

QUESTION 15

God's Ideas

Now that we have considered God's knowledge, we have to consider His ideas. On this topic there are three questions: (1) Are there divine ideas? (2) Is there more than one divine idea, or just one? (3) Are there ideas of all the things that are known by God?

Article 1

Are there divine ideas?

It seems that there are no divine ideas (*ideae*):

Objection 1: In *De Divinis Nominibus*, chap. 7, Dionysius says that God does not know things by means of an idea. But ideas are posited for no other reason than that things might be known through them. Therefore, there are no divine ideas.

Objection 2: As was explained above (q. 14, a. 5), God knows all things in Himself. But He does not know Himself through an idea. Therefore, neither does He know things distinct from Himself through an idea.

Objection 3: An idea is posited as a principle of knowing and a principle of acting. But God's essence is a sufficient principle of knowing all things and of effecting all things. Therefore, there is no need to posit ideas.

But contrary to this: In *83 Quaestiones* Augustine says, "The power in ideas is so great that if they were not understood, no one could be wise."

I respond: It is necessary to posit ideas in God's minds.

For 'idea' (ιδέα) in Greek corresponds to 'form' (*forma*) in Latin. Hence, it is through ideas that the forms of other things are understood outside of the existent things themselves. Now outside of the existent thing itself, the form of a thing can have two roles: either (a) as an exemplar of the thing of which it is called the form, or (b) as a principle of the cognition of the thing, since the forms of knowable things are said to exist within the knower. And it is necessary to posit the ideas for both of these roles.

This is clear as follows: In all things that are not generated by chance, the form has to be the goal of the generation of a thing. But an agent would not be acting for the sake of a form unless a likeness of the form existed within it. This can happen in two ways. For in the case of some agents, the form of the thing to be effected preexists in the agent according to its natural *esse*—viz., in those agents that act through their nature, as when a man generates a man or a fire generates a fire. However, in the case of other agents, the form preexists in the agent according to its intelligible *esse*—viz., in those agents that act through their understanding, as when a likeness of a house preexists in the mind of the builder. And this likeness can be called an idea of the house, since the builder intends to assimilate the house to the form that he mentally conceives.

Therefore, since, as will become clear below (q. 47, a. 1), the world was not made by chance, but was instead made by God acting through His understanding, there has to be in God's mind a form in the likeness of which the world was made. And this is what the nature of an idea consists in.

Reply to objection 1: God does not understand things according to an idea that exists outside of Himself. This is also the line of reasoning by which Aristotle disproves Plato's opinion about ideas, insofar as Plato posited the ideas as existing *per se* and not in an intellect.

Reply to objection 2: Even though God understands both Himself and other things through His essence, His essence is an efficient principle of the other things, but not of Himself. And so God's essence has the nature of an idea insofar as it is related to other things, but not insofar as it is related to

God Himself.

Reply to objection 3: It is according to His essence that God is a likeness of all things. Therefore, an idea in God is nothing other than God's essence.

Article 2

Is there more than one divine idea?

It seems that there is not more than one divine idea:

Objection 1: An idea in God is His essence. But there is only one essence of God. Therefore, there is likewise only one idea.

Objection 2: Just as an idea is a principle of knowing and acting, so too are wisdom and art. But in God there is not more than one wisdom or more than one art. Therefore, neither is there more than one idea.

Objection 3: Someone might reply that ideas are multiplied according to their relations to diverse creatures.

Against this: The plurality of ideas exists from eternity. Therefore, if there is more than one idea and creatures are temporal, then what is temporal will be a cause of what is eternal.

Objection 4: The relations in question are real relations either in the creatures alone or in God as well.

If they are real relations in the creatures alone, then the plurality of ideas will not exist from eternity, given that the ideas are multiplied only according to relations of this sort.

On the other hand, if the relations really exist in God, then it follows that there is some real plurality in God distinct from the plurality of the divine Persons. But this is contrary to Damascene, who says that in God all things are one except for "the ungeneration, the generation, and the procession." Therefore, it is not the case that there is more than one divine idea.

But contrary to this: In *83 Questions* Augustine says, "The ideas are certain principal forms or natures of things, stable and unchangeable. For they themselves are not formed, and because of this they are eternal and always remain the same, since they are contained in God's understanding. But even though they themselves have no beginning and no end, it is according to them that everything that can have a beginning and an end, and everything that does have a beginning and an end, is said to be formed."

I respond: It is necessary to posit more than one idea.

To see this clearly, note that in the case of every effect, it is the ultimate end that is properly intended by the principal agent—e.g., the order of the army is what is intended by the general. Now as is clear from the Philosopher in *Metaphysics* 12, the highest good there is among things is the good of the order of the universe. Therefore, the order of the universe is properly intended by God, and this order does not emerge *per accidens* from a succession of agents—in the way suggested by some who claimed that God created only the first creature, and that this creature created the second creature, and so on until a great multitude of things was produced. According to this opinion, God would have an idea only of the first created thing.

However, if it is the very order of the universe that has been created *per se* by Him and was intended by Him, then He must have an idea of the order of the universe. But one cannot have a conception of a whole without also having proper notions of the things out of which the whole is constituted. For instance, a builder is unable to conceive a likeness of a house without having a proper

conception of each of its parts. So, then, it must be the case that in God's mind there are proper conceptions of all things. Accordingly, in *83 Quaestiones* Augustine says, "Each thing is created by God through its own proper conception." Hence, it follows that there are many ideas in God's mind.

Moreover, it is easy to see that this does not conflict with God's simplicity, as long as one keeps in mind that the idea of a thing that is to be effected exists in the agent's mind as *that which* is understood—and not as a species *by which* something is understood, i.e., a form that makes the intellect to be in act. For the form of a house in the builder's mind is something that is understood by him and in whose likeness he forms the house in the relevant matter. But it is not contrary to God's simplicity that He should understand many things; rather, what would be contrary to His simplicity is that His intellect should be formed by many species. Hence, the many ideas exist in God's mind as ideas that are understood by Him.

This can be seen as follows: He knows His own essence perfectly. Hence, He knows it according to every way in which it can be known. But it can be known not only as it exists in itself, but also insofar as it can be participated in by creatures according to one or another mode of likeness. But each creature has its own proper species insofar as it participates in some way in a likeness of God's essence. So, then, insofar as God knows His own essence as imitable in this way by such a creature, He knows it as a proper conception and idea of this creature. And the same holds for the other creatures. And so it is clear that God understands the many proper natures of many things—and these are the many ideas.

Reply to objection 1: 'Idea' denominates God's essence not insofar as it is an essence, but insofar as it is a likeness or conception of this or that thing. Hence, since there are many conceptions understood by the one essence, they are called many ideas.

Reply to objection 2: Wisdom and art are assigned as that *by which* God understands, whereas an idea is assigned as *that which* God understands. But by one wisdom and art God understands many things, not only insofar as they exist in themselves, but also insofar as they are understood—and the latter is what it is to understand many ideas of things. Similarly, if a craftsman understands the form of a house as it exists in matter, he is said to understand the house, whereas if he understands the form of a house as something that he is thinking about, then by the very fact that he understands that he is understanding it, he understands an idea or conception of a house. But God not only understands many things through His essence, but also understands that He understands many things through His essence. But this is what it is to understand many ideas of things—or, alternatively, this is what it is for many ideas to exist in His intellect as things that are understood.

Reply to objection 3: Relations of the sort by which ideas are multiplied are caused not by the things but by the divine intellect as it compares its essence to things.

Reply to objection 4: The relations that multiply ideas exist not in created things, but in God. However, they are not real relations like the relations by which the Persons are distinguished; instead, they are relations that are understood by God.

Article 3

Are there ideas of all the things that are known by God?

It seems that it is not the case that there are ideas of all the things known by God:

Objection 1: The idea of evil does not exist in God, since otherwise it would follow that evil exists in God. But evils are known by God. Therefore, it is not the case that there are ideas of all the things that are known by God.

Objection 2: As was explained above (q. 14, a. 9), God knows those things that do not exist and will not exist and have not existed. But there are no ideas of such things, since, as Dionysius says in *De Divinis Nominibus*, chap. 5, “The exemplars are divine volitions that are determinative of things and effect them. Therefore, it is not the case that there are ideas in God of all the things that are known by Him.

Objection 3: God knows primary matter, which cannot have an idea because it has no form. Therefore, the same conclusion follows as before.

Objection 4: It is clear that God knows not only species, but also genera and singular things and accidents. But, as Augustine explains, there are no ideas of genera, singular things, and accidents according to Plato, who was the first to introduce the ideas. Therefore, it is not the case that there are ideas in God of all the things that are known by Him.

But contrary to this: As is clear from Augustine, the ideas are relations that exist in God’s mind. But God has proper conceptions of all the things He knows. Therefore, He has an idea for each thing that He knows.

I respond: Since Plato posited the ideas as principles both of the cognition of things and of their generation, an idea as posited in God’s mind has both these roles.

Insofar as it is a principle for effecting things, an idea is called an *exemplar* and pertains to practical cognition, whereas insofar as it is a cognitive principle, it is properly called a *conception (ratio)* and can also pertain to speculative knowledge.

Therefore, insofar as an idea is an exemplar, it is related to all the things that are made by God at some time or other. On the other hand, insofar as it is cognitive, it is related (a) to all the things that are known by God, even if they are never made, and (b) to all the things that are known by God according to a proper conception and insofar as they are known by Him in a speculative way.

Reply to objection 1: Evil is known by God not through a proper conception, but rather through the conception of the good. And so evil does not have an idea in God, either insofar as an idea is an exemplar or insofar as an idea is a conception.

Reply to objection 2: God does not have a practical cognition—except just virtually—of those things that do not exist and will not exist and have not existed. Hence, with respect to those things there is no idea in God insofar as ‘idea’ signifies an exemplar; instead, there is an idea of them only insofar as ‘idea’ signifies a conception.

Reply to objection 3: According to some authors, Plato posited uncreated matter and so claimed that there is no idea of matter but that the idea is a co-cause with matter. However, since we ourselves posit a matter created by God and yet not without form, matter has, to be sure, an idea in God, but not an idea distinct from the idea of a composite thing. For matter does not of itself have *esse* and is not of itself knowable.

Reply to objection 4: Insofar as ‘idea’ signifies an exemplar, genera cannot have an idea distinct from the idea of a species, since a genus is never effected except in some species.

The same holds for accidents that are inseparably connected with a subject, since they are effected simultaneously with their subject. However, accidents that are added to a subject have a special idea. For through the form of a house the craftsman makes all the accidents that are connected with the house from the beginning, but he effects through another form those things that are added to the house once it has already been built, e.g., pictures or other such things.

On the other hand, individuals, according to Plato, do not have an idea distinct from the idea of their species, both because (a) singular things are individuated by matter, which (some claim) he took to be uncreated and a co-cause with the idea, and also because (b) nature’s intention has to do with the species, and it produces individuals only in order to preserve the species in them.

However, as will be explained below (q. 22, a. 2), God's providence extends not only to species but also to singular things.