

CALVIN AND THE MIGRATION OF IDEAS

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It is, as Margo Todd has remarked, a 'truism' that the Scottish Reformation was Calvinist in character.¹ Although – in the words of a recent historian – Scottish protestantism 'began as a broadly Lutheran movement', it 'had unmistakably become a Reformed (or “Calvinist”) one' by 1560 when protestantism became politically ascendent.² In the decades which followed 1560, Calvinism sent deep tendrils into Scottish cultural soil. During the century-and-a-quarter which elapsed between the Scottish Reformation and the Glorious Revolution of 1688-89, Calvin's influence on Scottish thought was all-pervasive. In the period which followed, theological positions associated with Calvinism continued, sometimes vociferously;³ but schools of thought only indirectly related to Calvinism or antagonistic to Calvinism made themselves heard. A complicating factor is that, while the social and political context of Scottish Calvinism was in change, Calvinism itself was changing.

The present paper makes no attempt to assess Calvin's general importance for Scottish culture. Instead, it draws attention to what I take to be a surprising aspect of his influence. In opening its doors to Calvinism in 1560, what did Scotland admit? There are standard replies to this question: Scotland admitted decades and perhaps centuries of gloom and guilt and nail-biting anxiety. It embarked on a course of dogmatism and discipline backed up by supernatural fear. The standard replies are, I suggest, one-sided but not altogether mistaken. My proposal is that, alongside them, Scotland admitted philosophical and political scepticism and a willingness – more, a compulsion – to think of situations in the light of fundamental questions that they may raise.

In order to follow my suggestion through, argument is needed on two fronts. First,

1 M.Todd *The Culture of Protestantism in Early Modern Scotland*, Yale University Press 2002, p. 1.

2 A.Ryrie *The Origins of the Scottish Reformation*, Manchester University Press 2006, p. 131. On the “Lutheran” phase of Scottish protestantism, see J.E.McGoldrick *Luther's Scottish Connection*, Solid Ground Christian Books.2008. For a defence of the thesis that the Scottish Reformation was distinctively Calvinist, see J.Kirk *Patterns of Reform*, T&T Clark 1989, ch. 3.

3 See, for a “vociferous” example, divine-right presbyterianism as discussed by A.Raffe in his 'Presbyterianism, Secularization, and Scottish Politics after the Revolution of 1688-1690' *Historical Journal* Vol. 53 No. 2 (2010).

discussion is needed of the sceptical strands of thought which I take to be present in Calvin and, second, comment is wanted on what – other than a schooling in protestant piety – Scots during and after 1560 took on board as a result of their exposure to Calvin's (and Calvinism's) works. The paper which follows concentrates on the first of these tasks. It offers some thoughts on scepticism and Calvin. Towards its end, it adds remarks – some detailed, and some more speculative – on Scottish sixteenth- and seventeenth-century thought.

1. *Scepticism: a working definition*

The term *scepticism* can, notoriously, be understood in various fashions. According to a broad understanding, scepticism is present whenever a questioning attitude towards to a widespread view – say, a widespread religious view – is in play. The view may be merely customary or it may be explicitly framed. According to a narrower understanding of the term, scepticism may arise only in the face of conceptually clear first-order or higher-order claims. My working definition stands closer to the “narrow” than to the “broad” end of the broad/narrow spectrum. A view or an outlook counts as sceptical, I suggest, when it raises questions about whether criteria of validity are justified – and when, in doing so, it hints or proposes that such justifications are non-existent or unknowable or difficult to find.

Before turning to scepticism as a theme in intellectual history, I offer two comments on the definition just given. The first is a warning. My definition focuses on a specific issue – namely, that of criteria of validity – but specificity in focus may be combined with generality in application. Although terminology may vary, and be more or less explicit, concern with criteria and their justification was (as the second section of my paper argues) widespread in early-modern European thought.

My second comment is to the effect that, conceptually, *sceptical* and *foundational* questions are closely related. By a foundational question I understand a question about the basis on which judgements rest: stated differently, it is a question – like a sceptical question according to my definition – about the justification of criteria. Sceptical and foundational questions are, I propose, questions about the same thing. Where they differ is in their intent. A sceptic asks questions about the justification of criteria in order to demonstrate that such justifications are in short supply. A foundationalist asks similar questions with a view to demonstrating how claims may be made with fresh confidence or in a distinctive way. Thus understood, sceptical and foundational questions are (so to say) converse and obverse sides of the same conceptual coin. What the seeker after foundations attempts to establish is what the sceptic believes is difficult and, perhaps, impossible to find. In one sense diametrically opposed, sceptical and foundationalist patterns of thought are in another closely interwoven. Rather than speaking of “sceptical questions” and “foundational

questions” as two sorts of question one should, perhaps, speak of sceptical-*cum*-foundational questions. A sense of this closeness is, I suggest, helpful in understanding sixteenth-century theorising and implications of Calvin's work.

2. Sixteenth-century scepticism

In the centuries which followed the European Renaissance, sceptical questions and foundational questions – in the light of the preceding section I use the expressions interchangeably – took a number of forms. In philosophy, they presented themselves as questions about whether the five senses or rational judgement (or neither) supply an adequate basis for cognitive claims, and about whether a criterion of truth can be discovered.⁴ In religion, they took the form of questions about the standard against which faith might be measured. In addition, they arose as questions about how an authentic interpretation of the scriptures might be established. In the development of natural science, they took the form of questions about whether a 'method' might be found which led beyond human frailty – not least, frailty rooted in the 'dulness, incompetency, and deceptions of the senses'.⁵ Kindred issues were addressed in satire, in moral criticism, in literature and, perhaps, in the visual arts.⁶ In moral philosophy, sceptical-*cum*-foundational questions were highlighted by the discovery, during voyages of trade and exploration, of non-European ethical systems. Politically, questions about the criteria of allegiance and legitimacy became urgent in the context of wars of religion and processes of far-reaching social change.

My list of the forms taken by sceptical-*cum*-foundational questions is open ended and, in the nature of the case, blurry at the edges: the point where a change in the form of a question becomes a change in question is hard to pin down. This said, an enumeration of some at least of the ways in which foundational and sceptical questions presented themselves allows us to correct for, as it were, an optical illusion which might otherwise distort our view of sixteenth-century thought. In 1562, an influential translation (from Greek into Latin) of Sextus Empiricus's *Outlines of Scepticism* appeared and, from this translation, the struggle in modern philosophy between “Pyrrhonian”⁷ scepticism and its enemies may be said to begin.⁸ Here,

4 The theme of a criterion or standard of truth is raised in Sextus Empiricus *Outlines of Scepticism*, Cambridge University Press 200, p. 72. See R.H. Popkin *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Descartes*, Van Gorcum 1964, p. 3. Below, I suggest that a concern with criteria is present in sixteenth-century thought before the Sextus translation of 1562. A notable instance of such concern in the post-1562 period comes from Montaigne: both 'judged and judging' are 'ever shifting and changing' (Montaigne *An Apology for Raymond Sebond*, Penguin Books 1993, p. 186.) For concern regarding the senses, see Montaigne loc. cit.; and P. Charron *Of Wisdom: Three Books*, London 1630, pp. 39-43.

5 F. Bacon *Essays* Appendix 4 (Penguin Books 1985) pp. 280, 284.

6 In regard to the visual arts, I am thinking of Durer's 'Melancholia I' as discussed by Panofsky (E. Panofsky *The Life and Art of Albrecht Durer*, Princeton University Press 2005, pp. 156-71). Panofsky (*Durer* p. 160) describes the angel in 'Melancholia I' as 'super-awake' and as 'inactive not because she is too lazy to work but because work has become meaningless to her; her energy is paralysed not by sleep but by thought'. Is the angel brooding about scepticism?

7 Sextus's *Outlines* expounded the views of Pyrrho of Elis (c. 318-272 B.C.), who 'appears to us to have attached

without disputing the 1562 translation's significance, I draw attention to Stuart Clark's recent comment that 'Pyrrhonism acted as a commentary on what had already taken place (and was continuing to take place) in the visual culture of the age':⁹ Clark's work concerns puzzles and paradoxes concerning perception but, I suggest, the point which he raises applies in a general sense. The 1562 translation of Sextus was timely because it addressed issues which were current.¹⁰ This currency is, I further suggest, at its most visible when foundational-*cum*-sceptical questions are seen as taking non-philosophical (or not-explicitly-philosophical) forms. I underline the point here because Calvin was contemporary with scepticism in its pre-1562 incarnation.

My comment that sceptical and foundational thinking may take non-philosophical as well as philosophical forms calls for clarification. My claim is not that sceptical issues and issues concerning foundations may cease to call for conceptual thinking, but that such thinking may go forward in a wide range of cultural contexts. The issue highlighted in my working definition of scepticism is, indeed, paradigmatically conceptual (or "philosophical"). The general picture of the sixteenth century which I wish to present is one where questions concerning criteria are widely pervasive and, despite this, retain their conceptual edge.

I end the present background section of my discussion by indicating how widely persuasive – perhaps I should say: how surprisingly widely persuasive – the seemingly technical question of criteria and their justification turns out, in the sixteenth century, to be. Issues concerning interpretation (later important for hermeneutics) were raised by Erasmus's query about whether it is 'the Spirit' which allows us to read the scriptures or whether it is the scriptures which tell us what 'a life worthy of the Spirit' involves.¹¹ Luther's response to Erasmus – to the effect that 'the Spirit' is the enabling factor, at least where the 'internal clarity' of the scriptures is concerned¹² – addresses the criteriological issue directly but seems not to escape the circularity which (Erasmus is suggesting) interpretation entails. In satire, it is again Erasmus who raises the issue of criteria by making Folly (not Wisdom) the spokesman of inconvenient and unconventional views.¹³ Corneleus Agrippa raises questions about criteria – or, at least, relativism – when he observes that writers on natural philosophy and metaphysics are 'at great variance amongst themselves' on issues of fundamental principle, and when he comments that moral standards 'are

himself to scepticism more systematically and conspicuously than anyone before him' (*Outlines* p. 4). For the purposes of the present paper, the term "Pyrrhonism" may be taken to mean merely scepticism of a rigorous and consistent sort.

8 On the 1562 translation of Sextus and its significance, see Popkin *History* ch. 2.

9 S.Clark *Vanities of the Eye: Vision in Early Modern European Culture* (Oxford University Press 2007) p. 266.

10 As M.A.Screech observes in his Introduction to Montaigne's *Apology* ed. cit. p. xxiv: 'The rediscovery of Sextus gave a fresh impetus to Renaissance scepticism, but did not create it; Sextus fell on welcome ears'.

11 D.Erasmus 'On the Freedom of the Will' in E.Gordon Rupp and P.S.Watson (eds.) *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*, Westminster Press 1969, pp. 45-6.

12 M.Luther 'On the Bondage of the Will' in Rupp and Watson *Luther and Erasmus* p. 112.

13 See Erasmus *Praise of Folly*, especially first half.

changeable according to the times, places, and opinions of men'.¹⁴ Rabelais (writing in 1546) mocks in an 'Ephetic and Pyrrhonian' fashion philosophy's inability to decide on how to act¹⁵ and, in the visual arts, the brooding angel in Durer's 'Melancholia 1' holds a compass or divider as though confused about what measurement may be made. The example of Durer may, perhaps, be taken a stage further by noting his view that 'what *the beautiful* is' is humanly unknowable¹⁶ and by observing that, frequently, questions about criteria lie close to the surface in aesthetic debates. Be this as it may, the examples here given (all of which come from before 1562) suggest that Calvin lived at a time when questions about criteria's justification were asked widely and in varying ways.

3. Was Calvin a sceptic?

A proposal to the effect that Calvin's thought has anything whatsoever in common with scepticism flies in the face of deeply ingrained stereotypes. Calvin is famous for expounding dogma rather than for weighing the strength of sceptical arguments, and for writing works that are hortatory rather than self-reflective. He is widely seen as preoccupied with notions of sin and salvation, to the exclusion of conceptual or philosophical or epistemological issues. Here, without attempting to tackle stereotypical views head on, I suggest that a danger of oversimplification arises if his relation to scepticism is seen in black-and-white terms. Trevor-Roper, it seems to me, fails to avoid this danger when he declares that Calvinism was 'intolerant, fundamentalist, scholastic, determinist' whereas Erasmianism was 'tolerant, sceptical, mystical, liberal'.¹⁷ As Trevor-Roper indicates, Calvin was not a sceptic. However, sceptical lines of thought appear in his work: his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* may – and, perhaps, must – be read as a text belonging to a century when issues concerning scepticism were at stake. Not the least of the difficulties in stereotypical or black-and-white interpretations is that they view Calvin in disturbingly ahistorical terms.

Because my charge against stereotypical views is one of oversimplification, I for my part must state clearly what I take the conceptual relation between Calvin and scepticism to be. The relation is, I propose, complex. Stated differently, Calvin stands related to scepticism in more than one way. Sometimes, the notion of scepticism is accorded a place in Calvin's thinking: such is the case, I suggest, with his conception of sin. At other times, he appears not to free himself from sceptical difficulties and entanglements which threaten to undermine his general position: such is the case

14 Henry Corneleus Agrippa *The Vanity of Arts and Sciences*, London 1676, pp. 142, 146.

15 Rabelais *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, Penguin Books 1955, Bk. 3, ch. 36, pp. 386-90.

16 Durer as quoted in P. Doorly 'Durer's "Melancholia 1": Plato's Abandoned Search for the Beautiful' *Art Bulletin* Vol. 86, No. 2 (2004) p 261. See also E.G. Holt (ed.) *A Documentary History of Art*, Doubleday 1957, vol. 1, p. 316.

17 H.R. Trevor-Roper *The Crisis of the Seventeenth Century*, Liberty Fund 1999, pp. 204-5. The passage is quoted, and its implications discussed, in J. Coffey *Politics, Religion and the British Revolutions: The mind of John Rutherford*, Cambridge University Press 2002, pp. 20-1.

where his discussion of faith is concerned. Finally, the overall structure of his thought has similarities with views recommended by non-protestant sceptics such as Charron and Montaigne. In the sections of my paper which follow, I discuss in turn the just-mentioned ways in which Calvin's thought and scepticism are related.

Before proceeding, I warn a reader that my discussion focuses on claims that Calvin makes rather than on paths through which he may have been influenced. A detailed study of ways through which sceptical arguments may have impinged on Calvin would be valuable, not least because difficulties standing in the way of sceptical influence suggest themselves¹⁸ – as do routes through which sceptical influence might have taken place.¹⁹ I do not attempt a discussion of influences here.²⁰

4. *Calvin's conception of sin*

In Calvin's view, sin entered the human world through the events related in the Book of Genesis: with the serpent's encouragement, Eve and then Adam ate the forbidden fruit and thereby were plunged into an existence where the fruits of sin prevailed. The fruits of sin included death and childbearing and the necessity of work; in addition, they included *more* sinning and *continual* sinning, in the form of intentions and actions of a proud and morally depraved and ungodly kind. So deep is the sin in which (following the Fall) humanity is enmeshed, individuals who rely on themselves can do nothing sufficiently sin-free to make a contribution to their salvation: humankind's only hope lies in faith – which is not humanly earned but God-given. For Calvin, famously, the gift of faith is given to some individuals but not to others.²¹

How does Calvin understand the notion of sin? Viewed in stereotypical terms, he understands sin as through-and-through a moral category. My suggestion is that matters are more complex, and that Calvin's conception of sin has what may be termed an epistemological dimension: his notion of sinful existence²² overlaps with the notion of a world where scepticism prevails. In what follows, I turn to passages where sin's epistemological dimension is emphasised; then I comment, in general

18 Calvin was trained as a humanist but – if we are to trust Hopfl's generalisation – 'neither he nor his preceptors displayed any interest in epistemology, a central concern of what is now understood by "philosophy", irrespective of school or tradition; as the humanists used the term, "philosophy" meant [merely] discourse about the good life' (H.Hopfl *The Christian Polity of John Calvin*, Cambridge University Press 1982, p. 9). If Hopfl is right, it seems that humanism cannot helpfully be seen as a route through which Calvin became alive to sceptical lines of thought.

19 A line of thought which might be explored concerns Plato, whom Calvin read throughout his life. At the end of section 4, below, I comment briefly on the importance of Plato for Calvin's thought.

20 To the above very general comments, I add that Calvin was certainly aware of explicitly sceptical writings – whether at first or second hand. In his *Concerning Scandals*, Saint Andrew Press 1978, p. 61, Agrippa and Rabelais are mentioned by name. See B. Gordon *Calvin*, Yale University Press 2011, p. 195.

21 I do not become involved in the debate on whether Calvin sees faith as a gift given to all or only to some. In the present paper, I assume the validity of the traditional double-predestination view.

22 By 'sinful existence' I understand existence where there is sinning as well as existence where the fruits of sin are experienced.

terms, on how the epistemological and moral dimensions of Calvin's conception of sin may be related.

In a passage which may surprise readers in the grip of stereotypical expectations, Calvin dismisses as 'childish' the view that sin came into the world through 'sensual intemperance': instead, he argues, its roots lie in disobedience and unfaithfulness to God.²³ What, a reader of the *Institutes* may ask, was the source of this unfaithfulness? Calvin's answer contains nuances which are difficult to capture:

When the woman, through unfaithfulness, was led away from deceit [*captione abductor*] from the word of God, her fall obviously had its origins in disobedience... At the same time, it is to be observed, that the first man revolted against the authority of God, not only in allowing himself to be ensnared by Satan's wiles, but by despising the truth, and turning to lies.²⁴

What may be said with some confidence about this passage is that it invokes a cluster of related ideas, amongst them subtlety and ensnarement and deceit and (through deceit) fraud. The origins of sin lie in unfaithfulness and/or disobedience, but the origins of these origins lie in the cluster of ideas of which deceit is a member. However construed in precise terms, the ideas are ones which connote (or include in their implications) confusion and disorientation. The meaning of the passage is, then, that sin has not 'sensual' or, even, moralistic but intellectual beginnings: the seeds of sin lie in epistemological bewilderment. Read without moralistic (or 'childish') preconceptions, the conceptualist or, so to say, intellectualist thrust of the passage stands out clearly: if Eve was disobedient, it was because she was first led away from the word of God and, if Adam disregarded God's authority, it was because he found himself unable to hold 'truth' and 'lies' apart. Satan turned Adam and Eve into the world's first sinners not by telling them of hitherto-unimagined pleasures but by drawing them into a web of confusion – in the last instance, conceptual confusion – where the distinction between real and merely apparent good could no longer be seen.

Just as themes concerning disorientation and bewilderment are present in Calvin's account of sin's beginning, so they are present in the *Institutes'* characterisation of sin itself. Satan, says Calvin, assails 'truth' with 'lies' and 'lightness' with 'darkness'; he

23 J. Calvin *Institutes of the Christian Religion* [henceforth *Inst.*] 2.1.4 (B1 pp. 212-3). [My reference to the *Institutes* are by book, chapter and paragraph. 'B' refers to the Henry Beveridge translation published (as two volumes in one) by Eerdmans in 1989. 'McNeil' in the footnote which follows refers to the the John T. McNeill translation published by Westminster Press in 1960.]

24 *Ibid.* (cf. McNeill 1 p. 145); and Latin edn. of the *Institutes* published in London in 1576, p. 102.

plunges men's minds into 'error'.²⁵ In a Fallen world, the intelligence of men 'is so smothered with clouds of darkness, so that it cannot shine forth to any good effect'.²⁶ 'Reason' – Calvin tells us, in a passage of almost Pyrrhic intensity – 'is exposed to so many forms of delusion, is liable to so many errors, stumbles on so many obstacles, is entangled with so many snares, that it is ever wandering from the right direction'.²⁷ What lies behind such passages is a conviction that 'all parts of the soul'²⁸ – the intellect (or reason) as well as sense and appetite – are under sin's dominance: whereas philosophers have traditionally seen reason as the 'lamp' of the soul,²⁹ it is (when properly regarded) part of the problem rather than the solution. If reason is part of the problem, it is to be expected that sin has, in Calvin's view, an epistemological dimension.

The passages which I have quoted, on the origin and nature of sin, go some way towards indicating that Calvin and sceptical theorists respond to related themes. Both are concerned with truth's distinction from lies and deceptions, and both see humanity as too epistemologically feeble to know where a distinction between lies and deception should be drawn. Can we move beyond these general comparisons? Can we say on the strength of the passages quoted that, like the sceptic, Calvin is sensitive to criteriological issues? Think we can. Calvin's comments impute to humanity not merely a tendency to make mistakes on specific points – a tendency that is in-principle correctable – but a loss of direction that is comprehensive and fundamental. This loss of direction either *is* or (at least) *involves* a loss of direction where questions about criteria are concerned. Adam and Eve are, according to the *Institutes*, so irretrievably lost in a maze of Satan's making that they are uncertain not merely about how agreed-upon moral standards are to be applied but about how morality itself is to be measured.³⁰ The imagery of *darkness* and *obscurity* frequently employed by Calvin in his discussion of sin suggests a condition where man not merely lacks knowledge about himself but is unable to know where he stands.

Do the passages point to the conclusion that Calvin is indebted to scepticism – at least, where his conception of sin is concerned? Three objections suggest themselves. The first is that Calvin, who sees deceit and related terms as names of sin's various aspects, pictures sin in overwhelmingly moral (as distinct from epistemological) terms. I set this objection aside because it presupposes a what is at issue, namely, that Calvin pictures sin in such-and-such a way. The second is that terms such as deceit and ensnarement refer, primarily, to moral failings; only secondarily and in specific

25 *Inst.* 1.14.15 (B 1 p. 152).

26 *Inst.* 2.2.12 (B 1 p. 233).

27 *Inst.* 2.2.25 (B 1 p. 243).

28 *Inst.* 2.2.9 (B 1 p. 218).

29 *Inst.* 2.2.2 (B 1 p. 224).

30 In effect, my discussion of the Fall suggests that, for Calvin, it was Satan who first unleashed sceptical paradox upon an unsuspecting world. In the light of Bouwsma's report that 'Cornelius Agrippa allegorises the story of the Fall into a lesson in skepticism' (W.J. Bouwsma *John Calvin: A Sixteenth Century Portrait*, Oxford University Press 1988, p. 151), my suggestion renews a much earlier point of view.

circumstances do they point to conceptual confusion. Again, I set this objection aside: my comments on the passages quoted already indicate how, I suggest, such terms feature in Calvin's work. The third possible objection is rather different, and deserves a more considered response.

The objection is to the effect that, although my comments succeed in relating Calvin to scepticism, what they show is not that Calvin drew on sceptical thinking but that he was an enemy of scepticism and all its works. Calvin and scepticism is related, the objection concedes, but in such a fashion that scepticism *ends* where Calvinism *begins*.³¹ My response to this objection is to point out that, if Calvin saw Satan as launching sin by expounding sceptical philosophy, he took the threat or challenge presented by scepticism very seriously indeed. Adam and Eve were not merely subjectively mistaken in their estimate of Satan, or the victim of tricks or sleights of hand which might later be identified and discounted; they were drawn into a maze where light really did appear indistinguishable from darkness and from which (without faith) there was no escape. In the Fallen world, appearances are not merely untrustworthy but involuntary: they are, so to say, "real appearances" which humankind has no alternative but to see.³² In the same measure as Calvin saw appearances in the Fallen world as real appearances, scepticism – I suggest – played a genuine if much deplored and regretted part in the edifice of thought which the *Institutes* present.

I turn, finally, to the question of how the moral and (as I have termed it) epistemological dimensions of Calvin's conception of sin stand related. My comments on this relation are partly clarificatory and partly exploratory: the exploratory part raises an issue that cannot be systematically addressed here.

The clarifications which I have in mind are easily given. Although I have stressed the epistemological aspect of Calvin's conceptions of sin and of sinful existence, my claim is not that the *Institutes* see sin in solely epistemological terms. My argument is not that moral and practical issues such as pride and corruption, or murder and mayhem, have merely a theoretical or conceptual significance. Calvin's notion of a sinful world and the notion of a world where sceptical arguments triumph do, I propose, overlap – but they do not coincide. Calvin (so I suggest) sees scepticism as sinful because of its consequences: it renders man incapable of finding and following a godly course of action. Whether scepticism is seen as sinful in itself irrespective of its consequences is a question which I do not discuss here.

Behind these points of clarification there lies, however, an issue which may not be dismissed so readily. Calvin distances himself from what he takes to be Plato's 'error'

31 The view that scepticism ends where Calvinism begins is endorsed by Trevor-Roper (*Crisis* pp. 217-8).

32 The power of "real appearances" was a concern in protestantism's hostility to images. See Clark *Vanities of the Eye* p. 168.

in 'ascribing all sins to ignorance'³³ – or, stated differently, his error in seeing sin as a fruit of humankind's epistemological weakness – but it is less than certain that he frees himself from Plato's view. If, as I have suggested, Satan draws Adam and Eve into a labyrinth where the distinction between real and merely apparent goods is invisible, the assumption underlying Calvin's discussion is that the first humans would have acted obediently if confusion had not been unleashed. They would, that is, have seen the good and acted appropriately. This assumption is close to Plato's. Calvin's conceptual relation to Plato is an issue not addressed systematically here.

5. Calvin's discussion of faith

In a Fallen or sinful world, contends Calvin, a merciful God extends to humanity – or, at any rate, to some of humanity – the gift of faith. Because it is impossible that God should bestow a gift deceitfully, faith is a sign of election. That is, it is a sign that the believer is a member not of the reprobate (who are predestined to an eternity of hellish torment) but of the saved. Such a view is, we may concede, internally consistent. Problems arise, however, when it is asked how and, indeed, whether the believing individual may be certain that his or her faith is genuine. The question of how actual (or “true”) and merely apparent (or “false”) faith may be distinguished is, it may be suggested, one which a believer who expects an eternity of torment or its opposite cannot but attempt to answer. How may such a distinction be drawn? The unavoidability (for the believer) of this question means that issues concerning criteria and their justification lie at the centre of Calvinist spiritual life.³⁴

Passages where Calvin discusses faith are, I propose, disappointing to a reader who hopes to find “true” and “false” faith clearly distinguished. At times, indeed, such passages seem concerned not to provide assurance but to stress difficulties that lie in a believer's way. One plausible answer to questions about faith's identification may, perhaps, be to say that a sufficient – or, at least, a necessary – condition of true faith is that it is doubt-free. Calvin resists this plausible reply, telling his reader that the saints themselves 'often stumble through unbelief'.³⁵ 'When' – he emphasizes, in a passage much pored-over by commentators – 'we say that faith must be certain and secure, we certainly speak not of an assurance which is never affected by doubt, nor a security which anxiety never assails, we rather maintain that believers have a perpetual struggle with their own distrust'.³⁶ The point is repeated some pages later: 'I am not forgetting what I formerly said, and experience brings daily to remembrance –

33 *Inst.* 1.2.25 (B. 1 p. 243).

34 It is sometimes suggested that Calvinist spiritual life is less *angst*-ridden than my comments supply. My own impression, with Calvin himself and mainly Scottish Calvinists in mind, is that the “traditional” reading of Calvin is the most persuasive. If Calvinists were uninterested in the question raised here, they must be either altruistic – *impossibly* altruistic – or deeply foolish. They were neither, as history shows.

35 *Inst.* 4.1.29 (B. 2 p. 302).

36 *Inst.* 3.2.17 (B. 1 p. 484).

viz. that faith is subject to various doubts, so that the minds of believers are seldom at rest, or at least are not always tranquil'.³⁷ Doubt, we gather from these striking passages, is intrinsic to faith: whoever has faith must 'seldom', or 'at least not always', be certain that he or she possesses it. The faith to which doubt is intrinsic is, moreover, a faith which is 'certain and secure' – or, in a word, assured. How, a reader may ask, can faith be assured *and* afflicted by doubt? One commentator grasps the nettle firmly: 'Calvin' – writes Bell – 'does not affirm a faith without assurance, but rather posits an assurance tinged with doubt'.³⁸ Bell's formulation may make Calvin's words consistent but, arguably, does so at the cost of advising a reader to affirm at the same time two incompatible things.

What follows from seeing doubt as intrinsic to faith? A general implication is that faith becomes *either* intense but anxious *or* untroubled but less than wholehearted. (Frequently, it becomes a conceptually unstable blend of the two.) What happens where issues regarding faith's criteria are raised? At first sight, this question appears difficult to answer because Calvin does not tell us in so many words what the authentic believer doubts.³⁹ However the doubts are specified, however, the implication is – I suggest – that belief and unbelief merge into one another and do so in a confusing way.⁴⁰ Stated differently, it is that a believer is not in a position to distinguish between real and merely apparent faith. Criteriological issues are not addressed and, instead, scepticism gains a foothold in Calvin's thought. In a frightening passage, the *Institutes* appear to concede that this is the case: 'experience [Calvin tells us] shows that the reprobate are sometimes affected in a way so similar to the elect, that even in their own judgement there is no difference between them'.⁴¹ If there is a criterion which makes faith what it is, it is (it seems) humanly unknowable. The passage is frightening because it teaches that an individual who is on the road to hell may have no way of knowing that this is the case.

Should we conclude, on the basis of the passages quoted, that the *Institutes'* account of faith fails to free itself from sceptical difficulties? Such a conclusion would be hasty. Having declared that there may be 'no difference' between the experiences of the elect and the reprobate, Calvin draws – whether consistently or inconsistently – a distinction between the faith of those who have 'full assurance' and the faith of those who are merely 'impressed for a time'.⁴² This distinction is, seemingly, a distinction between those predestined for heaven and those predestined for hell. In the case of the elect, we are told, God grants 'a manifestation of his present mercy' whereas the reprobate receive God's gift 'confusedly and without discernment'.⁴³ Perhaps, after all,

37 *Inst.* 3.2.37 (B. 1 p. 501).

38 M.C.Bell *Calvin and Scottish Theology*, Handsel Press 1985, p. 24.

39 Does he or she doubt God's existence? Or does he or she doubt how true and authentic faith is to be seen?

40 The merge is *confusing* because it is non-gradual: even a "tiny" doubt may blossom, and probematise the whole of faith.

41 *Inst.* 3.2.11 (B. 1 p. 478).

42 *Ibid.*

43 *Ibid.* (B. 1 p. 479).

there *is* a difference between certain (or assured) and uncertain faith? Perhaps the criterion or criteria in virtue of which faith *counts as faith* takes on clearer lines? Let us see.

In the passages just referred to, Calvin claims in effect that faith must take one of two forms. Either faith is clear and distinct and, at the same time, genuine (or 'full of assurance'); or it is confused and merely apparent. Excluded from consideration are the confusing case of faith which is clear but merely apparent and faith which is confused but real. Does this drastic simplification of the possibilities improve a believer's ability to judge whether he or she has genuine faith?

At first sight, it does. The notion of a faith that is *clear and distinct and, at the same time genuine* suggests the notion of a faith that comes stamped with its own authenticity. Calvin encourages such a suggestion when, in linking together the notions of *confused* faith and *merely apparent* faith, he construes genuine faith as a 'manifestation' of God's mercy. The notion of a self-authenticating faith appears to favour the believer's position because the criterion of faith is seen as lying in faith itself. If the criterion of faith is internal then, it appears, a believer who has faith which is genuine may – indeed, must – know that this is the case.

At this point, however, difficulties arise. Is a seeming manifestation of God's mercy an actual manifestation? Is an apparent stamp of faith's authenticity a stamp that is to be trusted? Is an experience of *seeming* clarity an experience of *actual* clarity – or is it an instance of confusion that is deep-seated? From the experience alone, we cannot know. We have reason to be doubtful, in a world beset by deceit and sin.

Such difficulties are underlined when it is stressed that, according to Calvin's simplification of possibilities, two sorts of person – namely, the clear and the confused – exist. In which group, the believing individual wishes to know, does he or she belong? A confused individual may think – perhaps, must think – that he or she thinks clearly. A clear individual knows (presumably) that he or she may be mistaken. In neither case may the individual be confident that he or she is faithful in a clear and genuine way. The point here raised is, we may note, conceptual rather than theological: if some individuals are known to be confused, and it is not known who these individuals are, all individuals must be uncertain about whether their seeming clarity is real. But the point is one which admits of a theological application. Since each and every individual may be in the grip of confusion, the criterion in virtue of which faith *counts as faith* remains (for the elect and the reprobate alike) unclear. Whether or not it is the case that, as Calvin claims, genuine faith involves a 'manifestation' of God's mercy, there is no way for a believer to know whether he or she is in the grip of illusion.

In sum, the account of faith given in the *Institutes* remains entangled with criteriological and (in terms of the definition given earlier) sceptical difficulties. In

Calvin's discussion of sinful existence, the force of sceptical arguments is acknowledged and, so to say, given a place in the picture that the *Institutes* present. In his discussion of faith, by contrast, sceptical issues are confronted but the argument concerning them is left in an unfinished – and, perhaps, unfinishable – state. The result is that the position unfolded by Calvin has an unresolved feel. A reader who sees him or herself as a believer is led by the *Institutes* to a question of more than life and death importance – and then left in suspense. A reader for whom belief is not an option remains uncertain what, exactly, 'faith' in Calvin's meaning of the term means.

6. Calvin and sceptical thought: general considerations

My comments on Calvin have, so far, concentrated on specific issues. I have argued that recognisably sceptical issues are raised by his accounts of sin and faith. The present section shifts the focus of discussion from specific to more general considerations. It takes as its starting point the observation Calvin's thought and scepticism have a similar conceptual structure.

The similarity can readily be indicated. In both cases, the human realm (including human reason and human cognition) is viewed with disquiet, and as lacking resources needed to tackle difficulties with which it is beset. In both cases, again, the notion of faith is explored as a route through which problem-ridden humanity may draw strength from a more-than-human realm. These points of similarity are (we may agree) so general that, on their basis alone, nothing helpful can be said about Calvinist and sceptical thought. In the light of my more specific discussion, however, the similarity comes to seem striking and provides a perspective in which the question of Calvin's relation to scepticism can be seen.

My discussion explores the suggested similarity. It adds flesh to the bare bones of the proposal that Calvin and scepticism viewed human reality and issues of faith in related ways. I start by considering issues of faith.

The working definition of scepticism given in section 1, above, does not require that *faith* be seen as a supplement to, or route of escape from, scepticism's challenge. On the contrary, if questions about criteria of validity turn out to be irresolvable where religious claims are concerned, the notion of faith must (from a sceptical standpoint) be set aside. My comments in section 2 on forms which sceptical-*cum*-religious questions may take prepare us, however, for the suggestion that in the sixteenth century scepticism need not be opposed to religious belief. A brief review of writers mentioned earlier as being sensitive to sceptical-*cum*-foundational issues confirms that this is the case. Erasmus, for example, supplemented his more teasing or playful works with his *Enchiridion Militis Christiani*, which sought to emancipate man from

a 'cumbrous maze' of error and bring him into the 'pure and clear light of spiritual living'.⁴⁴ Durer (whom we have quoted as asserting that 'the beautiful' is humanly unknowable) affirmed that 'only God' knows what beauty is.⁴⁵ Agrippa gave as the reason for his mocking denunciation of the arts a concern to shift attention from the 'Opinions of Men' to the 'Word of God'.⁴⁶ Later in the century, Montaigne declared – following the most explicitly Pyrrhonist passage in his writings – that man may 'mount above himself or above humanity' only if God 'proffers him...His hand'; in the last sentence of his *Apology*, he turns from scepticism to 'Christian faith'.⁴⁷ What is striking in the passage quoted from Montaigne is that it introduces 'faith' not merely as a supplement to, or rationale of, sceptical reflection. It casts faith in the role of bringing certainty and clarity that merely human wisdom lacks. The *Apology's* closing words launch on their course a *fideist* position which, in the decades which followed, became a characteristic response to the challenge of sceptical thought.⁴⁸

From the end of Montaigne's *Apology*, a small conceptual step brings us – it seems – to Calvin's *Institutes*. Such a step disregards, of course, chronological order and doctrinal allegiance. Moreover, it sets aside the circumstance that Montaigne's reference to faith is brief and open-ended and unexplained whereas Calvin's discussion is part of a massive and comprehensive tract. The step is tempting nonetheless because Calvin can be read as exploring issues which (later) Montaigne's innovation of faith raises. He can, so to say, be pictured as having laboured in the garden to which Montaigne's affirmation leads.

Read thus, Calvin's *Institutes* give warning to fideists of struggles that lie ahead. Insofar as Calvin sees faith as God-given, and as a means of rescue for individuals who inhabit a world where sin and (as part of sin) scepticism are rife, he is – to be sure – a fideist. Arguably, he is the most emphatic and clear-cut of fideists. Insofar, however, as his discussion of faith fails to free itself from criteriological difficulties, he indicates problems which a turn to faith may bring. The difficulties with which Calvin's discussion of faith remains entangled are, we may note, ones which arise from the circumstance that an individual who has faith inhabits a world of sin and confusion. So to say, they are problems that arise at the interface of godly and godless realms. Even the 'saints' who, according to Calvin, experience doubt do so because they stand in a world where sin is all-pervasive. Even the notion of a self-authenticating faith fails to allay doubt entirely, because (as I have argued) faith must be certain not merely in itself but in a world wherein, besides the saved, the

44 D.Erasmus *A Book Called in Latin Enchiridion Miltis Christiuni, and in English The Manual of the Christian Knight*, Methuen 1905 [(Kessinger reprint), p. 112.

45 See references given in note 16 above.

46 Agrippa *Vanity* 'To the Reader'.

47 Montaigne *Apology* pp. 189-90.

48 By *fideism* I understand the view that religious belief rests upon a faith that is altogether independent of human or natural reason: human or natural reason may, perhaps, prepare the way for faith but is not (even partially) the basis on which faith rests. On scepticism and fideism see Popkin *History*, *passim*.

'reprobate' exist. Problems such as those addressed (unsuccessfully) by Calvin⁴⁹ can, I suggest, be expected to arise when *any* fideistic scenario is followed through. The source of the problems lies less in peculiarities of Calvin's thinking than in the attempt to straddle disparate realms that fideism represents.

From issues concerning faith I turn to issues regarding the human realm. In a world where scepticism (as defined in section 1) is current, and where criteria of validity await answers, claims made by human or "natural" reason⁵⁰ rest on an uncertain basis. Unless external help is imported – say, by appealing for supernatural assistance – the human realm remains a place where normative claims are apt to be sapped by relativistic arguments; as a consequence, confident cognitive claims are difficult to make.

Setting Calvin against the background of such considerations, a circumstance which forces itself on a reader's attention is that, famously, the *Institutes* is drastically unclear about the extent of damage to man – or, rather, the extent of damage to the image of God in man – that has taken place as a consequence of the Fall. The unclarity is important in the present connection because, if the damage has been utter, humankind is through-and-through sinful and unaided human reason is deprived of the hope that that an exit to the 'labyrinth'⁵¹ of scepticism may be found. Two passages (on, as it happens, consecutive pages) illustrate the difficulties faced by a reader. In the first, Calvin states that the image of God in Adam was, although 'not utterly effaced and destroyed', so corrupted that 'anything which remains is fearful deformity'.⁵² In the second, which is similar, the image of God is seen as 'almost destroyed' – rather than totally destroyed – but as reduced to 'a ruin, confused, mutilated, and tainted with impurity'.⁵³ For deformity or ruination to be the outcome, how bad must destruction be? If a work accompanies powerfully rhetorical images with careful qualifications, where (a reader may reasonably ask) does the centre-point of the writer's conviction lie? Unsurprisingly, the issue of the extent to the image of God in man survives the Fall has divided commentators.⁵⁴ Here, I refer to it as means of gaining purchase on a final question that calls for attention if Calvin's thought and scepticism are to be compared.

49 Do I exaggerate the extent of Calvin's entanglement in difficulties? I do, if – as Torrance proposes – Calvin's discussion of doubt is through-and-through soteriological: that is to say, if it is a discussion of how faith may be strengthened. In Torrance's view, Calvin expounds a 'theology' (and not a philosophy) which serves a 'didactic purpose'; we can understand what Calvin is telling us only 'by viewing the whole from the point of view of our restoration or renovation in Christ' T.F.Torrance *Calvin's Doctrine of Man*, Lutterworth Press 1949, pp. 19, 21. Such an approach is suspect, because it adopts the all-too-easy route of solving *by definition* problems that Calvin, for his part, is intellectually honest enough to acknowledge.

50 By human or "natural" reason I understand reason that is unaided by revelation.

51 Calvin has frequent recourse to 'labyrinth' terminology – for example: 'Every individual mind being a kind of labyrinth', it is 'not wonderful' that 'each nation has adopted a variety of fictions' (*Inst.* 1.5.12: B. 1 p. 59). On the notion of 'labyrinth' in Calvin, see Bouwsma *John Calvin Part II*.

52 *Inst.* 1.15.4 (B. 1 p. 164). This and similar passages are quoted by Bouwsma *John Calvin* pp. 139-43).

53 *Ibid.* (B. 1 p. 165).

54 See, for the exchange from which twentieth- and twenty-first century debate arises, E.Brunner and K.Barth *Natural Theology*, Wipf 1948.

The question concerns natural law. Does Calvin's thought allow conceptual space in which notions of natural law can be entertained? If man, or the image of God in man, is utterly destroyed by the events associated with the Fall, the notion of natural law becomes conceptually insupportable. (For the purposes of the present discussion, I understand natural law as a normative order which is immanent in nature and to which humankind has access by "natural" – which is to say, non-supernatural – means.⁵⁵) Human or natural reason, and indeed nature itself, count as *without remainder* corrupt and deceitful and (to employ a characteristically Calvinist term) 'deluded'⁵⁶ with sin. In terms of my discussion of sinful existence, the situation is as though sceptical arguments concerning normative claims turn out to be irrefutable. If, on the other hand, something of the image of God in man survives – if, however ruined and deformed they have become, human capacities are not entirely powerless and a natural order remains recognisable – a case may, perhaps, be made out for a notion of natural law which has application in, at least, a limited and subordinate sense. Calvin lays the foundation for such an application when he remarks that 'in the perverted and degenerate of man there are still some sparks which show that he is a rational animal'⁵⁷ and when declares that an 'admirable light of truth' is displayed in 'profane [i.e. Classical] authors'.⁵⁸ 'How' – he asks rhetorically – 'can we deny that truth must have beamed on those ancient lawgivers who arranged civil order and discipline with so much equity? Shall we say that the philosophers, in their exquisite researches and skillful description of nature, were blind?'⁵⁹ Such passages clear a space in which, it seems, a "Calvinist" notion of natural law may be unfolded and seen as applicable in, at least, human and secular (or 'civil') concerns. Here, I do not attempt to answer the much-debated question of to what extent Calvin endorsed the notion of natural law.⁶⁰ I note, however, a conceptual difficulty which arises if, on Calvin's premises, natural law is accorded even a subordinate role: if human nature is not entirely Fallen, and if the non-Fallen aspect is what makes natural law possible, how (given that we are allegedly Fallen) can we tell reliably which aspect is which? Our ability to know natural law depends, presumably, on our ability to know which part of our nature remains godly rather than sinful, and *this* knowledge rests (if Calvin's premises are accepted) on the authority of faith. If our knowledge of natural law depends, ultimately, on faith it ceases to be *natural* law.⁶¹ Calvin's recourse to the

55 Other understandings of natural law are of course possible: the understanding referred to here is one which I take to be helpful in discussing Calvin and early modern thought.

56 *Inst.* 2.2.9 (B. 1 p. 219).

57 *Inst.* 2.2.12 (B. 1 p. 233). See also the reference to 'the image of God' at 3.7.6 (B. 2 p. 11.)

58 *Inst.* 2.2.15 (B. 1 p. 236).

59 *Ibid.* See, for an exploration of passages in Calvin which explore this line of thought, Bouwsma *John Calvin* p. 75.

60 On natural law in Calvin, see J.T.McNeill 'Natural Law in the Teaching of the Reformers' *Journal of Religion*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (1946); Hopfl *Christian Policy* pp. 52, 179-81; S.F.Schreiner *The Theater of His Glory*, Baker Books 1991, pp. 87-90; Bouwsma *John Calvin* pp. 75ff.; S.J.Grabill *Rediscovering the Natural Law in Reformed Theological Ethics*, Eerdmans 2006, pp. 86 ff.. Although its reference is not to Calvin but to 'the original reformers, not least Luther', K.Haakonssen *Natural Law and Moral Philosophy: From Grotius to the Scottish Enlightenment*, Cambridge University Press 1996, p. 36 is helpful in the present connection.

61 It ceases to be natural law at least according to the meaning of the term given earlier. See text at note 56, above.

notion of a less-than-total destruction of God's image appears to be a red herring, so far as the foundation of natural law is concerned.

Standing back from Calvin, we may once again remind ourselves how close the issues just summarised stand to questions about scepticism. Writers on the history of political theory have, in recent years, accustomed themselves to seeing scepticism as a background against which modern natural law theory unfurls. More specifically, historians have proposed that the modern natural law tradition came into being as a response to scepticism's challenge.⁶² In the light of this proposal, it may be suggested that Calvin (on the one hand) and the developing natural law tradition (on the other) shared, in their concern with scepticism, a common intellectual context and, indeed, point of departure. The routes from this point of departure differed, it is true, and did so drastically: whereas Calvin favoured fideism as a response to sin and scepticism, the modern natural law tradition set out to supply a list of minimally necessary rules 'without which' – in Jean Barbeyrac's later words – 'society could not be maintained'.⁶³ Calvin, it may be said, took issues concerning scepticism seriously, but did so by developing a line of thought which adopted an all-but-nihilistic (or all-but-totally-sceptical) view of the human realm. The natural law tradition, in contrast, avoids nihilism but embraces a pattern of argument to which “free rider” objections are vulnerable;⁶⁴ it fails, that is to say, to supply a foundation for normative claims. My aim in rehearsing these strengths and weaknesses is to indicate that, despite fundamental differences in approach, differing schools of thought at (roughly) the time of the Scottish Reformation responded to similar issues and not-unrelated themes. To Scottish thought – my paper's point of departure – I now turn.

7. Calvinist scepticism in Scotland

When the Scottish Reformation turned to Calvin and Calvinism as a source of inspiration, what complex of ideas was brought into consideration? Stating the question differently, what issues became central in a Scottish culture that was Calvinist in tone? My discussion so far has suggested that stereotypical answers to the question are to be mistrusted. Calvin and Calvinism may, at a surface level, have

62 See R. Tuck *Natural rights theories: Their origin and development*, Cambridge University Press 1979; *Philosophy and government 1572-1651*; 'The “modern” theory of natural law' in A. Pagden (ed.) *The Languages of Political Theory in Early-Modern Europe*, Cambridge University Press 1987. For a sharply critical view of Tuck's claims, see J. P. Sommerville 'Seledon, Grotius, and the Seventeenth-Century Intellectual Revolution in Moral and Political Theory' in V. Kahn and L. Hutson (eds.) *Rhetoric and Law in Early Modern Europe*, Yale University Press 2001.

63 J. Barbeyrac *An Historical and Critical Account of the Science of Morality*, London 1729, p. 3. I do not engage, here, with the controversial questions of what (if anything) is distinctively “modern” in the modern natural law tradition, and of how far Barbeyrac may be taken as a reliable commentator on the modern natural law tradition as a whole.

64 Briefly stated, the argument is to the effect that *if* we want to survive, *then* such-and-such a set of minimal rules is mandatory. The argument has little or nothing to say against attempts to take advantage of others' self-sacrifice (as long as opportunistic or free-riding action does not rock the agreed-upon boat).

been inseparable from concern with social and spiritual discipline and a preoccupation with sin but, in addition, questions about whether scepticism may be answered (and their converse, questions about how conceptual foundations may be established) sank deep roots into Scottish cultural soil. When, in 1589, John Craig – Scottish minister and author of the 'Negative Confession' or 'King's Confession' which became part of the National Covenant – advised believers to 'reade the *Institutions of M. John Calvine*, and other godly men',⁶⁵ he was recommending a book which contained much more than a narrowly edifying and (in matters of faith) consoling charge.

In this and the following section, I comment first on sceptical and then on foundational issues as they appeared in Scottish Calvinist thought. In doing so, I indicate briefly the extent to which Scottish writers felt the force of sceptical-*cum*-foundational questions raised by Calvin's work.

So powerful is the force of stereotypes, a reader of my paper may view with incredulity the suggestion that Scottish Calvinism contains sceptical motifs. Once a reader has acknowledged that sixteenth-century scepticism may take a religious form, however, evidence for the suggestion becomes easy to find. In sections 4 and 5, above, I have argued that Calvin's accounts of sin and faith raised sceptical issues and, here, I note that discussions of sin and faith in Reformation Scotland abutted on to scepticism in a similar way.

I comment first of all on sin. For Scottish Calvinists, sin did indeed possess what (in section 4) I have referred to as an epistemological dimension. In one of his earliest writings, Knox for his part declared that the ungodly 'call light, darkness: and darkness light: that which was sweete, they called bitter: and by the contrary, that which was bitter, they called sweet: seeking salvation where none was to be found'.⁶⁶ John Welch (sometime minister at Ayr, and Knox's son-in-law) emphasised the devil's deceitfulness⁶⁷ and subtlety⁶⁸ – traits which, earlier, we have seen as linked to epistemological themes – and stressed that, because 'sickness' may affect experience, one may or may not be in a position to know whether one is 'a true member of Christ'.⁶⁹ Preaching some decades later, John Gray of Glasow underlined the activities of 'Satan, the great deceiver' and noted 'how ready our hearts are to deceive us, making us entertain a delusion in stead of truth'.⁷⁰ My claim is not that the passages quoted commit Knox or Welch or Gray to an explicitly or, even, implicitly sceptical

65 J.Craig *A Short Summe of the whole Catechisme*, London 1589, 'To the Reader'.

66 J.Knox, 'The Epistle' in H.Balnaves *The Confession of Faith*, Edinburgh, 1584. (The significance of my phrase 'In one of his earliest writings' is that, when the passage was written in 1540, Knox was not yet a Calvinist. The passage is nonetheless striking as an indication of Knox's initial – and, we may presume, continuing – concerns.)

67 J.Welch *Forty Eight Select Sermons*, Edinburgh 1744, pp. 141, 165, 168.

68 *Forty Eight Sermons* pp, 141, 156, 161, 165, 168, 185, 231.

69 *Forty Eight Sermons* p. 255

70 J.Gray *Great and Precious Promises*, Edinburgh 1678, p 126; see, similarly, p 137. Gray, Todd notes (*Culture of Protestantism* p. 52), was a preacher so powerful as to raise the hairs on his audience's heads.

position. It is that they suggest a conception of sin where epistemological (rather than merely moral) issues are at stake.

I turn from sin to faith. Calvin, we saw in section 5, saw faith as intrinsically doubt-ridden. For Scottish Calvinists, experiences of faith and of doubt tended to be painfully mixed. I quote three examples of what became, in effect, something of a stock post-Reformation theme. Robert Bruce, preaching in Edinburgh in 1589, drew his listeners' attention to 'the terrible doubt, the strange pits of desparation, into which the dearest servants of God are cast' and declared that 'doubt and faith are not directly opposed'.⁷¹ Welch, referred to earlier, preached that 'faith is mixed with doubting'.⁷² (We may note that, in Welch's view, faith is *almost inescapably* mixed with doubting because 'the Child of God is subject to Falling, as long as he lives in this world':⁷³ a member of the elect is divided, and self-divided, between mundane and heavenly realms.⁷⁴) More than a century later, Thomas Halyburton, professor of divinity at St Andrews, recounted – famously and, perhaps, notoriously⁷⁵ – a number of occasions in which he was 'brought into a doubt about the truths of religion'.⁷⁶ Episodes of personal spiritual crisis need not, to be sure, entail a stance (sceptical or otherwise) in matters of theory. However, the passages quoted in this and my preceding paragraph underline the extent to which, alongside dogma, uncertainty formed a central motif in Scottish Calvinist thought.

If a discussion of faith is (as in section 5) made to turn on questions of authenticity, or *what counts as faith*, the relation between Scottish Calvinism and criteriological anxiety appears closer still. Welch, whose sermons underline Scottish Calvinist concerns in an especially pungent fashion, expresses the anxiety vividly – 'But how shall ye know if your worship be in sincerity and truth?'⁷⁷ – and raises questions about assurance frequently.⁷⁸ In the seventeenth century, the issue of assurance moved to the centre of Scottish theological concerns and chapter-and-verse illustration of interest in questions about *what counts as faith* becomes needless.⁷⁹

71 T.F.Torrance (ed.) *The Mystery of the Lord's Supper: Sermons on the Sacrement preached in the Kirk of Edinburgh by Robert Bruce in A.D. 1589*, Rutherford House/Christian Focus 2005, pp. 201-3.

72 *Forty Eight Sermons* p. 175; see, similarly, p. 215. The passage are discussed in Bell, *Calvin and Scottish Theology* p. 61.

73 *Forty Eight Sermons* p. 42.

74 See *Forty Eight Sermons* pp. 144 and 147, where the self-divided nature of a member of the elect who lives in this world is stressed.

75 The "noteriety" lies in the circumstance that the episodes of personal crisis recounted by Halyburton resembled in their timing those of the Edinburgh student Thomas Aikenhead who was executed for blasphemy at roughly the same time. Davie, who draws attention to the comparison, describes Halyburton as dying 'in his bed surrounded by pious disciples and friends' whereas Aikenhead died 'on the scaffold...surrounded by a squad of soldiers': G.Davie *The Scottish Enlightenment and Other Essays*, Polygon 1991, pp. 9-10.

76 *Memoirs of the Life of Mr. Thomas Halyburton*, Edinburgh 1714, pp. 26-7, 41-4, 52-5. (The quoted passage is on p. 26.)

77 *Forty Eight Sermons* p. 188; see, similarly, p. 90.

78 See, for example, *Forty Eight Sermons* pp. 77, 94, 97, 110, 115, 119, 120, 143, 147, 233, 254, 269, 281, 289, 291.

79 For C. Bell – referred to earlier – the history of Calvinist theology in Scotland and of the doctrine of assurance are virtually one and the same. Torrance, for whom the doctrine of assurance is rooted in a distorted and 'forensic' understanding of election and justification (T.F.Torrance *Scottish Theology: From John Knox to John McLeod*

Standing back from specific issues concerning sin and faith, and bringing broader considerations into play, a final issue concerning Scottish thought and scepticism may be noted. In section 6, above, it was suggested that Calvin's uncertainties about natural law mirrored scepticism's reservations concerning the powers of human or natural reason. Here, I observe that, in the century following the Reformation of 1560, notions of natural law did not play a central part in Scottish social and political theory. Occasionally, important works did invoke natural law as a theme,⁸⁰ but the debate on which attention was focussed – that between “presbyterian” notions of covenanting and “monarchist” notions of divine right – tended to pit human action (the speech act of promising) and supernatural choice (God's providential choice of a ruler) against one another without appealing to order of a natural kind. To this observation I add the suggestion that post-1560 Scottish culture was, owing to its Calvinist character, soil in which natural law theory could scarcely be expected to take root.⁸¹ When natural law thinking did, in the late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries, establish itself in Scotland⁸² it was, significantly, at a time when Calvinism had made its peace with the notion of natural theology – upon which natural law thinking might be made to rest.⁸³

My observation and my suggestion are scarcely controversial. Few commentators would disagree with the claim that the natural law tradition exercised a profound and complex impact on Scottish thought but did so only when the high point of militant (or hard-edged) Calvinism was passed. My suggestion becomes less uncontroversial when a link between Calvin's thought and scepticism is stipulated. Did Scottish writers of the post-1560 period refrain from endorsing natural law merely because they suffered from an inflamed and unhealthy preoccupation with guilt and sin, or because anxiety concerning scepticism was part of the complex of ideas that Calvinism represented? Was the century between 1560 and 1660 an age, in Scotland, of darkness and barbarism which ended only when the grip of Calvinism relented or was it an age where criteriological worries bit deep – and natural law appeared an

Campbell, T&T Clark 1996, p. 59), does not dispute that the doctrine was of widespread interest.

80 See, most notably, G.Buchanan *A Dialogue on the Law of Kingship amongst the Scots*, Saltire Society 2006, p. 49; James VI/I 'The Trew Law of Free Monarchies' in his *Political Writings*, Cambridge University Press 1994, pp. 64-7, 76-8; T.Craig of Riccarton *The Jus Fudale*, William Hodge & Company 1934, vol. 1, pp 105-6; W.Drummond of Hawthornden *Poems and Prose*, Scottish Academic Press 1976, p. 180; S.Rutherford *Lex, Rex*, Sprinkle Publications 1982, p. 3.

81 When the notion of natural law *did* take root in the work of an explicitly Calvinist writer, the natural order to which appeal was made might – as in Gillespie and Rutherford – be nature in its prelapsarian condition. See Coffee *Politics, Religion and the British Revolutions* pp, 152-5.

82 On natural law and its reception in Scotland, see J.W.Cairns 'The Civil Law Tradition in Scottish Legal Thought' in D.L.Carey Miller (ed.) *The Civilian Tradition and Scots Law*, Duncker & Humblot 1997; 'Importing Our Law From Scotland: Netherlands Influences on Scots Law and Lawyers in the Eighteenth Centuries' in G.G.Simpson (ed.) *Scotland and the Low Countries 1124-1994*, Tuckwell Press 1996; 'The First Edinburgh Chair in Law: Grotius and the Scottish Enlightenment', <http://law.ed.ac.uk>; 'Legal theory' in A.Broadie (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to the Scottish Enlightenment*, Cambridge University Press 2003.

83 On natural theology as a basis for natural law, see J.Moore and M.Silverthorne (eds.) *Natural Rights on the Threshold of the Scottish Enlightenment: The Writings of Gershom Carmichael*, Liberty Fund 2002, pp. 17, 23-4, 30-1, 229-31.

unserious and inadequate response to scepticism's claims? Did Scotland in the century following its Reformation refuse to sign up for the emergence of the modern natural law tradition, as described by Tuck,⁸⁴ because it was too blinkered and dogmatic or because it was all-too-clearly aware of the seriousness of issues that animated European debate? When, in the eighteenth century, David Hume employed sceptical arguments to challenge a presbyterianism that had become complacent, was he breaking new ground in Scottish theorising or – as my paper gives grounds for thinking – was he drawing upon a tradition that was already established (but which Scotland's recent turn to natural law threatened to eclipse)?

7. Calvinist foundationalism in Scotland

Early sections of my paper have stressed the suggestion that sceptical and foundational questions are two sides of the same conceptual coin: what the sceptic doubts is what the foundationalist seeks to establish and, conversely, what the searcher after foundations hopes to find is what the sceptical theorist suspects does not exist. Sceptical and foundational questions are, my earlier sections have argued, the same questions approached from (so to say) rhetorically distinct points of view. My present section returns to this suggestion. If, the section asks, sceptical questions *just are* foundational questions, and if Calvinist questions are (in part at least) sceptical questions, may it not be – indeed, *must* it not be – that the complex of ideas imported into Scotland in 1560 throws foundational issues into relief?

An attempt to answer this question is complicated by two circumstances, the first relating to Calvin's work and the second to the nature of the Scottish Reformation. In the present section, I comment on each complication before indicating the sense in which, I consider, Scottish thought of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries did indeed address foundational issues.⁸⁵

The process through which, I suggest, Calvin transmitted awareness of sceptical-*cum*-foundational questions to Scotland is complicated by the circumstance that the *Institutes* adopted a broadly apolitical stance. The work which has frequently been read as a *summa* of Calvin's thought offers, in the words of a recent commentator, an 'implicit exoneration of his [Calvin's] co-religionists from the charge of subversiveness'⁸⁶ rather than guidance about how Reformed ideas may be furthered in a public and political sense. The standpoint adopted is, in a word, discouraging to extended speculation on foundational questions. This circumstance was one which had international implications. At numerous times and places in Europe, Calvinists

84 See note 63, above.

85 My comments in the present section are solely on *political* foundations.

86 Hopfl *Christian Polity* p. 44. See also p. 173, on Calvin's relative uninterest in sorts of knowledge (other than moral knowledge) which might be relevant to an account of 'the laws and mores of the Calvinian Christian commonwealth'.

found themselves in situations where replying to a charge of subversiveness was an insufficient response. A more active and foundational stance – not infrequently, a stance that involved more than passive resistance – was needed. It was, however, the writings of second-generation Calvinists (rather than the writings of Calvin himself⁸⁷) that contained arguments through which active resistance and foundational action might be legitimised. The influence of Calvin on Scottish foundationalism must be understood as mediated through such writers (not least Knox).

A no less important factor complicating the emergence of foundationalist thought in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Scotland is one of a domestic kind. The Scottish Reformation of 1560 can only in part be seen as resulting from an upsurge in creative and foundational energy. In equal part, it came about through a roller-coaster sequence of events which started with the succession in November 1558 of Elizabeth I as (protestant) queen of England and ended with the Treaty of Edinburgh in July 1560 when French troops agreed to withdraw from Scotland and the way was paved for the meeting of the Reformation Parliament in August of the same year. The extent to which the story of the Scottish Reformation was dominated by happenstance is underlined by the circumstance that the signatories to the all-important Treaty of Edinburgh were England and France, with the protestant Scottish nobles agreeing – in William Robertson's later, carefully balanced words – to 'accept the redress of their grievances as a matter of favour'.⁸⁸ The task confronting the Reformers was, in effect, to ride the storm and the tone of the Reformation Parliament was caught by Lord Lindsay (the assembly's oldest member) in his declaration: 'I will say with Simeon, "Nunc dimitis"'.⁸⁹ The atmosphere which predominated in the assembly appears to have been less one of euphoria than relief.

All this said, foundational questions did indeed come to the fore in Scottish thought of the Reformation and post-Reformation era. They did so in ways where, as elsewhere in Europe, a wide range of issues called for frequently active response. At the time of the Scottish Reformation itself, this response was contractualist in character: although the notion of contracting was not emphasised by Calvin,⁹⁰ Knox⁹¹

87 See, however, the famous passage in the *Institutes*' final pages where active resistance to an ungodly ruler is endorsed – if it is led by a magistrate who holds authority in the to-be-resisted regime (*Inst.* 4.30.31: B. 2, pp. 674-5). Q. Skinner ('The Origins of the Calvinist Theory of Resistance' in B.C. Malament, ed., *After the Reformation*, Manchester University Press 1980) has argued that the form of resistance here referred to has roots in Lutheran (rather than specifically Calvinist) thought.

88 W. Robertson *History of Scotland*, London 1794, Vol 1 pp. 241-2.

89 Lindsay's declaration is frequently quoted, e.g. M.H.B. Sanderson *Ayrshire and the Reformation*, Tuckwell Press 1997, p. 107.

90 Calvin does indeed stress that 'free promise' is the 'foundation of faith', but the promising that he has in mind is the gratuitous and unconditional promise made by God, rather than the 'conditional promise which throws us back upon our works' (*Inst.* 3.2.29: B. 1 p. 494). For reasons of space, the present paper skirts around the issue of Calvin's relation to Federal Theology – which the just-quoted passage raises.

91 In his 1558 'Appellation...to the Nobility and Estates of Scotland' in J.Knox *Political Writings*, Cambridge University Press 1994. See also the references to a contract or covenant 'betwixt God and us' in his 1553 'Godly Letter of Warning': J.Knox *Selected Writings: Public Epistles, Treatises and Expositions to the Year 1559*, Presbyterian Heritage Publications 1995, pp. 174-6. On Knox and contracting (of covenanting) see R. Greaves 'John

– in company with, internationally, Beza⁹² and Goodman⁹³ and Hotman⁹⁴ and the authors of the (anonymous) *Vindiciae, Contra Tyrannos*⁹⁵ – made the notion of covenanting or contracting central to political obligation. (In the present context, Goodman is an especially important figure since, on Knox's invitation, he moved to Scotland in June 1560 and remained there – working closely with Knox – for a number of years.⁹⁶) Moving forward in time, we may note that, in the century following the Scottish Reformation, Scottish political theory grouped itself into two violently – sometimes literally violently – camps: oversimplifying, I have referred to as “presbyterians” and “monarchists”. Following on from the contractarianism of Knox *et al.*, the “presbyterians” in effect turned to the human speech act of promising as a source from which obligation may be generated: the high point of their approach was reached in the 'general band'⁹⁷ of the National Covenant, first signed by Scottish citizens in 1638.⁹⁸ By contrast, the “monarchists” restated divine right theory in a protestant context and appealed, in a series of polemical writings, to divine will and the notion of monarchy set out in the Old Testament (1 Samuel ch. 8) as the basis on which political obligation rests.⁹⁹ Two points may be made about this debate. One, which has been noted earlier, is that neither side appealed (other than incidentally and atypically) to natural order as a source of legitimacy: for the presbyterians, the source of legitimacy lay in a human capacity (that of promising) whereas, for the divine right theorists, legitimacy's source lay in a supernatural realm. Both sides of the debate operated within the confines of scepticism as understood by Calvin. The second point is that both “presbyterians” and “monarchists” saw an understanding of political legitimacy and obligation as raising, directly and inescapably, criteriological questions. For the presbyterians, political obligation is

Knox and the Covenant Tradition' *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (1973); J.E.A.Dawson 'The Two John Knoxes: England, Scotland and the 1558 Tracts' *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* Vol. 42, No. 4 (1991); R.A.Mason *Kingship and Commonwealth*, Tuckwell Press 1998, ch. 5.

92 T.Beza *Concerning the Rights of Rulers over their Subjects and the Duty of Subjects towards their Rulers* [1574] <http://fly.hiwaay.net>

93 C.Goodman *How Superior Powers Ought to Be Obeyed by their Subjects and wherein they May Lawfully by God's Word be Disobeyed and Resisted*, Kessinger n.d.

94 F.Hotman *Franco-Gallia*, Bibliobazaar 2007 [reprint of 1705 English trans.]

95 G.Garret (ed.) *Vindiciae, Contra Tyrannos* (Cambridge University Press 1994).

96 For a discussion of Knox's association with Goodman, see D.G.Danner 'Christopher Goodman and the English Protestant Tradition of Civil Disobedience' *Sixteenth Century Journal*, Vol. 8, No. 3(1977). For general discussion of the second-generation Calvinists here mentioned, see R.M.Kingdon 'Calvinism and resistance theory, 1550-1580' in J.H.Burns (ed.) *The Cambridge History of Political Thought 1450-1700* (Cambridge University Press 1991).

97 W.C.Dickinson and G.Donaldson, *A Source Book of Scottish History*, vol 3, pp. 95, 102.

98 See, for discussion, R.Gunn 'Speech Acts in the Scottish National Covenant of 1638' *New Waverley Papers*, Politics Series, 2000-1.

99 Writers in the “monarchist” camp include – besides James VI/I himself – J.Maxwell *Sacro-sancta Regum Majestas or, The Sacred and Royal Prerogative of Christian Kings*, Oxford 1644; A. Honyman *A Survey of the Insolent and Infamous Libel Entitled, Naphtali*, Edinburgh 1668; G.Mackenzie *Jus Regium: Or, The Just and Solid Foundations of Monarchy*, London 1684. My argument does not require me to show that “monarchist” writers endorsed Calvinism, other than at a very general and cultural level. Note, however, Patterson's judgement that King James 'was, in his last years in England, as in his early years in Scotland, a moderate Calvinist': W.B.Patterson *King James and the Reunion of Christendom*, Cambridge University Press 1997, p. 340. Patterson's comment is based, especially, on a consideration of James's 'A Meditation upon the Lord's Prayer' in James [VI and] 1, *The Workes*, London 1616, pp. 574-99.

present when it is based on a promise; the justification of promising as a criterion lies in the speech act of promising itself. For the monarchists, political obligation is present when it is based on respect for *de facto* kingship; the justification of *de facto* kingship as a criterion lies in God's providential will. In each case, a different language of political theory is articulated. In both cases, however, foundational questions are not merely admitted but given pride of place.

My paper suggests that, in more ways than one, Calvin's thought stands related to the sceptical tradition. It notes passages in the *Institutes* which, when read against the grain of prevailing stereotypes, indicate that Calvin shared concerns that were widespread in his sixteenth-century world. The later sections of my paper propose that, in the light of my suggested reading, Scottish writers indebtedness to Calvin can be seen in a fresh and, perhaps, surprising way. Far from inaugurating a dark age in Scottish philosophy and political thinking, the turn to Calvin in 1560 set in motion a process of questioning which remained alive in the writings of Hume and Smith.

