

QUESTION 86

What Our Intellect Has Cognition of in Material Things

Next we have to consider what our intellect understands in material things. And on this topic there are four questions: (1) Does our intellect have cognition of singulars? (2) Does our intellect have cognition of infinitely many things? (3) Does our intellect have cognition of contingent things? (4) Does our intellect have cognition of future things?

Article 1

Does our intellect have cognition of singulars?

It seems that our intellect has cognition of singulars (*cognoscat singularia*):

Objection 1: If someone has cognition of a composition, then he has cognition of the terms (*extrema*) of the composition. But our intellect has cognition of the composition ‘Socrates is a man’; for it is the intellect’s role to form a proposition. Therefore, our intellect has cognition of the singular thing that is Socrates.

Objection 2: The practical intellect directs one in acting. But acts have to do with singulars. Therefore, the intellect has cognition of singulars.

Objection 3: Our intellect has an intellective understanding of itself. But the intellect is itself a singular; otherwise, it would not have any acts at all, since acts belong to singular things. Therefore, our intellect has cognition of something singular.

Objection 4: A higher power is capable of whatever a lower power is capable of. But the sensory power has cognition of singulars. Therefore, *a fortiori*, so does the intellect.

But contrary to this: In *Physics* 1 the Philosopher says, “The universal is known in accord with reason (*secundum rationem*), the singular in accord with the sensory power (*secundum sensum*).”

I respond: Our intellect cannot have a direct and primary cognition of the singular in material things. The reason for this is that the principle of singularity in material things is individual matter (*materia individualis*), while, as was explained above (q. 85, a. 1), our intellect has intellective understanding by abstracting the intelligible species from individual matter. But it is the universal that is abstracted from individual matter. Hence, our intellect has direct cognition only of the universals (*directe est cognoscitivus nisi universalium*).

However, our intellect can have cognition of the singular indirectly and, as it were, by a sort of turning back (*indirecte et quasi per quandam reflexionem*). For as was explained above (q. 85, a. 7), even after it has abstracted intelligible species, it cannot have actual intellective understanding except by turning itself to the phantasms, in which it has intellective understanding of the intelligible species, as *De Anima* 3 says.

So, then, our intellect understands the universal itself directly through the intelligible species, whereas it indirectly understands the singulars that the phantasms are phantasms of. And it is in this way that it forms the proposition ‘Socrates is a man’.

Reply to objection 1: The reply to the first object is obvious from what was just said.

Reply to objection 2: As *Ethics* 7 puts it, the choice of a particular action (*electio particularis operabilis*) is, as it were, the conclusion of the practical intellect’s syllogism. But a singular conclusion cannot be inferred directly from a universal proposition; rather, it is inferred by the mediation of some assumed singular proposition. Hence, as *De Anima* 3 says, the practical intellect’s universal conception effects movement only through the mediation of a particular apprehension by the sentient part of the soul.

Reply to objection 3: The problem with a singular’s being intelligible is not that it is *singular* but

rather that it is *material*, since nothing is understood intellectually except in an immaterial mode. And so if a given singular, such as the intellect, is immaterial, there is no problem with its being intelligible (*hoc non repugnat intelligibilitati*).

Reply to objection 4: A higher power can do what a lower power does, but it does it in a more eminent way. Hence, what the sensory power has cognition of materially and concretely—which is what it is to have direct cognition of a singular—the intellect has cognition of immaterially and abstractly—which is what it is to have cognition of a universal.

Article 2

Can our intellect have cognition of infinitely many things?

It seems that our intellect can have cognition of infinitely many things (*possit cognoscere infinita*):

Objection 1: God exceeds all infinities (*excedit omnia infinita*). But as was explained above (q. 12, a. 1), our intellect can have cognition of God. Therefore, *a fortiori*, our intellect can have cognition of all other infinities.

Objection 2: Our intellect is apt by nature to have cognition of genera and species. But some genera—e.g., *number*, *ratio*, and *shape*—have infinitely many species. Therefore, our intellect can have cognition of infinitely many things.

Objection 3: If one body did not prevent another body from being in one and the same place, then nothing would prevent infinitely many bodies from being in one place. But one intelligible species does not prevent another intelligible species from existing simultaneously in the same intellect, since it is possible to have habitual knowledge of many things (*multa scire in habitu*). Therefore, nothing prevents our intellect from having habitual knowledge of infinitely many things.

Objection 4: Since, as was explained above (q. 76, a. 1), our intellect is not a power that belongs to corporeal matter, it seems to be infinite in potentiality. But an infinite power ranges over infinitely many things (*virtus infinita est super infinita*). Therefore, our intellect can have cognition of infinitely many things.

But contrary to this: *Physics* 1 says, “The infinite, insofar as it is infinite, is unknown.”

I respond: Since a power is proportioned to its object, the intellect must be related to the infinite in the way that it is related to its object, viz., the ‘what-ness’ (*quidditas*) of a material thing. Now as *Physics* 3 explains, in material things there is no actual infinity (*infinitum in actu*), but only a potential infinity (*infinitum in potentia*) insofar as one thing succeeds another. And so a *potential infinity* is found in our intellect when it takes one thing after another, since our intellect never has an intellectual understanding of so many things that it cannot have an intellectual understanding of more things.

However, our intellect cannot have either an *actual* or a *habitual* cognition of infinitely many things.

Our intellect cannot have an *actual* cognition of infinitely many things, because it can have an actual cognition all at once only of that which it understands through a single species. But an infinity does not have a single species; otherwise, it would have the character of something total and complete. And so an infinity cannot be understood intellectually except by taking one part after another. This is clear from the definition of an infinity given in *Physics* 3. For the infinite is “that which is such that when one takes a quantity from it, it is always possible to take more,” and so it would be possible to have an actual cognition of an infinity only if all its parts were enumerated—which is impossible.

For the same reason, we cannot have a *habitual* intellectual cognition of infinitely many things. For

in our case a habitual cognition is caused by an actual thought, since as *Ethics 2* says, it is by understanding intellectually that we become scientific knowers (*scientes*). Hence, we would not be able to have the habit of having a distinct cognition of infinitely many things unless we had thought of all the infinitely many things by enumerating them through a succession of cognitions—which is impossible.

And so our intellect cannot have either an actual or habitual cognition of infinitely many things; rather, as has been explained, it can have a cognition of infinitely many things only in potentiality.

Reply to objection 1: As was explained above (q. 7, a. 1), God is called infinite as a form that is not terminated by any *matter*, whereas among material things something is called infinite because of a lack of *formal* termination (*per privationem formalis terminationis*). And because form is known in its own right (*secundum se*), whereas matter without form is not known, it follows that a material infinite is unknown in its own right. By contrast, a formal infinite, i.e., God, is known in His own right (*notum secundum se*), but He is unknown as far as we are concerned (*ignotum quoad nos*) because of the weakness of our intellect, which in the state of the present life has a natural ability to understand material things. And so in our present state we cannot know God except through His material effects. However, in our future state this defect of our intellect will be removed by [the light of] glory, and at that time we will be able to see God Himself in His essence—though without comprehending Him.

Reply to objection 2: Our intellect is apt to have a cognition of species by abstracting them from phantasms. And so one cannot have either an actual or habitual cognition of those species of numbers or shapes which he has not imagined—except, perhaps, generically (*in genere*) and in their general principles, which is to understand them potentially and indistinctly.

Reply to objection 3: If two or more bodies were in one place, they would not have to enter that place successively in such a way that the located bodies would be enumerated by a succession of entrances. By contrast, intelligible species enter our intellect successively, since it is not the case that many of them are actually understood all at once. And so it is necessary for the species in our intellect to be numbered and not to be infinitely many.

Reply to objection 4: Our intellect has cognition of the infinite in the same sense in which it is infinite in power. For its power is infinite in the sense that it is not terminated by corporeal matter. And it has cognition of the universal, which is abstracted from the material individual, and, as a result, it is not terminated in any individual, but, as far as it itself is concerned, it extends to infinitely many individuals.

Article 3

Does our intellect have cognition of contingent things?

It seems that our intellect does not have cognition of contingent things (*non sit cognoscitivus contingentium*):

Objection 1: As *Ethics 6* says, understanding (*intellectus*), scientific knowledge (*scientia*), and wisdom (*sapientia*) have to do with necessary things and not contingent things.

Objection 2: As *Physics 4* explains, things that exist at some times and not at others are measured by time. But the intellect abstracts from time in the same way that it abstracts from the other conditions of matter. Therefore, since it is a property of contingent things to exist at some times and not at others, it seems that our intellect cannot have cognition of contingent things.

But contrary to this: All scientific knowledge exists in the intellect. But some sciences have to do with contingent things—e.g., the moral sciences, which have to do with human acts subject to free choice, and the natural sciences, as regards that part of them which treats generable and corruptible

things. Therefore, the intellect has cognition of contingent things.

I respond: Contingent things can be thought of in two ways: first, insofar as they are contingent and, second, insofar as something necessary is found in them. For nothing is contingent to such an extent that it has nothing necessary within itself. For instance, the very thing that is Socrates' running is, to be sure, contingent in itself, but the relation of running to movement is necessary, since it is necessary that Socrates is moving if he is running.

Each thing is contingent on the part of its matter. For the contingent is that which is able to be and able not to be, and potentiality has to do with matter. By contrast, necessity follows upon the nature of form, since what follows upon the form is in the thing by necessity. Matter is a principle of individuation, whereas the universal notion (*ratio universalis*) is obtained by the abstraction of the form from particular matter. It was explained above (a. 1) that the intellect has *per se* and direct cognition of universals and the sensory power has *per se* and direct cognition of singulars, which, as was said above (a. 1), are also understood intellectually in a certain indirect way.

So, then, contingent things, insofar as they are contingent, are such that the sensory power has direct cognition of them and the intellect has indirect cognition of them, whereas the intellect has cognition of the universal and necessary aspects of contingent things. Hence, if we attend to the universal aspects of knowable things, all scientific knowledge has to do with what is necessary. But if we attend to the things themselves, then some scientific knowledge has to do with necessary things and some has to do with contingent things.

Reply to objection 1 and objection 2: The reply to the objections is clear from what has been said.

Article 4

Does our intellect have cognition of future things?

It seems that our intellect has cognition of future things (*cognoscat futura*):

Objection 1: Our intellect has cognition through intelligible species, which abstract from the here and now, and so they are related indifferently to all times. But the intellect can have cognition of present things. Therefore, it can have cognition of future things.

Objection 2: When a man is bereft of his sensory powers, he is able to have cognition of some future things, as is clear in the case of those who are asleep and those who are delirious. But when someone is bereft of his sensory powers, his intellect becomes stronger. Therefore, the intellect, as far as it itself is concerned, has cognition of future things.

Objection 3: Man's intellective cognition is more efficacious than any sort of cognition on the part of brute animals. But there are certain animals that have cognition of some future things; for instance, crows that caw repeatedly signify that rain is coming soon. Therefore, *a fortiori*, the human intellect can have cognition of future things.

But contrary to this: Ecclesiastes 8:6-7 says, "There is a great affliction for man, because he is ignorant of things past; and things to come he cannot know by any messenger."

I respond: As with the cognition of contingent things, so in the same way we have to draw a distinction concerning the cognition of future things. For *insofar as they fall under a time*, future things are singulars, which, as was explained above (a. 1), the human intellect has cognition of only by turning back [to the phantasms] (*per reflexionem*). However, the *natures* of future things can be universal and perceptible by the intellect, and there can even be scientific knowledge of them.

Speaking in general about the cognition of future things, notice that there are two possible ways to have cognition of future things, viz., (a) *in themselves* and (b) *in their causes*.

Cognition of future things *in themselves* can be had only by God, to whom they are present even while they are future in the course of time; for as was explained above when we discussed God's knowledge (q. 14, a. 13), His eternal intuitive vision (*aeternus intuitus*) ranges over the whole course of time all at once.

However, even we can have cognition of future things insofar as they exist *in their causes*. And if they exist in their causes in such a way that they proceed from those causes with necessity, then our cognition has the certitude of scientific knowledge (*cognoscuntur per certitudinem scientiae*), as when an astronomer (*astrologus*) foreknows a future eclipse. On the other hand, if they exist in their causes in such a way that they proceed from those causes in most cases (*ut in pluribus*), then there can be cognition of them through a prediction that is more or less certain (*conjectura vel magis vel minus certam*), depending on whether the causes are more or less inclined toward the effects.

Reply to objection 1: This argument goes through for a cognition that involves the universal aspects of causes, on the basis of which there can be a cognition of future things that stems from the way in which an effect is ordered toward its cause (*secundum modum ordinis effectus ad causam*).

Reply to objection 2: As Augustine puts it in *Confessiones* 12, the soul has a certain power of prophecy, so that it is able, by its nature, to have cognition of future things; and so when it withdraws from the bodily senses and in a sense reverts to itself, it participates in the knowledge of future things.

And this opinion would indeed be reasonable if we held, as the Platonists do, that the soul receives its cognition of things by participating in the ideas. For in that case, if it were unimpeded by the body, the soul would by its nature have cognition of the universal causes of all effects. Hence, it knows future things when it is withdrawn from the body's senses.

However, since this mode of cognition is not connatural to our intellect, given that our intellect instead receives its cognition from the sensory powers, it follows that it is not because of the soul's nature that it has cognition of future things when it turns itself away from the senses, but rather because of the action of certain higher spiritual or corporeal causes (*per impressionem aliquarum causarum superiorum spiritualium et corporalium*).

Through *spiritual* causes, as when a human intellect is illuminated by God's power through the ministry of the angels and its phantasms are ordered toward the cognition of future things—or even, as was explained above (q. 57, a. 3), when through the action of demons there is a movement in the imagination toward foreknowing certain future things that the demons have cognition of. It is when it is turned away from the senses that the human soul is more susceptible to these impressions from spiritual causes; for in turning away from the senses it becomes more like the spiritual substances and more unimpeded by external disturbances.

This also happens through the action of higher *corporeal* causes. For it is clear that higher bodies act upon lower bodies. Hence, since the sentient powers are the acts of corporeal organs, it follows that the imagination is in some way affected by the action of the celestial bodies. Hence, since celestial bodies are a cause of many future things, certain signs of future things come to exist in the imagination. These signs are perceived more often at night and by those who are asleep than during the day and by those who are awake. For as *De Somno et Vigilia* says, "Impressions made by day more easily dissipate. The night air is calmer, because the nights are more silent. And within the body these impressions do the job of the sensory power because of sleep, since small interior movements are sensed more readily by those who are asleep than by those who are awake. And these movements produce phantasms, on the basis of which future things are foreseen."

Reply to objection 3: Brute animals do not have anything beyond the imagination to order their phantasms, in the way that men have reason. And so a brute animal's imagination is wholly led by the

celestial impressions. Thus, some future things, like rain and others of this type, can be known better through movements of this sort in animals than through such movements in men, who are moved by the counsel of reason. Hence, in *De Somno et Vigilia* the Philosopher says, “Some extremely foolish men have the most foreknowledge. For their mind (*intelligentia*) is not affected by cares, but is, as it were, vacuous and empty of all anxiety and moves wherever it is led.”