

The Goodness of God:

Can Voluntary Goodness Be Guaranteed?

by Kel Good

The moral government view that God is voluntarily good, that His holiness is the sum total of the choices which He makes, rather than a natural, or constitutional attribute outside His control, is a doctrine which many people find troubling. It seems to shake people's confidence in the reliability and trustworthiness of God. In another essay I examine the basis for assurance in God's character and attempt to show that our confidence in God is not based on a theory of the nature of His holiness, but on its manifestation in what God has said and done.

This doctrine causes such hesitation that even in moral government circles writers pause in affirming the implication that voluntary holiness in God means that He could sin, to assure us that this will not happen. This essay is an exercise in intellectual honesty, with the intention of examining the arguments put forth to deny that God could sin, even though His holiness is voluntary. It is not our purpose to undermine confidence in God's faithfulness, but simply to demonstrate the weakness of arguments of this sort. This essay does not seek to affirm anything about the reliability of God's holiness, but to deny certain arguments which seek to establish it on other than moral grounds. The reader should refer to the essay noted in footnote 1 for an affirmative treatment of this subject.

Argument From Timelessness

It is clear from the writings of Charles Finney that he believed holiness was voluntary in God, but he denied that this meant that God could sin. His reason for this conclusion is clear in *The Heart Of Truth*. His character, whether holy or sinful, must be unchangeable. As He can have no new thoughts, and consequently no motives of any kind whatever to change.

The reason Finney gives for denying the possibility of a change of character in God is consistent, but one which 20th Century moral government advocates have seen wise to reject. Finney held to the "eternal now" understanding that God is timeless, and therefore all His acts, thoughts, etc., are simply given, frozen in the eternal present. The problems with this view of God's nature are numerous, as I have indicated elsewhere. Such recourse is not available to those who espouse the moral government view as presented by Gordon Olson and others.

Argument From Omniscience

Winkie Pratney draws attention to another reason Finney gave for denying that God could sin, one which carries on the surface more feasibility for those who wish to deny

the implications of voluntary holiness. Although Finney offered it in the theological context of God's timelessness, it does not require that belief.

Finney argues for God's goodness on the basis of His omniscience: "He could not but know all the reasons in favour of benevolence and all the reasons against malevolence. He could not by any possibility be ignorant of the reasons on either side, nor so divert His mind from them as that they should not have their full influence in deciding His character and confirming it forever.

On the surface, this sounds similar to the Greek belief that sin arises through ignorance. Socrates (and Plato after him) felt that man's basic moral problems were because of (the lack of) knowledge. He did wrong because he did not understand what was truly good. Each man pursued what he believed was good, but the good man's belief was correct. This Greek view confused the objective and subjective in doing good. Even people with pure motives fail to achieve perfect goodness in the objective sense. But Socrates failed to acknowledge that even if a person knew what was right in a given case, he could still choose to do otherwise. If all men meant to do what they thought was right, and acted on this intention, all men would be humanly holy. Sin is not an act of ignorance, but a refusal to do what is perceived as good. This is the subjective side, the side of intention, and it is here that moral character must be assessed.

Is Finney claiming that we sin because we do not know what is right? A cursory reading of Finney's theology shows us that this is not his view. Finney believed that men were only guilty for what they knew and disobeyed. What then is the meaning of the Pratney quote? It seems clear that Finney believed absolute knowledge in God would prevent the sinful choice, implying that temptation tricks us into thinking we will benefit from some forbidden act, and our limited knowledge allows us to believe this lie. It is not that we believe that true good is in a different direction, for if this were the case it would be right to take the different course. Rather, we choose to compromise what we believe to be the true good for a lesser good which we think will be satisfying. After we sin, we feel terrible and the lie is out. It did not give us what we thought it would. Before this we believe the lie of what the temptation promises us, in the face of what we believe we should do. God could not be deceived in this way, because He would have absolute knowledge of the real result of sinning in such a fashion and could not be tricked by the lie.

It seems clear that temptation can take this form. We must deny that it always does. Many sins seem to be committed in spite of the belief they are going to be regretted, in spite of the belief that the satisfaction is not worth how we will feel afterward. But the immediate pleasure is offered, and received, even though regret will follow. While God could not be tricked by a lie, would He be incapable of choosing in spite of knowledge, to do the wrong thing for a lesser value than that which is the right thing?

Swinburne's Perfectly Free Being

An attempt to deny this possibility to God, and one which explicates the necessary element in the argument which Finney's comments leave implicit, is argued by Richard Swinburne in *The Coherence Of Theism*. Swinburne's book attempts to demonstrate that the concept of God is a coherent one which could have factual application. The discussion which interests us is his description of what it would mean for God to act of His own free will, and his idea that God is "perfectly free."

To say of God that He acts freely would seem to be to say at least the same as of man - that God's actions result from His choices and that His choosing has no full explanation.

However, the theist wishes to say something more about God. He wishes to say that while men are quite obviously influenced, although perhaps not fully determined, by antecedent causes, God is quite uninfluenced by such factors.

"Human choices are obviously influenced by many causal factors, factors which act upon us as it were from without. Such causal factors incline or 'pull' us towards doing one action rather than another. It is in such situations that men suffer temptation. Their reason tells them that A is the right action to do, but their body 'pulls' them, as it were, towards not doing A. Yet on our normal understanding of God, there aren't any causal factors over which He has no control which can act on Him from without. His freedom is unimpaired by sensual desire or nervous impulses. A person who is not influenced in his choices by any causal factors I will call a perfectly free person."

Swinburne also stresses that when a person acts freely, he always acts from some motive, be it a reason or an irrational factor.

So an agent has to have some reason if he is to do an action A...If a man has strong sensual desires, it makes sense to suppose that he judges that over all it would be better to refrain from doing A than to do A but nevertheless intentionally does A...But the suggestion that a man might see refraining from A as better over all than doing A, and be subject to no non-rational influences inclining him in the direction of doing A and nevertheless do A, is incoherent.

The clincher is when we put the fact of God being perfectly free of all non-rational influences together with this explanation of temptation.

An omniscient person who is also perfectly free will necessarily do right actions and avoid wrong ones - since, ...he will necessarily do those actions which he believes right and avoid those which he believes wrong, and...being omniscient, he will hold true beliefs in this field.

The argument is impressive, and one which moral government advocates might hold. Like them, Swinburne also believes God must be a being of duration, rather than timeless, and that His holiness must be voluntary. But with the introduction of the concept of God being "perfectly free," Swinburne secures this view of God's character from the possibility of sinning. God must be perfectly holy since He is perfectly free and

uninfluenced by any but rational factors in His decisions. It is this element of being influenced only by reason which is the idea implicit in Finney's statement, which Swinburne brings out into the light. What are we to make of this?

Is God Only Influenced By Reason?

First, we must be clear what constitutes non-rational factors. Swinburne refers to sensual and nervous impulses, pointing directly to our bodies as their source. Since God is incorporeal, He would be uninfluenced by such things. It is assumed that only a physical being can have emotions and desires. This is the scholastic view that God is impassible, uninfluenced by desire or emotion. God does not feel.

This is not the God revealed in scripture. There God feels, regrets, mourns, rejoices, is jealous, and angered. The Bible shows God as a personal being who has feeling, emotion, and desire, as well as rationality. If God were impassible, Swinburne's argument might stand. Biblically it does not.

Secondly, Swinburne seems to fail in his understanding of morality. How could the sense of value and obligation so inherent in moral consciousness arise in a being incapable of feeling? Morality is rational but it is also much more. It appears to be the result of our whole rational and emotional makeup. Right and wrong seem intertwined with value and good. Without the emotive side, there would be no morality, no goodness in God. God must understand and feel as we do if He is a moral being to whom praise and blame is attributable. If He feels, He can be influenced by wrong feeling.

Is God Praiseworthy?

This last point brings out the final problem with Swinburne's argument. God is an object of worship and praise. Swinburne himself understands such homage is only due to beings who are free in their moral actions. He says:

If P's choice to do action A is fully explained by a brain state, or by his genetic make-up, or by his upbringing, affecting him in accord with natural laws, then, given the brain state or the genetic make-up or the upbringing, P could not but have chosen as he did - as a matter of physical necessity. In that case he is hardly to blame or praise for doing it. For the ultimate responsibility for what P did is not P's but goes back much further in time.

To use Swinburne's terminology, holiness in God is a part of his "genetic makeup." He cannot help doing good. He does good "of necessity." Swinburne calls this perfectly free. I call it not so free. Being left with no choice is not freedom. Exactly at the place where God must be free to be praiseworthy, Swinburne has Him bound by chains. He is not capable of any other action and cannot be influenced by wrong motives. Yet we are to praise Him for doing the only thing He could do, as if this is worthy of our veneration.

Swinburne would attempt to answer this charge by saying that what he denies is praiseworthy is when one acts outside of one's own intentions. It is intentional action

which is praiseworthy or blameworthy, but action caused by brain states or genetics is not truly intentional. This is a fair distinction. Swinburne's perfectly free being is not caused to act this way, he simply has no other choices. What he chooses, he chooses freely, but he does not have the full range of choices to give him a moral choice. This calls to mind the Calvinist explanation that man is accountable for his wrongdoing because he chooses freely what he "wants," even though what he wants is determined by a nature he did not choose. Just as such determination eliminates true blame for the "sinner" it must also remove true praise for God's "holiness."

"Free" Being Or Moral Being?

What Swinburne's argument really says, as did Luther's in *The Bondage Of The Will* concerning the sinner, is that God is free to choose in matters of no moral importance, hence He has freedom. He can only choose the good in matters moral. Hence, He is not free morally. This being the case, as Luther's sinner is not a moral agent, so Swinburne's God must be denied the title. Freedom to choose between good and evil is a condition of being a moral agent. Holiness is the free choice of the good, in the presence of an equally possible choice of the evil. Swinburne's God lacks this, and is not a candidate as a moral government solution to the implications of God's voluntary goodness.

I am unaware of additional arguments which attempt to deny that voluntary goodness implies the possibility of sin. Those we have examined do not work. God is good. God is faithful. He is worthy of our highest praise and trust because this is a voluntary disposition which He has exercised for eternity. He is our solid foundation of hope. And that is only one of the many reasons we freely worship and follow Him.