

47. The Possibility of Knowing God

From *Ordinatio* I, distinction 3, part 1, questions 1–2
Question 1: “Is God knowable naturally by a wayfarer?”

I. The Sense of the Question

In answering this question one should make no distinction between God’s being known negatively and his being known affirmatively, since a negation is known only in virtue of an affirmation, according to *On Interpretation* 2, near the end, and *Metaphysics* 4. It is also evident that we do not know negations about God except through affirmations: on the basis of those affirmations, we negate other things that are incompatible with those affirmations.

Also, we do not have supreme love for negations.

Similarly, a negation is conceived either in isolation or as said of something. If a negation—say, non-stone—is conceived in isolation, it is just as applicable to nothing as it is to God, since a pure negation is said of being and of non-being. So in such a case God is no more being understood than is nothing or a chimera. If we are talking about a negation said of something, then I ask about the underlying concept of which this negation is understood to be true: is it an affirmative concept or a negative concept? If it is an affirmative concept, my point is made. If it is a negative concept, I ask as before: is that negation conceived in isolation or as said of something? If in isolation, it is just as applicable to nothing as it is to God; if as said of something, I ask as before. And however far we might keep going with these negations, either God will not be understood any more than nothing is, or we eventually come to a stopping point in some affirmative concept that is first.

Second, one should make no distinction between the knowledge of what something is and the knowl-

edge of whether something is, because what I am asking about in this investigation is a simple concept concerning which “exists” is known through an act of an intellect composing and dividing. For I never know whether something is unless I have some concept of that subject whose existence I know about. That concept is what I am asking about here.

Third, there is also no need to distinguish two senses of the question whether something is: a question about the truth of a proposition and a question about the existence of God. For if there can be a question about the truth of a proposition in which ‘exists’ is predicated of a subject, in order to conceive the truth about that question or proposition one must first conceive the terms of the question, and our present investigation is about whether a simple concept of that subject is possible.

Fourth, there is no value in distinguishing between a natural concept and a supernatural concept. We’re looking for a natural concept.

Fifth, there is no value in distinguishing between ‘naturally’ as referring to nature taken absolutely and ‘naturally’ as referring to nature in its present condition. We’re asking exclusively about cognition in our present condition.

Sixth, there is no value in distinguishing between cognition of God in a creature and cognition of God in himself. If our cognition is drawn from a creature in such a way that discursive cognition *begins* from a creature, I ask, how far does that discursive cognition ultimately reach? If it reaches God in himself, my point is made, since I am looking for that concept of God in himself. If it does not reach God in himself but stops short with a creature, then the end of the discursive process will be the same as the beginning, and no knowledge of God will be possessed—at any rate, the intellect has not arrived at the end-point of its discourse if it stops short with some object that is the starting-point of its discourse. . . .

The sense of the question, then, is this: can the intellect of a wayfarer naturally possess a simple concept in which God is conceived?

Translated for this volume by Thomas Williams from the Vatican edition of *Ordinatio* I, d. 3, pars 1, qq. 1–2.

II. A Quidditative Concept of God Can Be Possessed

I say that a concept can be possessed naturally in which God is conceived not merely quasi-accidentally (say, in some attribute) but *per se* and quidditatively. Proof: according to Henry of Ghent, in conceiving 'wise,' one conceives a property or quasi-property in second actuality perfecting a nature. Therefore, in order to understand 'wise' I must first have a prior understanding of some 'what' in which I understand this quasi-property to inhere. And thus, prior to all concepts of attributes or quasi-attributes one must look for a quidditative concept to which one understands all those things to be attributed. This other concept will be a quidditative concept of God, since there cannot be a stopping point in any other concept.

III. A Concept Univocal to God and Creatures

Second, I say that God is conceived not merely in a concept analogous to creatures—that is, a concept completely different from that which is said of a creature—but in a concept that is univocal to God and creatures. And so that there is no dispute over the word 'univocal,' by a univocal concept I mean a concept that is one in such a way that its unity is sufficient for a contradiction if it is both affirmed and denied of the same thing. Its unity is also sufficient for it to serve as the middle term of a syllogism, so that if the extreme terms are united by a middle term that is one in this way, it can be concluded without committing the fallacy of equivocation that they are united to each other.

I prove univocity, so understood, in five ways.¹ First: any intellect that is certain of one concept and in doubt about others has a concept of that about which it is certain that is distinct from the concepts of the things about which it is in doubt. The subject includes the predicate. But the intellect of a wayfarer can be certain concerning God that he is a being while it is unsure whether he is a finite being or an infinite being. Therefore, the concept of the being of God is distinct from the concept of finite being and from the concept of infinite being. In itself it is not identical with either of

them, and it is included in each of them. Therefore, it is univocal. Proof of the major premise: one and the same concept is not both certain and subject to doubt. Therefore, either the certain concept is a different concept from the doubtful one, which is my point, or there is no certain concept at all, in which case there will not be certainty with respect to any concept. Proof of the minor premise: every philosopher was certain that what he identified as the first principle is a being. For example, one was certain that fire was a being, another that water was a being. But not one of them was certain that it was first, for if any had been, he would have been certain of something false, and what is false is not knowable. Nor was any of them certain that this being was *not* first, since if any had been certain, he would not have claimed that it *was* first.

Confirmation: someone taking note of the philosophers' disagreement could be certain, with respect to anything that someone identified as the first principle, that it is a being, and yet because of this variance of opinions he could remain in doubt about whether it is this being or that. And if a demonstration were offered to such a doubter that either established or refuted some inferior concept—for example, a proof that fire is not the first being, but a being posterior to the first being—that first concept that he is certain about, his concept of being, would not be undermined; it would be preserved in the particular concept proved about fire. And by this the proposition assumed in the last inference of the argument is established: the concept about which he is certain, a concept that is not identical with either of the concepts about which he is doubtful, is preserved in both of those concepts.

Now you may not care to rely on authority by arguing from the disagreements of the philosophers. You may say that anyone has two very close concepts in his intellect that, owing to the closeness of the analogy, appear to be a single concept. On the contrary: this maneuver appears to destroy any possible way of proving the unity of any univocal concept. For if you say that human beings have one concept for Socrates and Plato, anyone can contradict you and say that there are actually two concepts, but they appear to be one because they are so very similar. . . .

The second argument in favor of univocity is as follows. No concept of something real is naturally caused

1. The fifth way is omitted.

in a wayfarer's intellect except by things that naturally move our intellect: namely, phantasms, or the object represented in a phantasm, and the agent intellect. Therefore, no simple concept is produced in our intellect in its present state other than what can be produced by their power. But a concept that would not be univocal to the object represented in a phantasm, but is a wholly distinct and prior concept to which the latter is related by analogy, cannot be produced by the power of the agent intellect and the phantasm. Therefore, this other, analogous concept that is posited will never be naturally in a wayfarer's intellect; and thus it will not be possible for any wayfarer to have any concept of God naturally, which is false.

Proof of the assumption: any object, whether represented in a phantasm or in an intelligible species, with the cooperation of the agent or possible intellect, produces, when acting up to the limit of its power, an effect that is proportionate to itself: its proper concept and the concept of everything essentially or virtually included in it. But that other concept, the supposed analogous concept, is not essentially or virtually included in it and is not identical with it. Therefore, the supposed analogical concept is not produced by any such mover. . . .

The third argument is as follows. The proper concept of some subject is a sufficient basis for concluding about that subject all the conceivable features that necessarily belong to it. But we have no concept of God by which we can sufficiently know all the things we conceive about God that belong to him necessarily—this is evident in the case of the Trinity and other matters of belief that are necessarily true. Therefore, etc. . . .

Likewise, fourth, the following argument can be made. Either some unqualified perfection has a notion common to God and creatures, in which case my point is made, or else it does not. If it does not, then either the unqualified perfection is proper to creatures alone—which means that the notion of the unqualified perfection is formally inapplicable to God, which is absurd—or it has a notion that is altogether proper to God—in which case it follows that nothing is to be attributed to God on the grounds that it is an unqualified perfection, since that is simply to say that the notion of that perfection as it applies to God states an

unqualified perfection. And that will destroy Anselm's teaching in the *Monologion*, where he states that, leaving aside relatives, in all other [predicates] whatever is unqualifiedly better to be than not to be should be attributed to God, just as everything that is not like that is to be denied of God. So according to Anselm, one first knows that something is like this and then attributes it to God; therefore, it is not like this exclusively as it is in God. Confirmation: otherwise, no unqualified perfection would be in a creature. The inference is obvious, because (on this assumption) no concept of any such perfection would also characterize a creature; only an analogous concept would be applicable to a creature. . . . And it is not true of that notion [as it applies to a creature] that it is in every respect better to be such than not, because if it *were* true, that perfection would be attributed to God in accordance with that analogical notion.

This fourth argument is also confirmed as follows. Every metaphysical inquiry concerning God proceeds by considering the formal notion of something, removing from that formal notion every imperfection that it has in creatures, purifying that formal notion and attributing utterly supreme perfection to it, and in this way attributing it to God. Take, for example, the notion of wisdom (or understanding) or of will. First that notion is considered in itself and according to itself. And because that notion does not formally entail any imperfection or limitation, all the imperfections that accompany it in creatures are removed. Thus purified, that same notion of wisdom or will is attributed to God in the most perfect way. Therefore, every inquiry about God presupposes that the intellect has the same, univocal concept that it derives from creatures.

Now you might say that the formal notion of the perfections that belong to God is different [from the formal notion of the perfections that belong to created things]. But this leads to the absurd result that no conclusion can be drawn about God from any notion proper to these perfections as they are in creatures, because the two sorts of notions are wholly distinct. Indeed, the conclusion that God is formally wise would no more follow from the notion of wisdom that we grasp in creatures than would the conclusion that God is formally a stone. After all, some concept distinct from the concept of a created stone could be formed, and

the created stone could bear some analogical relationship to the concept of the stone as it is an idea in God, and thus in accordance with this analogous concept it could be said formally that God is a stone, just as it is said formally that God is wise, according to that analogous concept. . . .

IV. God Cannot Be Known through a Notion Proper to Him

Third, I say that God is not known naturally by a wayfarer in particular and properly, that is, under the notion of this essence as this and in itself. . . .

An argument for this conclusion: God, as this essence in itself, is not naturally known by us, because qua such an object of knowledge God is a voluntary object, not a natural object, except for his own intellect. And therefore God cannot be known by any created intellect under the notion of this essence as this; nor does any essence that is naturally knowable by us sufficiently manifest this essence as this, by any likeness of either univocity or imitation. For there is univocity only in general notions; and imitation, too, falls short because it is imperfect, since creatures imitate God imperfectly. . . .

V. The Concept of Infinite Being

Fourth, I say that we can arrive at many concepts proper to God that do not apply to creatures. The concepts of all unqualified perfections in the highest degree are concepts of this sort. And the most perfect concept, in which we most perfectly know God as though by a certain description, comes by conceiving all the unqualified perfections in the highest degree. Yet a concept that is at once more perfect and simpler is possible for us: the concept of infinite being. This concept is simpler than the concept of good being, true being, and similar concepts, because 'infinite' is not a quasi-property or quasi-attribute of being or of that of which it is said; it states an intrinsic mode of that entity. Thus, when I say 'infinite being,' I do not have a quasi-accidental concept consisting of a sub-

ject and its attribute, but a per se concept of a subject with a certain degree of perfection, namely, infinity—just as 'intense whiteness' does not state an accidental concept like 'visible whiteness'; instead, intensity states the intrinsic degree of whiteness in itself. And thus the simplicity of the concept of infinite being is evident.

The perfection of this concept is proved in two ways. First, of all the concepts we can conceive, this one virtually includes the most. For just as being virtually includes in itself true and good, so infinite being includes infinite truth and infinite good along with every unqualified perfection qua infinite. Second, the existence of an infinite being is the final conclusion of a demonstration *quia*, as is clear from the first question of Distinction 2 (p. 564), and things that are known as the final conclusion of a demonstration *quia* based on creatures are more perfect, because, owing to their remoteness from creatures, they are the most difficult conclusions to reach from creatures.

VI. God Is Known through Species of Creatures

Fifth, I say that what is known of God is known through species of creatures. For whether the more universal and the less universal are known through one and the same species, that of the less universal, or whether instead each has its own intelligible species proper to it, in any event, that which can impress a species of something less universal in the intellect can also cause a species of anything more universal. And thus creatures, which impress their proper species on the intellect, can also impress species of transcendentals that are applicable in common to them and to God. And then the intellect, by virtue of its own power, can make use simultaneously of many species—for example, the species of good and of supreme and of actuality—in order to conceive a supreme and perfectly actual good. This is evident from the topic *a minori*, since the imaginative power can make use of species of various sensibles in order to imagine something composed of those various things, as is obvious in imagining a golden mountain.