive for a mind that cannot be otherwise trusted not to wander off the designated “path” of God’s many manifestational “marks.”

prose style to the defining problems of the idolatrous mind as laid out in Chapters Three and Four. What we have seen is that language can address perception both by restraining the patterns of unmoored thought that occlude perception, as well as by supplementing perception through the provision of vivified and emotionally colored percepts.

Let us linger, in closing, over what this says about how language can be used as a way to address a mind whose defining problem is “idolatry.” Words are *not* useful for addressing idolatrous habits of mind because they are the opposite of images. Indeed, this dichotomy cannot hold because, as we have seen, both the words of Scripture and the words of the *Institutio* draw their power partly through their ability to produce sensory and especially visual effects for a reader.⁹⁹ Thus, language does not do away with vision.

Rather, words are a useful tool for intervening in a fallen mind because attaining the goal of human life—namely, the perception of God at the many perceptible sites of divine self-manifestation—is rendered both safer and easier when that manifestation occurs through the medium of language. It is safer, because language enacts real-time control over harmful patterns of thought that can subvert perception. It is easier, because language can bypass the compromised processing of the imagination to offer a vivid phantasm that accurately reflects what the mind is intended to appreciate in divine accommodations.

⁹⁹ We might add, as Zachman has observed in another connection, that Calvin characteristically links rather than opposes them. See Zachman, *Image and Word*, 437. Thus, as William A. Dyrness has recently observed, “hearing for Calvin will complement, not undermine, the visual spectacle of creation”—and, I might add, other perceptible accommodations. William A. Dyrness, *The Origins of Protestant Aesthetics in Early Modern Europe: Calvin’s Reformation Poetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 69.

Conclusion

“What is important now
is to recover our senses.
We must learn to see more,
to hear more, to feel more.”
– Susan Sontag

“Words were to teach eyes.”
– Lee Palmer Wandel

This dissertation has argued that perception, in the sense I have defined across the past seven chapters, is a central organizing concern of Calvin’s 1559 *Institutio*. The perceptual stakes of the text become newly visible when we situate it in its original, sixteenth-century milieu, a visual culture urgently preoccupied with the subjectivity of visual experience and especially with the imagination’s capacity to falsify sense experience. Interpreted against this backdrop, the *Institutio*’s portrait of sinful “blindness” can be understood not only to reflect, but also to capitalize on an increasingly salient cultural possibility—namely, that visual experience is conditioned, and thus can be distorted, by the internal conditions of a perceiver. Calvin’s rhetoric of perceptual distortion unto blindness—indeed, to the point of hallucination—recasts sin as an active process of imaginative projection whereby the human mind cuts itself off from the real world where it was intended to come into relationship with God.¹

1. Retrospective

This dissertation began by establishing the productivity of reading the *Institutio* in the light of a distinctively sixteenth-century European visual culture. I noted in the Introduction that

Epigraphs: Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, and Lee Palmer Wandel, *The Reformation: Towards a New History*.

¹ As I have emphasized throughout, this is a problem for which there are analogs, even potential mechanisms, in the optical and psychological theories of Calvin’s day.

the danger of failing to explicitly situate the *Institutio* in its original milieu is that we may unconsciously supply a later visual culture as our interpretive backdrop. Indeed, inadvertently approaching the *Institutio* from the standpoint of seventeenth- to nineteenth-century visual culture—in which visual experience results from an act of mental judgment performed upon neutral sense data—may fuel the temptation to interpret all of Calvin’s allusions to vision in terms of a “metaphorics of sight.”² This is because, in these contexts, vision is credibly understood as an act of thinking or knowing.³

By contrast, the readings offered in Chapters One through Four approach the *Institutio*’s bodily language of blindness and vision from the standpoint of “interpretive literalism.”⁴ This interpretive strategy embraces the overtly sensory denotations and stakes of Calvin’s language and situates this vocabulary in terms of the relevant *sixteenth*-century—that is, pre-Keplerian and pre-Cartesian—understandings of the visual process. Taking this approach has revealed that Calvin’s concerns are not so much conceptual as perceptual. It indicates, in other words, that the “perception of God,” “accommodation,” and “idolatry” *all* reflect a concern with the way the world is taken in through the senses and then re-presented by the imagination as the basis for conscious thought—and especially with how this process can be falsified by the effects of sin.

In the second half of the dissertation, I argued from the *Institutio*’s own theory of language that the text’s formative purpose vis-à-vis its reader is to intervene in the habits of mind

² The phrase comes from Suzannah Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment in the Middle Ages* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 4. For an illuminating model for how to interpret references to optical processes literally, see Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment*, 138-39.

³ On this model, see my footnotes in the Introduction regarding the contributions of Kepler and Descartes to a ‘modern,’ two-part understanding of the visual process.

⁴ This method has been recently advocated by Gail Kern Paster and, in different words, by Suzannah Biernoff. On the need to embrace an “interpretive literalism” if we are to take early modern body-talk seriously in its original context, see Paster, “Nervous Tension: Networks of Blood and Spirit in the Early Modern Body,” in *The Body in Parts: Fantasies of Corporeality in Early Modern Europe*, eds. David Hillman and Carla Mazzio (New York: Routledge, 1997), 110-11.

that fuel fallen “blindness.” In so doing, my analysis deliberately crossed the two wires of traditional Reformation historiography—word and image, or reading and seeing. Indeed, one advantage of situating Calvin’s *Institutio* within the framework of early modern visual culture—in which, as we have seen, verbal and visual *species* are taken into the mind by the same process, and vivid language can produce mental images that are in principle indistinguishable from the results of physical sensation—is that it allows us to analyze together, on a single theoretical plane, sites of analysis often kept separate. In this case, it allowed me to draw together the acts and objects of visual perception named in the text, the text’s verbal references to them, and the possible visual effects of such language.

The result is that we can now offer an answer to the most urgent question left outstanding in the wake of Randall Zachman’s important work on word and image in Calvin’s theology—namely, how should we think about the visuality of Calvin’s verbal imagery?⁵ Chapters Five through Seven answer this question by situating the vivid dimensions of Calvin’s prose as part of his larger program of using language to intervene in and condition his reader’s perception. As we have seen, the *Institutio*’s prose style addresses perception not only by disciplining the thought processes that would preclude it, but also by replicating the experience of accurate perception through the sensory potential of vivid language itself.

Taken together, the two parts of this dissertation have established that the *Institutio* is a text concerned with perception in more than one way—not only as regards its major doctrinal themes, but also in terms of its prose’s formative effects upon a reader.

⁵ “The most significant methodological question that arises in [Zachman’s *Image and Word*] is how to interpret passages in scripture that discuss or rely on visual imagery, but are clearly textual (as written words themselves).” John Slotemaker, review of *Image and Word in the Theology of John Calvin*, by Randall Zachman, *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 40, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 623.

2. A perceptual triptych

Over the course of this dissertation, we have encountered two distinct conditions or classes of perceivers. In Chapter One we followed a figure Calvin calls the “true spectator,” a perceiver capable of attaining the perception of God through the original accommodation of created works. In Chapters Three and Four, we met another heuristic figure I called the “idolatrous mind.” The idolatrous mind illustrates the sinful impulses that plague every fallen mind. Through its unmoored speculation and imaginative projections, this mind cheats itself of the ability to perceive the world—and thus the God who self-manifests there—as they are; as a result, it sees the world and its Maker as *it* is.

However, the idolatrous mind is not the end of the story. Implied throughout the *Institutio* is the possibility that a fallen mind’s idolatrous impulses might be tamed such that—through the use of the further accommodations provided after the fall—its blindness can be replaced with the intended perception of God. It is even possible to read Calvin’s true spectator not only as a counterfactual portrait of unfallen perception—as I did in Chapter One—but also as hinting at what could be in store for rehabilitated perception. In order to distinguish between humanity’s now-lost capacity to attain the perception of God through creation alone, and this other, practical possibility—namely, of attaining the perception of God through the use of further accommodations—let us designate this third figure with another moniker. Let us call the mind capable of attaining the perception of God even under fallen conditions “the pious mind (*pia mens*).” This label not only evokes the stance of piety that successful perception automatically evokes, but also references a telling line in which Calvin uses this phrase to name the mind who desists from the wandering and projective behaviors that doom the idolatrous mind.⁶

⁶ “The pious mind (*pia mens*) does not dream up (*somniat*) for itself any god it pleases, but contemplates (*intuetur*) the one and only true God. And it does not attach (*affingit*) to him whatever it pleases, but is content to hold him to

2.1 Comparing three conditions of mind. These three figures—true spectator, idolatrous mind, and pious mind—can be arranged into an instructive triptych. This juxtaposition highlights what distinguishes the true spectator’s unfallen perception from the other two conditions. The true spectator attains the goal of human life without the need for any act of judgment-formation or inference—or indeed any effort at all. Her perception of God is not discursively constructed or interpretively achieved, but simply the natural reaction of a human perceiver to perceptible works that were specially created so as to induce a stance of piety toward their Creator. Only before the fall was this kind of instantaneous and pre-conscious attainment of the perception of God possible. Indeed, the naturalness of this figure’s achievement of the perception of God raises the suggestive possibility that approaching God through acts of understanding is necessitated only *by* the fall. As the idolatrous mind shows us, the fallen mind gets into trouble precisely because of its overactive mental capacities. Whereas the true spectator’s consciously articulated ideas about God are merely transcriptions of prior perceptual experience, in the fallen mind imaginative *conception* overtakes pious *perception*.

Measured against these two heuristic figures, what is most striking about the fallen but rehabilitating mind—the third figure, which I am calling the “pious mind”—is the way it differs from the true spectator. If the pious mind is ultimately able to benefit from the sites of accommodation where God self-reveals and thus attain the perception of God, the way it does so looks quite different. First, to broach a subject that is conspicuously absent from the preceding analysis, the pious mind’s perception depends on the illumination of the Holy Spirit, the

be as he manifests (*manifestat*) himself; furthermore, the mind always exercises the utmost diligence and care not to wander astray (*perperam vagetur*), or rashly and boldly to go beyond his will (*ultra voluntatem eius egressa*).” John Calvin, *Institutio Christianae Religionis* (Berolini: Gustavum Eichler, 1834), 1.2.2. English translation from John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960). In this passage, Calvin characterizes a “pious mind” through contrasts with habits that, as I demonstrated in Chapter Three, he associates with idolatry.

condition Calvin calls “faith.”⁷ An expanded version of this project would need to articulate how for Calvin, “faith” names the condition of being made receptive once again after idolatrous impulses have rendered the mind hopelessly projective.⁸ The condition of faith, in other words, reinstates a would-be perceiver’s capacity to benefit from God’s designated accommodations.

This brings me to the second way the pious mind differs from the true spectator, which is that its rehabilitation depends on a much wider range of accommodations: creation alone is no longer sufficient to facilitate the perception of God. Instead, the pious mind’s perception must be continually supported by further accommodations like Scripture, preaching and the Sacraments, and most importantly, the perception of God as “Father” in the incarnate Christ.⁹ What we can say, then, is that the pious mind needs a series of extra accommodations—several, as we saw in Chapter Two, layered upon previous accommodations—in order to benefit from God’s program of rendering Godself perceptible.

It is critical to note in this connection that accommodations provide a corrective lens—as Calvin’s image for Scripture suggests—but not laser eye surgery. That is, they are not therapies that enact a lasting cure; rather, they are ongoing measures that must be continually employed to combat the continually idolatrous impulses of the fallen mind. As Susan Schreiner has observed, through the use of accommodations like Scripture, the original accommodation of created works can regain its revelatory function.¹⁰ However, even Calvin’s notable emphasis on the possibility

⁷ For passages indicating that the Holy Spirit initiates faith, see Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.1.4, 3.2.33, 4.14.8.

⁸ For passages that frame faith as being made receptive again, see Calvin, *Institutio*, 3.22.10, 3.24.2, 4.14.9-10.

⁹ See Calvin, *Institutio*, 2.6.1, 2.6.4, 3.2.1-2.

¹⁰ Schreiner, *The Theater of His Glory: Nature and the Natural Order in the Thought of John Calvin* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1995), 106. Schreiner goes on immediately to note that “The ‘original order of knowing’ is not thereby restored, since Scripture must continually function as ‘spectacles’ which correct the noetic failure caused by sin.”

and importance of growth over time¹¹ does not mitigate the fact that the malignant perceptual conditioning caused by sin persists throughout earthly life. Perhaps then, it is inaccurate to present the pious mind as entirely distinct from an idolatrous one: insofar as sin persists, the tendencies we have associated with “idolatry” must continually be bridled—both restrained and counteracted through a single-minded focus on God’s designated accommodations.¹²

2.2 Constructing pious perception. We should linger over the fact that Calvin includes not only Scripture, but also other conceptual and linguistic accommodations such as preaching and even doctrine among the long list of divine accommodations that enable fallen humans to attain the perception of God. What this tells us is that pious perception is not a neutral capacity arrived at simply by *removing* the idolatrous habits that preclude perception. Pious perception itself must be sustained by means of a constant practice of in-forming, conditioning, or constructing perception. If an unfallen true spectator requires no doctrinal primer to guide her unconscious and immediate achievement of the perception of God, a rehabilitating pious mind differs in that it requires the constant, conscious lens of conceptual and linguistic accommodations. This suggests that fallen minds cannot return to prelapsarian perception; rehabilitation is a process whereby they move toward something that is different—not unconstructed, pristine perception, but well-constructed perception.

If this interpretation sounds postmodern, that may be because we have largely missed the remarkable coincidence between sixteenth-century visual culture and our own. The *Institutio*, as

¹¹ Lee Palmer Wandel has drawn attention to the importance of growth across time, particularly in Calvin’s understanding of the Lord’s Supper. Wandel, *The Eucharist in the Reformation: Incarnation and Liturgy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 153–66.

¹² It is notable, in this respect, that Calvin advocated taking the Supper more frequently than other evangelical leaders. See Wandel, *The Eucharist*, 171–72.

I emphasized in the Introduction, was written and re-written during a period in which the regnant *species* model of vision had suffered unsustainable logical assaults, but before a replacement emerged in the work of Kepler and Descartes. From the shocks of the Columbian Encounter to the proliferation of new Biblical translations, threats of linguistic, interpretive, and cultural relativisms abounded. In the midst of the resulting instability—in which Europeans knew that they didn't know how to secure epistemological reliability—sixteenth-century people were beginning to consider the possibility that visual experience has a social, and not a natural basis.¹³ That is, as Stuart Clark has emphasized, Calvin's contemporaries were actively pondering “the modern-sounding notion that human subjects ‘make’ the objects they perceive, fashioning them out of the qualities that belong intrinsically to perception, not to the objects themselves.”¹⁴

An important observation by Lee Palmer Wandel names the implications of this for religious formation. In the face of the hermeneutical crisis induced by the philological insights of the early Reformation, she notes, “eyes were to be educated so that they might be able to discern the meaning that was no longer self-evident.”¹⁵ This exigency applied equally to the interpretation of Scripture as to the discernment of what is real from what is merely imagined—a high-stakes issue which, as we saw in Chapter Four, played out in multiple linked discourses, from magic, to demonology, to religious reform. Calvin's project in the *Institutio* sits squarely within this milieu. Indeed, as I suggested in the Introduction, it may be that the especially contested status of visual epistemology in sixteenth-century Europe offered Calvin a culturally

¹³ Stuart Clark, *Vanities of the Eye: Vision in Early Modern European Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 6.

¹⁴ Clark, *Vanities*, 4.

¹⁵ The full passage reads, “By the end of the sixteenth century, all Churches realized that the meaning of material things was not something self-evident... For all, meaning depended on the eye of the viewer, which might or might now be enabled to see the meaning of an object, a structure, a color, a shape. For all, eyes were to be educated so that they might be able to discern the meaning that was no longer self-evident. Words were to teach eyes.” Lee Palmer Wandel, *The Reformation: Towards a New History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 262.

salient and intuitively plausible way to depict and diagnose the perceptual effects of sin. It may even be that against this milieu, we can see Calvin capitalizing on changing understandings of the constructedness of perception to offer a novel account of not only the effects of sin, but also what is required to rehabilitate a sinful mind.

2.3 Whence the ideal of the true spectator? This overview of three distinct perceptual conditions will raise the question: from what position is the *Institutio* implicitly composed that it is capable of narrating all three subject positions? To put that question more baldly, what kind of mind does Calvin possess? As discussed in Chapter Five, the text implies that all of its readers, as well as its author, suffer from a more-or-less idolatrous mind—more, because Calvin insists that the effects of sin persist inevitably throughout life, and less, because clarifying accommodations really can cut through the dulling perceptual effects of sin.

This reality, however, begs the question: How can a rehabilitating but always-idolatrous mind speak to the perception that would be possible for an unfallen spectator? Calvin seems to find the idea that piety is the natural and appropriate human reaction to creation in Scripture.¹⁶ Perhaps he reaches his account of the true spectator by working back from this possibility—i.e., ‘what would it be like if the perception of God could be attained without perceptual construction?’ This ideal figure may also be the result of working back from the current reality of the idolatrous mind—i.e., ‘what would be possible if we did not render ourselves blind by always projecting human fictions about what God is like?’

Wherever Calvin derives this ideal, its subtle evocation in the opening chapters of the *Institutio* underlines an important point I made at the end of Chapter Seven, which is that on

¹⁶ See relevant references to Scripture at Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.1.3.

Calvin's account, God's self-manifestation is and remains objectively clear and eternally present. It is not God who has absented Godself from sinful human perceivers, but humans who have effectively separated themselves from perceptible reality. It is this danger, and the urgency of overcoming it, that is at stake in all three figures—in true spectator, idolatrous mind, and pious mind alike.

3. New insights about the *Institutio* that result from this study

My interpretation of the *Institutio* as a text centrally concerned with perception opens up new directions in several areas of research.

3.1 Calvin and the senses. First, it points the way toward a revised understanding of Calvin's positions regarding the visual, as well as the senses and sensory objects more broadly. For all the criticism that the old narrative that Calvin has a "bias against physical sense perception"¹⁷ has suffered over the last decade,¹⁸ this portrait retains something of its grip on early modern historiography, which still emplots Calvin as a forerunner of a desacralized modernity and perpetuates the view that his accusations of "idolatry" represent a rejection of the use of perceptible objects in religious practice.¹⁹

¹⁷ As in Barbara Pitkin, *What Pure Eyes Could See: Calvin's Doctrine of Faith in Its Exegetical Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 61. On the persistence of the idea that Calvin is an enemy of matter, see Ernst van den Hemel, "Things That Matter: The *Extra Calvinisticum*, the Eucharist, and John Calvin's Unstable Materiality," in *Things: Religion and the Question of Materiality*, eds. Dick Houtman and Birgit Meyer (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 67.

¹⁸ Recent interpretations that contest this view include Lee Palmer Wandel, "Incarnation, Image, and Sign: John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* & Late Medieval Visual Culture," in *Image and Incarnation: The Early Modern Doctrine of the Pictorial Image*, eds. Walter S. Melion and Lee Palmer Wandel (Leiden: Brill, 2015) and Randall C. Zachman, *Image and Word in the Theology of John Calvin* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007).

¹⁹ As in Carlos M. N. Eire's widely cited *War Against the Idols: The Reformation of Worship from Erasmus to Calvin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 197-202, 217 and Sergiusz Michalski, *The Reformation and the Visual Arts: The Protestant Image Question in Western and Eastern Europe* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 61-63. The characterization has been recently repeated in Bridget Heal, "Introduction: Art and Religious Reform in

In fact however, as Anna Kvicalova has argued in a recent monograph on the sense of hearing in Geneva, for Calvin the senses are neither negative nor even neutral; they must be governed, but *this is in order to ensure* that they can perform their essential function.²⁰ Complementing and extending Kvicalova's thesis, this dissertation has shown that Calvin's account of accommodation as God's strategy for making-perceptible gives sense perception an indispensable role in the economy of divine self-manifestation.²¹ There is no suggestion in the *Institutio*—as there is in the works of many of Calvin's medieval forebears²²—that physical sensation poses a threat to the perception of God. On the contrary, as we see in his aggressive attacks on the sinful mind's dismissal of sense experience and indulgence in unmoored speculation, Calvin is alarmed by any teaching that encourages humans to prescind from the physical world where God self-manifests. Far from teaching suspicion of sense experience, Calvin's campaign against "idolatry" asks his readers to discipline their concepts by way of percepts, not imaginations. It is a bid to get humans to sense more, not less.²³

These realizations provide new ground from which to reconsider another outstanding puzzle about Calvin's relation to the visual. Near the end of her important work on Calvin's doctrine of faith, Barbara Pitkin wonders how literally Calvin's visual language should be

Early Modern Europe," *Art History* 40, no. 2 (April 2017): 247-48. As Anna Kvicalova observed in 2019, "The fact that even the most radical branches of Protestantism, such as Calvinism, took shape around their own sensory programs has still not been widely acknowledged." Kvicalova, *Listening and Knowledge in Reformation Europe: Hearing, Speaking and Remembering in Calvin's Geneva* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 6.

²⁰ Kvicalova, *Listening and Knowledge*, 9-10, 12-13, 259-61.

²¹ In making this claim, I dissent from Kvicalova's observation that "in the new religious epistemology, objects of the natural world—unlike words—were no longer believed to have the ability to signify and convey a spiritual message." Kvicalova, *Listening and Knowledge*, 10.

²² On views along these lines as held by many of Calvin's medieval predecessors, see Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment*, 46-48, 55, 113.

²³ If anything, it would make sense to emplot Calvin as a forerunner of Francis Bacon's style of empiricism, which is conscious of the way that the "idols of the mind" can mislead and distort sense experience, and so embraces technologies which will reduce the former and bring stability to the latter. See Sorana Corneanu and Koen Vermeir, "Idols of the Imagination: Francis Bacon on the Imagination and the Medicine of the Mind," *Perspectives on Science* 20, no. 2 (Summer 2012): 183-206.

interpreted. That is, do the eyes of faith see only metaphorically, or do they literally see?²⁴ This research has suggested that the eyes of faith are enabled to literally see *accommodations*—to which their previous idolatry rendered them functionally blind, and which have been specially designed to facilitate their perception of God.

In offering this interpretation, I extend an important line of thought I traced in the Introduction, which goes back to Bob Scribner’s pathbreaking work on Protestant visual pieties.²⁵ I noted there that the possibility that Calvin and the other reformers are not eliminating but “reforming” the role of the eyes in religious life has been oft-raised but little elaborated.²⁶ This dissertation has offered an account of how one Reformation text aims not only to diagnose habits that preclude pious perception (Chapters Three and Four) but also to re-train its reader’s perception by disciplining patterns of thought that condition perception (Chapter Six) and by offering vivid objects of perception directly to the imagination (Chapter Seven). In so doing, it gives a textured and situated account of not only what a Calvinian visual piety might look like, but also how it might be cultivated through distinctive uses of language.

3.2 The uses of doctrine. There is now a critical mass of scholarship challenging the assumption that theological texts should be understood primarily as representational and advocating, instead, to approach premodern works of theology in terms of a “participatory,”

²⁴ Pitkin, *Pure Eyes*, 162.

²⁵ As in Robert W. Scribner, “Perceptions of the Sacred in Germany at the End of the Middle Ages,” *Religion and Culture in Germany (1400-1800)*, by Robert W. Scribner, ed. Lyndal Roper (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 102-103, and Scribner, “Popular Piety and Modes of Visual Perception in Late-Medieval and Reformation Germany,” in Scribner, *Religion and Culture*, 120.

²⁶ Suggestive gestures along these lines appear in Scribner, “Perceptions of the Sacred,” 102-103; Scribner, “Popular Piety,” 123, 128; Robert W. Scribner, “Ways of Seeing in the Age of Dürer,” in *Dürer and His Culture*, eds. Dagmar Eichberger and Charles Zika (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 103-104; Margaret R. Miles *Image as Insight: Visual Understanding in Western Christianity and Secular Culture* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1985), 124; Huston Diehl, *Staging Reform, Reforming the Stage: Protestantism and Popular Theater in Early Modern England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997, 46-66); and, more recently, Clark, *Vanities*, 183.

“performative,” or “pedagogical” framework. Michelle Chaplin Sanchez has recently brought this paradigm to bear on the *Institutio*²⁷ by foregrounding the question of “what Calvin’s doctrinal discussions are supposed to *do* in the context of the *Institutes* as a whole.”²⁸

As I noted above, a major problem of fallen life as depicted in the *Institutio* is that the conceptual, or what is generated from within the human mind, has overtaken the perceptual, which begins from what is outside the human mind. This allows us to appreciate at least part of what is at stake in problematic doctrines—namely, the way they perpetuate human imaginations and so compound the willful blindness of the idolatrous mind, which always prefers to fixate on its own creations in place of God’s. From this insight, we can also glimpse what may be useful about *sound* doctrines—namely, their ability to properly direct and in-form human attention to, and perception of, God-given accommodations.

These possibilities could be expanded into an account of how the *Institutio*’s explicit doctrinal interventions function to prime or condition key aspects of its reader’s perception. It is clear that on Calvin’s view, perception of God in accommodated sites should precede and form the basis of conceptual elaborations like doctrine, artistic creations like images, and ecclesiastical practices like ceremonies. Once derived from perception, there is good reason to think that such well-founded concepts—such as, presumably, the doctrine heard in preaching or encountered in the pages of the *Institutio*—can then be used to properly in-form subsequent perception. Indeed, this is exactly what Calvin’s lens image suggests: as Sanchez notes, “spectacles are not the things themselves. They accommodate the ability to see other things *through* their use.”²⁹ It may be, in

²⁷ Sanchez cites the work especially of Peter Candler, along with Mark D. Jordan, Louis Mackey, Rowan Williams, and Matthew Potts, as precedent for this approach to premodern theological texts. See Michelle Chaplin Sanchez, *Calvin and the Resignification of the World: Creation, Incarnation, and the Problem of Political Theology in the 1559 Institutes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019) 23-24, 29, 53-54.

²⁸ Sanchez, *Calvin and the Resignification of the World*, 45-46 (emphasis in original).

²⁹ Sanchez, *Calvin and the Resignification of the World*, 67.

other words, that when it comes to a verbal and conceptual accommodation, it is not its explicit subject matter, but how it enables humans unconsciously to *perceive*, that is the point.

Elaborating on this possibility could fund a new account of the purposes of theological doctrine.

3.3 The purpose of the *Institutio*. This insight—that Calvin is interested in humans’ pre-conscious perception of the world as informed by conscious ideas—can affect our interpretation not only of the uses of theological doctrine, but also of the purpose of the *Institutio* as a whole. There is a large literature devoted to debating the nature and aims of Calvin’s magnum opus. Much recent scholarship is agreed in moving away from the paradigm of systematic theology and instead emphasizing Calvin’s practical and pastoral concern for his reader’s piety.³⁰ I do not consider my argument that the *Institutio* is a text overwhelmingly concerned with perception to run at odds to this scholarly consensus. On the contrary, as discussed in Chapter One, “piety” is simply Calvin’s name for the embodied, affective orientation of the spectator who has attained the perception of God. I wish simply to emphasize that perception—not as reduced to an act of understanding, but as an embodied receptivity to God’s self-manifestations at designated sites of accommodation—is, for Calvin, the *sine qua non* of this orientation or stance. As he says, “For until men recognize (*sentiant*) that they owe everything to God, that they are nourished by his fatherly care, that he is the Author of their every good, that they should seek nothing beyond him—they will never yield him willing service.”³¹ To say that the text is concerned with “perception,” then, is affirm that it is also and therefore concerned with “piety.”

³⁰ For a representative example of this turn, see John Hesselink, “The Development and Purpose of Calvin’s Institutes,” *The Reformed Theological Review* 24, no. 3 (October 1965): 70-72.

³¹ Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.2.1.

With this in mind, let me relate my characterization of the text to one very specific articulation of the purpose of the *Institutio*. The argument I have offered here bears some resemblance to Zachman’s proposal that the purpose of the *Institutio* is to bring “the reader to an experience of the nature and force of the realities being defined,” to help the reader “encounter, ponder, consider, and contemplate the nature and force of each reality defined and explained by Calvin.”³² For Zachman’s relatively unspecified language of bringing the reader to an “experience” and “contemplation” of “realities,” I prefer to speak of facilitating the reader’s perception of God at the accommodated sites of God’s self-manifestation. There is also another nuance that distinguishes the account I have offered here. Zachman’s proposal hinges on the idea that the reader should turn from the *Institutio* back to Scripture in order to complete this process: “we are to seek in Scripture spiritual realities that we should ponder and contemplate, so that we might experience the force of them ourselves.”³³ I do not deny that Calvin wishes his reader to be continually occupied with the accommodation of Scripture, but I also think that an opportunity to contemplate important realities—or, as I prefer, to perceive a vivid re-presentation of God’s self-manifestations—is actually on offer in the language of the *Institutio* itself.

I would say, then, that the purpose of the *Institutio* is to contribute to the ongoing and lifelong project of rehabilitating its reader’s sinful perception. Its explicit teachings inform and redirect her distracted and indistinct perception by clarifying both that the goal of human life is the perception of God (Chapter One) and that God’s means for helping humans achieve it is perceptible accommodations (Chapter Two). It also provides an unmistakable portrait of the individual habits of thought (Chapter Three) and social and material practices (Chapter Four)

³² Randall C. Zachman, *John Calvin as Teacher, Pastor, and Theologian: The Shape of His Writings and Thought* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 78 and 99, respectively.

³³ Zachman, *John Calvin as Teacher*, 100.

that prevent accommodation from functioning as intended. Finally, in its prose style, the *Institutio* follows Scriptural practice (Chapter Five) in chastising idolatrous habits of thought (Chapter Six) and vivifying its reader's perception of God-given sites of perception (Chapter Seven). In so doing, Calvin's *Institutio* offers its reader a textually mediated encounter with the designated sites for attaining the perception of God that it also describes.

4. Broader contributions to which this study can lead

In establishing the fruitfulness of situating the *Institutio* in its original visual culture, this study can point the way toward new contributions in several broader scholarly conversations.

4.1 Reception history. First, attending to the way the *Institutio* reads differently against the backdrop of different moments in optical and epistemological history opens a new way of thinking about the afterlives of this influential text. As I have emphasized, readings which interpret the attainment I have called the "perception of God" as the result of a correct inference or judgment performed on the basis of neutral sense data are plausible only against the backdrop of the seventeenth century or later. A new reception history might be narrated by pulling on this thread. It is of particular interest because of the way European visual culture changed dramatically in the decades immediately following the final edition of the *Institutio*,³⁴ with the result that even its first and second generation of readers were receiving the text against a different visual milieu than that in which it was largely composed. Tracing the interpretive

³⁴ This period saw the rise of the diagrammatic culture of Ramism in the 1580s, as well as what Svetlana Alpers has called the mapping impulse in early seventeenth-century Dutch art. Particularly relevant for our purposes is Alpers' observation that lenses and maps both bring otherwise invisible objects before the eye—but in importantly different ways! Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), 133.

consequences of this changeover in visual culture could provide new purchase on the *Institutio*'s highly consequential reception history.

4.2 Texts as cultivating perception. Beyond Calvin studies, this dissertation's approach to the *Institutio* contributes to the broader project of moving past the study of overt religious teachings or concepts to illumine what Talal Asad calls the "sensibilities and attitudes that are distinct from beliefs."³⁵ A particular interest of mine is how theological texts participate in instilling not only conscious beliefs, but also such unconscious sensibilities and attitudes—how, in other words, they not only in-form but also re-form their readers through the act of reading. Indeed, the argument I have offered here is one way of carrying forward a broader line of thinking in the humanities—articulated most prominently in the work of Martha Nussbaum—regarding how texts can enact ethical effects by training their readers' perception.³⁶ Whereas for Nussbaum, novels are the preeminent school for honing perception, this argument is a case study in how non-narrative texts, too, might be understood on this model.

However, perhaps the most important contribution to the study of texts as vehicles for shaping perception lies in the methodology I have modeled for how to situate a text's formative program in its distinctive historical and cultural setting. Existing models of how to uncover texts' formative aims vis-à-vis readers typically move between the two poles of text and rhetorical culture.³⁷ While this approach can specify how the rhetorical power of a text's literary strategies

³⁵ Talal Asad, "Thinking about Religion, Belief, and Politics" in *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies*, ed. Robert A. Orsi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 37.

³⁶ Nussbaum focuses especially how texts can train emotional attentiveness. See Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 37-44, 162, 289-90; Martha C. Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1995), 3, 27-28, 43, 61.

³⁷ See, for example, Duncan Robertson, *Lectio Divina: The Medieval Experience of Reading* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011); Emily T. Hudson, *Disorienting Dharma: Ethics and the Aesthetics of Suffering in the*

might have been understood by participants in its original literary context, it supplies only one piece of the puzzle of how texts transform readers. Two further points of reference are required: first, an account of the distinctive tendencies and vulnerabilities taken to characterize a reader's mind and body, and second, an historically situated account of the ability of language, when read, to act upon that mind and body.

My analysis of the *Institutes*' intervention in its reader's visual perception—particularly in Chapter Seven—supplies these missing points of reference, thus illustrating a method that constellates *four* poles: text, rhetorical culture, visual culture, and philosophy of language. As this approach suggests, in order to trace the perceptual transformation facilitated by a text, we must understand not only the rhetorical force of its language, but also specify how such language—when read in its original setting—could be imagined to intervene in a mind constituted in an historically particular way, amenable to distinctive interventions and vulnerable to distinctive threats. In other words, if one powerful way that religious texts—indeed, potentially all texts—can affect their readers is by intervening in their patterns of perception, then our study of these effects must be based on culturally specific accounts of “texts,” “readers,” “perception,” and “language.”

4.3 Texts and visual culture. This brings me to the way this project contributes to the interdisciplinary field of visual culture. Despite a well-established theoretical appreciation of the fact that not only images but also discourses and practices—including *textual* practices—give shape to culturally distinctive ways of seeing and thinking about seeing, studies of visual culture still skew overwhelmingly toward discussions of images or visual décor. However, as Suzannah

Mahabharata (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Aaron Pelttari, *The Space that Remains: Reading Latin Poetry in Late Antiquity* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014).

Biernoff has remarked, “the imaging and imagining of vision occurs in texts” as well as in images.³⁸ On this view, the *Institutio* is a possible object of analysis, not only for its explicit discussions of vision and its striking visual motifs such as lenses, mirrors, and marks, but also for its more oblique allusions to questions regarding the trustworthy or untrustworthy nature of seeing, sensing, and knowing in sixteenth-century Europe. Acting upon the premise so succinctly articulated by Biernoff, this dissertation brings to light how the *Institutio* participates in that part of “visual culture” that goes beyond—while still critically conditioning—how a culture relates to images themselves.

By offering the first monograph-length study of a single, image-less³⁹ theological text under the rubric of “visual culture,” this project makes good on the theoretical premise that visual cultures can circulate through *non*-imagistic—though not necessarily, as I showed in Chapter Seven, *non-visual*—media. Indeed, in showing how a text that is non-imagistic nevertheless enacts important visual effects, my project illustrates W.J.T. Mitchell’s point that “there are no visual media” because “all media are always and already mixed media.”⁴⁰ This dissertation, then, offers a model for how visual culture can function as a framework for interpreting a text with no pictures, as well as for appreciating how even texts without pictures can be powerful motors of visual culture. Indeed, as I noted above, one major advantage of approaching a text like the *Institutio* under the rubric of visual culture is that it helps us avoid the false dichotomies between seeing and other ways of sensing, between texts and other visual media, that have long plagued early modern historiography.

³⁸ Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment*, 3-4.

³⁹ The exception, as noted in the Introduction, is the *Institutio*’s printer’s mark.

⁴⁰ W. T. J. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 343, 349-50 and Mitchell, “There are No Visual Media,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 4, no. 2 (2005): 260.

5. Ways of perceiving: medieval, modern, postmodern?

This brings me, finally, to the implications of this project for how we understand the *Institutio*'s place in narratives about the historical origins of modernity, particularly as this involves changing attitudes toward the material world.⁴¹ In these narratives, Calvin is often credited with a key role in the posited separation of “spirit” from “matter.”⁴² On this view, Calvin stands in continuity with *both* medieval, largely Augustinian, semiotics and a modern, de-sacralized view of the natural world. He accomplishes this feat by preserving the medieval notion that the visible world is a sign of spiritual realities, but at the same time, emphasizing the contingency of the sign-signifier relationship. In this way, Calvin is depicted as taking a crucial step toward the de-sacralized semiotics that characterize modernity⁴³—helping to usher in a milieu in which the world still has meaning, but that meaning is arbitrary, no longer God-given, no longer intrinsically related to the matter that now merely signifies it.⁴⁴

Pondering what place Calvin deserves in narratives like these raises the relationship between perceiving and interpreting. Wandel has argued that the defining project of the *Institutio* is “to teach the faithful how to read God’s marks and signs.”⁴⁵ However, she qualifies the possible semiotic connotations of this language by emphasizing both that Calvin wishes humans

⁴¹ See, most prominently, Joseph Leo Koerner, *The Reformation of the Image* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004); Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007); and Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2012). Sanchez has recently challenged longstanding consensus regarding Calvin’s place in narratives of modernity by reading the *Institutio* against the grain of theologically inflected operations of modern sovereignty. See Sanchez, *Calvin and the Resignification of the World*, 6-10, 38-39.

⁴² See Eire, *War Against the Idols* and Christopher Elwood, *The Body Broken: The Calvinist Doctrine of the Eucharist and the Symbolization of Power in Sixteenth-Century France* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁴³ Elwood argues that Calvin and other Reformed writers effected a “semiotic revolution” by distinguishing a material signifier from a spiritual signified. Elwood, *The Body Broken*, 5, 62.

⁴⁴ Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht has described the turn to modernity as discarding the medieval system of “symbolic realism” (whereby God gave meanings to things in creation) and replacing it with a view in which the material world is a mere surface to be interpreted, such that the act of interpretation means going ‘beyond’ the material to identify a meaning behind or beneath it. Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 25.

⁴⁵ Wandel, *The Eucharist*, 159. See also 143.

to attend to God's signs in their literal visibility, using their physical eyes to do so,⁴⁶ and that responding properly to God's perceptible "marks" is not a matter of de-coding a hidden meaning.⁴⁷ In a complementary way, this dissertation has revealed that acts of effortful interpretation lie rather far from the perceptual ideal represented by the true spectator, for whom the physical encounter with created works is enough to evoke—pre-reflectively and without an act of inference or interpretation⁴⁸—the posture of piety that embodies the perception of God.

Foregrounding Calvin's overtly perceptual concerns in this way offers a new perspective on his relationship to both medieval predecessors and modern successors. As we have seen, Calvin recoils at the thought that the highest vision of God prescind from the senses—as, for example, in the case of Augustine's "intellectual" vision.⁴⁹ Calvin will not credit any paradigm that encourages humans to disengage from perceptible accommodations; indeed, his portrait of the "blind idolater" looks very like someone attempting to approach God by such a route. Ultimately, Calvin's perceptual ideal is both more sensory and less interpretive than that espoused by either the 'medieval' or the 'modern' camp as characterized by such narratives. The obverse of Calvin's rhetoric of human "blindness" is his insistence that God is literally visible—perceptible right on the surface of things, if only we could see them accurately. As I noted with regard to the figure of the true spectator, no act of judgment or inference is necessary to perceive God; perceptible accommodations naturally induce this effect, if only they are not resisted by the

⁴⁶ Wandel, "Incarnation, Image, and Sign," 193.

⁴⁷ Wandel, "Incarnation, Image, and Sign," 199.

⁴⁸ As I discussed at length in Chapter One, in the passage that offers what is perhaps the most fulsome phenomenological account of spectatorship, Calvin specifies that this act may "hold our mental powers suspended (*suspensum... ingenium teneat*)." Calvin, *Institutio*, 1.5.9.

⁴⁹ Augustine draws distinctions among *visio corporalis*, *visio spiritualis*, and *visio intellectualis* in *De Genesi ad Litteram Libri Duodecim*, Book XII.

actively hallucinatory effects of sin upon perception.⁵⁰ Ultimately then, Calvin is an uneasy fit for any worldview that would make seeing God an act of interpretation.

Calvin's perceptual literalism is a call to suppress imaginative projection so that we may finally see the world as God is in it—and not as we are. As such, it may offer resources for critiquing what Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht has called the interpretive paradigm of modernity, and which he has criticized for separating moderns from matter by substituting “meaning” for “presence.”⁵¹ Whether a semiotic approach to the material world is credibly traced to the Reformation or not, we can see Calvin as an early critic of the burgeoning culture of interpretation,⁵² especially in his critical awareness of the way the mind is active in constructing not only knowledge, but even sense experience. We should remember that for Calvin, the tendency to impute meaning, to suppress embodied response in favor of a conscious act of creative interpretation, is precisely the behavior that emerges from the fall. Indeed, the idolatrous mind might be renamed, in modernity, the interpretive mind: it is what must be bridled and again rendered receptive to what is on offer in perceptible matter itself—ironically, not by returning to a pristine condition now lost to us, but through a deliberate and concerted program of constructing perception.

⁵⁰ This raises a possible disadvantage of the seeing-as-reading analogy, which is that reading is often understood as an act of ‘going beyond’ visual symbols to a hidden meaning that lies behind them. This formulation is not a good fit for the mode of perception that Calvin is advocating.

⁵¹ Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence*, xv.

⁵² Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence*, 26.

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