



THE ANGELS AND US

PART 1 OF 2

Preface

WHEN, in 1943, Robert Hutchins and I undertook to edit *Great Books of the Western World* for the Encyclopaedia Britannica company, I also worked on constructing a systematic guide to the discussion of the great ideas by the authors of the great books. The first task in the construction of the *Syntopicon*, which became the title of that guide, involved the selection of the ideas to be treated and the formulation of the topics to be considered under each idea.

By 1945, after working for two years with collaborators, I settled upon a final list of 102 ideas. My recollection is that I had little difficulty in getting my associates' approval of almost all the ideas I proposed to include. But I also remember that I stood almost alone in my insistence on the inclusion of the idea of ANGEL.

The task fell to me of writing an essay about each of the great ideas that were to become chapters in the *Syntopicon*. Deciding to adopt

an alphabetical order for the presentation of the ideas, I wrote the essay on ANGEL first, and sent copies of my first draft to Mr. Hutchins, who was then President of the University of Chicago, and to Senator William Benton, who was then publisher of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

I will never forget Senator Benton's immediate reaction. He was flabbergasted by my choice of ANGEL as one of the great ideas. He thought it did not belong in that company at all. What made matters worse was the prominence given it by putting it first.

Mr. Hutchins, some members of the Editorial Advisory Board, and my immediate associates in the work of producing the *Syntopicon* were also querulous about the inclusion of ANGEL, but not in such a temper about it as Senator Benton.

I persisted. My reading of the great books had persuaded me that ANGEL should be included among the great ideas. The *Syntopicon* was published in 1952 with ANGEL its opening chapter. The essay I wrote on that subject ran to about 5,000 words and barely skirted the surface of the subject that is treated at much greater length in the present volume.

Writing this book has further persuaded me that I was right in my judgment thirty-five years ago. Reading it, I hope, will persuade others that that is the case.

In the years subsequent to the completion of the *Syntopicon* and the publication of *Great Books of the Western World*, I have lectured on angels before a variety of audiences—the students in St. John's College at Annapolis and in the downtown college of the University of Chicago; the designers working for Steuben Glass, who considered making crystal angels in the round but found it easier to make them in bas-relief; and, on other occasions, popular audiences across the country.

On all these occasions, I found that the subject had the same fascination for others that it did for me, a fascination that was in no way affected by the heterodox beliefs of the persons listening or diminished by the absence or denial of any religious belief.

The most recent occasion occurred several summers ago in Aspen, Colorado, where I give an annual lecture under the auspices of the Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies. The announcement of a lecture on angels and angelology drew an audience larger than any I have ever enjoyed in the last thirty years. The auditorium was

filled to overflowing and the spirited discussion following the lecture ran for almost an hour. The range and character of the questions asked and the penetration of some of the points raised testified amply to the fascination of the subject for everyone involved.

It was then that I decided to write this book.

Aspen, Colorado
June 1981

M.J.A.

The Fascination of Angels

(1) Minds Without Bodies

BODIES without minds—nothing unusual about that. Except for the adherents of a strange doctrine known as panpsychism, it would not occur to anyone to think things might be otherwise. The spectacle of bodies without minds does not have the fascination of the odd or abnormal.

Equally familiar and calling as little for special notice are minds associated with bodies in various forms of animal life, including the human. But minds without bodies—that is, indeed, an extraordinary prospect. Therein lies the fascination of angels.

Nothing has greater fascination for the human mind than manifestations, supposed or real, of something akin to human intelligence in non-human beings. This accounts for our interest in the minds of other animals and even for our tendency to exaggerate the mental powers we attribute to them, especially to domesticated animals and household pets.

Our fascination with intelligence apart from our own is intensified when the minds conjectured or imagined are thought to be superior, and especially if they do not have the limitations imposed upon the human mind by its association with the frailties of the human body.

Angels as objects of religious belief and of theological or philosophical speculation represent only one form of such fascination with superhuman intelligence. For many centuries of Western civilization and until recently, it was the only form. It was preceded in antiquity by mythological figures to whom superhuman powers

were attributed and by the all-too-human gods and demigods of the polytheistic religions of the ancient world. These anthropomorphic deities were, perhaps, the oldest expression of man's interest in the superhuman.

Angelology, which is the subject of this book, is speculation about minds, either totally without bodies or with bodies that they take on as guises but do not inhabit. It is no longer in vogue. Angels are no longer the objects of poetic and pictorial imagination that they once were, nor are they now the objects of the extensive theological and philosophical speculation that they were in the Middle Ages and down to the nineteenth century. They have been replaced, both in our imagination and in our thought, scientific rather than philosophical, by cosmological conjectures about the presence of living and intelligent beings in outer space, by the androids and robots conjured up by science fiction, and by the aliens invented by sci-fi, in print or on the screen, who engage in intergalactic warfare or who visit this planet by means of UFOs.

Call angelology “theology-fiction” or “philosophy-fiction” if you like, or regard it as a legitimate part of theology as queen of the sciences and of philosophy as her handmaiden. However you look upon it, be prepared to acknowledge at least that it can exercise a fascination for us comparable to that of contemporary speculations or fantasies about other forms of superhuman intelligence.

I claim for it more than that. I will try to show that angels are the most fascinating of all such objects of fantasy and thought because, unlike all other forms of superhuman intelligence that fall short of the infinite power of a divine intellect, angels—and angels alone—are minds without bodies.

Anything that belongs to the cosmos, when that is understood as the totality of everything physical, must have corporeality or be associated with corporeality. No matter how fantastic are the bodily forms and powers of the aliens of outer space invented by science fiction, the intelligence of these imaginary figures operates through and with physical appendages.

Since the forms of extraterrestrial life and intelligence that some twentieth-century cosmologists think may inhabit the far reaches of our galaxy and beyond still fall within the cosmos as a whole, such minds will certainly have bodies. They will probably be endowed with nervous systems and brains that, however superior in degree to our own, cannot be totally unlike the physical organs upon which the operation of the human mind seems to depend.

Again, angels—minds without bodies—are the striking exception. They are not merely forms of extraterrestrial intelligence. They are forms of extra-cosmic intelligence.

(2) *Extraterrestrial Intelligences*

From the fifth century B.C. right down to the present day, philosophers and scientists have engaged in speculation about the existence and role of souls or minds in association with or as inhabitants of heavenly bodies—the stars and other planets than earth.

The context of these speculations is cosmological, not theological. They stem either from an effort to explain the motions of the celestial spheres or in response to questions about the structure of the physical cosmos as a whole. Earlier speculations differ in two respects from similar conjectures by twentieth-century cosmologists.

For one thing, earlier speculations occurred before astronomical inquiry had the telescopic instruments to expand its exploration of the cosmos beyond the solar system and the starry heavens visible to the naked eye. For another, the extraterrestrial intelligences were conceived as incorporeal—as spiritual substances—even though they were also thought to be attached to heavenly bodies either as their motive forces or as their animating principles.

We need not go into the details of Aristotle's pre-Copernican astronomy to understand the role that these extraterrestrial intelligences played. They were postulated by him as celestial motors to explain the regular and everlasting motion of the celestial spheres in perfectly circular orbits.

Everlasting motion, in Aristotle's view, could not be explained except by the everlasting action of a cause that performed this action without being acted on—an unmoved mover, in short. But, in addition to a prime mover, itself unmoved, Aristotle also thought that each of the celestial spheres required its own unmoved mover to account for its endless revolution. These secondary unmoved movers Aristotle conceived as intelligences that functioned as motors for the spheres to which they are attached. In order to be causes of motion without themselves being moved, they had to be incorporeal agents. For Aristotle, an incorporeal agent could be nothing other than a mind or intelligence.

While he sometimes used the word "God" as a synonym for the

prime mover of the physical cosmos, his meaning for that term differed in one crucial respect from the understanding of the deity in the Judaeo-Christian and Islamic religions of the West. Aristotle's prime mover did not create the cosmos that its agency maintained in everlasting motion. It preserved the motion of the spheres, but it did not preserve the existence of the cosmos.

His conception of the function performed by the celestial intelligences that were secondary unmoved movers differed as radically from the Judaeo-Christian and Islamic view of the role played by angels in the divine scheme of things. It is a serious mistake to suppose, as is supposed by some modern critics of angelology, that the theory of angels in the three great religions of the West was adopted from or even influenced by the now completely discarded, outmoded cosmology of antiquity.

In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the great post-Copernican astronomer Johannes Kepler dealt a death blow to the Aristotelian world picture. This completed the revolution begun by the Copernican attack upon Ptolemy. Even more consequential than the replacement of the geocentric by the heliocentric hypothesis, with the planets orbiting around the sun instead of the celestial spheres circling around the earth, was Kepler's rejection of the Aristotelian and Ptolemaic supposition that the matter composing the heavenly bodies differed radically from terrestrial matter. With it went the erroneous notion that the heavenly bodies were incorruptible, subject only to change of place and to no other mode of change, along with the equally erroneous notion that their movements were always perfectly circular.

Kepler's precise mathematical description of the elliptical pathways of the planets in their orbiting around the sun rested on massive observational data accumulated by Tycho Brahe. In the closing pages of his treatise on *Harmonies of the World*, Kepler disclaims any need to introduce either "god-intelligences" as Aristotle did, or "armies of innumerable planetary spirits" as the Magi did. Nevertheless, he reports Tycho Brahe's opinion that the globes other than this earth "are filled with inhabitants"; and he concludes by asking whether God had so exhausted his creative powers in peopling this planet with various forms of life "that he was unable . . . to adorn the other globes too with their fitting creatures?"

William Gilbert, another early scientist, living and writing at the same time, regarded the magnetic force (which was the subject of his investigation) as animate, imitating the human soul and even surpassing it. In the concluding pages of his treatise *On the Load-*

stone and Magnetic Bodies, Gilbert discusses what he takes to be Aristotle's hypothesis—that the heavenly bodies are animated by souls—not to reject it, but rather to correct it by attributing a soul as well to the planet earth, which so plainly manifests the action of magnetism.

Still another type of speculation concerning souls or minds inhabiting other portions of the cosmos occurred a century later. The following passage appears in the works of Lord Bolingbroke:

We cannot doubt that numberless worlds and systems of worlds compose this amazing whole, the universe; and as little, I think, that the planets which roll about the sun, or those which roll about a multitude of others, are inhabited by living creatures, fit to be inhabitants of them. When we have this view before our eyes, can we be stupid or vain or impertinent enough to imagine that we stand alone or foremost among rational created beings?

Influenced either directly by Bolingbroke, or by the reflection of Bolingbroke's thought in Alexander Pope's *Essay on Man*, which he read and admired, the great German philosopher Immanuel Kant lectured mankind about the modest position occupied by the human species in the cosmic scheme. "Human nature," Kant declared,

occupies, as it were, the middle rung of the Scale of Being, . . . equally removed from the two extremes. If the contemplation of the most sublime classes of rational creatures, which inhabit Jupiter or Saturn, arouses [man's] envy and humiliates him with a sense of his own inferiority, he may again find contentment and satisfaction by turning his gaze upon those lower grades which, in the planets Venus and Mercury, are far below the perfection of human nature.

Similar conjecturing comes to us from still another source a century later. Karl Barth's extensive discussion of the Kingdom of Heaven (in his *Church Dogmatics*, Volume III) calls attention to a number of relatively obscure German theologians in the nineteenth century who gave reasons for thinking it highly probable that elsewhere in the universe there are intelligent creatures superior to man.

One of these, Volkmar Reinhard, writing in 1812, argued that "since the heavenly bodies, whose number and size are almost immeasurable, . . . cannot possibly be left untenanted by God, but are incontestably filled with creatures appropriate to their nature, we are freely justified in assuming a host and variety of creatures infinitely surpassing all human conception."

This theme is repeated, with a number of variations played upon it,

by K. J. Bretschneider in 1838 and by Richard Rothke in 1870, down to Adolf Schlatter in 1923 and Ernst Troeltsch in 1925. Throughout this series of theological treatises, some attempt is made to relate the hypothesis of superior intelligences inhabiting other parts of the physical universe with the Biblical doctrine of God's heavenly host of holy angels.

It is easy to see why some connection between the two might be supposed. The one thread that connects them is the attribution to these hypothetical beings of intellects superior to that possessed by man. On the other hand, it is not always clear that these superior intellects are minds without bodies. That certainly does not enter into the conjectures of Carl Sagan and others who, in the twentieth century, have defended the probability of extraterrestrial life and intelligence.

Furthermore, in all the theorizing that has so far been recounted, the intellects whose existence is postulated, with or without bodies, either have a special location in one or another celestial body or have a special attachment to different portions of the physical cosmos.

In these two very important respects, they are not the angels of Biblical lore and of Western religious belief; nor are they immaterial substances that, as unembodied intellects, become the objects of philosophical thought.

Nevertheless, it is necessary to note an affinity between the arguments advanced by Lord Bolingbroke and others in the eighteenth century (for the existence in the universe of intellects superior to the human mind) and the arguments for the existence of angels (to which we will come in Chapter 4). What is common to both is the assumption that the hierarchy or scale of beings in the universe would be rendered defective if man, at the summit of the ascending scale of earthly creatures, did not have above him another series of gradations in being that ascended upward from man's middle position in the cosmic scheme, thus filling the gap between man and God.

When this affinity is noted, it also remains necessary to note that all the speculation about extraterrestrial intelligences, from Aristotle to Sagan, falls within the context of thinking about the structure and functions of the physical cosmos. For Sagan and his contemporaries, it is not the argument from gradations of being but rather the probability of biophysical and biochemical conditions favorable to extraterrestrial life that underlies guesses about the presence

of intelligent life elsewhere in the cosmos.

In sharp contrast, the Biblical testimony about angels, together with theological speculations about their nature and operation, falls within the context of thinking about God and about what Divine providence has ordained for the glory of God and the salvation of man.

We welcome your comments, questions, or suggestions.

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