

HISTORICAL AND THEOLOGICAL STUDIES

CALVIN ON DIVINE ATTRIBUTES: A QUESTION OF TERMINOLOGY AND METHOD

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Calvin's approach to the issue of the divine essence and attributes has been subject to two rather divergent interpretations. On one hand, he has been viewed as holding to a fairly traditional approach, while on the other hand he has been seen as taking an alternative, anti-speculative approach. One recent study has even claimed for Calvin a rather unique anti-speculative methodology that presents the divine attributes as "powers" exerted *ad extra*. This article looks closely at Calvin's vocabulary of the divine attributes, examining his usage both in the *Institutes* and in his exegetical works, with attention to early modern lexicography, and concludes that although Calvin does not engage in such scholastic niceties as those concerning the distinction of attributes in the simple divine essence, he is in accord with the older tradition in assuming that the divine attributes are intrinsic to the divine essence. This conclusion does not deny that Calvin's emphasis was on the divine attributes in their *ad extra* acts and relations or that he often emphasized the relationship between the knowledge of divine attributes and Christian piety. Rather it argues that Calvin's understanding of the divine essence and attributes, including the way in which they relate to soteriology and piety, was quite traditional and that to interpret Calvin's reading of divine attributes as *ad extra* acts associated with his soteriology rather than as properties or perfections belonging absolutely or essentially to God as the foundation of all his acts, including but not limited to the work of salvation, is a significant error.

I. *Calvin on the Divine Essence and Attributes: Varied Readings*

There are two rather divergent readings of Calvin's understanding of the divine attributes. One reading, exemplified by Benjamin Warfield's lengthy study, views Calvin as standing largely in accord with traditional

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views of the divine attributes as intrinsic to the divine essence, albeit with a certain level of distaste for highly speculative argumentation.¹ In this reading, Calvin consistently grounded his approach on his understanding of Scripture and took an *a posteriori* approach to the knowledge of God.² Warfield explicitly argues that the absence of a full treatment of the divine essence and attributes in the *Institutes* was neither the result of “any peculiarity of [Calvin’s] dogmatic standpoint or even of his theological method,” but rather a matter of literary genre.³ Another reading has looked often quite restrictively to the *Institutes* and, on the basis of the movement of Calvin’s argument from Scripture to the doctrine of the Trinity by way of a very brief comment on the spirituality, immensity, and incomprehensibility of the divine essence, has concluded that Calvin avoided discussion of the divine essence and attributes.⁴

A recent essay by Forrest Buckner draws on this second line of argument and raises the issue that—against a more or less traditional reading of Calvin’s doctrine—Calvin’s preference for referring to the divine attributes as *virtutes* (which Buckner translates as “powers”) implies “those acts of God by which we may positively know God, not God’s absolute attributes,”⁵ contests the assumption “that Calvin considers all the attributes of God as belonging to the simple divine essence” and concludes that “Calvin is not speaking about metaphysical, essential attributes of God but about the positive knowledge we can have of the one true God.”⁶ Buckner also quite directly opposes Warfield’s basic thesis

¹ Benjamin B. Warfield, “Calvin’s Doctrine of God,” in *Princeton Theological Review* 7 (1909): 381–436. My thanks to Alden McCray for stimulating discussion.

² Cf. Émile Doumergue, *Jean Calvin, les hommes et les choses de son temps*, 7 vols. (Lausanne: G. Bridel, 1899–1927), 4:88–90, 119–31; Warfield, “Calvin’s Doctrine of God,” 387–91, and passim; Richard Stauffer, *Dieu, la création et la providence dans le prédication de Calvin* (Bern; Frankfurt: Lang, 1978), 105–50; Paul Helm, *John Calvin’s Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 11–34; J. Todd Billings, “The Catholic Calvin,” in *ProEcl* 20, no. 2 (2011): 120–34, here 128–29; with Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 3:205–8.

³ Warfield, “Calvin’s Doctrine of God,” 383.

⁴ Cf. Shirley Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994), 103–4; with Wilhelm Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*, trans. Harold Knight (London: Lutterworth, 1956), 54; Charles Partee, *The Theology of John Calvin* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2008), 66–67.

⁵ Forrest Buckner, “Calvin’s Non-Speculative Methodology: A Corrective to Billings and Muller on Calvin’s Divine Attributes,” in *Calvinus Pastor Ecclesiae: Papers of the Eleventh International Congress on Calvin Research*, ed. Herman Selderhius (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2016), 241–42.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 242. Note that Buckner’s denial of metaphysical issues in Calvin’s expositions is rather indeterminate and unqualified, in contrast to Warfield’s careful statement. Warfield (“Calvin’s Doctrine of God,” 387) indicates that Calvin’s approach did not make “the attributes of God, metaphysically determined, the starting-point of a body of teaching deduced from them by quasi-mathematical reasoning” and did not follow an *a priori* approach. In a most basic sense, however, any identification of the essence of an infinite, spiritual being will necessarily be metaphysical—and essence, to which Calvin frequently refers and consistently explains in terms of various divine attributes, is itself not a “speculative” issue in the negative sense of the word. The “essence” question is about *quidditas* and asks, quite simply, “what is it?”

arguing that Calvin's approach to the attributes arose from a highly distinctive "non-speculative method."⁷

Buckner's argument raises two basic issues: first, how ought Calvin's typical reference to divine attributes as *virtutes* to be translated and second, regardless of the term employed in translation, how should it be understood? Much of Buckner's analysis is commendable, notably his analysis of the piety of Calvin's exposition of texts related to the doctrine of God, but there is also a series of problems that can be noted in his argumentation that undermine his stated conclusions. On one hand, he does not properly represent the arguments that he critiques. On the other hand, he bases his critique largely on a particular and somewhat disputable reading of Calvin's usages of the term *virtus* as his preferred reference to divine attributes, he ignores Calvin's references to attributes that would not typically be identified as *virtutes*, and he largely disregards the actual character of Calvin's often fairly extended comments on the divine essence.

First, then, Buckner notes that Calvin is not concerned with "the logical relations or ordering of attributes,"⁸ but neither of the essays that he critiques made that claim—in fact both indicated that Calvin did not engage in this sort of exercise.⁹ Similarly, he argues that Calvin's commentaries do not "incorporate extensive speculation regarding God's absolute properties,"¹⁰ but neither was this claimed by the essays that he critiques. His underlying point is that Calvin emphasized relational attributes as elicited from his exegesis of the biblical text, also not a point at issue—in fact a point emphasized by the essays with which he disagrees. Buckner also objects to the statement that the compilation of a theology out of Calvin's commentaries would potentially include "a rather vast discussion of divine attributes"¹¹ with the comment that Calvin's commentaries and lectures "do not include vast discussions of God's attributes, nor do they incorporate speculation regarding God's absolute perfections"—despite the fact that the statements to which he objects made neither of these claims. It is not that the commentaries were said to contain vast discussions of attributes—rather that a vast discussion could be compiled out of the commentaries (and, we add, lectures and sermons), where Calvin provided "a considerable mass of materials for the biblical discussion of divine attributes."¹²

Second, there is the issue of understanding Calvin's meaning. Much of Buckner's argumentation rests on his observation that the standard translation of Calvin's comment on Rom 1:20 problematically rendered *virtutes* as "attributes." *Virtutes*, as used in the early modern era, can be rendered by such

⁷ Buckner, "Calvin's Non-Speculative Methodology," 237, 242.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 242.

⁹ Cf. Billings, "Catholic Calvin," 128–29, with Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:207.

¹⁰ Buckner, "Calvin's Non-Speculative Methodology," 237.

¹¹ Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:207.

¹² Cf. *ibid.* with Billings, "Catholic Calvin," 129.

terms as powers, strengths, potencies, excellencies, or perfections. Various of Calvin's translators followed the option of "perfections," a standard reference to divine attributes and, in some cases simply chose to render *virtutes* as "attributes." Buckner argues that *virtutes* ought to be rendered differently—and he, like Battles, elected "powers" as the proper translation.¹³ This reading leads him to contest the recent scholarship on one particular point, namely, that in regarding Calvin as holding a traditional conception of the divine attributes, despite all of the stated qualifiers noted above, the scholarship fails to do justice to Calvin's "non-speculative method" according to which "powers" are to be understood as "those acts of God by which we may positively know God," or as "relative, personal attributes of God," and not as "metaphysical, essential attributes."¹⁴ Whereas Buckner's rendering of *virtutes* as "powers" represents an arguable translation of Calvin's term, his further interpretation of powers is quite misleading. In what follows, I propose to show that Buckner's interpretation falls short and that a proper understanding of Calvin's usage of *virtutes* remains within the traditional readings of divine attributes as essential (and accordingly metaphysical) properties, as argued in an *a posteriori* manner and in a somewhat imprecise relationship to the standard categories of absolute and relative attributes or primary attributes and attributes respecting operations of intellect and will.

1. Calvin's Terminology and Enumeration of Attributes

When Calvin wrote of the divine attributes, he most frequently identified them as *virtutes*,¹⁵ but also sometimes *propria*,¹⁶ and *epitheta*.¹⁷ Similarly, in French he employed the terms *vertus*, *tiltres*, *qualitez*, and *proprietez*, with *vertus* as his most frequent usage. Calvin also used the verb "to attribute" with reference to the predication of divine qualities: in the French of his Deuteronomy sermons, he asks how we ought to conceive of God beyond the word "God" and

¹³ Ford Lewis Battles, "Virtutes Dei: Theatrum Mundi," in Battles, *Interpreting John Calvin*, ed. Robert Benedetto (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 223–33.

¹⁴ Buckner, "Calvin's Non-Speculative Methodology," 234, 241–42. Note that the proper distinction is between absolute and relative attributes, not between essential and relative, given that all of God's attributes are essential. In addition, Buckner incorrectly identifies personal with relative attributes: whereas relative attributes are attributes of egress, the "personal" attributes refer to Trinitarian properties.

¹⁵ E.g., Calvin, *Commentarii in Isaiam prophetam*, Isa 43:21, in *Joannis Calvini opera quae supersunt omnia*, ed. G. Baum, E. Cunitz, and E. Reuss, 59 vols. (Brunswick: Schwetschke, 1863–1900), vol. 37, col. 97 (hereafter *CO*); Calvin, *Praelectiones in Ezechielis prophetae*, Ezek 11:18, in *CO* 40, col. 241. I have consulted *Commentaries of John Calvin*, 46 vols. (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1844–1855), but have emended or re-translated as necessary to reflect Calvin's original Latin.

¹⁶ Calvin, *Commentarii in Isaiam prophetam*, Isa 44:15–17, in *CO* 37, col. 116; cf. *ibid.*, Isa 38:13, in *CO* 36, col. 657.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Isa 9:6, in *CO* 36, col. 197; Calvin, *Commentarius in epistolam ad Timotheum I*, 1 Tim 1:17, in *CO* 52, col. 261.

indicates that “we attribute to him his qualities [*luy attribuer ses qualitez*],” in this case that he is “mighty and terrifying.¹⁸ Similarly, he comments that everyone should “attribute” the “title” of “all-powerful” to God.¹⁹

At the beginning of the chapters on God found in his *Institutes*, Calvin comments, “What is taught in the Scriptures concerning the immense and spiritual essence of God [*immensa et spirituali Dei essentia*], should serve not only to overthrow the foolish notions of the vulgar, but also to refute the subtleties of profane philosophy.”²⁰ In the same section, Calvin adds incomprehensibility and unity to his short list of divine attributes. In his commentary on Rom 1:21, Calvin lists eternity, power, wisdom, goodness, truth, righteousness, and mercy, adding a bit further on immutability and glory.²¹ Elsewhere Calvin references the “life, wisdom, power ... righteousness, goodness, mercy” of God;²² comments on God’s “eternity and self existence ... his *virtutes* ... clemency, goodness, mercy, justice, judgment, truth”;²³ writes of “the immeasurableness of wisdom, justice, goodness, and power” to be contemplated in creation;²⁴ describes God as “beyond all place ... exalted above corruption or mutation ... of infinite magnitude or sublimity, incomprehensible essence, irresistible power, eternal immortality”;²⁵ and as having “glory ... holiness ... [and] his *virtutes*, power, goodness, wisdom, righteousness, mercy, truth”;²⁶ and he indicates that God is eternal, spiritual, infinite, incomprehensible, simple, is characterized by power

¹⁸ Calvin, *Sermons sur le Deuteronomie*, Sermon 56, on Deut 7:19–24, in *CO* 26, col. 567: “Et quel est-il? O il ne nous faut pas seulement concevoir ce mot de Dieu: mais luy attribuer ses qualitez: Qu’il est puissant, et terrible.”

¹⁹ Calvin, *Sermons sur livre de Job*, Sermon 7, on Job 1:20–22, in *CO* 33, col. 101: “L’ay dit que ceci emporte plus, d’autant qu’encores quelqu’un pourroit attribuer à Dieu toute puissance souveraine...”; cf. *ibid.*, in *CO* 33, col. 587: “tout-puissant. Quand l’Ecriture attribue ce titre à Dieu, ce n’est pas qu’il puisse faire s’il vouloit, et qu’il ne face rien, qu’il se repose au ciel: mais elle entend la puissance de Dieu avec l’effect.”

²⁰ Calvin, *Institutio christianae religionis, in libris quatuor nunc primum digesta, certisque distincta capitibus, ad aptissimam methodum: aucta etiam tam magna accessione ut propemodum opus novum haberi possit* (Geneva: Robertus Stephanus, 1559), 1.13.1, here following the English of *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3 vols., trans. John Allen, intro. by Benjamin B. Warfield (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1909), with emendation as necessary. Note that Battles here mistranslates *immensitas* as “infinity”: see Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1.5.10.

²¹ Calvin, *Commentarius in Epistolam Pauli ad Romanos*, Rom 1:21, in *CO* 49, col. 24: “Concipi Deus non potest sine sua aeternitate, potentia, sapientia, bonitate, veritatem, iustitia, misericordia.”

²² Calvin, *Institutio* (1559), 1.5.10: “vitam, sapientiam, virtutem ... justitiam, bonitatem, clementiam.” On immutability in the sermons, see Stauffer, *Dieu, la création et la providence*, 107–8.

²³ Calvin, *Institutio* (1559), 1.10.2: “ejus aeternitatem καὶ αὐτοσύαν ... ejus virtutes ... clementiam, bonitatem, misericordiam, justitiam, judicium, veritatem.”

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.14.21: “immensas sapientiae, justitiae, bonitatis, potentiae.”

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.20.40: “extra omnem locum ... supra omnem aut corruptionis aut mutationis ... infinitae magnitudinis aut sublimitatis, incomprehensibilis essentiae, immensae potentiae, aeternae immortalitatis.”

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.20.41: “gloriam ... sanctitas ... eius virtutes, potentia, bonitas, sapientia, justitia, misericordia, veritas.”

(*vertu*), wisdom and incomprehensible goodness, and rules by his will.²⁷ Calvin also assumed divine impassibility.²⁸

It is worth observing at this stage that Calvin's frequent references to the incomprehensibility of the divine essence, contrary to Buckner's reading, do not simply indicate that human beings cannot understand the divine essence and, accordingly, ought not to speculate about it, they also indicate one of the traditional absolute attributes of God, namely, incomprehensibility. Nor does the characterization of the divine essence as incomprehensible imply that it is entirely unknowable and ought not to be discussed; rather it indicates that the divine essence cannot be fully or adequately grasped by human beings—an issue of major doctrinal and pastoral importance to Calvin.²⁹ Thus, Calvin characterizes various of the divine attributes as incomprehensible, but also as revealed in Scripture—such as divine majesty,³⁰ goodness,³¹ power,³² and glory.³³ Beyond this, again quite to the contrary of Buckner's thesis, Calvin's interest on incomprehensibility as an essential attribute of God—and one, by the way, that has no *ad extra* egress and cannot be described as a “power” or as an “act”—has a profoundly practical and pastoral application.³⁴

In each of the lists of attributes in the *Institutes* (1.5.10, 1.10.2, 1.14.21, 3.20.40, and 3.20.41) as well as in the commentary on Rom 1:20 prior to the list that Calvin offers in the comment on v. 21, the terms *virtutes* and *virtus* appear in relation to divine attributes, which Ford Lewis Battles renders “power” or “powers” in all cases, noting that *virtutes* is a term for divine attributes,³⁵ and that both medieval and Reformed orthodox theologies offer expositions of attributes—something not found in Calvin's *Institutes*.

Thus, there are places where *virtutes* clearly references attributes that involve divine relationality, as in the following statement where eternity and self-existence are set first and the *virtutes* follow:

²⁷ Calvin, *Confession de foy faite d'un commun accord par les eglises qui sont dispersee en France*, §2–4, in *CO* 9, col. 741: “nous croyons en un seul Dieu, eternel, d'une essence spirituelle, infinie, incomprehensible et simple.... Nous croyons aussi que dieu, par sa vertu, sagesse, et bonté incomprehensible, a crée toutes choses.... Nous croyons que le mesme Dieu gouverne toutes ses creatures, et dispose et ordonne selon sa volunté tout se qui advient.”

²⁸ Calvin, *Sermons sur le Deuteronomie*, in *CO* 29, col. 709: “Voila donc pourquoy Dieu se nomme ialoux, non point qu'il soit sujet à nulles passions: mais c'est pour monstrier que son honneur luy est precieux.” Cf. Stauffer, *Dieu, la création et la providence*, 106–7.

²⁹ See Derek Thomas, *Calvin's Teaching on Job: Proclaiming the Incomprehensible God* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Mentor, 2004), 115–224; note esp. 154, 157.

³⁰ Calvin, *Sermons sur livre de Job*, Sermon 33, on Job 9:1–6, in *CO* 33, col. 409.

³¹ Calvin, *Confession de foy*, §4, in *CO* 9, col. 741.

³² Calvin, *Praelectionum in Ieremiam prophetam*, Jer 25:8–9, in *CO* 38, col. 478.

³³ Calvin, *Commentarii in Isaiam prophetam*, Isa 40:22, in *CO* 37, col. 22.

³⁴ Thomas, *Calvin's Sermons on Job*, 175–76, and *passim*.

³⁵ See further his rationale for this translation in Battles, “*Virtutes Dei: Theatrum Mundi*,” 223–33.

We may observe [first] the assertion of his eternity and self existence, in the repetition of that magnificent name; and then, the celebration of his *virtutes*, by which he represents to us, not of what he is in himself, but of what he is to us; that our knowledge of him may consist rather in a lively perception, than in vain and airy speculation. Here we find an enumeration of the same *virtutes* which, as we have remarked, are displayed both in heaven and on earth; clemency, goodness, mercy, justice, judgment, and truth. For *virtus* and *potentia* are comprehended under the name Elohim.³⁶

The French translation of 1560 renders both references to *virtutes* as *vertus*, but condenses the reference to *virtus et potentia* to *puissance*.³⁷ Calvin goes on to indicate that God is identified by the same titles (Latin: *epitheta*; French: *titres*) by the prophets when they explain his “holy name” and then, rather than list multiple passages, “for the present let one Psalm satisfy us, which offers a precise summary of his *virtutes*, that nothing appears to be omitted.” What is more, all of these *virtutes* or *epitheta* may be “contemplated in the creatures.”³⁸

Several observations can be made concerning the passage. In the first place, Calvin uses *virtutes* synonymously with *epitheta*, *vertus* with *titres*. This usage points away from the identification of *virtutes* as “acts.” Even so, the comment that the divine *virtutes* are all to be contemplated in the creatures, while it does, certainly, stand against an *a priori* rational speculation concerning what the divine essence is in itself, it in no way implies that the *virtutes* or *epitheta* are not to be understood as essential attributes. In fact, Calvin’s language is quite in accord with his previous statements concerning the revelation of God in the created order, where he indicates,

Moreover those potencies [*virtutes*] are most clearly portrayed: but we consider their most important meaning, their use, and the goal of our consideration of them, when we descend into ourselves, and consider by what means God displays [*exserat*] in us his life, wisdom, *virtus* and exercises [*exerceat*] toward us his righteousness, goodness, and mercy.³⁹

Here, all of the attributes listed—life, wisdom, *virtus*, righteousness, goodness, and mercy—are identified as *virtutes*, but the former three are displayed and only the latter three are exercised.⁴⁰ Particularly telling against Buckner’s reading is

³⁶ Calvin, *Institutio* (1559), 1.10.2.

³⁷ Jean Calvin, *Institution de la religion chrestienne* (Geneva: Jean Crespin, 1560), 1.10.3 (note that the sections of the 1560 French do not always correspond with the sections of the 1559 Latin).

³⁸ Calvin, *Institutio* (1559), 1.10.2: “Iisdem etiam epithetis illum insigniunt prophetae, quum ad plenum volunt sanctum ejus nomen illustrare. Ne multa congere cogamur, in praesentia nobis Psalmus unus sufficiat, in quo tum exacte summa omnium ejus virtutem recensetur, ut nihil omisum videri queat. Et nihil tamen illic ponitur quod non liceat in creaturis contemplari.” Cf. *Institution* (1560), 1.10.3.

³⁹ Calvin, *Institutio* (1559), 1.5.10: “Porro lucidissimae quum illic appareant: quorsum tamen potissimum spectent, quid valeant, quem in finem a nobis sint reputandae, tum demum assequimur dum in nos ipsos descendimus, ac consideramus quibus modis suam in nobis vitam, sapientiam, virtutem Dominus exserat, suam iustitiam, bonitatem, clementiam erga nos exercent.”

⁴⁰ Cf. Calvin, *Institution* (1560), 1.5.10: “Or combien que les vertus de Dieu sont anisi pourtraites ... Dieu deploye en nous as vie, sagesse & vertu, & eserce envers nous sa iustice, bonté & clemence.”

that *virtus*, power or potency, is one of the *virtutes* that, together with life and wisdom, is “displayed,” not “exercised.” The discovery of the attributes is clearly *a posteriori*, in their manifestation, so that, again, Calvin’s interest is not in a speculative exercise concerning the divine essence in itself, but *virtutes* are not merely acts or exercises *ad extra*: they are indicators of what *divinitas* is.

Further, concerning the meaning and translation of this particular passage, it would be oddly redundant for Calvin to identify a series of God’s attributes as “powers” and then identify one attribute among others as “power.” The problem also occurs in the lectures on Malachi. Calvin references “power, justice, and other virtues, which are evident before our eyes,” where “power” renders *potentia* and “virtues” renders *virtutes*: to render the phrase “power, justice, and other powers” would be problematic.⁴¹ A similar issue arises in *Inst.* 1.10.2:

the celebration of his *virtutes* ... an enumeration of the same *virtutes* ... clemency, goodness, mercy, justice, judgment, and truth. For *virtus* and *potentia* are comprehended under the name Elohim.⁴²

Battles saw no particular problem here and rendered all three references to *virtus* as “power,” in the last reference reversing the words and rendering *virtus et potentia* as “power and might,” despite the typical translation of *potentia* as “power.” The other three translators recognized the difficulty: Norton rendered the two references to *virtutes* as “vertues” and then rendered *virtus et potentia* as “might and power.” Allen renders the first usage of *virtutes* as “attributes,” the second as “perfections,” and then removes the contrast of *virtus et potentia* by simply indicating “power,” perhaps because he consulted Calvin’s 1560 French text. Beveridge renders the first two usages of *virtutes* as “perfections” and offers “power and energy” for *virtus et potentia*.

Similarly, in *Inst.* 3.20.41, where Calvin referenced “the glory of God ... the holiness of God’s name ... [and] his *virtutes*, power, goodness, wisdom, righteousness, mercy, truth,”⁴³ it would be rather misleading to translate *virtutes* as “powers” and then go on to render *potentia* as “power,” not only because it creates a redundancy in the English, but also and primarily because all of these predications are viewed by Calvin as intrinsic to the essence of God. Norton rendered *virtutes* as “strength” and *potentia* as “power.” Allen and Beveridge chose “perfections” as the translation of *virtus* and also rendered *potentia* as “power.” Battles departs from his own rule and renders *virtutes* as “might,” *potentia* as “power.”

⁴¹ Calvin, *Praelectionum in duodecim prophetas minores*, Mal 4:2, in *CO* 44, cols. 491–92: “potentiae, iustitiae, et aliarum virtutem quae oculis nostris obiicit.”

⁴² Calvin, *Institutio* (1559), 1.10.2.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 3.20.41: “Dei gloriam ... nominis Dei sanctitas ... fieri non potest quin se proferent ejus virtutes, potentia, bonitas, sapientia, justitia, misericordia, veritas”; cf. *Institutio* (1560), 3.20.41: “la gloire de Dieu ... la sainteté du Nom de Dieu ... il est impossible que ses vertus ne viennent en avant: assavoir puissance, bonté, sagesse, iustice, misericorde, verité.”

The question of how to translate *virtutes* also arises in Calvin's commentary on Rom 1:20: "When we arrive at this point, the divinity becomes known to us, which cannot be sustained unless with all the *virtutes* of God, since they are all included under it [i.e., under the divinity]."⁴⁴ The sixteenth-century translators of the passage rendered *virtutes* as its cognate: "vertus" in the French;⁴⁵ "vertues" in the English.⁴⁶ Calvin's nineteenth-century translators rendered *virtutes* as "attributes."⁴⁷

T. H. L. Parker noted the difficulty of assigning meaning to Calvin's use of *virtutes* and sought to resolve the issue by analyzing how Calvin translated the word into French, often as *proprietez* but also associated with *oeuvres*. Thus, the divine *virtutes* that Calvin references from Ps 145 in his comments on attributes in *Inst.* 1.10.2 are identified as *proprietez* in his French version.⁴⁸ In *Inst.* 1.5.9, *virtutes* is rendered *oeuvres* in the earlier French editions, but as *vertus* in 1560.⁴⁹ Parker concluded that the usage indicated "the exercise towards mankind of the attributes of the nature of God."⁵⁰

2. Understanding and Translating Virtus: Calvin's Language in Early Modern Context

In addition to his decision to translate *virtutes* nearly uniformly as "powers," Battles also recognized that, in several places, Calvin used *virtus Dei* as a synonym for *potentia Dei*,⁵¹ but rather than work through the lexical issues posed by this usage, he went on to offer a somewhat fanciful explanation of Calvin's preference for the term, arguing that it arose via a rather oblique reference to angels as God's *virtutes* in *Inst.* 1.14.5, in tandem with usages in the Latin New Testament that identify "praiseworthy human qualities"—and therefore supply descriptions of "every aspect of the divine-human relationship": accordingly, the *virtus Dei*, Battles claims, is also "the working of the Holy Spirit."⁵² *Virtutes*, Battles concludes, is the term for divine attributes that

⁴⁴ Calvin, *Commentary on Romans*, Rom 1:20, in *CO* 49, col. 24: "Ubi si ventum est, iam se profert divinitas: quae nisi singulis Dei virtutes nequit consistere, quando sub ea omnes continentur."

⁴⁵ Calvin, *Commentaires sur toutes les epistres de l'apostre S. Paul, et aussi sur l'epistre aux Hebreux: item, sur les epistres canoniques de S. Pierre, S. Iehan, S. Jaques, et S. Jude* (Geneva: Conrad Badius, 1561), Rom 1:20 (p. 10).

⁴⁶ Calvin, *Commentarie upon the Epistle of Saint Paul to the Romanes*, trans. Christopher Rosdell (London: For John Harison and George Bishop, 1583), Rom 1:20 (p. 13).

⁴⁷ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, trans. and ed. John Owen (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1849), 70.

⁴⁸ Calvin, *Institution* (1560), 1.10.3: "toute la somme de ses proprietez est si diligemment recitee, qu'il n'y a rien laisse derriere." Cf. Parker, *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, 53.

⁴⁹ Parker, *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, 53; cf. *Institutio* (1559), 1.5.9: "A suis enim virtutibus manifestatur Dominus"; and *Institution* (1560), 1.5.9: "Car Dieu nous est manifeste par ses vertus."

⁵⁰ T. H. L. Parker, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God: A Study in the Theology of John Calvin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 53–54.

⁵¹ Battles, "Virtutes Dei: Theatrum Mundi," 223–24.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 224.

best reflects “the dynamic, personal scriptural teaching whose consummation is in Christ himself.”⁵³

Examination of early modern lexica offers a more substantial ground for explaining Calvin’s meaning as well as an explanation for all of the translations. A glance at Francis Gouldman’s definitions of *potentia* reveals not only “might, puissance, force, ability, power, sway,” and “authority,” but also “possibility,” understood as “power to do or suffer,” and “ability.”⁵⁴ The overlapping of meaning is seen in the definition of *virtus* as “vertue, strength, swiftness, puissance, manliness, power, help, perfection, merit, desert, authority.”⁵⁵ Under “vertue,” we find *virtus, probitas, praestantia, rectum,* with “vertue or strength” defined as *facultas, efficacitas, natura.*⁵⁶ Rider, for example, gives Latin equivalents for “power” understood as “ability or force,” offering *potestas, potentia, pollentia, valentia, factio,* and *opes* in a first set of words, *vis, vires, virtus, copia,* and *connatus,* among other possibilities, under a second set. Under “Power to do or speak,” he offers *facultas* and *habentia.*⁵⁷ Similar results arise from examining English equivalents to the French *propriété* and *vertu*. *Vertu* can be rendered as “vertue, goodnesse, honestie, sinceretie, integritie; worth, perfection, desert, merit; also, valour, prowess, manhood; also, energie, efficacie, force, power, might; also, a good part or propertie, a commendable qualitie.”⁵⁸ *Propriété* is defined as “a propertie; propriete; ... also the nature, qualitie, inclination, or disposition of.”⁵⁹ The one term used by various translators to render *virtutes* that is not found in the lexica is “attribute,” but its equivalents “perfection” and “property” are consistently attested.

These definitions offer some insight into the meanings of *virtus* that account for Norton’s rationale for translating the term as either “vertue” or “power.” In the case of spiritual beings, *virtus* can mean power, which is but one “propertie” or “commendable qualitie” that such a being might possess, and it can be used as a general term to indicate any of the various *virtutes animae* or “powers” of soul understood as properties, perfections, abilities, faculties, or habits. Norton typically renders the plural *virtutes* as “vertues” when it references multiple properties and the singular as “power” when it references one property in distinction from others—leading toward the conclusion that Norton did not understand the plural form to be rightly rendered as “powers,” at least not when contrasted with “power” in the singular, and perhaps not when used as a reference to divine attributes in general.⁶⁰

⁵³ Contra *ibid.*, 224–25.

⁵⁴ Francis Gouldman, *Dictionarium etymologicum* (Cambridge: Joannes Field, 1669), s.v. “Potentia.”

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, s.v. “Virtus.”

⁵⁶ John Rider, *Bibliotheca scholastica* (Oxford: Joseph Barnes, 1589), s.v. “Vertue” and “Vertue or strength”; cf. the same definition in Gouldman, *Dictionarium etymologicum*.

⁵⁷ Rider, *Bibliotheca scholastica*, s.v. “Power, ability or force” and “Power to do or speak.”

⁵⁸ Randle Cotgrave, *A Dictionarie of the French and English Tongues* (London: Adam Islip, 1611), s.v. “Vertu.”

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, s.v. “Proprieté.”

⁶⁰ Cf. Calvin, *Praelectionum in Ieremiam prophetam*, Jer 23:23–24, in *CO* 38, col. 438.

A further way of narrowing the usages of *virtus* to a theologically applicable range of meaning is to look to the definitions in specifically theological or philosophical dictionaries of the era. Altenstaig's *Lexicon* indicates that *virtus* as used in Scripture can indicate "corporeal strength" or an "exterior act or operation" but it also can mean "an inherent principle of operation" and when understood as a moral virtue, assumes "something in the soul" present as a *habitus*.⁶¹ Altenstaig also identifies the intellectual *virtutes* as the five Aristotelian ways of knowing: wisdom, understanding, knowledge, prudence, and art.⁶² Further, following Aristotle, the intellectual and moral virtues were understood as habits or dispositions (*habitus*) and, accordingly, as "powers of the soul," *virtutes animae* or *potentiae animae*.⁶³ Power in this sense, however, is not an outward act, rather it is a resident potency in the soul.⁶⁴ This sense of *virtus* is present in the several lexica that we have already examined and it is set forth in some detail in the massive work of Matthias Martinius, who offered, among other definitions of *virtus*, "perfection" or "capacity [*habitus*]" in human beings by which they are able to act or work well. Further, he noted that *virtus* can indicate moral perfection, strength or fortitude of the soul, and, in the case of God, "divine perfection."

In plural form, moreover, *virtutes* referenced properties or potencies of the soul, with *virtutes animae* functioning as a synonym of *potentiae animae*, and indicating capacities or *habitus* such as understanding, knowledge, wisdom, justice, fortitude, magnanimity, truth, and so forth. As Martinius's lexicon defined the term, a *virtus* is a perfection or capacity (*habitus*) by which a person is capable of working or acting: quite specifically, it is not the act or work, but the inherent capacity to act or work.⁶⁵ *Potentia* could also have much the same meaning, namely, a capacity (*habitus*), power (*vis*) or faculty that is capable of acting.⁶⁶ Calvin, of course, followed the generally accepted faculty psychology of the era,⁶⁷ and, as Battles pointed out, used *virtutes* and *potentiae* synonymously. Given the fairly typical analogy made between the soul, its life, and its faculties of intellect and will in discussions of God as well as the correspondence between the *virtutes*

⁶¹ Johannes Altenstaig, *Lexicon theologicum* (Antwerp: Petrus Bellerus, 1576), s.v. "Virtus." (The first edition of this work, titled *Vocabularius theologie*, was published in Hagenau in 1517.)

⁶² Altenstaig, *Lexicon theologicum*, s.v. "Virtus intellectualis."

⁶³ Cf. Joël Biard, "Diversité des fonctions et unité de l'âme dans la psychologie péripatéticienne (XIVe-XVIe siècle)," in *Vivarium* 46 (2008): 342–67, here 344–48, 359; with Sacha Salatowsky, *De Anima: Die Rezeption der aristotelischen Psychologie im 16. und 17. Jahrhundert* (Amsterdam: B. R. Grüner, 2006), 192–93, 360; and Sander W. de Boer, *The Science of the Soul: The Commentary Tradition on Aristotle's De anima, c. 1260–c. 1360* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2013), 147, 227–52.

⁶⁴ Leon Baudry, *Lexique philosophique de Guillaume d'Ockham: Étude des notions fondamentales* (Paris: Lethielleux, 1958), s.v. "Virtus moralis": "Virtus non est alia res, sed passiones debite moderatae."

⁶⁵ Matthias Martinius, *Lexicon philologicum praecipue etymologicum et sacrum*, editio altera (Frankfurt: Thomas Matthias Goetzen, 1655), s.v. "Virtus."

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, s.v. "Potentia."

⁶⁷ Cf. Richard A. Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin: Studies in the Formation of a Theological Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 164–70.

animae and the divine attributes revealed in Scripture, we may conclude that Calvin preferred the term *virtutes* as an analogically suitable term of reference.⁶⁸

This usage, however, for all of its obvious advantages, also entailed several problems. Aquinas posed the question, "In what sense can it be posited that there are virtues in God?" and responded "divine goodness must comprehend in itself after a certain manner all *virtutes*, but none of these are predicated as a habit, as they are in us. For it is not suitable for God to be good by anything superadded to him, but by his essence, which is absolutely simple ... virtue is not therefore in God as a habit, but as his essence."⁶⁹ And further, "a habit is an imperfect actuality, as between potentiality and actuality: hence those who have habits are compared to persons asleep, but in God actuality is most perfect, and therefore the actuality in him is not like a habit or a science, but like a contemplation, which is the ultimate and perfect actuality."⁷⁰ In short, because God is essentially simple (a point on which Calvin most certainly agreed) *virtutes* can be predicated of God, indicating properties that are essential to God but also correspond analogically with the exemplifications of goodness in human beings. The divine *virtutes*, then, are relative divine attributes or attributes of divine egress.

There are two places in the *Institutes* where Calvin appears to pose a distinction between *virtutes* understood as relative or operative attributes and absolute attributes of primary actuality. Thus, in *Inst.* 1.10.2, he notes eternity and self existence and then goes on to identify clemency, goodness, mercy, justice, judgment, truth as *virtutes*. In *Inst.* 3.20.41, he first mentions glory and holiness and then identifies power, goodness, wisdom, righteousness, mercy, and truth as *virtutes*. Both places support the thesis that Calvin's usage draws by analogy on the standard conception of *virtutes animae*. By contrast, *Inst.* 1.5.10 appears to identify "life, wisdom, power (*virtus*) ... righteousness, goodness, mercy" as *virtutes*. Whereas wisdom, righteousness, goodness, and mercy would typically be viewed as *virtutes animae*, life and probably power would not. So also in the commentary on Isa 41:1, Calvin refers to "the power, goodness, and wisdom of God, and other of his *virtutes*."⁷¹ The listing in Rom 1:21, which includes eternity, potentially offers a further exception inasmuch as Calvin subsequently references divine attributes as *virtutes*, by implication identifying *aeternitas* as

⁶⁸ Cf. Randall Zachman, "Calvin as Analogical Theologian," in *SJT* 51 (1998): 162–87.

⁶⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles*, 1.92: "Quomodo in Deo ponatur esse virtutes? ... oportet ergo bonitatem divinam omnes virtutes suo modo continere, unde nullis earum sevincum habitum in Deo dicitur, sicut in nobis. Deo enim non convenit bonum esse per aliquod aliud ei superadditum, sed per essentiam suam, cum sit omnino simplex ... non est igitur virtus in Deo aliquis habitus, sed sua essentia."

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*: "habitus imperfectus actus est quasi medius inter potentiam et actum; unde et habentes habitus dormientibus comparantur, in Deo autem est actus perfectissimus, actus igitur in eo non est sicut habitus et scientia, sed sicut considerare, quod est actus ultimus et perfectus."

⁷¹ Calvin, *Commentarii in Isaiam prophetam*, Isa 41:1, in *CO* 37, col. 33: "Dei potentia, bonitate, sapientia, aliisque eius virtutibus."

a divine *virtus*.⁷² The preponderance of attributes identified as *virtutes* corresponds with the capacities typically identified as *virtutes animae*, confirming the hypothesis that Calvin drew his usage from the contemporary language of faculty psychology on the assumption that, analogically, God could be described as a being with capacities of intellect and will.

Once the probable reason for Calvin's usage is recognized, it needs also to be noted that eternity, immutability, self-existence, impassibility, infinity, immensity, magnitude, sublimity, incomprehensibility, immortality, life, glory, and holiness are not *virtutes animae*—and reference to them does appear in characterizations of the divine essence found in Calvin's commentaries, lectures, and sermons. Calvin clearly did not confine his referencing of divine attributes to those that are relative or operative. He also, on occasion, identified as *virtutes* attributes that would not have been defined as powers or potencies, namely, life,⁷³ eternity,⁷⁴ glory,⁷⁵ and probably magnitude.⁷⁶ He also used *epitheta* to reference divine attributes in the commentary on 1 Tim 1:17, where God is identified as eternal, invisible, and alone wise—one of which, wisdom, would normally be identified as one of the *virtutes* if Calvin had applied his terminology strictly and consistently.⁷⁷

One of Calvin's frequently repeated statements concerning the divine attributes is that the Scriptures do not speak "merely of the divine essence" but of various divine attributes, often for the sake of indicating God's relationship to human beings. His point is clearly not to refrain from mention of the divine essence and simply refer to works of God *ad extra*: rather Calvin's point is consistently to note that various attributes—*virtutes*—belonging to the divine essence are also operative and, as operative, are to be recognized as defining God in contexts of human worship, obedience, and so forth. In other words, as Calvin argues in the comment on Isa 41:4, the issue is not merely divine essence nor merely *ad extra* exercise or relationality—rather what God is essentially is also the basis of his relationship to creation and creatures.⁷⁸ As Calvin explicitly states in the comment on Isa 46:4, God is always the same "not only in his essence, but with respect to us."⁷⁹ So also, his comment on Isa 45:18, "When he repeats that he is God, this is not intended merely to assert his essence, but to distinguish him from all idols ... nor is this concerned only with God's eternal essence, as some think, but of all the works which belong to him alone, that no part of them may be conveyed to creatures."⁸⁰ Calvin does, therefore, write

⁷² Calvin, *Commentarius in Epistolam Pauli ad Romanos*, Rom 1:21, in *CO* 49, col. 24.

⁷³ Calvin, *Institutio* (1559), 1.5.10.

⁷⁴ Calvin, *Commentarius in Epistolam Pauli ad Romanos*, Rom 1:21, in *CO* 49, col. 24.

⁷⁵ Calvin, *Praelectiones in Ezechielis prophetas*, Ezek 11:18, in *CO* 40, col. 241.

⁷⁶ Calvin, *Commentarii in librum psalmsorum*, Ps 145:4, in *CO* 32, col. 413.

⁷⁷ Calvin, *Commentarius in epistolam ad Timotheum I*, 1 Tim 1:17, in *CO* 52, col. 261.

⁷⁸ Calvin, *Commentarii in Isaiam prophetam*, Isa. 41:4, in *CO* 37, col. 37.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, Isa 46:4, in *CO* 37, col. 156.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, Isa 45:18, in *CO* 37, col. 144: "Quod repetit se Deum esse, non tantum asserendam essentiam spectat, sed ut se discernat ab omnibus idolis ... nec enim tantum hic agitur de seterna

both of relative and of absolute, communicable and incommunicable attributes of God.

3. Calvin on the Divine Essence and Essential Attributes

Buckner attempts to drive a wedge between Calvin's teaching and a traditional doctrine of the attributes by contrasting Calvin's highly negative usage of the notion of speculation with the positive usage of Aquinas—but the attempt at contrast falls rather short when Buckner rightly defines Aquinas's understanding of "speculative knowledge" as a knowledge that "relates to divine revelation and helps lead humanity toward its end in the beatific vision," and then describes Calvin's view of speculation as an attempt to penetrate "God's incomprehensible essence" that "ignores God's gracious self-witness in Scripture and in his works."⁸¹ Quite apparently Aquinas and Calvin not only used the term utterly differently, but Aquinas's view of speculative knowledge as resting on revelation and guiding humanity has a significant affinity with Calvin's understanding of the biblical revelation and the theological task. Even so, as Stauffer pointed out, Calvin's approach to the *vertus* and *propriétés* of God, despite their different forms of expression, "echoed" that of Aquinas who consistently indicated that no one in this life can see the divine essence and that God is known through his effects.⁸²

Although Calvin declaims against the subtlety of scholastic discussion concerning God's essence,⁸³ he offers considerable discussion of the divine essence in his commentaries inasmuch as the holy name, "Jehovah," expresses "the eternity and primary essence of God"⁸⁴ or, similarly, "the eternal essence and majesty of God."⁸⁵ Calvin frequently references the essence as one and simple in relation to his understandings both of the Trinity and of the divine attributes. For example, in the Ezekiel commentary, Calvin attacks the antitrinitarians of his day in an extended section of discussion of Jehovah, arguing that when "God" is mentioned, the Trinity is to be assumed inasmuch as "where God alone is mentioned, the whole essence is understood."⁸⁶ Accordingly, when Paul (1 Tim 3:16) states that "God was manifest in the flesh," it must be inferred that "the essence of God is one" and that "therefore the entire deity was manifest in the flesh."⁸⁷ Or, further, in the next verse, "and the essence may not be

essentia Dei, ut nonnulli putant, sed de officiis omnibus quae ad ipsum solum pertinent, ne ulla ex parte ad creaturas transferantur."

⁸¹ Buckner, "Calvin's Non-Speculative Methodology," 234.

⁸² Stauffer, *Dieu, la création et la providence*, 105.

⁸³ Calvin, *Praelectiones in Ezechielis prophetae*, Ezek 1:25–26, in CO 40, col. 57.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, in CO 40, col. 53: "Dei aeternitas et prima essentia."

⁸⁵ Calvin, *Commentarii in Isaiam prophetam*, Isa 1:24, in CO 36, col. 51: "aeterna Dei essentia et maiestas."

⁸⁶ Calvin, *Praelectiones in Ezechielis prophetae*, Ezek 1:25–26, in CO 40, col. 55: "ubi simplex sit Dei mentio, intelligi totam essentiam."

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, in CO 40, col. 56: "Una est enim essentia Dei. Ergo tota deitas manifesta fuit in carne."

divided without impiety, but there must be distinction among the persons.”⁸⁸ Similar extended discussion of the unity of the divine essence occurs in Calvin’s *Congrégation* on John 1:1–5. Calvin indicates that “Word” is not in God in the way that a “counsel” is in the human mind, given that God is immutable and that, echoing a scholastic maxim, “there is no proportion” between God and humanity.⁸⁹ Calvin goes on to indicate that when the gospel makes a “distinction” between God and the Word that is with God, this is “in no way a distinction of essence” because there “is only one simple essence in [God].”⁹⁰ Calvin next examines the doctrinal term “persons,” which he notes is used to express “properties such as are in the essence of God.”⁹¹ Arguably this exposition does not correspond with Buckner’s description of a revelation “in Scripture, and ultimately in Christ” that “reveals God’s unchanging nature without disclosing God’s unknowable essence or the intra-trinitarian relations, about which ... humans need not know or speculate.”⁹² There appears to be a confusion on Buckner’s part of incomprehensibility with unknowability—in contrast to Calvin’s rather subtle point that we do not comprehend the things of God in the way that we “comprehend the things of this world,” given, among other things, the absence of proportion between infinite God and his creation.⁹³

As to the essence of God, apart from the issue of Trinity, it is also clear from the frequent remarks concerning the divine essence found in Calvin’s commentaries that, far from regarding the subject as problematically speculative, his concern was to combat a theological and religious tendency to render God distant—a “naked essence”—whether by denying God entirely, by ignoring the divine power and work, or by engaging in excessive speculation concerning the essence. The intent of his arguments is to indicate that the *ad extra* manifestation of God is a revelation of his essence—as in his comments on Exod 3:14, where Calvin indicates that the words, “I am who I am” or “I will be who I will be” are an assertion of the divine glory that belongs only to God, inasmuch as God is revealed as existing *a se ipso* and eternally.⁹⁴ He concludes that it would be unprofitable simply to contemplate God’s “secret essence”—rather the understanding ought to be directed toward the “omnipotence” of God,

⁸⁸ Ibid., Ezek 1:28, in *CO* 40, col. 60: “neque essentia nisi impie discerpitur, quamvis sit distinctio inter personae.”

⁸⁹ Calvin, *Congrégation sur la divinité de Jésus-Christ*, in *CO* 47, cols. 471–72.

⁹⁰ Ibid., in *CO* 47, cols. 472–73.

⁹¹ Ibid., in *CO* 47, col. 473. Note also that Calvin goes to considerable lengths to argue the aseity of the Son as second person of the Trinity—also a matter of divine essence that comports well with traditional expositions of the doctrine of God: on which, see Brannon Ellis, *Calvin, Classical Trinitarianism, and the Aseity of the Son* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁹² Buckner, “Calvin’s Non-Speculative Methodology,” 239.

⁹³ Calvin, *Congrégation sur la divinité de Jésus-Christ*, in *CO* 47, col. 470: “les secrets qui sont yci contenus, ne sont point declarez si ouverement que nous les puissions comprendre, comme nous comprenons les choses de ce monde.”

⁹⁴ Calvin, *Mosis reliqui libri quatuor in formam harmoniae*, Exod 3:14, in *CO* 24, col. 43: “Hoc quidem satis liquet, Deum sibi uni asserere divinitatis gloriam, quia sit as se ipso ideoque aeternus.”

specifically toward “his immeasurable potency,” that is, not a naked essence but an essence made known in revelation.⁹⁵ This pattern of speaking of the essence of God, indicating that it is in itself incomprehensible and then stating how God has been revealed, can be found in numerous places in Calvin’s commentaries, lectures, and sermons. Buckner’s comment about the passage is misleading: it is true that Calvin draws out implications for belief and piety—in this instance using Moses as an example—but his intention, well illustrated by the length of his exposition, is not to move quickly away from the notion of divine essence; rather it is to link his traditional understanding of divine essence and attributes to the needs of faith. Specifically Calvin not only discusses how the passage presents the divine essence, he adds a critique of Plato, who rightly identified God as τὸ ὄν, ultimate Being, but who failed to make clear against polytheism that “the one sole God gathers in all imaginable essences.”⁹⁶ One might even read Calvin’s comment as referencing the Thomistic view that divine essence contains the exemplars of all individual things.⁹⁷

One further example may suffice. In his exposition of Jeremiah’s polemic against idolatry, Calvin points out that idols of wood and stone misrepresent God inasmuch as they evidence no similarity to God’s “immeasurable power” or “incomprehensible essence and majesty.”⁹⁸ After his denunciation of the idols, Jeremiah turns to praise of the true God. Calvin indicates that the prophet “extolls the glory of God,” states that “Jehovah is God,” and that God sets aside “the errors of all the nations” with the “brightness” of his “majesty.” Further, Jeremiah states that “the eternal God is truth,” “content” or “satisfied in himself,” having “in [his] essence ... true and complete glory.” The prophet then adds that “God is life” since, although “God is per se incomprehensible,” he nonetheless provides us “not only with signs of his glory” but with other sensible evidences.⁹⁹ Calvin’s argument here hardly corresponds with Buckner’s assertion that Calvin did not dwell on God’s essential attributes or absolute perfections—particularly inasmuch as Calvin continues his interpretation with the comment, “Now therefore the prophet, after having spoken of the essence of God, descends to its praxis.”¹⁰⁰ Characteristic of Calvin’s approach to the

⁹⁵ Ibid., in *CO* 24, col. 44: “Et quid profuisset Mosi arcanam Dei essentiam quasi coelo inclusam speculari nisi de eius omnipotentia factus certior clypeum fiduciae sibi inde fecisset? Docet ergo Deus se umum esse sacrosancto nomine dignum, quod perperam ad alios translatum profanatur: deinde immensam suam virtutem commendat.”

⁹⁶ Ibid.: “unicum esse Dei absorbeat quascunque imaginamur essentiae.”

⁹⁷ See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, Ia, q. 44, a. 3; cf. Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles*, 1.54.

⁹⁸ Calvin, *Praelectionum in Ieremiam prophetam*, Jer 10:8, in *CO* 38, col. 69: “Quid enim simile est ligno aut lapidi cum immensa Dei potentia? cum incomprehensibili essentia et maiestate?”

⁹⁹ Ibid., Jer. 10:10, in *CO* 38, col. 71: “extollit Dei gloriam ... dicit, *Atqui Iehovah est Deus ... sibi sufficere ad omnes gentium errores ... prodierit eius maiestas, quia tantus sit eius fulgor ... Deus est veritas ... contentus est in se ipso ... Desu sit vita ... per se est incomprehensibilis: tamen non tantum signa gloriae suae nobis ponit ante oculos, sed quodammodo praebet se palpandum.*”

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., in *CO* 38, col. 72: “Nunc ergo propheta, postquam loquutus est de essentia Dei, descendit ad praxin ipsam.”

divine attributes is to indicate both that they are intrinsic to the divine essence and that they are revealed in Scripture and in the created order.

Calvin does, of course, argue against what he regarded as excessive speculation concerning the divine essence in itself: when Scripture tells us that God fills heaven and earth, it does testify that “it is true that the essence of God extends throughout the heaven and the earth, since it is infinite.”¹⁰¹ This truth, however, ought not to become the basis of “frivolous or unfruitful cogitations,” inasmuch as Scripture intends to focus on the providence and power (*potentia*) of God in order to promote true religion.¹⁰² Still, the anti-speculative comment is not a denial that the attribute, in this case infinity, is not essential, only that one ought not to speculate about this truth instead of attending to the meaning of the biblical text: Calvin’s point is not that one need not discuss or inquire concerning the divine essence but “we ought not to investigate the divine essence beyond what is appropriate.”¹⁰³ Thus, commenting on Isa 46:4, “I am the same,” Calvin indicates that “it means that God is always the same and like himself, not only in his essence, but with respect to us, so that we will perceive that he is the same.”¹⁰⁴ These texts do not point to Buckner’s all too easy thesis that Calvin adopted a unique “non-speculative methodology” that referenced divine “powers” as “acts” and argued against the discussion of “essential attributes.” Calvin clearly argued that God’s revelation, whether by display or exercise, indicated what God is, namely, God’s essence—and that theology, following the teaching of Scripture, would present both essence and attributes. Like various of his contemporaries and successors,¹⁰⁵ Calvin emphasized the connection between traditional doctrine and the life of faith. When we attempt to comprehend God, we should look to his works,¹⁰⁶ but God’s revelation in his works, as Parker reminds us, reveals him as he is in himself.¹⁰⁷

Buckner also objects to reading Calvin’s statement about the divine *virtutes* or perfections in the commentary on Rom 1:20 as “a general metaphysical

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, in *CO* 38, col. 438: “Verum quidem est, extendi essentiali Dei per coelum et terram, ut est infinita.”

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, Jer. 51:19, in *CO* 39, col. 459: “nempe non investigemus Dei essentiali supra quam par est.”

¹⁰⁴ Calvin, *Commentarii in Isaiam prophetam*, Isa 46:4, in *CO* 37, col. 156: “sed eundem, ac sui similem perpetuo Deum esse significat, non tentum in essentia sua, sed respectu nostri, ut eundem ipsi sentiamus.”

¹⁰⁵ Buckner implies a major methodological contrast, but note Wolfgang Musculus, *Loci communes sacrae theologiae* (Basel: Johannes Hervagius, 1563), 41–51 (pp. 697–800), where each, admittedly lengthy, discussion of a divine attribute rests directly on Scripture and balances the traditional doctrine with practical meditation. Among the later Reformed, note, e.g., William Perkins on divine omnipotence in his *Exposition of the Symbole or Creede of the Apostles in The Works of that Famous and Worthie Minister of Christ, in the Universitie of Cambridge, M. W. Perkins* (Cambridge: John Legat, 1603), 150–52, where, again, discussion of the essential attribute is balanced with practical application.

¹⁰⁶ Calvin, *Praelectionum in Ieremiam prophetam*, Jer 51:19, in *CO* 39, col. 459.

¹⁰⁷ Parker, *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, 54.

assertion ... that God's essential attributes somehow co-adhere in God's simple essence" on the ground that "Calvin is predominantly concerned with God's powers as known through his acts."¹⁰⁸ Leaving aside Buckner's rather unusual term "co-adhere," he is apparently objecting to a rather differently stated claim, namely, that Calvin held a "traditional view of the attributes as indivisibly and irreducibly belonging to the divine essence."¹⁰⁹ We remind ourselves of Calvin's argument: "When we arrive at this point, divinity [*divinitas*] becomes known to us, which cannot be sustained unless with all the *virtutibus* of God, since they are all included under it [i.e., under the divinity]."¹¹⁰ As if Calvin were not arguing that we have positive knowledge, gained from Scripture and the nature of God's essential attributes! Calvin is not here making a distinction among divine attributes as if some were essential and others not, nor is he speaking merely about *ad extra* exercise of attributes. Prior to this comment about *virtutes*, Calvin references *aeternitas*, *potentia*, and *gloria*, adding that God is *sine initio* and *a se ipso*; later he references the divine *aeternitas*, *sapientia*, *bonitas*, *veritas*, *iustitia*, and *miser cordia*. Presumably Calvin assumed that God possesses all of these attributes essentially and that they are not simply revealed as "acts" *ad extra*. In this particular verse, moreover, Calvin is arguing that the notion of God's divinity includes recognition that all of his *virtutes* are "included" or "contained" in *divinitas*—and the clear implication, contra Buckner, is divine simplicity, indeed, simplicity in relation not only to the understanding of absolute but also, here, particularly, the relative attributes. Calvin, after all did speak of the "one and simple divine essence,"¹¹¹ he did assume that God possesses his attributes unchangeably and perpetually,¹¹² and as Buckner admits, did include simplicity in the list of attributes in his 1559 draft of a confession for the French Reformed.¹¹³ Calvin makes similar comments elsewhere: "there is nothing more proper to God than his goodness"; Calvin wrote that without goodness, God would not be God—"all goodness is in him."¹¹⁴ The divine name Elohim indicates "power [*potentia*]" that is "included in [God's] eternal essence."¹¹⁵ So too the act of creation out of nothing points toward the eternity of God's

¹⁰⁸ Buckner, "Calvin's Non-Speculative Methodology," 242n17.

¹⁰⁹ Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:207.

¹¹⁰ Calvin, *Commentarius in Epistolam Pauli ad Romanos*, Rom 1:20, in CO 49, col. 24.

¹¹¹ Calvin, *Commentarius in evangelium Joannis*, John 5:18, in CO 47, col. 112: "una et simplici Dei essentia."

¹¹² Calvin, *Commentarius in epistolam ad Timotheum I*, 1 Tim 1:17, in CO 52, col. 261: "Epitheta, quae hic tribuit Deo, tametsi perpetua sunt, tamen proprie conveniunt loci circumstantiae. Vocat regem aeternum vel saeculorum, in quem nulla cadit mutatio: invisibilem ... solum sapientem."

¹¹³ Calvin, *Confession de foy*, §2–4, in CO 9, col. 741: "nous croyons en un seul Dieu, eternel, d'une essence spirituelle, infinie, incomprehensible et simple.... Nous croyons aussi que dieu, par sa vertu, sagesse, et bonté incomprehensible, a crée toutes choses.... Nous croyons que le mesme Dieu gouverne toutes ses creatures, et dispose et ordonne selon sa volonte tout se qui advient."

¹¹⁴ Calvin, *Sermons sur le Deuteronomie*, Sermon 55, on Deut 7:16–19, in CO 26, col. 548; also cited and discussed in Stauffer, *Dieu, la création et la providence*, 110.

¹¹⁵ Calvin, *Commentarius in Genesis*, Gen 1:1, in CO 23, col. 15.

essence.¹¹⁶ In characterizing God's counsel and wisdom as eternal, Calvin comments that God is unlike human beings inasmuch as he is immutable and, by implication, simple: "whatever is in him is of his essence and eternity."¹¹⁷ Moreover, inasmuch as in this particular place, as in the other places already noted, *virtutes* references various divine properties that are neither powers being exerted nor acts, "potencies" would appear to be the most suitable translation.

The divine essence is rendered knowable in a manner appropriate to human beings by the revelation of attributes: thus, "When Moses asserts that God is one, this is restricted not solely to his essence, which is incomprehensible, but must be also understood of his power and glory, which were manifested to the people."¹¹⁸ Similarly, "having formerly been incomprehensible in his essence, he then became openly known by the effect of his power."¹¹⁹ Or, again, "we have explained what is meant by God descending, namely, the demonstration of his power; since his essence, which fills heaven and earth, is not moved from its place."¹²⁰ This is an *a posteriori* approach to God by way of the revelation of various attributes and not a unique "non-speculative method." Far from setting aside the assumption that these attributes belong to the divine essence, Calvin reinforces the essential nature of the attributes and builds an understanding of the essence based on an understanding that divine attributes, including those denominated *virtutes*, are intrinsic to the one, simple divine essence.

II. Some Conclusions

Buckner's insistence that there is not enough comment on the divine essence and attributes in Calvin's commentaries, lectures, and sermons to elicit and construct a locus on the doctrine of God was refuted long before Buckner set pen to paper by Richard Stauffer's magnificent *Dieu, la création et la providence dans le prédication de Calvin*. And Stauffer's conclusion is clearly reinforced by the discussion of Calvin's views on the divine essence presented here. Buckner's denials of consideration of metaphysical and essential attributes in Calvin arises, most probably, from a somewhat ill-defined understanding of the meaning of "essence" and of the implications of "metaphysical." Finally, the translation of *virtus* is what leads Buckner into his mistaken interpretation:

¹¹⁶ Ibid., in *CO* 23, col. 16.

¹¹⁷ Calvin, *Congrégation sur la divinité de Jésus-Christ*, in *CO* 47, col. 471: "ce qui est en luy, est de son essence et eternité."

¹¹⁸ Calvin, *Mosis reliqui libri quatuor in formam harmoniae*, Deut 6:4, in *CO* 24, col. 263: "Quod Moses Deum unum esse asserit, non solum ad eius essentiam, quae incomprehensibilis est restringitur, sed intelligi etiam debet de virtute et gloria quae populo innotuerat."

¹¹⁹ Calvin, *Commentarius in evangelium Ioannis*, John 1:3, in *CO* 47, col. 4: "Nam quum in sua essentia prius esset incomprehensibilis, tunc eius vis effectum palam fuit cognita."

¹²⁰ Calvin, *Mosis reliqui libri quatuor in formam harmoniae*, Exod 19:12, in *CO* 24, col. 192: "Quid significet descens Dei paulo ante exposuimus, nempe demonstrationem virtutis: quoniam eius essentia quae coelum et terram implet loco non movetur."

“power” understood as *virtus* or *potentia* does not necessarily or even primarily indicate an exercise or operation and even when it does, it consistently assumes a resident capacity, in the case of God, an essential attribute or perfection. Revelation of a divine attribute or *virtus* by its display or exercise, therefore, points back to the essential attribute or *virtus* in God.

These conclusions bring us to the other focus of our study: Calvin’s understanding of divine attributes as *virtutes* and how the term ought to be understood and translated. That Calvin used the term and, indeed, favored it was not in dispute. Parker long ago established the point. What was in dispute was the meaning of the term, particularly with reference to its singular and plural usages and, by extension, with reference to the way in which the usages reflect Calvin’s approach to divine attributes in general. Here, contra Buckner (and Battles), we have noted both that the context of usage is what determines meaning and translation and that the singular and plural forms often need to be translated differently, particularly when they are juxtaposed. Translation of the plural form *virtutes* as “powers” is what led Buckner into his mistaken interpretation of *virtutes* primarily, perhaps exclusively, as *ad extra* acts of God: the primary sense of *virtus* or *potentia* is a resident capacity, in the case of God, an essential attribute or perfection, specifically one that can be exercised or displayed *ad extra*. Buckner’s misinterpretation severs the link between the *ad intra* essential attribute and the *ad extra* exercise. Given the confusion caused by “powers” we are left with three translations of *virtutes* that have merit, all three resting on early modern lexical considerations: “virtues,” “potencies,” and “perfections.” “Attributes” remains usable, albeit less desirable.

Buckner characterizes Calvin’s method of presenting and expositing the divine essence and attributes as non-speculative, soteriological, and “skeletal.” That Calvin disapproved of excessive speculation is hardly debatable. But, contrary to Buckner’s view, we have seen that Calvin’s refusal to speculate concerning the divine essence did not entail either refusal to discuss the divine essence or to refrain from concluding that the revealed attributes, perfections, or potencies of God are intrinsic to and revelations of the divine essence. What Calvin does not do is engage in a *priori* discussion of the divine essence or raise the issue of how the attributes are distinct given the assumption of divine simplicity. It is also not accurate to reduce Calvin’s reading of the divine attributes to soteriology or to describe it as offering only a “skeletal,” bare-bones framework. Calvin offers many reflections on the attributes that do not relate directly to the work of salvation but are explanatory, hortatory, and doxological. Nor does Calvin simply mention the divine essence and list attributes in the manner of offering a framework: he devotes a significant amount of space to discussing their meaning and implication. Warfield’s explanation of the difference between Calvin’s approach to the divine attributes and the approach found in some traditional theological systems as more a matter of literary genre than of substantive or methodological difference continues to ring true.