

QUESTION 4

God's Perfection

Now that we have examined God's simplicity, we must consider the perfection of God Himself. And since each thing is called good to the extent that it is perfect, we must first talk about God's perfection and then about His goodness. On the first topic there are three questions: (1) Is God perfect? (2) Is God totally perfect, having within Himself the perfections of all things? (3) Can creatures be said to be similar to God?

Article 1

Is God perfect?

It seems that being perfect does not befit God:

Objection 1: That which is perfect is said to be made, as it were, to completion. But *being made* is not compatible with God. Therefore, neither is *being perfect*.

Objection 2: God is the first principle of things. But the principles of things seem to be imperfect; for example, the seed (*semen*) is a principle of animals and plants. Therefore, God is not perfect.

Objection 3: It was shown above (q. 3, a. 4) that God's essence is *esse* itself. But *esse* itself seems to be the least perfect thing, since it is the most common and receives all other things as additions. Therefore, God is not perfect.

But contrary to this: Matthew 5:48 says: "Be you therefore perfect, as also your heavenly Father is perfect."

I respond: As the Philosopher tells us in *Metaphysics* 12, certain ancient philosophers—viz., the Pythagoreans and Speusippus—did not attribute *best* and *most perfect* to the first principle. The reason is that the ancients were thinking of the material principle alone, and the first material principle is the least perfect. For since matter as such is in potentiality, the first material principle must have maximal potentiality and thus be maximally imperfect.

However, God is posited not as the first *material* principle, but as the first principle in the genus of *efficient* causes; and the first efficient principle has to be absolutely perfect. For just as matter as such is in potentiality, so an agent as such has actuality. Hence, the first acting principle must have maximal actuality and, as a result, must be maximally perfect. For something is said to be perfect to the extent that it has actuality, since what is called perfect is that which lacks nothing according to the mode of its perfection.

Reply to Objection 1: As Gregory says: "In stammering to the extent we can, we re-echo the high things of God. For that which is not made cannot properly be called complete (*perfectum*)."

However, because among the things that are made something is called perfect when it is brought from potentiality into actuality, the term 'perfect' is transferred to signify anything that is not lacking in actuality, whether or not it has this condition by virtue of having been made.

Reply to Objection 2: Material principles, which we find to be imperfect, cannot be first absolutely speaking, but instead are preceded by another principle that is perfect. Thus, even though the seed (*semen*) is a principle of an animal generated out of semen, it is nonetheless preceded by the animal or plant from which it is derived. For prior to anything that exists in potentiality, there must be something in actuality, since a being in potentiality is not brought into actuality except by some being that is already in actuality.

Reply to Objection 3: *Esse* itself is the most perfect of all things, since it is related to all things as their actuality. For nothing has actuality except insofar as it exists; hence, *esse* itself is the actuality of

all things and especially of their forms. For this reason, *esse* is related to other things not in the way that what receives is related to what is received, but rather in the way that what is received is related to what receives. For when I talk about the *esse* of a man or the *esse* of a horse or the *esse* of anything else, it is the *esse* itself that is being thought of as something formal and received, and not that to which the *esse* belongs.

Article 2

Do the perfections of all things exist in God?

It seems that it is not the case that the perfections of all things exist in God:

Objection 1: As has been shown (q. 3, a. 7), God is simple. But the perfections of things are many and diverse. Therefore, it is not the case that all the perfections of things exist in God.

Objection 2: Opposites cannot exist in the same thing. But the perfections of things are opposites, since each species is perfected through its specific difference, and the differences by which the genus is divided and the species constituted are opposites. Therefore, since opposites cannot simultaneously exist in the same thing, it seems that it is not the case that all the perfections of things exist in God.

Objection 3: A living thing is more perfect than a [mere] being, and one who is wise is more perfect than one who is merely alive. Therefore, it is likewise the case that *living* is more perfect than *being* and that *being wise* is more perfect than *living*. But God's essence is simply to be (*esse*). Therefore, He does not have within himself the perfection of being alive or the perfection of being wise or other perfections of this sort.

But contrary to this: In *De Divinis Nominibus*, chap. 5, Dionysius says that God in His oneness already has all things.

I respond: The perfections of all things exist in God. And He is said to be totally perfect because, as the Commentator puts it in *Metaphysics* 5, He does not lack any type of nobility that is found in any genus.

This can be thought of in two ways.

First of all, the same perfection that is found in an effect must be found in the cause either (a) according to the same nature when the agent is a univocal cause, as when a man generates a man, or (b) in a more eminent mode when the agent is an equivocal cause—for example, in the sun there is a likeness of the things that are generated through the sun's power. For it is clear that the effect preexists virtually in its agent cause, and that to preexist in the agent cause's power is to preexist in a more perfect, rather than less perfect, mode—even though to preexist in the potentiality of a *material* cause is to preexist in a less perfect mode, given that matter as such is imperfect. In contrast, an agent as such is perfect. Therefore, since God is the first efficient cause of things, the perfections of all things must preexist in God in a more eminent mode. Dionysius touches on this line of reasoning in *De Divinis Nominibus*, chap. 5, when he says of God, "It is not that He is this thing and not that thing; rather, He is all things as the cause of all."

Second, given what was shown above (q. 3, a. 4), viz., that God is *esse* itself subsisting *per se*, it must be the case that He contains within Himself the total perfection of being. For it is clear that if a hot thing does not have the whole perfection of a hot thing, this is because its heat is not participated to a perfect degree; but if the heat subsisted *per se*, it would not be able to lack any of the power of heat. Hence, since God is subsistent *esse* itself, he cannot lack any of the perfection of *esse*. But the perfections of all things are pertinent to the perfection of *esse*, since they are perfect to the extent that

they have *esse* in some mode or other. So it follows that there is no entity whose perfection God lacks. Dionysius touches on this line of reasoning as well in *De Divinis Nominibus*, chap. 5, when he says, “God does not exist in any particular way; instead, He already has within Himself, simply and without qualification, the whole of *esse* in a uniform way.” And later he adds, “He is *esse* for all subsistent things.”

Reply to Objection 1: As Dionysius puts it in *De Divinis Nominibus*, chap. 5, “Just as the sun, while itself existing as a unity and shining uniformly, has within itself in a uniform way many different sensible substances and qualities, so too, *a fortiori*, all things must preexist by a sort of natural union in the cause of all things.” And so things that in themselves are diverse and opposite preexist as one in God without any detriment to His simplicity.

Reply to Objection 2: The same answer applies to this objection.

Reply to Objection 3: As Dionysius says in the same chapter, even though, when they are considered as conceptually distinct from one another, *esse* itself is more perfect than life and life itself is more perfect than wisdom itself, nonetheless, a living thing is more perfect than a mere being, since a living thing is also a being; and someone who is wise is both a being and a living thing. Therefore, even if some being does not include either *living* or *wise* within itself—for that which participates in *esse* need not participate in every mode of being—nonetheless, God’s very *esse* does include within itself both life and wisdom. For no perfection of being can be lacking in one who is subsistent *esse* itself.

Article 3

Can a creature be similar to God?

It seems that no creature can be similar to God:

Objection 1: Psalm 85:8 says, “There is none among the gods like unto You, O Lord.” But it is the more excellent of all creatures that are being called gods here by a kind of participation. Therefore, it is even less the case that other creatures can be called similar to God.

Objection 2: Similarity is a relation. But there is no relation among things that belong to diverse genera. Therefore, there is no similarity among them; for instance, we do not say that sweetness is similar to whiteness. But no creature belongs to the same genus as God, since, as was shown above (q. 3, a. 5), God is not in a genus. Therefore, no creature is similar to God.

Objection 3: It is things that agree in form that are called similar. But nothing agrees in form with God, since nothing except God is such that its essence is its very *esse*. Therefore, no creature can be similar to God.

Objection 4: In things that are similar, the similarity is mutual. For what is similar is similar to what is similar to it. Therefore, if a creature is similar to God, then God will be similar to some creature. But this is contrary to Isaiah 40:18: “To whom then have you likened God?”

But contrary to this: Genesis 1:26 says, “Let us make man to our image and likeness,” and 1 John 3:2 says: “When He shall appear we shall be like to Him.”

I respond: Since similarity has to do with agreement or commonality in form, there are many kinds of similarity corresponding to the many ways of sharing in a form.

Some things are called similar because they share in the same form according to the same nature and the same mode. These things are called not just similar but equal in their similarity. For instance, two equally white things are called similar in whiteness. This is perfect similarity.

In a second way, things are called similar because they share a form according to the same nature

but not according to the same mode, with one having more and the other less. For example, a thing that is less white is called similar to a thing that is more white. This is imperfect similarity.

In a third way, things are called similar when they share in the same form, but not according to the same nature. This is clear in the case of non-univocal agents. For since every agent, as an agent, effects what is similar to itself and yet acts as a unit in accord with its own form, it must be the case that in the effect there is some likeness of the agent's form. Therefore, if the agent is contained in the same species as its effect, there will be a similarity in form between the maker and what is made, as when a man generates a man. But if the agent is not contained in the same species, then there will be a similarity, but not a similarity according to the same nature of a species. For instance, the things generated by the sun's power bear some similarity to the sun, but only to the extent that they receive the form of the sun according to a similarity of genus and not according to a similarity of species. Therefore, if the agent is not contained in any genus, its effects will bear a still more remote similarity to the form of the agent—not according to the nature of either the genus or the species, but in such a way that they participate in a similarity according to some sort of analogy, given that *esse* itself is common to all things. And this is the way in which the things that come from God, insofar as they are beings, are assimilated to Him as the first and universal principle of all being.

Reply to Objection 1: As Dionysius says in *De Divinis Nominibus*, chap. 9, when Sacred Scripture says that something is not similar to God, “this is not contrary to something's being assimilated to Him. For the same things are both similar and dissimilar to God—similar insofar as they imitate Him to the extent that it is possible to imitate Him who is not perfectly imitable, but dissimilar insofar as they fall short of their cause.” And they do not fall short just with respect to intensity and remission, in the way that a less white thing falls short of something that is more white; rather, they fall short because there is no agreement either according to species or according to genus.

Reply to Objection 2: God stands to creatures not as a thing of a diverse genus stands to another, but rather as that which is outside of every genus and the principle of all genera.

Reply to Objection 3: A creature is said to be similar to God not because they share in a form according to the same nature of genus or species, but only because of an analogy, viz., insofar as God is a being through His essence and the others are beings through participation.

Reply to Objection 4: Even though there is a sense in which it may be conceded that a creature is similar to God, one must in no way concede that God is similar to a creature. For, as Dionysius points out in *De Divinis Nominibus*, chap. 9, “Things that belong to the same order are susceptible to a mutual similarity, but not a cause and that which is caused.” For instance, we say that an image is similar to a man, but not conversely. Likewise, in some sense it can be said that a creature is similar to God, but not that God is similar to a creature.