

# THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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## ANGELS AND ANGELOLOGY

### Part 3 of 4

#### PART TWO: ANGELOLOGY AS A SCIENCE

##### I. *Initial Considerations*

- A. I said at the beginning that angelology is a science that has a high degree of rigor and precision.
- B. But it is a theological science, not an empirical, experimental, or mathematical science.
  1. This means that its first principles do not come either from experience or from reason.
  2. They are articles of faith. In the case of angelology, the belief that angels exist is founded on belief in the truth of Sacred Scriptures as the revealed word of God.
  3. Unlike the question, Whether God exists, the question, Whether angels exist, is not raised by the theologian.
    - a. The theologian regards the question of God's existence as one capable of being inquired into and argued

about. It is a question for philosophy as well as for sacred theology.

- b. But he does not regard the question about the existence of angels as a philosophical question. He does not think that rational arguments can be advanced to establish the existence of angels.
4. Nevertheless, as we have seen, some modern philosophers have argued that it is reasonable to believe in the existence of angels, if for no other reason, because their existence appears to carry out the divine plan of creation more perfectly.
- a. In the realm of material or corporeal things, there is a gradual ascent from the lowest forms of corporeal existence, from inert and inanimate bodies to living organisms, and in the realm of living organisms, from plants to brute animals to human beings.
  - b. If man were taken as the highest of God's creatures, there would be an unfilled gap in the grades of being between the human and the divine.
  - c. It is certainly possible to conceive a higher form of life and of intelligence than humanity represents. But to think of it, we must think of it as incorporeal or spiritual life.
  - d. The ranks and orders of angels represent the realization of that possibility, continuing the gradual ascent in the realm of creatures from the very lowest to the very highest—the highest of all being most proximate to God himself.
5. Philosophy can make one important contribution to the science of angels.
- a. It cannot prove that angels exist, but it can argue that the existence of angels is not impossible.
  - b. This constitutes a defense of angelology against those who claim that the notion of an angel is as self-contradictory as the notion of a round square.
    - (1) This, as we have seen, was the charge made by Thomas Hobbes, the materialist, who said, in so many words, that "incorporeal substance" was as meaningless an expression as "round square." Just as one cannot even think of a round square, so one cannot think of an incorporeal substance..

- (2) John Locke, in my judgment, was correct in his reply to Hobbes. The phrase “round square” is self-contradictory: what it signifies is unthinkable. But “incorporeal substance” is not self-contradictory.
- (a) It may not be possible to imagine a purely spiritual being, for what is purely spiritual is imperceptible by the senses and so is unimaginable.
  - (b) But a purely spiritual being—an incorporeal substance—is not unthinkable.
  - (c) If it is impossible to think of angels because we must think of them as incorporeal or purely spiritual beings, then it would also be impossible to think of God, which is not the case.
- C. We are now prepared to begin our examination of some (only some) of the principal propositions in angelology—propositions about the properties or characteristics of the angels as spiritual creatures.
1. Everything that remains to be said about angels follows deductively from two facts about angels that are implicit in the belief that God created spiritual as well as corporeal creatures.
    - a. This, by the way, is Augustine’s interpretation of the first sentence in Genesis: “the earth” represents the whole corporeal creation; “the heaven” represents the whole spiritual creation.
    - b. Human beings are corporeal creatures composite of matter and form, or as we sometimes say, of body and soul. The form—not the shape—is what makes them all specifically human. The matter is what individuates them—makes one human being individually different from another human being. Though both are alike in form, and so are specifically the same, they differ in matter, and so are individually different. (Example: twins)
  2. Angels, being incorporeal or purely spiritual creatures, are not composite of matter and form. Each is a self-subsistent form—a form that exists in total separation from matter.

- a. Hence, lacking matter, one angel cannot differ individually from another, since matter is the source of individuation among beings that are alike in form.
- b. It is the form of a substance that determines its specific nature.
- c. Hence, each angel, being a distinct form, is a distinct species.

D. From this fact about angels—that each is a distinct species—it follows that the angels are ordered in a perfect hierarchy, each being higher or lower than every other angels. (Their number, it is said, is finite but very, very large—larger than the number of human beings throughout time. But no population explosion occurs, because the number of angels is fixed eternally.

- 1. The order of angels is like the order of integers or whole numbers, beginning with one, with this exception: that the order of integers is potentially infinite, there being no highest number, whereas the order of angels is finite, there being a lowest and highest angel in the hierarchy.
- 2. From this it follows that no two angels are equal, since each has a lower or a higher place in the angelic hierarchy.
  - a. All human beings are equal with respect to their specific or common humanity: each is equally a human being, though as individual human beings, one may be unequal with another in a wide variety of respects.
  - b. The only thing comparable to human equality in hierarchy of angels lies in the fact that the angels are ordered in nine ranks. There is, therefore, a certain equality among the angels that belong to the same rank.
  - c. As we have seen, the nine ranks in the angelic hierarchy are distinguished by the grade of knowledge possessed by that rank and by their nearness to God.
  - d. The hierarchy of angels in three triads is constituted as follows:
    - (1) Seraphim, Cherubim, and Thrones
    - (2) Dominions, Virtues, and Powers

## (3) Principalities, Archangels, and Angels.

II. *Let us next consider the action of Angels*

- A. What is said about the action of angels in sacred theology constitutes an exception. to the purely deductive character of angelology as a science. It does not follow from our understanding of angels as incorporeal persons endowed with intellect and will. It is based solely on what we learn from Sacred Scripture, and belongs to the realm of faith rather than to that of reason.
- B. According to sacred theology, we know from Sacred Scripture only about the action of the lowest ranks in the hierarchy of angels—the archangels and the angels.
  - 1. Archangels and angels serve as divine messengers, instruments of God in the government of the corporeal universe.
  - 2. They perform this function mainly in their influence on the lives and actions of human beings.
    - a. Each human being has a guardian angel who exerts a saving and beneficent influence upon his or her life.
    - b. It must be added, of course, that each human being is also subject to attack by demons—the fallen angels who, though immediately controlled by the highest among them, Lucifer or Satan, are ultimately subject to the Divine will.
  - 3. What is of greatest to us in. this connection is that when angels act upon human beings to influence their lives for good or evil, they can do so only through acting on their senses, their imaginations, and their passions, which are bodily powers. They cannot act directly on their intellects or wills. Only God can do that.
- C. Given these facts about angelic action as a matter of faith, angelology must then go on to consider how angels can act in space and time.

III. *Angels in relation to space and time*

- A. Bodies occupy space extensively and exclusively. There can be only one body in a given place at a given time. Its being there excludes all bodies from being there.
- B. Angels, being incorporeal creatures, cannot occupy space extensively, but they can. be at a given place intensively—by the power or influence they exert at that place. In other

words, an angel is where it acts by its power and it encompasses the place occupied by the body it acts on.

- C. Such intensive occupation of space is just as exclusive as the extensive occupation of space by bodies.
1. A place envelopes a body, and can envelope only one body at a time.
  2. The spiritual power of an angel, acting on a body, thus enveloped by a place, envelopes the place occupied by that body.
  3. It follows that there can be only one angel at a given place at a given time, for its spiritual action enveloping that place and the body occupying it extensively, excludes all other angels from acting there.
  4. There is no sillier historical myth than the one about the dispute over the number of angels on the point of a needle.
    - a. In the first place, angels would not waste their effort dancing on the point of a needle. That would in no way discharge their ministry as messengers of God in the government of the universe.
    - b. In the second place, on the contrafactual supposition that dancing on the point of a needle were an angelic function, only one angel could do, so at a given instant in time.
- D. Bodies move from place to place continuously. In going from here to there, they traverse the intervening space. The local motion of bodies from here to there also takes time in transit; it is not instantaneous, but has some finite duration, longer or shorter.
- E. Angels, being incorporeal, move from place to place discontinuously and instantaneously.
1. An angel can go from one place to another without moving through the intervening space, as bodies do.
  2. And it can perform such motion instantaneously—without taking any quantity of time to do so.

*Digression:* Story of conversation with Arthur Holly Compton and other Nobel physicists at the University of Chicago in the early 1930<sup>1</sup>s. Angelology and quantum mechanics: In the Bohr theory of the atom, electrons, like

angels, go from outer to inner orbits without going through the intervening space and without taking any time to do so.

#### IV. *Angelic knowledge*

- A. In the consideration of angelic action in relation to space and time, we compared them with bodies. Here, considering how angels know, we must compare them with human beings.
  1. The human intellect is dependent upon the brain and nervous system: its thinking and knowing is dependent on the action of The senses and the imagination.
  2. Human thinking is discursive: it moves from one thought to another and takes time in doing so.
  3. All of our ideas—our concepts or notions—are somehow acquired from sense-experience and are somehow limited by sense-experience. We learn from sense-experience and we test our thinking by reference to sense-experience.
- B. The angelic intellect, being the intellect of an incorporeal creature, has no such dependence or limitations.
  1. Angels cannot have sense-experience and cannot learn from it.
  2. Everything they know must, therefore, consist in innate ideas that are implanted in them by GOD at the moment of their creation.
    - a. This means that their intellects do not develop in the course of time. They are not educable.
    - b. This also means that angels do not think discursively: their intellects do not pass from one thought to another by acts of reasoning or inference.
    - c. They are strictly intellectual, not rational, for to be rational is to learn by reasoning, and angels do not learn by reasoning.
    - d. Their knowledge is purely and wholly intuitive.
- C. Being creatures, and therefore, finite, they are not omniscient as God is. Their intuitive knowledge is limited by the innate ideas infused in them at the moment of their creation.
  1. The higher an angel is in the hierarchy of angels, the fewer are the innate ideas by which he knows intuitively whatever he knows.

2. The fewer the innate ideas, the more comprehensive they must be, so that the higher angels know more than the lower angels by virtue of the comprehensiveness of their innate ideas.

D. Two further consequences follow:

1. Angels know God better than men do, because they know God by ideas infused in them by God himself rather than by reflective thought, even when that thought is aided by God's revelation of himself in Sacred Scripture.
2. Angels also know themselves better than men do, because they know themselves by pure reflexivity.
3. Each angel, in self-knowledge, knows everything that all lower angels know, but not what higher angels know.

E. Even the knowledge of the highest angel has certain limitations: that knowledge does not extend to what will happen in the future in the corporeal universe, nor does it include knowledge of what goes on in the hearts and minds of men. To have such knowledge would be to have divine omniscience.

F. From all of the foregoing it follows that the angelic intellect, not learning, not growing or developing, is immutable or unchanging. It is also infallible in what it knows. Human fallibility or error stems from the dependence of the human intellect on the senses and the imagination, and also on its being subject to influence by bodily passions. The angelic intellect, being exempt from such dependence and such influences, is finite but infallible.





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