

# **Is it Coherent to Suppose that God is both Morally Good and "Above Morality"?**

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Among the things which Christians have wanted to assert about God is that He is good. Divine goodness has sometimes been taken in a distinctly metaphysical sense: God is ontologically complete, without flaw, defect, or lack in his being--the so-called plenitude of being model of divine goodness. But it has also been taken in a moral sense, where this is understood to involve God's fulfilling certain moral obligations or acting in perfect accordance with principles which specify moral duties for free human agents, as well as his going beyond the call of duty by engaging in acts of benevolence. It is the notion of goodness as a moral attribute of God which raises a number of philosophical problems, not the least of which is the relation between God and the good, most succinctly stated in the Euthyphro-based dilemma: Is the good good because God wills it, or Does God will the good because it is good? If the latter, then the good appears to be something independent of the will of God. If the former, the good would appear to be something arbitrary and changeable.

In the present paper I want to consider whether it is coherent to suppose both that God is morally good and that God is, in some sense, above morality. Belief that God is the sovereign Creator, the source and sustainer of all things distinct from Himself, has led some theologians to maintain that God is, in some significant sense, "above morality." Following the biblical image of God (certainly abounding in the Old Testament) that God is the source of moral law, the Divine Law-Giver, it has been claimed that God's goodness must consist in something other than the moral goodness that follows from the fulfilling of duties and obligations or even conformity to moral principles independent of His will. Consequently, the good is good because God wills it. I will be arguing for a position which I think best captures the intuition guiding those who have taken the first horn of the Euthyphro dilemma, though--as I will argue--we need not take the first horn to save God's sovereignty. I hope to show that belief in standards of goodness conceptually distinct from God's will, suggested by the second horn of the dilemma, do not entail standards independent of or more ultimate than God Himself. God is morally good and He also may be thought of transcending the moral categories and constraints involved in predicating goodness of human beings.

## **I. The God Above Morality**

According to the tradition of theistic voluntarism, the good is solely a function of free divine determinations. I take this position to be represented chiefly by William of Ockham (and not a few Protestant theologians). Whatever God wills is, by definition, good, for it is the will of God that determines what is good. The good is good precisely because it is God who is willing it. One can find this view apparently expressed in many statements by John Calvin: "God's will is so much the highest rule of righteousness that whatever he wills must be considered righteous, for this very reason, because he wills it" (Institutes III. 32. 2.). Similarly, Martin Luther writes: "What God wills is not right because he ought, or was bound, so to will; on the contrary, what takes place must be right, because he so wills it" (Bondage of the Will). As God established the physical laws by free divine fiat, so moral principles derive from his will. From this, of course follows divine command morality and the position that God's own goodness is His doing whatever He wills. Hence, God is in a very significant sense above morality. Human goodness may be a matter of an individual's doing what is good (where the good is something external to and independent of the person), but divine goodness is a matter of an individual doing whatever He wills to do.

Theistic voluntarism certainly has some prima facie force for someone interested in avoiding making the good independent of God, and it is no doubt further strengthened by such considerations as the omnipotence/sovereignty of God and his ontological status as the Creator and sustainer of the world. It also allows one to hold rather firmly that God cannot do evil or commit sins, since the good is defined by God's doing whatever he wills to do. Moreover, it would also seem to solve the problem of evil, for if the alleged evils of the world are brought about (directly or indirectly) by God, then they are not really evils, for whatever God does is good.

Unfortunately, this model of divine goodness is subject to at least one critical liability, perhaps already evident. The position seems to empty "goodness" of any determinate meaning. Even if it seems that in the human situation equating "goodness" with "the divine will" leads to predicating goodness to people because they have kept some specific commands with determinate content (say, such as those contained in the Ten Commandments), applied to God an evident vacuity objection arises. "God is good" might be compatible with the claim that God doesn't keep his promises, is a chronic liar, or tortures 2-year olds for the fun of it, not to mention the possibility that if he should command such things for human agents they would be morally good. Our intuitions tell us that something has gone wrong here--to put it mildly. And even though it is plausible to argue that since God has some rights over creation (by virtue of being the Creator and sustainer of the world) he can do some things which for the creature would be morally wrong, it is equally reasonable to assume that there are limits to what God can do and still be morally good. The Ockhamist line, grounding divine goodness in God's omnipotence and absolute free will, makes it difficult to anticipate God's action in the world. It is not just that God could have created a different moral order had he so willed, but--as far as divine action is concerned--we can never be sure how God will act in relation to the world he has freely created. Today God may tell us the truth, but tomorrow he may deceive us all. And how to do know that He has even told us the truth today? God's eternal will may consist of the decree to bring about X (the torture of infants) at time T1, Y (a revelation to a prophet which is a lie) at T2, and so on.

Looming in the theistic voluntarist argument, though, is another sense in which God could be above morality. Perhaps this simply amounts to God not being subject to any obligations or duties. One may hold to this without also buying into the idea that the good is to be conceptually identified with God's act(s) of willing. A prevalent view of God's moral goodness runs parallel to the duty model of human moral goodness. Jones's act A was a good act because he had a duty to perform it and he did. God, on this view, is also subject to obligations and duties, and his goodness is a consequence of his perfect duty fulfilment. But many in the classical theistic tradition would take issue with the notion that God could be subject to any obligations. It seems to run counter to the notion of God as the supreme Creator and governor of the universe, as well as the source of moral law. Brian Davies writes: "The impression given by the Old Testament is that duties and obligations come from God, not that they are binding on him. As the Old Testament presents it, God provides creation, puts people into it, and gives them rules for the direction of their actions. There is no suggestion that God himself is bound by rules for action" (p. 213, *Thinking About God*). An exalted creation-theology may easily lead one to see God as above morality precisely in this sense. Obligations and duties can be thought of as context relative, but God is First Cause, and as such God has no background or context. If anything He provides the contexts within which human individuals in fact have duties. Also, if one takes a hard doctrine of immutability (God is pure act--there is nothing which God could be that He isn't), God could have no obligations since these imply change of some sort. Moreover, significant moral freedom seems required in cases of obligation. The argument would go something like: An action A is morally good only if S ought to have done A, but it makes sense to apply "ought to do A" to some person only if S has a choice between doing or failing to do A. If an agent could not have possibly failed to do A, it seems incorrect to say of him that he had an obligation to do A. But God, many theists hold, is necessarily good, so He cannot possibly do what is morally bad. If God lacks the ability to act contrary to moral principles, it is doubtful that He can be said to have an obligation to perform them.

## **II. The Moral Goodness of God Minus Moral Obligations**

The question remains, though, as to whether there can be moral goodness without a duty model. Doubtless some would be content with a negative answer here and rest content with a non-moral model of divine goodness. This is especially apparent where a libertarian conception of freedom is made necessary to a morally good action. Can God's actions even be described as moral at all? Some would say no, not at all, if God does not possess significant moral freedom. But why suppose that all morally good acts are morally obligatory and hence require that a subject be able to fail in his duty? The easiest counter-examples here would be supererogatory acts. There are many acts performed by agents which are considered morally good, which are not thought of as morally obligatory. If S gives €200 to charity, most would tend to see this as a good act, but S was hardly obligated to do so. And a theist certainly wants to claim that God abounds in acts of mercy, forgiveness, and grace. He is not obligated to grant these, but He does. His moral goodness can certainly be accounted for (at least in part) by recognizing that he engages in acts of supererogation. And this would also be a ground for his being worthy of praise. So, if when we say that God is above morality, we merely mean that He, unlike the creature, is not subject to obligations, we are still left with a way to construe God as morally good.

I propose, then, that as a starting-point we can affirm the moral goodness of God on the basis of a benevolence model:

(1) God engages in acts of supererogation.

Perhaps we can shore up this account by integrating it with a modified duty model. The main reason which many theists have had for rejecting the duty model is that it seems to conflict with the notion of God as the sovereign Creator of the universe and the source of moral law. God simply cannot be subject to moral obligations. But perhaps God can be morally good in some sense other than that stipulated in the benevolence model. What is proposed here is the distinction between an agent's acting in accordance with moral principles and an agent's following moral principles. The same moral principles which are deontically prescriptive for one agent S1 stands in some other relation to another agent S2, especially if the latter agent has a significantly different ontological status. As T.V. Morris explains it, human agents exist in a state of being bound by moral duty. Consequently, we act under obligation. But God is of a quite different ontological status; He is not bound as are we. Therefore, he does not share our relation to moral principles; he does not have obligations. Nevertheless, we can say that God (necessarily) acts in accordance with principles which for a human agent would constitute moral duties. Such principles might be seen as descriptive of divine conduct. The position would surely allow us to have solid expectations as to the divine conduct (something lost on the voluntarist model). Under this modified duty model we can think of divine behaviour as analogous to the behaviour of a completely good human moral agent. If God says that he will do X, he will do X. If he communicates some proposition, we can be assured that the proposition is true. So we can add the following statement to our account of divine goodness,

(2) God acts in perfect accordance with moral principles.

Now, strictly speaking, (1) and (2) represent species of what Morris calls "axiological" goodness, and only (1) literally forms a part of God's moral goodness. In this way, one may keep the libertarian analysis of freedom, but still have a sophisticated account of God's goodness. (1) definitely gives us an account of God's moral goodness which is compatible with libertarianism, but (2) certainly seems to convey what believers want to say about God's goodness. And though it is not literally a case of moral goodness, it is analogical to a form of human moral goodness. It is functionally isomorphic with, but ontologically different from, human goodness. So, the (axiological) goodness of God may be thought of as the following:

Def. The goodness of God = Df. God's acting perfectly in accordance with moral principles and his engaging in acts of supererogation.

But to say that God acts in accordance with moral principles and engages in works of supererogation seems to go contrary to the motive for taking the first horn of the dilemma. Does it not make such principles somehow independent of God? In other terms, is it not to be committed to a denial that the good is good

because God wills it? Indeed it may well be. God may freely will some things and they may good on account of his freely willing them, but then such moral truths will be contingent, for they could have been otherwise. But if there are necessary moral truths (e.g., we should keep our promises, tell the truth, not engage in acts of groundless torturing of people), then they will not depend on God's freely willing them--any more than logical truths so depend. And here I take it is the key to the central question of this paper. Theologians who have advocated radical voluntarism (with only a few exceptions) have not held that truths of logic are dependent on God's will and therefore contingent. Even God could not have made it the case that the law of noncontradiction is other than it is or that  $2 + 2 = 5$ . But if it is no surrender of God's sovereignty and status as Creator that there are necessary logical truths (which he lacks the power to alter), why should necessary moral truths make God subject to standards which threaten his omnipotence?

What is crucial here is that, though such principles would be, in some sense, independent of God's will, they need not be construed as independent of God altogether. Here we can invoke the theory of theistic activism (articulated by Christopher Menzel and Thomas Morris) which takes the whole realm of abstract objects and necessary truths to be dependent upon God's ontologically efficacious intellectual activity. According to theistic activism, God is creator, not merely of all contingent reality, but of the entire framework of reality consisting of necessarily existing abstract entities (propositions, properties, etc.). According to Morris, God necessarily creates the entire modal framework. If God causes abstracta to exist, then every necessary truth may be seen to be dependent on Him. And this includes the realm of necessary moral truths. As Morris explains it: "when we say that God necessarily acts in accordance with moral principles, we do not have to think of objective moral laws as somehow existing "out there," independent of God, constraining his activity from above" (Our Idea of God, p 158.). The moral principles which God acts according to are analogous to the logical principles according to which he thinks. They are the necessary products of the divine creative intellectual activity. If they are dependent upon God's will in any sense, it is in the sense that God necessarily wills them. They are necessities of His nature. They could not have been otherwise, any more than the validity of modus ponens could have been otherwise. Even so, there is at least one sense in which moral truths can be seen to result from free divine creative activity. Whatever necessity involved in God's bringing about the entire framework of reality is not a necessity imposed from without Him; He is neither compelled nor constrained in that way. The necessity involved is "a feature and result of the nature of his own activity itself, which is a function of what he is" (Anselmian Explorations, pp. 170-71).

(3) God wills, out of the necessity of His nature, to bring about all necessary moral truths.

### **III. Conclusion**

I began this paper by introducing the question of the coherence of the supposition that God could be good and above morality. The latter claim seems to be rooted in the Christian view that God is the First Cause, the sovereign Creator and sustainer of all things distinct from Himself, the source of all moral law, and that He can in no way be dependent on anything. I believe that I have shown that if these claims are ultimately the grounds for the claim that God is above morality, then that claim is compatible with a fairly rich conception of the goodness of God, one that has a strong moral component (on the basis of supererogatory acts). (1) and (2) give us the "axiological" goodness of God (with (1) supplying the strictly moral component of divine goodness), and (3) allows us to assert that nothing in (2) threatens God's sovereignty--for though God's goodness consists (in part) in His acting perfectly in accordance with moral principles (objective, necessary, and absolute moral truths), these principles are dependent on God Himself, being willed by Him out of the necessity of His nature.