

## QUESTION 173

### The Mode of Prophetic Cognition

Next we have to consider the mode of prophetic cognition. And on this topic there are four questions: (1) Do prophets see the very essence of God? (2) Is prophetic revelation effected by means of the influence of any species, or is it effected solely by the influence of the [prophetic] light? (3) Is prophetic revelation always accompanied by a withdrawal from the senses? (4) Is prophecy always accompanied by a cognition of the things that are being prophesied?

#### Article 1

##### Do prophets see the very essence of God?

It seems that prophets see the very essence of God (*prophetae ipsam Dei essentiam videant*):

**Objection 1:** A Gloss on Isaiah 38:1 (“Set your house in order ...”) says, “Prophets are able to read the very book of God’s foreknowledge, in which all things have been written.” But God’s foreknowledge is His very essence. Therefore, prophets see God’s essence itself.

**Objection 2:** In *De Trinitate* 9 Augustine says, “In that eternal truth, from which all temporal things have been made, we grasp by a mental vision the form according to which we exist and according to which we act.” But among all men, it is the prophets who have the deepest cognition of divine things. Therefore, they especially see God’s essence.

**Objection 3:** Future contingents are foreknown by the prophets with unchangeable truth. But they do not exist as such except in God Himself. Therefore, the prophets see God Himself.

**But contrary to this:** The vision of God’s essence is not laid aside in heaven (*in patria*). But as 1 Corinthians 13:8ff. establishes, prophecy *is* laid aside [in heaven]. Therefore, prophecy is not effected through a vision of God’s essence.

**I respond:** Prophecy implies a divine cognition as being from afar, and this is why it is said of the prophets in Hebrews 11:13 that “they were seeing from far off.” Now those who are in heaven and existing in the state of beatitude do not see things as far removed, but instead see them as close by—this according to Psalm 139:14 (“The upright shall dwell with Your countenance”). Hence, it is clear that prophetic cognition is different from the perfect and complete cognition that will exist in heaven. Thus, prophetic cognition is distinguished from heavenly cognition as the *imperfect* or *incomplete* is distinguished from the *perfect* or *complete* (*sicut imperfectum a perfecto*), and, as is clear from the Apostle in 1 Corinthians 13:8, the former is laid aside when the latter arrives.

Now there have been some who, wanting to distinguish prophetic cognition from the cognition of the blessed in heaven, have claimed that the prophets see God’s essence itself, which they call ‘the mirror of eternity’, yet not in the way in which God’s essence is the object of the blessed in heaven, but instead insofar as the conceptions (*rationes*) of future events exist in God’s essence.

But this is altogether impossible. For God is the object of beatitude with respect to His very essence—this according to what Augustine says in *Confessiones* 5: “He is beatified who knows You, even if he does not know them”—that is, creatures. But it is not possible that an individual should see the conceptions of creatures within the divine essence itself without seeing the divine essence. This is because (a) the divine essence is a conception (*ratio*) of all the things that are made, whereas the ideal conception [of a creature] (*ratio idealis*) does not add anything to the divine essence except a relation to the creature; and also because (b) having a cognition of something *in itself*, i.e., having a cognition of God *as the object of beatitude*, is prior to having a cognition of God *with respect to the conceptions of things that exist within Him*. And so it is not possible for prophets to see God with respect to the conceptions of creatures but not insofar as He is the object of beatitude.

And so one should reply that (a) a prophetic vision is not a vision of God’s essence itself, and that (b) prophets do not see the things that they see in God’s essence itself, but instead see them in likenesses

in accord with the illumination provided by God's light (*sed in quibusdam similitudinibus secundum illustrationem divini luminis*). Hence, in *De Caelesti Hierarchia*, chap. 4 Dionysius is speaking of prophetic visions when he says, "The wise theologian calls that vision divine which is effected by likenesses of things that lack a bodily form and by which [the prophet] is led back from the things seen to divine things." And likenesses of the sort in question, when lit up by the divine light, have more of the character of a mirror than God's essence does. For in a mirror the appearances spring from other things—something that cannot be said of God. By contrast, the mind's being illuminated prophetically in the way in question can be called a mirror insofar as a likeness of the truth of God's foreknowledge springs up in the mind, and because of this it is called a 'mirror of eternity' in the sense that it represents God's foreknowledge—which, as has been explained (q. 172, a. 1), sees all things as present in its eternity.

**Reply to objection 1:** Prophets are said to peruse the book of God's foreknowledge insofar as truth springs up in the prophet's mind from the very foreknowledge of God.

**Reply to objection 2:** A man is said to see, in the First Truth, his own form by which he exists, insofar as a likeness of the First Truth glows in the human mind, and because of this the soul has cognition of itself.

**Reply to objection 3:** By the very fact that future contingents exist in God with unchangeable truth, He is able to imprint a similar cognition on a prophet's mind without its being the case that prophets see God through His essence.

## Article 2

### In a prophetic revelation is it new species of things that are divinely imprinted on the prophet's mind, or only a new light?

It seems that in a prophetic revelation it is not new species of things that are divinely imprinted on the prophet's mind, but only a new light:

**Objection 1:** As Jerome's Gloss on Amos 1:2 claims, the prophets made use of likenesses of things that they were familiar with. But if a prophetic vision were effected by newly imprinted species, then in such a case previous familiarity would not be doing anything. Therefore, it is not the case that any species are newly imprinted on a prophet's soul, but instead there is only a prophetic light.

**Objection 2:** As Augustine claims in *Super Genesim ad Litteram* 12, it is not a vision *in the imagination* that makes for a prophet, but an *intellectual* vision; hence, Daniel 10:1 says, "Understanding must come in a vision." But as Augustine says in the same book, an intellectual vision is effected not by any likenesses, but by the very truth of things. Therefore, it seems that a prophetic revelation is not effected by any species being imprinted.

**Objection 3:** Through the gift of prophecy the Holy Spirit shows a man something that lies beyond the capacity of nature. But a man can form any sort of species whatsoever by his natural power. Therefore, it seems that in a prophetic revelation no species of things are infused, but instead only an intelligible light.

**But contrary to this:** Hosea 12:10 says, "I have multiplied visions for them, and I have been likened in the hands of the prophets." But a multiplication of visions cannot be effected by an intelligible light that is common to every prophetic vision; instead, a multiplication of visions can be effected only by a diversity of species, in accord with which there is likewise a likening. Therefore, it seems that in a prophetic revelation new species of things are imprinted and there is not just an intelligible light.

**I respond:** As Augustine says in *Super Genesim ad Litteram* 12, "A prophetic cognition belongs most of all to the mind." Now there are two things that one has to consider with respect to the human mind's cognition, viz., the *reception* or *representation* of things, and the *judgment* concerning the things

presented.

Now some things are *represented* to the human mind by certain species and, according to the order of nature, species must *first* be presented to the senses (*sensus*), *second* to the imagination (*imaginatio*), and *third* to the passive intellect (*intellectus possibilis*), which is altered by the species that belong to the imagination (*a speciebus phantasmatum*) because of the active intellect's illumination (*secundum illustrationem intellectus agentis*).

Now in the imagination not only are there forms of sensible things as they have been received from the senses, but also forms that have been transmuted in various ways, either because of some corporeal change, as happens in the case of those who are sleeping or demented, or also because the images (*phantasmata*) are, by the command of reason, rearranged in an way that is ordered toward what is to be understood. For just as different understandings are taken from different orderings of the same letters, so, too, different *intelligible species* spring up in the intellect because of different arrangements of *images*.

Now the human mind's *judgment* is effected by the power of the intellectual light. But through the gift of prophecy something is conferred on the human mind beyond what belongs to its natural ability with respect to *both* things, viz., (a) with respect to *judgment*, through the influence of intellectual light, and (b) with respect to the *reception* or *representation* of things, which is effected through species. And human teaching can be likened to prophetic revelation with respect to the *second* thing, but not with respect to the *first* thing. For a man represents to his student various things through spoken signs, but he is unable to give interior illumination in the way that God does. And it is the first of the two things that is the more important in the case of prophecy, since judgment brings cognition to completion (*iudicium est completivum cognitionis*).

And so if the representation of certain things is effected in someone through likenesses in the imagination, as in the case of Pharaoh (Genesis 41:1-7) and in the case of Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 4), or even if it is effected through corporeal likenesses, as in the case of Belshazzar (Daniel 5:5), the individual in question is not to be counted as a prophet unless his mind is illuminated in order to judge. Instead, such an apparition is something imperfect and incomplete in the genus of prophecy (*quiddam imperfectum in genere prophetiae*). This why some have called it a "falling off from prophecy" (*casus prophetiae*), as is likewise the sort of divination that involves dreams (*sicut et divinatio somniorum*).

By contrast, an individual will count as a prophet only if his *intellect* is illuminated in order also to *judge* those things that are *seen* by others in their imagination; this is clear in the case of Joseph, who explained Pharaoh's dream. But as Augustine says in *Super Genesim ad Litteram* 12, "Especially is he a prophet who excels in both respects, so that he both *sees* within his spirit likenesses that signify corporeal things and *understands* them by the power of his mind."

Now sometimes certain sensible forms are divinely represented to the mind of the prophet exteriorly by means of the senses—in the way that, as we read in Daniel 5, Daniel sees the writing on the wall. But sometimes this is done through forms belonging to the imagination or through forms that are in their entirety impressed by God without having been received through the senses—as, for instance, if likenesses of colors were imprinted on the imagination of someone who had been born blind, or if even likenesses received through the senses are divinely put into a certain order, in the way that, as we read in Jeremiah 1:13, Jeremiah sees "a boiling pot, facing away from the north," or even by God's imprinting *intelligible species* on the mind itself, as is clear in the case of those who receive infused knowledge or infused wisdom, like Solomon and the apostles.

Now an intelligible light is sometimes divinely imprinted on the human mind either (a) to judge with discernment what is seen by others, as has already been stated about the case of Joseph and as is clear in the case of the apostles, for whom, as is explained in Luke 24:25, our Lord "opened their minds so that they might understand the Scriptures"—the *interpretation of speech* is relevant here—or, again, (b) to judge with discernment, in accord with divine truth, what a man apprehends in the natural course of things, or, again, (c) to judge truly and efficaciously what is to be done—this according to Isaiah 63:14 ("The spirit of the Lord was his leader").

So, then, it is clear that prophetic revelation is sometimes effected by the influence of an illumination alone and sometimes through species that are either imprinted anew or arranged in a different way.

**Reply to objection 1:** As has been explained, when, in a prophetic revelation, species belonging to the imagination that were previously received from the senses are divinely rearranged in a way congruent with revealing some truth, then antecedent familiarity does contribute something to the likenesses themselves. But this is not the case when the species are totally imprinted from the outside.

**Reply to objection 2:** An intellectual vision is not effected by any corporeal and individualized likenesses; instead, it is effected by an *intelligible* likeness. This is why in *De Trinitate* 9 Augustine says, “The mind has a certain likeness to the species known to it.” To be sure, the intelligible likeness in a prophetic revelation is sometimes immediately imprinted by God, but sometimes it springs from forms in the imagination with the help of the prophetic light. For from these same forms in the imagination a more subtle truth is seen because of the illumination by a higher light.

**Reply to objection 3:** A man is able by his natural power to fashion any forms whatsoever in the imagination by considering these forms in their own right (*absolute huiusmodi formas considerando*). Yet he cannot do this in such a way that these forms are ordered toward representing intelligible truths that exceed the human intellect. Instead, this requires the assistance of a supernatural light.

### Article 3

#### Is a prophetic vision always accompanied by a withdrawal from the senses?

It seems that a prophetic vision is always accompanied by a withdrawal from the senses (*visio prophetica semper fiat cum abstractione a sensibus*):

**Objection 1:** Numbers 12:6 says, “If anyone among you is a prophet of the Lord, I will appear to him in a vision or speak to him through a dream.” But as a Gloss at the beginning of the Psalter says, “A vision that comes through dreams and apparitions comes through things that seem to be said or done. But when certain things *seem* to be said or done without *actually* being said or done, there is a withdrawal from the senses (*est alienatio a sensibus*). Therefore, prophecy is always accompanied by a withdrawal from the senses.

**Objection 2:** When one power is greatly intensified in its operation (*multum intenditur in sua operatione*), another power is withdrawn from its own act. For instance, those who are strongly intent on hearing something do not visually perceive things that are happening around them. But in a prophetic vision the intellect is greatly elevated and intensified in its own act. Therefore, it seems that a prophetic vision is always accompanied by a withdrawal from the senses.

**Objection 3:** It is impossible for the same thing to be turned toward opposite directions at the same time. But in a prophetic vision the mind is turned toward receiving something from what is higher. Therefore, it cannot simultaneously be turned toward things that can be sensed. Therefore, it seems necessary for a prophetic revelation always to be accompanied by a withdrawal from the senses.

**But contrary to this:** 1 Corinthians 14:32 says, “The spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets.” But this could not be the case if a prophet were not in control of himself because he was instead withdrawn from his senses (*sed hoc esse non posset, si propheta non esset sui compos, a sensibus alienatus existens*). Therefore, it seems that a prophetic vision is not accompanied by a withdrawal from the senses.

**I respond:** As has been explained (a. 2), a prophetic revelation is effected in four ways, viz., by *the influence of an intelligible light*, and by *the imprinting of intelligible species*, and by *the imprinting or rearrangement of forms belonging to the imagination*, and by *the expression of sensible forms*:

Now it is clear that there is no withdrawal from the senses when *something is being represented to*

*the mind of a prophet through sensible species*, regardless of whether (a) these species are specially formed by God for this purpose, as with the bush shown to Moses (Exodus 3:2) and the writing shown to Daniel (Daniel 5), or whether (b) they are produced by other causes, yet in such a way that they are ordered by divine providence toward signifying something prophetically, in the way that the Church was signified by Noah's ark. Similarly, it is likewise unnecessary for there to be a withdrawal from the exterior senses because a prophet's mind is *being illuminated by an intelligible light* or *being formed by intelligible species*, since in us the intellect's complete judgment is attained by turning toward sensible things, which, as was established in the First Part (q. 84, a. 6), are the first principles of our cognition.

However, when the prophetic revelation is made by means of *forms that belong to the imagination*, then there has to be a withdrawal from the senses, so that this sort of appearance of images is not referred to things that are being sensed exteriorly. But withdrawing from the senses is sometimes done *completely (perfecte)*, i.e., in such a way that the man is not perceiving anything at all with his senses, and sometimes *incompletely (imperfecte)*, i.e., in such a way that he is perceiving something with his senses but is not fully distinguishing those things that he is perceiving exteriorly from those that he is seeing with his imagination. Hence, in *Super Genesim ad Litteram* 12 Augustine says, "The images of bodies which are fashioned in the spirit are seen in the same way that bodily things are seen through the body, so that at one and the same time a man who is present is seen and another who is absent is seen with the spirit as if with its own eyes." But this sort of withdrawal from the senses is effected in prophets not as accompanied by some sort of natural disorder, as in the case of those who are delirious or demented, but either through some ordinary or natural cause, such as sleep, or through some cause in the soul, such as the strength of an act of contemplating; for instance, we read of Peter in Acts 10:9-10 that while he was praying in the upper room, "he fell into an ecstasy" (*factus est in excessu mentis*) or was carried away by God's power—this in accord with Ezechiel 1:3 ("The hand of the Lord was upon him").

**Reply to objection 1:** This passage is speaking about prophets in whom forms belonging to the imagination were imprinted or rearranged, either in sleep, which is signified by "a dream," or in a waking state, which is signified by "a vision."

**Reply to objection 2:** When the mind is intense in its act with respect to absent things that are removed from the senses, then what follows because of the strength of this intensity is a withdrawal from the senses. But when the mind is intense in its act with respect to dealing with or judging sensible things, then it does not need to be withdrawn from the senses.

**Reply to objection 3:** The movement of the mind in prophecy is not because of the prophet's own power, but because of the power of a higher influence. And so it is not when the prophet's mind is inclined by a higher influence to judge or deal with something having to do with sensible things that there is a withdrawal from the senses, but only when his mind is elevated to contemplate more sublime things.

**Reply to the argument for the contrary:** The spirits of the prophets are said to be subject to the prophets with respect to a prophetic *pronouncement*, and this is what the Apostle is talking about in this passage. For the prophets announce what they see by their own understanding—and not, as Priscilla and Montanus claimed, with perturbed minds in the manner of those who are possessed.

However, in the prophetic *revelation* itself it is instead they themselves who are subject to the spirit of prophecy, i.e., to the prophetic gift.

#### Article 4

##### Do prophets always have cognition of what they are prophesying?

It seems that prophets always have cognition of what they are prophesying:

**Objection 1:** As Augustine says in *Super Genesim ad Litteram* 12, "There was not yet prophecy in

the case of those to whom signs were shown to their spirit through likenesses of corporeal things, unless the mind's role had reached the point where those signs were also understood." But what is understood cannot be such that there is no cognition of it. Therefore, a prophet is not ignorant of what he is prophesying.

**Objection 2:** The light of prophecy is more excellent than the light of natural reason. But if an individual has scientific knowledge by the natural light, then he is not ignorant of what he knows. Therefore, if an individual pronounces certain things by a prophetic light, then he cannot be ignorant of those things.

**Objection 3:** Prophecy is ordered toward illuminating men; hence, 2 Peter 1:19 says, "You have prophetic word, which you do well to attend to as to a light that shines in a dark place." But nothing can illuminate others unless it is illuminated within itself. Therefore, it seems that a prophet is antecedently illuminated in order to have cognition of what he is going to announce to others.

**But contrary to this** is what is said in John 11:51: "[Caiaphas] did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus was going to die for the nation ..." But Caiaphas had no cognition of this. Therefore, not everyone who prophesies has cognition of what he is prophesying.

**I respond:** In prophetic revelation the prophet's mind is moved by the Holy Spirit as an instrument that is deficient in relation to the principal agent. Now a prophet's mind is moved not only to *apprehend* something, but also to *announce* something or to *do* something—sometimes all three of these at once, sometimes two of them, and sometimes only one of them. And each of the three can happen along with some deficiency in cognition.

For instance, when a prophet's mind is moved to think something or apprehend something, sometimes he is led just to apprehend that thing, whereas sometimes he is led further to recognize that these things are being divinely revealed to him. Similarly, the prophet's mind is sometimes also moved to announce something in such a way that he understands what the Holy Spirit means by those words—like David, who in 2 Kings 23:2 said, "The Spirit of the Lord has spoken through me"—whereas sometimes the one whose mind is moved to utter certain words does not understand what the Holy Spirit means by those words, as is clear in the case of Caiaphas in John 11. Similarly, again, when the Holy Spirit moves the mind of an individual to do something, that individual sometimes understands what this deed signifies, as is clear in the case of Jeremiah, who, as we read in Jeremiah 13:1-11, hid his loin cloth in the Euphrates, whereas sometimes the individual does not understand, in the way that the soldiers who divided up Christ's garments did not understand what this signified.

Therefore, when an individual recognizes that he is being moved by the Holy Spirit to think of something or to signify something by words or deeds, this properly involves prophecy. By contrast, when he is being moved but does not recognize this, it is not a case of complete or perfect prophecy (*non est perfecta prophetia*) but instead a sort of prophetic impulse (*quidam instinctus propheticus*). Yet notice that, as has been explained, since a prophet's mind is a deficient instrument, even genuine prophets do not have cognition of everything that the Holy Spirit means by what they see or by their words or, again, by their deeds.

**Reply to objection 1 and objection 2 and objection 3:** From this the reply to the arguments is clear. For the initial arguments are speaking of genuine prophets, whose minds are illuminated completely by God.