

Objection 1. It would seem that the more universal is not first in our intellectual cognition. For what is first and more known in its own nature, is secondarily and less known in relation to ourselves. But universals come first as regards their nature, because “that is first which does not involve the existence of its correlative” (Categor. ix). Therefore the universals are secondarily known as regards our intellect.

Objection 2. Further, the composition precedes the simple in relation to us. But universals are the more simple. Therefore they are known secondarily by us.

Objection 3. Further, the Philosopher says (Phys. i, 1), that the object defined comes in our knowledge before the parts of its definition. But the more universal is part of the definition of the less universal, as “animal” is part of the definition of “man.” Therefore the universals are secondarily known by us.

Objection 4. Further, we know causes and principles by their effects. But universals are principles. Therefore universals are secondarily known by us.

On the contrary, “We must proceed from the universal to the singular and individual” (Phys. i, 1)

I answer that, In our knowledge there are two things to be considered. First, that intellectual knowledge in some degree arises from sensible knowledge: and, because sense has singular and individual things for its object, and intellect has the universal for its object, it follows that our knowledge of the former comes before our knowledge of the latter. Secondly, we must consider that our intellect proceeds from a state of potentiality to a state of actuality; and every power thus proceeding from potentiality to actuality comes first to an incomplete act, which is the medium between potentiality and actuality, before accomplishing the perfect act. The perfect act of the intellect is complete knowledge, when the object is distinctly and determinately known; whereas the incomplete act is imperfect knowledge, when the object is known indistinctly, and as it were confusedly. A thing thus imperfectly known, is known partly in act and partly in potentiality, and hence the Philosopher says (Phys. i, 1), that “what is manifest and certain is known to us at first confusedly; afterwards we know it by distinguishing its principles and elements.” Now it is evident that to know an object that comprises many things, without proper knowledge of each thing contained in it, is to know that thing confusedly. In this way we can have knowledge not only of the universal whole, which contains parts potentially, but also of the integral whole; for each whole can be known confusedly, without its parts being known. But to know distinctly what is contained in the universal whole is to know the less common, as to “animal” indistinctly is to know it as “animal”; whereas to know “animal” distinctly is know it as

“rational” or “irrational animal,” that is, to know a man or a lion: therefore our intellect knows “animal” before it knows man; and the same reason holds in comparing any more universal idea with the less universal.

Moreover, as sense, like the intellect, proceeds from potentiality to act, the same order of knowledge appears in the senses. For by sense we judge of the more common before the less common, in reference both to place and time; in reference to place, when a thing is seen afar off it is seen to be a body before it is seen to be an animal; and to be an animal before it is seen to be a man, and to be a man before it is seen to be Socrates or Plato; and the same is true as regards time, for a child can distinguish man from not man before he distinguishes this man from that, and therefore “children at first call men fathers, and later on distinguish each one from the others” (Phys. i, 1). The reason of this is clear: because he who knows a thing indistinctly is in a state of potentiality as regards its principle of distinction; as he who knows “genus” is in a state of potentiality as regards “difference.” Thus it is evident that indistinct knowledge is midway between potentiality and act.

We must therefore conclude that knowledge of the singular and individual is prior, as regards us, to the knowledge of the universal; as sensible knowledge is prior to intellectual knowledge. But in both sense and intellect the knowledge of the more common precedes the knowledge of the less common.

Reply to Objection 1. The universal can be considered in two ways. First, the universal nature may be considered together with the intention of universality. And since the intention of universality—viz. the relation of one and the same to many—is due to intellectual abstraction, the universal thus considered is a secondary consideration. Hence it is said (De Anima i, 1) that the “universal animal is either nothing or something secondary.” But according to Plato, who held that universals are subsistent, the universal considered thus would be prior to the particular, for the latter, according to him, are mere participations of the subsistent universals which he called ideas.

Secondly, the universal can be considered in the nature itself—for instance, animality or humanity as existing in the individual. And thus we must distinguish two orders of nature: one, by way of generation and time; and thus the imperfect and the potential come first. In this way the more common comes first in the order of nature; as appears clearly in the generation of man and animal; for “the animal is generated before man,” as the Philosopher says (De Gener. Animal ii, 3). The other order is the order of perfection or of the intention of nature: for instance, act considered absolutely is naturally prior to potentiality, and the perfect to the imperfect: thus the less common

comes naturally before the more common; as man comes before animal. For the intention of nature does not stop at the generation of animal but goes on to the generation of man.

Reply to Objection 2. The more common universal may be compared to the less common, as the whole, and as the part. As the whole, considering that in the more universal is potentially contained not only the less universal, but also other things, as in “animal” is contained not only “man” but also “horse.” As part, considering that the less common contains in its idea not only the more common, but also more; as “man” contains not only “animal” but also “rational.” Therefore “animal” in itself comes into our knowledge before “man”; but “man” comes before “animal” considered as part of the same idea.

Reply to Objection 3. A part can be known in two ways. First, absolutely considered in itself; and thus nothing prevents the parts being known before the whole, as stones are known before a house is known. Secondly as belonging to a certain whole; and thus we must needs know the whole before its parts. For we know a house vaguely before we know its different parts. So likewise principles of definition are known before the thing defined is known; otherwise the thing defined would not be known at all. But as parts of the definition they are known after. For we know man vaguely as man before we know how to distinguish all that belongs to human nature.

Reply to Objection 4. The universal, as understood

with the intention of universality, is, indeed, in a way, a principle of knowledge, in so far as the intention of universality results from the mode of understanding by way of abstraction. But what is a principle of knowledge is not of necessity a principle of existence, as Plato thought: since at times we know a cause through its effect, and substance through accidents. Wherefore the universal thus considered, according to the opinion of Aristotle, is neither a principle of existence, nor a substance, as he makes clear (*Metaph. vii, Did. vi, 13*). But if we consider the generic or specific nature itself as existing in the singular, thus in a way it is in the nature of a formal principle in regard to the singulars: for the singular is the result of matter, while the idea of species is from the form. But the generic nature is compared to the specific nature rather after the fashion of a material principle, because the generic nature is taken from that which is material in a thing, while the idea of species is taken from that which is formal: thus the notion of animal is taken from the sensitive part, whereas the notion of man is taken from the intellectual part. Thus it is that the ultimate intention of nature is to the species and not to the individual, or the genus: because the form is the end of generation, while matter is for the sake of the form. Neither is it necessary that, as regards us, knowledge of any cause or principle should be secondary: since at times through sensible causes we become acquainted with unknown effects, and sometimes conversely.