

Is God Good by Nature or by Choice?

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In understanding the nature and character of God it is important to distinguish between the natural and moral attributes of God. Natural attributes are those qualities or characteristics without which God could not be God. Natural attributes inherently belong to the essential being of God, and exist independently of any action of God's will. Examples include eternity of being, omnipresence, omniscience, and omnipotence.

Moral attributes involve choice on God's part, and give him moral character. Moral attributes are traits that are true in the realm of voluntary activity, not something behind God's will necessarily causing Him to act as He does. Examples are love, holiness, truthfulness and faithfulness.

God's praiseworthiness does not depend upon the existence of his natural attributes, but upon the exercise of them. Goodness in God should not be considered as merely a quality of His nature, or a latent state, but as an intense activity of His personal choice, particularly expressed in His moral government.

God is not under a "law of necessity" or "cause and effect" which forces Him to act in a particular way in any given situation. He acts one way or another according to occasions and information presented to His intellect. God does not necessarily or automatically act rightly, but he freely chooses to act in the light of His conscience. God's virtue consists in obeying the universal law of benevolence which is unselfish love.

God's right to govern the universe does not rest primarily on the fact that He is almighty, but that He is good. Might does not make right in a moral system of government. Benevolence seeks the highest good of all beings in the universe. Whatever God requires of man, He also does. He expects man to will good and to do good, He wills and does good Himself. He shows us the way through example. He is unselfish, man is to be unselfish.

God is not a tyrant or a despot. He is not above his own law. God freely chooses to submit Himself to the law of love to which all beings are subject. Should God cease to be loving and good, man would still have reason to fear Him because of His omnipotence, but he would have no motivation to love and worship Him.

The Islamic view of God is that he is arbitrary and above the law. Consequently, Islam has produced leaders such as the Ayatollah Khomeini and Saddam Hussain who have been dictatorial in their exercise of authority. In America, where the primary influence on government has historically been the Bible, our civil authorities are not supposed to govern dictatorially. Our founding fathers were repulsed by the idea of the divine right of the King-- that whatever the King does is right because he is King. Our highest executive officer, the president, can be impeached if he puts himself above the law. If God is

viewed as a tyrant or despot, then men, in attempting to pattern themselves after God's perceived character, will become autocratic in their behavior.

It is theoretically possible that God could sin and govern selfishly and cease being good. Man should not doubt that God will continue to be good forever because He has proven Himself in all of His dealings with men and angels throughout the ages. After making the ultimate sacrifice of giving His Son for the redemption of mankind, could any thinking man ever believe that God would become evil? When the Scriptures teach that it is "impossible for God to lie", this does not mean He is incapable of telling an untruth, but that He cannot lie and remain true to His character. The "cannot" is moral, not metaphysical. Indeed at one point God even sent a lying Spirit to confound the plans of the wicked. Although there is no darkness in God, it must be understood that He knows both good and evil. He knows about moral evil and its awful consequences better than any other being, but He has never personally experienced what it is like to do evil. In this respect, both Satan and man know what God does not. Whereas God has always continually participated in good, Satan and all men have sinned, not by nature, but by choice.

We are asked the old query, "Is the good good because God wills it?" or, "Does God will it because it is good." Answer: God wills it because it is good. Our consciences tell us the good is good regardless of God's will. We know it is wrong to commit adultery, whether God says it is wrong or not. The laws of our nature also affirm that we should love our neighbor as ourselves, and keep the Golden Rule. It is only intelligent that men and God should live lovingly for the sake of universal happiness. God is not arbitrary in any of His commandments, nor does He require of man any more or less than He willingly performs: "Be ye holy, for I am holy." If God can't help but be good, then He has asked more from man than from Himself. God does good, not because He has to, but because it is the right and reasonable thing to do. It promotes the highest well-being of all and works to prevent the misery of all.

If God is not free to do good or evil then God is not responsible or accountable. Many view the Sovereign God as being accountable or responsible to no one and without any control. Surely the God of the Bible exerts self-control in the light of His law which is the expression of His heart. Although God is by nature independent, when He created the universe He became accountable and responsible to His creatures. Now His happiness is to a large degree dependent on their loving response to His overtures of love. What? Create dependent beings, and then not acknowledge any responsibly or accountability for their well-being? No, not the God of the Bible! "O my people, what have I done unto thee? and wherein have I wearied thee? testify against me." (Micah 6:3) Here we have the great God humbling Himself before His creatures, asking them to judge Him. But how could men judge Him, if there is no standard to which even God is accountable?

Abraham in interceding for Sodom and Gomorrah pleaded with God not to destroy the righteous with the wicked, and boldly questioned the Almighty, "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (Gen. 18:25) It is apparent that our father Abraham believed that there was a moral standard in the nature of things to which even God was accountable.

God is under no compulsion to love and show mercy towards man. God freely gave His Son for our salvation, and Jesus laid down his life willingly. God is under a moral obligation to be just to all, but He has no obligation to show mercy to any, because all men deserve hell for all have sinned. There is nothing innate in God causing Him to behave morally for He is the causeless Cause or the First Cause. There is no natural necessity within God coercing Him to be just, merciful and longsuffering. When God was determined to destroy the rebellious nation of Israel, Moses reasoned with God and succeeded in changing His mind. (Exodus 32) God would have been just in demonstrating His wrath, but He choose to extend mercy. God is a free being who has always behaved lovingly, and who, Scripture confirms, will always act lovingly because this is the way He chooses to be.

God made man in His own image and likeness, not with the same physical powers, but with the same moral potential as Himself. Man, like God, has intellect, including conscience, emotion and free will. God created man in order that He might have a loving and personal relationship with beings in His own image. We intuitively know that we have these faculties, therefore we can conclude, as the Bible also affirms, that God must have these faculties. I am conscious of making choices independently of any outside or inside causation. To speak of being caused to choose is an obvious contradiction, an oxymoron. Reasonable men universally recognize the value of freedom, at least for themselves. Men are conscious of their freedom to choose; therefore, since God is infinitely greater than man, to refuse to acknowledge his freedom of conscience and choice, yes, even potential to do wrong, is demeaning to His greatness. God could choose to have His will always done on earth in the affairs of men, but to do so He would have to divest man of his freedom. Theologians who deny God's freedom naturally deny man's; therefore, they debase man to the level of, at best, a slave or, at worst, a brute.

Virtue can only exist where there is freedom. If man has a free will, and God doesn't, then man has something of value that God doesn't have. If God couldn't do anything but good and man could, wouldn't man in doing good be more righteous than God? If God is not free to do moral evil, then God is not a Holy Being, but an irresistible impersonal force or power, who absolutely and arbitrarily controls everything and everybody.

When the Bible speaks of God as immutable, in the moral sense, it means that God refuses to change His character. God has always chosen to be motivated by benevolence in everything that He has done without any lapses into selfishness. By His own choice, God is too wise to make mistakes, too good and just to do us wrong, too loving to ignore our interests or needs. His character is unchanging; but His feeling and actions will make adjustments to the changing characters of men. The man who is righteous today may be wicked tomorrow, and therefore God's emotions and relationship to him must change or He would not be just.

James 1:13 teaches, "God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth He any man." This does not mean that God is not free to choose to do evil, but evil is not a significant temptation to God like it is to man. Man's natural capacities are seriously weakened as a result of the Fall. God's strength has never been abated by sin. He is the Moral

Stronghold of the universe. Given God's conduct record, it is futile to tempt Him with any expectation of His succumbing to the temptation. In fact, we are commanded not to tempt the Lord (Deut. 6:16, quoted in Matt. 4:7). It is a common figure of speech for men to say, "That is no temptation to me." They don't mean that they don't have the ability to sin, but that the object is so removed from their will and the thought so odious to them that they experience no moral struggle in rejecting the temptation. God's moral fortitude is so great that He doesn't experience conflict within Himself if moral evil should be presented to His intellect.

Ideas have consequences. What effect has the false but popular doctrine of the inherent goodness of God had on the behavior of men? If moral good is inbred, innate, or inherent in God, then it follows that man can be born with inbred, innate, or inherent sin without the ability to do good. When God is believed to be primarily good by nature and not by choice, believers will be content with claiming a new divine righteous nature being imputed onto them by faith, but deny the possibility of habitually choosing the good and shunning the evil. If God can't freely choose to be holy, how could He righteously require man to choose to be holy? Holiness comes to be regarded as a mysterious something infused into man by God, instead of a disposition to do right. If holiness is a static or fixed something somewhere in God's nature instead of a dynamic state of being, then believers will be justified in the assurance of a positional righteousness while sinning daily in thought, word, and deed.

How reverent and marvelous it is to the great God, for us to know that His actions are not fixed, predetermined, and mechanical, but free, intelligent and benevolent. The truth that God is freely good sets men at liberty to obey the Lord's commandment to "Be ye therefore perfect even as your Father in heaven is perfect." If God is not inherently caused to do good, then we men, created in His image and likeness, are not innately caused to do evil, but are free to obey the law of love. Just as God is author of His own actions and character, man is the initiator of his own volitions, character and moral nature. The God who wills that none shall perish has put man's destiny into his own hands. The Lord has crowned man "with glory and honor." It is our responsibility to use our faculties for His glory by loving Him supremely and by loving our neighbor as ourselves.