

## QUESTION 57

### An Angel's Cognition of Material Things

Next we ask about the material things that are known by angels. On this topic there are five questions: (1) Do angels know the natures of material things? (2) Do angels know singulars? (3) Do angels know future things? (4) Do angels know the thoughts of hearts? (5) Do angels know all the mysteries of grace?

#### Article 1

##### Do angels know material things?

It seems that angels do not know material things:

**Objection 1:** What is understood is a perfection of the one who is understanding it. But material things cannot be perfections of the angels, since they are lower than the angels. Therefore, angels do not know material things.

**Objection 2:** As the Gloss on 2 Corinthians 12:2 says, an intellective vision is of things that exist in the soul through their essence. But material things cannot exist through their essences in the soul of a man or in the mind of an angel. Therefore, they cannot be known by an intellective vision, but can be known only by either (a) a vision of the imagination, by which likenesses of corporeal things are apprehended, or (b) a sentient vision, which is of the corporeal things themselves. But neither imaginative vision nor sentient vision exist in the angels; only intellective vision does. Therefore, angels cannot know material things.

**Objection 3:** Material things are not actually intelligible, but are knowable only by the apprehension of the senses and the imagination, which do not exist in angels. Therefore, angels do not know material things.

**But contrary to this:** A higher power is capable of whatever a lower power is capable of. But a man's intellect, which is lower than an angel's intellect in the order of nature, can know material things. Therefore, *a fortiori*, so can an angel's intellect.

**I respond:** The order among things is such that (a) the higher entities are more perfect than the lower entities, and that (b) what is contained in the lower entities in a deficient and partial and fragmented way is contained in the higher entities in a more eminent way and with a certain completeness and simplicity. Thus, as Dionysius puts it in *De Divinis Nominibus*, in God, the summit of things, all things pre-exist 'supersubstantially' in the manner of His own simple *esse*.

Now among all creatures it is the angels who are closest to and most similar to God, and hence, as Dionysius says in *De Caelesti Hierarchia*, chap. 4, they participate in more aspects of God's goodness and participate in them more perfectly. So, then, all material things pre-exist within the angels themselves in a more simple and immaterial way than they exist in themselves, though in a more fragmented and imperfect way than they exist in God.

Now everything that exists in a thing exists in it according to the mode of that in which it exists. But angels are intellectual beings by their nature. And so just as God knows material things through His own essence, so too angels know these things in virtue of the fact that they exist in the angels through their intelligible species.

**Reply to objection 1:** What is understood is a perfection of the one who is understanding it as regards the intelligible species which he has in his intellect. And so the intelligible species that exist in an angel's intellect are perfections of, and acts of, the angelic intellect.

**Reply to objection 2:** The senses do not apprehend the essences of things, but instead apprehend

only certain exterior accidents. Similarly, the imagination does not apprehend the essences of things, but instead apprehends only likenesses of corporeal things. It is the intellect alone that apprehends the essences of things. Hence, according to *De Anima* 3, the object of the intellect is the ‘what-ness’ of a thing, and the intellect cannot err with respect to this, just as the senses cannot err with respect to a proper sensible. So, then, the essences of material things do indeed exist in the intellect of a man or an angel—not, to be sure, with their own real *esse*, but rather in the way that what is understood exists in the one who is understanding it. On the other hand, there are some things that exist in the intellect or in the soul with both sorts of *esse*, and there is intellective vision with respect to both.

**Reply to objection 3:** If an angel received his cognition of material things from the material things themselves, then he would have to make those things actually intelligible by abstracting them. But he does not receive his cognition of them from the material things themselves; instead, he has knowledge of material things through the actually intelligible species of those things that are connatural to him—just as our intellect has knowledge of them through the species that it makes intelligible by abstraction.

## Article 2

### Does an angel know singulars?

It seems that an angel does not know singulars:

**Objection 1:** In *Physics* 1 the Philosopher says that sensation is of singulars, whereas reason (or understanding) is of universals. But as is clear from what was said above (q. 54, a. 5), the only cognitive power in angels is an intellective power. Therefore, they do not know singulars.

**Objection 2:** Every type of cognition occurs through the assimilation of the knower to what is known. But it seems impossible for there to be any assimilation of an angel to a singular thing *qua* singular. For, as was explained above (q. 50, a. 2), an angel is immaterial, whereas the principle of singularity is matter. Therefore, an angel cannot know singulars.

**Objection 3:** If an angel knows singulars, then he knows them either through singular intelligible species or through universal intelligible species. He does not know them through singular intelligible species, since in that case he would have to have infinitely many such species. Nor does he know them through universal intelligible species, since a universal is not a sufficient principle for knowing a singular *qua* singular; for singulars are known only potentially in a universal. Therefore, an angel does not know singulars.

**But contrary to this:** No one can exercise guardianship over what he has no knowledge of. But according to Psalm 90:11 (“He has given his angels charge over you, etc.”), angels exercise guardianship over individual human beings. Therefore, angels know singulars.

**I respond:** Some have completely denied the cognition of singulars to angels.

First of all, however, this position detracts from the Catholic Faith, which claims, in accord with Hebrews 1:14 (“Are they not all ministering spirits?”), that lower things here below are ministered to by the angels. But if angels did not have knowledge of singulars, then they would not be able to exercise providence over the things that are done in this world, since acts belong to singular things—and this is contrary to Ecclesiastes 5:5 (“Say not before the angel: ‘There is no providence’”).

Second, this position also detracts from the teachings of philosophy, which claims that angels are the movers of the celestial spheres and that they move the spheres by their intellect and will.

And so others have maintained that angels do indeed have cognition of singulars, but that they have this cognition in the universal causes which all particular effects are traced back to—in the way, for

instance, that an astronomer might judge that an eclipse will occur by appeal to the arrangement of the celestial motions.

However, this position does not evade the difficulties alluded to above. For to know a singular in this way in its universal causes is not to know it as a singular, i.e., as existing here and now. For when an astronomer comes to know that an eclipse will occur by computing the celestial motions, he knows the eclipse in general; and he does not know it as existing here and now unless he perceives it through the senses. But ministration and providence and motion all belong to singulars insofar as they exist here and now.

So we have to reply in an alternative way: Just as a man knows all the genera of things by diverse cognitive powers—viz., universals and immaterial things by the intellect, and singulars and corporeal things by the senses—so an angel knows both sorts of things through a single intellective power. For the order among things is such that to the extent that a thing is higher in that order, its power is more unified and extends to more things. For instance, in man himself it is clear that even though the common sensory power, which is higher than the proper sensory powers, is a single power, it knows all the things known by the five exterior senses as well as other things that none of the exterior senses knows, e.g., the difference between whiteness and sweetness. Something similar can be seen in other cases as well. Thus, since an angel is higher than a man in the order of nature, it is ridiculous to claim that a man knows something by some power of his that an angel does not know through his own single cognitive power, viz., his intellect. This is why, as is clear from *De Anima* 1 and *Metaphysics* 3, Aristotle thinks it absurd that God should not know about discord, which we know about.

Now the mode by which an angel's intellect knows singulars can be gathered from the fact that just as things flow forth from God in such a way as to subsist in their own proper natures, so too they flow forth from God in such a way as to exist in angelic cognition. But, clearly, what flows forth from God in things is not only that which pertains to their universal natures, but also those things that serve as their individuating principles. For God is a cause of the whole substance of a thing, with respect to both its matter and its form. And He knows things insofar as He is a cause, since, as was shown above (q. 14, a. 8), His knowledge is a cause of things. So, then, just as God is a likeness of all things by His essence, through which He causes all things, and just as He knows all things through His essence—not only what pertains to their universal natures, but also what pertains to their singularity—so, too, through the intelligible species that flow into the angels from God, the angels know things not only with respect to their universal natures but also with respect to their singularity, insofar as those species are multiple representations of the unified and simple divine essence.

**Reply to objection 1:** The Philosopher is speaking here about our intellect, which understands things only by abstracting; and it is through this abstraction from material conditions that what is abstracted becomes universal. But as was explained above (q. 55, a. 2), this mode of understanding does not belong to the angels, and so the arguments are not parallel.

**Reply to objection 2:** Angels are not by their nature assimilated to material things in the way that one thing is assimilated to another by an agreement in genus or species or accident. Rather, angels are assimilated to material things in the way that a higher entity bears a likeness to a lower entity, e.g., in the way that the sun is like a fire. And it is also in this manner that a likeness of all things exists in God, both with respect to their form and with respect to their matter, since whatever is found among things pre-exists in Him as its cause. For the same reason, the intelligible species in an angel's intellect, which are certain likenesses derived from God's essence, are likenesses of things not only with respect to their form, but also with respect to their matter.

**Reply to objection 3:** Angels know singulars through universal forms, and yet these forms are likenesses of the things both with respect to their universal principles and with respect to their principles of individuation. It has already been explained above (q. 55, a. 3) how it is that many things can be

known through the same intelligible species.

### Article 3

#### Do angels know future things?

It seems that angels know future things:

**Objection 1:** Angels are much more powerful in their cognition than men are. But some men know many future things. Therefore, *a fortiori*, so do the angels.

**Objection 2:** *Present* and *future* are specific differences within time. But an angel's intellect lies beyond time, since, as the *Liber de Causis* puts it, "An intelligence ranks with eternity," in the sense of aeviternity (*aevum*). Therefore, the past and the future do not differ as far as an angel's understanding is concerned; instead, he knows both of them in exactly the same way.

**Objection 3:** An angel knows things not through intelligible species that are received from the things themselves, but rather through innate universal intelligible species. But universal species are related in the same way to the present, the past, and the future. Therefore, it seems that angels know present things, past things, and future things in exactly the same way.

**Objection 4:** Something can be said to be distant in place just as something can be said to be distant in time. But angels know things that are distant in place. Therefore, they likewise know things that are distant in future time.

**But contrary to this:** That which is a proper indicator of divinity does not belong to the angels. But according to Isaiah 41:23 ("Announce the things that are to come hereafter, and we shall know that you are gods"), to know future things is a proper indicator of divinity. Therefore, angels do not know future things.

**I respond:** There are two ways in which something future can be known.

First, a future thing can be known *in its cause*. Future things that proceed by necessity from their causes can be known in this way with certitude, e.g., that the sun will rise tomorrow, whereas future things that proceed from their causes in most instances can be known by an educated guess (*per coniecturam*) but not with certitude, in the way that a physician foresees the health of someone who is sick. Now this is the way in which angels know future things, and they know them better than we do to the extent that they know the causes of things in a more universal and perfect way—just as a physician who sees the causes of an illness more accurately is better able to predict its future course. Finally, those things that proceed from their causes only in a few instances, i.e., random (*casualia*) or fortuitous (*fortuita*) events, are completely unknown.

Second, a future thing can be known *in itself*. And only God knows future things in this way—not only those future things which proceed from their causes by necessity or in most instances, but even random and fortuitous things. For God sees all things in His eternity, which, since it is simple, is present to the whole of time and includes the whole of time. And so God's single glance reaches to all things occurring throughout all of time as things that are present, and He sees all things as they are in themselves. This was explained above when we were discussing God's knowledge (q. 14, a. 13). By contrast, the angelic intellect—along with every created intellect whatsoever—falls short of God's eternity. Hence, the future, as existing in its own *esse*, cannot be known by any created intellect.

**Reply to objection 1:** Men do not know future things except in their causes or else because God reveals them. And angels know future things in this same way, though much more accurately.

**Reply to objection 2:** Even though an angel's intellect lies beyond the sort of time that measures

corporeal movements, time exists in an angel's intellect with respect to the succession of his intelligible conceptions. It is in this sense that Augustine says in *Super Genesim ad Litteram* 7 that God moves spiritual creatures through time. And so, since there is succession in an angel's intellect, it is not the case that all the things that occur throughout the whole of time are present to him.

**Reply to objection 3:** Even though the intelligible species that exist in an angel's intellect, taken just in themselves, are related in exactly the same way to present things, past things, and future things, still, it is not the case that present things, past things, and future things themselves are related to the species in exactly the same way. For things that are present have a nature through which they are assimilated to the intelligible species that exist in an angel's mind, and so they can be known through those intelligible species. By contrast, things that are future do not yet have a nature through which they are assimilated to the intelligible species, and so they cannot be known through them.

**Reply to objection 4:** Distances with respect to place already now exist in reality and participate in a species whose likeness exists in the angel. This is not true of future things, as has already been explained. And so there is no parallel between the two cases.

#### Article 4

##### Do angels know the thoughts of hearts?

It seems that angels know the thoughts of hearts (*cogitationes cordium*):

**Objection 1:** In *Moralibus*, section on Job 28:17 ("Gold or crystal cannot equal it"), Gregory says, "At that time [*read*: after those who rise from the dead are beatified] one will be transparent to another in the same way that he is transparent to himself, and as soon as the intellect of anyone is attended to, his consciousness (*conscientia*) will be immediately penetrated." But as Matthew 22:30 says, those who rise from the dead will be like the angels. Therefore, one angel can see what is in the consciousness of another angel.

**Objection 2:** A shape is to a body what an intelligible species is to the intellect. But when a body is seen, its shape is seen. Therefore, when an intellectual substance is seen, any intelligible species that exists in it is seen. Therefore, when an angel sees another angel or even a human soul, it seems that he can immediately see what each is thinking.

**Objection 3:** Things that exist in our intellect are more similar to an angel than things that exist in our imagination, since the former are actually understood, whereas the latter are only potentially understood. But things that exist in the imagination can be known by an angel in the same way that he knows corporeal things, since the imagination is a corporeal power. Therefore, it seems that an angel can know an intellect's thoughts.

**But contrary to this:** What is proper to God does not belong to the angels. But according to Jeremiah 17:9-10 ("The heart is perverse above all things, and unsearchable, who can know it? I the Lord search hearts"), to know the thoughts of hearts is proper to God. Therefore, angels do not know the secrets of hearts.

**I respond:** There are two ways in which thoughts of the heart can be known.

First, they can be known *in their effects*. A thought of the heart can be known in this way not only by an angel, but also by a man; and the more hidden an effect of this sort is, the more insightful the knowledge. For a thought is sometimes known not only through an exterior act, but also through a change in facial expression; and physicians can sometimes know certain affections of the soul even through the pulse. Angels, as well as demons, can know these affections all the more, given that they

examine hidden bodily changes of this sort with more subtlety. Hence, in *De Divinatione Daemonum* Augustine says that the demons sometimes discover men's dispositions with great ease—not only their spoken words, but even their conceived thoughts—when certain signs of those dispositions are expressed by the soul in the body. However, in the *Retractationes* Augustine cautions that we should not make assertions about how this takes place.

Second, thoughts can be known *as they exist in the intellect*, and affections *as they exist in the will*. God alone can know the thoughts of hearts and the affections of wills in this way. The reason for this is that a rational creature's soul is subject to God alone, and He alone can operate on the will, given that He is, as the ultimate end, the will's principal object. And so what exists in the will or depends on the will alone is known only to God. Now, clearly, it depends on the will alone that someone should actually be thinking about certain things, since when one has certain intelligible species or the habit of a science existing within him, he makes use of them whenever he wills to. This is why the Apostle says in 1 Corinthians 2:11, "No man knows the things of a man, except the spirit of a man that is in him."

**Reply to objection 1:** There are two obstacles which now prevent the thoughts of one man from being known to another, viz., the body's density (*grossities*) and the fact that the will hides its secrets. The first of these obstacles will be removed at the resurrection and is not found among the angels, whereas the second obstacle will remain after the resurrection and is now found among the angels. Yet after the resurrection the body's splendor (*claritas*) will represent the quality of the mind as far as its quantity of grace and glory are concerned. And in this sense one will be able to see the mind of another.

**Reply to objection 2:** Even if one angel sees another angel's intelligible species in the sense that the mode of the intelligible species—i.e., their greater or lesser universality—is proportionate to the nobility of the substances, it still does not follow that one knows how the other is making use of those intelligible species in his actual thinking.

**Reply to objection 3:** A brute animal's appetite is not the master of its own acts, but instead follows the impression of another corporeal or spiritual cause. Therefore, since angels know corporeal things and their dispositions, through these things they can know what is in a brute animal's appetite or what its imagination apprehends. And they can likewise know what is in a man's sentient appetite or what his imagination apprehends to the extent that the sentient appetite in men sometimes proceeds into act by following a corporeal impression in the way that this always occurs in brute animals.

However, to the extent that the sentient appetite and imagination are moved by the will and reason, one must not claim that angels know the movements of the sentient appetite or the apprehensions of the imagination. For even the lower part of the soul participates in some sense in the rational part, in the way that one obeys his commander, as *Ethics* 1 puts it. Nor does it follow that if an angel knows what is in a man's sentient appetite or imagination, then he knows what the man is thinking or willing. For the intellect and will are not subject to the sentient appetite and imagination, but are instead able to make use of them in various ways.

## Article 5

### Do angels know the mysteries of grace?

It seems that angels know the mysteries of grace:

**Objection 1:** Of all the mysteries of grace, the most excellent is the mystery of Christ's Incarnation. But the angels knew of this mystery from the beginning; for in *Super Genesim ad Litteram* 5 Augustine says, "This mystery, hidden from the ages in God, was such that He nonetheless made it known to the Principalities and Powers in heaven." And in 1 Timothy 3:16 the Apostle says, "This great

mystery of piety was apparent to the angels.” Therefore, angels know the mysteries of grace.

**Objection 2:** The reasons for all the mysteries of grace are contained in God’s wisdom. But angels see God’s wisdom itself, since it is His essence. Therefore, angels know the mysteries of grace.

**Objection 3:** As is clear from Dionysius in *De Caelesti Hierarchia*, chap. 4, the prophets are instructed by the angels. But the prophets knew the mysteries of grace; for instance, Amos 3:7 says, “The Lord will not carry out His word without revealing His secret to His servants, the prophets.” Therefore, the angels know the mysteries of grace.

**But contrary to this:** No one learns what he already knows. But the angels—even the highest ones—ask about the mysteries of grace and come to learn of them. For *De Caelesti Hierarchia*, chap. 7, says that Sacred Scripture “describes certain heavenly essences as putting questions to Jesus himself and learning the divine wisdom of His actions on our behalf, and it describes Jesus as teaching them directly.” This is clear from Isaiah 63:1, where to the angels who ask “Who is He who comes up from Edom?” Jesus replies, “It is I, who speak justice.” Therefore, the angels do not know the mysteries of grace.

**I respond:** There are two types of cognition in the angels.

One type is *natural*. By this type of cognition angels know things both through their essence and also through their innate intelligible species. Angels cannot know the mysteries of grace by this type of cognition. For these mysteries depend on God’s simple will (*ex pura voluntate*), and if one angel cannot know the thoughts of another angel that depend on the latter’s will, then he will all the less be able to know things that depend just on God’s will. The Apostle reasons along these same lines at 1 Corinthians 2:11: “What man knows the things of a man, but the spirit of a man that is in him? So the things also that are of God, no one knows, but the Spirit of God.”

The second type of angelic cognition is that which makes the angels *beatified* and by which they see the Word and all things in the Word. By this type of cognition they do indeed know the mysteries of grace—not all of them or all of them equally, but to the extent that God has willed to reveal the mysteries to them. This is in accord with what the Apostle says at 1 Corinthians 2:10, “But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit.” Yet He reveals them in such a way that the higher angels, who contemplate God’s wisdom more insightfully, know more and deeper mysteries in the very vision of God, and they then make these mysteries known to the lower angels by illuminating those angels. And some of these mysteries they knew from the beginning of their creation, whereas others they learn afterwards insofar as this knowledge is appropriate for their assigned roles.

**Reply to objection 1:** There are two possible ways to speak about the mystery of Christ’s Incarnation.

First, one can speak about it *in general*, and in this sense it was revealed to all the angels at the beginning of their beatification. The reason is that this mystery is a certain general principle to which all of the angels’ assigned roles are ordered. For all of them are ministers of the Spirit, according to Hebrews 1:14 (“Are they not all ministering spirits, sent to minister for those who shall receive the inheritance of salvation?”), and this inheritance occurs through the mystery of the Incarnation. Hence, from the beginning all the angels had to be taught about this mystery in general.

Second, we can speak of the mystery of the Incarnation *with respect to its specific circumstances*. And in this sense not all the angels were taught about all these circumstances from the beginning. Indeed, as is clear from the passage cited from Dionysius, even some of the higher angels learned about them afterwards.

**Reply to objection 2:** Even though the beatified angels *contemplate* God’s wisdom, they nonetheless do not *comprehend* it. And so it is not necessary that they should know whatever is hidden in it.

**Reply to objection 3:** Whatever the prophets knew through divine revelation about the mysteries of grace was revealed in a more excellent way to the angels. And even though the angels revealed to the prophets the things that God would do concerning the salvation of the human race, still, the apostles knew about this matter certain specific things that the prophets had not known—this according to Ephesians 3:4-5 (“You who are reading can perceive my understanding in the mystery of Christ, which was not known to other generations as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles”).

Again, even among the prophets themselves, the later ones knew things that the earlier ones had not known—this according to Psalm 118:100 (“I have understood beyond the ancients”). And Gregory says that the knowledge of divine things increased as time went on.