

Riddle me this

Introduction

In a conversation with a non-Christian friend I was asked a trick question designed to prove that God was unable to do something, and thus could not be perfect. I was hesitant to play that game and answered the question in vague terms explaining that it was not a genuine question but more of a riddle and rather pointless. It had little purpose, other than to be annoying. He actually agreed with me and we moved on.

At 2.35 in the morning I woke up with the feeling that I ought to discuss this type of matter more thoroughly. Not that the question deserved more attention, but there might be some value in explaining the context of it.

The question

Can God create a stone that is too heavy for him to lift?

This is similar to statements such as, if God cannot lie then there is something that God cannot do, therefore he cannot be God; or God cannot sin therefore there is something God cannot do.

This is an atheistic trick. Any answer to the question proves that God is not God. If God cannot create a stone too heavy for him to lift, he is not the all-powerful Creator. If God does create such a heavy stone, then God cannot be God because he cannot do something. Thus the question is pointless and deliberately futile.

The question is a lateral-thinking, intellectually self-defeating riddle. It involves the technique of identifying the attributes of someone and using an attribute to ponder a negative expression of it to promote a negative response. It is like the Zen conundrum, 'What is the sound of one hand clapping?' Of course such a thing is impossible, so the sound is silence. But the statement is rather meaningless and pointless, but it is a poetic way of suggesting silence or perhaps futility. There are many such lateral questions or riddles. They may provoke thought and be amusing but they have little actual didactic value. Yet some folk think that they are clever. Anyone can make up these pointless riddles; such as: 'What is the speed of one foot running?'

The attributes of God

The context of the question is not simple. It involves a discussion of the attributes of God.

God's character involves a number of attributes that are all infinitely perfect. The Westminster Shorter Catechism (4) states:

What is God? A. God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.

Thus God's attributes are conditioned by infinity, eternity and immutability. Thus God is infinitely, eternally and unchangeably wisdom. God is infinitely, eternally and unchangeably goodness. And so on.

Since God is declared to be holy, and unusually denominated by this attribute in triple terms (Isa 6:3; Rev 4:8), we could also say that God's attributes are also conditioned by holiness. Everything God does is holy. So God is infinitely, eternally and unchangeably holy goodness. God is infinitely, eternally and unchangeably holy righteousness. God is holy love.¹

God's goodness involves love, grace, benevolence, mercy and long-suffering; only doing what is right. God's righteousness is God's holiness applied to relationships, God's will is right. God is also just; which is righteousness applied to judging behaviour. God is just and does not show partiality.

Now the goodness and righteousness of God does not mean that God is merely nice. This is a human understanding of the terms. God is righteous in the sense that God can only do good in holiness; can only do exactly what is perfect and right; can only do the right thing in any circumstance. God's good response is always to do what is right, benevolent, holy, just and righteous. So God's goodness and righteousness regarding sin is wrath; that is the right response to sin. Sin must be answered and atoned (satisfied), either in Hell or in the cross of Christ; either in condemnation of the wicked or in mercy to the elect. God's goodness to the elect is in mercy, grace and blessing.

In the context of the question, God's goodness and righteousness cannot entertain something pointless and stupid. To even consider this question would not be consistent with all God's attributes.

The non-answer

Back to the question.

To answer the question would pose an affront to the attributes of God. It would make God do something pointless and stupid. Could God create a stone too heavy for him to lift? Theoretically he could because God can do anything he wills. Would God do this? No he would not.

The question is stupid because it considers that God would do something that is not good, that is pointless, that is foolish. God will never create a stone too heavy to lift because that is futile employment and God never does anything futile (unlike mankind).

In the same way could God lie? In theory he could because God can do anything he wills. Would God lie? No he would not because lying is neither good nor holy. Thus God cannot lie (Titus 1:2). The inability to lie is not a weakness proving that God is unable to do something and therefore weak; it is a feature of God's righteousness and holiness. The morality of God cannot entertain lying.

¹ Note that God's love is conditioned by holiness. Thus God does not love all people because that would mean that God loves sin (sin arises in the heart and works in the soul, in the person, Matt 12:35, 15:18-19; Ezek 18:4); to love a sinner involves condoning sin; condoning sin is the opposite of holiness. Sin must be hated (Ps 5:6, 11:5).

Both these questions would destroy the attributes of God so that God would cease to be infinitely perfect and holy. Since God is perfectly holy and immutable, then such a thing will never happen. The whole scenario is utterly pointless speculation.

God's choice of morality is an act of his will; God wills to be morally good and righteous. Everything has an opposite, therefore all of God's attributes have an opposite. God will never do these opposites because he wills to do what is morally good. Considering that a choice to not do these opposites is inability and weakness is intellectually sophistry.

Being unable to do something by choice is not weakness; it is moral strength. If I choose to never hit a frail old lady, that is an ethical choice; it is not weakness. If I choose to never ingest heroin, that is a moral position; it is not powerlessness. God wills to never do anything pointless and futile. All his acts have an eternal purpose.

I know that whatever God does, it shall be forever. Nothing can be added to it, and nothing taken from it. God does *it*, that men should fear before Him. Eccles 3:14

The counsel of the LORD stands forever, the plans of His heart to all generations. Ps 33:11

Conclusion

This is why I was reticent to even begin to answer this question; it is a pointless riddle. It is an intellectual piece of nonsense that achieves nothing and is a waste of time. It is a prosaic trick. It is sophistry; the riddle contains its own fallacy. It is a redundant question.

My advice regarding questions like this is to avoid them and not interact with them. They generate heat but no light. They are merely intellectual games that have no point.

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