

QUESTION 9

God's Immutability

The next things to consider are God's immutability (question 9) and His eternity, which follows from His immutability (question 10).

As for immutability, there are two questions to be asked: (1) Is God altogether immutable? (2) Is it peculiar to God to be immutable?

Article 1

Is God altogether immutable?

It seems that God is not altogether immutable (*omnino immutabilis*):

Objection 1: Whatever moves itself is in some sense mutable. But, as Augustine says in *Super Genesim ad Litteram* 8, "The Spirit creator moves Himself, but neither through time nor through space." Therefore, God is in some sense mutable.

Objection 2: Wisdom 7:24 says of wisdom that it is "more active than all active things." But God is wisdom itself. Therefore, God is moveable.

Objection 3: 'To come closer' and 'to go farther away' signify movement. But things of this sort are said of God in Scripture (James 4:8: "Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you"). Therefore, God is mutable.

But contrary to this: Malachy 3:6 says, "I am the Lord, and I change not."

I respond: On the basis of what has already been said, it can be shown that God is altogether immutable.

First, it was shown above (q. 2, a. 3 and q. 3, a. 1) that there is a first being that we call God, and that a first being of this sort must be pure actuality without the admixture of any potentiality, since potentiality is posterior in an absolute sense to actuality. But anything that changes in any way is in some sense in potentiality. From this it is clear that it is impossible for God to be changed in any way.

Second, everything that is moved is such that it stays the same with respect to something and undergoes a transition with respect to something else. For instance, that which is moved from whiteness to blackness stays the same with respect to its substance. And so in each thing that is moved some sort of composition is present. However, it was shown above (q. 3, a. 7) that there is no composition in God, but that instead He is altogether simple. Hence, it is clear that He cannot be moved.

Third, everything that is moved acquires something by its movement, and it attains to something that it did not attain to beforehand. But since God is infinite, including within Himself the fullness of the perfection of all being, He cannot acquire anything or attain to anything that He did not attain to beforehand. Hence, there is no way in which movement befits God.

And so it is that certain of the ancients—compelled, as it were, by the truth itself—held that the first principle of being is unmoveable (*immobile*).

Reply to objection 1: Augustine is here speaking in the manner of Plato, who claimed that the first mover moves itself because he was calling every operation a 'movement'. In this manner of speaking, even understanding and willing and loving are themselves movements. Thus, since God understands and loves Himself, they claimed accordingly that God moves Himself, but not in the sense in which movement and change belong to something that exists in potentiality—as we ourselves are now speaking of change and movement.

Reply to objection 2: Wisdom is called moveable metaphorically because it diffuses its likeness even to the least of things. For there cannot be anything that does not proceed, through a certain

imitation, from God's wisdom as a first effective and formal principle—in the way that artifacts proceed from the wisdom of the craftsman.

So, then, because the likeness of God's wisdom proceeds in degrees from the highest things, which have a greater participation in His likeness, all the way to the lowest things, which have a lesser participation, God's wisdom is said to have a 'procession' and 'movement' toward those things—just as if we were to say that the sun proceeds toward the earth because the rays of its light reach all the way to the earth. This is how Dionysius explains it in *De Caelesti Hierarchia*, chap. 1, when he says, "Every procession of God's manifestation comes to us from the movement of the Father of lights."

Reply to objection 3: Things of this sort are metaphorically predicated of God in the Scriptures. For just as the sun is said to enter a house or leave it to the extent that its rays reach the house, so, too, God is said to approach us or recede from us to the extent that we perceive the influence of His goodness or withdraw from Him.

Article 2

Is it peculiar to God to be immutable?

It seems that it is not peculiar to God to be immutable:

Objection 1: In *Metaphysics 2* the Philosopher says that there is matter in everything that is moved. But, as is evident to some, certain created substances, such as angels and souls, do not have matter. Therefore, it is not peculiar to God to be immutable.

Objection 2: Everything that is moved is moved for the sake of some end, and so if it has already attained its final end, it is no longer moved. But some creatures, e.g., all the blessed in heaven, have already attained their ultimate end. Therefore, some creatures are unmoveable.

Objection 3: Everything that is mutable is variable. But forms are invariable; for the book *Sex Principia* says, "A form consists in a simple and invariable essence." Therefore, it is not peculiar to God alone to be immutable.

But contrary to this: In *De Natura Boni* Augustine says, "Only God is immutable, whereas the things He has made are mutable because they come from nothing."

I respond: Only God is altogether immutable, whereas every creature is mutable in some way or other. Now notice that something can be called 'mutable' in one of two ways: first, because of a potentiality (*potentia*) that exists in its very self; second, because of a power (*potentia*) that exists in something else.

Before any creatures existed, they were not possible through any created power, since nothing created was eternal; rather, they were possible only because of God's power, i.e., only because God was able to bring them into being. But just as God's bringing things into being depends on His will, so too His conserving them in being depends on His will; for He conserves them in being precisely by always giving them being. Hence, as Augustine says in *Super Genesim ad Litteram* 4, if God were to withhold His action from them, all things would fall back into nothingness. Therefore, just as, before things existed in themselves, their existence depended on the creator's power, so too, after they exist in themselves, their non-existence depends on the creator's power. So, then, creatures are mutable through a power that exists in another, viz., in God, because they were able to be produced by Him from nothing and because they are able to be reduced by Him to non-being.

If, on the other hand, something is being called mutable because of a potentiality (*potentia*) that exists in its very self, then it is likewise the case that every creature is mutable in some way or other. For

in every creature there are two types of potentiality, viz., active and passive. Now I call a potentiality passive insofar as the thing in question is capable of attaining its own perfection, either in *being* or in *attaining its end*.

If we are talking about a thing's mutability with respect to potentiality for *being*, then this sort of mutability is not found in every creature, but only in those creatures in which what is possible in them is compatible with their non-being.

Thus, in lower bodies there is mutability both (a) with respect to *substantial* being, given that their matter can exist along with a privation of their substantial form, and (b) with respect to *accidental* being, as long as the subject is compatible with the privation of a given accident, in the way that the subject *man* is compatible with non-whiteness and so can change from being white to not being white. On the other hand, if the accident in question follows upon the subject's essential principles, then the privation of that accident is not compatible with the subject, and so the subject is not mutable with respect to that accident—in the way that snow cannot become black.

By contrast, in celestial bodies the matter is not compatible with the privation of their form, since their form perfects the whole potentiality of their matter, and so they are not mutable with respect to their substantial being. However, they are mutable with respect to their local being, since the subject is compatible with the privation of this or that place.

On the other hand, since incorporeal substances are themselves subsistent forms (which are nonetheless related to their *esse* as potentiality to actuality), they are not compatible with the privation of this act [of being]. For *esse* follows upon form, and nothing is corrupted except by losing a form. Hence, in the form itself there is no potentiality for non-being, and so substances of this sort are immutable and invariable with respect to their being. This point is made by Dionysius in *De Divinis Nominibus*, chap. 4: "Created intellectual substances are free from generation and from every variation, since they are incorporeal and immaterial." However, there are still two types of mutability in such creatures. For, first, they are in potentiality with respect to their *end*, and because of this, as Damascene says, they can change from goodness to badness by their own choice. Second, they are mutable with respect to *place*, because by their finite power they can affect places that they had not previously affected—something that cannot be said of God, who, as was explained above (q. 8, a. 2), fills all places by His infinity.

So, then, in every creature there is some potentiality for change, either (a) with respect to *substantial being*, as in the case of corruptible bodies; or (b) just with respect to *local being*, as in the case of the celestial bodies; or (c) with respect to *their being ordered to their end* or with respect to *the application of their power to diverse things*, as in the case of the angels. Moreover, all creatures in general share a common mutability because of the power of their creator, given that their being and non-being fall within His power.

Hence, since God is not mutable in any of these ways, it is peculiar to Him to be altogether immutable.

Reply to objection 1: This objection concerns things that are mutable with respect to both substantial being and accidental being, since these are the types of changes the philosophers had talked about.

Reply to objection 2: In addition to the immutability of being, which belongs to them by nature, the good angels have an immutability of choice by God's power. Yet mutability with respect to place still remains in them.

Reply to objection 3: Forms are called invariable because they themselves cannot be the subject of a variation. Yet they are subject to variation in the sense that their subjects are variable with respect to them. Hence, it is clear that they vary in a sense that accords with what they are. For they are called beings not because they themselves are the subject of being, but because something exists by virtue of them.