

QUESTION 15

Blindness of Mind and Dullness of Sense

Next we have to consider the vices opposed to knowledge and understanding. Since we treated ignorance, which is opposed to knowledge, above (*ST* 1-2, q. 76) when we were talking about the causes of sin, we have to inquire here about blindness of mind (*caccias mentis*) and dullness of sense (*hebetudo sensus*), which are opposed to the gift of understanding. And on this topic there are three questions: (1) Is blindness of mind a sin? (2) Is dullness of sense a sin distinct from blindness of mind? (3) Do these vices arise from carnal sins?

Article 1

Is blindness of mind a sin?

It seems that blindness of mind is not a sin (*caccias mentis non sit peccatum*):

Objection 1: What excuses one from sin does not seem to be a sin. But blindness excuses one from sin; for John 9:41 says, “If you were blind, you would not have sin.” Therefore, blindness of mind is not a sin.

Objection 2: The punishment (*poena*) differs from the sin (*culpa*). But blindness of mind is a certain punishment, as is clear from what is established in Isaiah 6:10 (“Make the heart of this people blind”). For since blindness is an evil, it would not be from God unless it were a punishment. Therefore, blindness of mind is not a sin.

Objection 3: As Augustine says, every sin is voluntary. But blindness of mind is not voluntary; for as Augustine says in *Confessiones* 10, “Everyone loves to have cognition of illuminating truth.” And Ecclesiastes 11:7 says, “Light is sweet, and it is delightful for the eyes to see the sun.” Therefore, blindness of mind is not a sin.

But contrary to this: In *Moralia* 31 Gregory posits blindness of mind among the vices that are caused by lust (*inter vita quae causantur ex luxuria*).

I respond: Just as corporeal blindness is the privation of that which is a principle of corporeal vision, so, too, blindness of mind is the privation of that which is a principle of mental or intellectual vision.

Now there are three principles of mental or intellectual vision:

One is *the light of natural reason*. Since this light belongs to the species *rational animal*, the soul is never deprived of it. However, as is clear in those who are mindless or furious, this light is sometimes kept from its proper act by obstacles posed by the lower powers, which, as was explained in the First Part (*ST* 1, q. 84, aa. 7-8), the human intellect needs in order to have intellectual understanding.

The second principle of intellectual vision is *a certain habitual light added to the natural light of reason*. The soul is sometimes deprived of this light, and such a privation is a blindness that is a punishment, insofar as the privation of the light of grace is posited as a punishment. Hence, Wisdom 2:21 says of some individuals, “Their malice blinded them.”

The third principle of intellectual vision is *an intelligible principle through which a man understands other things*. Now a man’s mind can either attend to or not attend to this sort of intelligible principle (*cui principio mens hominis potest intendere vel non intendere*). There are two ways in which it happens that the mind does not attend to it:

Sometimes it is because the mind has an act of will that spontaneously turns it away from considering such a principle—this according to Psalm 35:4 (“He did not want to understand in order to act well”).

In the other way, it happens because of the mind’s preoccupation with other things which it loves more and because of which it is turned away from paying attention to such a principle—this according to

Psalm 57:9 (“The fire”—i.e., concupiscence—“fell upon them, and they did not see the sun”).

Blindness of mind is a sin in both of these ways.

Reply to objection 1: The sort of blindness which excuses from sin is that which occurs by a natural defect on the part of one who is unable to see.

Reply to objection 2: This argument is talking about the second sort of blindness, which is a punishment.

Reply to objection 3: Having cognition of the truth is something lovable in its own right to everyone. However, it can be *per accidens* detestable to someone, viz., insofar as through such a cognition one is impeded from other things that he loves more.

Article 2

Is dullness of sense distinct from blindness of mind?

It seems that dullness of sense (*hebetudo sensus*) is not distinct from blindness of mind (*cacitas mentis*):

Objection 1: A single thing is the contrary to a single thing. But as is clear from Gregory in *Moralia* 2, dullness of sense is opposed to the gift of understanding; and yet blindness of mind is also opposed to it, because ‘understanding’ designates a certain principle of vision. Therefore, dullness of sense is the same as blindness of mind.

Objection 2: In *Moralia* 31 Gregory, in speaking of dullness, calls it “dullness of sense with respect to understanding” (*nominat eam hebetudinem sensus circa intelligentiam*). But to be dull of sense with respect to understanding seems to be nothing other than being deficient in understanding—which belongs to blindness of mind. Therefore, dullness of sense is the same as blindness of mind.

Objection 3: If they differ in anything, they seem especially to differ in the fact that, as was explained above (a.1), blindness of mind is voluntary, whereas dullness of sense is natural. But a natural defect is not a sin. Therefore, on this score dullness of sense would not be a sin. But this is contrary to Gregory, who numbers dullness of sense among the vices that arise from gluttony (*ex gula*).

But contrary to this: Diverse causes have diverse effects. But in *Moralia* 31 Gregory says that dullness of mind (*hebetudo mentis*) arises from gluttony, whereas blindness of mind arises from lust. Therefore, they are diverse vices.

I respond: *Dull* (*hebes*) is opposed to *sharp* (*acutum*). Now something is called ‘sharp’ because it is penetrative. Hence, something is called ‘dull’ because it is blunt and unable to penetrate.

Now a corporeal sensory power is said to penetrate a medium by means of a certain likeness insofar as it perceives its object from some distance or insofar as it is able to perceive by penetrating, as it were, to the inmost aspects of a thing. Hence, in the case of corporeal things, someone is said to have a sharp sensory power if he is able to perceive a sensible thing from afar, either by seeing it or hearing it or smelling it. And, conversely, he is said to be dull of sense if he perceives only those sensible things that are close by and large.

By way of similarity to a corporeal sense, there is likewise something called ‘sense’ with respect to intelligence, and, as *Ethics* 6 says, it has to do with certain “first terms,” just as a sensory power likewise has cognition of sensible things as certain principles of cognition. Now the sort of sense that has to do with understanding perceives its object not through the medium of corporeal distance, but rather through certain other media, as when someone perceives the essence of a thing through its property or a cause through its effects.

Therefore, someone is said to have a ‘sharp sense’ with respect to understanding (a) insofar as he

comprehends the nature of a thing immediately upon apprehending a property of it or even an effect of it, and (b) insofar as he gets to the point of considering the thing's least important aspects (*usque ad minimas conditiones rei considerandas pertingit*). By contrast, someone is said to be dull with respect to understanding insofar as he is unable to attain to a cognition of the truth about a thing except by having many things explained to him, and even then he is unable to get to the point of considering completely everything that belongs to the nature of the thing.

So, then, dullness of sense with respect to understanding implies a certain weakness of mind with respect to the consideration of spiritual goods, whereas blindness of mind implies a complete privation of the cognition of spiritual goods. And both of them are opposed to the gift of understanding, through which a man has cognition of spiritual goods by apprehending them and penetrates with subtlety to their hidden details. Hence, dullness has the character of a sin in the same way that blindness of mind does, viz., to the extent that it is voluntary, as is clear in the case of someone who, affectively drawn to carnal things, disdains or neglects the subtle consideration of spiritual things.

Reply to objection 1 and objection 2 and objection 3: This makes clear the replies to the objections.

Article 3

Do blindness of mind and dullness of sense arise from the carnal vices?

It seems that blindness of mind and dullness of sense do not arise from the carnal vices:

Objection 1: In *Retractationes* Augustine, retracting what he had said in *Soliloquia* ("God, who wishes only the clean to know the truth ..."), says, "One could reply that many unclean individuals likewise know many truths." But men are especially made unclean by the carnal vices. Therefore, blindness of mind and dullness of sense are not caused by the carnal vices.

Objection 2: Blindness of mind and dullness of sense are defects with respect to the intellectual part of the soul, whereas the carnal vices have to do with the corruption of the flesh. But the flesh does not act on the soul; rather, it is just the opposite. Therefore, the carnal vices do not cause blindness of mind and dullness of sense.

Objection 3: Each thing is acted upon more by what is closer than by what is farther away. But the spiritual vices are closer to the mind than the carnal vices are. Therefore, mental blindness and dullness of sense are caused more by the spiritual vices than by the carnal vices.

But contrary to this: In *Moralia* 31 Gregory says that dullness of sense with respect to understanding arises from gluttony, and that blindness of mind arises from lust.

I respond: The perfection of an intellectual operation in a man consists in a certain sort of abstraction from sensible phantasms. And so the more free a man's intellect is from phantasms of this sort, the better he is able to think about intelligible things and to order all sensible things—just as Anaxagoras likewise claimed that the intellect has to be 'unmixed' in order to command, and just as an agent has to be dominant over matter in order to be able to move it.

Now it is obvious that pleasure directs one's attention to the things that he takes pleasure in. Hence, in *Ethics* 10 the Philosopher says that each individual does those things best that he takes pleasure in, whereas the contrary things he does feebly or not at all. Now the carnal vices, viz., gluttony and lust, have to do with the pleasures of touch, viz., the pleasures of food and sex, which are the most vehement among all the corporeal pleasures. And so through these vices a man's attention is especially directed to corporeal things and, as a result, the man's operation with respect to intelligible things is weakened—and more through lust than through gluttony, to the extent that the pleasures of sex are more vehement than those of food.

And so lust gives rise to blindness of mind, which, as it were, totally excludes the cognition of spiritual goods, whereas gluttony gives rise to dullness of sense, which renders a man weak with respect to intelligible things of this sort. Conversely, the opposite virtues, viz., abstinence [from food] and chastity, especially dispose a man toward the perfection of intellectual operation. Hence, Daniel 1:17 says, “To these young men,” viz., those who abstained [from meat] and were continent, “God gave knowledge and learning in every book, and wisdom.”

Reply to objection 1: Even though certain individuals who are subject to the carnal vices can sometimes think subtly about intelligible things because of the excellence of their natural genius or habits added on, still, it is necessary that because of corporeal pleasures their attention is in most cases drawn back from this sort of subtlety of contemplation. And so the unclean can know some truths, but they are impeded in this by their uncleanness.

Reply to objection 2: The flesh acts on the intellective part of the soul not by altering it, but by impeding its operation in the way explained above.

Reply to objection 3: It is because the carnal vices are more remote from the mind that they do more to draw its attention away toward more remote things. Hence, they impede the mind’s operation more.