

## 7. What is an Angel?

Saint Thomas Aquinas is known as the Angelic Doctor. He is angelic for three reasons: his purity, his intellect, and his advanced teaching about angels. Angels may not seem like a philosophical topic, but for the ancient philosophers, the concept of what we call an "angel" was important. It is a question about whether there are intellects or minds that exist without material bodies. In the West, we call these "angels." In other places they are called spirits, ghosts, gods, demigods, daemons, or devils. In philosophy, they are called "intellectual separate substances." The idea of "intellectual separate substances" arose from the philosophical conclusion that stars, planets, and forces of nature would be ruled by God through the intermediary agency of creatures less than God but greater than humans and animals. The pagans especially believed that the movement of the spheres and heavenly bodies depended on pure spirits. Thomas Aquinas' knowledge of the angels derives not so much from the pagan philosophers, but from Sacred Scripture, the Church Fathers, and from his reasoned conclusions about the hierarchy of the universe.

**How Many Angels Can Dance on the Head of a Pin?** Have you ever heard someone say, "Well that's as ridiculous as arguing over how many angels can dance on the head of a pin!" If you hear someone say this, you'll know that he is not a Thomist. The answer to the question, "How many angels can dance on the head of a pin?" is extremely important because the answer provides us with everything you need to know about angelic nature. It is not a stupid question of curiosity. Instead, it is a thought-experiment that touches on the very nature of angelic intellects. In brief, the question raises a discussion over whether angels have material or physical bodies.

If I ask, "How many college students can fit into this Volkswagon?" I'm assuming college students have physical bodies and the Volkswagon has a limited physical volume. When I ask, "How many angels can dance on the head of a pin?" I am juxtaposing a physical space - the head of a pin - with a non-physical reality - angels. This introduces a problem. Angels, being "separate substances" do not take up any space. Zero space, to be exact. So then, there are two possible answers:

- "No angel can dance on the head of the pin since an angel cannot be on the physical head of a physical pin."
- "All the angels can dance on the head of a pin because they would all be able to "fit" in that location since they do not take up any space."

If someone answered by saying, "Hmmm. Angels are pretty small. They're sort of like butterflies. So probably only two could fit on the head of pin," then this person would miss the point of the question, which is: Angels do not have material bodies!

**Do Angels Have Matter?** Thomas Aquinas ran into a philosophical problem regarding angels as "intellectual separate substances." All things on earth are composed of form and matter. I am a soul (form) and body (matter). My wedding band is a ring-shape (form) and gold (matter). A book is a story (form) captured with paper and ink (matter). This is the general rule of the composition of things on earth. This is why angels are so philosophical troubling. They break the rule! Angels are not material. They are not composed of form and matter. They are form alone. Thomas Aquinas has a lot of explaining to do.

Now some philosophers took the easy way out. They said, "Oh, this is easy. Angels are composed of form and matter, except they are made of a special 'spiritual matter' that is non-physical." Thomas does not believe this is a good argument. However, by denying the materiality of angels, Thomas could be accused of turning angels into gods. What would make angels different from God?

**Are Angels Gods of Some Sort?** Thomas replies that angels are distinct from God. Whereas God's essence is his existence (God's *essentia* - God's *esse*), this is not the case for angels. The *essentia* of an angel is not to exist since angels have a beginning with their creation by God. Angels owe their existence to God. So they are distinct from God in this important way.

This raises a further problem for Thomas Aquinas. If every angel has the same form (angel-ness), then there could only be one angel since there is nothing material to separate them. So Thomas solves the problem by saying that every single angel has his own unique form. That is, every single angel is his own species of angel. On earth, every human person belongs to the human species, and we are differentiated by our bodies. However, in heaven every single angel is his own species. There is not one single "angelic species." According to Thomas, if there are one billion angels, then there are one billion different "species" or "forms" of angels. Thus, every angel is formally distinct from every other angel.

**How Angels Fill In the Gap Between God and Humans:** Important theological writings by an author known as "Dionysius the Areopagite" appeared in the fifth century. The Areopagite blends the philosophy of Plato with the writings of the New Testament. As a result, the Areopagite has a wonderful theology of angels - what we call angelology.

Thomas Aquinas, therefore, relies heavily on Dionysius the Areopagite. The Areopagite provides the most thorough philosophical analysis of angels of the early Christian era. Writing as a Christian, the Areopagite seeks to provide a rational account for the nature and role of angelic beings. The Areopagite assumes angels fit rightdy into the hierarchy of being since the perfection of the universe entails intellectual creatures that can know the First Cause who is God. However, human persons know through the body and have a limited ability to know. This leaves a giant gap between God and humanity. Since the hierarchy of beings is continuous, there would need to be special creatures who could know God in a more direct way, without being required to know through sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch. These would be angelic beings.

**Angels**    Spiritual only  
**Humans**    Spiritual & Physical Animals  
**Animals**    Physical only

Humans notice they are spiritual and physical, but that animals and plants are only physical. So then, should not there be something created that is only spiritual? These "only spiritual" things are angels.

**Angels Think Differently Than We Do:** Now humans know by abstracting data received through their physical sense organs. You hear the buzzing, you see the yellow and black insect, and you may feel a sting. You add up all that sense data and then you come to know what it is - a bee. Angels don't do it like this.

How, then, do angels know? Angels know that which is intelligible immediately and purely. They receive a mode of knowing that is proportionate to their form or species (remember each angel has his own form or species). Unlike God, the angel has a finite, limited essence. While God knows all things, the angel does not know all things through its own angelic nature. Unlike humans, the angels do not go through a process of knowing. They do not abstract ideas from sensory data.

Angels never think through anything. This is why we say that angels have "non-discursive" knowledge. The word discursive means "proceeding by argument or reasoning." Humans have discussions which eventually lead to moments in which someone says, "Aha! Now I finally understand it!" Angels never do that.

Angels think through innate forms. All angels, each one differing by the design of God, received forms into their angelic substances by which they know things.

Angels have purely formal knowledge. Whereas humans know and learn the idea of "triangle" by drawing them with pencils and describing them with our words (material representation), angels just know "triangle" without reference to pictures or description. We humans come to know what "sphere" is when someone compares it to a ball or to a globe. Yet the angel innately knows "sphereness." The angel does not abstract the idea of "sphereness" out of a physical ball or globe. So when we consider the minds of angels, we should be in awe. In comparison to humans, the minds of angels are like the internet, and our humans minds are like a calculator from the early 1980s. There's a big difference between us and them. This is especially scary when you consider that demons (fallen, evil angels) have massive intellects. We'll come to that in just a little bit.

**The Mysterious Hierarchy of Angels:** Thomas Aquinas then surprises us by saying an angel is lower by it having more forms given to it. We might expect the exact opposite. Would it not be the case that the angel with the most innate forms would be the best and most intelligent angel? Not so, says Thomas. According to him, the highest angels are most simple in that they know intelligible essences as proceeding from the God who is perfectly simple. These angels only think of God. Below these highest angels are those that know intelligible essences of the most universal created causes. Below these mid-range angels are those that know intelligible essences applied to particular causes. Just in case you are curious, guardian angels are the absolute lowest angels in the hierarchy since they are concerned with those things that are truly mundane - protecting and guiding lowly humans!

**First Hierarchy:** Angels of the First Hierarchy  
Seraphim consider intelligible things in God  
Cherubim alone, and therefore have the least  
Thrones amount of innate forms within them.

**Second Hierarchy:** Angels of the Second Hierarchy  
Dominations consider the most universal causes  
Virtues and principles of creation.  
Powers

**Third Hierarchy** Angels the Third Hierarchy  
Principalities consider intelligible things in  
Archangels particular effects and thus have the  
Angels most innate forms within them.

The higher angels illuminate the lower angels and so on and so forth. Yet as the knowledge gets passed down the chain, it gets broken up and less and less simple.

### **What Each Rank of Angel Does**

- The greatest angels are the Seraphim since they consider God's goodness as the goal of all creatures. For this reason they are called seraphim. Seraph means "burning," and they are continually burning with the love of God.
- Next are the Cherubim who consider God's goodness as it applies to creation - the providence of God.
- Third are the Thrones who contemplate how the goodness of God is reflected in divine judgments.

The Second or Middle Angelic Hierarchy considers the universal causes of creation:

- The fourth level of angels called Dominations organizes and decrees what should be done by the lower angels.
- The fifth level of angels called Virtues confers the causes of energy for these commands to be filled. Thus, the Virtues are responsible for the highest powers within the cosmos - the gravitational pull of orbits and the burning of suns and stars.
- The sixth level, belonging to those angels called Powers, protects the operation of the cosmos.

The Third Angelic Hierarchy concerns earthly matters.

- The seventh level of angelic Principalities governs human matters - the general welfare of nations and the common good.
- The eighth level of Archangels mediates messages between God and humans. Only these lower angels communicate with humans. For example, Saint Michael the Archangel protects the people of God, and Saint Gabriel the Archangel delivered special messages to Daniel and the Blessed Virgin Mary.
- At last we reach the ninth and lowest level. The angels are those who protect humans and bring less important messages. These lowest angels need the more innate forms than any other form of higher angel in order to relate to humans.

The principle there should be mediating, immaterial intelligences between God and humans can be seen by the gradual hierarchy of angels is important to understand,

especially as it relates to multiplicity of innate forms and angelic knowledge. In conclusion, Thomas Aquinas dealt a death-blow to ancient Greek philosophy by applying his concept of analogy of being to angels. For the ancient polytheistic pagans, the world was divided into immaterial and material. Anything immaterial was considered divine - gods and goddesses. Anything material was considered earthly - humans, animals, plants, and things. By applying the analogy of being, Thomas makes a distinction within the realm of the immaterial. Thomas divides the immaterial world itself between divine (God who exists of Himself) and the immaterial non-divine angels (who get their existence from God). Angels are immaterial, but they are not God. They are distinct from God in one important way. For God, his *essentia* is his *esse*. God exists of himself. Angels are immaterial but still owe their existence to God. So Thomas can agree with ancient Greek philosophy about immaterial intellectual agents "floating" around up there. However, unlike the ancient Greeks, Thomas is able to distinguish the angels from gods and reserve the title "God" to one alone. This saves Thomas from polytheism.

**How the Evil Angels Became Demons:** Thomas teaches there are good angels and bad angels. The bifurcation of angels into good angels (like Saint Michael) and bad angels (like Satan) is discussed by Saint Thomas at *Summa theologiae* I, qq. 63-64. Following passages from the Old and New Testament, Thomas teaches the angels were tested. Some angels adhered to God and were rewarded with the beatific vision of God's essence (good angels) and some rebelled and lost grace (bad angels or demons). According to Christian tradition, Satan was once a seraph and the highest angel of all.

A defect appeared in the bad angels. Thomas cites Job 4:18: "In His angels, He found wickedness." When they were first created, the angels did not have the beatific vision of God's essence. They were literally blind to the vision of God. They were first tested (some say by a vision of Christ incarnate in Mary and certain angels could not accept serving God if it entailed serving a lower species - namely the human species).

Thomas quotes Saint Augustine who says the devil "is not a fornicator nor a drunkard nor anything of the like sort, yet he is proud and envious." Lucifer and one third of the angels fell on account of pride and envy. Thomas explains the devil wanted to be God and he cites Isaiah 14:13-14: "I will ascend into Heaven...I will be like the Most High." Saint Augustine also confirms that Satan "wished to be called God."<sup>13</sup> Saint Augustine relates the fall of the evil angels to the book of Genesis: "And God saw the light that it was good, and he divided the light from the darkness" (Genesis 1:4, D-R). Thomas picks up this allegory from Augustine, and

identifies the separation here as the division of the good angels from the bad angels who became "dark."

All this means that the devils are not naturally wicked. God did not give certain angels a wicked nature. Just like humans, God originally made angels good and then some of them chose to become evil. By choosing themselves, rather than God as their final cause, the demons thwarted their angelic natures. They became dark and turned in on themselves. Although they do not have lust for material objects, the demons have spiritual greed. They desire to be God. They desire to be worshiped. This is the final and eternal decision of their free wills. We must now turn to humans who have also fallen by free will. However, unlike angels, humans can be redeemed. Let's take a look at the reasons for this.