

John Mark Hicks
Lipscomb University
Christian Scholars Conference 2012

Gratuitous Evil and Meticulous Providence
In the Thought of Alexander Campbell

I am pleased to offer a response to my friend Dr. Caleb Clanton. I deeply appreciate his engagement with the resources of the Stone-Campbell Movement, particularly Alexander Campbell, in the discipline of Philosophy of Religion. Of all the early Reformers, Campbell is the best—perhaps the only choice—for such a project. However, my appreciation not only extends to the subject matter, but also for how Clanton brings Campbell’s philosophy of religion into dialogue with contemporary discussions. In the language of Vatican II’s *aggiornamento*, Clanton brings the Campbellian philosophical tradition “up to date.”

My own personal interests gravitate toward the problem of evil, but also more specifically its relation to divine providence. I also have a primary interest in Stone-Campbell historical theology. Consequently, Clanton’s book for me is a “perfect storm.” I will focus on his chapter on the problem of evil but primarily concern myself with his discussion of gratuitous evil.

Clanton observes that Campbell's formulations and discussions regarding the problem of evil are "scattered throughout his writings on other topics."¹ Consequently, it is difficult to grasp his understanding without a wide reading in his literature, which is a huge task. I am pleased, for example, that Clanton brings to bear Campbell's thinking from the Campbell-Owen debate as it is lies in a morass of rhetoric and lengthy speeches. This is something that I myself had overlooked—much to my chagrin, careless reading and, I might add, delight. Clanton succeeds in bringing together the key elements for assembling Campbell's response to the philosophical problem of evil.

As I read Clanton, Alexander Campbell offers a "free-will" defense which anticipates Alvin Plantinga himself, takes a "skeptical theist" position (that is, no one knows what good reasons God might have for any particular evil) regarding gratuitous evil, and grounds the hiddenness of God in the moral reality of epistemic distance such that faith is a movement of the will to believe rational evidence (involving epistemic orientation) rather than something that is so rationally compelling that everyone is coerced into faith (which would then have no moral significance). This summary of Campbell's response to the problem of evil is modern and, at the same time, contemporary. It is, all things considered, quite stunning. I am grateful for Clanton's illuminating work here that not only

¹ J. Caleb Clanton, *The Philosophy of Religion of Alexander Campbell* (MSS), chapter 4, page 1. My

understands Campbell but also brings Campbell into contemporary dialogue with philosophers of religion. At least in this chapter Campbell anticipates contemporary discussions in surprising ways.

In this brief interaction, I will focus on gratuitous evil, but I will begin with the other two sections of the chapter with a few brief comments.

Free Will Defense

Campbell embraced some version of libertarian human freedom. While hesitant to engage in speculative discussion, human freedom is the origin of human evil. Clanton summarizes the argument well: human happiness is secured by affirming God as moral governor and human beings becoming praiseworthy obedient moral agents. Clanton correctly notes that Campbell's argument is similar to Plantinga's "Free Will Defense" in that God cannot "make an infallible fallible creature" and to make an infallible creature would undermine the moral purposes for which God created the universe.²

I will not elaborate Campbell's argument here since Clanton articulates it well and accurately. However, I do want to note a point that I did not see emphasized in Clanton's work. It seems to me that Campbell is quite hesitant to venture into these philosophical waters. At the very moment he argues that "it is

² Alexander Campbell, "Replication.—No. 1.," *The Christian Baptist* 4/1 (August 7, 1826): 14.

impossible to conceive of a rational creation of an infallible nature," he recognizes that he has brought the reader to "the shore of an immense ocean where weak heads are sure to be drowned." He ventures to swim in that ocean but only "a short distance in sight of land." He is willing to go far enough to argue that "it is impossible to create a being that shall be capable of obeying, and at the same time incapable of disobeying" but he remains in sight of land.³

Campbell certainly, as Clanton has demonstrated, articulated a "free-will defense," yet Campbell—the good empiricist he was—was uncomfortable with this sort of metaphysical reasoning. It seems he pursued it only as a negative apologetic.

To launch out into the development of views purely metaphysical, in order to correct metaphysical errors, is at best only calculated to create a distrust in those visionary problems on which some build as firmly as if on the Rock of Ages. I never wish to establish any one point in this way; but I desire to throw a caveat in the way of those who are willing to risk eternity itself upon a visionary problem.⁴

This metaphysical "free-will defense," however, is combined with an Augustinian understanding of natural evil. Thomas Campbell, for example, affirmed that natural evils are the "just and proper results and consequences of" moral evil. They "are ordained by God as punishments, preventives, or

³ Alexander Campbell, "To Mr. D.—A Skeptic.—Replication.—No. III," *Christian Baptist* 4/4 (November 6, 1826): 23-24.

⁴ *Loc. cit.*

correctives.”⁵ Alexander Campbell concurred: “Before the rebellion in Eden,” Alexander wrote, “all was good.” There was “no gloom, no pain, no sorrow any where. But the instant man rebelled...[n]ature was immediately diseased in all her members.”⁶ The original sin “is the root of all this bitterness and grief. This brought death into the world, and all our woe.”⁷ Consequently, “all the sins of all the world, and all the evils attendant on them, are developments of the sin of Adam (or of Eve,) and must be all taken into view with all the train of natural evils consequent upon them, before we can think aright of what sin is.”⁸ Humanity inherits a “fallen, consequently sinful nature” from Adam; human nature was “corrupted by the fall of Adam.”⁹ Moral evil, then, according to Campbell, is the result of human freedom. Natural evil is the consequence of that evil, as sin corrupted the cosmos. This is a fairly traditional, classic Arminian approach to the problem of evil.¹⁰

Divine Hiddenness

⁵ Thomas Campbell, “To Mr. D.—A Skeptic.—Replication—No. V.,” *Christian Baptist* 4/6 (January 1, 1827): 39.

⁶ Alexander Campbell, “History of Sin, Including the Outlines of Ancient History—No. I.,” *Millennial Harbinger* 1 (March 1830): 108.

⁷ *Loc. cit.*

⁸ *Ibid.*: 110.

⁹ Alexander Campbell, *The Christian System* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate, 1970; reprint of 1839 edition): 15.

¹⁰ Robert Richardson added an Ireanean “soul-making” dimension to his theodic thinking, even to the extent of affirming, to some degree, what is traditionally known as the “Happy Fall.” See Richardson’s “Sin—A Dialogue,” *Millennial Harbinger* (New Series) 3 (September 1839): 406, and (October 1839): 443, 445-6.

Schellenberg has brought the argument regarding “Divine Hiddenness” to the forefront in the last couple of decades.¹¹ The argument is not a new one, of course, as Clanton notes. Alexander Campbell deals with it though ever so briefly. Essentially, the argument suggests that if God exists, God would provide sufficient evidence that would make unbelief rationally impossible. Or, to put it another way, if God truly wants relationship with humanity or wants humanity to acknowledge divine existence, then God would demonstrate that existence in such a way that it would be nonsensical to deny it.

Clanton identifies a place where Campbell addresses this question directly. Campbell suggests any faith (the belief of evidence) such as that suggested by the “New Harmony people...over which ‘the will has no power,’ requires that species of evidence, which is incompatible with all moral virtue and goodness, and which would make belief like the fall of one of those volcanic stones which a few months since shivered a tree a few miles from Nashville, Tennessee.” That kind of faith—which involved a rational coercion of the mind—would undermine the Gospel narrative where Jesus “resolved the infidelity of his hearers on many occasions, entirely to the will—‘You will not come to me,’ and ‘You would not’.”¹² This goes to the point that Clanton calls “epistemic orientation.”

I would suggest that there is no tension in Campbell’s where Clanton suggests there is some. Do people irrationally refrain from belief while at the same time the kind of evidence God provides is not rationally compelling in the sense of coercing the will? It seems to me that what is affirmed in denying that God’s evidence is rationally compulsory such that rational people can deny God’s existence is not inconsistent with

¹¹ J. L. Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993).

¹² Alexander Campbell, “Deism and the Social System—No. IV,” *Christian Baptist* 5/2 (3 September 1827) 366.

the idea that unbelief is itself moved by irrationality. This is true because rational people do irrational things due to the movement of their wills. While their epistemic orientation may embrace rationality the movement of their wills moves them to believe something that is irrational. Whatever the case may be, I think Clanton could strengthen this critical comment on Campbell by more fully exploring this point.

As noted above, the Divine Hiddenness problem is not a new one. David Hume, for example, suggested it in his *Dialogues* (Part III). It seems to me that Pascal was on the right track in the seventeenth century when he wrote (*Pensees*, 232): “We can understand nothing of God’s works unless we accept the principle that he wished to blind some and enlighten others.” In this connection, Pascal also wrote (234): “God wishes to move the will rather than the mind. Perfect clarity would help the mind and harm the will. Humble their pride.”¹³ This goes to Campbell’s point about the moral significance of faith as an act of the will, a choice, but it is not choice without evidence. Nevertheless, it is an act of trust rather than epistemic compulsion.

Gratuitous Evil

Reared in the context of Scottish Presbyterianism, Campbell’s basic theological structure is Protestant and Reformed. Within this Reformed frame, however, his Arminian soteriology emphasized human freedom but within a high view of divine providence.¹⁴ It is this high view of providence that grounds

¹³ See Thomas V. Morris, *Making Sense of It All: Pascal and the Meaning of Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 97-108.

¹⁴ Some of this material is taken from John Mark Hicks, “Theodicy in Early Stone-Campbell Perspectives,” in *Restoring the First-century Church in the Twenty-first Century: Essays on the Stone-*

Campbell's "skeptical theism," as Clanton categorizes it, regarding gratuitous evil. In this section I want to extend Clanton's work by noting the theological—and narrational—dimensions that underlie Campbell's conviction that gratuitous evil is only apparent.

In 1833, Campbell published substantial extracts from William Sherlock's *A Discourse Concerning the Divine Providence*.¹⁵ First published in 1694,¹⁶ it had been reprinted for the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1823.¹⁷ Dean of St. Paul's Church in London in the late seventeenth century, Sherlock represented a moderate Anglican Arminianism with a rather traditional theology of meticulous providence,¹⁸ that is, a providence that governs every event in such a way that God directs it towards its proper end or goal. Sherlock attempted to steer a middle

Campbell Restoration Movement, ed. Warren Lewis and Hans Rollmann (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2005) 288-291

¹⁵ Alexander Campbell, "Sherlock on Providence," *Millennial Harbinger* 4/5 (May 1833): 205-12, 4/6 (June 1833): 247-51, 4/7 (July 1833): 296-300, 4/8 (August 1833): 389-95, 4/9 (September 1833): 435-9.

¹⁶ William Sherlock, *A Discourse Concerning the Divine Providence*, 2nd edition (London: William Rogers, 1694).

¹⁷ William Sherlock, *A Discourse Concerning the Divine Providence* (Cincinnati: M. Ruter, 1823; reprint of 2nd edition, 1694).

¹⁸ Michael L. Peterson was one of the first to define "meticulous providence" and identified it as "an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good God would not allow gratuitous or pointless evil" ("The Inductive Problem of Evil," *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation* 33 [1981]: 85). He first articulated this in "Evil and Inconsistency: A Reply," *Sophia* 18.2 (1979): 20-27. The term has now, unfortunately, become virtually synonymous with Augustinian or Calvinist understandings of providence (that is, deterministic or decretal) in the discussion of open theism.

course between Deism and Calvinism, between a divine *laissez faire* and theological determinism. Campbell endorsed Sherlock's views:¹⁹

Your commendations of Sherlock I think are well deserved. They are not exaggerated. He is a writer of good sense, and has chosen a very interesting subject. As far as I have perused his work, it appears to be well adapted to refute the scepticism of some professors on the doctrine of special providence. It would be well if our philosophists, who disbelieve the superintending care of the Almighty Father, would give Sherlock a candid hearing.²⁰

Campbell's traditional understanding is clear when he speaks of "special providence": "They who admit a general providence, and, at the same time deny a special providence, are feeble and perverted reasoners and thinkers."²¹ In the face of deists and rationalistic speculators, Campbell advises us to "place our hand upon our lips and be still."²²

Campbell's pedagogical example is the story of Joseph, which is filled with "apparent contingencies."²³ While Campbell spoke of "chance," he used it only accomodatively, that is, "Whatever occurs, the cause or instrument of which we do not perceive, is said to happen, or to come by chance." But "in the strict sense of

¹⁹ Likewise, Robert Richardson, Campbell's son-in-law, endorsed Sherlock and followed the extracts with his own complementary series on providence, "The Providence of God," *Millennial Harbinger* 7/5 (May 1836): 219-224, 7/6, (June 1836): 246-51, 7/7 (July 1836): 305-7, 7/8 (August 1836): 360-364, 7/9 (September 1836): 385-89; 7/10 (October 1836): 441-48.

²⁰ Alexander Campbell, "Reply to J. A. Waterman," *Millennial Harbinger* 4 (June 1833): 243.

²¹ Alexander Campbell, "Providence, General and Special," *Millennial Harbinger* (New Series) 5 (November 1855): 602.

²² *Ibid.*: 603.

²³ *Ibid.*: 604.

the word chance, as respects God, there is no such thing."²⁴ "Blind fortune" and "good luck" are the "creatures of Pagan imagination" and are "wholly incompatible with Christian sentiment and style."²⁵ Our histories, like Joseph's, are filled with "links of chain of designs" which terminate "in the eternal destiny of the world."²⁶ Indeed, "in this life many of our so-called misfortunes are the choicest blessings, and all things do work together for good to them who love God and keep his commandments."²⁷ Providence is benevolent, Campbell believed, even in misfortunes; he was careful to note, however, that none of this undermines human moral freedom. Special providence does not conflict with the "freedom of thought, of speech, or of action, in any issue involving or controlling the moral character or the eternal destiny of any man."²⁸

Campbell's understanding of special providence includes the death of infants and good men. In 1847, Campbell wrote on the mystery of providence in response to the death of several young ministers. He opined that God has a role for the "disembodied spirits of men" after death—they are his ministers, like angels.²⁹ Indeed, he surmised that "the Lord may need the services of infants and adults, and

²⁴ Alexander Campbell, "Chance," *Millennial Harbinger* (New Series) 1 (November 1851): 617.

²⁵ *Ibid.*: 617-8.

²⁶ *Ibid.*: 619.

²⁷ *Ibid.*: 620-1.

²⁸ Alexander Campbell (1855): 608.

²⁹ Alexander Campbell, "Mysteries of Providence," *Millennial Harbinger* 18 (1847): 707. In his "Address on Demonology," *Popular Lectures and Addresses* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: James Challen and Son, 1866): 379-402, Campbell defended the thesis that demons (both good and bad) are the spirits of the dead. See <http://www.mun.ca/rels/restmov/texts/acampbell/pla/PLA17.HTM>.

that for this purpose he often selects the purest and the best of our race and calls them hence to minister in his hosts of light, in other fields of labor, according to the wants of his vast dominions."³⁰ God's special providence includes the time of death, at least for some.

Campbell was explicit about the role of angels in special providence. While God's ministry is not carried out "exclusively" by angels, Campbell nevertheless affirmed, "I do believe that much has been done, and still is done by them."³¹ Campbell's Lockean epistemology meant that angels could influence human beings only through the five senses. Hence angels take on empirical form in order to influence events and persuade human thinking. He supposed that angels, whether good or bad, influence human beings to good or evil. They do this in a variety of ways:

...assuming a form of some sort—the form of a man—of any creature—of a thought—of a word, and by presenting it to the outward senses; or by an acquaintance with our associations of ideas, our modes of reasoning, our passions, our appetites, our propensities—and by approaching us through these avenues, they lead us backwards or forwards, to the right or to the left, as their designs may require....It is more than possible—it is probable.³²

Campbell extended this influence not only to angels but also to natural evils:

³⁰ Alexander Campbell (1847): 708.

³¹ Alexander Campbell (1833): 244.

³² *Ibid.*: 245.

I limit not human agency, nor angelic agency, nor divine agency in the government of the world; in providence, general or special; nor in the power of circumstances to arrest the attention and to fix the mind upon the arguments and motives which give to the gospel its potency over the mind of man. Men, good and bad, evil spirits, angels, dreams, pestilences, earthquakes, sudden deaths, personal and family afflictions, may become occasions of conversions to God.³³

Through these direct and indirect means, God manages the world, including its evil, toward its destiny, and God uses these means to awaken humanity to divine redemptive presence. His theology of providence denies gratuitous evil.

Conclusion

Clanton's work is impressive. His analysis of Campbell's ideas are fair, clear, and illuminating. His re-contextualization of Campbell's thought is insightful. He demonstrates that Campbell squarely faced the questions that philosophy of religion raised in the early nineteenth century. Campbell was well-acquainted with the philosophical issues of his day. Not only does this demonstrate that the Stone-Campbell Movement has its own "philosopher," but that the philosophic tradition Campbell represented may yet still provide some guidance in our current context. And, yet, I think it remains clear—as Clanton's discussion of the Campbell's ideation argument for the existence of God indicates—that Campbell, as a philosopher of ideas, is a deeply rooted empirical

³³ Alexander Campbell, "Editor's Reply," *Millennial Harbinger* 4 (July 1833): 333-6.

Biblicist who only ventures into metaphysical waters as a negative apologetic while always staying within sight of the empirical shore.