

QUESTION 111

The Action of Angels on Men

The next thing we have to consider is the action of angels on men. We will consider, first, the action of angels insofar as they are able by their own natural power to affect men (question 111); second, the sense in which they are sent by God to minister to men (question 112); and, third, the sense in which they guard men (question 113).

On the first topic there are four questions: (1) Can an angel illuminate a man's intellect? (2) Can an angel alter a man's affections? (3) Can an angel affect a man's imagination? (4) Can an angel affect a man's senses?

Article 1

Can an angel illuminate a man?

It seems that an angel cannot illuminate a man:

Objection 1: A man is illuminated by faith; hence, in *De Ecclesiastica Hierarchia* Dionysius attributes illumination to Baptism, which is the sacrament of faith. But according to Ephesians 2:8 ("By grace you are saved through faith, and not from yourselves; for it is a gift of God"), faith comes directly from God. Therefore, a man is illuminated not by an angel, but directly by God.

Objection 2: The Gloss on Romans 1:19 ("God made it known to them") says, "It was not only natural reason that was useful for making divine things known to men; in addition, God made these things known through His own work, i.e., through creatures." But both of these, viz., natural reason and creatures, are directly from God. Therefore, God directly illuminates a man.

Objection 3: If someone is illuminated, then he knows that he is being illuminated. But men do not perceive that they are being illuminated by angels. Therefore, they are not illuminated by angels.

But contrary to this: In *De Caelesti Hierarchia*, chap. 4, Dionysius proves that revelations of divine things come to men by the mediation of the angels. But, as was explained above (q. 106, a. 1), revelations of this sort are illuminations. Therefore, men are illuminated by the angels.

I respond: Since, as was explained above (q. 109, a. 2), the order of divine providence is such that lower creatures are subject to the actions of higher creatures, it follows that just as the lower angels are illuminated by the higher angels, so too men, who are lower than the angels, are illuminated by the angels.

Now these two types of illumination are in some sense similar and in some sense diverse. For it was explained above (q. 106, a. 1) that the type of illumination that is a manifestation of divine truth involves two aspects, viz., (a) the lower intellect is strengthened by the action of the higher intellect, and (b) the intelligible species that exist in the higher intellect are proposed to the lower intellect in such a way that they can be grasped by the lower intellect.

Now, as was explained above (*ibid.*), this second aspect occurs in the case of angels insofar as the higher angel, in keeping with the capacity of the lower angel, makes distinctions within the universal truth he conceives. However, the human intellect is incapable of grasping sheer intelligible truth itself, since, as has been explained (q. 84, a. 7), it is connatural to the human intellect to exercise its understanding by turning to phantasms. And so the angels propose intelligible truth to men under the likenesses of sensible things. Accordingly in *De Caelesti Hierarchia*, chap. 1, Dionysius says, "It is impossible for the divine ray to illumine us unless it is enshrouded by a variety of sacred veils."

As for the other aspect, the human intellect, as a lower intellect, is fortified by the action of an angelic intellect.

And so these two aspects are involved in the illumination through which a man is illuminated by an angel.

Reply to objection 1: Two things must come together for faith.

The first is a habit of the intellect by which the intellect is disposed to obey the will insofar as it tends toward divine truth. For the intellect assents to the truth of the Faith not because it is convinced by reason, but because it is impelled (*imperatus*) by the will, since, as Augustine says, no one believes unless he wills to. And on this score, faith is from God alone.

The second thing required for faith is that what is to be believed should be proposed to the believer. And this, to be sure, comes from men, insofar as “faith comes from hearing,” as Romans 10:17 puts it, but principally it comes from the angels, through whom divine things are revealed to men. Hence, the angels contribute something to the illumination of faith. And yet men are illuminated by the angels not only with respect to what is to be believed, but also with respect to what is to be done.

Reply to objection 2: As has been explained, natural reason, which comes directly from God, can be strengthened by an angel. And as in the case of species received from creatures, the stronger a human intellect is, the deeper the intelligible truth that is elicited. And so a man is helped by an angel in such a way that he comes to a more perfect cognition of God on the basis of creatures.

Reply to objection 3: Intellectual operations—including illumination itself—can be thought of in two ways.

First, they can be thought of in terms of *the thing that is understood*, and, on this score, if someone is understanding something or is being illuminated, then he knows that he is understanding something or that he is being illuminated. For he knows that something is being made manifest to him.

Second, these operations can be thought in terms of *their principle*, and, on this score, not everyone who is understanding a given truth knows what his intellect, i.e., the principle of his intellectual operation, is. And, similarly, not everyone who is being illuminated by an angel knows that he is being illuminated by an angel.

Article 2

Is an angel able to affect a man’s will?

It seems that an angel is able to affect a man’s will (*immutare voluntatem hominis*):

Objection 1: The Gloss on Hebrews 1:7 (“He who makes His angels spirits and His ministers a flame of fire”) says, “They are fire when they flame up in spirit and burn away our vices.” But this would not be the case if they did not affect our will. Therefore, angels are able to affect a man’s will.

Objection 2: Bede says, “The devil enkindles evil thoughts but does not send them.” However, Damascene says further that the devil sends evil thoughts as well; for in *De Fide Orthodoxa* 2 he says, “All malice and all unclean passions are thought up by the demons, and they undertake to send them to a man.” And, by parity of reasoning, the good angels send and enkindle good thoughts. But they would not be able to do this if they did not affect the will. Therefore, they affect a man’s will.

Objection 3: As has been explained (a. 1), an angel illuminates a man’s intellect by the mediation of phantasms. But just as the imagination, which serves the intellect, can be affected by an angel, so too the sentient appetite, which serves the will, can be affected by an angel, since the sentient appetite is likewise a power that uses a corporeal organ. Therefore, an angel can affect the will in the same way that he illuminates the intellect.

But contrary to this: According to Proverbs 21:1 (“The king’s heart is in the hand of the Lord; He

turns it whichever way He wills”), it is proper to God to affect the will.

I respond: The will can be affected in two ways.

First, it can be affected from within (*ab interiori*). And since the will’s movement is nothing other its inclination toward the thing that is willed, only God can change the will, since only God gives an intellectual nature the power for such an inclination. For just as a natural inclination is exclusively from God, who gives the nature, so too a voluntary inclination is exclusively from God, who causes the will.

Second, the will is moved from without (*ab exteriori*). And in an angel this is effected in just one way, viz., by a good apprehended by the intellect. Hence, someone moves the will to the extent that he is a cause of something’s being apprehended as a good to be desired. And on this score, too, only God can move the will with necessity (*efficaciter*), whereas, in keeping with what was said above (q. 106, a. 2), an angel or a man can move the will only by way of persuasion.

Now in addition to this mode, there is another mode in which a man’s will can be moved from without, viz., by a passion that exists in the sentient appetite. For instance, a man’s will is moved to will something by sense desire or by anger. And so, too, insofar as angels are able to incite passions of this sort, they are able to move the will—not, however, with necessity, since the will always remains free to consent to or to resist a passion.

Reply to objection 1: It is by way of persuasion that God’s ministers, whether angels or men, are said to burn away vices and inflame us toward the virtues.

Reply to objection 2: Demons cannot ‘send thoughts’ by causing them from within, since the use of the cogitative power is subject to our will. Still, the devil is said to ‘enkindle thoughts’ insofar as he incites us to think of certain things or to desire the things thought of, either by way of persuasion or by way of exciting a passion. And it is this sort of ‘enkindling’ that Damascene is calling ‘sending’, since such an operation is effected from within. On the other hand, good thoughts are attributed to a higher principle, viz., God, even if they are procured by the ministry of the angels.

Reply to objection 3: Given our present state, the human intellect cannot exercise understanding except by turning toward phantasms. But the human will can will something on the basis of reason’s judgments without following the passions of the sentient appetite. Hence, the two cases are not parallel.

Article 3

Is an angel able to affect a man’s imagination?

It seems that an angel is not able to affect a man’s imagination (*imaginatio*):

Objection 1: As is explained in *De Anima*, an act of imagining (*phantasia*) “is a movement effected by the senses as actually operating.” But if an act of imagining were effected by an angel’s influence, then it would not be effected by the senses as actually operating. Therefore, it is contrary to the nature of an act of imagining, i.e., an act of the imaginative power, that it should exist because of angel’s influence.

Objection 2: Since the forms that exist in the imagination are spiritual, they are more noble than the forms that exist in sensible matter. But, as has been explained (q. 110, a. 2), an angel cannot impress forms on sensible matter. Therefore, an angel cannot impress forms on the imagination. And so an angel cannot affect the imagination.

Objection 3: According to Augustine in *Super Genesim ad Litteram* 12, “By intermingling with another spirit you can, it happens, show the one with whom you are commingling the things that you know through images of the sort in question, so that either he understands them or else accepts them as

understood by another.” But it does not seem that an angel can intermingle with the human imagination, or that the imagination can grasp the intelligible things that an angel knows. Therefore, it seems that an angel cannot alter the imagination.

Objection 4: In an imaginative vision a man adheres to likenesses as if they were the things themselves. But in this there is a kind of deception. Therefore, since a good angel cannot be a cause of deception, it seems that he cannot cause an imaginative vision by altering the imagination.

But contrary to this: Things which appear in dreams are seen by an imaginative vision. But angels reveal certain things in dreams, as is clear from Matthew 1-2 in the case of the angel who appeared to Joseph in his dreams. Therefore, an angel can move the imagination.

I respond: Angels, both good and evil, are by their power able to move a man’s imagination. This can be thought of in the following way:

It was explained above (q. 110, a. 3) that a corporeal nature obeys an angel with respect to local motion. Therefore, things that can be caused by the local motion of bodies are subject to the natural power of angels. Now it is clear that imaginative appearances are sometimes caused in us by the local motion of bodily spirits and humors. Hence, in *De Somno et Vigilia* Aristotle, in specifying the cause of dreamers’ visions, says, “When an animal is sleeping and a lot of blood descends to the sentient principle, movements descend at the same time,” i.e., impressions left over from sensible motions, which are conserved in the sensory spirits and which move the sentient principle, so that a certain type of vision occurs, just as if the sentient principle were at that very time being affected by exterior things themselves. And the movement of the spirits and humors can be so strong that visions of this sort can occur even to those who are awake, as is clear in the case of madmen (*in phreneticis*) and others like them. Therefore, just as this can be brought about by the natural movement of the humors—and sometimes even by a man’s will when he voluntarily imagines what he has previously sensed—so too it can be brought about by the power of a good or bad angel, sometimes in separation from the corporeal senses and sometimes without such separation.

Reply to objection 1: The first principle of an act of imagining comes from the senses as actually operating. For we cannot imagine things that we have not sensed in any way at all, either wholly or partially. For instance, someone who is born blind cannot imagine colors. However, as has been explained, sometimes the imagination is formed in such a way that an actual movement of imagining arises from impressions that have been conserved interiorly.

Reply to objection 2: An angel does not influence the imagination by impressing an imaginative form that has not in any way been previously received through the senses (for instance, an angel cannot bring it about that a blind man imagines colors); rather, as has been explained, he does this through the local motion of the spirits and humors.

Reply to objection 3: The commingling of the angelic spirit with the human imagination is not through the angel’s essence, but rather through an effect which the angel brings about in the imagination in the way explained above. The angel shows the imagination what he knows, yet not in the way in which he knows it.

Reply to objection 4: In some cases, an angel who causes an imaginative vision illuminates the intellect at the same time, so that the intellect simultaneously comes to know what is being signified by likenesses of the sort in question. In such a case there is no deception.

On the other hand, in some cases the only result of the angel’s operation is that likenesses of things appear in the imagination. However, in such a case the deception is caused not by the angel, but by the weakness of the intellect of the one to whom such things appear—just as Christ was not a cause of deception when he proposed many things to the crowds in parables without explaining the parables to them.

Article 4

Can an angel affect the human senses?

It seems that an angel cannot affect the human senses:

Objection 1: A sentient operation is a vital operation. But an operation of this sort does not stem from an extrinsic principle. Therefore, a sentient operation cannot be caused by an angel.

Objection 2: The sentient power is more noble than the nutritive power. But an angel, it seems, cannot affect the nutritive power, just as he cannot affect other natural forms. Therefore, neither can an angel affect the sentient power.

Objection 3: The senses are naturally moved by a sensible thing. But as was explained above (q. 110, a. 4), an angel cannot alter the order of nature. Therefore, an angel cannot affect the senses; instead, the senses are always affected by a sensible thing.

But contrary to this: According to Genesis 19:11, the angels who destroyed Sodom “struck the Sodomites with blindness (or *aorasia*), so that they could not find the door of the house.” And 4 Kings 6:18 says the same of the Syrians whom Elisha led into Samaria.

I respond: The senses are affected in two ways:

First, they are affected by something exterior, as when they are affected by a sensible thing.

Second, they are affected by something interior; for we see that the senses are affected by perturbed spirits and humors. For instance, a sick man’s tongue, full of choleric humor, senses everything as bitter; and something similar happens with the other senses.

An angel can, by his natural power, affect a man’s senses in both ways. For an angel can present some exterior sensible thing to the senses, either by presenting something already formed by nature or, as was explained above (q. 51, a. 2), by forming something himself *de novo*, as he does when he assumes a body. Similarly, as was explained above (a. 3), an angel can also move from within the spirits and humors by which the senses are affected in various ways.

Reply to objection 1: The principle of a sentient operation cannot exist without an interior principle, viz., the sentient power, but, as has been explained, this interior principle can be moved in various ways by an exterior principle.

Reply to objection 2: By moving the spirits and humors from within, an angel can even affect the act of the nutritive power—as well as the act of the appetitive power or of the sentient power or of any power that uses a corporeal organ.

Reply to objection 3: An angel cannot do anything outside the order of the whole of creation, but he can do something outside the order of some particular nature, since he is not subject to such an order. And so he can affect the senses in a unique mode that lies beyond the common mode.