

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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Mortimer J. Adler
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ANGELS AND ANGELOLOGY

Part 1 of 4

OPENING

1. May I say at once that I hope no one has come to a lecture on angels thinking that the lecture would be about financial sponsors of shaky enterprises, or dear darling friends, or leather-coated motorcyclists.
2. Angels and the science of angels, which is called “angelology,” are great theological and philosophical subjects, as I will presently make clear.
3. I have been a student of the subject for many years, in the course of which I have given a number of lectures on angels, some of them publicly, some privately. Let me tell you a few stories from the private sector about the reactions evoked by the discussion of angels.
 - A. *Bill Benton*: the great ideas, beginning with Angel

B. *Arthur Houghton*: the lecture in San Francisco, and the consequences: Steuben glass angels.... and Gustav Davidson: “A Dictionary of Angels. “

C. *Eunice Kennedy Shriver* Honolulu at 5:30 a. m. on a Sunday morning. The question about who the expert was: Adler vs. Gustav Davidson. The, result: the Steuben bas relief of Raphael, as the Kennedy Award.

4. This lecture is divided into two parts.

Part One: A history of the subject, which will show how the consideration of angels runs through our Western tradition, not just its philosophy and theology, but its poetry and painting as well.

Part Two: An exposition of angelology—the science of angels which, given a few initial premises, moves to a number of extraordinary conclusions with a rigor and precision that has something of the quality of mathematical reasoning.

PART ONE: HISTORY ON THE SUBJECT

I. Introduction

A. Influenced by a long tradition of religious symbolism in painting and poetry, our imagination responds to the word “angel” by picturing a winged figure robed in dazzling white and having the bodily aspect of a human being.

1. This image, common to believers and unbelievers, contains features which represent some of the elements of meaning in the abstract conception of angels as this is found in the writings of Jewish and Christian theologians and in related discussions by the philosophers.
2. The human appearance suggests that angels, like men, are persons; that they are most essentially characterized by their intelligence.
3. The wings suggest the function of angels—their service as messengers from God to man.
4. The aura of light which surrounds them signifies, according to established conventions of symbolism, the spirituality of angels. It suggests that to imagine angels with bodies is to use a pictorial metaphor.
 - a. Another interpretation might be put upon this aura of light if one considers the role which the notion of angel has played in the history of thought.

- b. Wherever that notion has entered into discussions of God and man, of matter, mind, and soul, of knowledge and love, and even of time, space, and motion, it has cast light upon these other topics.
 - c. The illumination which has been and can be derived from the idea of angels as a special kind of being or nature is in no way affected by doubts or denials of their existence.
- B. Whether such beings exist or not, the fact that they are conceivable has significance for theory and analysis.
- 1. Those who do not believe in the existence—or even the possible existence—of utopias nevertheless regard them as fictions useful analytically in appraising accepted realities.
 - 2. What an ideal society would be like can be considered apart from the question of its existence; and, so considered, it functions as an hypothesis in political and economic thought.
 - 3. What sort of being an angel would be if one existed can likewise serve as an hypothesis in the examination of a wide variety of theoretical problems.
- C. The idea of angels does in fact serve in precisely this way as an analytical tool.
- 1. It sharpens our understanding of what man is, how his mind operates, what the soul is, what manner of existence and action anything would have apart from matter.
 - 2. Hence it suggests how matter and its motions in time and space determine the characteristics of corporeal existence.
 - 3. Pascal's remark—that “man is neither angel nor brute, and the unfortunate thing is that he who would act the angel acts the brute”—points to the different conceptions of man which result from supposing him to be either angel or brute rather than neither.
 - 4. The theories of Plato and Descartes, which attribute to the human mind or soul the being and powers of a purely spiritual substance or entity, seem to place man in the company of the angels.
 - 5. In this tradition Locke applies the word “spirits” equally to human minds and to suprahuman intelligences.

D. It would be misleading to suppose that the idea of angels is primarily a construction of the philosophers—a fiction invented for their analytical purposes; or that it is simply their conception of a supra-mundane reality, concerning the existence and nature of which they dispute.

1. In the literature of Western civilization, angels first appear by name or reference in the Old and the New Testaments. Readers of the Bible will remember many scenes in which an angel of the Lord performs the mission of acquainting man with God's will. Among the most memorable of such occasions are the visits of the angels to Abraham and Lot and the angelic ministry of Gabriel in the Annunciation to Mary.

2. In one book of the Bible, Tobias (Tobit, as it is called in the King James Apocrypha), one of the leading characters is the angel Raphael. Through most of the story he appears as a man, but at the end, after he has accomplished his mission, he reveals his identity. "I am the angel Raphael," he declares,

one of the seven, who stand before the Lord.

And when they had heard these things they were troubled; and being seized with fear they fell upon the ground on their face.

And the angel said to them: Peace be to you.

Fear not.

For when I was with you, I was there by the will of God: bless ye him and sing praises to him.

I seemed to eat and to drink with you; but I use an invisible meat and drink, which cannot be seen by men.

It is time therefore that I return to him that sent me....

And when he had said these things, he was taken from their sight; and they could see him no more.

3. As a result of scriptural exegesis and commentary, the angels become a fundamental topic for Jewish theologians from Philo to Maimonides, and for such Christian theologians as Augustine, Scotus Erigena, Gregory the Great, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Pascal, and Schleiermacher. They figure in the great poetry of the Judaeo-Christian tradition—in the *Divine Comedy* of Dante, in *Paradise Lost* of Milton, and in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and Goethe's *Faust*.

4. The philosophers, especially in the 17th and 18th centuries, are motivated by Scripture or provoked by theology to consider the existence, the nature, and the activity of angels.
 - a. Hobbes, for example, attacks the supposition that angels are immaterial on the ground that the notion of incorporeal substance is self-contradictory, and he undertakes to re-interpret all the scriptural passages in which angels are described as spirits.
 - (1) After examining a great many, he says that “to mention all the places of the Old Testament where the name of Angel is found, would be too long. Therefore to comprehend them all at once, I say, there is no text in that part of the Old Testament, which the Church of England holdeth for Canonical, from which we can conclude, there is, or hath been created, any permanent thing (understood by the name of *Spirit* or *Angel*) that hath not quantity... and, in sum, which is not (taking Body for that which is somewhat or somewhere) Corporeal. “
 - (2) All the passages can be interpreted, Hobbes thinks, simply in the sense in which “angel” means “messenger” and “most often, a messenger of God,” which signifies “anything that makes known his extraordinary presence.” If, instead of existing only when they carry God’s word to men, the angels are supposed to have permanent being, then they must be corporeal.
 - (3) As “in the resurrection men shall be permanent and not incorporeal, “Hobbes writes, “so therefore also are the angels... To men that understand the signification of these words, substance and incorporeal”—and mean by “incorporeal” having no body at all, not just a subtle body—the words taken together “imply a contradiction.”
 - (4) Hence Hobbes argues that to say “an angel, or spirit, is (in that sense) an incorporeal substance, is to say in effect that there is no angel or spirit at all. Considering therefore the signification of the word angel in the Old Testament, and the nature of dreams and visions that happen to men by the ordinary way of nature.”

(5) Hobbes concludes that the angels are “nothing but supernatural apparitions of the fancy, raised by the special and extraordinary operation of God, thereby to make his presence and commandments known to mankind, and chiefly to his own people.”

b. Locke seems to take the exactly opposite position. Asserting that we have “no clear or distinct idea of substance in general, “he does not think spirits any less intelligible than bodies.

(1) “The idea of *corporeal substance*, “he writes, “is as remote from our conceptions and apprehensions, as that of *spiritual substance* or spirit; and therefore, from our not having any notion of the substance of spirit, we can no more conclude its non-existence, than we can, for the same reason, deny the existence of body.”

(2) Just as we form the complex idea of bodies by supposing their qualities, such as figure and motion, or color and weight, to co-exist in some substratum; so by supposing the activities we find in ourselves—such as “thinking, understanding, willing, knowing, and the power of beginning motion, etc.”—to co-exist in some substance, “we are able to frame the *complex idea of an immaterial spirit*.”

(3) Not only does Locke think that “we have as clear a perception and notion of immaterial substances as we have of material, “but he also finds the traditional doctrine of a hierarchy of angels quite acceptable to reason.

(4) “It is not impossible to conceive, nor repugnant to reason, that there may be many species of spirits, as much separated and diversified one from another by distinct properties whereof we have no ideas, as the species of sensible things are distinguished one from another by qualities which we know and observe in them.”

(5) Locke goes even further—beyond the mere possibility of angels to the likelihood of their real existence. His reasoning resembles the traditional

argument of the theologians on this difficult point.

(6) “When we consider the infinite power and wisdom of the Maker,” he writes, “we have reason to think that it is suitable to the magnificent harmony of the Universe, and the great design and infinite goodness of the Architect, that the species of creatures should also, by gentle degrees, ascend upward from us toward his infinite perfection, as we see they gradually descend from us downwards.”

c. Such speculations concerning the existence and the order of angels are usually thought to be the province of the theologian rather than the philosopher. But Bacon, like Locke, does not think it unfitting for the philosopher to inquire into such matters.

(1) In natural theology—for him a part of philosophy—Bacon thinks it is improper “from the contemplation of nature, and the principles of human reason, to dispute or urge anything with vehemence as to the mysteries of faith.”

(2) But “it is otherwise, “he declares, “as to the nature of spirits and angels; this being neither unsearchable nor forbid, but in a great part level to the human mind on account of their affinity.”

(3) He does not further instruct us concerning angels in the *Advancement of Learning*, but in the *Novum Organum* he throws light on their nature as well as ours by touching on one characteristic difference between the human and the angelic mind.

(4) Discussing there the theory of induction, he holds that “it is only for God (the bestower and creator of forms), and perhaps for angels or intelligences at once to recognize forms affirmatively at the first glance of contemplation. “

E. Unlike most of the great ideas, the idea of angel seems to be limited in its historical scope.

1. It is not merely that since the 18th century the discussion has dwindled, but also that the idea makes no appearance in the great books of pagan antiquity—certainly not in the strict sense of the term, whereby “angel” signifies a

creature of God, spiritual in substance and nature, and playing a role in the divine government of the universe.

2. There are, nevertheless, analogous conceptions in the religion and philosophy of the ancients; and in philosophy at least, the points of resemblance between the analogous concepts are sufficiently strong to establish a continuity of discussion.
3. Furthermore, elements in the thought of Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus exercise a critical influence on Judaeo-Christian angelology.
 - a. Gibbon relates how the early Christians made the connection between the gods of polytheism and their doctrine about angels.
 - (1) “It was the universal sentiment both of the church and of heretics, “ he writes, “that the daemons were the authors, the patrons, and the objects of idolatry.”
 - (2) Those rebellious spirits who had been degraded from the rank of angels, and cast down into the infernal pit, were still permitted to roam upon the earth, to torment the bodies and to seduce the minds of sinful men.
 - (3) “The daemons soon discovered and abused the natural propensity of the human heart towards devotion, and, artfully withdrawing the adoration of mankind from their Creator, they usurped the place and honors of the Supreme Deity.
 - b. In the polytheistic religions of antiquity, the demigods or inferior deities are beings superior in nature and power to man.
 - (1) “The polytheist and the philosopher, the Greek and the barbarian, “writes Gibbon, “were alike accustomed to conceive a long succession., an infinite chain of angels, or daemons, or deities, or aeons, or emanations, issuing from the throne of light. “
 - (2) In Plato’s *Symposium*, for example, Diotima tells Socrates that Love “is intermediate between the divine and the mortal ... and interprets between gods and men, conveying and taking across to the gods the prayers and sacrifices of men, and to

men the commands and replies of the gods; he is the mediator who spans the chasm which divides them. "Love, Diotima explains, is only one of "these spirits and intermediate powers" which "are many and diverse."

- (3) Such demi-gods are intermediate by their very nature.
 - (a) Although superhuman in knowledge and action, they still are not completely divine.
 - (b) Occupying a place between men and, gods, they are, according to Plato, "by nature neither mortal nor immortal."
 - (c) Their existence is necessary to fill out the hierarchy of natures. They are links in what has come to be called "the great chain of being."
- (4) The analogy with the angels arises primarily from this fact of hierarchy. Both pagan and Christian religions believe in an order of supernatural or at least superhuman beings graded in perfection and power.
- (5) In both, these beings serve as messengers from the gods to men; they act sometimes as guardians or protectors, sometimes as traducers, deceivers, and enemies of man.
- (6) But the analogy cannot be carried much further than this. The angels, according to Christian teaching, are not inferior gods, or even demi-gods. As compared with the "intermediate spirits" of pagan religion, they are less human in character, as well as less divine.
- (7) Nevertheless, the reader of the great poems of antiquity will find a striking parallelism between the heavenly insurrection, which underlies the action of *Prometheus Bound* and the angelic warfare in *Paradise Lost*.



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Max Weismann, Publisher Emeritus

Elaine Weismann, Publisher and Editor

Phone: 312-943-1076

Mobile: 312-280-1011

Ken Dzugan, Senior Fellow and Archivist

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