

QUESTION 17

Falsity

Next we must inquire into falsity. And on this topic there are four questions: (1) Does falsity exist in things? (2) Does falsity exist in the senses? (3) Does falsity exist in the intellect? (4) How are the true and the false related?

Article 1

Does falsity exist in things?

It seems that falsity does not exist in things:

Objection 1: In the *Soliloquia* Augustine says, “If the true is that which is, one may infer—no matter who objects—that the false does not exist anywhere.”

Objection 2: The term ‘false’ derives from *fallere*, to deceive. But in *De Vera Religione* Augustine says that things do not deceive “because they do not manifest anything other than their own species.” Therefore, the false is not found in things.

Objection 3: As was explained above (q. 16, a. 1), ‘true’ is predicated of things because of their relation to God’s intellect. But each thing, insofar as it exists, imitates God. Therefore, each thing is true without any falsity. And so no entity is false.

But contrary to this: In *De Vera Religione* Augustine says, “Each body is a true body and a false unity,” since it merely imitates unity and is not a unity. But each entity imitates God’s goodness and falls short of that goodness. Therefore, falsity exists in all things.

I respond: Since the true and the false are opposed to one another, and since opposites are related to the same subject, falsity has to be looked for first where truth is primarily found, i.e., in the intellect.

Now neither truth nor falsity is found in the things except because of their relation to an intellect. And since each thing is named absolutely speaking in light of what belongs to it *per se*, whereas it is named only in a derivative way in light of what belongs to it *per accidens*, a thing can be called false absolutely speaking because of its relation to an intellect on which it depends [for its *esse*] and to which it is related *per se*, whereas in relation to other intellects to which it is related *per accidens* it can be called false only in a derivative way.

Now natural things depend on *God’s intellect* in the way that artifacts depend on a human intellect. Artifacts are called false absolutely speaking and in themselves insofar as they are defective in relation to the form of the relevant craft; thus, a craftsman is said to fashion a false work when that work is defective in relation to the operation associated with the craft. So in the case of things that depend on God, falsity cannot be found in relation to God’s intellect; for whatever accrues to things proceeds from the ordination of God’s intellect—except perhaps in the lone case of voluntary agents, who have it within their power to withdraw themselves from the ordination of God’s intellect. This is what the evil of sin consists in. Accordingly, in the Scriptures sins themselves are called falsehoods and lies (Psalm 4:3: “Why do you love vanity, and seek after lying?”)—just as, on the opposite side, virtuous action is called the ‘truth of life’ insofar it is subject to the order of God’s intellect (John 3:21: “He that does truth comes to the light.”).

On the other hand, as regards the order of *our intellect*, to which they are related *per accidens*, natural things can be called false not absolutely speaking, but in a derived sense. This happens in two ways:

In one way, things are called false because of the nature of the thing signified, so that what is signified or represented by a false assertion or conception is said to be false in the things. In this sense,

each thing can be said to be false with respect to what does not exist in it—as, for instance, if we were to call a diameter a false commensurable, as the Philosopher says in *Metaphysics* 5, or, as Augustine says in *Soliloquia*, “The tragic actor is a false Hector.” On the other hand, each thing can also be called true with respect to that which belongs to it.

In the second way, things are called false in the manner of a cause. Accordingly, a thing is called false when it is prone to cause a false belief about itself. Since it is natural for us to judge things by their external appearances, given that our cognition begins with the senses, which have to do *per se* and primarily with exterior accidents, it follows that things which resemble other things in their exterior accidents are said to be false as regards those other things. For instance, gall is false honey, and tin is false silver. Accordingly, in *Soliloquia* Augustine says, “We call things false when we apprehend them as very similar.” And in *Metaphysics* 5 the Philosopher says, “If a thing is prone to appear such as it is not, or to appear as what it is not, then it is called false.” In this sense a man can be called false to the extent that he is enamored with false beliefs and assertions—not, however, because he is able to formulate false beliefs and assertions, since in that case, as *Metaphysics* 5 says, even those who are wise and knowledgeable would be called false.

Reply to objection 1: In relation to an intellect, a thing is called true with respect to what it is and false with respect to what it is not. Hence, as *Soliloquia* 2 says, “The true tragic actor is a false Hector.” So to the extent that a sort of non-being is found in things which exist, so too a certain type of falsity is found in things that exist.

Reply to objection 2: Things deceive us *per accidens* rather than *per se*. For they provide an occasion for falsity in that they bear a resemblance to things whose reality they do not have.

Reply to objection 3: Entities are not called false in relation to *God’s* intellect, which would be for them to be false absolutely speaking. Rather, they are called false in relation to *our* intellect, which is for them to be false in a derived sense.

Reply to argument for the contrary: A defective likeness or representation brings with it the nature of falsity only insofar as it presents an occasion for a false belief. Hence, it is not the case that whenever there is a resemblance, the thing is called false. Rather, a thing is called false whenever the resemblance is apt to effect a false belief—not in all cases, but for the most part.

Article 2

Does falsity exist in the senses?

It seems that falsity does not exist in the senses:

Objection 1: In *De Vera Religione* Augustine says, “If all the bodily senses testify to the way in which they are affected, I do not know what more we should demand of them.” So it seems that we are not deceived by the senses. And so falsity does not exist in the senses.

Objection 2: In *Metaphysics* 4 the Philosopher says, “Falsity is proper not to the senses, but to the imagination.”

Objection 3: The true and the false exist only in propositions (*complexa*) and not in simple terms (*incomplexa*). But it does not pertain to the senses to compose and divide. Therefore, falsity does not exist in the senses.

But contrary to this: In the *Soliloquia* Augustine says, “It appears that we err in all the senses because of deceptive resemblances.”

I respond: Falsity should be looked for in the senses only to the extent that truth exists in them.

Now as was explained above (q. 16, a. 2), truth does not exist in the senses in such a way that the senses themselves have cognition of the true; rather, truth exists in them insofar as they have a true apprehension of sensible things. This happens to the extent that they apprehend the things as those things are. Hence, falsity can exist in the senses to the extent that they apprehend or assess things to be otherwise than those things are.

Now the senses know things insofar as a likeness of the things exists in them. But there are three ways in which a likeness of things exists in the senses:

In the first way, the likeness exists in them primarily and *per se*. This is the way in which a likeness of colors and other proper sensibles exists in the sense of sight.

In the second way, the likeness exists in them *per se* but not primarily. This is the way in which a likeness of shape or of magnitude or of the other common sensibles exists in the sense of sight.

In the third way, the likeness exists in them neither primarily nor *per se*, but rather *per accidens*. This is the way in which the likeness of a man exists in the sense of sight—not insofar as he is a man, but insofar as a thing of this particular color happens to be a man.

Now with respect to the proper sensibles the senses do not have a false cognition except *per accidens* and in just a few cases, viz., when, because a sense organ is not properly disposed, it does not receive the sensible form in the right way—just as other things that are acted upon likewise receive an agent’s impression in a defective way because they are not properly disposed. Thus, it is because of a disorder in the tongue that sweet things seem bitter to sick people.

On the other hand, as regards the common sensibles and the things that are sensed *per accidens*, there can be a false assessment even in properly disposed senses. For the senses are not related directly to these things, but are related to them *per accidens* or as a consequence of their being related to other things.

Reply to objection 1: The senses are such that their being affected is their very sensing. Hence, if the senses testify to the way in which they are affected, it follows that we are not deceived in judging them to be sensing something. However, because the senses are sometimes affected in a way different from the way the thing is, it follows that they sometimes testify to us differently from the way the thing is. And because of this we are deceived by the senses with respect to a given thing, but not with respect to the sensing itself.

Reply to objection 2: Falsity is said not to be proper to the senses because the senses are not deceived with respect to their proper object. Hence, in another and clearer translation the passage reads as follows: “The sensing of a proper sensible is not false.”

On the other hand, falsity is attributed to the imagination to the extent that it presents the likeness of a thing even when it is absent. Hence, when someone turns to the likeness of a thing as if to the thing itself, then falsity results from such an apprehension. Hence, in *Metaphysics* 5 the Philosopher also says that shadows and pictures and dreams are called false, insofar as they are not grounded in the things to which they have a likeness.

Reply to objection 3: This argument proves that falsity does not exist in the senses in the same way that it exists in a power that has cognition of the true and the false.

Article 3

Does falsity exist in the intellect?

It seems that falsity does not exist in the intellect:

Objection 1: In 83 *Quaestiones* Augustine says, “Whoever is deceived has no understanding of

that about which he is deceived.” But the false is said to exist in a cognition insofar as we are deceived by that cognition. Therefore, falsity does not exist in the understanding (*intellectus*).

Objection 2: *De Anima* 3 says that the understanding is always correct. Therefore, falsity does not exist in the understanding (*intellectus*).

But contrary to this: *De Anima* 3 says, “The true and the false exist where there is a composition of thoughts.” But the composition of thoughts occurs in the intellect. Therefore, the true and the false exist in the intellect.

I respond: Just as a thing has *esse* through its proper form, so a cognitive power has its cognition through a likeness of the thing that is known. Now a natural thing is not defective with respect to the *esse* that belongs to it through its form, but it can be defective with respect to certain things that are accidental to or follow upon its form. For instance, a man might be defective with respect to having two feet, but not with respect to being a man. In the same way, a cognitive power is not defective in its cognition with respect to that thing by whose likeness it is informed, but it can be defective with respect to what follows upon or is accidental to that likeness. This is similar to the claim, made above (a. 2), that the sense of sight is not deceived with respect to a proper sensible, but might be deceived with respect to (a) the common sensibles that are consequent upon a proper sensible or (b) things that are sensible *per accidens*.

Now the intellect is informed by a likeness of a thing’s ‘what-ness’ (*quidditas*) in just the way that the senses are directly informed by a likeness of the proper sensibles. Hence, just as the senses are not deceived about proper sensibles, so too the intellect is not deceived about a thing’s ‘what-ness’. However, in its composing and dividing the intellect can be deceived when it attributes to a thing whose ‘what-ness’ it understands something which does not follow upon that ‘what-ness’ or which is opposed to it. For the intellect is related to a judgment about such things in the same way that the senses are related to judgments about common sensibles or about things that are sensible *per accidens*. Still, we must keep in mind this difference, explained above (q. 16, a. 2) for the case of truth: Falsity can exist in the intellect not only because the intellect’s cognition is false, but also because the intellect has a cognition of falsity; however, as has been explained (a. 2), falsity does not exist in the senses as something that the senses have cognition of.

However, even though falsity exists *per se* in the intellect only with respect to the intellect’s composition, there can also be falsity *per accidens* in the operation of the intellect by which it knows a thing’s real definition, since the intellect’s composition may get mixed in with this operation. This can happen in two ways:

In the first way, it happens when the intellect attributes the definition of one thing to some other thing—for instance, if it should attribute the definition of a circle to a man. Hence, the definition of one thing is false of another thing.

In the second way, it happens insofar as the intellect puts together as parts of a definition things that cannot go together. For in such a case the definition is false in itself and not just with respect to some entity or other. For instance, if the intellect formulated a definition such as *rational quadrupedal animal*, then it would be false in formulating such a definition because it would be false if it formulated the proposition ‘Some rational animal is a quadruped’. It is for this reason that the intellect cannot be false in its cognition of a simple ‘what-ness’; rather, either it is true or else it understands nothing at all.

Reply to objection 1: The ‘what-ness’ of a thing is the proper object of our understanding (*intellectus*), and for this reason we are properly said to understand something when, reducing it to its real definition, we make a judgement about it of the sort that occurs in demonstrations, in which there is no falsity. This is how to interpret Augustine’s claim that whoever is deceived does not understand that about which he is deceived. However, his claim should not be interpreted to mean that no one is deceived in any operation of the intellect.

Reply to objection 2: The understanding is always correct to the extent that it is the understanding of principles about which no one is deceived—and this for the very same reason that no one is deceived about the ‘what-ness’ of a thing. For the principles that are known *per se* are those which are such that they are known as soon as their terms are understood, because the predicate is posited in the definition of the subject.

Article 4

Are the true and the false contraries?

It seems that the true and the false are not contraries:

Objection 1: The true and the false are opposed as that which is and that which is not; for, as Augustine says, “The true is that which is.” But that which is and that which is not are not opposed as contraries. Therefore, the true and the false are not contraries.

Objection 2: One of two contraries does not exist in the other. But the false exists in the true; for as Augustine says in the *Soliloquia*, “The tragic actor would not be a false Hector, if he were not a true tragic actor.” Therefore, the true and the false are not contraries.

Objection 3: In God there is no contrariety, since, as Augustine says in *De Civitate Dei* 12, nothing is contrary to God’s substance. But falsity is opposed to God, since in Scripture an idol is called a lie (Jeremiah 8:5: “They have laid hold on lying”; Gloss: “that is, idols”). Therefore, the true and the false are not contraries.

But contrary to this: In *Perihermenias* 2 the Philosopher claims that a false belief is contrary to a true belief.

I respond: The true and the false are opposed as contraries—and not, as some have claimed, as an affirmation and a negation.

To see this clearly, note that a *negation* neither posits anything nor determines a subject for itself. For this reason, a negation—e.g., ‘non-seeing’ or ‘non-sitting’—can be predicated either of a being or of a non-being.

A *privation*, on the other hand, does not posit anything but does determine a subject for itself. For, as *Metaphysics* 4 says, a privation is a negation in a subject. For instance, ‘blind’ is predicated only of something that is apt by its nature to have sight.

By contrast, a *contrary* both posits something and determines a subject for itself. For example, black is a certain species of color.

Now the false posits something. For, as the Philosopher says in *Metaphysics* 4, something is false because it is asserted or seen to be what it is not or because it is asserted or seen not to be what it is. For just as the true posits a belief that corresponds to the thing, so the false posits a belief that does not correspond to the thing. Hence, it is clear that the true and the false are contraries.

Reply to objection 1: That which exists in things is the truth of a thing, but that which exists *as apprehended* is the truth of the intellect, in which truth exists primarily. Hence, the false is that which is not, but *as apprehended*. And as the Philosopher proves in *Perihermenias* 2, apprehending what is and apprehending what is not are contraries; for example, the belief ‘A good thing is good’ is contrary to the belief ‘A good thing is not good’.

Reply to objection 2: The false is not grounded in the true that is contrary to itself, just as evil does not exist in a good that is contrary to itself. Rather, evil is grounded in the good which is its subject. In both cases, this happens because the true and the good are universal and convertible with being.

Hence, just as every privation is grounded in a subject that is a being, so too everything evil is grounded in something good, and everything false is grounded in something true.

Reply to objection 3: Contraries and things opposed privatively are apt to have the same subject. Therefore, nothing is contrary to God considered in Himself, either because of His goodness or because of His truth, since there cannot be any falsity in His intellect.

However, in *our* apprehension God does have a contrary in the sense that a false belief about Him is contrary to a true belief about Him. And so idols are called lies opposed to the divine truth, insofar as a false belief about idols is contrary to a true belief about God's oneness.