

Objection 1. It would seem that the intellectual soul knows itself by its own essence. For Augustine says (De Trin. ix, 3), that “the mind knows itself, because it is incorporeal.”

Objection 2. Further, both angels and human souls belong to the genus of intellectual substance. But an angel understands itself by its own essence. Therefore likewise does the human soul.

Objection 3. Further, “in things void of matter, the intellect and that which is understood are the same” (De Anima iii, 4). But the human mind is void of matter, not being the act of a body as stated above (q. 76, a. 1). Therefore the intellect and its object are the same in the human mind; and therefore the human mind understands itself by its own essence.

On the contrary, It is said (De Anima iii, 4) that “the intellect understands itself in the same way as it understands other things.” But it understands other things, not by their essence, but by their similitudes. Therefore it does not understand itself by its own essence.

I answer that, Everything is knowable so far as it is in act, and not, so far as it is in potentiality (Metaph. ix, Did. viii, 9): for a thing is a being, and is true, and therefore knowable, according as it is actual. This is quite clear as regards sensible things, for the eye does not see what is potentially, but what is actually colored. In like manner it is clear that the intellect, so far as it knows material things, does not know save what is in act: and hence it does not know primary matter except as proportionate to form, as is stated Phys. i, 7. Consequently immaterial substances are intelligible by their own essence according as each one is actual by its own essence.

Therefore it is that the Essence of God, the pure and perfect act, is simply and perfectly in itself intelligible; and hence God by His own Essence knows Himself, and all other things also. The angelic essence belongs, indeed, to the genus of intelligible things as “act,” but not as a “pure act,” nor as a “complete act,” and hence the angel’s act of intelligence is not completed by his essence. For although an angel understands himself by his own essence, still he cannot understand all other things by his own essence; for he knows things other than himself by their likenesses. Now the human intellect is only a potentiality in the genus of intelligible beings, just as primary matter is a potentiality as regards sensible beings; and hence it is called “possible”*. Therefore in its essence the human mind is potentially understanding. Hence it has in itself the power to understand, but not to be understood, except as it is made actual. For even the Platonists asserted that an order of intelligible beings existed above the order of intellects, forasmuch as the intellect understands only by participation of the intelligible; for they said that the participa-

tor is below what it participates. If, therefore, the human intellect, as the Platonists held, became actual by participating separate intelligible forms, it would understand itself by such participation of incorporeal beings. But as in this life our intellect has material and sensible things for its proper natural object, as stated above (q. 84, a. 7), it understands itself according as it is made actual by the species abstracted from sensible things, through the light of the active intellect, which not only actuates the intelligible things themselves, but also, by their instrumentality, actuates the passive intellect. Therefore the intellect knows itself not by its essence, but by its act. This happens in two ways: In the first place, singularly, as when Socrates or Plato perceives that he has an intellectual soul because he perceives that he understands. In the second place, universally, as when we consider the nature of the human mind from knowledge of the intellectual act. It is true, however, that the judgment and force of this knowledge, whereby we know the nature of the soul, comes to us according to the derivation of our intellectual light from the Divine Truth which contains the types of all things as above stated (q. 84, a. 5). Hence Augustine says (De Trin. ix, 6): “We gaze on the inviolable truth whence we can as perfectly as possible define, not what each man’s mind is, but what it ought to be in the light of the eternal types.” There is, however, a difference between these two kinds of knowledge, and it consists in this, that the mere presence of the mind suffices for the first; the mind itself being the principle of action whereby it perceives itself, and hence it is said to know itself by its own presence. But as regards the second kind of knowledge, the mere presence of the mind does not suffice, and there is further required a careful and subtle inquiry. Hence many are ignorant of the soul’s nature, and many have erred about it. So Augustine says (De Trin. x, 9), concerning such mental inquiry: “Let the mind strive not to see itself as if it were absent, but to discern itself as present”—i.e. to know how it differs from other things; which is to know its essence and nature.

Reply to Objection 1. The mind knows itself by means of itself, because at length it acquires knowledge of itself, though led thereto by its own act: because it is itself that it knows since it loves itself, as he says in the same passage. For a thing can be called self-evident in two ways, either because we can know it by nothing else except itself, as first principles are called self-evident; or because it is not accidentally knowable, as color is visible of itself, whereas substance is visible by its accident.

Reply to Objection 2. The essence of an angel is an act in the genus of intelligible things, and therefore it is both intellect and the thing understood. Hence an angel apprehends his own essence through itself: not so

* Possibilis—elsewhere in this translation rendered “passive”—Ed.

the human mind, which is either altogether in potentiality to intelligible things—as is the passive intellect—or is the act of intelligible things abstracted from the phantasms—as is the active intellect.

Reply to Objection 3. This saying of the Philosopher is universally true in every kind of intellect. For as sense in act is the sensible in act, by reason of the sensible likeness which is the form of sense in act, so likewise the intellect in act is the object understood in act, by reason of the likeness of the thing understood, which is the form of the intellect in act. So the human intellect, which becomes actual by the species of the object understood, is itself understood by the same species as by its own form. Now to say that in “things without mat-

ter the intellect and what is understood are the same,” is equal to saying that “as regards things actually understood the intellect and what is understood are the same.” For a thing is actually understood in that it is immaterial. But a distinction must be drawn: since the essences of some things are immaterial—as the separate substances called angels, each of which is understood and understands, whereas there are other things whose essences are not wholly immaterial, but only the abstract likenesses thereof. Hence the Commentator says (*De Anima* iii) that the proposition quoted is true only of separate substances; because in a sense it is verified in their regard, and not in regard of other substances, as already stated (*Reply obj. 2*).