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Thomas Aquinas on whether the Intellect Can Be False

Summa Theologiae

Part I, Question 17. Concerning Falsity

Article 3. Whether falsity is in the intellect

Objection 1: It seems that falsity is not in the understanding. For Augustine says (Questions 85, q. 32), “Anyone who is deceived does not understand that in which he is deceived.” But falsity is said to be in some cognition in so far as we are deceived in that cognition. Therefore, falsity does not exist in the intellect [i.e., understanding].

Objection 2: Further, the Philosopher [Aristotle] says (*De Anima* iii, 51) that the intellect is always right. Therefore there is no falsity in the intellect.

On the contrary, It is said in *De Anima* iii, 21, that “where there is composition of objects understood, there is truth and falsehood.” But such composition is in the intellect [i.e., understanding]. Therefore truth and falsehood exist in the intellect.

I answer that, Just as a thing has being by its proper form, so a cognitive faculty has cognition by the likeness of the thing cognized. Hence, just as natural things cannot fail to have the existence that belongs to them by their form, but may fail to have some things consequent upon or accidental to them, even as a man may fail to possess two feet, but may not fail to be a man; so a cognitive faculty may not fail in the cognition of the thing the likeness of which informs it, but may fail with regard to something consequent upon or accidental to that form. For it has been said that sight is not deceived about its proper sensible, but about common sensibles that are consequent upon that object or about accidental objects of sense.¹ Now just as the sense is directly informed by the likeness of its

¹ If I see a white sugar cube, I properly see something white, because my sight is properly receptive of color. I also see something cubical, because the color my sight receives is the quality of cubical surface. But this shape is not the proper object of my sight, because I could also sense it by touch. Finally, I also see something that is coincidentally (*per accidens*) sweet, but of course I do not see it insofar as it is sweet, because its taste does not affect my sight at all; so, this sweet thing is a merely

proper object, so is the intellect by the likeness of the essence of a thing. Hence the intellect is not deceived about the essence of a thing, as neither is the sense about its proper object. But in affirming and denying the intellect may be deceived, by attributing to the thing the essence of which it understands something which is not consequent upon it or is opposed to it. For the intellect is in the same position as regards judging of such things, as sense is as to judging of common, or accidental, sensible objects. There is, however, this difference, as mentioned earlier regarding truth, that falsity can exist in the intellect not only because its cognition is false, but also because the intellect cognizes its falsity, just as it is cognizes its truth; whereas the senses do not cognize their falsity, as was stated above.²

Although falsity of the intellect can occur properly only in the composition of the intellect, falsity nevertheless can also occur accidentally in that operation of the intellect whereby it knows the essence of a thing, insofar as it is mixed up with some composition of the intellect. This can take place in two ways. In one way, when the intellect attributes the definition of one thing to another thing; as when it attributes the definition of circle to a man. For the definition of one thing is false of another. In another way, when it constructs an inconsistent definition. For in this way the definition is not only false of some thing, but it is false in itself. For example, if it were to form the definition “rational four-footed animal”, the intellect would be false in making it, because it is false in forming the composition: “some rational animals is four-footed”. For this reason the intellect cannot be false in its knowledge of simple essences; but it is either true, or it understands nothing at all.

Reply to Objection 1: Because the essence of a thing is the proper object of the intellect, we are properly said to understand a thing when we reduce our judgment about it to its essence, as we do in demonstrations, in which there is no falsity. This is how Augustine’s words must be understood that anyone who is deceived does not understand that in which he is deceived, and not in the sense that no one is ever deceived in any operation of the intellect.

Reply to Objection 2: The intellect is always right concerning first principles; since it is not deceived about them for the same reason that it is not deceived about the essence of a thing. For self-evident principles are those that are known as soon as their terms are understood, because their predicate is contained in the definition of their subject.³

coincidental or accidental object of my sight. Under good conditions, and with clear eyesight, I cannot be deceived that what I see is something white, but under the same conditions I may rashly judge that what I see is a sugar cube, whereas it may actually be a slightly elongated prism of salt viewed from the wrong angle.

2 That is to say, when I clearly see something white, my sight truly represents the white thing I see, for it truly conforms to the whiteness of the thing, encoding its proper color in the natural process of color vision. Still, it is not by my sight that I know that what I see is truly white. This requires the intellectual operation of forming the judgment “This thing is white” of which I can only intellectually know that it is true. For I do not literally see its truth with my bodily eyes or hear its truth with my bodily ears, etc., because truth, consisting in the conformity of the intellect to the thing understood, is simply not a sensible quality. And similar considerations apply to falsity.

3 Note that the understanding of the terms here is supposed to be not the mere linguistic understanding of the meanings of the words used (the understanding of the *nominal definition* of the terms), but rather the understanding of the quiddity or essence of the thing signified by those terms. So, the point is that our cognition of the first principles of demonstration depends primarily on our understanding of the nature of things, as was explained by Aquinas in his *Commentary on Aristotle’s Posterior Analytics*, bk. 2, lc. 20.

Question 85. The Mode and Order of Understanding

Article 6. Whether the intellect can be false?

Objection 1: It would seem that the intellect can be false; for the Philosopher says (*Metaph.* vi) that “truth and falsehood are in the mind.” But the mind and intellect are the same, as was shown above. Therefore falsehood is in the mind.

Objection 2: Further, opinion and reasoning belong to the intellect. But falsehood exists in both. Therefore falsehood can be in the intellect.

Objection 3: Further, sin is in the intellectual faculty. But sin involves falsehood: for “they err who work evil” (Prov. 14:22). Therefore falsehood can be in the intellect.

On the contrary, Augustine says (Questions 83, q. 32), that “anyone who is deceived does not understand that in which he is deceived.” And the Philosopher says (*De Anima* iii, 10), that “the intellect is always true.”

I answer that, The Philosopher (*De Anima* iii, 6) compares intellect with sense on this point. For sense is not deceived in its proper object, as sight with regard to color, except accidentally, on account of some fault in the sense organ – for example, when the taste of a fever-stricken person judges a sweet thing to be bitter, because his tongue is vitiated by ill humors. Sense, however, may be deceived with regard to common sensible objects, as size or shape; when, for example, it judges the sun to be only a foot in diameter, whereas in reality it is larger than the earth. And it is even more deceived concerning accidental sensible objects, as when it judges that bile is honey because of their similar color. The reason for this is evident; for every faculty, as such, is *per se* directed to its proper object; and things of this kind are always related to one another in the same way. Hence, as long as the faculty exists, its judgment concerning its own proper object does not fail. Now the proper object of the intellect is the quiddity of a material thing; and hence, properly speaking, the intellect is not deceived concerning this quiddity; whereas it may go astray as regards the surroundings of the thing’s essence or quiddity, in relating one thing to another, by affirmation or negation, or also in the process of reasoning. For this reason, the intellect cannot err with regard to those propositions that are apprehended [to be true] as soon as the quiddities of their terms are apprehended, as in the case of first principles from which arises infallible truth in the certitude of scientific conclusions.

The intellect, however, may be accidentally deceived in the quiddity of composite things, not by the defect of its organ, for the intellect is not a faculty that uses an organ; but on account of the composition effecting the definition, when, for instance, the definition of a thing is false of something else, as the definition of a circle applied to a triangle; or when a definition is false in itself, because it involves the composition of incompatible things; for instance, taking “a rational winged animal” as the definition of something. Therefore, as regards simple objects, whose definitions cannot be effected by composition, we cannot be deceived, but we fail by totally not attaining to them, as is said in *Metaph.* ix.

Reply to Objection 1: The Philosopher says that falsehood is in the intellect in regard to affirmation and negation. The same answer applies to the *Second Objection* concerning opinion and reasoning, and to the *Third Objection*, concerning the error of the sinner, who errs in the practical judgment of the desirable object. But in the absolute consideration of the quiddity of a thing, and of those things which are known through it, the intellect is never deceived. And this is what the authorities quoted in the argument *on the contrary* say.