

DIVINE ASEITY, DIVINE FREEDOM: A CONCEPTUAL PROBLEM FOR EDWARDSIAN-CALVINISM

JAMES BEILBY*

The purpose of this paper is to consider whether the Calvinist's typical understanding of why God created the world is consistent with the assertion of God's independence and self-sufficiency—an attribute theologians have labeled "aseity." The essence of the problem is this: the Calvinist's typical assertion that God's fundamental purpose in creation is to demonstrate his glory seems to entail that God have an "other" to whom his glory must be demonstrated. But if this is the case, then God is dependent in some sense on this "other" for the demonstration of his glory and, ironically, less sovereign than in a theology where the demonstration of God's glory is less central. While this is not a new objection, it has not been a primary locus of discussion for some time. The reason for this is not that the objection is too obscure to be recognized, but rather that the objection has apparently been deemed to be answered.

I will begin by defining the central terms of the dispute: aseity, divine freedom, and Calvinism. Then, after sketching the basic contours of the objection, I will consider the answer of arguably the greatest American theologian, Jonathan Edwards, whose treatment of this topic has been enormously influential. After arguing that Edwards's answer fails, I will close with a consideration of the various options open to Calvinists with respect to this objection.

I. THE BASIC ARGUMENT: THE TENSION BETWEEN CALVINISM AND DIVINE ASEITY

As much as evangelical Christians disagree about how the sovereignty of God should be understood and what its implications should be, there is universal acceptance that God is independent, self-existent, and fully self-sufficient. He does not need anything outside of himself to exist, be satisfied, be fulfilled, or (to borrow an overused phrase from contemporary psychology) be "self-actualized." Whether Exodus 3:14 is translated "I am who I am" or "I will be what I will be," the meaning is the same: God's existence and character are determined by him alone.¹

* James Beilby is assistant professor of theology at Bethel College, 3900 Bethel Drive, St. Paul, MN 55112.

¹ See Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 161.

These characteristics highlight what has been called God's *aseity*. Derived from the Latin phrase *a se*, meaning "from or by himself," aseity is arguably the most fundamental divine attribute. Herman Bavinck, for example, argues that aseity "is commonly viewed as the first of the attributes" because it expresses the concept we need "to designate God as God, and to distinguish him from all that is not God."² Further, he argues that "all other attributes were derived from this one,"³ because it is only when one has accepted that God is *a se* that we can understand the sense in which all of the other attributes are ascribed to God.⁴ If Bavinck is right—and I believe that he is—our intuitions about, for example, God's sovereignty, immutability, and infinity do not imply divine aseity. Rather, they flow from a logically prior understanding of God's aseity.

Whether or not one accepts the primacy of aseity among the divine attributes, it is undeniable that aseity is of crucial importance to an orthodox understanding of God's nature. Further, it is clear that God's aseity provides the context in which we understand God's actions and involvement in the world. The fundamental theological principle entailed by divine aseity is that while creation is utterly dependent upon God, the dependence is not symmetrical. God's does not depend on creation in any way; there are no needs or even desires that are fulfilled in the act of creation or in the ensuing relationship with creation.

It would be a mistake, however, to treat aseity as a simple property. Rather, the property identified as God's aseity certainly encompasses multiple modes of perfection. For the purposes of my paper, I will distinguish two senses in which God may be said to be *a se*. First, God is *ontologically a se*. He is uncaused, without beginning, not dependent on an external person, principle, or metaphysical reality for his existence. Second, God is *psychologically a se*. There is no lack or need in God. He is fully self-satisfied, not needing anything outside of himself to be happy or fulfilled.

Thus understood, divine aseity requires that God's choice to create the world be free. But "free" in what sense? While the nature of freedom (human and divine) is among the most contentious topics in contemporary philosophy and theology, there is agreement that freedom must steer between the Scylla and Charybdis of causal determinism and indeterminism. What destroys freedom is the lack of self-determination and that results both when the will is determined by external events or states of affairs and when it has no cause at all or is indeterminate. In other words, freedom requires not just the absence of causal determinism, but that the agent be the cause of the choice.⁵ God's decision to create, therefore, can be said to be free if it is self-determined both in the sense of not determined by external factors and

² Herman Bavinck, *Doctrine of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951) 125.

³ *Ibid.* 144.

⁴ *Ibid.* 126–27.

⁵ See the helpful article by Gary Watson, "Free will," in *A Companion to Metaphysics* (ed. Jaegwon Kim and Ernest Sosa; Blackwell Companions to Philosophy Series; Oxford: Blackwell, 1994) 175–82.

in the sense that it was not completely arbitrary; it was based on good and sufficient reasons.

So the crucial question is, Why, then, did God create? My argument is that there exists a tension between God's aseity and the typical Calvinist understanding of God's purpose in creation. Holding the latter seems to suggest the denial of (or at least a modification of) the former. The rationale for this conclusion is as follows: If God's purpose in creation is to accomplish a task—bringing glory to himself—that he both desires and cannot accomplish without creation, it seems that God becomes dependent on creation to accomplish this task. In such a case, since the orthodox Christian conception of God seems to require aseity, the typical Calvinist's account of God's purpose in creation is called into question.

Before I develop this tension, let me be clear about what I am not claiming. First, there is no tension between aseity and claiming that *our* purpose in creation is to give God glory. Consequently, there is no problem in claiming with the Westminster Larger Catechism: "Man's chief and highest end is to glorify God, and fully enjoy him forever." Second, there is no tension in God in fact *being* glorified (or, more accurately, *glorious*). Being who he is, God is intrinsically glorious—his glory is entailed by the holiness, perfection, and unlimited value of his attributes. Rather, the tension exists between aseity and the claim that *God's* purpose in creating was to bring glory to himself. Finally, I do not claim that there exists any tension between Calvinism and God's *ontological* aseity. There is no sense in which God's desire to bring glory to himself makes him ontologically dependent on the created order. Rather, the tension arises between Calvinism and *psychological* aseity.⁶ Consequently, for the remainder of this paper, unless otherwise specified, the term "aseity" will be shorthand for "psychological aseity."

For the purpose of having a clear target, let me summarize this argument in the form of *modus tollens* where C = the Calvinist account of God's purpose in creation and A = divine aseity:

If C then ~ A
 A
 Therefore ~ C

Since the minor premise—the affirmation of divine aseity—is uncontroversial, I will direct all of my attention toward exploring the truth of the major premise and its implications for Calvinism as a whole.

Before doing so, however, I must pause to acknowledge that Calvinism is not a monolithic theological category. There are infralapsarians and supralapsarians; there are presuppositionalists (of varying stripes) and rationalists; there are Van Tillians, Dooywerdians, Kuyperians, Edwardsians, and a seemingly infinite number of combinations. An additional problem is that within Calvinism there are theses (all labeled as Calvinist) that do not

⁶ I am grateful to Bill Craig and Mike Rea for helpful discussion on this matter.

mutually entail each other. Abraham Kuyper, for example, saw as central to Calvinism a worldview the fundamental aspect of which was the impossibility of religious neutrality in any area of scholarship. But it is possible to be a Calvinist in Kuyper's sense and still be a soteriological Arminian, to reject many or all of the five points with which Calvinism is often associated. Alvin Plantinga is a well-known representative of this position. (I am a less well-known representative of this position.) Finally, while Calvinism is often associated with the "five points" of Calvinism (derived from the *Canons of Dort*), there is no agreement that these and only these points exhaust what Calvinism is or should be. (There are, in fact, some very good reasons to think that Reformed theology *cannot* be limited to these five points.)⁷

Of course, amid this blooming buzzing confusion there is a common core to Calvinism—an emphasis on the sovereignty of God above all else. Nevertheless, properly considering the implications of this argument for Calvinism is something that cannot be done given only the abstract affirmation of the primacy of God's sovereignty. We need a more concrete target. Consequently, I will investigate the response of the great American Calvinist, Jonathan Edwards. I choose Edwards for a number of reasons. First, he has written much more on this topic than any other Calvinist theologian (in fact, more than many of them combined!). His magisterial *A Dissertation Concerning the End for Which God Created the World*⁸ is wholly devoted to God's purpose and freedom in creating the world, and he addresses the issue in a significant number of shorter works.⁹ Second, his understanding of God's purpose in creation and his answer to the kind of objection I have sketched has been enormously influential. It is, perhaps, this fact that explains why there have not been more objections in the vein of the argument under consideration—many people think that Edwards has already answered this objection. Finally, Edwards's response is clear enough to help us see how this argument should be framed, and (I believe) clear enough to allow us to see why his defense fails.

II. JONATHAN EDWARDS ON DIVINE ASECITY AND THE CHIEF END OF CREATION¹⁰

In developing his account of God's purpose in creation, Edwards is clearly aware of the kind of objection I have raised. He begins section four of chap-

⁷ A point articulately and forcefully made by Richard A. Muller, "How Many Points?" *Calvin Theological Journal* 28 (1993) 425–33.

⁸ First published (posthumously) in 1765, with a preface by the editor, Samuel Hopkins, a friend of Edwards. I will refer to this work as "Dissertation" and cite chapter and section. I will also refer to the page number in John Piper's edition of this work. See his *God's Passion for His Glory: Living the Vision of Jonathan Edwards (With the Complete Text of The End for Which God Created the World)* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1998).

⁹ Primarily published as "The Miscellanies."

¹⁰ Edwards's *A Dissertation Concerning the End for Which God Created the World* is a rhetorically complex book. There are sections in which Edwards seems to be playing devil's advocate or throwing out ideas only to debunk them later. The question that arises in Hume's Dialogues—"Who speaks for Hume?"—can be asked with regard to Edwards as well. Consequently, to avoid

ter one in his *A Dissertation Concerning the End for Which God Created the World* with this statement: “Some may object against what has been said as being inconsistent with God’s absolute independence and immutability.”¹¹ From the context, it is clear that “absolute independence” is the same concept I have defined as God’s aseity.

The argument that Edwards seems to be addressing can be summarized as follows: If God’s purpose in creation is to bring glory to himself, then there exists a deficiency in God and this deficiency is addressed by receiving glory from creation. Edwards’s response seems to have the following structure: while it is God’s nature to display his glory, this does not imply that God is deficient in any respect, because, first, in creation, God’s glory is communicated, not received, and second, God communicates his glory in creation not because of a need, but because of an abundance.

1. *Step 1: In creation, God’s glory is communicated, not received.* Edwards argues that God’s creating with the purpose of displaying his glory does not entail that he needs to receive a response or acknowledgment of his glory *from creation*. This is because the glory God receives is not really given by the creature. He says: “This delight in God can’t properly be said to be received from the creature, because it consists only in a delight in giving to the creature.”¹² Edwards uses the analogy of a jewel to explain the sense in which God’s glory is “received” and “given”: “The sun receives nothing from the jewel that receives its light, and shines only by a participation of its brightness.”¹³

Consequently, according to Edwards, God’s purpose in creation is not to *receive* glory, but to communicate it. “The pleasure God hath in it [creation] is rather a pleasure in diffusing and *communicating* to, than in *receiving* from, the creature.”¹⁴ “Therefore, God doesn’t seek his own glory because it makes him the happier to be honored and highly thought of, but because he loves to see Himself His own excellencies and glories, appearing in his works—loves to see himself communicated. And it was his intention to communicate himself that was a prime motive of his creating the world.”¹⁵ Consequently, if there is a sense in which God receives glory, it is not from creation but from within the divine being. Creation is an opportunity for inter-trinitarian glory, an occasion in which the tri-personal God magnifies himself. “In communicating his fullness for them, he does it for himself. . . . Their excellency

potential exegetical pitfalls, I will draw most of my material from section four of chapter one. This section appears to be relatively unencumbered with rhetorical devices because it is a fairly straightforward consideration of a series of objections to his proposal.

¹¹ Edwards, *Dissertation*, I, 4, objection 1; Piper, *God’s Passion* 162.

¹² Edwards, “Miscellanies,” n. 679; cf. *The Philosophy of Jonathan Edwards* (ed. Harvey G. Townsend. Reprint; Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1972) 138.

¹³ Edwards, *Dissertation*, I, 4, objection 1, answer 1; Piper, *God’s Passion* 163.

¹⁴ Edwards, *Dissertation*, I, 4, objection 1, answer 1; Piper, *God’s Passion* 165; italics original.

¹⁵ Edwards, “Miscellanies,” n. 247, in Townsend, *Philosophy* 129–30.

and happiness is nothing, but the emanation and expression of God's glory: God, in seeking their glory and happiness, seeks himself."¹⁶

In summary, the first step of Edwards's argument is that his account of the purpose of creation does not entail that God created to receive a response *from creation*, but to communicate himself *to creation*. To the degree God's receives glory, it is received from within the Trinity.

2. *Step 2: God communicates his glory not because of a need, but because of an abundance.* Edwards argues that God's creating with his glory as the chief end does not imply that God is *deficient* in any way. While the act of creation is the occasion for the demonstration of his glory, God does not create out of a lack or deficiency, but with regard to the proper end for humanity. In John Piper's terms, "If God would do us good, he must direct us to his worth, not ours."¹⁷ Consequently, creation was motivated not by a lack, but by an abundance: "God infinitely loves himself, yet so is his love that it flows out to the creature."¹⁸ God's motive in creation is, therefore, located in his abundantly good nature: "God's disposition to cause his own infinite fullness to flow forth is not the less properly called his *goodness* because the good he communicates is what he delights in, as he delights in his own glory. . . . Nor is this disposition in God to diffuse his own good the less excellent, because it is implied in his love to himself."¹⁹ Therefore, in creation, we see God's desire to "share his over abundance, to permit creatures to enter into his super-sufficiency."²⁰

III. DOES EDWARDS'S UNDERSTANDING OF GOD'S PURPOSE IN CREATION UNDERMINE DIVINE ASEITY?

It is beyond question that Edwards's answer has been enormously influential. But does it successfully hold together divine aseity and his understanding of God's purpose in creation? I will argue that it does not. But first, I may voice a quibble over how Edwards frames the question itself. In defending his account of God's purpose in creation, the only options he considers for God's chief end of creation are the glory of God and the happiness of his creatures. Not only are these not the only two options, they are not remotely contradictory—as Edwards himself ably and repeatedly points out. Consequently, it might be objected that Edward's argument creates a straw man.

Setting that objection aside, recall the two-part objection Edwards is addressing: (1) there exists a deficiency in God; and (2) this deficiency is addressed by receiving glory from creation. His defense consists of two propositions: (1) in creation, God's glory is communicated, not received; and

¹⁶ Edwards, *Dissertation*, I, 4, objection 4, answer; Piper, *God's Passion* 176–77.

¹⁷ Piper, *God's Passion* 35.

¹⁸ Unpublished ms. sermon on Exodus 33:18–9; cited in John H. Gerstner, *The Rational Biblical Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 2 (Powhatan, VA: Berea; Orlando, FL: Ligonier, 1992) 16 n. 57.

¹⁹ Edwards, *Dissertation* I, 4, objection 4, answer; Piper, *God's Passion* 178.

²⁰ Gerstner, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards* 16.

(2) God communicates his glory in creation not because of a need, but because of an abundance. His responses deal with the objection in reverse order—the first argues that God’s glory is not received, and the second argues that there is no deficiency in God. The problem with Edwards’s apologetic is not that these answers are not adequate or defensible, but that their *implications* undercut his assertion of God’s aseity. I will discuss two such implications.

1. *Implication 1.* The first problematic implication of Edwards’s apologetic can be identified by asking the question, How does God communicate his glory in creation? Edwards makes clear that God’s glory is found in the communication of his *complete nature*—the whole pantheon of his attributes—not just his *capacity* to create. This is an important fact, because “there are many of the divine attributes that, if God had not created the world, never would have had any exercise—the power of God, the wisdom of God, the prudence and contrivance of God, the goodness and mercy and grace of God, and the justice of God. It is fit that the divine attributes should have exercise. . . . God, as he delights in his own excellency and glorious perfections, so he delights in the exercise of those perfections.”²¹

The fact that God’s glory consists in the demonstration of, for example, his wrath—an attribute inexpressible without creation—would seem to be a major problem for Edwards’s account of divine aseity. But things are not yet as bad as they seem. After approvingly citing Edwards’s assertion that God’s glory is seen in the communication of all of his attributes, Daniel Fuller suggests that the demonstration of all of his attributes is necessary only given God’s choice to create. He says: “If He [God] did not act in this way [display his glory], in the world He freely created, He would cease to be God.”²² Here I take it that Fuller’s argument is not that God is inherently wrathful, but that given his choice to create, he must display his glory in the form of all of his attributes, including his wrath. On this response, God’s displaying his glory was only accidentally necessary given his choice to create, not logically necessary.

2. *Implication 2.* The second implication of Edwards’s defense is correlated with his assertion that God’s glory is shown in creation not because of a deficiency, but because of an abundance. Granted. God is not lacking. But why is God’s abundance *demonstrated* to creation? Edwards’s answer seems to be that God is disposed *by his nature* to overflow. He says: “It is the *necessary consequence* of his delighting in the glory of his nature, that he delights in the emanation and effulgence of it.”²³ But even if it is granted that there is no deficiency or lack in God, given this stance, it does *not* follow that God

²¹ Edwards, “Miscellanies” 553, in Townsend, *Philosophy* 136.

²² Daniel Fuller, *The Unity of the Bible: Unfolding God’s Plan for Humanity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) 448.

²³ Edwards, *Dissertation* I, 4, objection 1, answer 1; Piper, *God’s Passion* 164; italics original.

has no unfulfilled needs. It is possible to be needy either because of a deficiency—a lack that needs to be filled—or an abundance—a surplus that must be distributed. Either way, there is an unfulfilled need, a need that is met in the divine creative act. The problem for Edwards is not in defining God's nature as abundant, but in inferring from God's abundance that his nature requires a demonstration of his abundance. He says: "It is a regard to himself that disposes him to diffuse and communicate himself. It is such a delight in his own internal fullness and glory, that disposes him to an abundant effusion and emanation of that glory. The same disposition that causes him to delight in his glory, causes him to delight in the exhibitions, expressions, and communications of it."²⁴ God's abundance implies that God must demonstrate his glory.

Let me summarize my argument. Edwards's task is to reconcile his account of God's purpose in creating the world with:

- (1) Divine aseity and freedom in creation

The implications of his defense are twofold:

- (2) God's glory in creation consists in the demonstration of all of his attributes, including attributes not expressible without creation
- (3) God must demonstrate his glory

Edwards's attempt to hold together divine aseity and his account of God's purpose in creation, therefore, is dependent on the compatibility of (1), (2), and (3). There is no incompatibility between (1) and (2), because the expression of all of God's attributes might have only been accidentally necessary—that is, only necessary given his choice to create. Likewise, there is no incompatibility between (1) and (3), because God's glory can be expressed within the Trinity, completely apart from creation. The incompatibility arises between (1) and *the conjunction of* (2) and (3), because if God must express his glory and his glory requires the expression of attributes expressible only in creation, then it follows that to express his glory—that is, according to Edwards, to be who he is—he must create.

IV. RESPONSES AVAILABLE TO THE CALVINIST

Suppose this is substantially correct—Edwards's understanding of God's purpose in creation undermines God's aseity.²⁵ But there is no necessity for all Calvinists to follow Edwards down this rabbit hole. Consequently, it is

²⁴ Edwards, *Dissertation*, I, 4, objection 2, answer 3; Piper, *God's Passion* 170.

²⁵ One possible objection to my argument might be that I have misinterpreted Edwards. While failures of exegesis are certainly possible, it must be noted that even if I have misread Edwards, it does not follow that Edwards is not susceptible to an argument like the one I have developed. Unless Edwards's theological ruminations are understood in a very different manner than is typical, he will remain susceptible to this sort of objection.

certainly possible for the Calvinist to aver that Edwards got on the wrong track and that his stance must be modified. That is, one might claim that Edwards's version of Calvinism is problematic not by virtue of his Calvinist lineage, but by virtue of the metaphysical framework out of which he develops his theology. A theme in Edwards's writings I have not developed, but with which I have been dancing around, is his understanding of the God-world relationship. Numerous authors have commentated on Edwards's pantheistic tendencies.²⁶ Even the analogies Edwards uses—the jewel and the fountain—are borrowed directly from Plotinus and imply a neo-Platonic, emanationist metaphysic.

What then are the responses available to the Calvinist? As far as I can see, there are three general avenues of response. First, one might deny that the definition of aseity assumed by this argument is a necessary part of Christian theology. Second, one might modify one of Edwards's theological or philosophical assumptions. Third, one might acknowledge that there is a tension between aseity and the typical Calvinist understanding of God's purpose in creation, but respond by arguing that this is a problem for all theological positions, not just Calvinism. I will deal briefly with each of these responses.

The version of divine aseity under consideration by my argument is *psychological* aseity. There is nothing in Edwards's writings (so far as I can tell) that undercuts God's *ontological* aseity. Therefore, one avenue of response for the Calvinist is to argue that while ontological aseity is a property essential to God's nature, psychological aseity is not. This perspective might assert that God is, by nature, a creator and being self-satisfied requires the exercise of that capacity. This response, however, does not so much evade the objection as it ignores it and denies that it identifies an actual problem for Calvinism. The problem is that there is strong consensus within the orthodox Christian tradition that psychological aseity is indeed part of God's nature. So while this is a possible response, it is not likely to be warmly embraced by the Calvinist.

A second response involves modifying one of the aspects of Edwards's theology. The incompatibility between (1) and the conjunction of (2) and (3) can be removed by abandoning or adequately revising either (2) or (3). Suppose (3) is chosen. Here there are a range of options, the first of which is the following:

(3a) God must demonstrate his glory *in creation*.

This modification removes the incompatibility between (1) and the conjunction of (2) and (3) by making even the expression of God's glory contingent on his choice to create. He did not have to display his glory, but given his choice to create, he must do so. While this maneuver is logically possible, it is not clear that it is an epistemic possibility for the Calvinist. Epistemic possibility is more restrictive than logical possibility. While propositions such as "My

²⁶ Charles Hodge, for example, viewed Edwards's doctrine of continuous creation as entailing pantheism. See his *Systematic Theology* (3 vols.; New York: Scribners' Sons, 1872) 1.577 and 2.217ff.; cf. Gerstner, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards* 12 n. 45.

computer has a mass greater than the sun” and “China has a population of four” are logically possible, they are not epistemically possible—that is, they are not possible given what is commonly known or accepted. The question that must be asked is, Why is God such that he *must* demonstrate his glory *in creation*? The key word here is *must*. If God *must* demonstrate his glory, ultimately, the choice must be grounded by an aspect of God’s nature; his choice must reflect who he is. Consequently, while God’s choice was free in that it was self-determined—it was neither indeterminate nor externally determined—for divine aseity to be maintained, self-determination is necessary, but not sufficient. Divine aseity requires that God’s decision to create the world be free in a libertarian²⁷ sense of the word—God possessed *power to the contrary* in his choice. While he was not and could never be “disinterested” in his decision, there was nothing—either external to him or *part of his internal nature*—that necessitated one choice or made another impossible. Divine aseity, therefore, requires not only that God’s choice be free—that is, self-determined—but that it not be internally necessitated. For if it was internally necessitated, then God’s nature would be such that he needed to create the world to be who he was. By implication, while God has the capacity to create, being a creator is neither one of his essential properties nor is it entailed by any of his essential properties (either singly or in conjunction).

If (3a) is not an option, how about:

(3b) God *will* demonstrate his glory.

Unfortunately for the Calvinist, weakening (3) in this way does not sidestep the objection under consideration because the conjunction (2) and (3b) is still incompatible with (1). If God will express his glory and God’s glory requires the expression of attributes expressible only in creation, then it follows that God must create the world; creation was not an option. So even if the modal qualifier in (3) is weakened significantly, problems remain. In fact, given the acceptance of (2), demonstration of God’s glory must be defined as *merely possible* to evade the objection, for example:

(3c) God *can* demonstrate his glory.

However, (3c) is so uncontroversial and such a weak statement of God’s sovereignty that it is highly unlikely to be embraced by the Calvinist.

The lesson to be learned is that the more problematic proposition is (2). Suppose then that the Calvinist chooses to evade the objection under consideration by rejecting (2)—that is, the Calvinist abandons Edwards’s assertion that God’s glory includes the expression of attributes expressible only

²⁷ A caveat: “libertarian freedom” is not a term I relish. By usage and implication it is too tied to an Enlightenment notion of an autonomous moral agent, basing choices solely on the deliverances of reason, having a nature that originated as *tabula rasa*. Not only is this nothing like an accurate description of the human decision-making process, I submit that it cannot be anything like an accurate description of God’s decision to create the world.

in creation. Of course, God could still express his glory by expressing his attributes; if God's glory is understood in terms of the expression of attributes already given full expression within the Trinity, there is no problem in saying that God creates with the purpose of displaying his glory. While abandoning (2) would, in fact, evade my objection, it is not an avenue likely to be attractive to many Calvinists because (2) is often thought to be central to the Calvinist explanation and defense of unconditional damnation and election.

So it seems this objection will not be *easily* sidestepped. But there is one final possibility. One might acknowledge that there is an incompatibility between aseity and the typical Calvinist understanding of God's purpose in creation, but respond by, in effect, throwing mud on the entire issue. In this respect, it might be argued that there is either no need to answer the question: "Why did God create?" or that answering this question is fundamentally beyond our ken. Edwards lands in the trouble he does because he was willing to speculate about God's purpose in creation. With no such speculation, the objection is a non-starter. Martin Luther, for example, would have probably embraced this option. In response to the question, "What was God doing before he created the world?" Luther reportedly answered: "Cutting switches to punish those who answer impertinent questions." Perhaps Calvin would also have chosen this option since he once said that before creation God was "building hell for the curious."²⁸

There is ample rationale for remaining agnostic with respect to God's purpose in creation in the inscrutability of God's will or the noetic finitude of humanity (or a combination of both). A rationale for agnosticism that I do not find convincing, however, is that no theological position, including Arminianism, has a satisfactory answer to the objection under consideration.²⁹ I believe that there is an adequate Arminian answer to this objection.

The Arminian understanding of the purpose of creation is, not surprisingly, markedly different from the Calvinist's. While the Calvinist makes God's glory the chief end in creation, the Arminian calls attention to God's love. While there are many ways to express this basic idea, I like Greg Boyd's description of God's chief end in creation—to bring about the Trinification of reality by replicating divine love throughout creation. While the Arminian must acknowledge that there is some sense in which God receives something from creation and that God deems the reception of that thing to be intrinsically good, I will argue that this fact does not compromise an unflinching acceptance of divine aseity.

Recall that what created problems for Edwards was the incompatibility between (1) and the conjunction of (2) and (3). The Arminian both rejects

²⁸ *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* I, xiv, 1 (ed. John T. McNeill; trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960) 160.

²⁹ This objection is raised forcefully by Jonathan Edwards: "If any are not satisfied with the preceding answer [his account of God's purpose in creation], but still insist on the objection [that it makes God dependent on creation], let them consider whether they can devise any other scheme of God's last end in creating the world, but what will be equally obnoxious to this objection in its full force, if there be any force in it" (*Dissertation*, I, 4, objection 1, answer 2).

(2)—the assertion that God’s glory in creation consists in the demonstration of all of his attributes, including attributes not expressible without creation—and modifies (3)—by asserting that God’s glory is found in the expression of his love. Since love is an attribute that is not expressible *only* in creation, and in fact, finds its fullest expression within the divine being, there is no sense in which God must create to be who he is.³⁰ Therefore, the Arminian is not committed to (2) and (3) but to:

- (A2) God’s love in creation is seen in the creation of human freedom
- (A3) God is such that he must demonstrate his love.

Of course, an Arminian might choose to remain agnostic about God’s purpose in creation. My point is that it is not necessary to do so to maintain divine aseity.

But does this suggest that the Arminian abandons the idea of the glory of God? Certainly not! It would be an egregious (and indeed heretical) mistake to ignore God’s glory. My argument, however, is that God’s glory is most properly seen in his love. The nature of God’s glory—as seen in the demonstration of all of God’s attributes—is such that it cannot be the sole and ultimate purpose for creation. To do so would be to compromise God’s aseity. Rather, it is in affirming that creation is a gift of God’s love—unmerited and unnecessitated—that the glory of God finds its fullest expression.

V. CONCLUSION

In Edwards’s *A Dissertation Concerning the End for Which God Created the World* we find what is perhaps the most comprehensive account of God’s sovereignty in creation. Even for one who disagrees with Edwards’s theological position, there is much with which to be impressed. Nevertheless I have argued that his position is problematic in that it implies the denial of divine aseity. It has been said that it is dangerous to pay God too many metaphysical compliments. The lesson learned from Edwards is that, perhaps, it is dangerous to pay God too many theological compliments as well.

³⁰ Perhaps this is why Grudem defends God’s freedom by referring to God’s love, not his glory: “Since there was perfect love and fellowship among the members of the Trinity from all eternity (John 17:5, 24) God did not create us because he was lonely or because he needed fellowship with other persons” (*Systematic Theology* 440). This is, of course, true, but it is not the sort of defense one would expect from a Calvinist such as Grudem, and certainly not in a paragraph entitled: “God Did Not Need To Create Man, Yet He Created Us for His Own Glory.”