

# THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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## ANGELS AND ANGELOLOGY

### Part 2 of 4

#### II *Angels in Pre-Christian Philosophy*

- A. In the writings of Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus, philosophical inquiry turns from the sensible world of material things to consider the existence and nature of an order of purely intelligible beings.
  1. As there is an inherent connection between being perceptible to the senses and being material, so that which is purely intelligible must be completely immaterial.
  2. If ideas exist independently—in their own right and apart from knowing or thinking minds—then they constitute such an order of purely intelligible entities.
  3. At this point a number of difficult questions arise. Are the intelligibles also intelligences, i.e., are they an order of knowers as well as a realm of knowables? Can they be regarded as substances? And if so, do they have a mode

of action appropriate to their mode of being—action which is other than knowing, action which in some way impinges on the course of events or the motions of the physical world?

4. Plotinus answers affirmatively that the purely intelligible beings are also pure intelligences, but he does not conceive them as having any power of action except that of knowing.
  5. Another answer to these questions given in antiquity and the Middle Ages is that the intelligences are the celestial motors, the movers of the heavenly bodies.
    - a. “Since we see, “Aristotle writes, “that besides the simple spatial movement of the universe, which we say that the first and unmovable substance produces, there are other spatial movements—those of the planets—which are eternal (for a body which moves in a circle moves eternally), each of *these* movements also must be caused by a substance, both unmovable in itself and eternal.”
    - b. These secondary movers, Aristotle thinks, are “of the same number as the movements of the stars,” and not only must they be eternal and unmovable, as is the prime mover, but also “without magnitude” or immaterial.
    - c. Plato offers an alternative hypothesis—that the celestial bodies are alive and have souls. This hypothesis, like Aristotle’s, tends in the Middle Ages to be restated in terms of the theory of angels.
      - (1) Aquinas reports Augustine as thinking that “if the heavenly bodies are really living beings, their souls must be akin to the angelic nature.”
      - (2) He himself holds that “spiritual substances are united to them as movers to things moved,” the proof of which, he says, “lies in the fact that whereas nature moves to one fixed end, in which having attained it, it rests; this does not appear in the movement of the heavenly bodies. Hence it follows that they are moved by some intellectual substances.”
- B. This ancient theory of intelligences governing the planets later occupied the attention of the astronomer, Kepler.

1. Although he denied any need, for such intelligences—among other reasons because planetary motion is not circular but elliptical—he argued that the celestial movements are the work either “of the natural power of the bodies, or else a work of the Soul acting uniformly in accordance with those bodily powers.
  2. But whether or not they are to be regarded as movers, as well as knowers, the intelligences represent for ancient thought a mode of being exempt from the vicissitudes of physical change, even as it is a mode of being separate from matter.
- C. When modern philosophers consider spirits or spiritual being, they seldom deal with the ancient speculations about pure intelligibles or separate intelligences without being influenced by the theological doctrine of angels which developed in mediaeval thought.

### III. *The Angels in Sacred Theology*

- A, The extent of this doctrine may be judged from the fact that the *Summa Theologica* of Aquinas contains a whole treatise on the angels, as well as additional questions on the speech of angels, their hierarchies and orders, the division between the good and the bad angels, and their action on men—the guardianship of the good angels and the assaults of the demons.

That these additional questions are contained in the treatise on divine government throws some light on their theological significance.

1. The primary fact about the angelic nature is immateriality. An angel is immaterial both in its substantial being and in its characteristic activity which, says Aquinas, is “an altogether immaterial mode of operation. “
2. Being immaterial, they are also incorruptible. “Nothing is corrupted except by its form being separated from the matter. . . . Consequently, “Aquinas writes, “a subject composed of matter and form ceases to be actually when the form is separated from the matter. But if the form subsists in its own being, as happens in the angels, it cannot lose its being. “To signify that they are intelligences existing apart from matter, the angels are sometimes called “subsisting forms” and sometimes “separate substances.”

3. Although they are imperishable in being and have immortal life, the angels are not, like God, truly eternal. “That *heaven of heavens* which Thou *createdst in the beginning* is some intellectual creature,” Augustine writes, but it is in “no ways coeternal unto Thee. “
  4. As created, the angels have a beginning. Yet, while not eternal, neither are they temporal creatures in continual flux, but, according to Augustine, they “partake of Thy eternity... through the sweetness of that most happy contemplation of Thyself... cleaving close unto Thee, placed beyond all the rolling vicissitudes of times. “
  5. It is for this reason that the angels are spoken of as “aeviternal.”
- B. The nine orders or ranks of angelic being are described by Dante in the *Paradiso* as distinct circles of love and light.
1. Using these metaphors he thus reports his vision of the heavenly hierarchy. “I saw a Point which was raying out light so keen that ‘the sight on which it blazes must needs close because of its intense brightness. ... Perhaps as near as a halo seems to girdle the light which paints .it, when the vapor that bears it is most dense, at such distance around the Point a circle of fire was whirling so rapidly that it would have surpassed that motion which most swiftly girds the world; and this was girt around by another, and that by the third, and the third then by the fourth, by the fifth the fourth, and then by the sixth the fifth. Thereon the seventh followed, so widespread now in compass that the messenger of Juno entire would be narrow to contain it. So the eighth and ninth.”
  2. Beatrice explains to him how the relation of the circles to one another and to the Point which is God depends upon their measure of love and truth, whereby there is “in each heaven a marvellous agreement with its Intelligence, of greater to more and of smaller to less.” She then amplifies her meaning: “The first circles have shown to thee the Seraphim and the Cherubim. Thus swiftly they follow their own bonds, in order to liken themselves to the Point as most they can, and they can in proportion. as they are exalted to see.

Those other loves, which go around ‘them, are called Thrones of the divine aspect, because they terminated the first triad.... The next triad, that in Like manner

bourgeons in this sempiternal spring Which the nightly  
Aries despoils not, perpetually sing Hosannah with three  
melodies, which sound in the throe orders of joy... first  
Dominations, and then Virtues, the third order is of Pow-  
ers. Then the two penultimate dances, the Principalities  
and Archangels circle; the last is wholly of Angelic  
sports. These orders all gaze upward, and downward so  
prevail, that towards God all are drawn, and all draw.”

#### IV. *Hell's Angels*

A. One of the great theological dogmas asserts that, from the beginning, the angels are divided into two hosts—the good and evil spirits.

1. The sin of Lucifer, or Satan, and his followers is that of disobedience, or rebellion against God, motivated by a pride which refuses to be satisfied with being less than God.

2. As Satan himself says, in *Paradise Lost*,

...pride and worse Ambition threw me down  
Warring in Heavn'n against Heav'ns matchless King.  
his good prov'd ill in me,  
And wrought but malice; lifted up so high  
I 'sdeind subjection, and thought one step higher  
Would set me highest, and in a moment quit  
The deb immense of endless gratitude...  
..... And that word  
Disdain forbids me, and my dread of shame  
Among the spirits beneath, whom I seduc'd  
Then to submit, boasting I could subdue  
Th' Omnipotent.

3. The theologians try to define precisely the nature of Satan's pride in wishing to be God. But Satan's sin is difficult to understand: an infallible intellect and a passionless will.

4. In the original sin of Satan and the other fallen angels, as well as in all subsequent intervention by Satan or his demons in the affairs of men, lie the theological mysteries of the origin of evil in a world created by God's love and goodness, and of the liberty of those creatures who, while free, can only do God's will.

- a. The fall of Adam from grace and innocence involves the same mysteries: free will uninfluenced by passions in a state of preternatural grace.
  - b. Man's destiny is connected with the career of Lucifer in traditional Christian teaching, not only on the side of sin, but also with regard to man's redemption—salvation replacing the fallen angels by the souls of the elect in the heavenly choir.
  - c. Among the most extraordinary moments in our literature are those in which Lucifer talks with God about mankind, as in *Paradise Lost*; or about a particular man, as in the Book of Job or in the Prologue in Heaven in *Faust*.
  - d. Their pagan parallel is the speech of Prometheus to a silent Zeus, but Prometheus, unlike Satan, is man's benefactor and he can defy Zeus because the Fates, whose secret he knows, rule over the gods.
  - e. Lucifer, on the contrary, seems always to be in the service of God. When he appears to Ivan in the *Brothers Karamazov*, he protests, "I love men genuinely... and against the grain I serve to produce events and do what is irrational because I am commanded to."
  - f. If it were otherwise, the warfare between the powers of light and darkness would have to 'be constructed as a battle between equals, which, according to Christian orthodoxy, is the Manichean heresy that regards the world as the battle ground of the forces of good and evil.
- B. The word "angelic" usually has the connotation of perfect moral goodness, but that must not lead us to forget that the demons are angelic in their nature although of a diabolical or evil will.
- C. Nor should the fact of Satan's subservience to God cause us to forget that Christian theology tries not to underestimate the power of the devil in his goings and comings on earth.
- 1. Satan tried to tempt even Christ, and throughout the New Testament the destruction of the diabolical influence over men occupies a prominent place.
  - 2. The intervention of the devil in man's life provides, if not the theme, the background of Goethe's *Faust*.

- D. As the theory of demonic influences and diabolical possession is an integral part of the traditional doctrine of angels, so, in modern times, demonology has been a major focus of attack upon theological teaching concerning spirits.
1. Moralists have thought it possible to explain human depravity without recourse to the seductions of the devil, and psychiatrists have thought it possible for men to go mad or to behave as if bewitched. without the help of evil spirits.
  2. The idea of the devil, according to Freud, is a religious fiction—"the best way out in acquittal of God" for those who try "to reconcile 'the undeniable existence... of evil with His omnipotent and supreme goodness.'"

#### VI. *Conclusion*

- A. The characteristic skepticism of our age has been directed against the belief in angels generally.
- B. It casts doubt by satire or denies by argument the existence of spirits, both good and
- C. Yet, all arguments considered, it may be wondered whether the existence of angels—or, in philosophical terms, the existence of pure intelligences—is or is not still a genuine issue.
- D. Or are there two issues here, one philosophical and the other theological, one to be resolved or left unresolved on the level of argument, the other to be answered dogmatically by the declarations of a religious faith?




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