

QUESTION 56

An Angel's Cognition of Immaterial Things

The next thing to ask about is the cognition of angels with respect to the things that they know. We ask, first, about their cognition of immaterial things (question 56) and, second, about their cognition of material things (question 57).

On the first topic there are three questions: (1) Does an angel know himself? (2) Does one angel know another? (3) Does an angel have natural knowledge of God?

Article 1

Does an angel know himself?

It seems that an angel does not know himself:

Objection 1: In *De Caelesti Hierarchia*, chap. 6, Dionysius says that angels “are unaware of their own powers.” But when a substance is known, its powers are known. Therefore, an angel does not know his own essence.

Objection 2: An angel is a certain sort of singular essence; otherwise, he would not act, since actions belong to singular subsistent things. But no singular thing is intelligible. Therefore, it cannot be understood intellectually (*non potest intelligi*). And so, since an angel has only intellectual cognition, no angel can know himself.

Objection 3: An intellect is moved by an intelligible thing, since, as *De Anima* 3 puts it, to understand intellectually is a certain way of being acted upon. But nothing is moved or acted upon by itself, as is clear in the case of corporeal things. Therefore, an angel cannot understand himself intellectually.

But contrary to this: In *Super Genesim ad Litteram* 2 Augustine says that an angel “knew himself as soon as he was fashioned, i.e., illuminated by the truth.”

I respond: As is clear from what was said above (q. 14, a. 2 and q. 54, a. 2), the object of an action that remains within the agent differs from the object of an action that passes into something external to the agent.

For in an action that passes into something external, the object or matter into which the act passes is separate from the agent; for instance, that which is heated is separate from that which gives it heat, and that which is built is separate from the builder.

By contrast, in an action that remains within the agent, the object must be united to the agent in order for the action to proceed; for instance, the sensible object must be united to the sense organ in order for an actual sensing to occur. And so in this sort of action the object is united to the relevant power like the form which serves as the principle of action in other agents. For just as in a fire the heat is the formal principle of giving heat, so too the sensible species of the thing that is seen is the formal principle of an act of seeing in the eye.

Now notice that this sort of species of an object sometimes exists only in potentiality in the relevant cognitive power, and in that case the power has cognition only in potentiality. In order for this cognitive power to be having an actual cognition, it must be brought into the act of the species. However, if it always has this species in actuality, then it can have cognition through it without any preceding change or receptivity. From this it is clear that being moved by the object is not part of the nature of a knower *qua* knower, but only part of his nature *qua* potential knower.

Moreover, in order for a form to be a principle of action, it does not matter whether the form itself inheres in another or whether it instead subsists *per se*. For example, an instance of heat would not give

any less heat if it existed as subsistent *per se* than it does when it inheres [in a fire]. So, then, if something that belongs to the genus of intelligible things is a subsistent intelligible form, then it will understand itself. But given that an angel is immaterial, he is a certain sort of subsistent form and thereby actually intelligible. Hence, it follows that he understands himself through this form, which is his substance.

Reply to objection 1: The cited passage is from the old translation and is corrected by the new translation, which has “and, furthermore, they, viz., the angels, knew their proper powers” instead of “and still they were unaware of their proper powers,” which appears in the other translation.

Still, even the old translation can be salvaged with respect to one point, viz., that angels do not know their own power perfectly insofar as that power flows from the order of God’s wisdom, which cannot be comprehended by the angels.

Reply to objection 2: We ourselves have no intellective understanding of the singulars that exist among corporeal things—not because of their singularity, but because of their matter, which is the principle of individuation in them. Hence, if there are singular things which, like the angels, subsist without matter, then nothing prevents them from being actually intelligible.

Reply to objection 3: To be moved and to be acted upon belong to an intellect insofar as it is in potentiality. Hence, being moved and being acted upon have no place in the case of the angelic intellect, especially with respect to an angel’s understanding of himself.

Also, the intellect’s action is not of the same type as the sort of action that is found among corporeal things, since the latter sort of action passes into another matter.

Article 2

Does one angel know another?

It seems that one angel does not know another:

Objection 1: In *De Anima* 3 the Philosopher says that if the human intellect had within itself a nature from among the sensible natures, then that nature existing within it would prevent external natures from being apprehended by the intellect—just as, if the pupil of the eye were itself colored, then the eye would not be able to see all the colors. But the angelic intellect is related to the cognition of immaterial things in just the way that the human intellect is related to the cognition of corporeal things. Therefore, since the angelic intellect has within itself a determinate nature from among the immaterial natures, it seems that it cannot know other immaterial natures.

Objection 2: The *Liber de Causis* says, “Every intelligence is such that he knows (a) what is above him insofar as he is caused by it and (b) what is below him insofar as he is a cause of it. But it is not the case that one angel is a cause of another angel. Therefore, it is not the case that one angel knows another.

Objection 3: One angel cannot know another through the essence of the knowing angel, since every cognition is in accord with some likeness, whereas the essence of the knowing angel is similar to the essence of the known angel only in its genus, as is clear from what was said above (q. 50, a. 4 and q. 55, a. 1). Hence, it would follow that one angel has only a general cognition of another and not a proper cognition.

Again, it cannot be claimed that one angel knows another through the known angel’s essence, since that by which the intellect understands something is intrinsic to the intellect, whereas only the Trinity penetrates the mind.

Again, it likewise cannot be claimed that one angel knows another through an intelligible species, since the species in question would not differ from the understood angel, given that both are immaterial. Therefore, there seems to be no way in which one angel could understand another.

Objection 4: If one angel understands another, this occurs either (a) through an innate intelligible species, in which case it would follow that if God were now to create an angel *de novo*, this new angel could not be known by the angels that now exist; or (b) through an intelligible species acquired from the things themselves, in which case it would follow that higher angels would not be able to know lower angels, since they acquire nothing from lower angels. Therefore, there seems to be no way in which one angel knows another.

But contrary to this: The *Liber de Causis* says, “Every intelligence knows the things that are not corrupted.”

I respond: As Augustine says in *Super Genesim ad Litteram* 2, the things that pre-existed from eternity in the Word of God flowed from Him in two ways: (a) first, into the angelic intellect, and (b) second, as subsisting in their own proper natures.

Now the things in question proceeded into the angelic intellect by virtue of God’s impressing on an angel’s mind likenesses of the things He produced with their natural *esse*. But the Word of God contained from eternity not only the notions (*rationes*) of corporeal things, but also the notions of all spiritual creatures. Therefore, all the notions of all things, both corporeal and spiritual, were impressed by the Word of God on each spiritual creature. And yet they were impressed in such a way that the notion of his own species was impressed on each angel both with respect to its natural *esse* and with respect to its intelligible *esse*, so that he might subsist in the nature of his own species and through that species understand himself. On the other hand, the notions of the other natures, both corporeal and spiritual, were impressed on him only with respect to their intelligible *esse*, so that through impressed intelligible species of this sort he might know both corporeal creatures and spiritual creatures.

Reply to objection 1: As was explained above (q. 50, a. 4), the spiritual natures of the angels are distinguished from one another by a certain ordering. And so the nature of a given angel does not prevent his intellect from knowing the other angelic natures, since both higher and lower angels have an affinity with his nature, whereas the differences among them stem only from diverse grades of perfection.

Reply to objection 2: The notions of causing and being caused do not contribute to one angel’s knowing another except by reason of a likeness, i.e., insofar as a cause is similar to what it causes. And so as long as there is a likeness without causality among the angels, each will retain his cognition of the others.

Reply to objection 3: One angel knows another through an intelligible species which exists in his own intellect and which differs from the angel whose likeness it is—not in the way that immaterial *esse* differs from material *esse*, but rather in the way that intentional *esse* (*esse intentionale*) differs from natural *esse* (*esse naturale*). For the [known] angel is himself a form that subsists with natural *esse*, while the intelligible species of him that exists in the intellect of the other angel is not a subsistent form, but has only intelligible *esse* there—just as the form of a color has natural *esse* in a wall, but only intentional *esse* in the medium that conveys it [to the eye].

Reply to objection 4: God made each creature proportionate to that whole which He decided to create. And so if God had resolved to create more angels or more natures of things, then He would have impressed more intelligible species on the minds of the angels—just as, if the builder had wished to make a bigger house, he would have laid a bigger foundation. Hence, God’s adding some creature to the whole is of a piece with His adding another intelligible species to an angel.

Article 3

Can angels know God by their natural powers?

It seems that angels cannot know God by their natural powers:

Objection 1: In *De Divinis Nominibus*, chap. 1, Dionysius says that God “is situated above all the heavenly minds with His incomprehensible power.” And afterwards he adds, “For He is above every substance and removed from all cognition.”

Objection 2: God is infinitely far removed from an angel’s intellect. But what is infinitely far removed cannot be reached. Therefore, it seems that an angel cannot know God by his natural powers.

Objection 3: 1 Corinthians 13:12 says, “We see now through a mirror in a dark manner, but then face to face.” From this it seems to follow that there are two kinds of cognition of God, one by which He is seen through His essence, and in this sense it is said that He is seen “face to face”; and, second, insofar as He is seen in the “mirror” of creatures. But as was shown above (q. 12, a. 4), angels could not have had the first sort of cognition of God by their natural powers. On the other hand, a mirror-like vision does not belong to the angels, since, as Dionysius says in *De Divinis Nominibus*, chap. 7, they do not receive their cognition of God from sensible things. Therefore, angels cannot know God through their natural powers.

But contrary to this: Angels are cognitively more powerful than men. But men can know God through their natural powers—this according to Romans 1:19 (“Because that which is known of God is manifest in them”). Therefore, *a fortiori*, so can the angels.

I respond: Angels can have a certain sort of cognition of God by their natural powers. To see this clearly, note that there are three ways in which something can be known.

First, a thing can be known through the presence of its essence in the knower—in the way in which light is seen in the eye—and this is the way, as was explained above (a. 1), in which an angel understands himself. Second, a thing can be known through the presence of a likeness of itself in the cognitive power—in the way that a rock is seen by the eye because of the likeness of itself that arises in the eye. Third, a thing can be known not by virtue of the fact that a likeness of it is received immediately from the very thing that is known, but rather by virtue of the fact that a likeness of it is received from some other thing in which it occurs—in the way in which we see a man in a mirror.

Thus, the cognition of God by which He is seen through His essence is like the first type of cognition. And, as was explained above (q. 12, a. 4), this cognition of God cannot be present in any creature through its natural powers.

On the other hand, the cognition of God by which we know God in this life, through the likeness of Him that occurs in creatures, is like the third type of cognition—this according to Romans 1:20 (“For the invisible things of God are clearly seen, being understood through the things that have been made”). This is why we are said to see God in a mirror.

Now the cognition by which an angel knows God through his natural powers lies between these two types of cognition, and it is like the type of cognition by which a thing is seen by means of a likeness received from it. For since the image of God is stamped on the very nature of an angel through his essence, an angel knows God insofar as he himself is a likeness of God. Yet he does not see the very essence of God, since no created likeness suffices to represent God’s essence. Hence, this type of cognition is more like looking into a mirror, since an angel’s very nature is itself a sort of mirror representing the likeness of God.

Reply to objection 1: Dionysius is talking here about a cognition that involves comprehension, as his words explicitly indicate. And God is not known in this way by any created intellect.

Reply to objection 2: Because an angel's intellect and essence are indeed infinitely far removed from God, it follows that an angel cannot comprehend God or see God's essence by his nature. However, it does not thereby follow that he cannot have any cognition of God at all. For just as God is infinitely far removed from the angel, so too the cognition that God has of Himself is infinitely far removed from the cognition that an angel has of Him.

Reply to objection 3: The cognition of God that an angel has by his nature lies between the two types of cognition mentioned in the objection—and yet, as was just explained above, it is more like the one of them [than the other].