

QUESTION 88

How the Human Soul Understands Things That are Above It

Next we have to consider how the human soul has cognition of things that are above it, viz., immaterial substances. And on this topic there are three questions: (1) Can the human soul, in the state of the present life, have intellectual understanding of the immaterial substances which we call angels through themselves? (2) Can the human soul come to a knowledge (*notitia*) of immaterial substances through its cognition of material things? (3) Is it God that is understood by us in the first place?

Article 1

Can the human soul, in the state of the present life, have intellectual understanding of immaterial substances through themselves?

It seems that the human soul, in the state of the present life, can have intellectual understanding of immaterial substances through themselves (*possit intelligere substantias immateriales per seipsas*):

Objection 1: In *De Trinitate* 9 Augustine says, “Just as the mind itself gathers knowledge of corporeal things through the bodily senses, so it gathers knowledge of incorporeal things through its very self (*per semetipsam*).” But things of this latter sort are immaterial substances. Therefore, the mind has intellectual understanding of immaterial substances.

Objection 2: What is similar is known by means of what is similar to it. But the human mind is more similar to immaterial things than to material things, since, as is clear from what was said above (q. 76, a. 1), the mind is itself immaterial. Therefore, since our mind has intellectual understanding of material things, *a fortiori* it has intellectual understanding of immaterial things.

Objection 3: The fact that things that are maximally sensible in their own right (*secundum se maxime sensibilia*) are not maximally sensible by us stems from the fact that excesses in the case of sensibles (*excellantiae sensibilibus*) damage our sensory power. But as *De Anima* 3 says, excesses in the case of intelligibles (*excellantiae intelligibilium*) do not damage our intellect. Therefore, things that are maximally intelligible in their own right are likewise maximally intelligible to us. But since material things are intelligible only because we make them actually intelligible through abstraction from matter, it is clear that substances that are immaterial are by their nature more intelligible in their own right. Therefore, *a fortiori*, we have a much better intellectual understanding of them than of material things.

Objection 4: In *Metaphysics* 2 the Commentator says that if we could not understand abstract substances intellectually, then “nature would have acted pointlessly (*otiose*), since it would have rendered what is naturally intelligible in its own right (*intellectum in se*) unintelligible by anyone (*non intellectum ab aliquo*).” But there is nothing pointless or useless (*otiosum sive frustra*) in nature. Therefore, we can have intellectual understanding of immaterial substances.

Objection 5: The intellect is related to intelligible things in the same way that the sensory power is related to sensible things. But our sense of sight can see all bodies, regardless of whether they are higher and incorruptible bodies or lower and corruptible bodies. Therefore, our intellect can have intellectual understanding of all intelligible substances, even higher and immaterial substances.

But contrary to this: Wisdom 9:16 says, “Who will investigate the things in the heavens?” But substances of the sort in question are said to be ‘in the heavens’ (*in caelis*)—this according to Matthew 18:10 (“Their angels in heaven (*in caelis*)”). Therefore, immaterial substances cannot be understood through human inquiry (*per investigationem humanam*).

I respond: According to Plato’s opinion, not only are immaterial substances understood by us intellectually, but they are the very first things understood by us. For Plato claimed that immaterial

subsistent forms, which he called ‘ideas’, are the proper object of our intellect, and so they are understood by us in the first place and *per se* (*primo et per se*). However, the soul’s cognition is applied to material things insofar as the imagination and sensory power are mixed in with intellection (*intellectui permiscetur phantasia et sensus*). Hence, the more the soul has been purified (*depuratus*), the more it perceives the intelligible truth that belongs to the immaterial things.

By contrast, according to Aristotle’s position, which is closer to our experience (*quam magis experimur*), in the state of the present life our intellect has a natural relation to the natures of material things. Hence, as is clear from what has been said (q. 84, a. 7), our intellect does not understand anything except by turning itself toward the phantasms. And so it is clear that given the mode of cognition that we experience, we cannot have intellectual understanding in the first place and *per se* of immaterial substances, which do not fall under the sensory power or the imagination.

However, in his commentary on *De Anima* 3, Averroes claims that in this life man can in the end arrive at an intellectual understanding of separated substances because of our continuity or union with a certain separated substance which he calls the active intellect and which, because it is a separated substance, naturally understands separated substances. Hence, when the active intellect has been perfectly united with us in such a way that we are able to have perfect intellectual understanding through it, then we will understand separated substances in the same way that we now understand material substances through the passive intellect that is united with us.

Now Averroes claimed that the active intellect is united with us in the following way: Since we have intellectual understanding through the active intellect and through the contemplated intelligibles (*per intelligibilia speculata*), as is clear when we understand conclusions through their understood principles, the active intellect has to be related to the contemplated intelligibles either (a) as a principal agent to its instruments or (b) as a form to its matter. For these are the two ways in which an action is attributed to two principles. That is, the action is attributed either (a) to a principal agent and to its instrument, as when the action of cutting is attributed to the craftsman and to his saw, or (b) to a form and its subject, as when the action of heating is attributed to the heat and to the fire. But in both these ways the active intellect will be related to the contemplated intelligibles as a perfection to what is perfectible, and as an actuality to a potentiality. Now what is perfected is received along with the perfection itself all at once in something; for instance, what is actually visible is received along with the light all at once in the pupil. Therefore, the contemplated intelligibles are received along with the active intellect all at once in the passive intellect. And the greater the number of contemplated intelligibles we receive, the closer we get to the active intellect’s being perfectly united with us—so that when we have had cognition of all the contemplated intelligibles, the agent intellect will be perfectly united with us and we will be able to have cognition of all things, material and immaterial, through it. This is what he posits as ultimate human happiness. Moreover, as far as this proposal is concerned, it does not matter (a) whether in that state of happiness the passive intellect understands separated substances through the active intellect, as Averroes himself thinks, or (b) whether instead—a view Averroes attributes to Alexander—the man understands separated substances through the active intellect, and the passive intellect never understands separated substances (because he posits a corruptible passive intellect).

However, the positions just laid out cannot stand.

First of all, if the active intellect is a separated substance, it is impossible for us to formally have intellectual understanding through it. For that by which an agent formally acts is a form and actuality that belongs to the agent, since every agent acts insofar as it is actualized—just as was explained above (q. 76, a. 1) concerning the passive intellect.

Second, given the position in question, if the active intellect is a separated substance, then it is not united with us in its substance. Instead, only its light is united to us to the extent that there is a participation in the contemplated intelligibles (*secundum quod participatur in intellectis speculatis*); and

the active intellect is not united to us with respect to its other actions, so that we might thereby be able to understand immaterial substances. This is like the fact that when we see colors illuminated by the sun, it is not the sun's substance that is united with us, so that we might be able perform the sun's actions. Instead, it is only the sun's light that is united with us for seeing colors.

Third, even on the assumption that the active intellect's substance is united with us along the lines explained above, they themselves do not claim that the active intellect is totally united with us after one or two intelligibles—instead, it is totally united with us after *all* the contemplated intelligibles. But all the contemplated intelligibles together fall short of the active intellect's power, since it takes much more power to understand separated substances intellectually than to understand all material substances. Hence, it is clear that even if all material substances were understood intellectually, the active intellect would not be united with us in such a way that we would be able to understand separated substances through it.

Fourth, it is scarcely possible for anyone in this world to have an intellectual understanding of all material intelligibles, and so no one—or at most very few—would attain happiness. But this contradicts the Philosopher in *Ethics* 1, where he says that happiness is “a general good that is accessible to all who are not bereft of virtue.” It is likewise contrary to reason that the end of a species should be attained only by a few members of the species (*ut in paucioribus consequantur ea quae continentur sub specie*).

Fifth, in *Ethics* 1 the Philosopher explicitly says that happiness “is an operation in accord with perfect virtue.” And having enumerated many virtues, he concludes in *Ethics* 10 that ultimate happiness, which consists in the cognition of the most intelligible things, is in accord with the virtue of wisdom, which he had claimed in *Ethics* 6 is “the chief among the speculative virtues.” Hence, it is clear that Aristotle located man's ultimate happiness in cognition of separated substances of a sort that can be had through the speculative sciences—and not through the sort of continuity with the active intellect fabricated by some.

Sixth, it was shown above (q. 79, a. 4) that the active intellect is not a separated substance, but a certain power of the soul that extends actively to the same things that the passive intellect extends to passively. For as *De Anima* 3 says, the passive intellect “is that by which the intellect becomes all things,” whereas the active intellect is “that by which the intellect makes all things.” Therefore, both the active intellect and the passive intellect extend, in the state of the present life, only to material things, which the active intellect makes actually intelligible and which are received in the passive intellect.

Hence, in the state of the present life, we cannot understand immaterial substances through themselves either by means of the passive intellect or by means of the active intellect.

Reply to objection 1: From this quotation from Augustine one can infer that what our mind is capable of attaining by way of cognition of incorporeal things is such that the mind can have this cognition through itself. And this is true to the extent that even among the philosophers one finds the claim that knowledge concerning the soul is a certain source of cognition about separated substances. For by understanding itself, our soul takes a step toward having the sort of cognition of incorporeal substances that it is possible for it to have. But it does not, by understanding itself, understand them absolutely speaking or perfectly.

Reply to objection 2: Likeness to a nature is not a sufficient explanation for cognition; otherwise, one would have to say what Empedocles said, viz., that the soul shares in the nature of all things in order to have cognition of all things. Instead, what is required for cognition is that a likeness of the thing understood should exist in the one having the cognition as a certain form of his own. Now in the state of the present life our passive intellect is apt to be informed by the likenesses of material things abstracted from phantasms, and so it has a better cognition of material substances than of immaterial substances.

Reply to objection 3: The object must have a certain proportion to the cognitive power—more specifically, a proportion of what is active to what is passive, and a proportion of what is perfect to what

is perfectible. Hence, the fact that excessive sensibles (*excellencia sensibilia*) are not grasped by the sensory power is explained not only by the fact that they damage the sensory organs but also by the fact that they are disproportionate to the sentient powers. And it is in this latter way that immaterial substances are disproportionate to our intellect, in its present state, with the result that they cannot be understood by it.

Reply to objection 4: This argument of the Commentator's is defective in several ways.

First, from the fact that separated substances are not understood by us, it does not follow that they are not understood by any intellect. For they are understood by themselves and by one another.

Second, separated substances do not have being understood by us as their end. But what is called 'pointless' or 'useless' is that which does not attain the end for which it exists. And so even if immaterial substances were not understood in any way by us, it would not follow that they are useless.

Reply to objection 5: The sensory power has cognition of higher and lower bodies in the same way, viz., through an organ's being affected by the sensible thing. But we do not have intellectual cognition of material substances, which are understood by means of abstraction, in the same way that we have intellectual cognition of immaterial substances, which cannot be understood in this way by us, since there are no phantasms of them.

Article 2

Can our intellect arrive at an intellectual understanding of immaterial substances through its cognition of material things?

It seems that our intellect can arrive at an intellectual understanding of immaterial substances through its cognition of material things:

Objection 1: In *De Caelesti Hierarchia*, chap. 1, Dionysius says, "It is impossible for the human mind to be stimulated upward to the immaterial contemplation of the heavenly hierarchies unless in its own right it uses material guidance." Therefore, it follows that we can be led by material things to an intellectual understanding of immaterial substances.

Objection 2: Scientific knowledge exists in the intellect. But there are sciences about immaterial substances, along with definitions. For instance, Damascene defines an angel, and certain texts about angels are proposed in both the theological and philosophical disciplines. Therefore, immaterial substances can be understood by us.

Objection 3: The human soul belongs to the genus of immaterial substances. But it itself can be understood intellectually by us through its own act, by which it understands material things. Therefore, other immaterial substances, too, can be understood by us through their effects on material things.

Objection 4: The only sort of cause that cannot be comprehended through its effects is one which lies at an infinite distance from its effects. But this is proper to God alone. Therefore, other immaterial substances, which are created, can be understood by us through material things.

But contrary to this: In *De Divinis Nominibus*, chap. 1, Dionysius says, "Intelligible things cannot be understood by means of sensible things, and simples cannot be understood by means of composites, and incorporeal things cannot be understood by means of corporeal things."

I respond: As Averroes reports in *De Anima* 3, a thinker by the name of Avempace held that through the understanding of material substances we are able to arrive, through true philosophical principles, at an intellectual understanding of immaterial substances. For given that our intellect is able to abstract the 'what-ness' (*quidditas*) of a material thing from matter, if there is still something material

left in that ‘what-ness’, our intellect will be able to do another abstraction; and since this process does not go on to infinity, it will be able at last to arrive at an understanding of a ‘what-ness’ that is wholly without matter. And this is what it is to understand an immaterial substance intellectually.

This argument would be effective if, as the Platonists held, immaterial substances were the forms and species of the material things around us. However, if we do not hold this but presuppose instead that immaterial substances have a nature that is altogether different from the ‘what-nesses’ of material things, then no matter how much our intellect abstracts the ‘what-ness’ of a material thing from matter, it will never arrive at anything like an immaterial substance. And so it is not the case that through material substances we can perfectly (*perfecte*) understand immaterial things.

Reply to objection 1: We can ascend from material things to some sort of cognition of immaterial things, but not to perfect cognition, since there is not enough likeness (*comparatio*) between material things and immaterial things. Instead, as Dionysius points out in *De Caelesti Hierarchia*, chap. 2, if the likenesses taken from material things are used for understanding immaterial things, they turn out to be very dissimilar.

Reply to objection 2: In the sciences the higher things are treated principally through the way of negation (*per viam remotionis*). So, for instance, Aristotle makes the celestial bodies known by negating the properties of lower bodies. Hence, *a fortiori*, we cannot have cognition of immaterial substances in such a way as to apprehend their ‘what-nesses’. Instead, the treatments proposed to us in the sciences about immaterial substances proceed by appeal to the way of negation and to certain of their relations to material things.

Reply to objection 3: The human soul has intellective cognition of itself through its own act of understanding, which is the act proper to it and which perfectly reveals its power and nature. By contrast, the human soul is not able, either through its own act or through any other features found in material things, to have a perfect cognition of the power or nature of immaterial substances. For material things do not measure up to (*non adaequant*) the powers of immaterial substances.

Reply to objection 4: Created immaterial substances do not share the same *natural* genus with material substances, since immaterial substances do not have the same type of power or matter. However, they do share the same *logical* genus with material substances, since even immaterial substances are in the category of *substance*, given that their ‘what-ness’ is not the same as their *esse*.

By contrast, God does not share with material substances either a *natural* genus or a *logical* genus, since, as was explained above (q. 3, a. 5), there is no sense in which God is in a genus. Hence, through the likenesses of material things something affirmative can be understood of the angels in accord with a common conception (*secundum rationem communem*), though not in accord with any conception of a species (*secundum rationem speciei*); but this cannot occur in any way in the case of God.

Article 3

Is God the first thing that the human mind has cognition of?

It seems that God is the first thing (*primum*) that the human mind has cognition of:

Objection 1: That in which all other things are understood and by appeal to which we pass judgment on other things is the first object understood by us—in the way that light is sensed by the eye, and in the way that first principles are understood by the intellect. But as Augustine says in *De Trinitate* and in *De Vera Religione*, we have cognition of all things in the light shed by the first truth, and it is through this truth that we pass judgment on all things. Therefore, God is that which is first understood

by us.

Objection 2: That because of which a thing is such-and-such is itself such-and-such to a greater degree (*propter quod unumquodque, et illud magis*). But God is a cause of all of our cognitions, since as John 1:9 says, “He is the true light, which enlightens every man who comes into the world.” Therefore, God is that which is understood by us in the first place and to the greatest degree.

Objection 3: That which is first understood in an image is the exemplar by reference to which the image is formed (*exemplar quo imago formatur*). But as Augustine says, the image of God exists in our mind. Therefore, God is that which is first understood in our mind.

But contrary to this: John 1:18 says, “No one has ever seen God.”

I respond: Since, as has been explained (a. 1), the human intellect cannot, in the state of the present life, have cognition of created immaterial substances, *a fortiori* it cannot have cognition of the essence of the uncreated substance. Hence, one should reply simply that God is not the first object understood by us; instead, we come to a cognition of God through creatures—this according to the Apostle in Romans 1:20 (“The invisible things of God are clearly seen, being understood through the things that have been made”).

Now, as has been explained many times above (q. 84, a. 7 and q. 85, a. 8 and q. 87, a. 2), in the state of the present life the first thing understood by us is the ‘what-ness’ of a material thing, which is the object of our intellect.

Reply to objection 1: The sense in which we understand and pass judgment on all things in the light of the first truth is that, as was explained above (q. 12, a. 2 and q. 84, a. 5), the intellect’s very light—whether its natural light (*lumen naturale*) or the light of grace (*lumen gratuitum*)—is nothing other than the imprint of the first truth. Hence, since our intellect’s light is itself related to our intellect not as *that which* is understood but as *that by which* things are understood, *a fortiori* God is not that which is first understood by our intellect.

Reply to objection 2: As was explained above (q. 87, a. 2), the dictum ‘That because of which a thing is such-and-such is itself such-and-such to a greater degree’ must be thought of as applying to things that belong to the same order.

Now the sense in which other things are understood ‘because of God’ is not that God is the first object, but rather that He is the first cause of our cognitive power.

Reply to objection 3: If the image of God in our soul were perfect, in the way that the Son is the perfect Image of the Father, then our mind would immediately have an intellective understanding of God. However, our mind is an imperfect image. Hence, the argument does not go through.