

QUESTION 51

The Relation of Angels to Bodies

The next thing to ask about is the relation of angels to corporeal things. We ask, first, about the relation of angels to bodies (question 51); second, about the relation of angels to places (question 52); and, third, about the relation of angels to local motion (question 53).

On the first topic there are three questions: (1) Do angels have bodies that are naturally united to them? (2) Do angels assume bodies? (3) Do angels exercise life functions in their assumed bodies?

Article 1

Do angels have bodies that are naturally united to them?

It seems that angels have bodies that are naturally united to them:

Objection 1: In *Peri Archon* Origen says, “Only God—that is, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—is such that it is proper to His nature that He is understood to exist without a material substance and without any commerce with a corporeal appendage.” Again, in *Homilia Super Canticum Cantorum* 6 Bernard says, “Let us grant incorporeality, as we do immortality, only to God, whose nature alone is in no need of the help of a corporeal instrument either for His own sake or for the sake of another. By contrast, it is clear that every created spirit needs corporeal assistance.” Again, in *Super Genesim ad Litteram* Augustine says, “The demons are called animals of air (*animalia aeria*) because by nature they are like airy bodies.” But the nature of the demons is the same as the nature of the angels. Therefore, angels have bodies that are naturally united to them.

Objection 2: In his homily for the feast of the Epiphany Gregory calls an angel a rational animal. But every animal is composed of a body and a soul. Therefore, angels have bodies that are naturally united to them.

Objection 3: Life is had more perfectly by angels than by souls. Yet the soul is not only living, but also gives life to the body. Therefore, angels give life to bodies that are naturally united to them.

But contrary to this: In *De Divinis Nominibus*, chap. 4, Dionysius says, “Angels are understood to be incorporeal.”

I respond: Angels do not have bodies that are naturally united to them. For what happens incidentally to a nature is not found always and everywhere in that nature. For instance, *having wings* does not belong to every animal because it is not part of the nature *animal*. But since, as will become clear below (q. 75, a. 2), an act of intellective understanding (*intelligere*) is not the act of a body or of any corporeal power, *having a body united to itself* is not part of the nature *intellectual substance* as such, but rather accrues to some intellectual substances for the sake of something else. For instance, *being united to a body* belongs to the human soul because the human soul is imperfect and exists in potentiality within the genus *intellectual substance*, not having the fullness of knowledge within its nature, but instead, as will be explained below (q. 84, a. 6 and q. 89, a. 1), acquiring knowledge from sensible things through the corporeal senses.

Now if in a given genus there is something imperfect, then something perfect must exist in that same genus. Therefore, within the genus *intellectual nature* there are some perfect intellectual substances that do not need to acquire knowledge from sensible things. Therefore, not all intellectual substances are united to bodies; instead, some of them are separate from bodies. And these are the intellectual substances we call angels.

Reply to objection 1: As was noted above (q. 50, a. 1), some have held the opinion that every entity is a body. And this belief seems to have led others to think that there are no incorporeal substances

unless they are united to bodies—so much so that, as Augustine reports in *De Civitate Dei* 7, some even claimed that God is the soul of the world. However, since this is incompatible with the Catholic Faith, which claims that God is exalted above all things, in keeping with Psalm 8:2 (“Your magnificence is exalted beyond the heavens”), Origen, refusing to make this claim about God, followed the opinion of the others about substances other than God. Here, as in many other matters, he was deceived in following the opinions of the ancient philosophers.

Now the passage from Bernard can be understood to be claiming not that created spirits need a corporeal instrument that is naturally united to them, but that instead, as will be explained below (a. 2), they need a corporeal instrument that is assumed for some purpose.

On the other hand, Augustine is not speaking assertively here; rather, he is making use of the opinion of the Platonists, who posited certain airy animals that they called ‘demons’ (*daemones*).

Reply to objection 2: Here Gregory is calling an angel a rational animal metaphorically, because of the angel’s likeness to reason.

Reply to objection 3: To give life as an efficient cause is an absolute perfection. Hence, it belongs especially to God, according to 1 Kings 2:6 (“The Lord kills and gives life”).

However, to give life as a formal cause belongs to a substance that is part of some nature and does not have the whole nature of the species within itself. Hence, an intellectual substance that is not united to a body is more perfect than one that is united to a body.

Article 2

Do angels assume bodies?

It seems that angels do not assume bodies:

Objection 1: There is nothing superfluous in an angel’s work, just as there is nothing superfluous in a work of nature. But it would be superfluous for angels to assume bodies, since an angel does not need a body, given that his power exceeds every corporeal power. Therefore, angels do not assume bodies.

Objection 2: Every instance of assuming a thing (*assumptio*) terminates in some sort of union, since to assume (*assumere*) means ‘to take up to oneself’ (*ad se sumere*). But as has been explained (a. 1), a body is not united to an angel in the sense that the angel is the form of the body. Moreover, a body’s being united to an angel in the sense that the angel moves the body is not the same as the body’s being assumed by an angel; otherwise, it would follow that all the bodies moved by angels are assumed by them. Therefore, angels do not assume bodies.

Objection 3: Angels do not assume bodies made of earth or water, since then they would not disappear suddenly. Nor, again, do angels assume bodies made of fire, since then they would burn things that they touched. Nor, yet again, do angels assume bodies made of air, since air cannot have a shape or a color. Therefore, angels do not assume bodies.

But contrary to this: In *De Civitate Dei* 16 Augustine says that angels in assumed bodies appeared to Abraham.

I respond: Some have claimed that angels never assume bodies, but that instead all the things we read in the divine Scriptures about the apparitions of angels have occurred in prophetic visions, i.e., in the imagination.

However, this view is incompatible with the intent of the Scriptures. For that which is seen in an imaginative vision exists just in the imagination of the one who has the vision and so is not seen

generally by everyone. But the divine Scriptures sometimes introduce the appearances of angels in such a way that the angels are seen by everyone. For instance, the angels who appeared to Abraham (Genesis 18-19) were seen by him, by his whole family, by Lot, and by the citizens of Sodom. Similarly, the angel who appeared to Tobias (Tobit 5ff.) was seen by everyone. Hence, it is clear that occurrences of this sort involved corporeal vision, in which what one sees is something existing outside of the seer, and so it can be seen by everyone. But only a body is seen by such a vision. Therefore, since, as is clear from what has been said (a. 1 and q. 50, a. 1), angels are not bodies and do not have bodies naturally united to them, it follows that they sometimes assume bodies.

Reply to objection 1: Angels need an assumed body not for their own sake, but rather for our sake, so that by living on familiar terms with men, they might indicate the sort of intellectual companionship that men expect to have with them in the life to come.

In addition, the fact that angels assumed bodies in the Old Testament was a sort of figurative indication that the Word of God would assume a human body. For all their appearances in the Old Testament were ordered toward that appearance by which the Son of God appeared in the flesh.

Reply to objection 2: An assumed body is united to an angel not in such a way that the angel is its form or even just its mover, but rather in such a way that the angel is a mover who is represented through the assumed movable body. For just as the properties of intelligible things are described in Sacred Scripture by likenesses drawn from sensible things, so too, by God's power, sensible bodies are formed by angels in such a way as to represent the intelligible properties of an angel. And this is what it is for an angel to assume a body.

Reply to objection 3: Even though air does not have a shape or a color as long as it remains rarified, nonetheless, when it is condensed, it can have a shape and a color, as is clear in the case of clouds. And so angels assume a body made of air by condensing it through God's power as much as is necessary for forming the body that is going to be assumed.

Article 3

Do angels exercise life functions in their assumed bodies?

It seems that angels exercise life functions (*opera vitae*) in their assumed bodies.

Objection 1: Deception does not befit angels of truthfulness. But it would be a deception if the body which they have assumed and which seems to be alive and to have life functions did not have functions of this sort. Therefore, angels exercise life functions in their assumed bodies.

Objection 2: There is nothing without a purpose in the works of an angel. But the eyes and ears and other sensory instruments would be formed without purpose in the body assumed by an angel if the angel did not sense anything through them. Therefore, an angel senses through his assumed body, and this is an especially characteristic life function.

Objection 3: As is clear from *De Anima 2*, one of the life functions is to move around. But angels clearly move around in their assumed bodies. For Genesis 18:16 says that "Abraham walked along with them," giving directions to the angels who had appeared to him. And when Tobias asked, "Do you know the way to the city of the Medes?" the angel responded, "I do know the way, and I have often walked all its streets." Therefore, angels often exercise life functions in their assumed bodies.

Objection 4: Speaking is a life function, since it is done by means of the voice, which is a sound enunciated by the mouth of an animal, as *De Anima 2* puts it. But it is clear from many places in Scripture that angels spoke in their assumed bodies. Therefore, they exercise life functions in their

assumed bodies.

Objection 5: To eat is a function proper to an animal. Thus, as the last chapter of Luke tells us, the Lord ate with his disciples after the resurrection as a proof of His resumed life. But the angels who appeared in assumed bodies ate, and Genesis 18:2 says that Abraham offered them food after he had bowed down (*adoraverat*) before them. Therefore, angels exercise life functions in their assumed bodies.

Objection 6: To generate a man is a life function (*actus vitae*). But this action belongs to angels in their assumed bodies. For Genesis 6:4 says, “After the sons of God went in to the daughters of men, they brought forth children, and these are the mighty men of old, men of renown.” Therefore, angels exercise life functions in their assumed bodies.

But contrary to this: As was explained above (a. 2), the bodies assumed by angels are not alive. Therefore, the angels cannot exercise life functions through those bodies.

I respond: Certain life functions have something in common with other kinds of operations. For instance, speaking, which is a life function, has something in common with other sounds that are made by inanimate things insofar as it is a sound, and walking has something in common with other movements insofar as it is a movement. Therefore, with respect to what is common to both sorts of operations, life functions can be exercised by angels through their assumed bodies. However, this is not the case with respect to what is proper to living things, since, according to the Philosopher in *De Somno et Vigilia*, an action belongs to that which has the power for it. Hence, nothing can have a life function if it does not have life, which is the principle of power for such an action.

Reply to objection 1: It is not contrary to truthfulness that intelligible things are described in Scripture by sensible figures. For this is not done in order to suggest that the intelligible things are sensible things; rather, it is through figures drawn from the sensible things that the properties of the intelligible things are understood by way of a certain likeness.

So, too, it is not incompatible with the truthfulness of the holy angels that the bodies assumed by them should seem to be living men even though they are not. For these bodies are assumed only in order that the angels’ spiritual properties and their spiritual operations might be depicted by means of human properties and human operations. This would not be done as appropriately if they assumed real men, since the properties of those men would lead us to think of the men themselves and not of the angels.

Reply to objection 2: Sensation is exclusively a life function, and hence one cannot in any way claim that angels have sensation through the organs of their assumed bodies. And yet it is not the case that these assumed bodies are formed for no purpose. For they are formed not in order for the angels to sense through them, but rather in order for the spiritual powers of the angels to be depicted by means of organs of the sort in question. For instance, as Dionysius teaches in the last chapter of *De Caelesti Hierarchia*, an angel’s cognitive power is depicted by means of the eye, and his other powers are depicted by means of other parts of the assumed body.

Reply to objection 3: Movement that has a conjoined mover as its source is a proper life function. But this is not the way in which the bodies angels assume are moved by them, since angels are not the forms of those bodies. Still, the angels are moved *per accidens* when their assumed bodies are moved, since the angels exist in the bodies as movers in movable things, and so they are here [where the bodies are] and nowhere else—something that cannot be said of God. Hence, even though God is not moved when the things in which He exists are moved (for He is everywhere), angels are moved *per accidens* with the movement of their assumed bodies.

However, angels are not moved with the movement of the celestial bodies, even if they exist in them as movers in movable things. The reason is that the celestial bodies do not completely leave a place, and the spirit who moves a sphere does not have a place (*locus*) in any determinate part of the

substance of the sphere, given that any such determinate part is now in the east and now in the west; rather, the spirit has a set position (*situm*), since, as *Physics* 8 says, the moving power is always in the east.

Reply to objection 4: Strictly speaking, angels do not speak through their assumed bodies. However, there is something like speech insofar as they produce sounds in the air that are similar to human words.

Reply to objection 5: Again, angels do not eat, properly speaking. For eating implies the ingestion of food that can be converted into the substance of the eater. And even though food was not converted into the body of Christ after His resurrection, but was instead resolved into its preexisting matter, still, Christ had a body of such a nature that food could be converted into it, and so His was a true eating. By contrast, the food taken by the angels was not converted into the assumed body, and the assumed body was not of such a nature that food could be converted into it. Hence, theirs was not a true eating, but was instead a depiction of spiritual eating. And this is just what the angel said at Tobit 12:18-19: “When I was with you ... I seemed indeed to eat and to drink with you, but I use an invisible meat and drink.” Again, Abraham offered [the angels] food, thinking them to be men; and yet he venerated God in them, “as God is wont to be in the prophets,” according to Augustine in *De Civitate Dei* 16.

Reply to objection 6: As Augustine says in *De Civitate Dei* 15, “Many affirm that they know by experience—or have heard from those who know by experience—that Silvans and Fauns, whom common people call ‘Incubi’, have often presented themselves improperly to women and have sought and procured sexual intercourse with them. Hence, it smacks of impudence to deny this. But the holy angels of God could not have fallen in this way before the flood. Hence, ‘the sons of God’ means the sons of Seth, who were good, whereas Scripture calls ‘the daughters of men’ those women who had been born of the race of Cain. It is no surprise that giants could have been born of them, since even though not all of them were giants, there were more of them before the flood than after it.”

However, if some of them were sometimes born from intercourse with demons, this was not through semen that came from the demons or from their assumed bodies; rather, it was through semen that was taken from some man for this purpose, so that the same demon who was a ‘Succubus’ to the man became an ‘Incubus’ to the woman—in the way that, according to Augustine in *De Trinitate* 3, they likewise took the seeds of other things in order to generate those other things. The upshot is that the one who is born is not the demon’s son, but instead the son of the man whose semen was taken.