

Divine Extrinsicity and Immutability

by

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The Scriptures are replete with references to the unchangeableness or immutability of God. Take for instance Malachi 3:6, “I the Lord do not change. So you, O descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed”; or Psalm 110:4, “The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind”; or 1 Samuel 15:29, “He who is the Glory of Israel does not lie or change his mind; for he is not a man that he should change his mind”; or James 1:17, “Every good and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.”

But there are equally many biblical references to the changeability of God. Take for instance James 4:8, “Come near to God and he will come near to you”; or 1 Samuel 15:10, “I am grieved that I have made Saul king”; or Genesis 6:6, “The Lord was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain.” The Psalmist severally appeals to the Lord to return to Israel, to forgive, to restore, to hear and do something about Israel’s state of affairs—all of which presuppose that God is changeable.

How is one to reconcile such apparent conflicting biblical asseverations about God and change? In this paper, I propose a way out – a way that accommodates these biblical data and renders these asseverations about God and change coherent. The benefit of this study is that it dispels plausible arguments for conflict between divine immutability and divine changeability by noting, on the contrary, compatibility between divine immutability and change.

Classical theists (St. Augustine, St. Anselm and St. Thomas)¹ – influenced by Platonism and Aristotelianism – do favor a strong statement of the doctrine of divine immutability, which easily averts predicating change of God. Reinforcing the doctrine of divine immutability with the doctrine of divine simplicity (i.e., the doctrine that God is identical with all his properties), they assert that God *cannot* change either with respect to his being or his properties. All of God’s properties are necessary to him so he cannot lose them at any moment whatsoever. They define God: God is necessarily omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent; hence in all possible worlds God exists and instantiates his properties. Classical theists do not distinguish between intrinsic and extrinsic properties of God, so they let divine immutability encompass extrinsic properties as well. But that raises serious exegetical problem for handling biblical passages alluding to divine changeability.

Contemporary theists (their name is Legion) – influenced by Hegelian idealism, existentialism, and process metaphysics – insist that God is intimately involved in our perpetually changing world; hence God is essentially changeable. Karl Barth, for instance, deduces from the deep involvement of God in our changing world that God is mobile. Barth rejects the classical theistic explication of the doctrine of divine immutability because it is absolutistic, thus rendering God dead. “We must not make any mistake,” Barth warns, “the pure immobile is death. If, then, the pure immobile is God, death is God. And if death is God, then God is dead.”²

Lester J. Kuyper concurs with Barth's judgment over classical theistic explication of immutability. However, he attributes the classical theistic explication of the doctrine of divine immutability to Hellenism and neo-Platonism rather than to the true teachings of the Scriptures about God. Kuyper insists that the Scriptures clearly speak of God walking in the garden, coming to see human wickedness, suffering with his people, etc.; all of these events could not be done by God if he were absolutely immutable.³ Similarly, Ronald J. Teske denies that biblical writers affirmed the Greek metaphysical notion of immutability; rather they broadly affirmed God's persistence and deny his subjection to death or corruption.⁴ Nicholas Wolterstorff, the consummate Reformed philosopher, vigorously defends God's changeableness, saying:

The biblical writers do not present God as some passive factor within reality but as an agent in it. Further, they present him as acting within human history. . . . Indeed, so basic to the biblical writings is the speaking of God as agent with history that if one viewed God as only an impassive factor in reality, or as one whose agency does not occur within human history, one would have to regard the biblical speech about God as at best one long sequence of metaphors pointing to a reality for which they are singularly inept, and as at worst one long sequence of falsehoods.⁵

It is sufficiently evident from the foregoing that while classical theists read the Scriptures as teaching that God is absolutely immutable, most contemporary Christian theists read the Scriptures as teaching that God is changeable. There seems to be irreconcilable polarity between these readings of the Scriptures on God and change. But, I shall argue that the biblical portrait of God is not quite exclusive as it may appear at first glance. There is an effective way of reading the Scriptures that readily reconciles these passages. The most effective way of reading the Scriptures is, I suggest, to distinguish between God's extrinsic and intrinsic properties and to predicate change of God with respect to his extrinsic properties, but to deny that God changes with respect to his intrinsic properties. Let me explain.

Defining Immutability and Extrinsicity

Immutability. Immutability is a negative term that essentially negates predicating change of God. So, to get a good hold of immutability, we must first define change. A thing (x) changes if and only if it either it acquires or loses properties (p) at some time in the course of its existence. Change, furthermore, requires the endurance of some aspect of the thing (call it, substance), to ensure the preservation of its identity. For instance, a car may change with respect to its color if it had a certain color at an earlier time, which it loses at a later time.⁶ On this definition of change, to say God is immutable, therefore, is to deny that God could gain or lose any of his properties.

Extrinsic property. Extrinsic properties are properties whose instantiation by an individual is a matter of how the individual stands with respect to other distinct individuals. That is, the instantiation of the property by an individual is not a matter of the nature of that individual alone regardless of the nature or existence of any distinct individual.⁷

These definitions are important to theology in two ways: first, they delineate and clarify the extent to which the doctrine of divine immutability (DDI) is predicated of God. It also supplies logical categories need for distinguishing between "real" change and "mere" change

(i.e., mere Cambridge change). Real change is change in intrinsic properties, while mere change is change in extrinsic properties.

I shall employ the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic properties in this paper to analyze the doctrine of divine immutability and show it warrants that God changes with respect to his extrinsic properties, but not immutable with respect to his intrinsic properties. My methodology is quasi-logical, without logical symbols. I choose it because it stipulates the rationale or condition for predicating change of God and the rationale or condition for predicating immutability of God.

God and Extrinsic Properties

Let us begin by assuming the validity of this maxim: “Every object (x) has intrinsic and extrinsic properties.” Now, let us grant, furthermore, that this maxim applies to God as well. So, God has extrinsic and intrinsic properties. God’s extrinsic properties are exemplified in his relationship with individuals in the world (or as Aquinas prefers to say the world’s relationship to God). Extrinsic properties are not constitutive of God’s substance, but they pertain to God’s true identity in so far as he is truly related to those individuals. Such a relationship allows for the true predication of certain properties of God, say, “being the creator of the world” or “being loved by Abraham” or “being worshipped by Paul.” God truly instantiates these extrinsic properties because God is related to these individuals or (if you are a Thomist), those individuals are related to God. If God were not so related to those individuals, God would then have instantiated complementary extrinsic properties. That is, had Abraham not loved God then God would have instantiated the complementary extrinsic property of being such that Abraham does not love God.

Evidently, extrinsic properties are contingent to every being that has them, including God. They are not necessary properties to God, so God could exist but lack them. God could exist as God, but not have the extrinsic property of being such that Abraham, you, or I love God. For such state of affairs to be true all that God needs to do is refrain from creating the world – then not Abraham or you or I would exist to love God. Still God would exist and have the complementary extrinsic properties of being not the creator of the world and being such that not Abraham or you or I love God.

Now, let us suppose that Abraham began to love God at a time (T1). Let T1 be the time that God called Abraham from Ur (Genesis 12). We may say then that prior to T1, God had the extrinsic property of being such that Abraham does not love God. But after T1, say, T2, God had the extrinsic property of being such that Abraham loves God. Intuitively, God underwent extrinsic property change between T1 and T2.

Take another example from the state of affairs of God being the father of Jesus Christ. Say that God has the extrinsic property of being the father of Jesus Christ because of how Jesus Christ is related to God the Father. Now, this example may appear extreme, but it is not farfetched because Jurgen Moltmann does assert that at the death of Jesus Christ, for those three days he was in the grave, God ceased being the Father because he hadn’t his only Son. If Moltmann is right then, at death, Jesus Christ ceased to relate to the Father as Son. Therefore, God acquired the complement extrinsic property of being sonless or not being the Father. Of course, after the resurrection God resumed being the Father of Jesus Christ. Indeed, Moltmann thinks that the necessity of resurrection is for restoring the fatherhood of God.

Well, someone may point out a theological difficulty with Moltmann's account, which is that it predicates successive temporal changes to an eternal God, who is eternally related as Father and Son. Such objection has theological legitimacy, but I will not argue for or against it here. Let us suppose, tentatively, that Moltmann's assertion is sensible; then it is plausible to infer that God undergoes extrinsic property change with respect to Trinitarian relations.⁸

Divine Immutability

How then shall we state the doctrine of divine immutability to accommodate the conclusion that God undergoes extrinsic property change? To answer this question, let us posit three criteria necessary for a legitimate affirmation of the Christian doctrine of divine immutability. Since we have defined change simply as the gaining or losing of properties, we may interpret the Christian doctrine of immutability as denying that God gains or loses his properties. By which we are understanding:

1. God exemplifies property stability. That is, God has properties that are such that God will not cease to have them no matter what. I call these divine intrinsic properties (others prefer the term divine attributes), which God has *de re*, since they are essential to God's nature.
2. God exemplifies immutable existence or a continuum of identity. That is, there is no time at which God began to exist neither is there time at which God would cease to exist. This claim is not simple affirmation of divine immortality, but a denial that God can ever stop to be God – thus, the Scriptures say, God is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow.
3. God exemplifies steadfastness of will. That is, God's intentions and plans are not capriciously or whimsically adopted through sudden or hurried response to events in the world. Rather God's intentions and plans are eternally fixed; hence God cannot change his mind about the good that he purposes for us.

All that these affirm is that God does not change with respect to his nature or will. Several theological reasons can be cited for the view that God does not change his nature or will:

- The divine substance is necessary to God. Since God is an exclusive membership of three divine persons without any possibility of addition or subtraction in Godhead, we must maintain that God cannot increase or decrease in number.
- God is eternal, which means that all of time exists simultaneous with God. There is no time at which God is absent, so that to occupy it, God would have to move from, say, T1 to T2.
- God is omnipresent, which means that God occupies all space simultaneously. There is no place or locale where God is absent, so that to be present at it, God would have to move from P1 to P2.

From the above analysis, therefore, we are allowed to deduce rightly that the doctrine of divine immutability maintains that God does not undergo intrinsic property change. But, the doctrine of divine immutability does not aim to deny that God undergoes extrinsic property change.

Conclusion

The distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic change allows us to accommodate biblical passages that deny that God changes and those that affirm that God changes. But classical theists may criticize the claim that God undergoes extrinsic property change on the basis of divine perfection. She may object that divine perfection permits God to undergo change, because change would undermine God's perfection. But if it is by changing that God becomes perfect then God was not perfect. But there is no time at which God *is* not perfect, so God can neither become perfect nor cease to be perfect.

This argument, however, fails for two reasons: Extrinsic property change does not pertain to God's essential or constitutive properties, so undergoing this type of change does no harm to God's perfection. Moreover, perfection is a communicative property, which God himself transmits to every property that he instantiates. In other words, no single property is what makes God perfect; rather it is God who perfects his properties. God is not perfect because he instantiate this or that property, so God's perfection cannot impinge on God's extrinsic properties.

Another criticisms of extrinsic property change made by process theologians is that it is slight or bogus because it fails to predicate "real" change of God. Since God, supposedly, changes only in respect to his relations with other individuals but not in himself, process theologians argue that extrinsic property change hardly amounts to anything.

But, it must be noted that in this criticism, Process theologians fail to see that God really change in his extrinsic properties. The main defect of this criticism, as I see it, is that process theologians do not realize that God is the efficient cause of changes in those individuals that are so related to God. Supposing we let t_3 be prior time to our occupying this room. At t_3 this room has the extrinsic property of being empty. Now, let t_4 be the time we occupied this room. At t_4 this room has the extrinsic property of being occupied. We can then say that between t_3 and t_4 , this room undergoes the extrinsic property change of being empty to being occupied. Yet, note that it is really we (not the room) who really changed by moving from our houses to this room – the room didn't undergo any such real change.

Process theologians criticize extrinsic property change for implying that God is passive in extrinsic property change while individuals related to God really change. I am arguing, however, that God is active in extrinsic property change. Since God is the efficient cause of change in the world, God initiates the real change in those individuals who really change in relation to God.

Indeed, this point is alluded to by St. Augustine in his denial that relational change (what I am calling extrinsic change) is slight or bogus. St. Augustine asserts: "Certainly to be the Lord of man happened to God in time. And that all dispute may be taken away, certainly to be your Lord, or mine, who have only lately begun to be, happened to God in time."⁹

But one may question St. Augustine's argument on ground that it puts God outside time. Since St. Augustine denies that God is outside time, he cannot advance this argument. In response to this object, let me note that eternity should not be taken as precluding God from existence in time. If God is totally outside of time then talk of God entering into successive temporal relationship with us is meaningless. It makes no sense to say that, in 100 B.C., God had the property of being worshiped by St. Paul even though St. Paul had not yet existed. But, it makes perfect sense, and it is true, to say that St. Paul worshiped God in 40 AD; hence in 40

AD God acquired a property he lacked in 100 BC, namely, the property of being worshiped by St. Paul. Indeed, such assertions are made truly of God in Christianity.

Let me end, thus, that in the absence of any good argument for absolute immutability, which bars the predication of any and all kinds of change of God, we must predicate extrinsic property change of God. But that God undergoes extrinsic property change does not license the denial of the Christian doctrine of divine immutability. The aim of this exercise is to help us successfully exegete and explicate those difficult Scriptural passages that appear conflicting over the immutability and mutability of God.

¹ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a. 9. 1; Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 1.16.

² Karl Barth *Church Dogmatic*, II/1: 31, 494.

³ Lester J. Kuyper, "The Repentance of God," *Reformed Review* 18 (1965): 3-16.

⁴ Ronald J. Teske, "Divine Immutability in Saint Augustine," *The New Schoolman*, 63 (1986): 246-247.

⁵ Nicholas Wolterstoff, "God Everlasting," in *God and the Good*, eds., Clifford Orlebeke and Lewis B. Smedes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 181.

⁶ Time denotes more than the Aristotelian notion of time as numbering of movement by before and after; rather it denotes also the understanding of temporal succession – thus, Boethius says: "nothing escapes God's knowledge" (Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, 5.6.10).

⁷ David A. Denby, "The Distinction between Intrinsic and Extrinsic Properties," *Mind*, 115.457 (2006): 1.

⁸ See, Jurgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974).

⁹ St. Augustine, *De Trinitate*, IV. 2-3.