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Henry of Ghent on Divine Illumination

[II.] Reply

[A. Knowledge in a broad sense]

Consider all the objects of cognition, standing in an ordered relation to each other so that the last is always suited to be cognized through a preceding one. If a cognition of the first of those could be attained through intellect by purely natural means without any special divine illumination, then likewise a cognition of all the later ones could be attained in the same way. For if a human being by purely natural means without any special divine illumination could attain a cognition of the first theoretical principles, then likewise by purely natural means without any special divine illumination he could attain a cognition of all the conclusions following from those principles. For although the cognition of principles is a kind of illumination toward the cognition of conclusions, nevertheless if someone could attain such a cognition by purely natural means then there is not said to be any special divine illumination in cognizing conclusions through those principles.

In contrast, if in the case of some interrelated objects of cognition the first of them cannot be attained by someone by purely natural means, but only through a special divine illumination, then likewise neither can any of those that come later. For the later ones are cognized only by reason of the first. But now it is undoubtedly true that in the case of some objects of cognition, the first of them cannot be cognized or known by purely natural means, but only by a special divine illumination. This is so in the case of those that are held by the faith in themselves, unconditionally (*per se et simpliciter credibilia*). And so in such cases, it ought to be granted unconditionally and absolutely that it is not possible for a human being to know anything by purely natural means, but only by a special divine illumination. We will establish this later [*Summa* art. 5, q.3].

But some want to extend this mode of knowing to everything that is knowable: They say that nothing true can be known by a human being by purely natural means, without a special divine illumination infused by some supernatural light. And they believe this to be Augustine's view in all his works, wherever he claims that whoever sees something true sees

it in the first truth, or in the eternal rules, or in the eternal light. As he says in *City of God* XI.x,

It is not inappropriate to say that the soul is illuminated by the incorporeal light of God's simple wisdom, just as a body of air is illuminated by a bodily light.

Those who speak in this way greatly degrade the worth and perfection of the created intellect. For matched with every natural thing that is perfect in its form there ought to be some natural action or operation that is proper to it and through which by purely natural means it can attain the good natural to it. This is clear in the case of all other natural things. In keeping with this, Damascene says in *Sentences* Bk. I that of things whose natures are different, their operations are also different. For it is impossible for a substance to lack its natural operation. And in the *Liber de duplici natura et voluntate Christi*, ch. 4: It is impossible for a nature to be established outside of those natural characteristics that are proper to it – e.g., living, rational, voluntary. For someone that does not reason is not a human being, since no human being has been made that does not reason, either well or badly. But as is said in *De anima* I [403a8], knowing and understanding are the intellect's proper operation, "above all else." For this reason, then, if knowing is not possible for someone by purely natural means, then neither is any operation at all; such a person would hence be inferior to all creatures, which is absurd. As the Philosopher says in *De caelo* II [292a22–b12], a thing well completed by the whole of goodness does not need an operation by which it is good, and it is the first cause of everything from which every other thing receives its goodness. So [every other thing] needs its proper operations, through which it is moved toward that [first cause] so as to participate in its divine existence insofar as it can. For all things desire it, and whatever they do by nature they do because of it.

At this point, perhaps it will be said in defense of the above view that it clearly is true that understanding and knowing what is true are the proper and natural operation of intellect and the human soul, and that through which it acquires its goodness. Still, because of that act's eminence and worth, one needs a special illumination for it, even though other beings carry out their actions by purely natural means. For they do so because of the imperfection of those actions – and it is not absurd that one thing should need more to carry out a more perfect action, whereas another thing needs less to carry out a less perfect action.

It is utterly absurd to say this, and is highly derogatory to the worth of the rational soul. For if other inferior things are by purely natural means capable of some operation corresponding and proportionate to their nature, then it is absurd to deny this of the rational soul. The result would be not just that it is not capable by purely natural means of an eminent operation exceeding its nature, but also that it would not even be capable of some operation agreeing with and proportionate to its nature. For it is highly absurd that God would have made the human soul among natural things and not have prepared for it the natural instruments by which it would be capable of any natural operation suited to it, given that he prepared those instruments for other inferior things. For God, much more than nature, does not do anything pointless, or fail to provide a thing with what is necessary for it. But the proper natural operation of the human soul is nothing other than knowing or cognizing. Therefore it must absolutely be granted that a human being through its soul without any special divine illumination can know or cognize something, and can do so by purely natural means. For to hold the contrary is highly derogatory to the worth of the soul and of human nature.

(When I say 'by purely natural means,' I am not excluding the general influence of the first intelligence – which is the first agent in every intellectual and cognitive action. Just as in every movement of every natural thing, the first mover produces the movement, so too the general influence that helps with cognition does not preclude that cognition's being said to be brought about by purely natural means. For a human being has that influence assisting him while he cognizes all the things he cognizes naturally, and for this reason it should be said that he attains by purely natural means the cognition of all the other subsequent things that he attains through that influence.)

So if we take 'to know' broadly for every certain cognition (*notitiam*) of a thing, so that it includes even sensory cognition (*cognitionem*), then (as was said in the preceding question) to the extent that it comes from the senses and sensory cognition, it is clear that we ought to say unconditionally and absolutely that one can know and cognize something through a sensory cognition that is certain, as was shown in the preceding question. Further – and this pertains to the present question – this can occur by purely natural means, because the primary sensible objects make an impression on the senses by purely natural necessity, and it is through these sensibles, again by natural necessity, that all subsequent sensible objects make an impression on both the external and internal senses.

[B. Knowledge of the truth]

A distinction must be drawn, however, with respect to intellect and intellectual cognition: It is this cognizing, strictly, that is called knowing. For although nothing is known unless it is true (according to Augustine in his *Book of 83 Questions* [Q54]), still it is one thing to know of a creature what is true with respect to it, and another to know its truth. So there is one cognition by which a thing is cognized, another by which its truth is cognized. For every cognitive power that through its cognition apprehends a thing just as it has existence in itself, outside the cognizer, apprehends what is true in it. But through this it does not apprehend the thing's truth. For the senses even in brute animals apprehend well enough concerning a thing what is true in it – for instance, a true human being, true wood, a true stone, and especially the proper objects with respect to which the senses are necessarily true. But still they apprehend or cognize the truth of no thing, because they cannot judge regarding any thing what it is in actual truth – e.g., concerning a human being, that it is a true human being, or concerning a color, that it is a true color.

So through the intellectual cognition of something created, one can have two kinds of cognitions. By one, someone knows or cognizes through a simple understanding solely what a thing is. By the other, someone knows and cognizes the truth of the thing itself, through an understanding that composes and divides. In the case of the first cognition our intellect entirely follows the senses, and there is no concept in intellect that was not first in the senses. Insofar as it is of this sort, then, such an intellection certainly can be true – by conceiving or cognizing the thing as it is – just as the sense that it is following can be. But it doesn't conceive or understand the thing's very truth through a certain judgment by perceiving of it what it is – for instance, that it is a true human being or a true color.

There are two reasons for this, one pertaining to the intellect itself, another pertaining to what is intelligible. The reason that pertains to the intellect is that it conceives the truth not by a simple understanding, but only by composition and division (as the Philosopher claims in *Metaphysics* VI [10727b18–32] and as will be explained below). Hence just as a sense is called true because of grasping a thing as it is, not because of grasping its truth, so too a

simple understanding following a true sense is called true because of grasping a thing as it is, not because of grasping its truth.

The reason that pertains to what is intelligible is that the intention of the thing by which it is that which it is and the intention by which it is called true are two different things, even though – since every being is true and vice versa – these intentions coincide in each and every thing and are convertible with one other. For as the first proposition of the *Liber de causis* says, the first of created things is existence, and so the first intention capable of being grasped by intellect is the notion *being* (*ratio entis*). One can understand this notion without understanding any other intention pertaining to *being*, because it includes none of the others in itself, and is included in all the others. For although the intention *being* is understood only under the notion *true*, which is the per se object of intellect, it is nevertheless not the case that *true*, as the notion from which *being* is understood, is the object of intellect in the way that *being* is. For the notion *true* is the notion of intelligibility in all things. But the object [of intellect] is *true being*, or *true good*, and so on for the other intentions of things. Hence, the intention *being* is included in all the other intentions of things, both universal and particular, because what is not a being is nothing. For this reason, the Commentator claims regarding the first proposition of the *Liber de causis* that existence is characterized by its adhering to the thing more vehemently than do the other intentions in that thing.

The next most proximate intentions in the thing, after the intention *being*, are these universal intentions: *one*, *true*, and *good*. This is so in various ways, in order, because anything existing under the intention *being* can be considered in three ways:

- First, insofar as it has in its nature a determinate existence by which through its form it is in itself undivided but divided from everything else. In this way the intention *one* holds of it. For everything is one insofar as it is, in itself, formally undivided, but divided from everything else. For as the Philosopher says in *Metaphysics* III [999b33], something is one that exists by itself and alone.
- Second, insofar as it has in its own existence what its corresponding exemplar represents it as having. In this way the intention *true* holds of it. For each thing is true insofar as it contains in itself what its exemplar represents.
- Third, insofar as it holds of the end to which it is directed. In this way the intention *good* holds of it. For every thing is good insofar as it aims toward an end that is good.

So *true* indicates an intention concerning the thing relative to its exemplar. And since this is not first but secondary, whereas *being* indicates the first, discrete intention concerning the thing, it follows that the intellect can indeed apprehend that which is a being and is true in the thing, without apprehending the intention of its truth. For the intention of truth in a thing can be apprehended only by apprehending its conformity to its exemplar. The intention *being*, on the other hand, is apprehended in the thing discretely, without such a relation. But in a second cognition, by which the truth of the thing itself is known or cognized (without which it is not a complete human cognition of the thing), the cognition and judgment of intellect altogether exceed the cognition and judgment of the senses, since (as has been said) the intellect cognizes something's truth only by composing and dividing, which a sense cannot do. Hence such an intellection can cognize a thing in a way that the senses cannot, nor can even an intellection that is an understanding of simples: Such an

intellecion can apprehend by a certain judgment concerning a thing that in actual truth it is such or such – for instance, [that it is] a true human being, a true color, and so on.

[C. Different kinds of exemplars]

So with respect to this mode of knowing and cognizing something through intellect, by which the truth of the thing is known (this is knowing in the strict sense), it is still in doubt whether a human being can know anything by purely natural means, without any special divine illumination. We should say the following. It was said already [II.B] that the truth of a thing can be cognized only by cognizing the conformity of the cognized thing to its exemplar. For as Augustine says in *De vera religione* [xxxvi.66], “true things are true insofar as they are like their one source.” Also, Anselm says in *De veritate* [ch. 7] that “truth is the conformity of a thing to its most true exemplar” and, in the same passage: “What is, truly is, insofar as it is what is there.” For this reason, then, inasmuch as there are two kinds of exemplars of a thing, a thing’s truth has two ways of being cognized by a human being, with respect to two exemplars. For according to what Plato holds in the *Timaeus* [27d–29a], there are two exemplars: one kind made and constructed, the other kind perpetual and unchangeable. The first exemplar of a thing is its universal species existing within the soul, through which the soul acquires a cognition of all the individuals it stands for. This exemplar is caused by the thing. The second exemplar is the divine art containing the ideal formulations of all things. Plato says that God established the world from this exemplar (just as an artisan builds a house from an exemplar of the artistry in his mind) and not from the first exemplar.

We should know, then, that in examining that first exemplar, there are two ways in which a human being can go about it:

- First, so as to examine the cognized object depicted outside the cognizer – as by examining a person’s image painted on a wall in order to recognize that person;
- Second, so as to examine the basis (*rationem*) of cognizing depicted in the cognizer – in that the species of sensible things are depicted in the senses and the species of intelligible things in the intellect.

In the first way it is impossible to cognize a thing’s truth by examining its exemplar. One can have only an imaginary apprehension of the thing, an apprehension of whatever sort someone’s imaginative power happened to be able to form for him. Thus, as Augustine says in *De trinitate* VIII [v.7], someone would marvel if a person he had imagined but never seen were to appear before him [just as he imagined]. Also, through that imaginary apprehension taken from a painted image, if someone were to learn the name of the person in the image, then he could come to an estimative judgment of that person – if that person were to appear before him. At that point he could for the first time, on the basis of the thing itself seen in its own form, cognize its truth, and on that basis make a judgment as to whether that image is a true one, corresponding to the person seen. It was in this way, one reads, that Queen Candace had a painted image of Alexander made for herself before she had ever seen him, and she recognized him immediately when she saw him, even though he pretended to be someone else.¹

1 *Historia Alexandri Magni*, III. 19–22.

So in the second way – that is, by examining the exemplar taken from the thing itself, so as to examine the basis of cognizing in the cognizer himself – the truth of the thing itself can indeed be cognized in a way: by forming a mental concept of the thing, conforming to that exemplar. It was in this way that Aristotle held that human beings acquire knowledge of things and a cognition of truth by purely natural means – and this with respect to natural, changeable things. Aristotle held that such an exemplar is acquired from things through the senses as the primary basis of art and knowledge, according to what he says at the start of the *Metaphysics* [981a5–7]: “Art results when from many things understood through experience, one universal judgment is made regarding similar cases.” And in *Posterior Analytics* II [100a4–8]:

Memory is produced from sense, and from a memory often produced, experience. And from experience – a universal existing in the soul – the one [is produced] over the many. That is the basis of art and knowledge.

This accords with what Augustine says in *De trinitate* XI.iii [6]:

If the species of a body that is sensed by a body is taken away, its likeness remains in the memory. Through this the will turns the mind’s attention so that it is formed internally by that, just as it was formed externally by the body that was its sensible object.

And so, as he says in *De trinitate* VIII.v [7], things we have not seen we think of according to generic or specific cognitions, either naturally innate or gathered from experience. So through the universal cognition that we have within ourselves, acquired from different species of animals, we form a cognition, regarding whatever appears to us, of whether it is an animal or not, and through the specific cognition of a donkey we form a cognition, regarding whatever appears to us, of whether it is a donkey or not.

[D. Infallible knowledge of the truth requires illumination]

But through such an exemplar, acquired within us, it is altogether impossible for us to have an altogether certain and infallible cognition of the truth. There are three reasons for this: The first draws on the thing from which such an exemplar is abstracted, the second on the soul in which such an exemplar is received, the third on the exemplar itself that is received in the soul from the thing.

The first reason is that such an exemplar, because it is abstracted from a changeable thing, necessarily has some of the characteristics of a changeable thing. So since natural things are more changeable than mathematical things, the Philosopher claimed that our knowledge of mathematical things has more certainty than our knowledge of natural things, through their universal species. This can be only because of the changeability of the species themselves existing within the soul. Hence Augustine, taking up this cause of the incertitude of the knowledge of natural things (the cause due to sensibles), says in his *Book of 83 Questions* Q9 that “pure truth shouldn’t be sought from the bodily senses” and that

We are warned for our own sake to turn away from this world and toward God – that is, toward the truth that is understood and apprehended in the inner mind, and that always remains and is of the same nature – and to make this turn with all haste.

The second reason is that because the human soul is changeable and undergoes error, nothing that is equally changeable or more so can correct it so that it is not bent by error, and so that it persists in the correctness of truth. Therefore, every exemplar that the soul receives from natural things, since it is of a lower grade of nature than the soul, is necessarily equally changeable as the soul or more so. It therefore cannot correct the soul so that it persists in infallible truth. This is the argument of Augustine in *De vera religione* [xxx.56] by which he proves that the unchangeable truth through which the soul has certain knowledge is above the soul:

It is clear enough that the law of all arts, since it is utterly unchangeable – whereas the human mind, to which it has been granted to see such a law, can suffer the changeability of error – is the law above our mind that is called the truth.

Only this is sufficient to correct our changeable and bendable mind with infallible cognition. The mind does not have the ability to judge this law, but through it it judges everything else. For the mind is more able to judge anything lower than itself than it is able through that to judge another, as Augustine concludes in the same passage.

The third reason is that an exemplar of this sort, since it is an intention and species of a sensible thing abstracted from a phantasm, has a likeness with the false as well as with the true. So as far as the species is concerned, they cannot be distinguished. For it is through the same images of sensible things that (a) we judge in sleep and in madness that the images are the things themselves, and (b) when awake we judge the things themselves. But the pure truth is not perceived unless it is discerned from what is false. Therefore it is impossible through such an exemplar to have certain knowledge and a certain cognition of the truth. Thus if we are to possess certain knowledge of the truth, the mind must turn away from the senses and sensible things and from every intention, no matter how universal and abstracted from the senses, and turn toward the unchangeable truth existing above the mind. This truth “does not have an image of the false from which it cannot be discerned,” as Augustine says in his *Book of 83 Questions* Q9, where he discusses this argument.