

QUESTION 58

The Mode of an Angel's Cognition

The next thing to consider is the mode of an angel's cognition. On this topic there are seven questions: (1) Is an angel sometimes thinking in potentiality and sometimes in actuality? (2) Can an angel understand many things at once? (3) Does an angel understand by means of discursive reasoning? (4) Does an angel understand by composing and dividing? (5) Can there be falsity in an angel's intellect? (6) Can an angel's cognition be called 'morning knowledge' and 'evening knowledge'? (7) Are morning knowledge and evening knowledge the same, or are they distinct from one another?

Article 1

Is an angel's intellect sometimes in a state of potentiality?

It seems that an angel's intellect is sometimes in a state of potentiality:

Objection 1: As *Physics* 3 says, movement is the act of something that exists in a state of potentiality. But as Dionysius says in *De Divinis Nominibus*, chap. 4, the minds of angels are moved when they think. Therefore, the minds of angels are sometimes in a state of potentiality.

Objection 2: Since desire is directed toward a thing that is not had but is able to be had, whoever desires to understand something is now in potentiality with respect to understanding that thing. But 1 Peter 1:12 talks of "things into which angels desire to look." Therefore, an angel's intellect is sometimes in a state of potentiality.

Objection 3: The *Liber de Causis* says that an intelligence understands in a way that accords with the mode of his substance. But an angel's substance has an admixture of potentiality. Therefore, an angel sometimes understands in potentiality.

But contrary to this: In *Super Genesim ad Litteram* 2 Augustine says of the angels that "from the moment they were created, they thoroughly enjoyed the very eternity of the Word with holy and pious contemplation." But a contemplating intellect understands in actuality and not in potentiality. Therefore, an angel's intellect is not in a state of potentiality.

I respond: As the Philosopher says in *De Anima* 3 and *Physics* 8, there are two ways for the intellect to be in a state of potentiality: (a) in the first way, it is said to be in potentiality before it learns or discovers something, i.e., before it has the habit of a given science; and (b) in the second way, it is said to be in potentiality when it already has the habit of a science, but is not actually considering that science.

As for the first way, an angel's intellect is never in potentiality with respect to the things its natural cognition can extend to. For just as the higher bodies, i.e., the celestial bodies, do not have any potentiality for *esse* which has not already been brought to completion through their actuality, so the celestial intellects, viz., the angels, do not have any intellectual potentiality which has not already been brought to total completion through the intelligible species that are connatural to them. On the other hand, nothing prevents the intellects of angels from being in potentiality with respect to the things revealed to them by God—just as the celestial bodies are likewise sometimes in potentiality with respect to being illuminated by the sun.

As for the second way, an angel's intellect can be in potentiality with respect to the things it knows by its natural cognition, since it is not always actually considering all the things that it knows by its natural cognition. However, an angel's intellect is never in potentiality in this way with respect to its cognition of the Word and of the things it sees in the Word, since an angel's intellect is always actually viewing the Word and the things it sees in the Word. For it is this vision that the angels' beatitude consists in and, as the Philosopher says in *Ethics* 1, beatitude consists in an act and not in a habit.

Reply to objection 1: In the cited passage, ‘movement’ is not being taken for the act of something imperfect, i.e., of something that is in a state of potentiality. Rather, it is being taken for the act of something perfect, i.e., of something that is in a state of actuality. For as *De Anima* 3 says, this is the sense in which acts of understanding and acts of sensing are called movements.

Reply to objection 2: This particular desire on the part of the angels does not rule out possession of the thing desired, but rules out only weariness of it.

An alternative reply is that the angels are said to desire the vision of God in the sense of new revelations, which they receive from God in order to make them fit for their assigned roles.

Reply to objection 3: There is in an angel’s substance no potentiality that is wholly bereft of actuality. And, similarly, an angel’s intellect is not in potentiality in such a way that is without its act.

Article 2

Can an angel understand many things at once?

It seems that an angel cannot understand many things at once:

Objection 1: In *Topics* 2 the Philosopher says that it is possible to know (*scire*) many things at once, but it is possible to be understanding (*intelligere*) only one thing at a time.

Objection 2: Nothing is understood except insofar as the intellect is formed by an intelligible species in the way in which a body is formed by its shape. But a single body cannot be formed by different shapes. Therefore, one intellect cannot understand diverse intelligible things all at once.

Objection 3: To understand is a certain movement. But no movement is terminated at diverse endpoints. Therefore, it is not possible to understand many things at once.

But contrary to this: In *Super Genesim ad Litteram* 4 Augustine says, “The spiritual power of an angel’s mind easily comprehends at once all the things that the angel wants to.”

I respond: Just as the oneness of a movement requires the oneness of its endpoint, so too the oneness of an operation requires the oneness of its object. However, it can happen that several things are taken either as many or as one, in the way that the parts of a continuum are taken as one.

For if each of them is taken by itself (*per se*), then they are many, and as such they cannot be grasped by the senses or the intellect all at once in a single operation.

In the second way, they are grasped as a single whole and so, as *De Anima* 3 says, they are known by the senses or the intellect in a single operation as long as the whole continuum is being considered. So even our own intellect understands the subject and the predicate together insofar as they are parts of a single proposition; and it understands the two in comparison with one another insofar as they come together in a single comparison.

From this it is clear that many things cannot be understood all at once insofar as they are distinct from one another, but that they are understood all at once insofar as they are united in a single intelligible object.

Now each thing is actually intelligible insofar as its likeness exists in the intellect. Therefore, if several things can be known through a single intelligible species, then they are known as a single intelligible object, and so they are known all at once. On the other hand, things that are known through diverse intelligible species are grasped as diverse intelligible objects.

Therefore, in the cognitive act by which angels understand things through the Word, they know all things through a single intelligible species, viz., God’s essence. And so as far as this cognitive act is concerned, they know all things at once—just as, according to Augustine in *De Trinitate* 15, “In heaven

our own thoughts will not be changeable, going from one thing to another, but we will see all our knowledge together at a single glance.” By contrast, in the cognitive act by which angels know things through their innate intelligible species, they can understand simultaneously whatever things are known through a single intelligible species, but they cannot understand simultaneously things that are known by diverse intelligible species.

Reply to objection 1: To understand many things as one is in a sense to understand one thing.

Reply to objection 2: The intellect is formed by an intelligible species that it now has present to itself. And so through a single intelligible species it can see many intelligible things all at once, in the way that through a single shape a given body can be similar to many bodies.

Reply to objection 3: The reply here is the same as the reply to objection 1.

Article 3

Does an angel gain knowledge through discursive reasoning?

It seems that an angel gains knowledge through discursive reasoning:

Objection 1: Discursive understanding takes place to the extent that one thing is known through another. But an angel knows one thing through another, since he knows creatures through the Word. Therefore, an angel’s intellect gains knowledge through discursive reasoning.

Objection 2: A higher power can do whatever a lower power can do. But the human intellect can reason through syllogisms, and it can know causes in their effects—both of which involve discursive reasoning. Therefore, *a fortiori*, an angel’s intellect, which is higher in the order of nature, can do this.

Objection 3: Isidore says that the demons know many things from experience. But experiential cognition is discursive, since an experience is made up of many memories and since, as it says at the end of the *Posterior Analytics* and the beginning of the *Metaphysics*, a single universal is fashioned from many experiences. Therefore, angels have discursive cognition.

But contrary to this: In *De Divinis Nominibus*, chap. 7, Dionysius says, “Angels do not collect divine cognition from diffuse lines of thought, nor do they go from something general to something specific.”

I respond: As has already been explained several times (a. 1 and q. 50, a. 3, and q. 55, a. 2), angels occupy the status among spiritual substances that celestial bodies occupy among corporeal substances. For this reason, Dionysius calls them ‘celestial minds’. Now the difference between celestial bodies and terrestrial bodies is that terrestrial bodies attain their ultimate perfection through change and movement, whereas celestial bodies attain their ultimate perfection immediately through their very nature. So, then, lower intellects, i.e., human intellects, attain perfection in their cognition of the truth through a certain kind of movement and discourse, viz., as they proceed from the cognition of one thing to the cognition of another. But if in their cognition of a known principle they immediately perceived, as it were, all the knowable conclusions that follow from that principle, then discursive reasoning would have no place in them.

And this is the way it is with the angels. For in the things that the angels know first by their natural knowledge they perceive anything whatever that can be known in those first things. And angels are called ‘intellectual’ (*intellectuales*) beings because, even among us, things that are naturally apprehended in an unmediated way are said to be understood (*intelligi*). This is why *understanding* (*intellectus*) is called a habit with respect to first principles.

By contrast, human souls, which acquire knowledge of the truth through a certain sort of discursive

reasoning, are called ‘rational’. This condition stems from the weakness of the intellectual light in human souls. For if human souls had the fullness of intellectual light, as the angels do, then in their first glance at the principles they would immediately comprehend the entire power of those principles by intuiting whatever could be derived from them by means of syllogisms.

Reply to objection 1: ‘Discursive reasoning’ names a certain sort of movement. But all movement is from one thing that is prior to something else that is posterior. Hence, discursive reasoning involves going from something previously known to the cognition of something else that is then later known and was not previously known. However, if that something else were seen as soon as the first thing was seen—in the way that the image of a thing and the thing itself are seen together in a mirror—then because of this there would be no discursive cognition. And it is in this way that angels know things in the Word.

Reply to objection 2: Angels can reason by syllogisms in the sense that they know the syllogisms. And they see effects in their causes and causes in their effects, but not in such a way that they acquire knowledge of an unknown truth by reasoning syllogistically from the causes to what is caused or from what is caused to the causes.

Reply to objection 3: In the case of angels and demons, ‘experience’ is predicated according to a certain likeness, viz., insofar as they know sensible things as present—though without any sort of discursive reasoning.

Article 4

Do angels understand by composing and dividing?

It seems that angels understand by composing and dividing:

Objection 1: As *De Anima* 3 says, there is a composition of thoughts where there is a multitude of thoughts. But there is a multitude of thoughts in an angel’s intellect, since he understands diverse things through diverse intelligible species, and he does not understand the diverse things all at once. Therefore, there is composition and division in an angel’s intellect.

Objection 2: Negation is more distant from affirmation than any two opposed natures are distant from one another, since the first distinction is that between affirmation and negation. But as is clear from what was said above (a. 2), there are certain natures, distant from one another, that an angel understands through diverse intelligible species and not through just one species. Therefore, he must know affirmation and negation in diverse ways. And so it seems that an angel understands by composing and dividing.

Objection 3: Speech is a sign of what is understood. But as is clear from many places in Sacred Scripture, angels who speak to men use affirmative and negative propositions, which are signs of composition and division in their own understanding. Therefore, it seems that angels understand by composing and dividing.

But contrary to this: In *De Divinis Nominibus*, chap. 7, Dionysius says, “The intellectual power of the angels reflects the clear simplicity of God’s thoughts.” But as *De Anima* 3 says, simple understanding (*simplex intelligentia*) occurs without composition and division. Therefore, angels understand without composition and division.

I respond: A predicate is related to its subject in an intellect that is composing and dividing in just the way that a conclusion is related to its principle in an intellect that is reasoning discursively (*in intellectu ratiocinante*). For if the intellect immediately saw the truth of the conclusion in the principle

itself, then it would never come to understand by means of discursive reasoning or ratiocination. Similarly, if in apprehending the subject's 'what-ness' (*quidditas*), the intellect immediately knew everything that can be attributed to the subject or denied of it, then it would never come to understand by means of composing and dividing. Instead, it would understand everything by understanding what the subject is. Therefore, the fact that our intellect understands by composing and dividing clearly has the same source as the fact that it understands by reasoning discursively—viz., that it cannot in its initial apprehension of some first thing see whatever is virtually contained in that thing. And this is so, as has been pointed out (a. 3), because of the weakness of the intellectual light in us.

Hence, since the intellectual light is perfected in an angel—for an angel is, as Dionysius puts it in *De Divinis Nominibus*, chap. 4, a pure and absolutely clear mirror—it follows that just as an angel does not understand by means of discursive reasoning, so too he does not understand by composing and dividing. However, he does understand the composition and division involved in propositions, just as he likewise understands the reasoning involved in syllogisms. For he understands in a simple way that which is composed, and he understands in a motionless way that which is in motion, and he understands in an immaterial way that which is material.

Reply to objection 1: It is not just any sort of multitude of thoughts that causes a composition, but rather a multitude of thoughts which is such that one is attributed to the other or denied of the other. Now in understanding the 'what-ness' of a given thing, an angel understands all at once whatever can be attributed to that thing or denied of it. Hence, in understanding what the thing is, he understands by his one simple thought whatever we ourselves are able to understand by composing and dividing.

Reply to objection 2: The different 'what-nesses' of things differ less from one another with respect to the nature of existence than an affirmation differs from a negation. Nonetheless, with respect to the nature of cognition, an affirmation and negation agree more with one another, because by the very fact that the truth of an affirmation is known, the falsity of the opposite negation is immediately known.

Reply to objection 3: The fact that an angel speaks with affirmative and negative propositions shows that angels know *about* composition and division, but not that they know *by means of* composing and dividing. Instead, they know what something is in a simple way.

Article 5

Can there be falsity in an angel's understanding?

It seems that there can be falsity in an angel's understanding:

Objection 1: Perversity pertains to falsity. But as Dionysius puts it in *De Divinis Nominibus*, chap. 4, the demons have a perverted imagination. Therefore, it seems that there can be falsity in an angel's understanding.

Objection 2: Ignorance is a cause of false judgment. But as Dionysius says in *De Ecclesiastica Hierarchia*, chap. 6, there can be ignorance in angels. Therefore, it seems that there can be falsity in them.

Objection 3: Everyone who falls away from the truth of wisdom and has a depraved nature has falsity and error in his understanding. But this is what Dionysius attributes to the demons in *De Divinis Nominibus*, chap. 7. Therefore, it seems that there can be falsity in an angel's understanding.

But contrary to this: In *De Anima* 3 the Philosopher says, "Understanding is always true." Also, in 83 *Quaestiones* Augustine says, "Nothing except what is true is understood." But the angels have no type of cognition other than understanding. Therefore, there cannot be deception or falsehood in

an angel's cognition.

I respond: The truth regarding this matter depends to some extent on what has already been said. For it has already been explained (a. 4) that an angel understands something by understanding what the thing is and not by composing and dividing. But as *De Anima* 3 says, the intellect is always accurate (*verus*) with respect to what a thing is, just as the senses are with respect to their proper objects.

However, deception and falsehood do occur *per accidens* in our understanding of what a thing is, viz., within a composition, when either (a) we take the definition of one thing as the definition of some other thing, or (b) the parts of a given definition do not cohere with one another—as, for instance, if *four-footed flying animal* were taken to be the definition of something (for there is no such animal). And this happens in the case of *composite* things, whose definitions are taken from diverse sources, one of which is material with respect to the other. By contrast, as *Metaphysics* 9 says, there is no falsity in our understanding of *simple* 'what-nesses', because either they are not grasped at all, in which case we understand nothing about them, or else they are understood as they are.

So, then, neither falsity nor error nor deception can exist *per se* in any angel's understanding, but they can occur *per accidens*—though in a way different from the way they occur in us. For we ourselves sometimes arrive at an understanding of the 'what-ness' of a thing by composing and dividing, as when we carry on an inquiry by dividing or demonstrating a definition. This does not happen in the case of angels; for through a given thing's 'what-ness' they know all the propositions that pertain to that thing.

Now it is clear that a thing's 'what-ness' can be a principle of knowledge with respect to what *naturally* belongs to it or is denied of it, but not with respect to what depends on God's *supernatural* ordination. Therefore, the good angels, who have an upright will, do not through their cognition of a thing's 'what-ness' make any judgment about what naturally pertains to the thing except in light of God's ordination. Hence, in the good angels there cannot be falsity or error. By contrast, the demons, who have withdrawn their intellect from God's wisdom through their perversity of will, sometimes make absolute judgements about a thing on the basis of its natural condition. And while they are not deceived in matters that pertain naturally to the thing, they can be deceived with respect to matters that are supernatural. For instance, considering that man is mortal, a demon might judge that he will not rise from the dead; or seeing the man Christ, a demon might judge that He is not God.

Reply to objection 1 and objection 2 and objection 3: The reply to the objections on both sides is clear from what has been said. For the perversity of the demons stems from the fact that they do not subject themselves to God's wisdom. Still, ignorance is found in the angels not with respect to what is naturally knowable, but with respect to what is knowable [only] supernaturally.

Again, it is clear that an angel's understanding of a thing's 'what-ness' is always true except *per accidens*, when it is ordered in an inappropriate way to some composition or division.

Article 6

Does an angel have both evening knowledge and morning knowledge?

It seems that an angel has neither evening knowledge (*cognitio vespertina*) nor morning knowledge (*cognitio matutina*):

Objection 1: Both evening and morning have an element of darkness. But there is no darkness in an angel's cognition, since there is no error or falsity in it. Therefore, an angel's cognition should not be called either 'morning knowledge' or 'evening knowledge'.

Objection 2: Night falls between evening and morning, and noontime falls between morning and evening. Therefore, if there is morning knowledge and evening knowledge in angels, then by parity

of reasoning there should be noontime knowledge and nocturnal knowledge in them as well.

Objection 3: Cognitions are distinguished by differences in the objects known, and this is why in *De Anima* 3 the Philosopher says, “The sciences are divided in the same way that things are.” Now as Augustine says in *Super Genesim ad Litteram* 2, things have three types of existence (*esse*), viz., (a) existence in the Word, (b) existence in their own proper nature, and (c) existence in the angelic mind (*intelligentia angelica*). Therefore, if morning knowledge and evening knowledge are posited in the angels because of the existence of things in the Word and because of their existence in their own proper nature, then a third type of knowledge should also be posited in the angels because of the existence of things in the angelic mind.

But contrary to this: In *Super Genesim ad Litteram* 4, and again in *De Civitate Dei* 11, Augustine distinguishes between the morning knowledge of angels and their evening knowledge.

I respond: Talk about morning knowledge and evening knowledge in the angels was introduced by Augustine, who claimed that the six days in which God is said in Genesis 1 to have made all things are to be thought of not as ordinary days lasting for one circuit of the sun (for we read that the sun was made on the fourth day), but as a single day—more specifically, as the angelic cognition presented with six kinds of things.

Now just as the morning is the beginning of a normal day and the evening its end, so too the cognition of the primordial existence of things is called ‘morning knowledge’, and this is knowledge of things insofar as they exist in the Word. On the other hand, what is called ‘evening knowledge’ is the cognition of the very *esse* of a created thing insofar as it exists in its own proper nature. For the *esse* of things flows from the Word as from a primordial principle, and this outflow is terminated in the *esse* that things have in their own proper nature.

Reply to objection 1: In the case of angelic cognition, ‘evening’ and ‘morning’ are used not because of their likeness in having an element of darkness, but because of their likeness to a beginning and an end.

An alternative reply is that, as Augustine points out in *Super Genesim ad Litteram* 4, nothing prevents a thing from being called ‘light’ in comparison to one thing and ‘darkness’ in comparison to something else. For instance, in keeping with Ephesians 5:8 (“You were once darkness, but now light in the Lord”), the life of those who are faithful and just is called ‘light’ in comparison to the wicked, whereas, in keeping with 2 Peter 1:19 (“You have the prophetic word, which you do well to attend to as a light that shines in a dark place”), the life of those who are faithful is said to be dark in comparison to the light of glory. So, then, the angelic cognition by which an angel knows things in their own proper nature is like day in comparison to ignorance or error, but it is dark in comparison to the angel’s vision of the Word.

Reply to objection 2: Morning and evening knowledge pertain to the day, i.e., to the illuminated angels, who are distinct from the darkness, i.e., the bad angels. Now in knowing a creature, the good angels do not cling to it, which would be to turn to darkness and become as night; instead, they turn their knowledge into praise of God, in whom they know all things as in the source of all things. And so after evening comes morning, and not night, in the sense in which morning is the end of the preceding day and the beginning of the next day, because the angels turn their knowledge of the previous work into the praise of God.

On the other hand, noontime is included under the name ‘day’ as a midpoint between two extremes. Alternatively, noontime can refer to their knowledge of God Himself, who has no beginning or end.

Reply to objection 3: The angels are themselves creatures, and so the existence of things in the angelic understanding is itself included under evening knowledge, in just the way that the existence of

things in their own proper nature is.

Article 7

Is evening knowledge the same as morning knowledge?

It seems that evening knowledge is the same as morning knowledge:

Objection 1: Genesis 1:5 says, “And there came evening and morning one day.” But as Augustine says, ‘day’ refers here to angelic cognition. Therefore, in angels the morning knowledge and the evening knowledge are one and the same.

Objection 2: It is impossible for one power to have two operations at the same time. But angels are always actually having morning knowledge, since, according to Matthew 18:10 (“Their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father”), they always see God and other things in God. Therefore, if his evening knowledge were distinct from his morning knowledge, then an angel could not in any way actually be having evening knowledge.

Objection 3: In 1 Corinthians 13:10 the Apostle says, “When that which is perfect is come, that which is in part shall be done away with.” But if evening knowledge is distinct from morning knowledge, then it is related to it as something imperfect to something perfect. Therefore, evening knowledge will not be able to exist together with morning knowledge.

But contrary to this: In *Super Genesim ad Litteram* 4 Augustine says, “There is a huge difference between knowing a thing in the Word of God and knowing it in its own nature, so that the former is properly like daytime and the latter like evening.”

I respond: As has been explained (a. 6), the knowledge by which an angel knows things in their own proper nature is called evening knowledge. But this cannot be understood in such a way that angels receive their cognition from the proper natures of things, so that the preposition ‘in’ would indicate the source of their cognition; for as was explained above (q. 55, a. 2), angels do not receive their cognition from the things themselves. Therefore, it follows that the phrase ‘in their own proper nature’ is being taken for the thing known insofar as it is subject to the cognition—so that, namely, knowledge is called ‘evening knowledge’ in the angels insofar as they know the existence that the things have in their own proper nature.

Now the angels know this through two mediums, viz., (a) through their innate intelligible species and (b) through the ideas of things that exist in the Word. For it is not the case that in seeing the Word they know only the existence that the things have in the Word; rather, they [also] see the existence that the things have in their own proper nature—just as God, in seeing Himself, knows the existence that things have in their own proper nature. Therefore, if their knowledge is called ‘evening knowledge’ because in seeing the Word they know the existence that things have in their own proper nature, then evening knowledge and morning knowledge are one and the same in essence, differing only with respect to what is known. On the other hand, if their knowledge is called ‘evening knowledge’ because they know the existence that things have in their own proper nature by means of their innate intelligible forms, then their evening knowledge is distinct from their morning knowledge. And Augustine seems to understand the matter in this latter way, since he claims that the one sort of knowledge is imperfect in comparison to the other.

Reply to objection 1: Just as the number of the six days, as understood by Augustine, is taken from the six kinds of things that are known by the angels, so the oneness of the day is taken from the oneness of the thing known, and yet this one thing can be known by diverse types of cognition.

Reply to objection 2: Two operations of the same power can exist at the same time as long as the one is referred back to the other. This is clear in a case in which the will simultaneously wills (a) an end and (b) what is ordered to that end, as well as in a case in which the intellect, once it has acquired knowledge (*scientia*), simultaneously understands (a) the principles and (b) the conclusion through the principles. Now as Augustine explains, the evening knowledge in angels is referred back to the morning knowledge. Hence, nothing prevents both of them from existing in the angels simultaneously.

Reply to objection 3: When the perfect has come, the imperfect that is opposed to it is done away with. For instance, faith, which is of things that are not seen, is done away with when the vision [of God] comes.

However, the imperfection of evening knowledge is not opposed to the perfection of morning knowledge. For the fact that a thing is known in its own self is not opposed to its being known in its cause. Again, there is nothing incoherent about a thing being known through two mediums, one of which is more perfect and the other of which is less perfect; for instance, we can have both a demonstrative middle term and a dialectical middle term with respect to the same conclusion. Similarly, the same thing can be known by an angel both through the Uncreated Word and through an innate intelligible species.