

QUESTION 172

The Cause of Prophecy

Next we have to consider the cause of prophecy. And on this topic there are six questions: (1) Is prophecy natural? (2) Does prophecy come from God through the mediation of angels? (3) Is a natural disposition required for prophecy? (4) Is moral goodness (*bonitas morum*) required for prophecy? (5) Are there any prophecies from demons? (6) Do the prophets of the demons ever speak the truth?

Article 1

Can prophecy be natural?

It seems that prophecy can be natural (*prophetia possit esse naturalis*):

Objection 1: In *Dialogi* Gregory says, “Sometimes the very power of souls, by its own subtlety, foresees something.” And in *Super Genesim ad Litteram* 12 Augustine claims that it belongs to the human soul to foresee future things insofar as it is withdrawn from the bodily senses. But this pertains to prophecy. Therefore, the soul is naturally able to attain to prophecy.

Objection 2: The human soul’s cognition is more alert when an individual is awake than when he is sleeping. But as is clear from the Philosopher in *De Somno et Vigilia*, certain individuals foresee future things in their sleep. Therefore, *a fortiori*, a man is naturally able to have precognition of future things.

Objection 3: Man is by his nature more perfect than the non-rational animals. But some non-rational animals have precognition of future things that are relevant to themselves; for instance, ants have precognition of coming rainfalls, which is clear from the fact that before a rainfall they begin to store their grain in tunnels, and, again, fish have precognition of coming storms, as is clear from their movement when they leave stormy places. There, *a fortiori*, men can naturally foreknow future things that are relevant to themselves, and these are the things that prophecy is about. Therefore, prophecy comes from nature.

Objection 4: Proverbs 29:18 says, “When prophecy fails, the people will be dispersed,” and so it is clear that prophecy is necessary for the preservation of men. But nature does not fail when it comes to necessities. Therefore, it seems that prophecy comes from nature.

But contrary to this: 2 Peter 1:21 says, “For prophecy came not by the human will at any time; instead, the holy men of God spoke when the Holy Spirit inspired them.” Therefore, prophesy comes from the gift of the Holy Spirit and not from nature.

I respond: As was explained above (q. 171, a. 6), there are two ways in which there can be prophetic precognition about future things: (a) *insofar as the future things exist in themselves*, and (b) *insofar as they exist in their causes*.

Now having cognition of future things *insofar as they exist in themselves* is proper to God’s intellect, which all things are present to in its eternity; this was explained in the First Part (*ST* 1, q. 14, a. 13, and q. 57, a. 3, and q. 86, a. 4). And so this sort of precognition of future things cannot come from nature, but can come only from divine revelation.

By contrast, things that are *future in their causes* can be foreknown through natural cognition even by a man, in the way that a physician foreknows future health or death in given causes, where men had previously come to know through experience the ordering of these causes to such-and-such effects. And there are two ways in which this sort of precognition of future things might be thought of as being *from nature*:

First, in the sense that the soul, *because of what it possesses within itself*, can *immediately* have a precognition of the future things. And on this score Augustine says in *Super Genesim ad Litteram* 12, “Some have claimed that the human soul has within itself a certain power of divination.” And this seems to accord with the opinion of Plato, who claimed that souls *have cognition of all things through participation in the Ideas*, but that this cognition is clouded in them by their being conjoined to their

bodies—though more clouded in some individuals and less in others, because of the diverse degrees of purity had by the bodies. Accordingly, it could be claimed that men with souls that are not too darkened by being united to their bodies can foreknow future things of the sort in question by their own knowledge. Now against this Augustine objects, “Why, then, can’t the soul *always* have this power”—that is, the power of divination—“whenever it wants to?”

On the other hand, since it seems closer to the truth to claim that the soul *acquires its cognition from the things that can be sensed*—this according to Aristotle’s opinion, as was explained in the First Part (*ST* 1, q. 84, a. 6)—it is better to reply, in the second way, that men do not have [by nature] any precognition of future things of the sort in question, but that they can acquire such precognition by way of their experience (*per viam experimentalem*). In this they are assisted by a natural disposition to the extent that a given man has perfection in his power of imagination and clarity in his understanding.

Still, there are two ways in which *this second* sort of precognition differs from the *first* sort, which is had by *divine revelation*:

First, because the *first* sort can have to do with any kind of event at all, and this infallibly. By contrast, the *second* sort of precognition, which can be had *naturally*, has to do [only] with effects to which human experience can extend.

Second, because the *first* sort of prophecy is in accord with unchangeable truth, but *not* the *second* sort, which can be false.

Now it is the *first* sort of precognition, and *not* the *second* sort, that properly belongs to prophecy. For as was explained above (q. 171, a. 3), prophetic cognition is about things that altogether exceed human cognition. And so one should reply that prophecy, absolutely speaking, comes only from divine revelation and cannot come from nature.

Reply to objection 1: When the soul is withdrawn from corporeal substances, it is rendered more apt to perceive the influence of spiritual substances, as well as to perceive the subtle movements which are left in the human imagination by the impressions of natural causes and which the soul is prevented from perceiving when it is occupied with corporeal substances. And this is why Gregory says that when the soul is close to death, “it has precognition of future things by the subtlety of its nature,” i.e., in the sense that it perceives even slight impressions.

An alternative reply is that the soul has cognition of future things by angelic revelation and not by its own power. For as Augustine explains in *Super Genesim ad Litteram* 12, if the soul had this by its own power, then it would have it within its power to foreknow future things whenever it wanted to—which is clearly false.

Reply to objection 2: As was explained when we were talking about divination (q. 95, a. 6), the precognition of future things that takes place in dreams is either from revelation made by spiritual substances or from a corporeal cause. Now both of these can be accomplished better in those who are sleeping than in those who are awake, since the soul of one who is awake is occupied with exterior things that can be sensed and so is less able to perceive *subtle impressions* either from spiritual substances or even from natural causes. On the other hand, as regards perfection in *judgment*, reason is more vigorous when one is awake than when one is sleeping.

Reply to objection 3: Non-rational animals have precognition of future effects only insofar as those effects are known from their causes, by which the imaginations of the animals are moved—and their imaginations are moved more than are those of men because men’s imaginations, especially in waking hours, are more disposed by reason than by the impressions made by natural causes. But reason does for a man much more abundantly what the impressions made by natural causes do in non-rational animals. And the divine grace that inspires the prophets assists a man still more.

Reply to objection 4: The prophetic light also extends to directing human acts. And on this score prophecy is necessary for governing the people—and mainly in relation to divine worship, for which grace is required and nature is not sufficient.

Article 2

Is prophetic revelation effected through the mediation of angels?

It seems that prophetic revelation is not effected through the mediation of angels:

Objection 1: Wisdom 7:27 says, “The wisdom of God transfers itself to holy men and makes them friends of God and prophets.” But it makes them friends of God without mediation (*immediate*). Therefore, it likewise makes them prophets immediately and without the mediation of angels.

Objection 2: Prophecy is posited among the gratuitously given graces. But the gratuitously given graces are from the Holy Spirit—this according to 1 Corinthians 12:4 (“There are diverse graces, but the same Spirit”). Therefore, it is not the case that prophetic revelation is effected through the mediation of angels.

Objection 3: Cassiodorus says that prophecy is “a divine revelation.” But if it were effected by the mediation of angels, it would be called an angelic revelation. Therefore, prophecy is not effected through angels.

But contrary to this: In *De Caelesti Hierarchia*, chap. 4, Dionysius says, “Our glorious fathers were used to divine visions through mediating celestial powers.” But he is speaking here of prophetic visions. Therefore, prophetic revelation is effected through the mediation of angels.

I respond: As the Apostle says in Romans 13:1, “The things that are from God are ordered.” But as Dionysius says, “God’s ordering is such that it takes care of the lowest things by means of the middle things.” But angels are in the middle between God and men, because they participate more than men do in the perfection of God’s goodness. And so divine illuminations and revelations are conveyed from God to men through the angels. Now prophetic cognition is effected by divine illumination and revelation. Hence, it is clear that it is effected through the mediation of angels (*fiat per angelos*).

Reply to objection 1: Charity, by which a man becomes a friend of God, is a perfection of the will, and only God can impress it on the will. But prophecy is a perfection of the intellect, on which an angel is likewise able to make an impression; this was explained in the First Part (*ST* 1, q. 111, a. 1). And so the argument is not the same in the two cases.

Reply to objection 2: Gratuitously given graces are attributed to the Holy Spirit as their first principle, but the Holy Spirit effects graces of this sort in men by the mediation of the ministry of angels.

Reply to objection 3: The operation of an instrument is attributed to the principal agent, in the power of which the instrument acts. And since a minister is like an instrument, prophetic revelation, which is effected by the ministry of angels, is said to be divine.

Article 3

Is a natural disposition required for prophecy?

It seems that a natural disposition is required for prophecy:

Objection 1: A prophecy is received in the prophet in accord with the recipient’s disposition. For in commenting on Amos 1:2 (“The Lord will roar from Sion”) Jerome says, “It is natural for all who want to compare one thing to another to take their comparisons from those things of which they have experience and on which they have been nourished. For instance, sailors compare their enemies to the winds and their losses to a shipwreck. So, too, Amos, who shepherded cattle, compares the fear of God to a lion’s roar.” But if something is received in someone in accord with the recipient’s mode, then it requires a natural disposition. Therefore, prophecy requires a natural disposition.

Objection 2: The contemplation that belongs to prophecy (*speculatio prophetiae*) is more lofty than the contemplation that belongs to an acquired science. But the lack of a natural disposition impedes

the contemplation that belongs to an acquired science (*impedit speculationem scientiae acquisitae*), since there are many who, because of a natural lack of disposition, cannot succeed in grasping scientific outlooks. Therefore, *a fortiori*, a natural disposition is required for prophetic contemplation (*requiritur contemplationem propheticam*).

Objection 3: The lack of a natural disposition impedes an individual more than an accidental obstacle does. But the contemplation that belongs to prophecy (*speculatio prophetiae*) is impeded by something accidental that supervenes; for in *Super Matthaeum* Jerome says, “At the time when conjugal acts are being performed, the presence of the Holy Spirit will not be given, even if it is a prophet who is complying with the duty of generating.” Therefore, *a fortiori*, a natural lack of disposition impedes prophecy. And so it seems that a good natural disposition is required for prophecy.

But contrary to this: In a homily for Pentecost Gregory says, “He”—viz., the Holy Spirit—“fills the boy harpist and makes him a Psalmist; He fills the cattle herdsman trimming sycamores and makes him a prophet.” Therefore, it is not the case that any antecedent disposition is required for prophecy, but instead it depends solely on the will of the Holy Spirit, of whom 1 Corinthians 12:11 says, “One and the same Spirit does all these things, distributing to each one as He wills.”

I respond: As has been explained (a. 1), prophecy, truly and absolutely speaking, comes from a divine inspiration, whereas what comes from a natural cause is not called prophecy except relatively speaking (*nisi secundum quid*).

However, notice that just as God, since He is a universal cause in acting, does not require matter or any disposition of matter in His corporeal effects, but instead can simultaneously induce the matter and its disposition and the form, so, too, in the case of spiritual effects He does not require any disposition, but instead can, along with the spiritual effect, simultaneously induce an appropriate disposition of the sort that is required by the order of nature. And He could further even produce the subject itself through creation in such a way as to dispose the soul for prophecy in its very creation and give to it the gift of prophecy.

Reply to objection 1: The similitudes by which a prophetic pronouncement is expressed is a matter of indifference to the prophecy. And so this is not affected by God’s operation on the prophet. On the other hand, it is removed if it conflicts in any way with the prophecy.

Reply to objection 2: The contemplation that belongs to a science is effected by a natural cause, and nature cannot operate unless there is an antecedent disposition in the matter. But this must not be said of God, who is the cause of prophecy.

Reply to objection 3: There are natural indispositions which could impede prophetic revelation if they are not removed—as, for instance, if an individual were totally lacking in natural understanding. Again, an individual is impeded from an act of prophesying by intense passion, whether the passion of anger, or a passion of sentient desire of the sort that is found in sexual intercourse, or any other passion. But God’s power, which is the cause of prophecy, removes natural indispositions of this sort.

Article 4

Is moral goodness required for prophecy?

It seems that moral goodness is required for prophecy (*bonitas morum requiratur ad prophetiam*):

Objection 1: Wisdom 7:27 says, “God’s wisdom conveys herself to holy souls throughout the nations and makes of them friends of God and prophets.” But holiness cannot exist without moral goodness and without sanctifying grace (*sine bonitatem morum et sine gratia gratum faciente*). Therefore, prophesy cannot exist without moral goodness and sanctifying grace.

Objection 2: Secrets are revealed only to friends—this according to John 25:15 (“I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything whatsoever that I have heard from my

Father”). But as Amos 3:7 says, “God reveals His secrets to the prophets.” Therefore, it seems that the prophets are friends of God. But this cannot be the case without charity. Therefore, it seems that prophecy cannot exist without charity, which does not exist in the absence of sanctifying grace.

Objection 3: Matthew 7:15 says, “Be on the lookout for false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but are inwardly rapacious wolves.” But if an individual is inwardly without grace, then he seems to be a rapacious wolf. Therefore, it seems that prophecy cannot exist without charity, which does not exist in the absence of sanctifying grace.

Objection 4: In *De Somno et Vigilia* the Philosopher says, “If the divination that belongs to sleepers is from God, then it is inappropriate for God to give it to just anyone and not to the best men.” But it is clear that the gift of prophecy is from God. Therefore, the gift of prophecy is given only to the best men.

But contrary to this: Matthew 7:22-23 says, “To those who had said, ‘Lord, did we not prophesy in your name?’ he replied, ‘I have never known you.’” But as 2 Timothy 2:19 says, “The Lord knows those who are His own.” Therefore, prophecy can exist in individuals who do not belong to God through grace.

I respond: Moral goodness can be thought of in two ways: (a) *with respect to its interior root*, which is sanctifying grace, and (b) *with respect to the interior passions of the soul and exterior actions*.

Now *sanctifying grace* is given mainly in order that a man’s soul might be joined to God through charity. Hence, in *De Trinitate* 15 Augustine says, “If the Holy Spirit were not imparted to each individual in order that He might make him a lover of God and neighbor, he would not be transferred from the left side to the right side.” Hence, if anything can exist without charity, it can exist without sanctifying grace and, consequently, without moral goodness.

Now *prophecy* can exist without *charity*. This is clear from two things:

First, from the *act* of each of them. For prophecy belongs to the intellect, the act of which precedes the act of the will, which charity perfects. Hence, in 1 Corinthians 13:1-2 the Apostle counts prophecy with other things belonging to the intellect that can be had without charity.

Second, from the *end* of each of them. For prophecy is given for its usefulness to the Church, just like the other gratuitously given graces—this according to the Apostle in 1 Corinthians 12:7 (“The manifestation of the Spirit is given to each of them for its usefulness”)—whereas it is not directly ordered toward the prophet’s own affections being joined to God, which is what charity is ordered toward.

And so prophecy can exist without moral goodness, as far as the *primary root of goodness* is concerned.

On the other hand, if we consider moral goodness with respect to *the passions of the soul and exterior actions*, then on this score an individual is impeded from prophecy by moral badness. For what is required for prophecy is a great elevation of the mind to the contemplation of spiritual things, which is impeded both by excessively strong passions and by a disordered occupation with exterior things. Hence, in 4 Kings 4:38 we read of the sons of the prophets that “they were dwelling with Elisha,” living a solitary life in order not to be deprived of the gift of prophecy because of their mundane occupations.

Reply to objection 1: The gift of prophecy is sometimes given to man *both* for the sake of its usefulness to others and *also* for the sake of the illumination of his own mind. And these are the ones whose souls God’s wisdom, “transferring itself through sanctifying grace, makes into friends of God and prophets.”

By contrast, there are some individuals who receive the gift of prophecy *only* for the sake of its usefulness to others and who are, as it were, the instruments of God’s operation. Hence, in *Super Matthaicum* Jerome says, “Sometimes prophesying and working miracles and casting out demons do not involve the merit of the individual who is acting, but instead it is the invocation of the name of Christ that does these things, or they are granted either for the condemnation of those who do the invoking or for their usefulness to those who see and hear them.”

Reply to objection 2: In his exposition of John 25:15 Gregory says, “When we love the lofty

things of heaven as they are heard, we know that we already love them, since the knowledge itself is love. Therefore, He had made known to them everything [that He had heard from His Father] because, having been transformed out of their earthly desires, they burned as torches of the greatest love.” And divine secrets are *not* always revealed to the prophets in this way.

Reply to objection 3: Not all bad individuals are “rapacious wolves,” but only those who intend to do harm to others. For in *Super Matthaicum* Chrysostom says, “Catholic teachers, even if they are sinners, are called ‘servants of the flesh’, but not rapacious wolves, because they do not have the intention of bringing Christians to ruin.” And since prophesy is ordered toward being useful to others, it is clear that [those with the intention of bringing Christians to ruin] are false prophets, since they are not sent by God for this purpose.

Reply to objection 4: Divine gifts are not always given to those who are the best individuals absolutely speaking; instead, they are sometimes given to those who are the best for receiving such a gift. And so God gives the gift of prophecy to those whom He judges to be the best to give it to.

Article 5

Does any prophecy come from demons?

It seems that no prophecy comes from demons:

Objection 1: As Cassiodorus says, prophecy is “a divine revelation.” But what is done by demons is not divine. Therefore, no prophecy can come from a demon.

Objection 2: As was explained above (q. 171, aa. 2-3), an illumination is required for prophetic cognition. But as was explained above in the First Part (*ST* 1, q. 109, a. 3), demons do not illuminate a human intellect. Therefore, no prophecy can come from a demon.

Objection 3: A sign that is related in the same way to contraries is not efficacious. But prophecy is a confirmation of the Faith; hence, a Gloss on Romans 12:6 (“... if prophecy, then according to the measure of faith”), “Notice that in the enumeration of gifts he begins with prophecy, which is the first proof that our faith is reasonable; for those who believed, having received the Spirit, prophesied.” Therefore, it is not the case that a prophecy can be given by demons.

But contrary to this: 3 Kings 18:19 says, “Gather unto me all of Israel at Mount Carmel, and the [four] hundred fifty prophets of Baal, and the four hundred prophets of the grove who eat at Jezebel’s table.” But these prophets were worshipers of demons. Therefore, it seems that a prophecy can also come from demons.

I respond: As was explained above (q. 171, a. 1), prophecy implies a cognition far removed from human cognition. Now it is clear that an intellect of a higher order can have cognition of things that are remote from the cognition of a lower intellect. But above the human intellect there is not only the divine intellect but also, according to the order of nature, the intellects of the good and bad angels. And so the demons, even by their own natural cognition, have cognition of some things which are remote from the cognition of men and which can be revealed to men.

Now there are things which are absolutely and maximally remote and which God alone has cognition of. And so prophecy *properly and absolutely speaking* (*proprie et simpliciter dicta*) comes only through divine revelation. On the other hand, the revelation made by demons can be called prophecy *in a certain respect* (*secundum quid*). Hence, those to whom something is revealed by demons are not called prophets simply speaking in Sacred Scripture; instead, they are called prophets with an addition, viz., *false* prophets or prophets *of the idols*. Hence, in *Super Genesim ad Litteram* 12 Augustine says, “When an evil spirit lays hold of men in these matters”— viz., visions— “that makes them either *demonic* prophets, or *possessed* prophets, or *false* prophets.”

Reply to objection 1: Cassiodorus is here defining prophecy *properly and absolutely speaking*.

Reply to objection 2: Demons make the things they know manifest to men not by illuminating their intellect but through a vision in the imagination or even by speaking in a way that can be sensed. And in this way the prophecy in question falls short of genuine prophecy.

Reply to objection 3: The prophecy of demons can be distinguished from divine prophecy by signs, including exterior signs. Hence, in *Super Matthaeum* Chrysostom says, “There are those who prophesy in the spirit of the devil, such as the diviners, but they are distinguished by the fact that the devil sometimes announces what is false, whereas the Holy Spirit never does.” Hence, Deuteronomy 18:21-22 says, “If you reply in silent thought, ‘How can I recognize a word that the Lord has not spoken?’, you shall have this sign: If what that prophet foretold in the name of the Lord has not come to pass, then the Lord did not speak that word.”

Article 6

Do the prophets of the demons ever foretell truths?

It seems that the prophets of the demons never foretell truths:

Objection 1: Ambrose says, “Everything true, no matter who utters it, is from the Holy Spirit.” But the prophets of the demons do not speak ‘from the Holy Spirit’, since, as 2 Corinthians 6:15 says, “Christ has no concord with Belial.” Therefore, it seems that prophets of the sort in question never foretell truths.

Objection 2: Just as true prophets are inspired by the Spirit of truth, so the prophets of the demons are inspired by the spirit of lies—this according to 3 Kings 22:22 (“I will go forth, and I will be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets”). But as was established above (a. 5 and q. 171, a. 6), the prophets inspired by the Holy Spirit never speak falsehood. Therefore, the prophets of the demons never speak truth.

Objection 3: John 8:44 says of the devil, “When he utters a lie, he is speaking on his own, for the devil is a liar and its father”—i.e., the father of the lie. But in inspiring his own prophets the devil speaks only on his own. For he is not set up as a minister of God to pronounce truth, since, as 2 Corinthians 6:14 says, “Light has no fellowship with darkness.” Therefore, the prophets of the demons never foretell truths.

But contrary to this: A Gloss on Numbers 22:14 says, “Balaam was a diviner, for he sometimes foreknew the future with the help of the demons and the magical art.” But he announced many truths ahead of time—for instance, the one found in Numbers 24:17: “A star will arise out of Jacob, and a scepter shall spring up from Israel.” Therefore, even the prophets of the demons foretell truths.

I respond: The true plays the same role in cognition that the good plays in the case of things. Now it is impossible for there to exist among things anything that is totally deprived of goodness. Hence, it is likewise impossible for there to be any cognition that is totally false, without the admixture of any truth. Thus, Bede says, “There is no false teaching that does not at some point mix true things with false things.” Hence, the teaching itself of the demons by which they instruct their own prophets contains some truths through which it is rendered acceptable; for the intellect is led to falsehood by the appearances of truth in the same way that the will is led to what is bad by the appearances of goodness. Hence, in *Super Matthaeum* Chrysostom says, “It is conceded that the devil sometimes says true things, in order that he might commend his lie by way of a stray truth.”

Reply to objection 1: The prophets of the demons do not always speak from the revelation of demons, but *they sometimes speak from divine inspiration*. For instance, we clearly read in the case of Balaam that the Lord spoke to him (Numbers 22:8ff.), even though he was a prophet of the demons. For God makes use even of bad individuals to the advantage of those who are good. Hence, He foretells some truths through the prophets of the demons, both (a) in order that a truth that has testimony in its favor

even from His adversaries might be made more believable, and also (b) because as long as men trust such individuals, they are more easily led to the truth through their pronouncements. Hence, the ancient prophetesses (*Sibyllae*) likewise foretold many truths about the Christ.

However, *even when the prophets of the demons are instructed by the demons*, they foretell some truths—sometimes by the power of their own nature, the author of which is the Holy Spirit, and sometimes even, as is clear from Augustine in *Super Genesim ad Litteram* 12, by revelation from good spirits. And in this way even the truth that the demons pronounce is from the Holy Spirit.

Reply to objection 2: A true prophet is always inspired by the Spirit of truth, in whom there is no falsity, and so He never utters what is false. By contrast, a prophet of falsity is not always instructed by the spirit of falsity but is sometimes inspired by the Spirit of truth. In addition, as has been explained, the spirit of falsity sometimes pronounces truths and sometimes falsehoods.

Reply to objection 3: What is said to be *proper (propria)* to the demons are those things that they have from themselves, viz., lies and sins. However, what *belongs to their proper nature* is such that they do not have it from themselves but instead have it from God. And, as has been explained, through the power of their proper nature they sometimes foretell truths. In addition, as has been explained, God makes use of them in order to bring about the manifestation of truth through them, when divine mysteries are revealed to them by the [good] angels.