

Whether The Knowledge of God  
Is Discursive; Whether He Has  
Knowledge of Evil; and Whether  
He Has Knowledge of Future  
Contingent Things

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Donald J. Hale  
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Saint Meinrad College  
St. Meinrad, Indiana

As the title points out, this thesis will focus on three articles covered in question fourteen of Summa Theologica, dealing with God's knowledge. First, a distinction will be made between discursive and nondiscursive knowledge by paralleling how man comes to know things by the way God comes to know things. Next we will look at the problem of evil and how God can have knowledge of it, without being the cause of it. Finally it will be shown how God can have knowledge of the future while not being deterministic.

What is discursive knowledge? Discursive knowledge is knowledge proceeding from principles to conclusions while unable to consider both at once.<sup>1</sup> The first objection of article seven states that He (God) does not understand all at once but proceeds from one another, directly implying that the nature of God's knowledge is discursive. This method of knowing depicts the human process, but unlike man, God knows both the principles and their conclusions, the cause and its effect simultaneously. St. Augustine contradicts the stated objection when he said that God does not see all things in their particularity or separately, as if He looked first here and then there; but sees all things together at once.<sup>2</sup> St. Thomas continues this thought when he wrote that God does not see things successively for He sees all things together in one thing above, Himself.<sup>3</sup> It is possible then for God in knowing Himself to know reality as a whole, while man must continually gather knowledge exterior to him, for in just knowing himself he would remain hopelessly ignorant.

God knows the multitude of beings in the one simple act of knowing Himself.<sup>4</sup> In man's case, he is the knower, and all that is to be known is outside of his humble essence, but where God is concerned, He is infinite intellect in which knower and known<sup>5</sup> are identical.

The second objection suggests that God knows other things through Himself, but only as effects through their cause. Within this small statement the objection has managed to deny that God's knowledge is infinite, and that He possesses no foreknowledge, making a part of His knowledge uncertain. Thomas quickly interjects by countering that God does not know first a cause and then, through it, its hitherto supposedly unknown effects; but He knows the effects in their cause.<sup>6</sup> Where the objectors strayed is in forgetting that God's essence encompasses all, and that it cannot be possible for something to be unknown to Him. God knows all truths (things) in and through Himself, that is to say, by virtue of His own Essence and His self-comprehension.<sup>7</sup> There is no limit to the knowledge of God since all of reality either possible or actual is contained in His essence. Only in His own essence, which most clearly reflects all beings possible and actual, does He understand all that is not Himself.<sup>8</sup> For God to know of things by any means other than Himself, would be for Him to know them imperfectly. Man finds himself in a perpetual hypothetical situation, based on theories and calculation that can at best have a high degree of probability amidst specific circumstances, but can never attain the plateau of perfect knowledge. Our knowledge is a composite of our experience, de-

rived from many different sources. God's knowledge is derived from Himself, never from any other source.<sup>9</sup>

Another misconception evolving from this objection is that God creates all things, but that what He has created somehow contributes to His knowledge. This is unquestionably false because nothing outside of God's knowledge is acquired: it is not physically caused by the objects in which it terminates; it is an eternal and immutable knowledge of what to us is past, present, and future.<sup>10</sup> Nothing is self-subsisting, for without God nothing would exist. All things are dependent on God and the reciprocal of the premise cannot also be true, for God is not dependent on His creatures for anything, including knowledge. God does not learn from existent creatures the fact of their existence nor what perfections these creatures have; His knowledge is one of the very determinants--the exemplary cause of their reality.<sup>11</sup> Augustine points out in respect to all His creatures both spiritual and corporeal, that He does not know them because they are, but they are because He knows them.<sup>12</sup>

Restating this objection, God knows other things through Himself, as effects through their cause, we must recognize the last two words as pivotal. They profess a distinction between God, an object, and the causes and the effects of the object, but such a distinction does not exist. He knows His effects in His own causality. His knowledge extends as far as that causality, that is, to the entire reality of every being.<sup>13</sup>

Objection number three depicts God and man alike, going discursively from causes to things caused. Thomas decides to

expand on the concept of man's discursive knowledge to prove how these characteristics can in no way pertain to God. The two modes of discursion in man according to Thomas consist of one according to succession only, as when we have actually understood anything we turn ourselves to understand something else; while the other mode is according to causality, as when through principles we arrive at the knowledge of conclusions.<sup>14</sup> Since God does not come to understand things in a successive manner, the first mode of discursion cannot hold for Him. As was stated earlier, God sees all things in one thing alone, which is Himself.<sup>15</sup> In this regard it is clear that God and man are not alike. Secondly, the procession from principles to conclusions in the second mode of discursion, presupposes we move from what is known, to the unknown.<sup>16</sup> With this mode, the unity in God encompassing both the cause and its effect, is dissolved. Again we find that although this holds true for man, God cannot be considered subject to this way of knowing. Thomas' final reply to the third objection is that the knowledge of the effects is not caused in Him by the knowledge of the created causes, as is the case with us.<sup>17</sup>

Now we will parallel the characteristics of human knowledge with the characteristics of Divine knowledge. Man's knowledge is distinct from his substance and intellect.<sup>18</sup> This means that the sources of his knowledge are not from within himself, rather he must completely rely on things external to him, by gradually and successively internalizing his experiences. On the other hand, God's knowledge is identical with His substance and intel-

19 lect. Clearly there is a difference in kind and not degree. We do not mean that intelligence is in God in the same mode in which it is in us, only bigger, but it is more precise to state 20 that we have intelligence, however God is intelligence.

21 Human knowledge requires the process of learning. At the moment of our conception we do not possess any knowledge, and through the course of our life we have opportunities for acquiring knowledge. The means by which we attain knowledge is through the senses. The striking fact about ourselves as intelligent beings is that we start off in ignorance, whatever we 22 ever know is something we have learned. Aristotle used the analogy of the blank tablet to describe the human intellect before experience. Conversely, Divine knowledge is not acquired, and therefore there is no learning process. A fundamental distinction is made based on the fact that God never passes from 23 ignorance to knowledge, for He is unchangeable. If we were to draw a flowchart to illustrate the increase of man's knowledge over the course of a lifetime, the line would steadily rise, portraying growth and an obvious change. Concerning God's knowledge, a flowchart would consist of a perfectly horizontal line to show that God does not experience a learning process, and that His knowledge is not effected by any factors capable of diminishing or supplementing His knowledge.

In closing, Thomas writes that what is known through another, and not through itself, is imperfectly known. 24 Man can know nothing in himself, therefore everything we know is imperfectly known. Mortal knowledge can be described in three

words; fragmentary, fallible, and uncertain.<sup>25</sup> When we proceed successively, we encounter decisions that must be made to enable us to move on, but these decisions carry the gloom of uncertainty since we lack perfect knowledge. God's knowledge can be called scientia, to indicate that it excludes on the one hand doubt, and on the other mere opinion and suspicion.<sup>26</sup> Doubt is not included in His knowledge since He does not ponder about judgements. Opinion and suspicion are not included because God is always certain of things and not quite sure. To describe God's knowledge in three words we could use total, comprehensive, and infallible.<sup>27</sup>

Whether God knows evil things, is the predicament studied in article ten of question fourteen. Already we are faced with a dilemma. If we take the position that God does know evil, we are saying that evil is in God, for it is through His essence that all things are known. Our other alternative is to say that evil cannot be in God, but since the sole means in which God comes to know things is through His essence, something, namely evil, would remain unknown to Him. Thirdly, we recently stated that God is the cause of all reality, and if evil exists, then its existence must be attributed to God. As we see, Thomas will masterfully synthesize every possible alternative to find one workable solution to a seemingly impossible question.

Does evil exist? Jacques Maritain in his book Saint Thomas and the Problem of Evil firmly expresses what we know to be true.

"Evil is real, it actually exists like a wound or mutilation of the being; evil is there in all reality, whenever a thing--which, insofar as it is and has being, is good,--is deprived of some being or some good it should have." 28

Now that we have openly stated our presupposition that evil does in fact exist, we must turn our attention to it's relation to God.

Those who hold that God does not know evil begin in objection one by saying that evil is the privation of good, but since God's intellect is not in potentiality, it does not know privation, and therefore does not know evil. Thomas responds by saying God knows evil, not by a privation existing in Himself, but in its opposite, the good.<sup>29</sup> Evil is known through the good as darkness is known by light, for if God did not evil things, He<sup>30</sup> would not be able to know good things perfectly.

All knowledge is either the cause of the thing known, or is caused by it, but the knowledge of God is not the cause of evil, nor is it caused by evil. Therefore God does not know evil.

There is a complicated response to the second objection. Thomas verbally affirms that God does not exert all the causation in the universe.<sup>31</sup>

How can this be so? Thomas believed that every event has two causes; a primary efficient cause and a secondary efficient cause. In all events God is the primary efficient cause, and in all nonmiraculous events, there is a secondary efficient cause.<sup>32</sup>

These two causes work together to initiate all events. There is no combination involving a percentage of one with a percentage of the other for a particular event, but a total participation of both for all events.<sup>33</sup> When we listen



to music for example, there is a secondary efficient cause, a guitar, and a primary efficient cause, a guitar player. This is the analogy he uses to explain his position. In reality all of creation is a secondary efficient cause, and God is the primary efficient cause. God allows creation to produce events, because if they did not, they would be useless.<sup>34</sup> Since creatures are not useless, then secondary efficient causes exist.

Evil is attributable to defects in these secondary causes.<sup>35</sup> Using Thomas' analogy we can see how this is possible. If a man has studied and played the guitar for twelve years, he is more than capable of creating beautiful music with a guitar. However, if you hand this man a guitar with one string missing, while the other strings are out of tune, the man can not create beautiful music. This incapability can in no way be attributed to the guitarist, but entirely to the defective instrument. This explains how evil can exist, with God having full knowledge of it, but in no way responsible for it.

There is only one perfect, omnipotent being; God. Within God's essence there is no evil, and He is the only being in which no evil subsides. In addition God cannot make any creature who is naturally impeccable any more than He can make a squared circle, or cease His own existence.<sup>36</sup> This statement can account for the fall of man in the Garden of Eden. Eventually man would have fallen regardless of his environment, because he, being an imperfect being, was not immune from evil.

In regard to evil, man, not God, is the primary efficient cause, and his actions, are the secondary efficient causes. God

is exterior to this event. God's knowledge is the cause of all being, but in the line of evil, the human being is the first cause (primary efficient cause), and evil is known by God without having been created by Him.<sup>37</sup> We know that terrible things happen in the world; suffering, injustice, murder, and war, all totally known by God. Remembering what was said earlier concerning the primary and secondary efficient causes working together to produce an event, continues to hold. In a murder for example, the secondary efficient cause is the gun, the primary efficient cause is the killer, and God's presence, as the primary efficient cause in all events, is His allowing of the event to occur. Actual bad actions take place because God wills to allow them to take place as the sort of things they are, their badness as such being produced entirely by the creature.<sup>38</sup>

Therefore although He permits this failure, He is not responsible for it.<sup>39</sup>

Thomas' reply under this article to objection number two is that the knowledge of God is the cause of the good whereby evil is known. The reciprocal of this preposition also holds a place in the world. Evil is permitted by divine providence, because God is powerful and good enough to bring good out of the very evil.<sup>40</sup> Events such as a cougar killing a lamb, in itself is an evil. If however it was essential for the cougar to eat, one of the ways the cougar's life can be sustained is in eating the lamb. This is a good, the preservation of the cougar's life, brought out by God in an evil, the killing of a lamb. In a relating article concerning the providence of

God and the presence of evil Thomas writes:

"Since God, then provides universally for all being, it belongs to His providence to permit certain defects in particular effects, that the perfect good of the universe may not be hindered; for if all evil were prevented, much good would be absent from the universe." 41

How the divine essence is or is not effected by evil, is the next point of inquiry. Everything known by God is through His essence, yet evil is not present in His essence and it is not its contrary. Thomas flatly responds that evil is not opposed to the divine essence and the divine essence is not corruptible by evil. Jacques Maritain suggests that reflecting upon the divine transcendence will lead to seeing that God can know evil without causing it, and without its having a causal effect on God.<sup>42</sup>

Throughout this section we have been saying that evil is known by God through the good. Moving to the fourth objection, if evil know through something else it would be known by Him imperfectly. The assumption that anything knowable eludes the knowledge of God, or the infinite intellect of the Creator, is preposterous as well as derogatory to the dignity of the Most High.<sup>43</sup> God knows evil perfectly, through the good.

Article thirteen of question fourteen addresses whether the knowledge of God is of future contingent things. The following syllogism; from a necessary cause proceeds a necessary effect, and since knowledge is necessary, what He knows must also be necessary, we conclude that the knowledge of God is not of contingent things, is presented in objection one. Thomas

makes the distinction between the mode of God's knowledge (which is necessary), and the mode of the event (which is free).<sup>44</sup> It is necessary, for it can not be otherwise, that God knows all things. Through His knowledge, together with natural causes, all events evolve. God necessarily knows all things as they are or will be, but this necessity does not destroy (limit or predestine) the order of natural causes that produces these events.<sup>45</sup> Let us refer to what was discussed earlier about the primary efficient cause and the secondary efficient cause in relation to what is being said here. The event, poor music, will occur if the secondary efficient cause, a terrible guitar is used to create music, regardless of the primary efficient cause, the ability of the instrumentalist. This instrumentalist could be the best in the world, but a terrible instrument is responsible for the poor music. Evil was accounted for in this manner, similarly free events shall be accounted for. The event, free activity, will occur if the secondary efficient cause, a man desiring to do something, in the presence of the primary efficient cause, God's knowledge. As we said in the first section, God knows all things, nondiscursively. He is not waiting for things to occur, but He knows all things in all times, presently. Free activity can still occur, for just as an outstanding guitarist, the primary efficient cause, could in no way bring beautiful music out of a terrible guitar, the secondary efficient cause, so too God's knowledge the primary efficient cause, does in no way affect the outcome of a man's actions, the secondary efficient cause,

to have free activity. This reply to objection one covers what is proposed in the second objection, because a necessary antecedent and a necessary consequent are terms substituted in the second, for a necessary cause and a necessary effect used in the first.

God's knowledge must necessarily be, but no contingent thing must necessarily be; therefore no contingent thing is known by God. This final objection tries to demote the way God knows, to the way man knows. Since our knowledge is not infinite, it is possible to approximate how much an individual as well as a race can know. God's knowledge, unlike our own, is not measured by time but by eternity; that is it has no<sup>46</sup> measure at all. There is no possible comparison between these two intellects. God does not know future contingent things because He is not dependent on the actual unfolding or succession of the events themselves, for all things, whether past, present, or future are known to God in one single act.<sup>47</sup> God does not experience a feeling of wonderment when things occur, He knows everything regardless of the time of the occurrence, simultaneously. In that single act of knowing Himself, God knows all the possibles and all the actuals because they are dependent<sup>48</sup> on Him. What all this means is that God knows the future infinitely better than we know the present. God's knowledge of the future is certain, not probable, and it is in no way<sup>49</sup> based on the unfolding of the events themselves.

Knowing the future, and predestination are two distinct entities. Predestination implies no choice, no alternative,

and no hope. The role of God in creation is not one of pre-destination. God's foreknowledge no more exercises a compulsory influence on the free acts of the future, than does the contemporaneous knowledge of any observer on an event happening at the present time.<sup>50</sup> Just as God is the cause of all things but not the cause of evil itself, so also does He possess foreknowledge without governing or planning our every move. His foreknowledge does not interfere with our freedom any more than<sup>51</sup> our knowledge of someone's past could affect their freedom. The key phrase to remember is that God is contemporary with all<sup>52</sup> events.

Foreknowledge is to God, what apples are to apple pie, for the only being that contains foreknowledge is God. To confess that God exists and at the same time deny that He has foreknowledge of future things, is a folly, for He who has no foreknowledge of all future things, can not be God.<sup>53</sup> Nothing is exterior to the knowledge of God, for He is not bound to any limit. Perfect and infinite are adjectives to describe how God know each and every event. His perfect knowledge includes<sup>54</sup> the realms of both the actual and possible world. If God did not know in a perfect and infinite way, His knowledge<sup>55</sup> would be little more than a calculation based on probabilities.

Man can have knowledge of contingent things, but not of future contingent things. The example used to explain this is whether a man will sit or not-sit. When we watch someone enter a room with an unoccupied chair, we know that he will either sit or choose to remain standing. We are certain that he will do...

one or the other, but we can only guess what the man will do. God however, is certain of what the man will do before the event, since eternal knowledge is present to all the future contingents that will be.<sup>56</sup> Thomas uses a good analogy to describe how our knowledge is different from His knowledge. He speaks of a mountain, that is very wide at the bottom and very tiny at the top. There is a path that proceeds from the bottom to the top in a circular motion. A traveller on the path at the midway point, can see who is around him, but can only remember who he has seen, and is incapable of knowing who is farther along on the path. God, however is at the tip of the mountain top, able to see those on the lower, middle, and higher sections of the mountain simultaneously. This is how we are to understand His foreknowledge, replacing lower, middle, and higher in regard to the mountain with past, present, and future in regard to events.<sup>57</sup>

In trying in the second section covered in this thesis; God's knowledge of evil, and this third article on His foreknowledge, there's an interesting quote found in Anthony Kenny's book; The God of the Philosophers.

"If the evil in the world is to be shown to be compatible with its having a wise creator, it is essential that God should know all true counterfactuals about the free actions of actual and possible creatures: for on this will depend which possible worlds He can and which He cannot actualize."

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(Counterfactuals are things that could happen in all possible worlds.) This is a very delicate as well as difficult proposition. The concept we are concerned with is "possible worlds which God cannot actualize." For help in this matter we must turn to

Descartes. Descartes professes that God knows what we would do in all possible worlds (in the face of all counterfactuals,) since God knows what He does in the actual world.<sup>59</sup> No matter what the circumstances may be have been, how they are presently, or how they will be in the future, God knows them because He knows Himself perfectly.

What can we conclude? That unlike man, God does not move from principles to conclusions, but knows all of reality in the single act of knowing Himself, for all things are contained in His essence. We know that when evil occurs, it is solely because of a defect in the secondary efficient cause, and in no way attributable to the primary efficient cause, God. Finally we can say; that God definitely has knowledge of future contingent things, because His knowledge is not measured by time, but eternity.



## ENDNOTES

- 1 Anton C. Pegis, Introduction to St. Thomas Aquinas (New York: The Modern Library, 1948), p. 141.
- 2 Pegis, p. 140.
- 3 Pegis, p. 140.
- 4 Brother Benignus, Nature, Knowledge, and God. (New York: Manhattan College, 1947), p. 538.
- 5 Thomas Gornall, A Philosophy Of God: The Elements of Thomist Natural Theology (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1962), p. 77.
- 6 Pegis, p. 141.
- 7 Joseph Pohle, God: His Knowability, Essence, and Attributes (St. Louis: B. Herder Books Company, 1946), p. 337.
- 8 Pohle, p. 395.
- 9 Gornall, p. 80.
- 10 Arnold J. Benedetto, Fundamentals in the Philosophy of God (The Macmillan Company, 1936), p. 266.
- 11 Benedetto, p. 267.
- 12 Pohle, p. 337.
- 13 Benignus, p. 537.
- 14 Pegis, p. 140.
- 15 Pegis, p. 140.
- 16 Pegis, p. 141.
- 17 Pegis, p. 141.
- 18 Benedetto, p. 237.
- 19 Benedetto, p. 273.
- 20 Benignus, p. 533.

- 21 Benedetto, p. 273.
- 22 Benignus, p. 533.
- 23 Benignus, p. 534.
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- 25 Benedetto, p. 273.
- 26 Pohle, p. 344.
- 27 Benedetto, p. 273.
- 28 Jacques Maritain, Saint Thomas and the Problem of Evil  
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- 30 Pegis, p. 145.
- 31 David Ray Griffin, God, Power, and Evil: A Process  
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- 34 Griffin, p. 80.
- 35 Griffin, p. 81.
- 36 Maritain, p. 16.
- 37 Griffin, p. 87.
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- 41 Pegis, p. 219.
- 42 Griffin, p. 89.
- 43 Pohle, p. 342.
- 44 Robert J. Kreyche, God and Reality: An Introduction To  
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1965), p. 68.

- 45 Kreyche, p. 68.  
46 Kreyche, p. 66.  
47 Kreyche, p. 66.  
48 Gornall, p. 81.  
49 Kreyche, p. 67.  
50 Pohle, p. 365.  
51 Gornall, p. 82.  
52 Benedetto, p. 269.  
53 Pohle, p. 365.  
54 Pegis, p. 154.  
55 Pohle, p. 346.  
56 Gerard Smith, Natural Theology (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1951), p. 201.  
57 D.J.B. Hawkins, The Essentials Of Theism (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1950), p. 122-123.  
58 Anthony Kenny, The God of the Philosophers (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), p. 66.  
59 Kenny, p. 79.

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