

On Perfect Goodness

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Abstract

God is typically conceived as perfectly good and necessarily so, in two senses: in terms of always performing the best possible act and in terms of having maximal moral worth. Yet any being that freely performs the best act she can must be accorded greater moral worth for any such action than a being that does so necessarily. I conclude that any being that performs the best possible act of necessity cannot also have maximal moral worth, making the concept of God's perfect goodness incoherent.

Keywords God - Divine goodness - Divine perfection

According to one standard view in Western philosophy of religion, God is defined as having maximal greatness. This means, as for example Plantinga describes it,¹ that God is not only omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good,² but that God has each of these perfections necessarily. To have any one of these perfections contingently would make God less than maximally great. So, we may conclude that God, according to this standard conception, is perfectly good and necessarily so. Now it is necessarily the case that if any being is perfectly good, then that being will always do x when doing x is the best thing for that being to do. It is usually understood that, if A is the perfectly good being, A 's doing of x arises from the metaphysically prior fact of A 's being perfectly good. I believe that this is the appropriate way for us to understand it, certainly in the case of God. It can be understood, however, as though A 's being perfectly good is a consequence of A 's always doing the best act, even if the series of best acts arises purely by accident, or, in each case, by free choice. This latter approach implies that A 's perfect goodness is itself accidental or contingent, which cannot be the case for God as ordinarily understood.

If, then, in the case of God, A 's perfect goodness is itself a necessary (or essential) attribute, then it must be concluded that God's doing of x in some particular case is necessitated by God's 'being' and the nature of x as the best possible action in the circumstances.³ (We will ignore here further complexities concerning how one is to judge what the best possible action is and what 'in the circumstances' means in relation to God.) It seems to me, further, that any being who has perfect goodness as part of her nature (not simply, shall we say, by the accident of always happening to perform the best action or by happening in each instance freely to choose to perform the best action⁴), during any time period in which that is her nature, performs the best action by necessity and not by choice. We will discuss that issue in greater detail later. In the meantime, however, let us consider the following argument in relation to God's perfect goodness.

If agent A and agent B are both able to do x , x is believed by both A and B to be the best action that can be performed at a given time, A does x of necessity, and B does x freely (i.e., not of necessity), then agent B is morally superior to (more morally praiseworthy than) agent A in performing this action. Furthermore, if agent A is perfectly good in the way that God is perfectly good, then A will necessarily do x . So, it seems that in relation to doing x agent A is perfectly good and yet agent B is morally superior to A . I can only conclude from the preceding that perfect goodness, if it means necessarily doing what is best, is an incoherent notion because perfect goodness must be unsurpassable and yet cannot be. Throughout this essay, I'm ignoring any conception of goodness [if there is one] that doesn't entail praiseworthiness, on the grounds that its part of the office of God or part of our conception of God that God be worthy of worship and thus be wholly praiseworthy as well as on the grounds that human moral conceptions rely upon an understanding of moral actions as praiseworthy or admirable whether or not they refer to God.

Let me make this point in another way. If God is only able to do what is best on any given occasion and human beings are able to do what is best freely, then a human being, who can do what is best or can refrain from so doing and nevertheless does what is best, is morally superior to God in doing what is best, because she has done so not of necessity but freely. One might say in response that a human being may be morally superior to God *in relation to a*

particular circumstance, but not *overall* because God is perfectly good and the human being is not (and cannot be without losing that aspect of moral superiority given by the freedom of her action). But if God's perfect goodness results in God's good actions being done of necessity, then we could conclude that a human being who is quite good by human standards and thus frequently does what is best and does so freely is morally superior to any being, including God, who can never do what is best freely. It seems to me that a rock that always and only 'does' exactly what is fitting at the time, and does so necessarily (i.e. because of its nature), is similar in goodness to a divine being who always and only does exactly what is fitting at the time, and does so necessarily (i.e. because of its nature), and that a human being who might (we are supposing) do either what is fitting or not and does what is fitting freely is morally superior both to a rock and to God.

One might legitimately question the notion of necessity used above. Let us suggest instead that God's goodness is an essential attribute rather than a necessity. Such essential attributes can be understood in different ways, e.g. human beings can be essentially rational and yet behave irrationally at times; human beings could be said to be essentially good, and nevertheless capable of evil. Looking however at this latter example, we see clearly a difference between two understandings of essential attributes. In the human case, we can be essentially rational or good without always displaying either attribute. In the divine case, however, God cannot be essentially rational or good in a godlike way and sometimes behave irrationally or evilly. The difference lies in the distinction between a capability and a requirement. In our case, our nature makes us, we could claim, capable of either rationality or irrationality, of either goodness or evil. God, on the other hand, is capable of rationality or goodness but at the same time incapable of irrationality and evil. To claim that God is 'free' with regard to being rational or good might have some meaning, but it certainly does not mean that God can 'freely' either act or think in ways that are irrational or evil. Human beings, however, are free in this regard apparently exactly in the sense of being capable of rationality or irrationality and of goodness or evil. Although being capable of rationality and goodness might be thought of as divine attributes just as they are human attributes, being capable of irrationality and evil cannot be divine attributes (on the standard view) even though they can be human attributes.⁵

Of course, the rock referred to earlier is not capable of 'doing' anything, unlike, we would suppose, either God or us. When it comes to God, however, although we can conceive perhaps of a number of equally good actions among which God could choose, God cannot choose any action that is less than maximally good and thus, in this regard, is no more capable than a rock is of choosing among a large number of what might otherwise count as options. The exaggeration here is meant to be instructive. A rock cannot be praised for just sitting there nor for rolling down a hill; no more can a being be praised for carrying out the best possible alternative when that being is thoroughly incapable of doing anything less.

One could object, along the lines proposed by Norman Kretzmann and discussed approvingly by Rowe,⁶ that failing to do that which is logically impossible in no way reduces either the power or goodness of a being. As Rowe points out this seems like a perfectly reasonable suggestion. Thus, in terms of God's creating the world, God's failure to do what logically cannot be done does not reduce God's goodness.⁷ In terms of the issue at hand currently, however, this point lacks traction. If one were to concede that perfect goodness is logically impossible, then one can hardly conclude that failing to be perfectly good has no effect on the claim that God is perfectly good!

One could, of course, claim that God is as good as a being can be, and that that is good enough. We could then say that God is highly good, or very good, but not perfectly good. Trying this out in practice however seems to lead to the conclusion that God is good most of the time, or that God is good except when the temptation not to be is just too great, or that God is good but we cannot expect infinite goodness just goodness to a very high degree. While any of these claims might work in regard to certain kinds of being, traditional views of God require more. They demand perfection, not just an extremely high degree of an attribute. Any high degree of an attribute that yet falls short of perfection might be surpassed, and surely God is a being whose goodness (and other attributes) *cannot* be surpassed.

It might be the case of course that a being of some sort is able to make herself or himself perfectly good by strenuous moral effort, perhaps over a long period of time. In that case, all other things being equal, this being will be considered morally superior to others who could have but did not put forth that moral effort. This case of moral superiority, however, has the following limitations: first, it cannot apply to God as typically conceived, and second, it does not apply to a given instance of acting in which the now perfectly good being acts of necessity while another acts freely. The perfectly good being who has made himself so may have a measure of moral superiority (for having put forth a morally commendable effort in the past) over others who have not put forth the requisite effort. I would

deny, however, that he is morally superior in a given instance in which he does what is good, but not freely, while the other freely does what is good.

We might want to think of the issue at hand in terms of the following categories. Moral admirableness or worth in a given instance might be assessed on the basis of: (1) the goodness (or rightness) of the particular action performed, (2) the moral correctness (or not) of the agent's intentions (potentially including the agent's character), and (3) the moral freedom of the agent. These categories are additive in the sense that greater moral worth arises from (1) and (2) than from (1) alone and that combining (1), (2), and (3) provides the highest level of moral worth. One difficulty with this additive approach, however, lies in complications concerning assessing the admirableness of resistance to temptation as well as the overall importance of category (3).

A good action stands on its own as holding a particular worth as an action. Nevertheless when we wish to address the worth of the agent, we cannot be satisfied with the worth of the action alone. The agent only becomes morally worthy when she has acted with a proper intention. That intention can also be judged in relation to the character from which it arises, though this provides a bit of difficulty, since someone who unexpectedly does the right thing contrary to her character might rightly be praised for overcoming the power of internal inertia in acting thus. Even if, however, we agree with Aristotle that a right character ordinarily boosts the worth of a right action, presumably neither a right intention nor a right character counts toward moral worth if the agent cannot intend otherwise or cannot have a character different than the one he has. One might surmise that an 'agent' totally lacking in freedom is not an agent at all, but certainly such a being would not deserve praise for its right actions.

Let's try a thought experiment to clarify these differences in regard to our concern with perfect goodness. We can begin with agents A and B; agent A cannot commit murder, let us say, because due to her character she so abhors such an action that it is inconceivable to her. Agent B, on the other hand, has no such compunction. Given a time and place in which one might be tempted to commit murder, agent A will not murder, and we could say would not be able to do so; agent B can commit murder and thus might do so, with proper provocation. Agent A is not tempted by the possibility of murder, and B is. Agent A then has the morally better character. If, however, B is strongly tempted and resists the temptation his resistance *relative to the occasion of action* surely counts more than A's resistance to a similar temptation, since she is not tempted at all. We would thus value A's character highly, and at the same time we would value B's resistance to temptation highly, though his character receives a much lower valuation.

The point here is that moral worth or admirableness can be judged relative to a particular instance concerning which we value B's resistance much more highly than A's, since A has nothing to resist, being in fact not tempted at all. At the same time we value A's character much more highly than B's because A cannot be tempted and B can. Even this fails to account for the situation adequately since we must ask if A is responsible for her character or not. Suppose she is genetically predisposed to abhor all violence. In that case, she is not responsible for this aspect of her character. How are we then to place a value on her character? Disliking violence seems like a good character trait, so we would value the trait itself positively. On the other hand, we have stipulated that she bears no responsibility for that trait, so we do not value *her* positively in this regard. If on the other hand she had a genetic predisposition to violence and managed to overcome that disposition in a particular instance, we would positively value her response in this case. (Just as we might positively value her overcoming her predisposition against violence if a situation arose in which violence were necessary to save the lives of her family or friends or others.)

We might suppose further that an agent might be such that he cannot avoid following his character. In that case the agent could be directly responsible for acquiring a particular character but would not be immediately responsible for the particular action arising from that character. If we stipulate further that an agent C is not responsible for his character and cannot choose any action contrary to his character, then although we still might find a particular action admirable and might admire the type of character as well as the specific intention that leads to that action, surely the agent himself will not be admirable relative to either the action or the character behind it.

These ideas then lead to another means of restating our original claim. We might value an action *x* regardless of its origin, so that one level of moral admirableness attaches to the action itself; we might value a particular intention that would lead to a good action, giving us another level of possible moral admirableness, one attached exclusively to a being capable of intentions; we might, further, value a particular character that would normally lead to or make more likely a particular intention, providing a third level of possible admirableness, attached exclusively either to a being capable of character or at least to the character itself. The goodness of a person lies not in the action alone,

since it might be undertaken accidentally or for reprehensible reasons. The moral worth or goodness of a person lies instead in the person's intentions and character, which can be admired individually or together, over time or in relation to a particular instance. We might value these differently, valuing most highly that intention or character that leads appropriately or regularly to a good action. Our valuing of a person's intention is undermined by that intention either being wrong-headed (one intended to lie but inadvertently told the truth; one believes that lying is the right thing to do but resists doing what is right) or its having been acquired the wrong way (one tells the truth compulsively or under extreme duress, or even regularly but solely for the sake of self-aggrandizement). Our valuing of character seems parallel to this. A good character is one that was properly acquired and that increases the likelihood of one's acting rightly. With regard to a particular case of action, we judge the agent in multiple ways, according to her intentions, her character, and in certain cases according to her resistance to character. The one who breezily, cheerily does the right thing without temptation need not be preferred morally, *in relation to a given instance*, to the one who must struggle mightily and succeeds in doing the right thing despite its difficulty.

There are thus at least two aspects to the moral admirableness of a person. We can admire a person in relation to his character, which involves a person's admirableness over time. We can also admire a person in relation to that person's response to temptation or his intention contrary to a bad or neutral character, which involves a person's admirableness in a given instance. This latter property reaches its peak when there is some temptation to overcome.

Moral perfection seems to require the highest degree of admirableness, which is impossible for a being who never faces temptation, since such a being is denied any instances of admirableness solely in relation to a given instance, and also for one who bears no responsibility for acquiring whatever character we might otherwise admire. In both these cases, God fails to have a high degree of admirableness that humans can have. God never faces temptation, so never can overcome it thus never deserving this degree of admirableness *in a given instance*; God bears no responsibility for having acquired a good 'character' and thus cannot be admired on that count *over time*. Although what passes for character in God is admirable in itself, a distinction must be drawn between the admirableness of a trait and the admirableness of a being who has that trait. On the human level one might be manipulated into forming or be born already having a particular character trait, but could not very well be admired as a person for that trait. So, one could admire God's actions to the extent that they are good, and one could admire God's intentions and God's character (to the extent that God has something sufficiently parallel to human intentions and character so that the words hold meaning for God). But one cannot fully admire God's action in a particular instance in comparison with a human being who acts a particular way based on the development of a good character or based on resistance to temptation, since God is incapable of either of these admirable possibilities.

One might quite rightly suggest an Aristotelian objection to the claim that putting forth effort in performing a good action is better than not doing so, as in the case of overcoming temptation. The fully virtuous person, Aristotle tells us, does not need to work at being virtuous in any given instance as does the less-regarded continent person. Thus God, who performs good actions effortlessly based on an inner necessity or on essential attributes that make any other choice impossible, might simply represent a step above the virtuous person and thus might have a character that transcends in praiseworthiness that of the best human being. The virtuous human being claims in Aristotle's view a form of perfection, a kind of completion that could be seen as culminating in the 'character' of the gods. Yet human beings must practice or develop that which comes by nature to the gods. The most divine aspect of human life turns out to be not virtues of character but the intellectual virtue of contemplation, and that cannot be entered into as the gods do (NE X, 8). On the other hand, the gods cannot be praised for contemplating – it is simply their nature to do so. Human beings can be praised for developing and maintaining virtues for the very reason that they are not given us by nature but must be acquired (NE II, 1).

We might suggest, on the other hand, that being more apt to do wrong does not engender greater praise, so that the person who overcomes the impulse to kill another is quite obviously not more praiseworthy than the person who has no such impulse. God has no impulse to do wrong. How can our state of having to overcome a desire to do harm be better than God's state of effortless perfection? The person who could not be induced to be unfaithful surely is simply better than one who must constantly struggle against temptation. God, however, is not merely a being with a more firm and stable character than most others; God has no character in the human sense of a set of deep habits acquired over time. God did not develop good character; God was simply, metaphorically speaking, born with it. Among human beings those who have greater abilities, through no fault of their own, as we might say, might be admired for their beauty, strength, intelligence, or agility, but are wrongly praised for it. If, in Aristotle's terms, nature endowed someone with virtue, that person could not rightly be praised for that fact.

We may work out a conclusion concerning this issue as follows: If *A* has put forth a morally commendable effort in order to become perfectly good and *B* could have done so but did not, then *A* is a morally superior being in comparison to *B*. If *C* is perfectly good of necessity (due to *C*'s nature, in the case of God), then *A* is morally superior to *C* as a being, for having put forth a morally commendable effort when *C* has not, and *B* is morally superior to both *A* and *C* in relation to any instance in which *B* does some good action freely and neither *A* nor *C* acts with a similar measure of freedom. *In any given instance*, if *B* performs the best possible action freely and both *A* and *C* perform (or would perform) that action of necessity (taking *A* to have developed a character such that he can no longer perform any action other than the best possible action), then *in relation to this action* *B* is morally superior to *A* and *C*. It seems then that a perfectly good being may be commended for her perfect goodness (in relation to the goodness of others) if and only if that goodness has been reached by strenuous moral effort and that, even in this case, once that being has reached perfect goodness her individual good actions lack moral superiority in relation to those of any being who performs a good action freely. It further seems to be the case that God, if understood as a 'maximally good' being, could never be seen as maximally good in relation to any of his actions, present or past, thus revealing the incoherence of the notion of 'maximal goodness,' because the maximally good being would never be as good (i.e. as praiseworthy or admirable) in taking any specific action as a being who is less than maximally good in terms of necessary or essential attributes and performs the same action freely.

The issue then comes down to this: if to call a being perfectly good has both a descriptive and an honorific side, and if the description of perfect goodness in a being such as God involves either an essential characteristic that allows of no exception or a necessity, and if finally the honorific aspect of perfect goodness requires that which the descriptive side negates, then perfect goodness is incoherent. My argument, in its simplest form, suggests first that God's perfect goodness is describable either as an essential characteristic that allows of no exception or as a necessity (also allowing of no exception). God, in other words, cannot fail to act according to whatever God knows to be maximally good. Second, even without comparison such action cannot be praised, but certainly in comparison to a person who performs good actions either with difficulty or at least while capable of not doing the good action, such an action lacks praiseworthiness. Finally, perfect goodness includes not only doing the right thing but being praiseworthy for doing so. In this regard, that which makes God perfectly good in the definitional sense blocks God's being called perfectly good in the honorific sense.⁸

References

Plantinga. (1990). *The nature of necessity*. New York: Oxford UP.

Rowe, W. L. (2004). *Can God be free?* New York: Oxford UP.

Footnotes

¹ See, for example, Plantinga's (1990).

² Throughout this essay, I will use the terms maximally good and perfectly good as roughly synonymous.

³ Concerning this point, Rowe's (2004) fine work, presents a strong and straightforward argument that God's necessary goodness makes it the case that God necessarily does the best that God can do.

⁴ Again, I find Rowe's discussion of God's perfect goodness quite helpful. He points out, quite rightly I believe, that free choice of the best action cannot provide the level of certainty necessary to claim *perfect* goodness. Genuinely contingent goodness leaves the nature of one's next action in doubt, which perfect goodness must not. Even in the case mentioned later in which a being might become perfectly good through strenuous moral effort, perfect goodness, once attained, leaves no room for choice. The perfectly good being must do and must only do that which he believes (or in the case of an omniscient being, knows) to be best.

⁵ I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for a clarification concerning the notion of rationality discussed here. Although we can think or behave irrationally, thus making a certain form of rationality a capability but not a requirement of our nature, in another sense we are rational animals whose actions are performed for reasons, and this idea of rationality is a requirement of being agents at all.

⁶ Rowe (2004, pp. 90–91). Rowe approves of this claim, not of the way Kretzmann uses the claim.

⁷ Rowe goes on to claim that the issue he addresses concerning creating a best possible world falls in a different category; in this case, Rowe says, God fails to do something that logically can be done. Rowe (2004, pp. 91).

⁸ My thanks to Michael B. Burke who commented valuably on several early drafts of this paper, to John J. Tilley for his willingness to read and comment on later revised drafts, and to an anonymous reviewer for *Sophia* for thoughtful and helpful comments.