

Is God's Sovereign Will the foundation of Moral Obligation?

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It has already been observed that this is a highly practical question, and one of surpassing interest and importance. I have gone through the discussion and examination of the several principal theories, for the purpose of preparing the way to expose the practical results of those various theories, and to show that they legitimately result in some of the most soul-destroying errors that cripple the church and curse the world.

I will begin with the theory that regards the sovereign will of God as the foundation of moral obligation.

One legitimate and necessary result of this theory is, a totally erroneous conception both of the character of God, and of the nature and design of His government. If God's will is the foundation of moral obligation, it follows that He is an arbitrary sovereign. He is not under law Himself, and He has no rule by which to regulate His conduct, nor by which either Himself or any other being can judge of His moral character. Indeed, unless He is subject to law, or is a subject of moral obligation, He has and can have, no moral character; for moral character always and necessarily implies moral law and moral obligation. If God's will is not itself under the law of His infinite reason, or, in other words, it is not conformed to the law imposed upon it by His intelligence, then His will is and must be arbitrary in the worst sense; that is, in the sense of having no regard to reason, or to the nature and relations of moral agents. But if His will is under the law of His reason, if He acts from principle, or has good and benevolent reasons for His conduct, then His will is not the foundation of moral obligation, but those reasons that lie revealed in the divine intelligence, in view of which it affirms moral obligation, or that He ought to will in conformity with those reasons. In other words, if the intrinsic value of His own well-being and that of the universe be the foundation of moral obligation; if His reason affirms His obligation to choose this as His ultimate end, and to consecrate His infinite energies to the realization of it; and if His will is conformed to this law it follows:

- (1.) That His will is not the foundation of moral obligation.
- (2.) That He has infinitely good and wise reasons for what He wills, says, and does.
- (3.) That He is not arbitrary, but always acts in conformity with right principles, and for reasons that will, when universally known, compel the respect and even admiration of every intelligent being in the universe.
- (4.) That creation and providential and moral government, are the necessary means to an infinitely wise and good end, and that existing evils are only unavoidably incidental to

this infinitely wise and benevolent arrangement, and, although great, are indefinitely the less of two evils. That is, they are an evil indefinitely less than no creation and government would have been. It is conceivable, that a plan of administration might have been adopted that would have prevented the present evils; but if we admit that God has been governed by reason in the selection of the end He has in view, and in the use of means for its accomplishment, it will follow that the evils are less than would have existed under any other plan of administration; or at least, that the present system, with all its evils, is the best that infinite wisdom and love could adopt.

(5.) These incidental evils, therefore, do not at all detract from the evidence of the wisdom and goodness of God; for in all these things He is not acting from caprice, or malice, or an arbitrary sovereignty, but is acting in conformity with the law of His infinite intelligence, and of course has infinitely good and weighty reasons for what He does and suffers to be done reasons so good and so weighty, that He could not do otherwise without violating the law of His own intelligence, and therefore committing infinite sin.

(6.) It follows also that there is ground for perfect confidence, love, and submission to His divine will in all things. That is, if His will is not arbitrary, but conformed to the law of His infinite intelligence, then it is obligatory, as our rule of action, because it reveals infallibly what is in accordance with infinite intelligence. We may always be entirely safe in obeying all the divine requirements, and in submitting to all His dispensations, however mysterious, being assured that they are perfectly wise and good. Not only are we safe in doing so, but we are under infinite obligation to do so; not because His arbitrary will imposes obligation, but because it reveals to us infallibly the end we ought to choose, and the indispensable means of securing it. His will is law, not in the sense of its originating and imposing obligation of its own arbitrary sovereignty, but in the sense of its being a revelation of both the end we ought to seek, and the means by which the end can be secured. Indeed this is the only proper idea of law. It does not in any case of itself impose obligation, but is only a revelation of obligation. Law is a condition, but not the foundation, of obligation. The will of God is a condition of obligation, only so far as it is indispensable to our knowledge of the end we ought to seek, and the means by which this end is to be secured. Where these are known, there is obligation, whether God has revealed His will or not.

The foregoing, and many other important truths, little less important than those already mentioned, and too numerous to be now distinctly noticed, follow from the fact that the good of being, and not the arbitrary will of God, is the foundation of moral obligation. But not one of them is or can be true, if His will be the foundation of obligation. Nor can any one, who consistently holds or believes that His will is the foundation of obligation, hold or believe any of the foregoing truths, nor indeed hold or believe any truth of the law or gospel. Nay, he cannot, if he be at all consistent, have even a correct conception of one truth of God's moral government. Let us see if he can.

(1.) Can he believe that God's will is wise and good, unless he admits and believes that it is subject to the law of His intelligence? If he consistently holds that the divine will is the foundation of moral obligation, he must either deny that His will is any evidence of what is wise and good, or maintain the absurdity, that whatever God wills is wise and good,

simply for the reason that God wills it, and that if he willed the directly opposite of what he does, it would be equally wise and good. But this is an absurdity palpable enough to confound any one who has reason and moral agency.

(2.) If he consistently holds and believes that God's sovereign will is the foundation of moral obligation, he cannot regard Him as having any moral character, for the reason, that there is no standard by which to judge of His willing and acting; for, by the supposition, He has no intelligent rule of action, and, therefore, can have no moral character, as He is not a moral agent, and can Himself have no idea of the moral character of His own actions; for, in fact, upon the supposition in question, they have none. Any one, therefore, who holds that God is not a subject of moral law, imposed on Him by His own reason, but, on the contrary, that His sovereign will is the foundation of moral obligation, must, if consistent, deny that He has moral character; and he must deny that God is an intelligent being, or else admit that He is infinitely wicked for not conforming His will to the law of His intelligence; and for not being guided by His infinite reason, instead of setting up an arbitrary sovereignty of will.

(3.) He who holds that God's sovereign will is the foundation of moral obligation, instead of being a revelation of obligation, if he be at all consistent, can neither have nor assign any good reason either for confidence in Him, or submission to Him. If God has no good and wise reasons for what He commands, why should we obey Him? If He has no good and wise reasons for what He does, why should we submit to Him?

Will it be answered, that if we refuse, we do it at our peril, and, therefore, it is wise to do so, even if He has no good reasons for what He does and requires? To this I answer that it is impossible, upon the supposition in question, either to obey or submit to God with the heart. If we can see no good reasons, but, on the other hand, are assured there are no good and wise reasons for the divine commands and conduct, it is rendered forever naturally impossible, from the laws of our nature, to render anything more than feigned obedience and submission. Whenever we do not understand the reason for a divine requirement, or of a dispensation of divine Providence, the condition of heart-obedience to the one and submission to the other, is the assumption that He has good and wise reasons for both. But assume the contrary, to wit, that He has no good and wise reasons for either, and you render heart-obedience, confidence, and submission impossible. It is perfectly plain, therefore, that he who consistently holds the theory in question, can neither conceive rightly of God, nor of anything respecting His law, gospel, or government, moral or providential. It is impossible for him to have an intelligent piety. His religion, if he have any, must be sheer superstition, inasmuch as he neither knows the true God, nor the true reason why he should love, believe, obey, or submit to Him. In short, he neither knows, nor, if consistent, can know, anything of the nature of true religion, and has not so much as a right conception of what constitutes virtue. But do not understand me as affirming, that none who profess to hold the theory in question have any true knowledge of God, or any true religion. No, they are happily so purely theorists on this subject, and so happily inconsistent with themselves, as to have, after all, a practical judgment in favor of the truth. They do not see the logical consequences of their theory, and of course do not

embrace them, and this happy inconsistency is an indispensable condition of their salvation.

(4.) Another pernicious consequence of this theory is that those who hold it will of course give false directions to inquiring sinners. Indeed, if they be ministers, the whole strain of their instructions must be false. They must, if consistent, not only represent God to their hearers as an absolute and arbitrary sovereign, but they must represent religion as consisting in submission to arbitrary sovereignty. If sinners inquire what they must do to be saved, such teachers must answer in substance, that they must cast themselves on the sovereignty of a God whose law is solely an expression of His arbitrary will, and whose every requirement and purpose is founded in His arbitrary sovereignty. This is the God whom they must love, in whom they must believe, and whom they must serve with a willing mind. How infinitely different such instructions are from those that would be given by one who knew the truth. Such an one would represent God to an inquirer as infinitely reasonable in all His requirements, and in all His ways. He would represent the sovereignty of God as consisting, not in arbitrary will, but in benevolence or love, directed by infinite knowledge in the promotion of the highest good of being. He would represent His law, not as the expression of His arbitrary will, but as having its foundation in the self-existent nature of God, and in the nature of moral agents; as being the very rule which is agreeable to the nature and relations of moral agents; that its requisitions are not arbitrary, but that the very thing, and only that, is required which is in the nature of things indispensable to the highest well-being of moral agents; that God's will does not originate obligation by any arbitrary fiat, but on the contrary, that He requires what He does, because it is obligatory in the nature of things; that His requirement does not create right, but that He requires only that which is naturally and of necessity right. These and many such like things would irresistibly commend the character of God to the human intelligence, as worthy to be trusted, and as a being to whom submission is infallibly safe and infinitely reasonable.

The fact is, the idea of arbitrary sovereignty is shocking and revolting, not only to the human heart, whether unregenerate or regenerate, but also to the human intelligence. Religion, based upon such a view of God's character and government, must be sheer superstition or gross fanaticism.

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In dismissing this subject, I would remark, that any system of moral philosophy that does not correctly define a moral action, and the real ground of obligation, must be fundamentally defective. Nay, if consistent, it must be highly pernicious and dangerous. But let moral action be clearly and correctly defined, let the true ground of obligation be clearly and correctly stated; and let both these be kept constantly in view, and such a system would be of incalculable value. It would be throughout intelligible, and force conviction upon every intelligent reader. But I am not aware that any such system exists. So far as I know, they are all faulty, either in their definition of a moral action, and do not fasten the eye upon the ultimate intention, and keep it there as being the seat of moral character, and that from which the character of all our actions is derived; or they soon

forget this, and treat mere executive acts as right or wrong, without reference to the ultimate intention. I believe they have all failed in not clearly defining the true ground of obligation, and, consequently, are faulty in their definition of virtue.

**This article has been adapted from the 1878 edition Finney's "Systematic Theology" Lecture 8, The Foundation of Moral Obligation.*