

Question 85

Of the Mode and Order of Understanding

Article One: Whether Our Intellect Understands Corporeal and Material Things by Abstraction from Phantasms?

Obj. one: "It would seem that our intellect does not understand corporeal and material things by abstraction from the phantasms. For the intellect is false if it understands an object otherwise than it really is." A phantasm is a sense image. It is an internally visualization of something the senses perceive. Such as the smell of a rose brings to mind what a rose is and how it looks. The rose has a typical appearance though there are many variations. A rose has common colors though there are many and even multiple colored roses. What this object is getting at is that though we may try to gain a real picture of something in our mind's eye, it cannot be the real thing. So this objection concludes no, it would not be perceiving reality, but only a figment of one's imagination.

Obj. two: Abstraction of the universal form is inadequate for discerning corporeal and material things because even though a material thing is naturally known by its definition, but material things cannot be understood apart from matter for matter is the principle of individualization. (PM) "Therefore material things cannot be understood by abstraction of the universal form."

On the Contrary: The philosopher (De Anima iii. 4) says that *things are intelligible in proportion as they are separable from matter*. Things therefore, must be abstracted from matter and material images known as phantasms.

I answer that: According to TA there are three powers of knowledge. One is through the sense, which is the act of a corporeal organ. Therefore every power of the sensitive part can only have knowledge of the individual. The other grade of cognitive power which is neither the act of a corporeal organ, not in any way connected with corporeal, but is the angelic intellect, the object of whose cognitive power is therefore a form existing apart from matter: for though angels know material things, yet they do not know them save in something immaterial, namely either in themselves or in God. But humans have a intellect which holds a middle place. This is not an act of an organ, but it is a power of the soul which is the form of the body. It is clear and proper to it to know a form existing individually in corporeal matter, but not as existing in this individual matter. But to know what is in individual matter, not as existing in such matter, is to abstract the form from individual matter which is represented by the phantasms. Therefore we must needs say that our intellect understands material things by abstracting from the phantasms' and through material things thus considered we acquire some knowledge of immaterial things, just as, on the contrary, angels know material things through the immaterial.

Reply Obj. one: "Abstractions may occur in two ways: First by way composition and division; thus we may understand that one thing does not exist in some other, or that it is separate therefrom. Secondly,

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by way of simple and absolute consideration; thus we understand one thing without considering the other. Thus for the intellect to abstract one from another things which are not really abstract from one another, does, in the first mode of abstraction imply falsehood. But, in the second mode of abstraction, for the intellect to abstract things which are not really abstract from one another, does not involve falsehood, as clearly appears in the cases of the senses...”

Reply to Obj. two: “Some have thought that the species of a natural thing is a form only, and that matter is not part of the species {essence}. If that were so, matter would not enter into the definition of natural things. Therefore it must be said otherwise, that matter is twofold: common, and signate or individual; common, such as flesh and bone; and individual, as this flesh and these bones. The intellect therefore abstracts the species of a natural thing from the individual sensible matter, but not from the common sensible matter; for example, it abstracts the species of man from this flesh and these bones, which do not belong to the species as such, but to the individual (Metaph. Vii. 10), and need not be considered in the species: whereas the species of man cannot be abstracted by the intellect from *flesh and bones*.”

“Mathematical species, however, can be abstracted by the intellect from sensible matter, not only from individual, but also from common not from common intelligible matter, but only from individual matter.”

Article Two: Whether the Intelligible Species Abstracted from the Phantasm Is Related to Our Intellect As that Which is Understood?

Obj. two: “Further, what is actually understood must be in something; else it would be nothing. But it is not in something outside the soul: for, since what is outside the soul is material, nothing therein can be actually understood. Therefore what is actually understood is in the intellect. Consequently it can be nothing else than the aforesaid intelligible species...”

On the contrary: “The intelligible species is to the intellect what the sensible image is to the sense. But the sensible image is not what is perceived, but rather that by which sense perceives. Therefore the intelligible species is not what is actually understood, but that by which the intellect understands.”

I answer that: “Some have asserted that our intellectual faculties know only the impression made on them; as, for example, that sense is cognizant only of the impression made on its own organ. According to this theory, the intellect understands only its own impression, namely, the intelligible species which it has received, so that this species is what is understood.”

TA insists that for two reasons the former statement is false because the things we understand are the objects of science; therefore if what we understand is merely the intelligible species in the soul, it would follow that every science would not be concerned with objects outside the soul, but only with the intelligible species within the soul. . .Secondly, it is untrue, because it would lead to the opinion of the

Article Two: I answer that cont.

ancients [the Sophists] who maintained that *whatever seems, is true* [cf. Arist., *Metaph.* iii. 5], and that consequently contradictories are true simultaneously." Opinion would be equally true whether held by one person or another. (PM) ". . . But since the intellect reflects upon itself, by such reflection it understands both its own act of intelligence, and the species by which it understands. Thus the intelligible species is that which is understood is the object, of which the species is the likeness. . ."

Reply Obj. two: "In these words *the thing actually understood* there is a double implication: the thing which is understood, and the fact that it is understood. In like manner the words *abstract universal* imply two things, the nature of a thing and its abstraction or universality. Therefore the nature itself to which it occurs to be understood, abstracted, or considered as universal, is only in individuals; but that it is understood, abstracted, or considered as universal, is in the intellect. . . humanity understood is only in this or that man; but that humanity be apprehended without conditions of individuality, that is, that it be abstracted and consequently considered as universal, occurs to humanity inasmuch as it is brought under the consideration of the intellect."

Article Five: Whether Our Intellect Understands by Composition and Division?

I answer that: TA says: "The human intellect must of necessity understand by composition and division. For since the intellect passes from potentiality to act, it has a likeness to things which are generated which do not attain to perfection all at once but acquire it by degrees: so likewise the human intellect does not acquire perfect knowledge by the first act of apprehension; but it first apprehends something about its object, such as its quiddity, and this is its first and proper object; and then it understands the properties, accidents and the various relations of the essence." From composition and division the human mind goes to the process of reason. (PM) "Now God and the angels do not have to use this process for the Divine and the angelic intellect know, indeed, composition, division, and reasoning, not by the process itself, but by understanding the simple essence."

Article six: Whether the Intellect Can be False?

Obj. one: "It would seem that the intellect can be false, for the Philosopher says (*Metaph.* vi, *Did.* V. 4) that *truth and falsehood are in the mind*. But the mind and intellect are the same, as is shown above (Q. 70, A. 1). Therefore falsehood may be in the mind . . ."

On the contrary: "Augustine says (QQ. 83, qu. 32), that *everyone who is deceived, does not rightly understand that wherein he is deceived*, And the Philosopher says (*De Anima* iii 10), that *the intellect is always true*."

I answer that: "Every faculty, as such, is *per se* directed to its proper object. . . Hence, so long as the faculty, its judgment concerning its own proper object does not fail. . . the intellect, however, may be accidentally deceived in the quiddity of that is composite things, not by the defect of its organ, for the intellect is a faculty that is independent of an organ, but on the part of the composition affecting the

Article six: I answer that cont.

definition, when, for instance, the definition of a thing is false in relation to something else, as the definition of a circle applied to a triangle, or when a definition is false in itself as involving the composition of things incompatible.” PK says that St. Thomas does not mean that there are no false judgments or opinions in our intellect, but that there are no “*false forms*”, or *false concepts*.” TA is merely saying that the intellect either does not understand a form, or it does understand it. This is not a case of falsity, but a matter of understanding a definition; falsehood only occurs in judgment. (PM)

Reply to Obj. one: “The Philosopher says that falsehood is in the intellect in regard to composition and division. . . But in the absolute consideration of the quiddity of a thing, and of those things which are known thereby, the intellect is never deceived.”

Article Seven: Whether One Person Can Understand One and the Same Thing Better Than Another Can?

On the contrary, “Experience shows that some understand more profoundly than do others, as one who carries a conclusion to its first principles and ultimate cause understands it better than the one who reduces it only to its proximate causes.”

I answer that: “A thing being understood more by one than by another may be taken in two senses. First, so that the word *more* be taken as determining the act of understanding as regards the thing understood: and thus, one cannot understand the same thing more than another, because to understand it otherwise than as it is, either better or worse, would entail being deceived, and such a one would not understand it, as Augustine argues (loc. Cit). In another sense the word *more* can be taken as determining the act of understanding on the part of him who understands; and so one may understand the same thing better than someone else, through having a greater power of understanding: just as a man may see thing better with his bodily sight, whose power is greater, and whose sight is more perfect.

The same applies to the intellect in two ways: First, as regards the intellect itself, which is more perfect. For it is plain that the better the disposition of a body, the better the soul allotted to it; which clearly appears some men have bodies in things of different species; and the reason thereof is that act and form are received into matter according to matter’s capacity; thus because some men have bodies of better disposition, their souls have a greater power of understanding. . . Secondly, this occurs in regard to the lower powers of which the intellect has need in its operation for those in whom the imaginative, cognitive and memorative powers are of better disposition, are better disposed to understand.”

Q & A for Question 85

1. Does Our Intellect Understand Corporeal and Material Things by Abstraction from Phantasms?

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2. Does the Intelligible Species Abstracted from the Phantasm Relate to Our Intellect As that Which is Understood?

"Some have asserted that our intellectual faculties know only the impression made on them; as, for example, that sense is cognizant only of the impression made on its own organ. According to this theory, the intellect understands only its own impression, namely, the intelligible species which it has received, so that this species is what is understood."

3. Does Our Intellect Understand by Composition and Division?

TA says: "The human intellect must of necessity understand by composition and division. For since the intellect passes from potentiality to act, it has a likeness to things which are generated which do not attain to perfection all at once but acquire it by degrees: so likewise the human intellect does not acquire perfect knowledge by the first act of apprehension; but it first apprehends something about its object, such as its quiddity, and this is its first and proper object; and then it understands the properties, accidents and the various relations of the essence." From composition and division the human mind goes to the process of reason. (PM) "Now God and the angels do not have to use this process for the Divine and the angelic intellect know, indeed, composition, division, and reasoning, not by the process itself, but by understanding the simple essence."

4. Can the Intellect be False?

"Every faculty, as such, is per se directed to its proper object. . . Hence, so long as the faculty, its judgment concerning its own proper object does not fail. . . the intellect, however, may be accidentally deceived in the quiddity of that is composite things, not by the defect of its organ, for the intellect is a faculty that is independent of an organ, but on the part of the composition affecting the definition, when, for instance, the definition of a thing is false in relation to something else, as the definition of a circle applied to a triangle, or when a definition is false in itself as involving the composition of things incompatible." PK says that St. Thomas does not mean that there are no false judgments or opinions in our intellect, but that there are no "false forms", or false concepts." TA is merely saying that the

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intellect either does not understand a form, or it does understand it. This is not a case of falsity, but a matter of understanding a definition; falsehood only occurs in judgment. (PM)

5. Can One Person Understand One and the Same Thing Better Than Another Can?

“A thing being understood more by one than by another may be taken in two senses. First, so that the word more be taken as determining the act of understanding as regards the thing understood: and thus, one cannot understand the same thing more than another, because to understand it otherwise than as it is, either better or worse, would entail being deceived, and such a one would not understand it, as Augustine argues (*loc. Cit.*). In another sense the word more can be taken as determining the act of understanding on the part of him who understands; and so one may understand the same thing better than someone else, through having a greater power of understanding: just as a man may see thing better with his bodily sight, whose power is greater, and whose sight is more perfect.

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