

What is Moral Depravity?

By [Charles G. Finney](#)*

In discussing the subject of human depravity, I shall:

Define the term *depravity*.

The word is derived from the Latin *de* and *pravus*. *Pravus* means "crooked." *De* is intensive. *Depravatus* literally and primarily means "very crooked," not in the sense of original or constitutional crookedness, but in the sense of having become crooked. The term does not imply original mal-conformation, but lapsed, fallen, departed from right or straight. It always implies deterioration, or fall from a former state of moral or physical perfection.

Depravity always implies a departure from a state of original integrity, or from conformity to the laws of the being who is the subject of depravity. Thus we should not consider that being depraved, who remained in a state of conformity to the original laws of his being, physical and moral. But we justly call a being depraved, who has departed from conformity to those laws, whether those laws be physical or moral.

Point out the distinction between physical and moral depravity.

Physical depravity, as the word denotes, is the depravity of constitution, or substance, as distinguished from depravity of free moral action. It may be predicated of body or of mind. Physical depravity, when predicated of the body, is commonly and rightly called disease. It consists in a physical departure from the laws of health; a lapsed, or fallen state, in which healthy organic action is not sustained. When physical depravity is predicated of mind, it is intended that the powers of the mind, either in substance, or in consequence of their connection with, and dependence upon, the body, are in a diseased, lapsed, fallen, degenerate state, so that the healthy action of those powers is not sustained.

Physical depravity, being depravity of substance as opposed to depravity of the actions of free will, can have no moral character. It may as we shall see, be caused by moral depravity; and a moral agent may be blameworthy for having rendered himself physically depraved, either in body or mind. But physical depravity, whether of body or of mind, can have no moral character in itself, for the plain reason that it is involuntary, and in its nature is disease, and not sin. Let this be remembered.

Moral depravity is the depravity of free will, not of the faculty itself, but of its free action. It consists in a violation of moral law. Depravity of the will, as a faculty, is, or would be, physical, and not moral depravity. It would be depravity of substance, and not of free, responsible choice. Moral depravity is depravity of choice. It is a choice at variance with moral law, moral right. It is synonymous with sin or sinfulness. It is moral depravity, because it consists in a violation of moral law, and because it has moral character.

Of what physical depravity can be predicated.

1. It can be predicated of any organized substance. That is, every organized substance is liable to become depraved. Depravity is a possible state of every organized body or substance in existence.

2. Physical depravity may be predicated of mind, as has already been said, especially in its connection with an organized body. As mind, in connection with body, manifests itself through it, acts by means of it, and is dependent upon it, it is plain that if the body become diseased, or physically depraved, the mind cannot but be affected by this state of the body, through and by means of which it acts. The normal manifestations of mind cannot, in such case, be reasonably expected. Physical depravity may be predicated of all the involuntary states of the intellect, and of the sensibility. That is, the actings and states of the intellect may become disordered, depraved, deranged, or fallen from the state of integrity and healthiness. This every one knows, as it is matter of daily experience and observation. Whether this in all cases is, and must be, caused by the state of the bodily organization, that is, whether it is always and necessarily to be ascribed to the depraved state of the brain and nervous system, it is impossible for us to know. It may, for aught we know, in some instances at least, be a depravity or derangement of the substance of the mind itself.

The sensibility, or feeling department of the mind, may be sadly and physically depraved. This is a matter of common experience. The appetites and passions, the desires and cravings, the antipathies and repellencies of the feelings fall into great disorder and anarchy. Numerous artificial appetites are generated, and the whole sensibility becomes a wilderness, a chaos of conflicting and clamorous desires, emotions and passions. That this state of the sensibility is often, and perhaps in some measure always, owing to the state of the nervous system with which it is connected, through and by which it manifests itself, there can be but little room to doubt. But whether this is always and necessarily so, no one can tell. We know that the sensibility manifests great physical depravity. Whether this depravity belong exclusively to the body, or to the mind, or to both in conjunction, I will not venture to affirm. In the present state of our knowledge, or of my knowledge, I dare not hazard an affirmation upon the subject. The human body is certainly in a state of physical depravity. The human mind also certainly manifests physical depravity. But observe, physical depravity has in no case any moral character, because it is involuntary.

Of what moral depravity can be predicated.

1. Not of substance; for over involuntary substance the moral law does not directly legislate.

2. Moral depravity cannot be predicated of any involuntary acts or states of mind. These surely cannot be violations of moral law apart from the ultimate intention; for moral law legislates directly only over free, intelligent choices.

3. Moral depravity cannot be predicated of any unintelligent act of will, that is, of acts of will that are put forth in a state of idiocy, of intellectual derangement, or of sleep. Moral depravity implies moral obligation; moral obligation implies moral agency; and moral agency implies intelligence, or knowledge of moral relations. Moral agency implies moral law, or the development of the idea of duty, and a knowledge of what duty is.

4. Moral depravity can only be predicated of violations of moral law, and of the free volitions by which those violations are perpetrated. Moral law, as we have seen, requires love, and only love, to God and man, or to God and the universe. This love, as we have seen, is goodwill, choice, the choice of an end, the choice of the highest well-being of God, and of the universe of sentient existences.

Moral depravity is sin. Sin is a violation of moral law. We have seen that sin must consist in choice, in the choice of self-indulgence or self-gratification as an end.

5. Moral depravity cannot consist in any attribute of nature or constitution, nor in any lapsed and fallen state of nature; for this is physical and not moral depravity.

6. It cannot consist in anything that is an original and essential part of mind, or of body; nor in any involuntary action or state of either mind or body.

7. It cannot consist in anything back of choice, and that sustains to choice the relation of a cause. Whatever is back of choice, is without the pale of legislation. The law of God, as has been said, requires good willing only; and sure it is, that nothing but acts of will can constitute a violation of moral law. Outward actions, and involuntary thoughts and feelings, may be said in a certain sense to possess moral character because they are produced by the will. But, strictly speaking, moral character belongs only to choice, or intention.

It was shown in a former lecture, that sin does not, and cannot consist in malevolence, properly speaking, or in the choice of sin or misery as an end, or for its own sake. It was also shown, that all sin consists, and must consist in selfishness, or in the choice of self-gratification as a final end. Moral depravity then, strictly speaking, can only be predicated of selfish ultimate intention.

Moral depravity, as I use the term, does not consist in, nor imply a sinful nature, in the sense that the substance of the human soul is sinful in itself. It is not a constitutional sinfulness. It is not an involuntary sinfulness. Moral depravity, as I use the term, consists in selfishness; in a state of voluntary committal of the will to self-gratification. It is a spirit of self-seeking, a voluntary and entire consecration to the gratification of self. It is selfish ultimate intention; it is the choice of a wrong end of life; it is moral depravity, because it is a violation of moral law. It is a refusal to consecrate the whole being to the highest well-being of God and of the universe, and obedience to the moral law, and consecrating it to the gratification of self. Moral depravity sustains to the outward life, the relation of a cause. This selfish intention, or the will in this committed state, of course, makes efforts to secure its end, and these efforts make up the outward life of the selfish

man. Moral depravity is sinfulness, not of nature but of voluntary state. It is a sinfully committed state of the will to self-indulgence. It is not a sinful nature but a sinful heart. It is a sinful ultimate aim, or intention. The Greek term *amartia*, rendered sin in our English Bible, signifies to miss the mark, to aim at the wrong end. Sin is a wrong aim, or intention. It is aiming at, or intending self-gratification as the ultimate and supreme end of life, instead of aiming, as the moral law requires, at the highest good of universal being, as the end of life.

Mankind are both physically and morally depraved.

1. There is, in all probability, no perfect health of body among all the ranks and classes of human beings that inhabit this world. The physical organization of the whole race has become impaired, and beyond all doubt has been becoming more and more so since intemperance of any kind was first introduced into our world. This is illustrated and confirmed by the comparative shortness of human life. This is a physiological fact.

2. As the human mind in this state of existence is dependent upon the body for all its manifestations, and as the human body is universally in a state of greater or less physical depravity or disease, it follows that the manifestations of mind thus dependent on a physically depraved organization, will be physically depraved manifestations. Especially is this true of the human sensibility. The appetites, passions, and propensities are in a state of most unhealthy development. This is too evident, and too much a matter of universal notoriety, to need proof or illustration. Every person of reflection has observed, that the human mind is greatly out of balance, in consequence of the monstrous development of the sensibility. The appetites, passions, and propensities have been indulged, and the intelligence and conscience stultified by selfishness. Selfishness, be it remembered, consists in a disposition or choice to gratify the propensities, desires, and feelings. This of course, and of necessity, produces just the unhealthy and monstrous developments which we daily see: sometimes one ruling passion or appetite lording it, not only over the intelligence and over the will, but over all the other appetites and passions, crushing and sacrificing them all upon the altar of its own gratification. See that bloated wretch, the inebriate! His appetite for strong drink has played the despot. His whole mind and body, reputation, family, friends, health, time, eternity, all, all are laid by him upon its filthy altar. There is the debauchee, the glutton, the gambler, the miser, and a host of others, each in his turn giving striking and melancholy proof of the monstrous development and physical depravity of the human sensibility.

3. That men are morally depraved is one of the most notorious facts of human experience, observation and history. Indeed, I am not aware that it has ever been doubted, when moral depravity has been understood to consist in selfishness. The moral depravity of the human race is everywhere assumed and declared in the Bible, and so universal and notorious is the fact of human selfishness, that should any man practically call it in question should he, in his business transactions, and in his intercourse with men, assume the contrary, he would justly subject himself to the charge of insanity. There is not a fact in the world more notorious and undeniable than this. Human moral depravity is as palpably evident as human existence. It is a fact everywhere assumed in all governments,

in all the arrangements of society, and it has impressed its image, and written its name, upon every thing human.

Subsequent to the commencement of moral agency, and previous to regeneration, the moral depravity of mankind is universal.

By this it is not intended to deny that, in some instances, the Spirit of God may, from the first moment of moral agency, have so enlightened the mind as to have secured conformity to moral law, as the first moral act. This may or may not be true. It is not my present purpose to affirm or to deny this, as a possibility, or as a fact.

But by this is intended, that every moral agent of our race is, from the dawn of moral agency to the moment of regeneration by the Holy Spirit, morally depraved, unless we except those possible cases just alluded to. The Bible exhibits proof of it:

1. In those passages that represent all the unregenerate as possessing one common wicked heart or character. "And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (Gen. 6:5). "This is an evil among all things that are done under the sun, that there is one event unto all: yea, also the heart of the sons of men is full of evil, and madness is in their heart while they live, and after that they go to the dead" (Eccl. 9:3). "The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked: who can know it?" (Jere. 17:9). "Because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be" (Romans 8:7).

2. In those passages that declare the universal necessity of regeneration. "Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3).

3. Passages that expressly assert the universal moral depravity of all unregenerate moral agents of our race. "What then? Are we better than they? No, in no wise: for we have before proved both Jews and Gentiles, that they are all under sin; as it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one. There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no not one. Their throat is an open sepulcher; with their tongues they have used deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips: whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness: their feet are swift to shed blood: destruction and misery are in their ways: and the way of peace have they not known: there is no fear of God before their eyes. Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law: that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in His sight; for by the law is the knowledge of sin" (Romans 3:9-20).

4. Universal history proves it. What is this world's history but the shameless chronicle of human wickedness?

5. Universal observation attests it. Who ever saw one unregenerate human being that was not selfish, that did not obey his feelings rather than the law of his intelligence, that was not under some form, or in some way, living to please self? Such an unregenerate human being, I may safely affirm, was never seen since the fall of Adam.

6. I may also appeal to the universal consciousness of the unregenerate. They know themselves to be selfish, to be aiming to please themselves, and they cannot honestly deny it.

The moral depravity of the unregenerate moral agents of our race is total.

By this is intended, that the moral depravity of the unregenerate is without any mixture of moral goodness or virtue, that while they remain unregenerate, they never in any instance, nor in any degree, exercise true love to God and to man. It is not intended, that they may not perform many outward actions, and have many inward feelings, that are such as the regenerate perform and experience: and such too as are accounted virtue by those who place virtue in the outward action. But it is intended, that virtue does not consist either in involuntary feelings or in outward actions, and that it consists alone in entire consecration of heart and life to God and the good of being, and that no unregenerate sinner previous to regeneration, is or can be, for one moment, in this state.

When virtue is clearly seen to consist in the heart's entire consecration to God and the good of being, it must be seen, that the unregenerate are not for one moment in this state. It is amazing, that some philosophers and theologians have admitted and maintained, that the unregenerate do sometimes do that which is truly virtuous. But in these admissions they necessarily assume a false philosophy, and overlook that in which all virtue does and must consist, namely, supreme ultimate intention. They speak of virtuous actions and of virtuous feelings, as if virtue consisted in them, and not in the intention.

Henry P. Tappan, for example, for the most part an able, truthful, and beautiful writer, assumes, or rather affirms, that volitions may be put forth inconsistent with, and contrary to the present choice of an end, and that consequently, unregenerate sinners, whom he admits to be in the exercise of a selfish choice of an end, may and do sometimes put forth right volitions, and perform right actions, that is, right in the sense of virtuous actions. But let us examine this subject. We have seen that all choice and all volition must respect either an end or means, that is, that everything willed or chosen, is willed or chosen for some reason. To deny this, is the same as to deny that anything is willed or chosen, because the ultimate reason for a choice and the thing chosen are identical. Therefore, it is plain, as was shown in a former lecture, that the will cannot embrace at the same time, two opposite ends; and that while but one end is chosen, the will cannot put forth volitions to secure some other end, which end is not yet chosen. In other words, it certainly is absurd to say, that the will, while maintaining the choice of one end, can use means for the accomplishment of another and opposite end.

When an end is chosen, that choice confines all volition to securing its accomplishment, and for the time being, and until another end is chosen, and this one relinquished, it is

impossible for the will to put forth any volition inconsistent with the present choice. It therefore follows, that while sinners are selfish, or unregenerate, it is impossible for them to put forth a holy volition. They are under the necessity of first changing their hearts, or their choice of an end, before they can put forth any volitions to secure any other than a selfish end. And this is plainly the everywhere assumed philosophy of the Bible. That uniformly represents the unregenerate as totally depraved, and calls upon them to, repent, to make to themselves a new heart; and never admits directly, or by way of implication, that they can do anything good or acceptable to God, while in the exercise of a wicked or selfish heart.

**(Editor's note: This article constitutes the first of three lectures on Moral Depravity from Finney's Systematic Theology, the 1878 edition. It was included in that volume as Lecture 22)*