

Moral Depravity Not Inborn!

By [Charles G. Finney](#) *

Let us consider the proper method of accounting for the universal and total moral depravity of the unregenerate moral agents of our race.

In the discussion of this subject, I will:

1. Endeavor to show how it is not to be accounted for.

In examining this part of the subject, it is necessary to have distinctly in view that which constitutes moral depravity. All the error that has existed upon this subject, has been founded in false assumptions in regard to the nature or essence of moral depravity. It has been almost universally true, that no distinction has been made between moral and physical depravity; and consequently, physical depravity has been confounded with and treated of, as moral depravity. This of course has led to vast confusion and nonsense upon this subject. Let the following fact, which has been shown in former lectures, be distinctly borne in mind.

That moral depravity consists in selfishness, or in the choice of self-interest, self-gratification, or self-indulgence, as an end.

Consequently it cannot consist,

(1.) In a sinful constitution, or in a constitutional appetency or craving for sin. This has been shown in a former lecture, on what is not implied in disobedience to the moral law.

(2.) Moral depravity is sin itself and not the cause of sin. It is not something prior to sin, that sustains to it the relation of a cause, but it is the essence and the whole of sin.

(3.) It cannot be an attribute of human nature, considered simply as such, for this would be physical, and not moral depravity.

(4.) Moral depravity is not then to be accounted for by ascribing it to a nature or constitution sinful in itself. To talk of a sinful nature, or sinful constitution, in the sense of physical sinfulness, is to ascribe sinfulness to the Creator, who is the author of nature. It is to overlook the essential nature of sin, and to make sin a physical virus, instead of a voluntary and responsible choice. Both sound philosophy and the Bible, make sin to consist in obeying the flesh, or in the spirit of self-pleasing, or self-indulgence, or, which is the same thing, in selfishness in a carnal mind, or in minding the flesh. But writers on moral depravity have assumed, that moral depravity was distinct from, and the cause of sin, that is, of actual transgression. They call it original sin, indwelling sin, a sinful

nature, an appetite for sin, an attribute of human nature, and the like. We shall presently see what has led to this view of the subject.

I will, in the next place, notice a modern, and perhaps the most popular view of this subject, which has been taken by any late writer, who has fallen into the error of confounding physical and moral depravity. I refer to the prize essay of Dr. Woods, of Andover, Mass. He defines moral depravity to be the same as "sinfulness." He also, in one part of his essay, holds and maintains, that it is always and necessarily, voluntary. Still, his great effort is to prove that sinfulness or moral depravity, is an attribute of human nature. It is no part of my design to expose the inconsistency of holding moral depravity to be a voluntary state of mind, and yet a natural attribute, but only to examine the philosophy, the logic, and theory of his main argument. The following quotation will show the sense in which he holds moral depravity to belong to the nature of man. At page 54 he says:

"The word depravity, relating as it here does to man's moral character, means the same as sinfulness, being the opposite of moral purity, or holiness." In this use of the word there is a general agreement. But what is the meaning of native, or natural? Among the variety of meanings specified by Johnson, Webster, and others, I refer to the following, as relating particularly to the subject before us.

Native. Produced by nature. Natural, or such as is according to nature; belonging by birth; original. Natural has substantially the same meaning: 'produced by nature; not acquired.' So Crabbe: 'Of a person we say, his worth is native, to designate it as some valuable property born with him, not foreign to him, or ingrafted upon him; but we say of his disposition, that it is natural, as opposed to that which is acquired by habit.' And Johnson defines nature to be 'the native state or properties of any thing, by which it is discriminated from others.' He quotes the definition of Boyle: 'Nature sometimes means what belongs to a living creature at its nativity, or accrues to it by its birth, as when we say a man is noble by nature, or a child is naturally forward.' 'This,' he says, 'may be expressed by saying, the man was born so.'

"After these brief definitions, which come to nearly the same thing, I proceed to inquire, what are the marks or evidence which show anything in man to be natural, or native; and how far these marks are found in relation to depravity."

Again, page 66, he says:

"The evil, then, cannot be supposed to originate in any unfavorable external circumstances, such as corrupting examples, or insinuating and strong temptations; for if we suppose these entirely removed, all human beings would still be sinners. With such a moral nature as they now have, they would not wait for strong temptations to sin. Nay, they would be sinners in opposition to the strongest motives to the contrary. Indeed, we know that human beings will turn those very motives which most powerfully urge to holiness, into occasions of sin. Now, does not the confidence and certainty with which we foretell the commission of sin, and of sin unmixed with moral purity, presuppose a full

conviction in us, and a conviction resting upon what we regard as satisfactory evidence, that sin, in all its visible actings, arises from that which is within the mind itself, and which belongs to our very nature as moral beings? Have we not as much evidence that this is the case with moral evil as with any of our natural affections or bodily appetites?"

This quotation, together with the whole argument, shows that he considers moral depravity to be an attribute of human nature, in the same sense that the appetites and passions are. Before I proceed directly to the examination of his argument, that sinfulness, or moral depravity, is an "attribute of human nature," I would premise, that an argument, or fact, that may equally well consist with either of two opposing theories, can prove neither. The author in question presents the following facts and considerations in support of his great position, that moral depravity, or sinfulness, is an attribute of human nature; and three presidents of colleges indorse the soundness and conclusiveness of the argument.

He proves his position first from the "universality of moral depravity." To this I answer, that this argument proves nothing to the purpose, unless it be true, and assumed as a major premise, that whatever is universal among mankind, must be a natural attribute of man as such; that whatever is common to all men, must be an attribute of human nature. But this assumption is a begging of the question. Sin may be the result of temptation; temptation may be universal, and of such a nature as uniformly, not necessarily, to result in sin, unless a contrary result be secured by a Divine moral suasion. This I shall endeavor to show is the fact. This argument assumes, that there is but one method of accounting for the universality of human sinfulness. But this is the question in debate, and is not to be thus assumed as true.

Again: Selfishness is common to all unregenerate men. Is selfishness a natural attribute? We have seen, in a former lecture, that it consists in choice. Can choice be an attribute of human nature?

Again: This argument is just as consistent with the opposite theory, to wit, that moral depravity is selfishness. The universality of selfishness is just what might be expected, if selfishness consists in the committal of the will to the gratification of self. This will be a thing of course, unless the Holy Spirit interpose, greatly to enlighten the intellect, and break up the force of habit, and change the attitude of the will, already, at the first dawn of reason, committed to the impulses of the sensibility. If moral depravity is to be accounted for, as I shall hereafter more fully show, by ascribing it to the influence of temptation, or to a physically depraved constitution, surrounded by the circumstances in which mankind first form their moral character, or put forth their first moral choices, universality might of course be expected to be one of its characteristics. This argument, then, agreeing equally well with either theory, proves neither.

His second argument is, that "Moral depravity develops itself in early life." Answer:

This is just what might be expected upon the opposite theory. If moral depravity consist in the choice of self-gratification, it would of course appear in early life. So this argument

agrees quite as well with the opposing theory, and therefore proves nothing. But this argument is good for nothing, unless the following be assumed as a major premise, and unless the fact assumed be indeed a truth, namely, "Whatever is developed in early life, must be an attribute of human nature." But this again is assuming the truth of the point in debate. This argument is based upon the assumption that a course of action common to all men, and commencing at the earliest moment of their moral agency, can be accounted for only by ascribing it to an attribute of nature, having the same moral character as that which belongs to the actions themselves. But this is not true. There may be more than one way of accounting for the universal sinfulness of human actions from the dawn of moral agency. It may be ascribed to the universality and peculiar nature of temptation, as has been said.

His third argument is, that "Moral depravity is not owing to any change that occurs subsequent to birth." Answer:

No, the circumstances of temptation are sufficient to account for it without supposing the nature to be changed. This argument proves nothing, unless it be true, that the peculiar circumstances of temptation under which moral agents act, from the dawn of moral agency, cannot sufficiently account for their conduct, without supposing a change of nature subsequent to birth. What then, does this arguing prove?

Again, this argument is just as consistent with the opposing theory, and therefore proves neither.

His fourth argument is, "That moral depravity acts freely and spontaneously." Answer:

"The moral agent acts freely, and acts selfishly, that is, wickedly. This argument assumes, that if a moral agent acts freely and wickedly moral depravity, or sin, must be an attribute of his nature. Or more fairly, if mankind universally, in the exercise of their liberty, act sinfully, sinfulness must be an attribute of human nature." But what is sin? Why sin is a voluntary transgression of law, Dr. Woods being judge. Can a voluntary transgression of law be denominated an attribute of human nature?

But again, this argument alleges nothing but what is equally consistent with the opposite theory. If moral depravity consist in the choice of self-gratification as an end, it would of course freely and spontaneously manifest itself. This argument then, is good for nothing.

His fifth argument is, "That moral depravity is hard to overcome, and therefore it must be an attribute of human nature." Answer:

If it were an attribute of human nature, it could not be overcome at all, without a change of the human constitution. It is hard to overcome, just as selfishness naturally would be, in beings of a physically depraved constitution, and in the presence of so many temptations to self-indulgence. If it were an attribute of human nature, it could not be overcome without a change of personal identity. But the fact that it can be overcome

without destroying the consciousness of personal identity, proves that it is not an attribute of human nature.

His sixth argument is, that "We can predict with certainty, that in due time it will act itself out." Answer:

Just as might be expected. If moral depravity consists in selfishness, we can predict with certainty, that the spirit of self-pleasing will, in due time, and at all times, act itself out. We can also predict, without the gift of prophecy, that with a constitution physically depraved, and surrounded with objects to awaken appetite, and with all the circumstances in which human beings first form their moral character, they will seek universally to gratify themselves, unless prevented by the illuminations of the Holy Spirit. This argument is just as consistent with the opposite theory, and therefore proves neither.

It is unnecessary to occupy any more time with the treatise of Dr. Woods. I will now quote the standards of the Presbyterian church, which will put you in possession of their views upon this subject. At pp. 30, 31, of the Presbyterian Confession of Faith, we have the following: "By this sin, they (Adam and Eve) fell from their original righteousness and communion with God, and so became dead in sin, and wholly defiled in all the faculties and parts of soul and body. They being the root of all mankind, the guilt of this sin was imputed, and the same death in sin and corrupted nature conveyed to all their posterity, descending from them by ordinary generation. From this original corruption, whereby we are utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite to all good, and wholly inclined to all evil, do proceed all actual transgressions."

Again, pp. 152-154, Shorter Catechism. "Question 22. Did all mankind fall in that first transgression? Answer: The covenant being made with Adam as a public person, not for himself only, but for his posterity; all mankind descending from him by ordinary generation, sinned in him, and fell with him in that first transgression.

"Question 23. Into what estate did the fall bring mankind? Answer: The fall brought mankind into an estate of sin and misery.

"Question 24. What is sin? Answer: Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, any law of God, given as a rule to the reasonable creature.

"Question 25. Wherein consists the sinfulness of that estate where into man fell? Answer: The sinfulness of that estate whereinto man fell, consisteth in the guilt of Adam's first sin, the want of that righteousness wherein he was created, and the corruption of his nature, whereby he is utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite unto all that is spiritually good, and wholly inclined to all evil, and that continually, which is commonly called original sin, and from which do proceed all actual transgressions.

"Question 26. How is original sin conveyed from our first parents unto their posterity? Answer: Original sin is conveyed from our first parents unto their posterity by natural generation, so as all that proceed from them in that way, are conceived and born in sin."

These extracts show, that the framers and defenders of this confession of faith, account for the moral depravity of mankind by making it to consist in a sinful nature, inherited by natural generation from Adam. They regard the constitution inherited from Adam, as in itself sinful, and the cause of all actual transgression. They make no distinction between physical and moral depravity. They also distinguish between original and actual sin. Original sin is the sinfulness of the constitution, in which Adam's posterity have no other hand than to inherit it by natural generation, or by birth. This original sin, or sinful nature, renders mankind utterly disabled from all that is spiritually good, and wholly inclined to all that is evil. This is their account of moral depravity. This, it will be seen, is substantially the ground of Dr. Woods:

It has been common with those who confound physical with moral depravity, and who maintain that human nature is itself sinful, to quote certain passages of Scripture to sustain their position. An examination of these proof texts, must, in the next place, occupy our attention. But before I enter upon this examination, I must first call your attention to certain well-settled rules of biblical interpretation.

- (1.) Different passages must be so interpreted, if they can be, as not to contradict each other.
- (2.) Language is to be interpreted according to the subject matter of discourse.
- (3.) Respect is always to be had to the general scope and design of the speaker or writer.
- (4.) Texts that are consistent with either theory, prove neither.
- (5.) Language is to be so interpreted, if it can be, as not to conflict with sound philosophy, matters of fact, the nature of things, or immutable justice.

Let us now, remembering and applying these plain rules of sound interpretation, proceed to the examination of those passages that are supposed to establish the theory of depravity I am examining.

"Adam lived an hundred and thirty years, and begat a son in his own likeness and after his own image, and called his name Seth" (Gen. 5:3). It is not very easy to see, why this text should be pressed into the service of those who hold that human nature is in itself sinful. Why should it be assumed that the likeness and image here spoken of was a moral likeness or image? But unless this be assumed, the text has nothing to do with the subject.

Again: it is generally admitted, that in all probability Adam was a regenerate man at the time and before the birth of Seth. Is it intended that Adam begat a saint or a sinner? If, as is supposed, Adam was a saint of God, if this text is anything to the purpose, it affirms that Adam begat a saint. But this is the opposite of that in proof of which the text is quoted.

Another text is: "Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? Not one" (Job 14:4). This text is quoted in support of the position of the Presbyterian Confession of Faith, that children inherit from their parents, by natural generation, a sinful nature. Upon this text, I remark, that all that can be made of it, even if we read it without regard to the translation or the context, is, that a physically depraved parent will produce a physically depraved offspring. That this is its real meaning, is quite evident, when we look into the context. Job is treating of the frail and dying state of man, and manifestly has in the text and context his eye wholly on the physical state, and not on the moral character of man. What he intends is; who can bring other than a frail, dying offspring from a frail dying parent? Not one. This is substantially the view that Professor Stuart takes of this text. The utmost that can be made of it is, that as he belonged to a race of sinners, nothing else could be expected than that he should be a sinner, without meaning to affirm anything in regard to the quo modo of this result.

Again: "What is man that he should be clean, and he that is born of a woman that he should be righteous" (Job 15:14).

These are the words of Eliphaz, and it is improper to quote them as inspired truth. For God Himself testifies that Job's friends did not hold the truth. But, suppose we receive the text as true, what is its import? Why, it simply asserts, or rather implies, the righteousness or sinfulness of the whole human race. It expresses the universality of human depravity, in the very common way of including all that are born of woman. This certainly says nothing, and implies nothing, respecting a sinful constitution. It is just as plain, and just as warrantable, to understand this passage as implying that mankind have become so physically depraved, that this fact, together with the circumstances under which they come into being, and begin their moral career, will certainly, (not necessarily), result in moral depravity. I might use just such language as that found in this text, and, naturally enough, express by it my own views of moral depravity, to wit, that it results from a physically depraved constitution; and the circumstances of temptation under which children come into this world, and begin and prosecute their moral career; certainly this is the most that can be made of this text.

Again: "Behold, I was shapen in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me" (Psalms 51:5).

Upon this I remark, that it would seem, if this text is to be understood literally, that the Psalmist intended to affirm the sinful state of his mother, at the time of his conception, and during gestation. But, to interpret these passages as teaching the constitutional sinfulness of man, is to contradict God's own definition of sin, and the only definition that human reason or common sense can receive, to wit, that "sin is a transgression of the law." This is, no doubt, the only correct definition of sin. But we have seen that the law does not legislate over substance, requiring men to have a certain nature, but over voluntary action only. If the Psalmist really intended to affirm, that the substance of his body was sinful from its conception, then he not only arrays himself against God's own definition of sin, but he also affirms sheer nonsense. The substance of an unborn child sinful! It is impossible! But what did the Psalmist mean? I answer: This verse is found in

David's penitential psalm. He was deeply convinced of sin, and was, as he had good reason to be, much excited, and expressed himself, as we all do in similar circumstances, in strong language. His eye, as was natural and is common in such cases, had been directed back along the pathway of life up to the days of his earliest recollection. He remembered sins among the earliest acts of his recollected life. He broke out in the language of this text to express, not the anti-scriptural and nonsensical dogma of a sinful constitution, but to affirm in his strong, poetic language, that he had been a sinner from the commencement of his moral existence, or from the earliest moment of his capability of being a sinner. This is the strong language of poetry.

Some suppose that, in the passage in question, the Psalmist referred to, and meant to acknowledge and assert, his low and despicable origin, and to say, I was always a sinner, and my mother that conceived me was a sinner, and I am but the degenerate plant of a strange vine, without intending to affirm anything in respect to the absolute sinfulness of his nature.

Again, "The wicked are estranged from the womb; they go astray as soon as they be born, speaking lies" (Psalms 58:3). Upon this text I remark that it has been quoted at one time to establish the doctrine of a sinful nature, and at another to prove that infants commit actual sin from the very day and hour of their birth. But certainly no such use can be legitimately made of this text. It does not affirm anything of a sinful nature, but this has been inferred from what it does affirm, that the wicked are estranged from their birth. But does this mean, that they are really and literally estranged from the day and hour of their birth, and that they really go astray the very day they are born, speaking lies? This every one knows to be contrary to fact. The text cannot then be pressed to the letter. What then does it mean? It must mean, like the text last examined, that the wicked are estranged and go astray from the commencement of their moral agency. If it means more than this, it would contradict other plain passages of scripture. It affirms, in strong, graphic, and poetic language, the fact, that the first moral conduct and character of children is sinful. This is all that in truth it can assert; and it doubtless dates the beginning of their moral depravity at a very early period, and expresses it in very strong language, as if it were literally from the hour of birth. But when it adds, that they go astray, speaking lies, we know that this is not, and cannot be, literally taken, for, as every one knows, children do not speak at all from their birth. Should we understand the Psalmist as affirming, that children go astray as soon as they go at all, and speak lies as soon as they speak at all, this would not prove that their nature was in itself sinful, but might well consist with the theory that their physical depravity, together with their circumstances of temptation, led them into selfishness, from the very first moment of their moral existence.

Again, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (John 3:6).

Upon this I remark that it may, if literally taken, mean nothing more than this, that the body which is born of flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the spirit is spirit; that is, that this birth of which he was speaking was of the soul, and not of the body. But it may be understood to mean, that which results from the influence of the flesh is flesh, in the

sense of sin; for this is a common sense of the term flesh in the New Testament, and that which results from the Spirit, is spirit or spiritual, in the sense of holy. This I understand to be the true sense. The text when thus understood, does not at all support the dogma of a sinful nature or constitution, but only this, that the flesh tends to sin, that the appetites and passions are temptations to sin, so that when the will obeys them it sins. Whatever is born of the propensities, in the sense that the will yields to their control, is sinful. And, on the other hand, whatever is born of the Spirit, that is, whatever results from the agency of the Holy Spirit, in the sense that the will yields to Him, is holy.

Again, "By nature the children of wrath, even as others" (Eph. 2:3). Upon this text I remark that it cannot, consistently with natural justice, be understood to mean, that we are exposed to the wrath of God on account of our nature. It is a monstrous and blasphemous dogma, that a holy God is angry with any creature for possessing a nature with which he was sent into being without his knowledge or consent. The Bible represents God as angry with men for their wicked deeds, and not for their nature.

It is common and proper to speak of the first state in which men universally are, as a natural state. Thus we speak of sinners before regeneration, as in a state of nature, as opposed to a changed state, a regenerate state, and a state of grace. By this we do not necessarily mean, that they have a nature sinful in itself, but merely that before regeneration they are universally and morally depraved, that this is their natural, as opposed to their regenerate state. Total moral depravity is the state that follows, and results from their first birth, and is in this sense natural, and in this sense alone, can it truly be said, that they are "by nature children of wrath." Against the use that is made of this text, and all this class of texts, may be arrayed the whole scope of scripture, that represents man as to blame, and to be judged and punished only for his deeds. The subject matter of discourse in these texts is such as to demand that we should understand them as not implying, or asserting, that sin is an essential part of our nature.

**(Editor's note: This article constitutes the second of three lectures on Moral Depravity from Finney's Systematic Theology, the 1878 edition. It was included in that volume as Lecture 23)*