

Angels and Demons

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According to Bertrand Russell's famous essay, "A Free Man's Worship" (1903), natural science has shown the universe to be wholly indifferent to the hopes and aspirations of those cosmic accidents known as human beings, and, as a result, any honest modern reflection on the significance of human life must be based, in Russell's own words, on a "firm foundation of unyielding despair." In effect, he is telling us, "There is no God or divine providence, and there is no hope for eternal life. So there!" And even though today's intellectuals are generally smart enough not to appeal solely to science to support this type of ultimate despair, many still agree with Russell that we live in a "disenchanted world" (*read*: no God, no soul and, most certainly, no angels!). As G.K. Chesterton was to put it just a few years after Russell's essay:

"When rationalists say that the ancient world was more enlightened than the Christian, from their point of view they are right. For when they say 'enlightened' they mean darkened with incurable despair. It is profoundly true that the ancient world was more modern than the Christian. The common bond is in the fact that ancients and moderns have both been miserable about existence, about everything, while mediaevals were happy about that at least" (*Orthodoxy*, chap. 9).

Chesterton had earlier remarked that modern philosophy's "despair is this, that it does not really believe that there is any meaning in the universe." Indeed, one gets the distinct impression that many among today's intellectual elite *prefer* it this way, even if it makes their lives on the whole less deeply satisfying. Apparently, there's something 'grown-up' about embracing despair, and something childish about looking for an alternative.

Well, we Catholics would rather say 'childlike' than 'childish'. But there is no denying that compared to the world of ultimate despair, our world is more 'enchanted'—which is to say, more interesting, more dramatic, more adventuresome, and more challenging. Life is a high stakes game for

every human being, and it abounds with opportunities and pitfalls. And, as they say, we are not alone. From our perspective, the world is in some ways against us and in some ways for us, but it is most assuredly not indifferent to our hopes and aspirations. On the one side, through the merits of His Son, God provides for us not only the interior transformation and assistance worked by His grace, but also the exterior assistance of the communion of saints, among whom are numbered the good angels. And lined up on the other side are the world, the flesh, and, yes, the devil, along with all his demonic followers. What more could you ask for by way of excitement? It's even better than J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, where only a few angelic beings (e.g., Sauron, Saruman, and Gandalf) play a leading role.

To be sure, some unimaginative Catholics seem embarrassed by angels. Sadly, when the preliminary version of the new Catechism was first circulated, there were complaints that too much space was being devoted to the angels; my own view is that the final version devotes much too little space to them.

But who are these angels and demons? What sort of beings are they? What do they know and when do they know it? How did the demons go bad? And what do they have to do with us?

Where better to look for answers to these questions than the *Summa Theologiae* of Thomas Aquinas? In the First Part of the *Summa* St. Thomas deals with angels and demons in two separate places: first, in questions 50-64, which fall within his discussion of the various sorts of beings God has created, and, second, in questions 106-114, which fall within his discussion of how God governs the universe He has created. (If you'd like to read these questions in a spanking new translation, see www.nd.edu/~afreddos/summa-translation/toc.htm.)

Even though we use the term 'angel' to designate the beings in question, so that an angel can be either good or bad, the term itself is derived from the Greek *angelos*, which means 'messenger' and hence in its origin designates the role of the good angels. This leads to a certain amount of confusion, since we sometimes use 'angel' with a positive connotation (as in "She is on the side of the angels") and sometimes without such a connotation (as in "Lucifer is a fallen angel"). In the writings of St. Thomas's

non-Christian philosophical predecessors, we find more neutral designations for angelic beings, e.g., ‘intellectual substance’, ‘separated substance’, and ‘intelligence’. Even though St. Thomas believes that divine revelation is our firmest and most extensive source of information about the existence, nature, and functions of the angels, he realizes that the classical pagan philosophers had, without the aid of revelation, hit upon the idea of incorporeal (or immaterial) substances and had counted God, the separated substances, and the human soul among them. In fact, St. Augustine tells us in his *Confessions* (book 7, chap. 1) that it was only through the help of Platonist philosophy that he was able to overcome one of his principal intellectual difficulties with the Catholic Faith, viz., his inability to conceive of God as something other than a bodily or corporeal being (even if a pretty wispy one).

So the angels are, like God, immaterial substances. In the technical language that St. Thomas borrows from Aristotle, the angels are pure forms rather than, like us, beings composed of matter and form. This fact has some interesting consequences.

First, none of an angel’s acts depends on matter; hence, all of his acts are either intellectual acts of knowing and willing or else the consequences of such acts. This means, for one thing, that angels do not have sensory cognition or any powers which, like imagination and sensory memory, are linked to sensation. (A question: Does this entail that there is no such thing as angelic art? Even if there is no angelic music or painting or architecture, are there, for instance, pieces of fiction passed from one angel to another? And might there be some angelic counterpart to the other arts?)

Second, angels do not have ‘lower’ life-functions such as digestion, growth, or sexual reproduction. In fact, they cannot reproduce themselves in any way at all, since they do not have parts that can serve as angelic ‘genetic material’. But, then again, neither do they grow old or suffer from sickness and physical deterioration. (For instance, unlike some of us oldsters, angels do not need reading glasses of various strengths for different tasks!) Needless to say, angels cannot die or, as St. Thomas would put it, undergo corruption.

Third, if angels have some relation to places and to bodily things, then this relation is unlike

anything else we know—with the possible exception of the very strange behavior attributed to the fundamental particles described by contemporary quantum physicists. Nonetheless, it is natural to believe—at least some pretty impressive ancient philosophers did—that the ‘intelligences’ do have some sort of power over bodies.

Now try to imagine what it would be like to be an incorporeal being with knowledge and power, but without sensation and sensory imagination. A little creepy, eh? You can’t see or hear or smell anything. (We really do depend on—and delight in—our senses, and it is hard for us to imagine a being that learns things without them.) What’s more, you don’t have any feelings or emotions, strictly speaking; your joy and peace and love are the quiet kind, simple acts of will. On the other hand, even though you do not get your knowledge through sensation, you suddenly realize, upon closer in(tro)spection, that you’re really quite the expert in mathematics and natural science, without ever having taken any courses and without having devised any long proofs or carried out any experiments. In fact, your grasp of nature is as thorough as it was painless to acquire. You came by it naturally, as they say; you’ve had it ever since you popped into existence or, more accurately, ever since you were brought into existence.

What’s more, even though you have no body, you can move around really quickly. But to understand exactly what this means, we have to start with your relation to bodies located in space and time. Generally speaking, you are present to a place when you use your power to act on the bodies located in that place. Unlike the bodies themselves, you are not ‘contained’ by your place; for instance, you can, if you want to, go from point A to point B without tracing a continuous path between them. Instead, like God Himself, you contain the place in the sense of being able to perform certain operations there. Of course, unlike God, you are not present to all of space through your power; nor are you able to do everything that God does in a given place. Instead, you are limited to effecting certain qualitative and quantitative changes in the bodies located in a particular place. Occasionally, as we read in Sacred Scripture, you may be called upon by God to fashion something that looks like a human body and to ‘assume’ that body, thus taking on a human appearance in the manner of the archangel Raphael in the

book of Tobit. But in such a case, as Raphael himself makes clear in Tobit 12:18-19, your assumed body is not really a living human organism and does not really have life-functions like speaking and digestion. (Interestingly, you are related to this type of assumed 'human' body in much the same way that Descartes mistakenly took human souls to be related to their bodies. But that is a story for another time.) So you move around by becoming present through your power to different places (or bodies) at different times; and you yourself get to choose where you will be located.

Besides your knowledge of nature, what other sorts of knowledge do you have? For instance, do you know all that God intends to do? Do you know what your fellow angels are thinking? Do you know what human beings are thinking?

Assuming for now that you are a good angel, the depth of your initial knowledge of God's intentions depends on where you stand in the hierarchy of angels. According to tradition, bolstered by various passages from Sacred Scripture, there are nine orders of angels, arranged in three hierarchies. The first and highest hierarchy contains, in descending order, the Seraphim, the Cherubim, and the Thrones; the second hierarchy consists of the Dominations, the Virtues, and the Powers; and the third and lowest hierarchy, the one that deals directly with human affairs, includes the Principalities, the Archangels, and the Angels.

Think of the angels in the highest hierarchy as something like close consultants who continually confer with the commander-in-chief. They see the big picture both diplomatically and militarily, and with God's help they lay out the general strategy for the war against evil. As we descend down the through the orders of angels, we meet the equivalent of generals, colonels, majors, captains and lieutenants, who receive insights and instructions from the angels above them and convey these insights and instructions to the appropriate lower angels. And lower angels, especially those in the third hierarchy, are the privates and corporals assigned to us as guardians. They don't always see the big picture, and, according to St. Thomas, this means that, on the surface at least, they are sometimes working at cross-purposes. (Your guardian angel wants Boston College to win the game, so that you can

overcome your recent grumpy disposition; my guardian angel wants Notre Dame to win, for similar reasons. The two angels have to consult the higher-ups to see what the divine game plan calls for in this case.)

Communication among the angels takes place by means of the angelic equivalent of speech. One angel can communicate with another simply by willing to make something known to him. And if he wishes, he can do this in such a way that what he says to the other angel is a private matter between them. In the same way, angels can speak to human beings, though normally this communication takes place through hints and promptings and is successful only when the person in question is paying attention. St. Thomas seems to think that this is the way things normally happen; that is, the promptings of the Holy Spirit, both intellectual and affective, come to us through the action of our guardian angels. However, unless we live “in the presence of God,” we will be stone deaf to this angelic speech. Conversely, our prayers are presented to God through the mediation of our guardian angels. But since angels cannot read our minds, we must reveal whatever it is we want them to know.

So much for the good angels. Unfortunately, there is a dark side to angelic life as well. The Church teaches that many angels fell, led by (as tradition has it) the angel who was, naturally speaking, the greatest of them all, viz., Lucifer, the light-bearer. (For what follows, Tolkien’s creation stories, *Ainulindale* and *Valaquenta*, published in *The Silmarillion*, are a great aid to the imagination.)

A lot of ink was spilled in the middle ages over the question of how it was possible for an angel to sin. After all, an angel—especially a ‘highly ranked’ angel—is an agent who knows his own situation perfectly well, who is free from all passion that might cloud his judgement, and who realizes that he can’t be God and that he depends on God for his very existence. So if he is not subject to ignorance or passion, then how can he go wrong? St. Thomas’s answer, as I understand it, is that an angel is capable of a sort of willful ignorance that stems from pride. More specifically, even though he desires a genuine good, viz., eternal beatitude, he nonetheless, in an excess of self-esteem, leaves out of consideration the fact that God is the only possible source of genuine angelic fulfillment. Instead, puffed up by his own

undeniable splendor and reluctant to depend on another for his own fulfillment, he chooses to have just that fulfillment which he himself can be the source of. In essence, he makes himself into the sort of person who sees God's gracious offer of eternal fellowship with the Holy Trinity as a threat to his own autonomy and self-worth. From such a perspective, God's goodness and generosity come to appear as oppressive. And so Lucifer, pridefully misinterpreting God's loving call to friendship as a demand for abject servitude, utters his definitive "*Non serviam*" ("I will not serve").

If we think about it for a moment, the devil's sin isn't really so hard for us to understand. After all, we can recognize within ourselves a similar reluctance to abandon ourselves to the will of God. We fear being somehow 'swallowed up' by God and unable, as it were, to be our own glorious selves. In such a mood, we can scarcely believe that service to God can actually constitute our true liberation and fulfillment. We deserve better than this, we want to say. And remember, the devil is, naturally speaking, a much more impressive creature than any of us. So if even we can sometimes feel this way, it is not difficult to imagine how the greatest angel might fall as well.

So the demons are too proud to serve the living God. Yet, at the same time, Satan and the other fallen angels are envious both of the angels who have remained faithful to God (they sure *seem* happy despite their lack of autonomy!) and also of human beings, who, despite our lowly natural status, have been given the gift of the Incarnation of the Son of God. And because of this the devil and his minions try to make us fail, even as our guardian angels try to protect us. I can't go into this here, but if you want to appreciate (and to better guard against) the wiles and snares of the demons, you should read C.S. Lewis's *Screwtape Letters: A Devil's Diabolical Advice for the Capturing of the Human Heart*.

I have barely scratched the surface here. If you're interested in learning more about angels and demons, then in addition to the reading recommended above, you might consult the Catechism of the Catholic Church and the homepage for my course, *Aquinas on Angels*:

<http://www.nd.edu/~afreddos/courses/450/phil450.htm>. Enjoy!