

QUESTION 54

An Angel's Cognition

Now that we have considered what pertains to an angel's substance, we must proceed to his cognition. This consideration will have four parts: we must consider, first, an angel's cognitive power (question 54); second, those matters that have to do with the medium of his knowing (question 55); third, the things known by him (questions 56-57); and, fourth, the mode of his cognition (question 58).

On the first topic there are five questions: (1) Is an angel's act of understanding the same as his substance? (2) Is an angel's *esse* the same as his act of understanding? (3) Is an angel's substance the same as his intellectual power? (4) Is an angel's intellect both active and passive? (5) Is there any cognitive power in angels besides the intellect?

Article 1

Is an angel's act of understanding the same as his substance?

It seems that an angel's act of understanding (*intelligere*) is his substance:

Objection 1: An angel is more sublime and more simple than the soul's active intellect. But as is clear from Aristotle and his Commentator in *De Anima* 3, the substance of the active intellect is its own action. Therefore, *a fortiori*, an angel's substance is his own action, viz., his act of understanding.

Objection 2: In *Metaphysics* 12 the Philosopher says that the intellect's action is its life. But since, as *De Anima* 2 puts it, to live (*vivere*) is what it is to be (*esse*) for living things, it seems that their life is their essence. Therefore, the intellect's action is the essence of the angel who is doing the understanding.

Objection 3: If the termini are the same, then what is in the middle between them does not differ from them, since the one terminus is more distant from the other terminus than the middle is. But in an angel the intellect is the same as what is understood, at least insofar as he understands his own essence. Therefore, the act of understanding, which lies in the middle between the intellect and the thing understood, is the same as the substance of the angel who is doing the understanding.

But contrary to this: A thing's action differs from its substance more than its *esse* itself differs from its substance. But no created entity is such that its *esse* is its substance, since, as is clear from what was said above (q. 3, a. 4 and q. 44, a. 1), this is proper to God alone. Therefore, it is not the case for an angel, or for any other creature, that its action is its substance.

I respond: It is impossible for the action of an angel or of any other creature to be its substance.

For an action is, properly speaking, the actualization of a power (*actualitas virtutis*), just as *esse* is the actualization of a substance or essence (*actualitas substantiae vel essentiae*). But it is impossible for anything which has an admixture of potentiality and which is not pure actuality to be its own actualization, since actualization is incompatible with potentiality. But God alone is pure actuality. Hence, it is only in the case of God that His substance is His *esse* and His acting (*agere*).

Furthermore, if an angel's act of understanding (*intelligere*) were his substance, then the angel's act of understanding would have to be subsistent. But there can be only one subsistent act of understanding, just as there could be only one abstract subsistent [whiteness] (cf. q. 7, a. 1 and q. 41, a. 6). Hence, an angel's substance would not be distinct either (a) from God's substance, which is His subsistent act of understanding itself, or (b) from the substance of any other angel.

Again, if an angel himself were his own act of understanding, then there could not be gradations with respect to more perfect and less perfect understanding, since these gradations occur because of the diverse degrees of participation had by the act of understanding itself.

Reply to objection 1: When the active intellect is said to be its own action, the predication is not an essential predication (*per essentiam*), but one of concomitance (*per concomitantiam*). For when the active intellect's substance exists in actuality, then insofar as it exists in itself, its action is immediately concomitant with it. This is not the case with the passive intellect, since it has actions only after it has been brought into act.

Reply to objection 2: The relation between *a life (vita)* and *to live (vivere)* is not like the relation between *an essence (essentia)* and *to be (esse)*, but it is rather like the relation between *a run (cursus)* and *to run (currere)*, the former signifying the relevant act abstractly and the latter signifying it concretely. Hence, it does not follow that if to live is what it is to be for some entity, then its life is its essence.

However, 'life' is sometimes used for an essence, as when Augustine says in *De Trinitate* that "memory and intelligence and will are one essence, one life." But this is not what the Philosopher means when he says that the intellect's action is its life.

Reply to objection 3: An action that passes into an extrinsic thing is in reality a middle ground between the agent and the subject that receives the action. By contrast, an action that remains in the agent is not in reality a middle ground between the agent and the object; instead, it is a middle ground only in the mode of signifying, whereas in reality it *follows upon* the union of the object with the agent. For from the fact that the thing understood is one with that which understands it, the act of understanding follows like an effect that differs from them both.

Article 2

Is an angel's act of understanding the same as his *esse*?

It seems that an angel's act of understanding is his *esse*:

Objection 1: As *De Anima 2* says, to live (*vivere*) is what it is to be (*esse*) for living things. But as it says in the same place, to understand (*intelligere*) is a certain way of living. Therefore, an angel's act of understanding is his *esse*.

Objection 2: One effect is related to another in the way that the cause of the one is related to the cause of the other. But the form through which an angel exists is the same as the form through which he understands at least himself. Therefore, his act of understanding is the same as his *esse*.

But contrary to this: As is clear from *De Divinis Nominibus*, chap. 4, an angel's act of understanding is his motion (*motus*). But *esse* is not a motion. Therefore, an angel's *esse* is not his act of understanding.

I respond: The action of an angel is not his *esse*; nor is the action of any other creature its *esse*.

For as *Metaphysics 9* says, there are two kinds of action. The first kind of action is that which passes into something external, bringing with it an instance of being acted upon (*passio*)—e.g., setting fire to something or cutting something. The second kind of action is that which does not pass into an external thing but remains within the agent himself—e.g., sensing, understanding, and willing. In this kind of action nothing external is changed; rather, everything takes place within the agent himself.

It is clear, then, that the first kind of action cannot be the agent's very *esse*. For the agent's *esse* is signified as being within the agent, whereas this kind of action is the agent's flowing forth into the thing that is acted upon.

On the other hand, the second kind of action has by its nature a certain unlimitedness (*infinitas*), either absolutely speaking or relatively speaking:

(a) The act is unlimited, *absolutely speaking*, in the case of an act of understanding, whose object is the true, or an act of willing, whose object is the good, where both *true* and *good* are convertible with *being*. And so an act of understanding or an act of willing, taken just by itself, is related to all things, and it receives its species from its object.

(b) The act is unlimited, *relatively speaking*, in the case of an act of sensing, which is related to all sensible things; for instance, the act of seeing is related to all visible things.

However, the *esse* of each creature is limited to a single genus and species. It is the *esse* of God alone that is absolutely unlimited (*infinitum*), comprehending all things within itself, as Dionysius puts it in *De Divinis Nominibus*, chap. 5. Hence, it is only God's *esse* that is His act of understanding and His act of willing.

Reply to objection 1: 'To live' is sometimes taken for the very *esse* of a living thing and sometimes taken for an operation associated with life, i.e., an operation through which it is demonstrated that something is alive. It is in this latter sense that the Philosopher says that to understand is a certain way of living. For in that place he is distinguishing the different grades of living things according to the different life functions.

Reply to objection 2: An angel's essence itself exhausts the nature of his entire *esse*, but does not itself exhaust the nature of his whole act of understanding, since he cannot understand all things through his essence. And so it is according to his proper nature, i.e., insofar as his essence is such-and-such, that he is related to the *esse* itself of an angel, whereas he is related to his act of understanding according to the nature of a more universal object, viz., *true* or *being*.

From this it is clear that even though the form is the same in both cases, it is not a principle of being in the same way in which it is a principle of understanding. For this reason, it does not follow that in an angel the *esse* is the same as the act of understanding.

Article 3

Is an angel's intellectual power or potentiality distinct from his essence?

It seems that an angel's intellectual power or potentiality is not distinct from his essence:

Objection 1: 'Mind' and 'intellect' are names of the intellectual power. But in many places in his books Dionysius calls the angels themselves minds and intellects. Therefore, an angel is his own intellectual potentiality.

Objection 2: If an angel's intellectual potentiality is something over and beyond his essence, then it has to be an accident; for what we call an accident of a thing is something over and beyond its essence. But as Boethius says in *De Trinitate*, a simple form cannot be a subject. Therefore, an angel would not be a simple form—which is contrary to what was established above (q. 50, aa. 1 and 2).

Objection 3: In *Confessiones* 12 Augustine says that God made the angelic nature close to Himself, whereas He made primary matter close to nothingness. From this it seems to follow that an angel is more simple than primary matter is, given that he is closer to God. But primary matter is its own potentiality. Therefore, *a fortiori*, an angel is his own intellectual potentiality.

But contrary to this: In *De Caelesti Hierarchia*, chap. 11, Dionysius says that angels "are divided into substance, power, and operation." Therefore, the substance in them is one thing, the power or potentiality another thing, and the operation still another thing.

I respond: It is not true either of an angel or of any other creature that its operative power or potentiality is the same as its essence. This is clear as follows:

Since ‘power’ or ‘potentiality’ is predicated with respect to an act, there must be a diversity of potentialities with respect to diverse acts, and because of this it is said that a thing’s proper act corresponds to its proper potentiality. Now as is clear from what was said above (a. 1 and 2, and q. 3, a. 4, and q. 44, a. 1), every created thing is such that its essence differs from its *esse* and is related to its *esse* as potentiality is related to actuality. But the act to which an operative potentiality is related is an operation. Now the act of understanding in an angel is not the same as his *esse*; nor is any other operation, either in an angel or in any other created thing, the same as the thing’s *esse*. Hence, an angel’s essence is not his intellectual potentiality; nor is the essence of any created thing its operative potentiality.

Reply to objection 1: The reason that an angel is called an intellect or a mind is that all of its cognition is intellectual cognition. By contrast, the soul’s cognition is partly intellectual and partly sentient.

Reply to objection 2: A simple form that is pure actuality cannot be the subject of any accident, since a subject is related to its accidents as potentiality is related to actuality. God alone is a simple form of this first sort, and it is this sort of form that Boethius is talking about in the cited passage.

By contrast, a simple form which is not its own *esse*, but which instead is related to its *esse* as potentiality is related to actuality, can be the subject of an accident—especially of an accident that follows upon its species, since this type of accident pertains to the form (whereas an accident that belongs to an individual and does not follow upon the whole species follows upon the matter, which is the principle of individuation). An angel is a simple form of this second sort.

Reply to objection 3: The potentiality of primary matter is a potentiality for substantial *esse* itself. However, an operative potentiality is a potentiality for accidental *esse* and not substantial *esse*. Hence, the two cases are not parallel.

Article 4

Is an angel’s intellect both active and passive?

It seems that in an angel the intellect is both active (*agens*) and passive (*possibilis*):

Objection 1: In *De Anima* 3 the Philosopher says, “Just as in every nature there is something by which it can become all things and something by which it can constitute all things, so too it is with the soul.” But an angel is a certain nature. Therefore, in an angel the intellect is both active and passive.

Objection 2: As is clear from *De Anima* 3, to receive is proper to the passive intellect, whereas to illuminate is proper to the active intellect. But an angel receives illumination from a higher angel and illuminates a lower angel. Therefore, in him the intellect is both active and passive.

But contrary to this: In us the intellect is active and passive in relation to phantasms, which, as is clear from *De Anima* 3, are related (a) to the *passive* intellect in the way that colors are related to sight and (b) to the *active* intellect in the way that colors are related to light,. But this is not the case with an angel. Therefore, in an angel the intellect is not both active and passive.

I respond: It was necessary to posit a *passive* intellect in us because we are sometimes understanding in potentiality and not in actuality. Hence, there must be a power which (a) is in potentiality with respect to intelligible things before the act of understanding itself and which (b) is actualized with respect to those things when it comes to apprehend (*sciens*) them and, further, when it comes to inquire into (*considerans*) them. This power is called the passive intellect.

On the other hand, it was necessary to posit an *active* intellect in us because the natures of the

material things that we understand do not subsist outside the soul as *actually* immaterial and intelligible; rather, they exist outside the soul only as *potentially* intelligible. And so there had to be a power that would render those natures actually intelligible. This power is called the active intellect in us.

Neither of these necessities is present in the angels. For it is not the case that they sometimes understand only in potentiality the things that they naturally understand, and it is not the case that the things they understand are intelligible only in potentiality and not in actuality. For as will become clear below (q. 56), they principally and primarily understand immaterial things. And so in angels there cannot be an active intellect or passive intellect, except by equivocation.

Reply to objection 1: As the words themselves clearly indicate, the Philosopher means that these two features exist in every nature in which it is possible for something to be generated or effected. However, in an angel knowledge is not generated, but is instead naturally present. Hence, it is not necessary to hold that the intellect is active and passive in them.

Reply to objection 2: The role of the agent intellect is not to illuminate another being who himself has understanding; rather, it is to ‘illuminate’ things that are potentially intelligible, and it does this by rendering them actually intelligible through abstraction. On the other hand, it is the role of the passive intellect (a) to be in potentiality with respect to things that are naturally knowable and (b) sometimes to be brought into act.

Hence, the fact that one angel illuminates another has nothing to do with the notion of the active intellect. Nor is it relevant to the notion of the passive intellect that an angel is illuminated about supernatural mysteries which he at some point is in potentiality to knowing. Still, if someone insists on calling this an active and passive intellect, then he will be speaking equivocally and we should not fuss over the names.

Article 5

Is there just intellective cognition in angels?

It seems that there is not just intellective cognition in angels:

Objection 1: In *De Civitate Dei* 8 Augustine says angels have a life of understanding and sensing. Therefore, there is a sentient power in angels.

Objection 2: Isidore says that angels have learned many things through experience. But as *Metaphysics* 1 says, experience comes from many memories. Therefore, there is also a power of memory in angels.

Objection 3: In *De Divinis Nominibus*, chap. 4, Dionysius says that in the demons there are perverted fantasies. But fantasies pertain to the power of imagination. Therefore, there is a power of imagination in the demons, and for the same reason in the angels, since they have the same nature as the demons.

But contrary to this: In his homily for the feast of the Ascension Gregory says that man senses with the brutes and thinks with the angels.

I respond: In our soul there are certain powers whose operations are exercised through corporeal organs, and powers of this sort are acts of certain parts of the body; for instance, the act of seeing is in the eye, and the act of hearing is in the ear. On the other hand, there are powers of our soul, e.g., intellect and will, whose operations are not exercised through corporeal organs, and these are not acts of any part of the body.

Now as is clear from what was said above (q. 51, a. 1), angels do not have bodies naturally united

to them. Hence, the only powers of the soul that can belong to them are intellect and will. The Commentator likewise says in *Metaphysics* 12 that separated substances are divided into intellect and will. Furthermore, it befits the order of the universe that the highest intellectual creature should be completely intellective—and not just partly intellective, as our soul is. As was pointed out above (a. 3), this is why angels are called intellects and minds.

Reply to the objection 1 and objection 2 and objection 3: There are two possible replies to the objections in support of the contrary position.

First, one can reply that these passages are talking in accord with the opinion of those who had claimed that angels and demons have bodies naturally united to them. Augustine often makes use of this opinion in his books, even though he does not mean to assert it. Hence, in *De Civitate Dei* 21 he says that one should not spend much effort on this inquiry.

Second, one can reply that these and similar passages are to be interpreted according to certain likenesses.

For instance, since the senses apprehend their proper sensibles with certitude, we are likewise commonly said to ‘have a strong feeling’ (*sentit*) about what is apprehended with certitude by the intellect. This is also called ‘a strong sentiment’ (*sententia*).

Again, ‘experience’ can be attributed to the angels because of a likeness in the things that are known, even if not because of a likeness in the relevant cognitive power. For we ourselves have experience when we know singular things through sensation, whereas Angels likewise know singular things, though not through sensation, as will become clear below (q. 57, a. 2). And yet memory can be posited in the angels to the extent that Augustine posits memory in the mind—even though memory cannot belong to them insofar as it is posited as a part of the sentient soul.

Similarly, one should say that ‘perverted fantasies’ are attributed to the demons in virtue of the fact that they have a false practical estimation of the true good, while in our case deception properly arises from the imagination, because of which we sometimes cling to the likenesses of things as if they were the things themselves, as is clear in the case of people who are dreaming or hallucinating.