

Objection 1. It would seem that the intellect is not a passive power. For everything is passive by its matter, and acts by its form. But the intellectual power results from the immateriality of the intelligent substance. Therefore it seems that the intellect is not a passive power.

Objection 2. Further, the intellectual power is incorruptible, as we have said above (q. 79, a. 6). But “if the intellect is passive, it is corruptible” (De Anima iii, 5). Therefore the intellectual power is not passive.

Objection 3. Further, the “agent is nobler than the patient,” as Augustine (Gen. ad lit. xii, 16) and Aristotle (De Anima iii, 5) says. But all the powers of the vegetative part are active; yet they are the lowest among the powers of the soul. Much more, therefore, all the intellectual powers, which are the highest, are active.

On the contrary, The Philosopher says (De Anima iii, 4) that “to understand is in a way to be passive.”

I answer that, To be passive may be taken in three ways. Firstly, in its most strict sense, when from a thing is taken something which belongs to it by virtue either of its nature, or of its proper inclination: as when water loses coolness by heating, and as when a man becomes ill or sad. Secondly, less strictly, a thing is said to be passive, when something, whether suitable or unsuitable, is taken away from it. And in this way not only he who is ill is said to be passive, but also he who is healed; not only he that is sad, but also he that is joyful; or whatever way he be altered or moved. Thirdly, in a wide sense a thing is said to be passive, from the very fact that what is in potentiality to something receives that to which it was in potentiality, without being deprived of anything. And accordingly, whatever passes from potentiality to act, may be said to be passive, even when it is perfected. And thus with us to understand is to be passive. This is clear from the following reason. For the intellect, as we have seen above (q. 78, a. 1), has an operation extending to universal being. We may therefore see whether the intellect be in act or potentiality by observing first of all the nature of the relation of the intellect to universal being. For we find an intellect whose relation to universal being is that of the act of all being: and such is the Divine intellect, which is the Essence of God, in which originally and virtually, all being pre-exists as in its first cause. And therefore the Divine intellect is not in potentiality, but is pure act. But no created intellect can be an act in relation to the whole universal being; otherwise it would needs be an infinite being. Wherefore every created intellect is not the act of all things intelligible, by reason of its very existence; but

is compared to these intelligible things as a potentiality to act.

Now, potentiality has a double relation to act. There is a potentiality which is always perfected by its act: as the matter of the heavenly bodies (q. 58, a. 1). And there is another potentiality which is not always in act, but proceeds from potentiality to act; as we observe in things that are corrupted and generated. Wherefore the angelic intellect is always in act as regards those things which it can understand, by reason of its proximity to the first intellect, which is pure act, as we have said above. But the human intellect, which is the lowest in the order of intelligence and most remote from the perfection of the Divine intellect, is in potentiality with regard to things intelligible, and is at first “like a clean tablet on which nothing is written,” as the Philosopher says (De Anima iii, 4). This is made clear from the fact, that at first we are only in potentiality to understand, and afterwards we are made to understand actually. And so it is evident that with us to understand is “in a way to be passive”; taking passion in the third sense. And consequently the intellect is a passive power.

Reply to Objection 1. This objection is verified of passion in the first and second senses, which belong to primary matter. But in the third sense passion is in anything which is reduced from potentiality to act.

Reply to Objection 2. “Passive intellect” is the name given by some to the sensitive appetite, in which are the passions of the soul; which appetite is also called “rational by participation,” because it “obeys the reason” (Ethic. i, 13). Others give the name of passive intellect to the cogitative power, which is called the “particular reason.” And in each case “passive” may be taken in the two first senses; forasmuch as this so-called intellect is the act of a corporeal organ. But the intellect which is in potentiality to things intelligible, and which for this reason Aristotle calls the “possible” intellect (De Anima iii, 4) is not passive except in the third sense: for it is not an act of a corporeal organ. Hence it is incorruptible.

Reply to Objection 3. The agent is nobler than the patient, if the action and the passion are referred to the same thing: but not always, if they refer to different things. Now the intellect is a passive power in regard to the whole universal being: while the vegetative power is active in regard to some particular thing, namely, the body as united to the soul. Wherefore nothing prevents such a passive force being nobler than such an active one.