

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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Mortimer J. Adler
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ANGELS AND ANGELOLOGY

Part 4 of 4

V. *The Society of Angels*

- A. Here as before, what we must say about the society of angels is determined by their nature as incorporeal persons, having intellects and wills, knowledge and love, but without having senses, imaginations, or bodily passions.
 1. The society of the good angels represents the anarchist's ideal: a society of perfect peace and order constituted by knowledge and love and without any resort to coercive force.
 - a. The good angels are governed by divine law to which their wills are perfectly obedient.
 - b. When Alexander Hamilton wrote, in the Federalist Papers, that if men were angels, no government would be necessary, what he should have written, if he had been a good student of angelology, would

read as follows : if men were angels, they could be governed without any resort to coercive force.

- c. The human will, influenced by the passions of the body, often fails to will what it ought and often wills what it ought not to will. From this arises disobedience to just laws which prescribe what ought or ought not to be done. Hence the need for coercive force in the government of human societies.
2. What has just been said about the government of angelic society leaves a deep theological mystery about the fall of Lucifer (highest in the rank of Seraphim) and the other angels who disobeyed God and became the devils or demons who dwell in Hell. I have mentioned this earlier and will not discuss it further here because I cannot throw light on it.
- B. There is communication in the society of angels, but it is unlike human communication, for it does not employ a physical language. It does not involve any visible or audible signs.
 1. Angelic speech needs no medium of communication: it is purely intellectual—a conveyance of what one angel understands to another.
 2. Not dependent on a physical language, there is no possibility of one angel's misunderstanding another.
 3. This, too, contributes to perfect peace and harmony in the society of angels.

VI. *Conclusion*

- A. I have selected only a few of the high points in the theological science of angels. A complete exposition of angelology would take more time and effort than you could be expected to give to the subject. The Treatise on Angels in the Summa Theologica of Thomas Aquinas is a large and difficult book, all of which I am not sure I fully understand.
- B. The points I have selected for treatment have a special significance, in my judgment. They serve to safeguard us against a number of philosophical errors, all of which consist in attributing to human beings properties or characteristics that can belong only to angels because they are incorporeal creatures.
- C. Since the root of these errors lies in the attribution to human beings of properties or characteristics that belong to angels, the term “angelism” can be used to designate them all.

D. Let me call your attention to a half dozen or so angelistic errors, some of them committed by eminent Western philosophers, notably Plato in antiquity and Descartes at the dawn of modern philosophy in the 17th century.

1. The attribution to the human mind of innate ideas is the most obvious of these angelistic errors. It is to be found in both Plato and Descartes. For both, the ideas that the human intellect employs in its knowledge of reality are not derived by abstraction from sense-experience, but are innate endowments.
2. Hand and glove with the error about innate ideas is the consequent error that is to be found in the view that the human intellect knows intuitively rather than discursively and that, when it is in the presence of clear and distinct ideas, it knows the truth infallibly.
3. The totally impracticable ideal proposed by Leibniz, who thought it was possible to devise a perfect language that would enable men to communicate with one another without any misunderstanding, is still another angelistic error. The degree of perfection in communication that Leibniz sought in an ideal language exists for angels who do not use any language at all; but it can never be achieved in human communication.
4. The widespread belief in the possibility of telepathic communication between human beings—the conveyance of thought from mind to mind without the use of visible or audible signs, or any other physical means of communication—is angelism for fair.

Telepathy is for angels, not for human beings.

5. The Socratic doctrine in ethics is another angelistic error. Socrates held that knowledge is virtue, that to know the good is to will and do the good, and that to understand what a just law commands is to obey that law willingly.

This holds true for angels, but not for human beings.

6. Philosophical anarchism is a parallel angelistic error in political theory. The philosophical anarchist admonishes us to aim at the utterly impracticable ideal of a human society in which persons live together in peace and harmony, through perfect understanding and love, and without the need of any form of government that employs coercive force to keep the peace, do justice, and maintain harmony.

This is an ideal that is realized in the society of angels, but it is totally unrealizable in a human society. To think the opposite, as the anarchist does, is to commit an angelistic error.

7. Finally, there is a widespread, popular notion that the human soul, when it becomes separated from the body at death and goes to heaven, becomes an angel—a member of the angelic community.
 - a. While it is true, according to sacred theology, that the community of saints—the souls of the blessed—commingle with the society of the good angels in the heavenly choir, it is not theologically true that the human soul in heaven ever becomes more than a human soul, which is always less than an angel in nature.
 - b. This popular error is connected with a fundamental angelistic error to be found in both Plato and Descartes—the error of viewing the human soul or the human intellect as if it were a purely spiritual or purely intellectual substance, in no way dependent on the body for its existence or for its proper action.
 - (1) On this view of the soul, the body to which it is related in this life becomes, as the English poet Wordsworth said, a “prison house,” from which it is liberated by death.
 - (2) On this view, the soul is indistinguishable in its essential nature from that of an angel, differing only in that it is condemned to being connected with a body that it is much better off without.

Ode on the Intimations of Immortality

“trailing clouds of
glory [the soul]
comes from heaven
which is its home.
Shades of prison
house fall fast.

- (3) Aristotle held an opposite view of the soul, one which avoids the error of angelism. On Aristotle’s view, every material or corporeal substance is composite of matter and form. In living organisms, the form, which is the principle of life, is called the soul, but like every other substantial

form, it is a form immersed in matter—a material form and not a purely spiritual substance by itself.

- (4) Hence, when the death of the living organism dissolves the composition of matter and form, the human soul, like the souls of animals and vegetables, would cease to be; but according to Jewish and Christian theology, which declares as an article of religious faith that the human soul is immortal, it can exist in separation from the body by God's grace, not by its own natural propensity to survive by itself.
- (5) That it is not better off in this condition, and not like an angel, is indicated by the theological doctrine of the resurrection of 'the body, without which the soul exists imperfectly.

E. I hope the points I have just made show how angelology—when taken as a purely hypothetical science, based on assumptions in which one may not believe—can contribute to our understanding of human nature, human life, and human society.

- 1. Man is neither an angel nor a brute.
- 2. Unlike the brutes, Man is a rational, a philosophical animal, an animal able to think discursively and abstractly.
- 3. Unlike the angels, man. is a rational animal, not a purely intellectual being, man is not able to know intuitively without reflective thought or reasoning, not able to communicate with others perfectly, not able to live in peace and harmony with others in a society without coercive government; and so on.
- 4. It has been said that in the corporeal cosmos human beings stand at about the midpoint in size or quantity between the smallest particles of matter and the largest celestial bodies.
- 5. In the realm of being or existence, man stands at the boundary line that separates the whole corporeal creation from the realm of purely spiritual creatures—in the hierarchy of beings, higher than other animal organisms and lower than the lowest of the angels.

(If there is time, I would like to read you a poem by William Wadsworth Longfellow, entitled "Sundolphin.")



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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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