

QUESTION 21

God's Justice and Mercy

Now that we have considered God's love, we have to discuss His justice and mercy.

On this topic there are four questions: (1) Is there justice in God? (2) Can God's justice be called truth? (3) Is there mercy in God? (4) Do justice and mercy exist in every work of God?

Article 1

Is there justice in God?

It seems that there is no justice in God:

Objection 1: Justice and temperance fall under the same classification. But temperance does not exist in God. Therefore, neither does justice.

Objection 2: If someone does everything that pleases his own will, then he does not act in accord with justice. But in Ephesians 1:11 the Apostle says that God "works all things according to the counsel of His will." Therefore, justice should not be attributed to God.

Objection 3: The act of justice is to render a debt. But God is a debtor to no one. Therefore, justice does not belong to God.

Objection 4: Whatever exists in God is His essence. But justice cannot be God's essence; for in *De Hebdomadibus* Boethius says, "The good has to do with essence, whereas the just has to do with action." Therefore, justice does not belong to God.

But contrary to this: Psalm 10:8 says, "The Lord is just, and has loved justice."

I respond: There are two types of justice.

The first has to do with mutual giving and receiving—as, for instance, the giving and receiving involved in buying and selling and in other types of trades or exchanges. In *Ethics* 5 the Philosopher calls this *commutative* justice, i.e., justice that directs exchanges or trades. This type of justice does not belong to God, since as the Apostle says in Romans 11:35, "Who has first given to Him, and recompense shall be made him?"

The second type, which consists in distribution, is called *distributive* justice, whereby a ruler or manager gives to each according to his deserts. Therefore, just as the appropriate ordering of a family—or of any governed group of people—exhibits this sort of justice in the one who has authority over it, so too the order of the universe, which is apparent in both natural effects and voluntary effects, exhibits God's justice. Hence in *De Divinis Nominibus*, chap. 8, Dionysius, says, "God's true justice must be seen in the fact that (a) He gives what is appropriate to all things according to the worthiness of each of the things that exist, and that (b) He preserves the nature of each thing in its own proper order and with its own proper powers."

Reply to objection 1: Some of the moral virtues have to do with the passions. For instance, temperance has to do with sense desires, fortitude has to do with fear and daring, and mildness has to do with anger. Virtues of this sort cannot belong to God except metaphorically, since, as was explained above (q. 20, a. 1), in God there are no passions; moreover, in God there is no sentient appetite, which, according to the Philosopher in *Ethics* 3, is the subject in which virtues of this sort exist.

On the other hand, some moral virtues have to do with actions; for instance, justice and liberality and magnificence have to do with giving and taking. These virtues exist not in the sentient part of the soul, but in the will. Hence, nothing prevents virtues of this sort from being posited in God—yet not with respect to civic actions, but with respect to actions that are appropriate for God. For, as the Philosopher says in *Ethics* 10, it would be ridiculous to praise God for His political virtues.

Reply to objection 2: Since the object of the will is the good as understood, God cannot will anything other than what conforms to the measure of His wisdom. For the measure of His wisdom is, as it were, the law of justice, in accord with which His will is upright and just. Hence, God does justly whatever He does in accord with His will, just as we ourselves do justly whatever we do in accord with the law. But we act in accord with a law that is given to us by some superior, whereas God is a law for Himself.

Reply to objection 3: What is due to each thing is what is its own; and what is its own is that which is ordered to it. For instance, a servant is his master's own, and not vice versa, since what is free is master of itself. Therefore, the term 'debt' implies that the thing to which the debt is ordered has a certain need or requirement.

Now we have to take into account two types of orderings among things. The first is that by which one created thing is ordered to another created thing—in the way that the parts are ordered to the whole, and accidents to substances, and each thing to its proper end. The second type of ordering is that by which all created things are ordered to God.

Thus, there are two types of debt that have to be considered in the case of God's action: (a) what is owed to God and (b) what is owed to a created thing. And God renders a debt in both cases.

For it is owed to God that what belongs to His wisdom and will, along with what manifests His goodness, should be fulfilled in things. In this sense, God's justice has to do with His own uprightness, in accord with which He renders to Himself what is owed to Himself.

Moreover, it is owed to each created thing that it should have that which is ordered to it. For instance, it is owed to man that he should have hands and that the other animals should serve him. And so God also enacts His justice when He gives to each thing what is owed to it by reason of its nature and status. However, this second debt depends upon the first, since each thing is owed what is ordained for it in the order of God's wisdom. And even though God in this sense renders a debt to another thing, He is nonetheless not Himself a debtor. For it is not the case that He Himself is ordered to other things; just the opposite, the other things are ordered to Him.

And so justice in God is sometimes called His conformity with His own goodness, whereas at other times it is called His recompense for what is deserved. Anselm touches on both these modes when he says, "It is just when You punish evildoers, because it corresponds to what they deserve; and it is just when You spare evildoers, because it befits your goodness."

Reply to objection 4: Even though justice has to do with acts, it is not thereby excluded from being God's essence. For what belongs to a thing's essence can also be a principle of action.

However, it is not always the case that the good has to do with action. For something is said to be good not only insofar as it acts, but also insofar as it is perfected in its essence. This is why Boethius says in the same place that goodness is related to justice as the generic is related to the specific.

Article 2

Can God's justice be called truth?

It seems that God's justice is not truth:

Objection 1: Justice exists in the will; for as Anselm says, justice is rectitude of the will. But according to the Philosopher in *Metaphysics* 6 and *Ethics* 6, truth exists in the intellect. Therefore, justice does not pertain to truth.

Objection 2: According to the Philosopher in *Ethics* 4, truth is a certain virtue distinct from

justice. Therefore, truth does not pertain to the nature of justice.

But contrary to this: Psalm 84:11 says, “Mercy and truth have met each other.” And ‘truth’ is here being used for justice.

I respond: As was explained above (q. 16, a. 1), truth consists in a correspondence between the intellect and reality.

Now an intellect that is a cause of the relevant real thing is related to it as a rule and measure, whereas the converse holds in the case of an intellect that takes its knowledge from the thing.

Thus, when, as happens with us, the things are the measure and rule of the intellect, then truth consists in the intellect’s corresponding to the thing. For it is because reality is or is not such-and-such that our beliefs and statements are true or false.

By contrast, when the intellect is the rule or measure of the things, then truth consists in the thing’s corresponding to the intellect. So, for instance, the craftsman is said to produce a true work when that work agrees with his craft. Now just actions are related to the law with which they accord as artifacts are related to their craft. Therefore, God’s justice, which establishes among things the order that conforms to the measure of His wisdom, i.e., His law, is appropriately called ‘truth’. And this is why, even among us, one speaks of the truth of justice.

Reply to objection 1: With respect to the *law* that regulates, justice exists in reason or in the intellect, but with respect to the *command* by which actions are regulated in accord with the law, justice exists in the will.

Reply to objection 2: The ‘truth’ of which the Philosopher is speaking here is a certain virtue by which someone’s words and deeds reveal what he is really like. And so it consists in the conformity of a sign to the thing signified—and not, as has been said about the truth of justice, in the conformity of an effect to its cause and its rule.

Article 3

Is there mercy in God?

It seems that mercy does not belong to God:

Objection 1: As Damascene says, mercy is a species of sadness. But sadness does not exist in God. Therefore, neither does mercy.

Objection 2: Mercy is a relaxation of justice. But God cannot omit what pertains to His justice. For as 2 Timothy 2:13 says, “If we believe not, He continues faithful, He cannot deny himself,” and as the Gloss says in the same place, He would be denying Himself if He denied His own dictates. Therefore, mercy does not belong to God.

But contrary to this: Psalm 110 says, “He is a merciful and gracious Lord.”

I respond: Mercy must especially be attributed to God—though according to its effect and not according to the affective element in a passion.

To see this clearly, note that someone is called merciful (*misericors*) when he has, as it were, a saddened heart (*miserum cor*)—viz., because he is affected with sadness at the unhappiness of another as if it were his own unhappiness. And from this it follows that he acts to dispel the other’s unhappiness, and this is the effect of mercy.

Thus, to be saddened at the unhappiness of another does not belong to God, but it does especially belong to Him to dispel another’s unhappiness, insofar as we mean by ‘unhappiness’ any sort of defect. But defects are removed only through the perfection of some type of goodness, and, as was shown above

(q. 6., a. 4), the first source of goodness is God.

Note, however, that the distribution of perfections to things pertains—though under different concepts—to God’s goodness and to His justice and to His generosity (*liberalitas*) and to His mercy. For, as was shown above (a. 6, a. 1 and 4), the communication of perfections, considered absolutely, pertains to God’s *goodness*. However, as was noted just above (a. 1), it pertains to God’s *justice* that perfections are given to things by God in a way that is appropriate to them. On the other hand, it pertains to His *generosity* that He grants perfections to things not for His own advantage, but solely because of His goodness. Finally, it pertains to God’s *mercy* that the perfections given by Him to things expel every sort of defect.

Reply to objection 1: This objection argues from mercy’s affective element as a passion

Reply to objection 2: God acts mercifully not by doing anything contrary to His justice, but by doing something that goes beyond His justice. In the same way, if one gives two hundred denarii of his own money to someone who is owed one hundred denarii, then he is acting generously or mercifully and not contrary to justice. The same thing holds if someone forgives an offense committed against himself. For in forgiving this debt, he is in a certain sense making a gift of it; hence, in Ephesians 4:32 the Apostle calls forgiveness a ‘gift’: “Make a gift to one another, just as Christ has made a gift to you.”

From this it is clear that mercy, far from destroying justice, is a certain fullness of justice. Hence, James 2:13 says, “Mercy is exalted above judgment.”

Article 4

Do both mercy and justice both exist in every work of God?

It seems that mercy and justice do not both exist in every work of God:

Objection 1: Some of God’s works, e.g., the justification of the wicked, are attributed to His mercy, whereas others, e.g., the damnation of the wicked, are attributed to His justice; hence, James 2:13 says: “Judgment will come without mercy to him that has not done mercy.” Therefore, mercy and justice do not both appear in every work of God.

Objection 2: In Romans 15:8-9 the Apostle attributes the conversion of the Jews to justice and truth, whereas he attributes the conversion of the Gentiles to mercy. Therefore, justice and mercy do not both exist in every work of God.

Objection 3: Many just men are afflicted in this world. But this is unjust. Therefore, justice and mercy do not both exist in every work of God.

Objection 4: To render a debt belongs to justice, whereas to alleviate unhappiness belongs to mercy. And so acts of both justice and mercy presuppose something. But creation does not presuppose anything. Therefore, in the act of creation there is neither mercy nor justice.

But contrary to this: Psalm 24:10 says: “All the ways of the Lord are mercy and truth.”

I respond: It is necessary for both mercy and truth to be found in every work of God—as long as mercy is understood as the removal of any sort of defect. (However, not every defect can be properly called ‘unhappiness’ (*miseria*), since this applies only to defects in a rational nature, which is able to be happy. For unhappiness is opposed to happiness (*felicitas*.)

The reason for this necessity is that since the debt rendered by God’s justice is either a debt owed to God or a debt owed to some creature, neither of these can be overlooked in any of God’s works. For God cannot do anything that conflicts with His wisdom and goodness—which is the sense in which, as we explained above (a. 1), something is owed to God. Similarly, whatever God does among created

things, He does with a fitting order and proportion—which is what the nature of justice consists in. And so it is necessary that justice should exist in every work of God.

Moreover, a work of God's justice always presupposes, and is founded upon, a work of His mercy. For a creature is not owed anything except because of something that preexists or is preconceived in it. Again, if anything is owed to a creature, this will be because of something prior. And since an infinite regress is impossible here, we finally come down to something which depends solely on the goodness of God's will, which is the ultimate end. So, for instance, we say that having hands is owed to man because of his rational soul, and having a rational soul is owed to him because he is man; but that man should exist at all is due to God's goodness. And so mercy appears in every work of God as its first source. For the force of mercy is preserved in each of the consequent things, and it operates even more powerfully in them, in just the way that a first cause has a more powerful influence than a secondary cause. For this reason, even the things that are owed to a given creature are such that God, out of the abundance of His goodness, dispenses them more generously than is demanded by what is fitting for the thing's nature. For what would be sufficient to preserve the order of justice is less than what is in fact conferred by God's goodness, which exceeds what is merely fitting for each creature.

Reply to objection 1: Some works are attributed to God's justice and others to His mercy because justice appears more forcefully in some and mercy appears more forcefully in others.

Yet mercy is apparent even in the damnation of the reprobate—not in the sense that it totally relaxes justice, but in the sense that it slackens it in some way by making the punishment less than what is deserved.

Again, justice is apparent even in the justification of the wicked, when it remits sins because of the love which God Himself has mercifully infused into the sinner—as we read in Luke 7:47 about Mary Magdalene: “Many sins are forgiven her, because she has loved much.”

Reply to objection 2: Justice and mercy are apparent in the conversion of both the Jews and the Gentiles. However, in the conversion of the Jews there is a certain element of justice that is not present in the conversion of the Gentiles, since the Jews are saved because of the promises made to their fathers.

Reply to objection 3: Justice and mercy both appear in the fact that the just are punished in this world. For through these afflictions certain of their inconstancies are purged, and they are directed away from a love for earthly things toward God. Accordingly, Gregory says, “The evils that oppress us in this world impel us to go to God.”

Reply to objection 4: Even though creation presupposes nothing in the nature of things, it nonetheless presupposes something in God's cognition. Accordingly, even in this case the nature of justice is preserved, since a thing is brought into being insofar as this accords with God's wisdom and goodness. Likewise, the nature of mercy is in some way preserved insofar as a thing passes from non-being into being.