

QUESTION 50

The Substance of Angels Considered Absolutely

The next thing to consider is the distinction between the corporeal creature and the spiritual creature. We will consider, first, the purely spiritual creature, which is called an angel in Sacred Scripture (questions 50-64); second, the purely corporeal creature (questions 65-74); and, third, the creature composed of the spiritual and the corporeal, viz., man (questions 75-102).

On the topic of angels, we must first consider what pertains to their substance (questions 50-53); second, what pertains to their intellect (questions 54-58); third, what pertains to their will (questions 59-60); and, fourth, what pertains to their creation (questions 61-64).

As for the substance of angels, we must consider it both absolutely (question 50) and in relation to corporeal things (questions 51-53).

On the topic of the substance of angels considered absolutely, there are five questions: (1) Is there any creature that is wholly spiritual and completely incorporeal? (2) On the assumption that an angel is wholly spiritual, is he composed of matter and form? (3) How many angels are there? (4) How do they differ from one another? (5) Are angels immortal, i.e., incorruptible?

Article 1

Is an angel wholly incorporeal?

It seems that an angel is not wholly incorporeal:

Objection 1: That which is incorporeal only with respect to us and not with respect to God is not incorporeal absolutely speaking. But in *De Fide Orthodoxa* 2 Damascene says, “An angel is called incorporeal and immaterial with respect to us, but as compared to God, he is corporeal and material.” Therefore, an angel is not incorporeal absolutely speaking.

Objection 2: As *Physics* 6 proves, nothing is moved except a body. But in the same place Damascene says, “An angel is an ever movable intellectual substance.” Therefore, an angel is a corporeal substance.

Objection 3: In *De Spiritu Sancto* Ambrose says, “Every creature is circumscribed by the set limits of its nature.” But being circumscribed is something proper to bodies. Therefore, every creature is corporeal. But as is clear from Psalm 148:2 (“Praise the Lord, all you His angels ... For He spoke, and they were made; He commanded, and they were created”), angels are creatures of God. Therefore, angels are corporeal.

But contrary to this: Psalm 103:4 says, “He makes His angels spirits.”

I respond: It is necessary to hold that some creatures are incorporeal. For what God principally intends in the case of created things is the good, which consists in an assimilation to God. But the perfect assimilation of an effect to its cause occurs when the effect imitates its cause with respect to that through which the cause produces the effect. For instance, what is hot effects what is hot. But as was shown above (q. 14, a. 8 and q. 19, a. 4), God produces creatures through His intellect and will. Hence, the perfection of the universe requires that there be some intellectual creatures. But an act of understanding is not an act of a body or of any corporeal power, since each body is limited to the here and now. Hence, in order for the universe to be perfect, it is necessary to hold that some creatures are incorporeal.

However, the ancients, who did not appreciate the power of understanding and failed to distinguish sensing from understanding, thought that there was nothing in the world except what could be apprehended by sensation and imagination. And since only bodies fall under the power of imagining, they thought that the only beings were bodies, as the Philosopher points out in *Physics* 4. The error of

the Sadducees, who claimed that there are no spirits, originated from these premises.

Nonetheless, the very fact that understanding is superior to (*altior*) sensing is a plausible proof that there are some incorporeal beings that are comprehensible only by the understanding.

Reply to objection 1: Incorporeal substances stand in the middle between God and corporeal creatures. But when what is in the middle is compared to one of the endpoints, it looks like the other endpoint; for instance, what is lukewarm, when compared to what is hot, seems cold. It is for this reason that angels, when compared to God, are said to be ‘material’ and ‘corporeal’—and not because anything of a corporeal nature exists in them.

Reply to objection 2: ‘Movement’ is here being taken in the sense that acts of understanding and willing are called movements. Thus, an angel’s substance is said to be ‘ever movable’ because he is always understanding in actuality and not, like us, sometimes understanding in actuality and sometimes in potentiality. Hence, it is clear that the objection involves an equivocation.

Reply to objection 3: It is proper to bodies to be circumscribed by the limits of their place, but it is common to all creatures, whether corporeal or spiritual, to be circumscribed by the limits of their essence. This is why Ambrose says in *De Spiritu Sancto* that even though certain creatures are not contained by corporeal places, they are nonetheless not without circumscription as far as their substance is concerned.

Article 2

Is an angel composed of matter and form?

It seems that an angel is composed of matter and form:

Objection 1: Everything contained under any genus is composed of a *genus* and a *difference*, where the difference constitutes the species when added to the genus. But as is clear from *Metaphysics* 8, the genus is taken from the matter, while the difference is taken from the form. Therefore, everything that is in a genus is composed of matter and form. But an angel is in the genus of substance. Therefore, an angel is composed of matter and form.

Objection 2: Matter is found in anything in which the properties of matter are found. But the properties of matter are *being receptive* (*recipere*) and *being a subject* (*substare*); this is why Boethius says in *De Trinitate* that a simple form cannot be a subject. But these properties are found in an angel. Therefore, an angel is composed of matter and form.

Objection 3: Form is an actuality (*actus*). Therefore, whatever is just a form is pure actuality. But an angel is not pure actuality, since this belongs to God alone. Therefore, an angel is not just a form, but instead has a form in matter.

Objection 4: A form is properly limited (*limitatur*) and made finite (*finitur*) by matter. Therefore, a form that does not exist in matter is infinite. But an angel’s form is not infinite, since every creature is finite. Therefore, an angel’s form exists in matter.

But contrary to this: In *De Divinis Nominibus*, chap. 4, Dionysius says, “The first creatures are understood to be incorporeal and immaterial.”

I respond: Some claim that angels are composed of matter and form. This is the opinion that Avicenna tries to establish in *Fons Vitae*. For he assumes that things that are distinguished intellectually likewise exist as distinct in reality (*in rebus*). But in the case of an incorporeal substance our intellect apprehends something by which it is distinguished from a corporeal substance and something in which it agrees with a corporeal substance. Hence, from this he wants to infer that (a) that by which an

incorporeal substance differs from a corporeal substance is, as it were, its form, and that (b) what is common, as it were, and serves as the subject of this distinguishing form is its matter. For this reason he claims that the same ‘universal’ matter belongs to both spiritual and corporeal beings, so that the form of an incorporeal substance is thought of as being impressed on the matter of spiritual beings in the same way that the form of quantity is impressed on the matter of corporeal beings.

However, it is obvious at first glance that it is impossible for there to be a single matter for both spiritual beings and corporeal beings. After all, it is impossible that a spiritual form and a corporeal form should be received into the same part of matter, since in that case numerically one and the same thing would be both corporeal and spiritual. Hence, it follows that one part of the matter would receive the corporeal form and another part would receive the spiritual form. But matter cannot be divided into parts except insofar as it is understood to be the subject of quantity—so that, as *Physics* 1 explains, if the quantity were removed, then an indivisible substance would remain. So, then, it follows that the matter of spiritual beings would be the subject of quantity—which is impossible. Therefore, it is impossible that there should be a single matter for both spiritual beings and corporeal beings.

But beyond this, it is impossible that an intellectual substance should have *any* kind of matter at all. For the operation of any given entity corresponds to the mode of its substance. But an act of understanding is a completely immaterial operation. This is clear from its object, since every act takes its species and nature from its object. For a thing is understood insofar as it is abstracted from matter, since forms in matter are individual forms, which the intellect cannot apprehend as such. Hence, it follows that every intellectual substance is completely immaterial.

Moreover, it is not necessary for things that are distinguished intellectually to exist as distinct things in reality, since the intellect apprehends things not according to the mode of the things but according to its own mode. Hence, material entities, which are lower than our intellect, exist in our intellect in a more simple way than they exist in themselves. By contrast, angelic substances are higher than our intellect. Hence, our intellect cannot attain to an apprehension of them as they are in themselves. Rather, it apprehends them in its own mode, according to which it apprehends them as composite things. And, as was explained above (q. 3, a. 3), it is in this same way that our intellect apprehends God.

Reply to objection 1: It is the *difference* that constitutes the species. But each thing is constituted in a species insofar as it is limited to some specific grade of being (*gradus in entibus*). For as *Metaphysics* 8 says, the species of things are like numbers, which differ through the addition and subtraction of the unit.

Now in the case of material things, that which determines the specific grade, viz., the form, is distinct from that which is so determined, viz., the matter, and this is why the genus is taken from the one and the difference from the other.

By contrast, in the case of immaterial things, that which does the determining is not distinct from that which is determined. Instead, each immaterial being possesses through its very self a determinate grade of being. And so in the case of immaterial things, the genus and the difference are taken not from different sources, but from one and the same source.

Still, there are different sources as far as our own understanding is concerned. For insofar as our intellect considers an immaterial being *indeterminately*, the concept of a genus is apprehended in it, whereas insofar as it considers an immaterial being *determinately*, the concept of a difference is apprehended in it.

Reply to objection 2: This objection is put forth in *Fons Vitae*. And the argument would reach its conclusion with necessity if the mode in which an intellect receives [a form] were the same as the mode in which matter receives [a form]. But this is clearly false.

For matter receives a form in order to be constituted by it in the *esse* of some species, such as air or

fire or any other. By contrast, an intellect does not receive a form in this way; if it did, then this would validate the opinion of Empedocles, who claimed that we know earth by means of earth and fire by means of fire. Instead, an intelligible form exists in an intellect with the very nature of a form; for this is how it is known by an intellect. Hence, this sort of reception is not the sort of reception that belongs to matter, but is instead the sort of reception that belongs to an immaterial substance.

Reply to objection 3: Even though there is no composition of form and matter in an angel, nonetheless, both actuality and potentiality exist in him. This can be made clear by considering material things, in which there are two types of composition.

The first type is the composition of the form and the matter out of which a given nature is constituted.

However, a nature composed in this way is not its own *esse*; instead, its *esse* is its actuality. Hence, the nature itself is related to its own *esse* as potentiality is related to actuality. Therefore, even if the matter were subtracted and we assumed that the form itself subsisted without the matter, the form would still be related to its *esse* as potentiality is related to actuality. This latter is the sort of composition that should be understood to exist in angels.

This is the point being made by those who say that an angel is composed of *that by which it is* (*quo est*) and *that which is* (*quod est*) or, as Boethius puts it, that an angel is composed of *esse* and *that which is*. For *that which is* is a subsistent form, whereas the *esse* itself is *that by which the substance is*, in the sense in which an act of running (*cursus*) is that by which a runner runs.

By contrast, as was shown above (q. 3, a. 4), in God the *esse* is not distinct from *that which is*. Hence, God alone is pure actuality.

Reply to objection 4: Every creature is finite absolutely speaking, insofar as its *esse* is not an absolute subsistent thing but is instead limited to the given nature that it comes to. However, nothing prevents a creature from being unlimited (*infinita*) in a relative sense.

Now material creatures have unlimitedness on the part of their matter and limitedness on the part of their form, which is limited by the matter in which it is received. Immaterial substances, on the other hand, are limited with respect to their very *esse*, but unlimited in the sense that their forms are not received in something else. It would be like saying that a whiteness existing as separate [from any subject] is unlimited with respect to the nature of whiteness because it is not restricted to any subject; yet its *esse* would still be limited, since that *esse* is determined to a specific nature.

This is why the *Liber de Causis* says that an intelligence is a *higher finite* being, viz., insofar as it receives *esse* from its superior, whereas it is a *lower infinite* being insofar as its *esse* is not received in any matter.

Article 3

Do angels exist in great numbers?

It seems that angels do not exist in great numbers (*non sint in aliquo magno numero*):

Objection 1: Number is a species of quantity, and it follows upon the division of a continuum. But this cannot be the case with angels, since, as was shown above (a. 1), they are incorporeal. Therefore, angels cannot exist in great numbers.

Objection 2: As is clear in the case of numbers, the closer something is to one, the less it is multiplied. But compared to the other created natures, angelic nature is closer to God. Therefore, since God is maximally one, it seems that a minimal multitude is found within angelic nature.

Objection 3: The proper effect of the separated substances seems to be the movements of the

celestial bodies. But the movements of the celestial bodies have some small determinate number that we can comprehend. Therefore, angels are not more numerous than the movements of the celestial bodies.

Objection 4: In *De Divinis Nominibus*, chap. 4, Dionysius says, “All intelligible and intellectual substances subsist because of the rays of God’s goodness.” But rays are multiplied only according to the diversity of their recipients. Now one cannot claim that it is the matter of the intellectual substances that receives an intelligible ray, since, as was shown above (a. 2), the intellectual substances are immaterial. Therefore, it seems that the multiplication of intellectual substances can occur only because the first bodies, viz., the celestial bodies, need them in order for the procession of the aforementioned rays to be terminated by those bodies in those ways. And so we reach the same conclusion as before.

But contrary to this: Daniel 7:10 says, “Thousands of thousands ministered to Him, and ten thousand times a hundred thousand stood before Him.”

I respond: As far as the number of separated substances is concerned, different authors have gone their different ways.

For instance, Plato held that the separated substances are the species of sensible things, as if to say that human nature itself is a separated substance. Accordingly, he had to claim that the separated substances are as numerous as the species of sensible things.

However, Aristotle disproves this position by appealing to the fact that matter is part of the nature of the species of these sensible things. Hence, separated substances cannot be the exemplary species of such sensible things; instead, separated substances have higher natures than the natures of sensible things. Yet Aristotle claimed that these more perfect natures are related to those sensible natures as their movers and ends. And so he tried to discover the number of the separated substances by appealing to the number of primary movements.

However, since this appears to be incompatible with the teaching of Sacred Scripture, Rabbi Moses, himself a Jew, wishing to reconcile Aristotle and Sacred Scripture, claimed that (a) insofar as the angels are called *immaterial substances*, they are multiplied according to the number of movements or the number of celestial bodies, as Aristotle held, but that (b) in Scripture even men who announce divine tidings are called angels, as are the powers of natural things, since they manifest God’s omnipotence.

However, it is foreign to the usage of Scripture for the powers of non-rational things to be called angels.

Hence, one should reply that even insofar as they are immaterial substances, angels have a certain maximal multitude, exceeding every material multitude. As Dionysius says in *De Caelesti Hierarchia*, chap. 14, “There are many holy armies of the higher minds, exceeding the feeble and limited measure of our material numbers.” The reason for this is that since the perfection of the universe is what God principally intends in the creation of things, to the extent that certain things are more perfect, they are created by God in greater abundance. But just as there is abundance in *magnitude* in the case of bodies, so too there is abundance in *multitude* in the case of incorporeal things. For we notice that incorruptible bodies, which are the most perfect bodies, exceed corruptible bodies beyond measure in their magnitude, since the whole sphere of active and passive things is very small compared with the celestial bodies. Hence, it is reasonable to think that immaterial substances exceed material substances beyond measure in their multitude.

Reply to objection 1: The sort of number that is a discrete quantity and is caused by the division of a continuum does not exist among angels. Instead, as was explained above (q. 11, a. 2 and q. 30, a. 3), the sort of number that exists among the angels is caused by a distinction among forms, and it corresponds to the sense in which *many* (*multitudo*) belongs to the transcendentals.

Reply to objection 2: The fact that angelic nature is close to God means that it must have a minimum of multiplicity in its [intrinsic] composition, and not that it must be preserved in just a few entities.

Reply to objection 3: This argument is drawn from Aristotle in *Metaphysics* 12, and it would establish its conclusion with necessity if separated substances existed for the sake of corporeal substances. For in that case immaterial substances would be superfluous unless certain movements among corporeal things occurred because of them.

However, it is not true that immaterial substances exist for the sake of corporeal substances, since an end is more noble than the things that are ordered to that end. Hence, even Aristotle himself says in the same place that the argument in question is a probable rather than necessary argument. However, he was forced to use this argument because we cannot reach a cognition of intelligible things except through sensible things.

Reply to objection 4: This argument finds its source in the opinion of those who held that matter is the cause of the distinctions among things. But this has already been disproved (q. 47, a. 1).

Hence, the multiplicity of angels is to be taken neither from matter nor from bodies, but instead from God's wisdom insofar as it devises the various orders of immaterial substances.

Article 4

Do angels differ from one another in species?

It seems that angels do not differ from one another in species:

Objection 1: Since the *difference* is more noble than the *genus*, things that agree with respect to what is most noble in themselves agree in the ultimate constitutive difference, and so they are the same in species. But all angels agree in that which is most noble in themselves, viz., their intellectuality. Therefore, all angels belong to a single species.

Objection 2: Species are not diversified by the greater and the lesser. But angels seem to differ from one another only with respect to the greater and the lesser, insofar as one is more simple than another, and insofar as one has a more perspicacious intellect than another. Therefore, angels do not differ from one another in species.

Objection 3: The human soul and an angel are divided as corresponding opposites. But all human souls belong to the same species. Therefore, so do all angels.

Objection 4: The more perfect something is in its nature, the more it ought to be multiplied. But this would not be the case if there were just a single individual in a given species. Therefore, many angels belong to a given species.

But contrary to this: As *Metaphysics* 3 says, among the things that belong to the same species there is no prior and posterior. But as Dionysius says in *De Caelesti Hierarchia*, chap. 10, among angels—even among those belonging to a single order of angels—there are those who are first, those who are in the middle, and those who are last. Therefore, it is not the case that angels belong to the same species.

I respond: Some have claimed that all spiritual substances, including human souls, belong to a single species. Others, leaving aside human souls, have claimed that all angels belong to a single species. And still others have claimed that all angels in the same hierarchy or in the same order belong to a single species.

However, this is impossible. For things that agree in species while differing in number agree in their form and are distinct in their matter. Therefore, if, as was argued above (a. 2), angels are not composed of matter and form, it follows that it is impossible for two angels to belong to the same species—just as it would likewise be impossible to claim that there are many separated whitenesses or

many separated humanities. For whitenesses are many only insofar as they exist in many substances.

Yet even if angels had matter, it would still be impossible for many angels to belong to one species. For if they had matter, the principle by which one angel is distinct from another would have to be matter—not, to be sure, matter in accord with a division of quantity, since angels are incorporeal, but instead matter in accord with a diversity of powers. But this sort of diversity of matter makes for a diversity not only of species, but even of genus.

Reply to objection 1: The *difference* is more noble than the *genus* in the sense that what is determinate is more noble than what is indeterminate, and in the sense that what is proper is more noble than what is common. But this is not the sense in which one nature is more noble than another. Otherwise, either all non-rational animals would have to belong to one species or else they would all have to have another form more perfect than the sentient soul. Thus, non-rational animals differ in species according to diverse determinate grades of sentient nature. And, similarly, angels differ in species according to diverse grades of intellective nature.

Reply to objection 2: Insofar as the greater and the lesser are caused by the intensification and remission of a single form, they do not diversify species. Rather, they diversify species insofar as they are caused by forms of diverse grades, in the way that we say that fire is more perfect than air. And it is in this way that angels are diversified according to greater and lesser.

Reply to objection 3: The good of the species takes precedence over the good of the individual. Hence, it is much better that the species of angels should themselves be multiplied than that individuals should be multiplied within a single species.

Reply to objection 4: As was explained above (q. 47, a. 3), since numerical multiplication can be carried on to infinity, it is not intended by an agent—only the multiplication of species is so intended. Hence the perfection of angelic nature requires a multiplication of species and not a multiplication of individuals within a single species.

Article 5

Are angels incorruptible?

It seems that angels are not incorruptible:

Objection 1: Damascene says of the angel, “He is an intellectual substance who receives immortality by grace and not by nature.”

Objection 2: In the *Timaeus* Plato says, “O gods of the gods, whose maker and father I am, you are indeed my works, dissoluble by nature, yet indissoluble because I will it.” But by ‘gods’ he may mean nothing other than the angels. Therefore, angels are corruptible by their nature.

Objection 3: According to Gregory, “All things would fall into nothingness if the hand of the Almighty did not conserve them.” But whatever is able to fall into nothingness is corruptible. Therefore, since angels are made by God, it seems that they are corruptible by their nature.

But contrary to this: In *De Divinis Nominibus*, chap. 4, Dionysius says, “Intellectual substances have unfailing life and are free from all corruption, death, matter, and generation.”

I respond: One must claim that angels are by their nature incorruptible. The reason for this is that nothing is corrupted except in virtue of the fact that its form is separated from its matter. Hence, since, as is clear from what has been said (aa. 1 and 2), an angel is a subsistent form, it is impossible for his substance to be corruptible. For what belongs to a thing with respect to its very self (*secundum se*) can never be separated from it, whereas what belongs to it through something else (*per aliud*) can be

separated from it when that in virtue of which that thing belongs to it is itself separated. For instance, roundness cannot be separated from a circle, since roundness belongs to the circle with respect to its very self, whereas a bronze circle can lose its roundness by virtue of the circular shape's being separated from the bronze.

Now *esse* belongs to a form *with respect to its very self*, since each thing is a being in actuality insofar as it has a form. Matter, by contrast, is a being in actuality *through* its form. Therefore, that which is composed of matter and form can cease to exist in actuality by virtue of the fact that its form is separated from its matter. But if the form itself subsists in its own *esse*—which, as has been explained (a. 2), is the case with angels—then it cannot lose its *esse*.

Therefore, the very immateriality of an angel is the reason why an angel is incorruptible by his nature. And an indication of this incorruptibility can be taken from the angel's intellectual operation. For since each thing operates insofar as it is actual, a thing's operation indicates the mode of its *esse*. Now the species and nature of an operation is grasped through its object. But an intelligible object, since it lies beyond time, is everlasting (*sempiternum*). Hence, every intellectual substance is incorruptible by its nature.

Reply to objection 1: Damascene has in mind *perfect* immortality, which includes every type of immutability, since, as Augustine puts it, every change is a sort of death. But as will be explained below (q. 62, a. 2), angels attain perfect immutability only through grace.

Reply to objection 2: By 'gods' here Plato means the celestial bodies, which he took to be composed of the elements and thus dissoluble by their nature, though always conserved in *esse* by God's will.

Reply to objection 3: As was explained above (q. 44, a. 1), there are some necessary beings that have a cause of their necessity. Hence, it is not impossible for a necessary or incorruptible being to have its *esse* depend on another as its cause. Thus, the claim that all things, even angels, would fall into nothingness if they were not maintained by God should be understood to imply not that there is some principle of corruption within angels, but rather that the *esse* of an angel depends on God as its cause. For something is said to be corruptible not because God can reduce it to non-being by withdrawing His act of conserving it, but rather because it has within itself a principle of corruption, either some sort of contrariety or at least the potentiality of matter.