

QUESTION 87

How Our Intellect Has Cognition of Itself and of What Exists Within It

Next we have to consider how the intellectual soul has cognition of itself and of what exists within it. And on this topic there are four questions: (1) Does the intellectual soul have cognition of itself through its own essence? (2) How does it have cognition of the habits that exist within it? (3) How does the intellect have cognition of its own act? (4) How does it have cognition of an act of the will?

Article 1

Does the intellectual soul have cognition of itself through its own essence?

It seems that the intellectual soul has cognition of itself through its own essence:

Objection 1: In *De Trinitate* 9 Augustine says, “The mind knows itself through itself, because it is incorporeal.”

Objection 2: An angel and a human soul share in the genus *intellectual substance*. But an angel has intellectual understanding of himself through his own essence. Therefore, so does the human soul.

Objection 3: As *De Anima* 3 says, “In things that exist without matter, the intellect and what is understood are the same.” But the human mind exists without matter, since, as was explained above (q. 76, a. 1), it is not the actuality of any body. Therefore, in the human mind the intellect and what is understood are the same. Therefore, it has intellectual understanding of itself through its own essence.

But contrary to this: *De Anima* 3 says, “The intellect has intellectual understanding of itself in the same way that it has intellectual understanding of other things.” But it has intellectual understanding of other things through likenesses of those things and not through their essence. Therefore, neither does it have intellectual understanding of itself through its own essence.

I respond: As *Metaphysics* 9 says, each thing is such that there can be cognition of it insofar as it is actual and not insofar as it is potential. For something is a being and is true, i.e., falls under cognition, insofar as it is actual. This is manifestly obvious in the case of sensible things; for instance, the power of seeing perceives only what is actually colored and not what is potentially colored. Similarly, it is clear that insofar as the intellect has cognition of material things, it has cognition only of what is actual; and so, as *Physics* 1 says, the intellect does not have cognition of primary matter except in relation to form (*secundum proportionem ad formam*).

Hence, among immaterial substances, too, each of them bears the same relation to being intelligible through its essence that it bears to being actual through its essence.

Thus, God’s essence, which is pure and perfect (*perfectus*) actuality, is simply and perfectly intelligible in its own right (*secundum seipsam*). Hence, it is through His essence that God has perfect intellectual understanding not only of Himself but also of all things.

On the other hand, an angel’s essence is, to be sure, in the genus of intelligible things as an actuality, but not as a pure and completely perfect (*completus*) actuality. Hence, an angel’s act of intellectual understanding (*eius intelligere*) is not completely perfected (*completur*) through his essence. For even though an angel has intellectual cognition of himself through his essence, he nonetheless cannot have cognition of all things through his essence; instead, he has cognition of things other than himself through likenesses of those things.

By contrast, a human intellect is in the genus of intelligible things only as a being in potentiality, in the same way that primary matter is in the genus of sensible things; this is why the intellect is called the passive or potential intellect (*intellectus possibilis*). Therefore, if the intellect is considered in its essence, it has intellectual understanding in potentiality (*potentia intelligens*). Hence, of itself it has the

power to have intellectual understanding, but it is not itself understood intellectually except insofar as it becomes activated (*actu*).

On this score, the Platonists likewise held that the order of intelligible entities transcends the order of intellects; for the intellect has intellectual understanding only through participation in what is intelligible, and, according to them, what participates is inferior to what it participates in. Therefore, if, as the Platonists held, the human intellect were activated (*fieret actu*) through participation in separated intelligible forms, then the human intellect would understand itself through this sort of participation in incorporeal things.

However, since, as was explained above (q. 86, a. 4), it is connatural to our intellect, in the state of the present life, to be directed toward material and sensible things, it follows that our intellect understands itself insofar as it is activated (*fit actu*) by species abstracted from sensible things through the light of the active intellect—and this is the actualization (*actus*) both of the intelligible things themselves and, through their mediation, of the passive intellect (*intellectus possibilis*).

Therefore, it is through its act, and not through its essence, that our intellect has cognition of itself. And this in two ways:

First, in a *particular* way (*particulariter*), insofar as Socrates or Plato perceives himself to have an intellectual soul in virtue of the fact that he perceives himself to have intellectual understanding.

Second, in a *general* way (*in universali*), insofar as we consider the nature of the human mind on the basis of the intellect's act. But, as was explained above (q. 84, a. 5), it is true that the discernment (*iudicium*) and efficacy of the cognition by which we grasp the nature of the soul belongs to us because of the derivation of our intellect's light from God's truth, in which the conceptions (*rationes*) of all things are contained. Hence, in *De Trinitate* 9 Augustine says, "We intuitively see (*intuemur*) inviolable truth, on the basis of which we perfectly define, as far as we are able to, not how each man's mind in fact is, but rather how it ought to be in light of the eternal conceptions."

However, there is a difference between these two types of cognition. For the mind's very presence, which is the principle of the act by which the mind perceives itself, is sufficient for the first type of cognition that is had of the mind. And it is for this reason that the mind is said to have a cognition of itself through its own presence. By contrast, the mind's presence is not itself sufficient for the second type of cognition that is had of the mind; instead, what is required is diligent and subtle inquiry. Hence, many are ignorant of the nature of the soul, and many have fallen into error about the nature of the soul. This is why, in *De Trinitate* 10, Augustine says of this sort of inquiry into the mind, "It is not as something absent that the mind seeks to discern itself; rather, it seeks to discern itself as something present"—that is, to have a cognition of how it differs from other things, which is what it is to have a cognition of its own 'what-ness' and nature.

Reply to objection 1: The mind knows itself through itself in the sense that it eventually (*tandem*) arrives at a cognition of itself, but through its own act. For the mind itself is what is known, because it loves itself, as Augustine adds in the place cited. For there are two possible reasons why something is said to be known in itself (*per se notum*): either (a) because there is nothing else through which one arrives at a knowledge of it, in the way that the first principles are said to be known in themselves, or (b) because it is not known *per accidens*—in the way in which color is *per se* visible, whereas a substance is visible *per accidens*.

Reply to objection 2: An angel's essence is an actuality in the genus of intelligible things, and so it is both an intellect and something that is understood intellectually. Hence, an angel apprehends his own essence through himself.

By contrast, this is not the case with a human intellect, which either (a) is entirely in potentiality with respect to intelligible things, as is the case with the passive intellect (*intellectus possibilis*), or else (b) is the actuality of the intelligible things which are abstracted from the phantasms, as is the case with

the active intellect.

Reply to objection 3: This proposition (*verbum*) of the Philosopher's is true in general of all types of intellect. For just as an activated sensory power (*sensus in actu*) is the sensible thing, because of the likeness of the sensible thing that serves as the form of the activated sensory power, so too the activated intellect (*intellectus in actu*) is the thing as actually understood (*intellectum in actu*), because of the likeness of the thing understood that serves as the form of the activated intellect. And so the human intellect, which proceeds into act because of the species of the thing understood, is itself understood through that same species as through its own form.

Now to say that in those things without matter the intellect is the same as the thing understood is the same as saying that in things that are actually being understood the intellect and what is understood are the same. For something is actually being understood intellectually because it is without matter. But there is a difference here. For the essences of certain things exist without matter, e.g., the separated substances we call angels, and each of them is both something that is understood intellectually and something that understands intellectually. On the other hand, there are some things whose essences do not exist without matter; instead, all that exists without matter are the likenesses abstracted from them.

Hence, in *De Anima* 3 the Commentator says that the proposition adduced in the objection is true only in the case of the separated substances. For, as was just explained, the proposition is rendered true in their case in a way in which it is not rendered true in the case of other things.

Article 2

Does our intellect have cognition of the soul's habits through their essence?

It seems that our intellect has cognition of the soul's habits through their essence:

Objection 1: In *De Trinitate* 13 Augustine says, "Faith is not seen in the heart in which it exists in the same way that the soul of another man is seen from the movements of his body. Rather, a most certain knowledge grasps it, and the conscience calls out in testimony to it." And the same argument holds for the other habits of the soul. Therefore, the habits of the soul are perceived (*cognoscuntur*) through themselves and not through their acts.

Objection 2: We have cognition of material things that exist outside the soul in virtue of the fact that their likenesses are present in the soul, and this is why they are said to be understood (*cognoscuntur*) through their likenesses. But the soul's habits are present in the soul through their essence. Therefore, it is through their essence that they are understood.

Objection 3: That because of which a thing is such-and-such is itself such-and-such to a greater degree (*propter quod unumquodque tale, et illud magis*). But other things are understood by the soul because of its habits and intelligible species. Therefore, the soul's habits and intelligible species are understood by the soul to a greater degree through themselves.

But contrary to this: Habits are principles of acts, just as powers are. But as *De Anima* 2 says, "Acts and operations are conceptually prior (*priores secundum rationem*) to powers." For the same reason, therefore, acts and operations are prior to habits. And so habits are known through their acts, just as powers are.

I respond: In some sense a habit lies between a pure potentiality (*potentia pura*) and a pure actuality (*actus purus*). Now it has already been explained (a. 1) that nothing is understood except insofar as it is actual. So, then, insofar as a habit falls short of being a complete actuality, it falls short of being knowable through itself. Rather, it has to be known through its act—whether this be (a) when

someone perceives himself to have a habit by virtue of perceiving himself to be producing the act proper to that habit, or (b) when someone is inquiring into the nature and character of a habit by considering its act. The first type of cognition of a habit is effected by the very presence of the habit, since by the very fact that it is present it causes the act in which it is immediately perceived. On the other hand, the second type of cognition of a habit comes about through diligent inquiry, as was explained above (a. 1) in the case of the mind.

Reply to objection 1: Even though faith is not perceived through exterior bodily movements, it is nonetheless perceived by the one in whom it exists through an interior act of the heart. For no one knows that he has faith unless he perceives himself to be making an act of faith (*nisi per hoc quod se credere percipit*).

Reply to objection 2: Habits are not present in our intellect as objects of the intellect, since, as was explained above (q. 84, a. 7), in the state of the present life the object of our intellect is the nature of a material thing. Instead, habits are present in the intellect as things by which the intellect engages in intellectual understanding.

Reply to objection 3: The dictum ‘That because of which (*propter quod*) a thing is such-and-such is itself such-and-such to a greater degree’ is true if it is understood to apply to things that belong to the same order, e.g., things in the same genus of cause. For instance, if one claimed that health exists for the sake of life (*propter vitam*), it would follow that life is desirable to a greater degree.

However, the dictum is not true if it is applied to things that belong to diverse orders. For instance, if one claimed that health exists because of medicine (*propter medicinam*), it would not thereby follow that medicine is more desirable; for health belongs to the order of ends, while medicine belongs to the order of efficient causes.

So, then, if we take two things, both of which belong *per se* to the order of the objects of cognition, the one because of which the other is known (*cognoscitur*) will itself be known (*notum*) to a greater degree—in the way that principles are known to a greater degree than their conclusions are. However, a habit does not, insofar as it is a habit, belong to the order of objects of cognition. Furthermore, it is not because of a habit as an *object* of cognition that certain things are known; instead, certain things are known because of a habit as a *disposition* or *form* by which the knower understands. And so the argument does not go through.

Article 3

Does the intellect have cognition of its own act?

It seems that the intellect does not have cognition of its own act (*non cognoscat proprium actum*):

Objection 1: It is the object of a cognitive power (*cognoscitiva virtus*) that is properly speaking such that there is cognition of it. But an act differs from its object. Therefore, the intellect does not have cognition of its own act.

Objection 2: If there is a cognition of something, then there is an act by which that cognition takes place. Therefore, if the intellect has a cognition of its own act, then there is an act by which it has the cognition of that act; and, again, the cognition of this latter act will take place by means of yet another act. Therefore, there will be an infinite regress (*erit procedere in infinitum*)—which seems impossible.

Objection 3: The intellect is related to its own act in the same way that a sensory power is related to its own act. But a proper sensory power does not sense its own act; rather, as *De Anima* says, this is the role of the common sensory power. Therefore, neither does the intellect have intellectual cognition

of its own act.

But contrary to this: In *De Trinitate* 10 Augustine says, “I understand that I understand.”

I respond: As has already been explained (a. 1), there is cognition of a thing insofar as it is actual. Now the ultimate perfection of an intellect is its operation. For this operation is not like an action which tends toward something else (*tendens in alterum*) and which is a perfection of the thing acted upon, in the way that an act of building is a perfection of the thing built. Rather, as is explained in *Metaphysics* 9, the intellect’s action remains within the agent as the agent’s own perfection and actuality.

Therefore, the first thing that is understood about an intellect is its very act of intellectual understanding. But this applies in different ways to the different types of intellects:

For there is one type of intellect, viz., God’s intellect, which is its very act of intellectual understanding. And so in the case of God, His understanding that He understands is the same as His understanding His own essence, since His essence is His very act of intellectual understanding.

On the other hand, there is another type of intellect, viz., the angelic intellect, which, as was explained above (q. 79, a. 1), is not its own act of intellectual understanding, but is nonetheless such that the first object of its act of understanding is its own essence. Hence, even though, in an angel, his understanding that he understands is conceptually different from his understanding his own essence, he nonetheless understands both of them together and in a single act; for his understanding his own essence is a proper perfection of his essence, and an entity taken together with its perfection is understood all at once and by a single act.

But there is another type of intellect, viz., the human intellect, which (a) is not its own act of understanding and which (b) is such that the primary object of its act of understanding is not its own essence but instead something extrinsic, viz., the nature of a material thing. And so what is understood in the first place by the human intellect is an object of this latter sort, and what is understood in the second place is the very act by which the [primary] object is understood. Furthermore, by this act the intellect itself is understood, since the intellect’s perfection is the very act of intellectual understanding. This is why the Philosopher says that objects are understood prior to their acts, and acts prior to their powers.

Reply to objection 1: The object of the intellect is something general, viz., *being* and *true*, under which is also included the very act of intellectual understanding. Hence, the intellect is able to have intellectual understanding of its own act. But it does not understand its own act in the first place, since in the state of the present life the primary object of our intellect is not just any being or any true thing but rather, as was explained above (q. 84, a. 7), *being* and *true* as thought of in material things (*ens et verum consideratum in rebus materialibus*). And it is on this basis that our intellect arrives at the cognition of all other things.

Reply to objection 2: The human act of intellectual understanding is not itself the actuality and perfection of the material nature that is understood, in the sense that the nature of the material thing and the very act of understanding it could be understood in a single act, in the way that a thing together with its perfection is understood by a single act. Hence, the act by which the intellect understands a rock is different from the act by which it understands that it understands the rock, and so on. Nor, as was explained above (q. 86, a. 2), is it problematic for there to be a potential infinity in the intellect.

Reply to objection 3: A proper sensory power has an act of sensing (*sentit*) because of a change effected in the material organ by a sensible exterior thing. But it is impossible for something material to effect a change within itself; instead, one material thing is affected by another. And so the act of a proper sensory power is perceived through the common sensory power.

By contrast, the intellect does not have intellectual understanding through any material change in an organ, and so the cases are not parallel.

Article 4

Does the intellect have intellectual understanding of acts of willing?

It seems that the intellect does not have intellectual understanding of acts of willing (*non intelligat actum voluntatis*):

Objection 1: The intellect does not have cognition of anything that is not in some way present in the intellect. But an act of willing is not present in the intellect, since the intellect and the will are diverse powers. Therefore, the intellect does not have cognition of acts of willing.

Objection 2: An act takes its species from its object. But the object of the will differs from the object of the intellect. Therefore, an act of willing has a species different from that of an object of the intellect. Therefore, the intellect does not have cognition of it.

Objection 3: In *Confessiones* 10 Augustine says of the soul's affections that they are perceived "neither through images, in the way that bodies are, nor through their presence, in the way that crafts (*artes*) are, but through certain notions (*per quasdam notiones*)." But it does not seem to be possible for there to be notions of things in the soul other than the essences of the things perceived or likenesses of those things. Therefore, it seems impossible for the intellect to have cognition of the soul's affections, i.e., of acts of willing.

But contrary to this: In *De Trinitate* 10 Augustine says, "I understand myself to have an act of willing (*intelligo me velle*)."

I respond: As was explained above (q. 59, a. 1), an act of willing is nothing other than a certain inclination that follows upon an understood form, in the same way that a natural desire (*appetitus naturalis*) is an inclination that follows upon a natural form. But a thing's inclination exists within the thing itself in the way appropriate to it (*per modum eius*). Hence, a natural inclination exists naturally in a natural thing; and an inclination which is a sentient desire exists in a sensible way in a thing that has sentience; and, similarly, an intelligible inclination, which is an act of willing, exists intelligibly, as in its source and proper subject, in someone who has intellectual understanding. This is why, in *De Anima* 3, the Philosopher employs the following manner of speaking: "The will exists in reason." But if something exists intelligibly in someone who has intellectual understanding, then it follows that that thing is understood by him.

Hence, an act of willing is understood by the intellect both (a) insofar as someone perceives himself to be willing (*inquantum aliquis percipit se velle*) and also (b) insofar as someone has cognition of the nature of this act (*inquantum aliquis cognoscit naturam huius actus*) and, as a result, cognition of the nature of its source (*principium*), which is either a habit or a power.

Reply to objection 1: This argument would go through if the will and the intellect differed in subject in addition to being diverse powers. For in that case what exists in the will would be absent from the intellect. As things stand, however, since both of them are rooted (*radicetur*) in the same substance of the soul and the one is in some sense a principle of the other, it follows that what exists in the will somehow exists in the intellect as well.

Reply to objection 2: The good and the true, which are the objects of the will and the intellect, do, to be sure, differ conceptually, but, as was explained above (q. 16, a. 4 and q. 82, a. 4), the one is contained under the other. For the true is something good, and the good is something true. And so what belongs to the will falls under the intellect, and what belongs to the intellect is able to fall under the will.

Reply to objection 3: The soul's affections do not exist in the intellect just through a likeness, as bodies do, or through their presence in the subject, as crafts do. Rather, they exist in the intellect in the way that something that is derived from a principle exists in a principle that is such that a notion of what

is derived exists in it (*principiatum est in principio in quo habetur notio principiati*). And this is why Augustine says that the soul's affections exist in memory through certain notions (*per quasdam notiones*).