Mutable, So That He Might Fall: Why Guillaume Bignon's Flat Compatibilism Fails in Eden

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Abstract

Guillaume Bignon's *Excusing Sinners and Blaming God* is among the ablest recent defences of Calvinist determinism, and with its two conclusions I agree: theological determinism does not excuse sinners, and it does not make God culpable for their sin. The disagreement begins after that is granted. Bignon defends one modal rule for every creature in every state, and he denies that Satan, Adam and Eve, unregenerate sinners or Christians ever had a categorical ability to choose otherwise. I call that a flat account. For fallen humanity, enslaved to sin, much of it is true, and I grant it. My claim is that it fails for Adam before the Fall. It leaves out the third option the Reformed tradition actually used, a power affirmed of Adam in the divided sense and denied of every creature in the composite sense. It is reached by none of Bignon's arguments. It erases the Fall as an epoch. It collapses into theological fatalism. And, by inference, it lays the first sin at the door of God. The remedy is an asymmetric account, in which the mode of the will's freedom is constant across the states of man while its range changes at the Fall. Adam in innocence had limited ultimate freedom, with regulative and guidance control, grounded within the decree and never autonomous from God. The decree secures every event by the necessity of the consequence and replaces no creature's will as its cause. The Confession says that Adam was made mutably, so that he might fall.

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1. Introduction

Guillaume Bignon's *Excusing Sinners and Blaming God* is among the ablest recent defences of Calvinist determinism. Aku Visala, who does not share its conclusion, calls it "one of the best defences of theological compatibilism available."[1] Its two theses are that theological determinism does not excuse sinners and that it does not make God culpable for their sin. On both conclusions I agree with him. Sinners are without excuse, and God is without blame. The Reformed confessions say so, and I say so before I say anything else.

The disagreement begins after that is granted. Bignon defends one modal rule for every creature in every state. Asked whether Satan, Adam and Eve, unregenerate sinners or Christians ever had a categorical ability to choose otherwise, he answers that "Calvinists should say 'no' to all of these, and nothing bad follows from that."[2] I will call that a symmetric, or flat, account: one model of freedom applied the same way in innocence, in sin, in grace and in glory, with the decree fixing the complete created state from which every act follows. For fallen humanity, enslaved to sin, much of Bignon's account is true, and I grant it generously. My claim is that the flat account fails for Adam before the Fall. It leaves out the third option the Reformed tradition actually used. It is reached by none of Bignon's arguments. It erases the Fall as an epoch. It collapses into theological fatalism. And it makes God the author of the first sin. Something bad does follow from saying "no" for Adam and Eve.

The remedy is an asymmetric account, in which the mode of the will's freedom is constant across the states of man while its range changes at the Fall. I do not claim to prove that Bignon's position is incoherent. Each objection below is an inference from a premise he holds, together with a premise I take from Scripture and the Confession, and I try to say in each case which premise a reply would have to deny.

2. Bignon Stated Fairly

Bignon is a strong opponent because he refuses the easy caricatures. His book is a defence, not a construction. Kevin Timpe observed that it shows at most that if Calvinist determinism were true, neither human responsibility nor divine goodness would be ruled out, and Bignon agreed: "That's right. That was the aim of my book." He adds that he does not "try to prove determinism in the book."[3] Nor does he offer a full set of sufficient conditions for responsibility; that, he says, is "not

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[1] Aku Visala, review of *Excusing Sinners and Blaming God: A Calvinist Assessment of Determinism, Moral Responsibility, and Divine Involvement in Evil*, by Guillaume Bignon, *Journal of Analytic Theology* 7 (2019): 724. The book is Guillaume Bignon, *Excusing Sinners and Blaming God: A Calvinist Assessment of Determinism, Moral Responsibility, and Divine Involvement in Evil*, foreword by Paul Helm (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2018). I quote the book as it is quoted by Kevin Timpe and Aku Visala in their reviews, and I give the book's page with the reviewer's.

[2] Guillaume Bignon, "A Critical Review and Fairly Comprehensive Refutation of 'Human Freedom, Divine Knowledge, and Mere Molinism' by Timothy A. Stratton" (Association Axiome, December 2020), 42, https://theologui.blogspot.com/2020/12/response-to-tim-stratton.html, accessed October 7, 2026.

[3] Guillaume Bignon, "A Response to Kevin Timpe's Objections" (Caldwell University / Association Axiome, March 2019), 20, https://theologui.blogspot.com/2019/03/response-to-kevin-timpe.html, accessed October 7, 2026. Timpe's remark is at review, 378–79. Visala likewise calls the strategy "for the most part, defensive" (review, 721).

part of my project."[4] He defines the position he defends plainly. Calvinist determinism is the claim that "everything that comes to pass is determined, or necessitated by prior conditions," those conditions being, finally, God's providential decree and his supernatural activity.[5]

His central analytic move is a distinction between two principles of alternate possibilities. On the first, PAPAll, "a person is morally responsible for what he has done only if, all things inside and outside the person being just as they are at the moment of choice, he could have done otherwise." On the second, PAPIf, "a person is morally responsible for what he has done only if he could have done otherwise, had his inner desires inclined him to do so at the moment of choice."[6] He holds that the first is false and the second true. The first names "the categorical ability to do otherwise while holding everything in place"; the second names "the conditional ability to do otherwise if one wanted to do otherwise, which compatibilists do grant is necessary for moral responsibility."[7]

He gives two positive arguments against PAPAll, and he names their lineage in one sentence: "They're my versions of Jonathan Edwards' claim that God is praiseworthy for acting righteously even though he is unable to act unrighteously, and of Martin Luther's claim that fallen men afflicted by original sin are blameworthy for failing to live a sinless life, even though they're unable to live a sinless life."[8] The first holds that PAPAll is "refuted by the coherence of a God who is both impeccable and praiseworthy."[9] The second is a reductio. If the categorical ability were necessary for responsibility, there would be a possible world in which a man chose rightly at every step and secured God's favour without grace, which is Pelagianism; and if no such world is possible, then on that principle the fallen are not blameworthy for failing to live sinlessly, which ends in universalism.[10] He does not rest his compatibilism on Frankfurt-style cases. He thinks the "flickers of freedom" reply to them "is actually successful (and hence why I don't think Frankfurt-style cases work to establish compatibilism)."[11]

He insists that determinism is not coercion: "on theistic compatibilism, in usual cases of human free choices, God does not determine the actions of humans against their wills, but through their wills."[12] Against manipulation arguments he takes the soft line. A choice for which its maker is responsible "need not be undetermined, but it does need to be determined (assuming determinism is true) by the agent's own desires, which flow from the agent's God-given character and inclinations."[13] On Visala's report, God on this view "does not bypass humans' cognitive apparatus, nor does He coerce, blackmail or otherwise influence them externally," and Bignon draws the line in Derk Pereboom's four-case argument between the first two cases and the third.[14]

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[4] Bignon, "Response to Timpe," 10.

[5] Bignon, *Excusing Sinners*, 4–5, quoted in Kevin Timpe, review of *Excusing Sinners and Blaming God*, by Guillaume Bignon, *Faith and Philosophy* 35, no. 3 (2018): 373.

[6] Bignon, *Excusing Sinners*, 72, quoted in Timpe, review, 375, and in Visala, review, 722.

[7] Bignon, "Response to Timpe," 10.

[8] Bignon, "Response to Timpe," 11.

[9] Bignon, *Excusing Sinners*, 164, quoted in Timpe, review, 376. Timpe gives Bignon's formal version of the argument from the same chapter (review, 377).

[10] See Bignon, *Excusing Sinners*, 133–37, as summarized in Visala, review, 721; and Timpe, review, 376.

[11] Bignon, "Response to Timpe," 15 n. 33.

[12] Bignon, *Excusing Sinners*, 23, quoted in Timpe, review, 374.

[13] Bignon, *Excusing Sinners*, 37, quoted in Timpe, review, 374.

[14] Visala, review, 723, summarizing Bignon, *Excusing Sinners*, chap. 3. On the line between the cases, see Visala, review, 723; on the candidate sufficient condition, see Visala, review, 724, citing *Excusing Sinners*, 36–37.

In the second part of the book he sorts the charge that Calvinism makes God the author of sin into foggy, ambitious and timid versions. The ambitious version complains that God brings about evil, which strikes all theism; the timid complains of how he does, and Bignon argues that it "begs the question by its failure to establish that this property is in fact problematic."[15] He adds a sceptical-theist reply: the objector must carry "the heavy burden of proof of showing that it is not possible for God to have morally sufficient reasons to allow evil."[16]

What he gets right should be stated at full strength. Determinism is not coercion, and a man who sins willingly is not excused because his act stands under providence. The demand for ultimate sourcehood, pressed all the way, is a demand that the creature be the unconditioned source of his nature, his history and his being kept in being, and that is aseity, which belongs to God alone.[17] The categorical ability to do otherwise is not a necessary condition of every responsible act. God is praiseworthy and cannot sin. The will in glory is made "perfectly, and immutably free to good alone," and the saints are not less free for it.[18] The fallen are blameworthy though they cannot live without sin. The conditional ability is real: the fallen man is not prevented from a good he wants; he does not want it. Bignon's candour about the Frankfurt cases and about the defensive design of his book is a model of honest argument, and it makes his position easy to locate, since what he does not claim to prove can be named exactly.

One fairness guard must stand before any objection. Bignon is not a fatalist in the crude sense. He does not teach that what will be will be whatever anyone deliberates or chooses. On his account the creature's desires and willing are among the causes through which outcomes come about. The charge in what follows concerns the theological import of his one rule, and above all its import in Eden, where a personal God fixes the complete created state of an upright creature from which the first sin follows.

3. First Objection: The Missing Third Option

PAPAll asks whether an agent could have done otherwise with "all things inside and outside the person being just as they are at the moment of choice." Bignon glosses it as the ability to do otherwise "while holding everything in place." The question is what "everything" includes, and there are two answers.

On the first reading, everything is held in place, the decree that the act shall be included. Could the creature then do otherwise? No creature could, in any state, for no creature has the power to make the decree false. That is the denial of power in the composite sense, and every Reformed party

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[15] Bignon, *Excusing Sinners*, 190, quoted in Timpe, review, 378; on the ambitious and timid versions, see *Excusing Sinners*, 180, quoted in Timpe, review, 378.

[16] Bignon, *Excusing Sinners*, 171, quoted in Timpe, review, 378.

[17] Gerald Milton Smith, Jr., *God's Knowledge within the Decree: A Proposed Solution to the Quarrel between Divine Determinism and Libertarian Freedom* (unpublished manuscript, October 2026), §1.5.

[18] Westminster Confession of Faith 9.5, in *The Humble Advice of the Assembly of Divines, Now by Authority of Parliament Sitting at Westminster, Concerning a Confession of Faith, with the Quotations and Texts of Scripture Annexed* (London: Printed for the Company of Stationers, [1647]), 20, facsimile published by the Westminster Assembly Project, https://westminsterassembly.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/WCF-edition-3-W1429-WAPc.pdf, accessed October 7, 2026. I quote the Confession from this edition throughout, giving chapter and section with its page. The long s is printed as s; spelling and punctuation are otherwise as printed.

denies it. On the second reading, every created thing inside and outside the agent at the moment of choice is held in place: his nature, his desires, his reasons, his history, his circumstances, the command, the temptation and God's ordinary concurrence. Could the creature then do otherwise? For Adam in innocence the answer is yes. Nothing in his created antecedents made eating the only possible exercise of his will. He could have refrained in the same created circumstances in which he fell.

Bignon's own wording favours the second reading. It fixes what is "inside and outside the person" at "the moment of choice." The decree is neither. It is eternal, and it is not a created thing. The libertarians he answers mean the second reading too, for their arguments concern the past and the laws of nature, not the counsel of God. But the force of his denial of PAPAll, for a Reformed reader, comes from the first reading. No one can do otherwise than God has decreed. That is true. The move from "no creature can falsify the decree" to "no creature's created antecedents leave him a real alternative" is a transfer of necessity from the order of the First Cause into the order of second causes, and it is made without argument.

His dichotomy therefore leaves out the option the tradition actually used. The choice is not between an impossible power with the decree held fixed and a conditional power purchased by changing the agent's desires. There is a third: the same created circumstances, a real potency to the contrary in the faculty, and infallibility supplied from outside the creature's order by the First Cause. That is the scholastic distinction between the divided and the composite senses. Turretin held the will "indifferent and undetermined in the divided sense, and as to the first act," while denying that indifference in the composite sense.[19] Calvin drew the same line with the distinction between the necessity of the consequence and the necessity of the consequent: "that which God has determined, though it must come to pass, is not, however, precisely, or in its own nature, necessary." His example was the Saviour's bones, which "were capable of being broken and yet it was impossible that they should be broken."[20] Antonius Walaeus asked for more than an undetermined power. Contingency, he said, must be kept in the act itself, so "that that free principle be determined not only by a higher principle but also by itself."[21]

A conditional ability is not that. PAPIf allows a different output only by first changing the input. It says that the agent would have chosen otherwise had his desire been other, and it says nothing about whether, with the desire as it was, the faculty had a potency to the contrary. PAPIf is a true necessary condition of responsibility. It is not the freedom the Confession ascribes to Adam, and a two-option menu that omits the divided sense has not shown that the Reformed meant either of the two options on it.

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[19] Franciscus Turrettinus, *Institutio theologiae elencticae*, pars prima (Edinburgh: John D. Lowe, 1847), X.3.12; English adapted from Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., vol. 1 (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1992), 668.

[20] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1845), 1.16.9, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, https://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/institutes.iii.xvii.html, accessed October 7, 2026.

[21] Antonius Walaeus, *Consilia et epistolae*, in *Opera omnia*, vol. 2 (Leiden: Franciscus Hackius, 1643), 405. Translations from the Latin of Walaeus and of the other Latin authors quoted below are my own; the English of Turretin, Calvin and the Canons of Dort is credited in their notes.

4. Second Objection: Not Necessary Is Not Never Possessed

Grant both of Bignon's arguments. What do they establish? At most that the categorical ability is not necessary for every responsible act. God is praiseworthy without it, and the fallen are blameworthy without it. They do not establish that no creature ever had it. "Not necessary for responsibility in every case" does not imply "never possessed." The asymmetric account accepts the first and denies the second.

Notice what the two arguments cover: the necessarily good God, and the sinner in bondage. Neither concerns the one case in dispute, a creature that was neither necessarily good nor bound to sin. The confessions describe that state with care. Our first parents were created "under a possibility of transgressing, being left to the liberty of their own will, which was subject unto change."[22] Man in his state of innocency had "freedom, and power, to will, and to do that which was good, and well pleasing to God; but yet, mutably, so that he might fall from it."[23] Augustine's states, as Turretin gives them, name the difference. The liberty of sinners "is not to be able not to sin." The liberty of believers "is to be able to sin, and not to sin." "But the liberty of Adam was to be able not to sin."[24] Bignon's arguments reach the state of sin and the state of glory, and they reach God. They say nothing about the state of innocence. Yet when that state is put to him directly, he does not argue. He answers "no" for Adam and Eve, "and nothing bad follows from that." The one case neither argument reaches is the one case settled by assertion.

The assertion rests on universal determinism: if every act is fixed by sufficient created antecedents, no creature ever had the categorical ability. But Bignon says he does not try to prove determinism. In his system, then, the claim that matters most here, that Adam lacked the power to stand, is a premise and not a conclusion. The defensive design of his book protects it from the charge of failing to prove determinism, and by the same token gives no reason to accept the extension of determinism to Eden.

The argument from impeccability has a further limit. Bignon anticipates one reply to it, that God remains praiseworthy because his inability comes not from "an outside determination of his character, but an inner determination of his necessary, self-existent nature." He answers: "That's fine as a distinction, but then as I say in my book, it grants that the PAP is false."[25] I grant that it does. I am not defending the principle of alternate possibilities as a universal condition. But the reply carries the point I need. God's necessity is the necessity of a self-existent nature. The necessity Bignon ascribes to Adam would be the necessity of a nature given, and a history fixed, by another. These are not the same necessity, and an argument from the one to the other does not respect the distinction between Creator and creature. Timpe makes the same point against Bignon: God's moral perfection is compatible with his deciding to create and not to create, "and thus there are at least some categorical abilities that even God has."[26]

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[22] Westminster Confession of Faith 4.2, in *Humble Advice*, 11.

[23] Westminster Confession of Faith 9.2, in *Humble Advice*, 20; compare Second London Baptist Confession of Faith (1677/1689) 9.2.

[24] Turrettinus, *Institutio*, VIII.1.9, citing Augustine, *De correptione et gratia*; English from Turretin, *Institutes*, trans. Giger, 1:571.

[25] Bignon, "Response to Timpe," 16.

[26] Timpe, review, 376.

The argument also concerns praise, and the problem of Eden concerns blame. Susan Wolf argued that praise and blame are asymmetrical with respect to the ability to do otherwise: an agent who does right because he sees and follows the good may be praiseworthy though he could not have done otherwise, while an agent who does wrong is blameworthy only if he could have done right.[27] The theological data fit that asymmetry. God and the saints in glory are praiseworthy without the power to sin. Adam was blameworthy, and he had the power to stand. Walaeus stated the same asymmetry in the seventeenth century. He refused the comparison of God's concurrence in sinful acts with a rider on a lame horse, "for the lameness of the horse plainly follows that motion of necessity, and therefore the horse merits no punishment by its lameness." The human will moved by God does not fail of necessity, "but fails contingently and freely: whence it also comes about that it binds itself to a particular guilt in each particular vicious action before God."[28] For Walaeus an effect that follows by necessity carries no guilt, and guilt is contracted where the will fails contingently. Necessary goodness tells us nothing about whether a first evil, if necessitated, is chargeable to the one who necessitated it.

5. Third Objection: The Fall Erased as an Epoch

On PAPIf, what distinguishes Adam before the Fall from Cain after it? Both could have done otherwise had their desires inclined them to. On a flat determinism both had desires settled by antecedents that the decree fixed. PAPIf assigns them the same ability. Bignon can reply that their desires differed, Adam's being upright and Cain's evil. That reply only moves the question back to where Adam's first evil desire came from, which is the question of the fifth objection. Augustine's "able not to sin" was not a conditional ability. It was a real power in the first man not to sin, lost at the Fall and not restored to nature in this life. An analysis of ability that cannot tell the first state from the second has not explained the confessional doctrine of the Fall. It has replaced it.

The Pelagian reductio shows the same thing from another side. If the categorical ability were necessary, Bignon argues, there would be a possible world in which a man chose rightly at every step and so secured God's favour without grace. For the fallen the argument is sound, and I accept it. But then the impossibility of self-salvation is secured by the bondage of sin, which is where Luther located it, and not by the decree's determination of every volition. For Adam in innocence the argument is no reductio at all. It describes the covenant of works. In that covenant "Life was promised to Adam, and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personall obedience."[29] Benjamin Keach says that God "gave him power to stand in that happy Estate, tho he left him in a possibility of Falling to prove his Fidelity and Obedience to his Maker."[30] Nor is that Pelagianism. Adam's righteousness was created with him, not earned, and any reward would have come by "some voluntary condescension on Gods part."[31] The possibility Bignon presents as heresy is the Reformed doctrine of Adam's probation. A covenant that promises life on condition of obedience is a probation only if the condition could be kept and could be broken. On the flat rule

[27] See Susan Wolf, "Asymmetrical Freedom," *Journal of Philosophy* 77, no. 3 (1980): 151–66.
[28] Walaeus, *Consilia et epistolae*, in *Opera omnia*, vol. 2, 405.
[29] Westminster Confession of Faith 7.2, in *Humble Advice*, 15.
[30] Benjamin Keach, *The Display of Glorious Grace; or, The Covenant of Peace Opened* (London: S. Bridge, 1698), 11.
[31] Westminster Confession of Faith 7.1, in *Humble Advice*, 15.

Adam could neither keep it nor break it otherwise than he did, in any sense that belongs to Adam, and the probation becomes the outworking of a decree that already contained its result.

The argument from Luther needs the Fall in a stronger way still. The fallen man's inability is not a bare fact about him, like a congenital limit. It is penal. Adam's posterity derive corruption "by the propagation of a vicious nature [in consequence of a just judgment of God]."[32] "Sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned."[33] The principle the Reformed held is therefore not that every blameworthy act requires an alternative at the moment of the act. It is that blame requires a real alternative either at the moment of the act or at an earlier free act to which responsibility for it traces. John Martin Fischer and Mark Ravizza, who deny that responsibility requires alternatives at all, accept tracing of a parallel form. Their drunk driver, whose driving no longer issues from a reasons-responsive mechanism, is answerable because his getting drunk did, and they hold that responsibility for an act at a time requires such a mechanism "at T or some suitable earlier time."[34] Bignon's Luther argument refutes the principle at the moment of action. It does not touch the principle by tracing, because the fallen man's responsibility for his bondage traces, through the federal headship of Adam, to an act in which the alternative was real. Neither horn of the dilemma follows. The fallen cannot live sinlessly, so Pelagianism is excluded. They are blameworthy, so universalism is excluded.

Here the flat account is in difficulty. On Bignon's view Adam, too, lacked the categorical ability, so the trace ends in an act that was itself settled by sufficient antecedents the decree fixed. Tracing, in his system, does not reach a free act. It reaches the decree. Remove Adam's real alternative, and the fallen man's guilt for his bondage rests on nothing but the general claim that blame never requires alternatives, which is the claim the Luther argument was meant to support. Luther's case seemed to support it only because the confessional doctrine of the Fall was carrying the weight. The asymmetric account can say what Paul says without strain: "by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners."[35] The one man's disobedience was a free act in which obedience was possible. And because the race fell in its head, God owes salvation to none of it. "God would have done no injustice by leaving them all to perish."[36] Grace is grace because the posterity's condemnation is just, and it is just because the head of the race fell when he could have stood.

6. Fourth Objection: The Collapse into Fatalism

On the flat account every creaturely "could have done otherwise" is a PAPIf "could." The creature would have done otherwise had his desires been otherwise. That step is Bignon's own. "To say that a person has a choice understood conditionally," he writes, "is precisely to say that the person could choose otherwise, if only something (like his inner desires) had been different." He calls the conditional ability "the only analysis of choice that has so far been shown (and admitted) to be

[32] Canons of Dort III/IV.2, in Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 3, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/creeds3.iv.xvi.html, accessed October 7, 2026. The bracketed words are Schaff's, supplying *justo Dei judicio*. I quote the Canons from this translation throughout.

[33] Rom 5:12 (ESV).

[34] John Martin Fischer and Mark Ravizza, *Responsibility and Control: A Theory of Moral Responsibility* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 50; they call theirs a "tracing" approach (50–51).

[35] Rom 5:19 (ESV).

[36] Canons of Dort I.1.

necessary for moral responsibility," and he holds that the examples offered for the categorical ability "only reaffirm a PAPIf."[37] The next steps are my inferences from his determinism. His desires are fixed by his complete created state, and that state is fixed by the decree. So every creaturely "could" reduces to "had God decreed otherwise." Every real alternative in the history of the world, at the garden, at the cross and at every conversion, lies in God's options and none in the creature's powers. The Confession's "mutably, so that he might fall" then names nothing in Adam. Adam's "might fall" becomes "God might have decreed his fall or his standing," and the creature's mutability becomes a fact about God's options rather than about Adam's will. The creature's open future survives only as his ignorance of what has been settled.

That is theological fatalism, and the phrase must be used precisely. Calvin refused the Stoic label for the doctrine of providence: "we do not with the Stoics imagine a necessity consisting of a perpetual chain of causes, and a kind of involved series contained in nature, but we hold that God is the disposer and ruler of all things,—that from the remotest eternity, according to his own wisdom, he decreed what he was to do."[38] What Calvin set against the chain of causes was not a creature free of the decree but a God who decrees according to his own wisdom. The danger I call baptized fatalism is a picture in which the decree is the will of God alone, the first link in a chain that carries every choice to its end, with no contingency left in the creature.[39] In that picture the outcome does depend on what the creature wills, and so it is not fatalism in the crude sense. But what the creature wills is itself necessitated by a prior totality, and nothing in the created order settles which of two live potencies becomes act. The chain has been given a Christian first link, and that is the only thing about it that has changed.

The tradition refused that move. Turretin says that the same effect is "both necessary and contingent at once," the first "on the part of God and in relation to the decree," the second "on the part of the thing and in relation to the second and proximate causes, which could have been otherwise."[40] On the flat account the second clause is false, or true only in the PAPIf sense. But "could have been otherwise," said of the causes themselves, does not mean "would have been otherwise had the causes been changed." The decree, Turretin says, takes away "the liberty of independence" but not "the liberty of spontaneity and indifference," because its necessity is hypothetical only.[41] The Westminster Confession says the same of every event: "in relation to the fore-knowledge and decree of God, the first Cause, all things come to passe immutably, and infallibly: yet, by the same Providence, he ordereth them to fall out, according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently."[42] Infallibility is predicated in relation to the First Cause, and contingency in relation to the second. The grammar itself asks for two orders of evaluation.

A flat account converts the necessity of the consequence into the necessity of the consequent. Necessity propagates from the First Cause into the order of second causes, and the old distinction becomes verbal within a single necessitating sequence. The limit must be stated so the argument is not oversold. The necessity of the consequence can hold in every state of man without this collapse.

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[37] Bignon, *Excusing Sinners*, 84–85, quoted in Timpe, review, 375–76; and 75, quoted in Timpe, review, 376.
[38] Calvin, *Institutes*, trans. Beveridge, 1.16.8.
[39] Smith, *God's Knowledge within the Decree*, §1.2.
[40] Turrettinus, *Institutio*, IV.4.6; English adapted from Turretin, *Institutes*, trans. Giger, 1:321.
[41] Turrettinus, *Institutio*, IV.4.8; English from Turretin, *Institutes*, trans. Giger, 1:321.
[42] Westminster Confession of Faith 5.2, in *Humble Advice*, 12.

Given the decree, the act will occur. Turretin says that Adam sinned "necessarily, and freely: the former with respect to the decree and the futurition of the thing; the latter with respect to his will and the manner."[43] The objection is not to that sentence. It is to the further claim that Adam's complete created state was sufficient for his sin, so that the decree's certainty becomes the act's created necessity. The Confession's "yet so as," by which the decree neither makes God the author of sin nor takes away the "Liberty or contingencie of second Causes," can then be said only by stipulation.[44]

7. Fifth Objection: God the Author of Sin

Bignon's proposed sufficient condition is that an agent is responsible for acts determined by "the agent's own desires, which flow from the agent's God-given character" (see n. 13). Apply that condition to Adam. Adam's character was God-given, and it was upright. "God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes."[45] Yet Adam sinned. On a flat determinism his first sinful volition was the necessary result of his prior state together with its inputs: the serpent, the fruit, the woman's offer, the order of his thoughts. All of these the decree fixed. Then one of two things is true. Either Adam's upright, God-given character already contained the inclination that issued in sin, in which case that inclination was itself God-given and "upright" is equivocal. Or the inclination arose from circumstances God arranged, in which case the decree fixed both the circumstances and Adam's response to them. On either horn, the antecedents the decree set suffice for the first sin.

This is a problem of causal location, and it is not the foggy charge. It does not merely say "God is the author of sin." If the complete created state is sufficient to necessitate Adam's sinful choice, that state explains why the sin and not obedience occurs at the level of second causes. On the flat account God establishes that state, intending the outcome. Adam's will is then the proximate route of the act, but the sufficiency for the act lies in the antecedent order God established. The usual Reformed defence is that sin is a privation and that God concurs with the act as act and not with its malice. That defence locates the malice. It does not relocate the sufficiency. Augustine would not give the evil will an efficient cause at all; its cause is deficient, and to look for an efficient cause of the will's defection is like trying to see darkness.[46] The point of that refusal is that the defection is not the necessary product of the good state before it, for then the good state would be its efficient cause. Merely adding that Adam wanted it does not dissolve the problem. The Confession says that the sinfulness of every sinful act "proceedeth onely from the creature, and not from God, who being most holy and righteous, neither is, nor can be the Author or Approver of sin."[47] A model in which God establishes a created state sufficient for the first sin has a harder time saying that than a model in which God permits a contingent second cause to determine its own defect.

Nor is the objection ambitious. It does not deny that God ordains a history containing evil. It is not timid in Bignon's question-begging sense either, for it is stated from inside Reformed theology by men who affirmed an exhaustive decree. Louis Le Blanc de Beaulieu held grace efficacious of

[43] Turrettinus, *Institutio*, IV.4.8; English adapted from Turretin, *Institutes*, trans. Giger, 1:321.
[44] Westminster Confession of Faith 3.1, in *Humble Advice*, 8.
[45] Eccl 7:29 (ESV).
[46] See Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 12.6–7.
[47] Westminster Confession of Faith 5.4, in *Humble Advice*, 13.

itself and election by good pleasure, and he wrote: "But we are of this opinion, that second causes do many things in time to which they are not predetermined by God." His reason was that he could not see how God would not be the author of sin if he predetermined free causes to acts evil in themselves.[48] Benjamin Keach, a leading Particular Baptist, distinguished two ways in which things come to pass under the decree: "all things come to pass by his All-wise Providence: According to his Eternal Decree; either by his special Commission, or by his Permission; to say all things come to pass by Gods special Commission, is to make him the author of Sin."[49] Both confessions use the second word for the Fall: "This their sin, God was pleased, according to his wise and holy counsell to permit, having purposed to order it to his own glory."[50] Le Blanc and Keach do not assume that divine determination is objectionable. They affirm it of every event. Their objection is to one mode of it applied to the sinful act. That is a timid version of the objection, but it begs no question against Calvinism. It is a claim about which Calvinism the confessions teach.

The same structure undoes Bignon's soft line on manipulation. In Pereboom's second case, Professor Plum was programmed at the start of his life so that his own reasoning would produce the crime. Nothing is bypassed at the time of action. His reasoning runs its normal course.[51] What disturbs us is not bypassing but design. Another agent, intending the outcome, settled at the beginning of Plum's existence the character from which his reasoning would produce it. Theological determinism of Bignon's kind has exactly that structure, with a perfect designer. On Bignon's own placement of the line, between the second case and the third, the decree falls on the side of the second. Timpe pressed the point that if theological determinism is true, "all cases of manipulation are ultimately God-given."[52] Visala asked the sharper question: "is it not the fact that God is ultimately responsible for the agent's character the source of the problem in the first place?"[53] Bignon replies that there is "some sense of God-given-ness one can affirm about a person's naturally obtained character and desires," which cannot be affirmed of a mad scientist with electrodes, and that the critic "must convince me that no meaning of my phrase does what I want it to do."[54] I do not need to rule out every meaning. In Eden there is no fallen character for God-given-ness to name. Whatever meaning the phrase bears, an upright God-given character is either the source of the first sin or it is not. If it is, God's gift is the source of sin. If it is not, the sufficient source lies in the arrangement God made, and the design is his.

Sceptical theism does not help here. It answers the question why God permitted evil by saying that we cannot show he lacked sufficient reasons. It has nothing to say to the question whether the decree, through antecedents it fixed, necessitated the first evil volition. Bignon's model answers that question yes, and no appeal to inscrutable reasons changes the answer. Sceptical theism can

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[48] Louis Le Blanc de Beaulieu, "De concordia libertatis humanae cum decretis divinis," pars I, th. LIV, in *Theses theologicae, variis temporibus in Academia Sedanensi editae et ad disputandum propositae* (London: Moses Pitt, 1675), 454.

[49] Benjamin Keach, *God Acknowledged* (London: W. and J. Marshal, 1696), 7.

[50] Westminster Confession of Faith 6.1, in *Humble Advice*, 14; compare Second London Baptist Confession 6.1, where our first parents, "without any compulsion, did wilfully transgress the Law of their Creation."

[51] See Derk Pereboom, *Living without Free Will* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 110–17; and Pereboom, *Free Will, Agency, and Meaning in Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 71–103, the pages Visala cites for the four-case argument (review, 723 n. 2).

[52] Timpe, review, 375.

[53] Visala, review, 724.

[54] Bignon, "Response to Timpe," 8.

shield a theodicy. It cannot alter a causal structure. On Timpe's report, Bignon grants in passing that Calvinism fares worse than Arminianism on suffering, since there are evils that "God could have brought about with less suffering on Calvinism, since God could have controlled the inner workings of the heart more successfully."[55] That concession is made of Calvinism as he defines it. It need not be made of the Calvinism of the confessions.

8. The Asymmetric Remedy

The account I propose keeps everything Bignon rightly affirms and corrects what the flat rule gets wrong. Its centre is the epoch of the Fall.

Before the Fall, Adam had limited ultimate freedom. I call it LUF. It is libertarian, creaturely and grounded within the decree, and it is not autonomy from God. Nor is it the "limited libertarian freedom" that Timothy Stratton ascribes to Luther and Melanchthon, freedom "limited to things other than soteriological matters," to which Bignon replies that "we cannot jump from 'freedom' to 'libertarian freedom.'"[56] It is limited in another way, because Adam did not create himself, was not consulted over his existence or his nature, and did not keep himself in being or stand outside providence. It is libertarian because, in the divided sense, his faculty had a real two-way power: with every created thing inside and outside him held in place, he could have refrained.[57] Walaeus had a name for a power of that shape, the liberty of contradiction, "that faculty by which the same object [can] either be admitted or be refused."[58] He had regulative control as well as guidance control.[59] God's concurrence with his act was "of itself indifferent," and Adam's will gave it direction.[60] God did not premove him to the defect. The composite sense is still denied. While the decree that he fall stood, Adam could not refrain with that decree held fixed. The power affirmed is the power of the faculty in its circumstances, not a power to make the decree false, and what the decree secures is the futurition of the act, not the absence of the power. No creature is an uncaused cause. Adam was caused in being, sustained in operation and governed at every moment. The claim is only that the moral determination of his free act was not necessitated by a prior created condition.

After the Fall, I grant the compatibilist much of what he asks. For fallen humanity, enslaved to sin, an account in which responsible acts flow from the agent's own desires and character, with guidance control and a conditional ability to do otherwise, is the right account of the will toward God. The Confession states the range of the loss exactly: man by his fall "hath wholly lost all ability of Will to any spirituall good accompanying salvation."[61] What is lost is that good, and the will that has lost it still acts from its own desires. The fallen man is "neither able nor willing to

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[55] Bignon, *Excusing Sinners*, 175, quoted in Timpe, review, 378.

[56] Stratton's words, quoted in Bignon, "Review of Stratton," 14, with Bignon's reply on the same page; compare 13.

[57] Smith, *God's Knowledge within the Decree*, §6.5.

[58] Antonius Walaeus, *Enchiridion religionis reformatæ*, "De libero arbitrio," in *Opera omnia*, vol. 1, fol. 16.

[59] The terms are Fischer and Ravizza's: "Regulative control involves alternative possibilities: it is a kind of dual power of free action. In contrast, guidance control does not, by its nature, involve alternative possibilities." John Martin Fischer and Mark Ravizza, "Précis of *Responsibility and Control: A Theory of Moral Responsibility*," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 61, no. 2 (2000): 441. I use their terms without their semicompatibilism.

[60] Le Blanc de Beaulieu, *Theses theologicae*, "De concordia," pars I, th. LIII, 454.

[61] Westminster Confession of Faith 9.3, in *Humble Advice*, 20.

return to God."[62] His bondage is not a design installed in each man as Plum's programming was installed. It is the will itself. He is not prevented from a good he wants; he does not want it. "A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit."[63] There is no intervener behind the tree. Its inability is its nature, and its fruit is its own. What the fallen man's condition needs, beyond ownership, is justice, and that comes from the trace. Federal headship carries the judgment to the posterity, and with it the whole doctrine of Dort: total inability, election by good pleasure, grace efficacious of itself, and a salvation God owes to no one. The asymmetric account and Bignon's agree about the fallen will. They disagree about why it is just that the fallen will is bound.

The covenant of redemption is God's sole cause and motive in the decree. The creature's would-choice is its occasion, never its cause. Nehemiah Coxe wrote that God, "who from Eternity foresaw the Fall of Man, had also from Eternity a gracious Purpose … to redeem."[64] Keach calls the foreseen fall the "occasion" of the covenant of peace and God's "Love and Mercy" its "grand Motive."[65] Franciscus Gomarus said that God regarded the foreseen series of things "not as a cause but as an occasion," and "by a free and wise decree distinctly predefined it."[66] Johann Heinrich Alsted denied that God's will is "moved and ordered by the will of the creature," and said that God's will is moved by no external cause, "not even by the object."[67] The end is first. God's glory in the Son, the display of his manifold wisdom, his love and his mercy are motive and end, and nothing in the creature moves him.[68] Adam's freedom determined which routes were available. God's wisdom chose among them. God's purpose alone moved the choice.

God knows what a mutable creature would freely do under a condition by the conditioned knowledge held by a minority of the Reformed orthodox. It is no third kind of knowledge. Alsted defined it as the knowledge by which God knows "if this should be, that will be future."[69] Ludwig Crocius placed it within God's simple intelligence.[70] The condition always includes God's own will, supposed and not yet decreed: to create, to uphold, to concur and to permit. Le Blanc put the point exactly: for a thing to be absolutely future "there is indeed prerequired some decree of God on which its futurition depends; but in order that a thing be not simply future, but only would be future under some condition, there is not required a decree which is in God in act, but a decree suffices which, according to the hypothesis, would have to be posited in God."[71] The grounding is in two tiers. The truths God knows by this knowledge are never grounded apart from God. They have their first ground in God's own understanding and supposed will, and only within that in the nature and

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[62] Canons of Dort III/IV.3.

[63] Matt 7:18 (ESV).

[64] Nehemiah Coxe, *A Discourse of the Covenants That God Made with Men before the Law* (London: J. D. for Nathaniel Ponder and Benjamin Alsop, 1681), 36–37.

[65] Keach, *Display of Glorious Grace*, 8–10.

[66] Franciscus Gomarus, *Disputationes theologicae*, disp. X, th. XXXV, in *Opera theologica omnia*, 2nd ed. (Amsterdam: Joannes Janssonius, 1664), pars II, 28.

[67] Johann Heinrich Alsted, *Theologia scholastica didactica* (Hanau: Conrad Eifrid, 1618), sect. I, cap. XXII, reg. IV, 86; cap. XXI, reg. X, 82.

[68] Eph 3:10 (ESV): "so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places."

[69] Alsted, *Theologia scholastica didactica*, sect. I, cap. XXIV, praec. III, 97.

[70] Ludovicus Crocius, *Syntagma sacrae theologiae quatuor libris adornatum* (Bremen: Bertholdus Villerianus, 1636), III.15, aph. XVII, 575.

[71] Le Blanc de Beaulieu, *Theses theologicae*, "De concordia," pars I, th. XLVIII, 453.

circumstances of the creature he conceives. This knowledge reaches only a will that can go either way, which for the spiritual good means Adam's act alone. It has no part in the choice of persons, and it is never applied to grace. Walaeus saw that it guards the decree rather than threatening it: "without this hypothetical knowledge preceding the decrees of God, the immutability of the divine decrees seems hardly able to be defended."[72]

The decree secures, and the creature causes. The Fall is certain by the decree with the necessity of the consequence only, and its cause is Adam's will. The fallen man's sin is certain by the decree and caused by his corrupted will. His conversion is certain by the decree and caused by grace that changes the will. In every state the certainty comes from the First Cause and the contingency remains in the second cause. Turretin's double description then has both its clauses true: the decree "so determines the futurition of the event that it does not change the nature of things, but lets necessary things act necessarily and free things act freely."[73]

Each objection now meets its answer. The third option is restored: the divided sense is affirmed of Adam, and the composite denied of every creature. Bignon's arguments keep their conclusions where they belong, in God, in the fallen and in glory. The Fall has its epoch, and the race's guilt has a free act to trace to. Contingency in Eden is on Adam's side and not only on God's, so the collapse into fatalism is blocked. Nothing in God settled that Adam ate rather than refrained, so the marks of a deficient cause have a seat, and the manipulation argument finds no design to grip at the origin.

9. Replies to Objections

This is Molinism. Bignon would say so. Of a Reformed theologian who answered "yes" where Bignon answers "no," he writes: "Stratton declared him a Molinist. Yes. That's what I would call him too."[74] On Adam's act alone the structure is close to Molina's, and I say so. Molina's condition, like mine, includes God's supposed will: God knows what a creature would do "given the hypothesis that He wills to create it in this or that order of things with these or those circumstances, or aids."[75] The difference lies in scope, grounding and use. Molina's knowledge reaches every free act, including the adult's cooperation with grace. Mine reaches only a will that can go either way, which excludes the fallen will's response to grace. It is grounded within the order of God's own understanding and will and never apart from God, and it is the occasion of the decree, never its cause or motive. Election remains by good pleasure, and grace remains efficacious of itself. The minority who held such a knowledge were not counted Molinists by the strict. Friedrich Spanheim the Younger wrote: "Falsely, too, is the Middle Knowledge of the Remonstrants imputed to Gomarus, Walaeus, or to our Theologians, who always suppose an intervening Decree as the condition." Johannes Marck judged that they differed from the rest "more in phrasing than in substance."[76]

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[72] Walaeus, *Loci communes*, "De Dei scientia," in *Opera omnia*, vol. 1, 175.

[73] Turrettinus, *Institutio*, IV.4.6; English adapted from Turretin, *Institutes*, trans. Giger, 1:321.

[74] Bignon, "Review of Stratton," 42.

[75] Luis de Molina, *Concordia liberi arbitrii cum gratiae donis* (Paris: P. Lethielleux, 1876), disp. 49, 290.

[76] Friedrich Spanheim the Younger, *Elenchus controversiarum*, VII, "De scientia Dei media," §II, in *Opera*, vol. 3 (Leiden, 1703), col. 859; Bernhard de Moor, *Commentarius perpetuus in Johannis Marckii Compendium theologiae christianae didactico-elencticum*, pars 1 (Leiden, 1761), cap. IV, §XXXVIII, 660, quoting Marck.

The divided-sense power is PAPIf under another name, or it is luck. It is neither. PAPIf purchases the alternative by changing the desire. The divided-sense claim is that the actual faculty, under the same created circumstances, is not antecedently necessitated to one act, and that the creature's own grounds do not entail it. That claim is substantive. It fails if the creature's antecedents suffice for his act, and the flat model affirms exactly what it denies. As for luck, a power to do otherwise is not a cause that explains why one alternative and not the other became actual, and to demand a prior sufficient cause of that is to demand the determinism in question. Every account reaches a primitive. The flat account stops in antecedent sufficiency and the decree. The asymmetric account stops, at the level of second causes, in the exercise of a created rational power, and at the first in God's wise decree. Adam had reasons on both sides, the command and the promise against the serpent's word, and he acted on one set. That the reasons did not necessitate the choice does not make it random. It makes it his.

The tradition calls Adam free, but free is not libertarian. Bignon makes this reply to Stratton's reading of Calvin, who said that Adam had "free choice of good and evil": "the mere mention of free choice isn't an affirmation of libertarianism, or Stratton should count me as a libertarian too."[77] On the word he is right, and my case does not rest on it. It rests on what the tradition said of the power: that the will is undetermined in the divided sense, that the effect is contingent "in relation to the second and proximate causes, which could have been otherwise," and that the free principle is determined "not only by a higher principle but also by itself."[78] Those are claims about the shape of the power, and no one adopts them by calling himself free. The same passage, with his answer about Adam and Eve, shows that Bignon reads innocent Adam's freedom by his one rule.

Holding the decree fixed is fair, because the decree is the cause. That is true on the flat account and is the point at issue. For Adam's act the asymmetric account denies that the decree works through a created sufficiency. It makes the event certain by the necessity of the consequence, and its content is ordered to what Adam would freely do as its occasion. To assume that the decree works as a sufficient cause, and then hold it fixed to show that Adam could not have done otherwise, assumes the flat account in order to prove it. Bignon charges the consequence argument with begging the question. The same charge applies here.

The Confession excludes conditioned knowledge. The Westminster Confession affirms that God "knows whatsoever may, or can come to passe upon all supposed conditions," and denies that he decreed any thing "because he foresaw it as future, or as that which would come to passe upon such conditions."[79] I accept both clauses. The conditioned truth is not the cause, ground or motive of the decree. It is the occasion, and the decree remains free. Whether occasion can be admitted without becoming a forbidden "because" is a question of ecclesial and historical judgment, and it is the judgment under which the strict counted Gomarus and Walaeus orthodox.

Your fallen man is my fallen man. Largely, yes. The asymmetric account agrees that the fallen will toward God is one-way, that it acts from its own desires, and that the man is without excuse. The difference is the ground of the justice of that condition. The asymmetric account traces it to a free act. The flat account traces it to a decree that fixed that act too. The agreement on the fallen state is what makes the disagreement about Adam decisive.

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[77] Bignon, "Review of Stratton," 15, where Calvin's words are as Bignon quotes them.

[78] Turrettinus, *Institutio*, IV.4.6 (English adapted from Turretin, *Institutes*, trans. Giger, 1:321); Walaeus, *Consilia et epistolae*, in *Opera omnia*, vol. 2, 405; on the divided sense, Turrettinus, *Institutio*, X.3.12 (Giger, 1:668).

[79] Westminster Confession of Faith 3.2, in *Humble Advice*, 9.

10. Conclusion

Bignon has done the Reformed a service. He has shown with unusual clarity what a theological determinist can say to the charges that his doctrine excuses sinners and blames God, and he has been honest about what his defence does not attempt. His compatibilism is sound as an account of the fallen will, and on the conclusions of his book the asymmetric account agrees with him.

But the system he defends is flat. A decree fixes a character, the character's desires settle the act, and this holds without distinction for Satan, Adam, the unregenerate, the believer and the saint. That one rule costs the third option, the divided-sense power the tradition actually used. It settles Adam's case by assertion, where none of Bignon's arguments reaches. It erases the Fall as an epoch and leaves the race's guilt with no free act to trace to. It reduces the confessional "might fall" to God's options and so collapses into theological fatalism. And it leaves the first sin with a created sufficiency that God established, which, by inference, lays the first sin at the door of God.

The remedy is to restore the epoch. Adam in innocence had limited ultimate freedom, with regulative and guidance control, grounded within the decree and never autonomous from God. After the Fall the will is free by guidance control and bound toward God, its guilt traced to the head of the race, its salvation owed by God to no one and given by grace alone. The decree secures every event by the necessity of the consequence and replaces no creature's will as its cause. The covenant of redemption is God's sole cause and motive, and the foreseen fall is its occasion. The question between Bignon and me is not whether God holds everything in place. He does. It is whether, in holding everything in place, he held Adam in a place from which he could have stood. The Confession says he did: mutably, so that he might fall.

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