

QUESTION 55

The Medium of Angelic Cognition

The next thing to ask about is the medium of angelic cognition. On this topic there are three questions: (1) Do angels have cognition of all things through their own substance or through intelligible species? (2) If they have cognition through intelligible species, are these species connatural to them, or are they instead received from the things themselves? (3) Do higher angels have cognition through species that are more universal than those of lower angels?

Article 1

Do angels have cognition of all things through their own substance?

It seems that angels have cognition of all things through their own substance:

Objection 1: In *De Divinis Nominibus*, chap. 7, Dionysius says that angels know the things that exist on earth through the proper nature of their mind. But an angel's nature is his essence. Therefore, an angel has cognition of these things through his own essence.

Objection 2: According to the Philosopher in *Metaphysics* 12 and *De Anima* 3, in things which exist without matter, the intellect is the same as that which is understood. But that which is understood is the same as the one who understands it by reason of that by which it is understood. Therefore, in things, like the angels, which exist without matter, that by which things are understood is the very substance of the one who understands.

Objection 3: Everything that exists in another exists in it according to the mode of that in which it exists. But an angel has an intellective nature. Therefore, whatever exists in an angel exists in him in an intelligible mode (*per modum intelligibilem*). But all things exist in an angel, since among beings the lower ones exist in the essence of the higher ones, whereas the higher ones exist in the lower ones by participation; this is why Dionysius says in *De Divinis Nominibus*, chap. 4, that God gathers together the whole within the whole, i.e., all things in all things. Therefore, an angel has cognition of all things in his own substance.

But contrary to this: In the same chapter Dionysius says that angels are illuminated by the notions of things (*rationes rerum*). Therefore, they have cognition of things through these notions and not through their own substance.

I respond: That by which an intellect understands is related to the understanding intellect as its form, since a form is that by which an agent acts. But in order for a power to be brought to complete fulfillment by a form, all the things to which that power extends must be contained under that form. Hence, the reason why among corruptible things the form does not bring the matter's potentiality to complete fulfillment is that the matter's potentiality extends to more things than are contained under this or that form.

Now an angel's intellective power extends to the understanding of all things, since the object of an intellect is *being* or *true* in general. But an angel's essence does not include all things within itself, since it is an essence limited to a genus and a species. Rather, it is proper to God's essence, which is unlimited, that it should perfectly comprehend all things within itself, absolutely speaking. And so God alone has cognition of all things through His essence. By contrast, an angel cannot have cognition of all things through his essence; rather, his intellect must be brought to fulfillment by intelligible species in order for him to have cognition of things.

Reply to objection 1: When it is said that an angel has cognition of things through his own nature, the word 'through' is referring not to the medium of cognition, which is a likeness of the thing known,

but rather to the cognitive power that belongs to an angel by his nature.

Reply to objection 2: Just as, according to *De Anima* 3, a sense organ in act is the sensible thing in act—not in the sense that the sentient power is itself the very likeness of the sensible thing that exists in the sense organ, but rather in the sense that something unified is fashioned from the likeness and the organ as from an actuality and a potentiality—so, too, the intellect in act is said to be the thing understood in act—not because the substance of the intellect is itself the very likeness through which it understands, but because that likeness is the form of the intellect. Now to say that in those things which exist without matter, the intellect is the same as what is understood is just to say that the intellect in act is the thing understood in act, since it is by virtue of being immaterial that a given thing is actually being understood.

Reply to objection 3: Both the things that stand lower than an angel and the things that stand higher than him exist in some sense in his essence—not, to be sure, perfectly or according to their proper notion (*secundum propriam rationem*), since an angel's essence is limited and thus distinct from other things through its proper notion, but rather according to a certain general notion (*secundum quendam rationem communem*).

By contrast, in God's essence all things exist perfectly and according to their proper notion (*sunt omnia perfecte et secundum propriam rationem*) as in the first and universal operative power from which proceeds whatever exists, be it proper or common, in any entity. And so God has a proper cognition of all things through His essence, but an angel has only a common cognition of all things through his essence and not a proper cognition.

Article 2

Do angels understand things through intelligible species received from the things themselves?

It seems that angels understand things through intelligible species received from the things themselves:

Objection 1: Everything that is understood is understood by means of some likeness of itself that exists in the one who understands. But a thing's likeness existing in another exists in that other either (a) in the manner of an *exemplar* (*per modum exemplaris*), so that the likeness is a cause of the thing in question, or (b) in the manner of an *image* (*per modum imaginis*), so that it is caused by that thing. Therefore, all the knowledge had by the one who understands must either be a cause of the thing that is understood or be caused by that thing. But an angel's knowledge is not a cause of the things that exist in nature; only God's knowledge is (cf. q. 14, a. 8). Therefore, the intelligible species by means of which the angelic intellect understands things must be received from the things themselves.

Objection 2: An angel's intellectual light is stronger than the light of the active intellect in the soul. But the active intellect's light abstracts intelligible species from phantasms. Therefore, the light of an angel's intellect can likewise abstract intelligible species from sensible things themselves. And so there is nothing to prevent one from claiming that an angel understands things through intelligible species received from the things themselves.

Objection 3: The intelligible species that exist in the intellect are related in exactly the same way to what is present and to what is distant, except to the extent that they are being received from the sensible things themselves. Therefore, if an angel did not understand things by means of intelligible species received from the things themselves, then his cognition would be related in exactly the same way both to nearby things and to distant things, and so local motion would be utterly pointless for him.

But contrary to this: In *De Divinis Nominibus*, chap. 7, Dionysius says, “The angels do not gather their divine knowledge from divisible or sensible things.”

I respond: The intelligible species by which angels understand things are not received from the things themselves; instead, they are connatural to the angels.

For the distinction and ordering among spiritual substances must be thought of in the same way as the distinction and ordering among corporeal substances. Now the highest bodies have a potentiality in their nature that is brought to total fulfillment by their form. By contrast, among lower bodies the potentiality of the matter is not brought to total fulfillment by the form; instead, the matter receives now one form from an agent and now another form. Similarly, the lower intellectual substances, viz., human souls, have an intellectual potentiality that is not naturally fulfilled, but is instead brought to fulfillment gradually in them by their reception of intelligible species from the things themselves. By contrast, the intellectual potentiality of the higher spiritual substances, i.e., angels, is naturally fulfilled through their intelligible species because they have connatural intelligible species for understanding all the things that they can have natural knowledge of.

This same point is also clear from the very mode of being had by substances of these types. For the lower spiritual substances, viz., souls, have *esse* that has an affinity for a body, since they are the forms of bodies. And so because of their mode of being they attain their intellectual fulfillment from bodies and through bodies; otherwise, it would be pointless for them to be united to bodies. By contrast, the higher substances, i.e., angels, are totally unconnected with bodies, since they subsist immaterially and in intelligible *esse*. And so they attain their intellectual fulfillment from the intelligible outpouring through which they receive from God, along with their intellectual nature, intelligible species of the things they have cognition of. Hence, in *Super Genesim ad Litteram 2* Augustine says, “The other beings that are lower than the angels are created in such a way that they first come to exist in a rational creature’s cognition and then come to exist in their own nature.”

Reply to objection 1: The likenesses of creatures in the mind of an angel are received not from the creatures themselves, but from God, who is the cause of creatures and in whom the likenesses of things primarily exist. Hence, in the same book Augustine says, “Just as the idea through which a creature is made exists in the Word of God before the creature itself is made, so too a cognition of that same idea first exists in an intellectual creature, and then there is the creation itself of the creature.”

Reply to objection 2: In going from one endpoint to the other, one must pass through the middle. The *esse* of forms in the imagination, which is without matter but not without material conditions, lies in the middle between (a) the *esse* of the forms that exist in matter and (b) the *esse* of the forms that exist in the intellect through abstraction from matter and from material conditions. Hence, however powerful an angel’s intellect might be, it could not give material forms intelligible *esse* unless it first gave them the *esse* of forms in the imagination. But this is impossible, since, as was explained above (q. 54, a. 5), an angel does not have imagination.

And even if we granted that an angel could abstract intelligible species from material things, he would not abstract them in any case, since he would not need them, given that he has connatural intelligible species.

Reply to objection 3: An angel’s cognition is related in exactly the same way to things that are distant with respect to place and to things that are nearby. But it does not follow that an angel’s local motion is pointless. For he moves to a place not in order to find something out, but in order to do something in that place.

Article 3

Do higher angels understand things through intelligible species that are more universal than those had by lower angels?

It seems not to be the case that higher angels understand things through intelligible species that are more universal than those had by lower angels:

Objection 1: A universal, it seems, is what is abstracted from particulars. But angels do not understand things through intelligible species abstracted from the things themselves. Therefore, one cannot claim that the intelligible species of an angel's intellect are either more or less universal.

Objection 2: What is known in a specific way (*in speciali*) is known more perfectly than what is known in a universal way (*in universali*), since to know in a universal way in some sense lies between potentiality and actuality. Therefore, if higher angels have cognition of things through forms that are more universal than those had by lower angels, it follows that higher angels have a knowledge that is more imperfect than that of lower angels—which is absurd.

Objection 3: One and the same thing cannot be a proper notion (*propria ratio*) of many diverse things. But if a higher angel knows through a single universal form (*per unam formam universalem*) diverse things that a lower angel knows through several more specific forms (*per plures formas speciales*), then it follows that the higher angel is using a single universal form to know diverse things. Therefore, he could not have a proper cognition of both things—which seems absurd.

But contrary to this: In *De Caelesti Hierarchia*, chap. 12, Dionysius says that higher angels have a greater participation in universal knowledge than lower angels do. And the *Liber de Causis* says that higher angels have forms that are more universal.

I respond: The reason that some beings are higher is that they are closer and more similar to the one first being, viz., God. But in God the whole plenitude of intellectual cognition is contained in a single thing, viz., the divine essence, through which God knows all things. Now in created intellects this sort of intellectual plenitude is found in an inferior and less simple way. Hence, what God knows through one thing, lower intellects must know through many; and the lower the intellect is, the more things it knows them through. So, then, to the extent that an angel is higher, he is able to apprehend the universe of intelligible things through fewer intelligible species. And so his forms must be more universal, with each of them extending, as it were, to many intelligible things.

An example of this can be seen to some extent in our own case. For there are some people who cannot grasp an intelligible truth unless it is explained to them piece by piece through separate steps, and this is so because of the weakness of their intellect. By contrast, others who have a stronger intellect can grasp many things on the basis of a few.

Reply to objection 1: It is accidental to a universal that it should be abstracted from singulars; this happens insofar as the intellect that knows it receives its cognition from the things themselves. However, if there is an intellect that does not receive its cognition from the things themselves, then the universal as known by that intellect will not be abstracted from the things, but will in some way exist prior to the things—either (a) prior in the order of *causality*, in the way that the universal notions of things are contained in the Word of God, or at least (b) prior in the order of *nature*, in the way that the universal notions of things exist in the angelic intellect.

Reply to objection 2: There are two senses of 'to know something in a universal way (*in universali*)'.

The first sense, which has to do with *the thing that is known*, is that only the universal nature of that thing is known. And to know something in a universal way in this sense is less perfect. For instance,

someone would know a man less perfectly if all he knew about him was that he is an animal.

The second sense has to do with *the medium of knowing*. And in this sense it is more perfect to know something in a universal way. For if an intellect is able to know proper singulars through a single universal medium, then it is more perfect than an intellect that cannot do this.

Reply to objection 3: One and the same thing cannot be a *precisely equal* proper notion (*propria ratio adaequata*) of many things. However, if it *exceeds* them, then one and the same thing can be taken as a proper notion and likeness of many things.

For instance, in man there is such a thing as universal prudence (*universalis prudentia*) with respect to *all* acts of virtue, and this universal prudence can be taken as a proper notion and likeness of the particular sort of prudence that exists in a lion with respect to acts of magnanimity and of the particular sort of prudence that exists in a fox with respect to acts of caution, etc.

In the same way, because of its excellence, God's essence is taken as a proper notion of each thing, since it contains within itself that by reason of which each thing is assimilated to it in keeping with its proper notion. In the same way, one should say about a universal notion that exists in the mind of an angel that, because of its excellence, many things can be known through it by a proper cognition.