

What is God's Goodness?  
Understanding Lady Anne Conway

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Philosophies written on God can be dated back as far as time can tell. Within these texts are questions on God's character, is He a loving God or one of vengeance? Does He offer us mercy or does He cause our suffering? In the writings of Lady Anne Conway, God's love delivers both of these modes of viewing Him. Lady Anne Conway (1631–1679) was a British philosopher who gave us her sole work *Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, “published anonymously” in 1690, in this Conway provides deep insight and arguments against concepts on God, His “existence and attributes,” and from here develops theories on the body and mind and the human's position with God (Hutton, 2020). For the purpose of this paper, we will be accepting God's existence to look further into Conway's attribute of “goodness” and how her argumentation places both good and bad within the same definition of His goodness.

The terms “good” and “bad”, in this instance, are the socially constructed terms that define the ethicality, morality, or situational happenings of a thing to another person or a person to another person, and so on. The terms in which Conway uses are then to be that of His goodness, “he is infinitely wise, good, just, and strong; he knows everything” and “Spirits that agreed and united in doing good or bad will be rewarded and punished together” (p. 1, p. 37). With these definitions, it can be made clear that God's good contains all things that can be humanly deemed as either “good” or “bad” just the same.

In the beginning of Conway's work, it can be seen that God is beyond time itself in His all-knowing power and His being creation, with this Conway adds that God's will is “eternal” and because of this nothing within Him changes or can change. “God's wisdom and will are not entities or substances distinct from him, but distinct modes or properties of a single substance” (p. 1), to Conway, God and His will are one and the

same and through this creates our existence. From here, Conway's later chapters that lie out more on sin and suffering connect how God's will still carries His goodness while conveying both "good" and "bad" social concepts. Conway argues that when our spirit leans towards the bad, that this will be counteracted with punishment "and this punishment turns the evil back towards good" (p. 26), because we are then able to perceive the punishments that follow sin. Alongside this, Conway invents a sort of scale where God is the ultimate good and perfection to strive for, and where spirits and bodies balance their proportions with how good and perfect that being becomes. Conway makes it apparent that God's creatures (which are all things) are constantly becoming through pain and suffering and this can only lead toward goodness and perfection. Describing a religion with no Hell, Conway writes "eternal torment [ ... ] is impossible because all pain and torment stimulates the life, the spirit, of the sufferer" (p. 27). What Conway is implying is that our spirit will bounce back and forth, up and down, between good and bad, all the while towards God's goodness in the end.

This philosophy is not unique to Conway but does paint a unique form of God for us to ponder. God's love is a spirit that will always strive for His good, and the life He brings is that of trials to aid in our becoming more like Him. Just as the very anti-Christian philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche once said: "What does not destroy me, makes me stronger." To view the occurrences of life as a "trial" to become better, rather than something "good" and "bad" happening to an individual, Conway provides an optimistic view on life's sufferings. And to view things deemed sinful as something that will bring punishment sooner than death, Conway also provides more rationale for ethical norms and more urgency, along with more hope, for becoming better in the future.

References:

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