

Angelic Understanding and its Possible Relevance

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A direct understanding of divine understanding being not possible for us as human beings: hence, if we are to have any kind of understanding at all, if an analogical or an indirect understanding of divine understanding must first begin with ourselves, with the data of our self-understanding with respect to how our understanding exists as a created, incarnate kind of human understanding which we happen to have as human beings (living as conscious subjects), and if we then move toward possibly identifying another kind of understanding which would exist in a purely spiritual, simple kind of way (it would be bereft of any complexities which would belong to any of its actions or operations because it would not exist or function through a compound of immaterial and material conditions, or as a compound of immaterial and material acts),¹ for this reason thus, our proximate or our initial object (as we move toward a possible understanding of divine things) becomes an understanding of the kind of understanding which allegedly, properly belongs to the being of created, disembodied spirits who would exist as disembodied, knowing, willing, loving subjects whom, commonly, we refer to as God's angels. They differ from us as human beings although as another species of created thing because, in differing from ourselves, they exist in a wholly disembodied manner (or, in other words, as pure forms if we should choose to work with a more Platonic type of designation). Hence, traditionally, as we proceed and if we should choose to employ words that come to us from the technicalities of Aristotle's language, we would refer to them or they would exist in their own right as “separate substances,”² or as

¹*Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 77, a. 2. See also Frederick E. Crowe, *Three Thomist Studies*, supplementary issue of *Loneragan Workshop*, vol. 16, ed. Fred Lawrence (Boston: Loneragan Institute, 2000), p. 114, n. 1 where Crowe cites a list of texts in Aquinas which posit a number of distinctions. On the one hand, we can distinguish between souls that can achieve imperfect forms of goodness and those which can achieve perfect forms of goodness. But, among souls that can achieve perfect forms of goodness, a soul which can achieve perfect goodness through fewer acts and means possess a greater dignity and rank than one which can achieve the same goal but by means of many actions and operations that employ a wide variety of tools or instruments.

²*Summa Contra Gentiles*, 2, 97, 3; 6. See also *On Separated Substances*, c. 3, as cited by *An Aquinas Reader*, ed. Mary T. Clark (Garden City, New York: Image Books, 1972), p. 71. In *Verbum: Word and Idea in Aquinas*, eds. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), p. 197, Loneragan notes that, while Aristotle spoke about one kind of separate substance, Aquinas speaks about two kinds. Cf. *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 54, aa. 1-3. God exists as subsistent understanding or understanding itself (*ipsum intelligere*). But, with respect to angels, the essence of an angel is not its existence which is something quite other and distinct as is also the case with the difference between the intellect of an angel and its acts of understanding. The understanding or intellect of an angel refers to its form as an intelligible principle, but its actualization is an act or an operation of understanding that is received by an angel's formal essence in a way which indicates that a degree of potentiality exists in an angel (a potentiality which is to be equivocally understood as noted by Aquinas in the *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 54, a. 4) since no angel exists as a pure act of understanding which has always existed and which has never, at any time, come into being. With respect to all these spirits (whether we speak about God or angels), no material component exists, and so this absence of a material component explains why angels possess only one form of potentiality

immaterial, imperceptible “separate intellectual substances,”³ having purpose, role, or function of their own which would have to belong to them as, in the context of our inquiry and understanding, we seek to ask about why they happen to be or why they exist in the way that they do.⁴ Where do angels exist in the general scheme of things? How do they fit in? Sometimes, more simply, in Aquinas, as disembodied acts of understanding, they would exist or they are simply referred to as created, finite “intelligences”⁵ although with a purpose, finality, or function which differs from how angels exist in the cosmology of Aristotle's physics where, in the context of his physics, angels exist as a species of active mover. They account for a species of movement which is more perfect than the types of movement which seem to be so obvious to us if our point of departure is the kind of given which belongs to us in our ordinary acts of human sensing. As movers, angels exist as a species of secondary cause and, in our own way, we exist as another species of secondary cause.

Apart from any differences however which distinguish the thought of Aristotle from that of Aquinas: every disembodied immaterial spirit, as a species of immaterial, incorporeal subject, possesses a purely intellectual nature or a purely spiritual type of constitution and, to it, there belongs no other power or facility other than the performance and the actuality of engaging in intellectual kinds of act (in activities which exist in an entirely immaterial and spiritual kind of way).⁶ A disembodied immaterial spirit exists simply, in other words, as an act of comprehensive, effective understanding (which, as an act of understanding, is bereft of any parts or elements, or it is indistinguishable in terms of any constitutive parts or elements) since, here, intellectuality, as an attribute, predicate, trait, or property, exists as an unadulterated, pure type of effect or as a consequence of immateriality if we should want to think about immateriality as a species or type of subject and cause which would be more conscious

which is the potentiality of a form to receive an act (cf. *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 2, 98, 10). In contrast, anything having a material component is characterized by two forms of potentiality: there exists the potentiality of matter to receive a form and then the potentiality of a form to receive an act. The absence of materiality in an angel and the fact that an angel exists as not a pure subsistent act of understanding which has always existed accordingly explains why the existence of an angel is best classified as a “subsisting quiddity” or as a subsisting essence (cf. *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 2, 93, 2; *Super Librum De causis*, prop. 9) although, as noted, the essence of an angel is strictly formal. It lacks any union with a material component and, at the same time, it is not to be identified with an act of being or existence. In the *Sententia super Metaphysicam*, 7, 17, 1669, Aquinas speaks about these “separate substances” as “simple substances” since they are not composed of matter and form. Because they are not known to us through any act of sense, a greater knowledge of them cannot be had through any typical form of human inquiry which moves from our sensing toward our understanding.

³*De ente et essentia*, 4. For a good introduction and discussion that can speak about why angels exist as a legitimate object of thought and reflection within the two orders of analysis which exist in philosophy and theology and how this thought and reflection about angels is complemented as we would move from one order of analysis to the other, see Mortimer J. Adler's *The Angels and Us* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1982). The distinctiveness of our human cognition is more fully appreciated if we were to try to think about it from a standpoint which would begin from the nature of angelic cognition (to the extent that this type of cognition exists as a thinkable, conceivable kind of thing).

⁴Adler, *Angels and Us*, p. 39, citing Aristotle.

⁵*De ente et essentia*, 4; p. 46; *Super Librum De causis*, prop. 9; pp. 65-73.

⁶*Summa Contra Gentiles*, 2, 77, 2; *De Veritate*, q. 10, a. 1, ad 4.

than any kind of consciousness which happens to belong to us as human subjects.⁷ Intellectuality can come from immateriality although conversely or mutually, immateriality from intellectuality (depending on how we use these words and designations in the ordering that we choose to give to them). As with an immaterially existing act, so too with an immaterially existing thing or an immaterially existing subject: its simplicity or its lack of composition precludes the possibility of there being any parts or elements that we can distinguish from each other in a way which would have to point to differences which would exist within an order of real distinctions.⁸

With respect however to the question of being: the created, disembodied existence of acts of understanding (which exist as angels or which we have chosen to designate as angels) enjoys a probable and also, arguably, an undoubted type of existence for the following number of reasons that, at times, have been proposed and adduced and then combined and joined with each other to form a species of probative whole.⁹ First, angels exist as the most noble of God's creatures since a created

⁷*Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 105, a. 3. As Francis Selman explains Aquinas's use of an analogy that is based on the immaterial character of understanding, in his *Aspects of Aquinas* (Dublin: Veritas, 2005), p. 80, citing the *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 50, a. 1, it can be argued that the mind is not able to "think of things in an immaterial way unless it is itself immaterial." Understanding is not the act of a corporeal organ; it is not the act of a brain but an act of the mind, or an act of the intellect or an act of our intelligence. But, because it exists as an immaterial act, and as we sense or realize that "our own thinking is immaterial," we can conclude that some beings exist "who have been created immaterial in their nature."

⁸Selman, *Aquinas*, p. 82. To avoid confusion here, please distinguish how real distinctions differ from ideational or conceptual distinctions and how these two kinds of distinction differ from the being of empirical, sensible distinctions. In our different acts of sensing, differences are experienced by us and so, through our self-knowledge, they are known as one species of distinction; then, in our different acts of thinking and understanding, other differences are experienced by us and these are known as a second species of distinction; and then, through our reflective acts of understanding and judgment, a third kind of difference is experienced by us and they are known in a way which points to a third species of distinction. No sound or true understanding of things can ever truly occur if an understanding of these differences among these three kinds of distinctions is not fully grasped and understood and so, through our inquiries and thinking, is applied in some way.

⁹Adler, *Angels and Us*, pp. 56-59. Please note that if we argue that Aquinas offers no proofs that are definitive for affirming that angels truly and really exist, it can be argued however that, as his reasons accumulate and as they complement each other in a way which points to a kind of mutual reinforcement that exists among them, a kind of proof can be alluded to as, within our understanding, we move from one act to another in a way which points to a growing experience of likelihood or a growing experience of probability that can act upon us in ways which move and trigger our acts of understanding toward an experience of apprehension which would exist in an affirmative act of judgment (in an affirmative act of judgment which would exist in its own right as a reflective act of understanding). Reasons convince a given person though they might not be sufficient for convincing some other person if, for the other person, more reasons are needed of this or that other kind.

Please note also that other reasons can be known in a way which points to the rational possibility of the existence of angels (although not to the necessity of their existence) since arguments which allege that angels do not exist are not to be confused with arguments which can explain why their existence is not unthinkable or impossible. Some things exist in a way which is unthinkable and

order of things is more perfect and complete if, besides having beings within it which exist or which are constituted by a union of spiritual and material conditions (as in conjunctions of “spirit and matter”), it should also contain beings which do not have to be united to specifications of matter in order to enjoy their own form of real existence, or to engage in any operations which would manifest the fullness of their reality.¹⁰ It is alleged, with Aquinas thus, that “the universe would be incomplete without [them].”¹¹ “The perfection of the universe,” if truly it is to have perfection, “must not lack any nature that can possibly [be or] exist.”¹² As devoid of any material determinations and hence, as pure spirits, angels, as created beings, cannot be limited or they cannot be restricted by the necessity of having to be received or to exist within this or that instance of matter, nor do they need to be received by anything which exists in any kind of material way.¹³ In language which comes to us from Aristotle and Aquinas: they exist as simple essences or as simple quiddities since, as beings, substances, or things, their essences (which refer to what they are) do not exist as composite unities of matter and form.¹⁴

inconceivable (see, for instance, Adler's example of a “round square”) but other things exist in a way which is entirely thinkable, conceivable, and so reasonably and rationally possible because, within the being of the thing that is being thought about and spoken about, no form of inner contradiction exists. For example here, we can think about the being of an incorporeal, spiritual being: a substance that is lacking in having any kind of body. Cf. Adler, p. 106. We can also think too about God as a reasonable, rational possibility although, as a possibility and like angels, as an immaterial or as an incorporeal type of being that we can decide to think about and consider. Cf. Adler, 111. Our apprehensions of possibility all point to why the possibility or the conceivability of a thing is to be identified with an intelligibility which belongs to it or with a rationality which has been grasped as a possibility which is suggestive or which is open to an orientation that could be directed toward another form or act of cognition which would move us from an ideational kind of being that we have experienced and which we experience within our understanding toward an objectively existing kind of being that we can experience within the data of our cognitive awareness if we are able to move into another species of cognitive act. Cf. Adler, 112. From an apprehension of possibility in terms that would have to point toward a realization of potency that would exist in us as an apprehension of possibility and in the context of this kind of potency which would exist within us as conscious subjects as a species of cognitive act, further receptions can become more possible for us in terms of our possibly receiving additional, later acts of understanding which would exist in a way which points to a possible experience of probative likelihood and probability and also acts of understanding or insight which would exist in a mysterious, infused manner as possibly an act of consent and faith which could possibly exist as a religious species of apprehension. Cf. Adler, pp. 104-107. Not all of our acts of understanding exist in us because we have desired them or, in some way, have sought and worked toward them by whatever we might do or propose.

10 *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 2, 46, 2; *De Spiritualibus Creaturis*, a. 5; *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 20, a. 4, ad 2; q. 50, a. 1; q. 54, a. 5.

11 *Summa Theologiae*, as cited by Adler, *Angels and Us*, p. 56.

12 Adler, *Angels and Us*, pp. 56-57, quoting Aquinas.

13 *De ente et essentia*, 5.

14 *In 1 Scriptum super libros sententiarum*, d. 8, q. 5, a. 2; *Super Librum De causis*, prop. 9; p. 71. To avoid confusion, please note that while a body exists as an entirely material kind of thing (as an incidence or instance of matter) and it is known through different acts of human sensing, a substance or a thing exists as something that is known by us through our acts of understanding (through direct acts of understanding) and not through our acts of human sensing. Hence, through the grasping which

If, on the other hand however, we should want to speak about any kind of composition which can allegedly exist or which should exist with respect to the being of angels, we should instead speak about how they exist as a composite unity of form and act where, by a received act of being which comes to them from some other source (from an externally active, productive, efficient, outer cause that would have to exist in some other radically different kind of way), an angel (or an angel as simply a disembodied act of understanding) exists in the way that it does because it has been brought into a condition of existence that it cannot effect by itself by anything that it could possibly be or do. Intelligibility, meaning, or nature as an act differs from being or existence as an act. Essence is not existence.

If, however, through our philosophical queries and reflections, we can prove the reasonable or the rational possibility that angels can in fact exist, in the further context of our possibly moving into a theological form of reflection, this possibility can shift and, statistically, it often shifts within us, within the order of our understanding, into an apprehension of probability as it turns into an experience of certainty which belongs or which is to be associated with a wider or a deeper experience of probability. The probability exists as a kind of heightened, inner sense of things. Too many indications from a combination of different viewpoints are pointing toward the truth and the reality of something which would have to exist although it cannot be known in any kind of direct way as a datum which can be experienced by us through one of our different acts of human sensing. A real distinction always exists between visible or sensible kinds of being and invisible or insensible kinds of being.

Second, if we attend to a hierarchical order of things that is constitutive of our world and universe, as created immaterial spirits, angels play a mediating type of role as they bridge a gap which would seem otherwise to exist in either of two directions that we can think and speak about: first, downwards, as we move from God who exists “at the topmost summit of things” as “a being which is in every way simple and one” toward corporeal beings who exist in a “composite and divisible”¹⁵ kind of way; or secondly, upwards, as we move from the created, incarnate complexity of ourselves as human beings toward the heightening or the extremity of simplicity which would have to exist if we should refer to the possible being of an uncreated, pure type of spirit which would be wholly lacking in any form of passivity or potentiality (hence, in any form of receptivity).¹⁶ The potentiality and the receptivity both exist together if actuality can never be derived from anything which exists in a purely potential way. From nothing, comes nothing; from possibility, no actuality.

In a more general sense, we move not through differences of degree as these would exist within one species of kind but through differences of kind or species as we move from one species to another in a

exists in our acts of understanding, a substance or thing is something which is known to exist as a composite or union of form and matter where the form refers to an inhering type of intelligibility that is grasped and known by us and the matter, as an intellectualized specification of matter which is also grasped and acknowledged by us and which has been traditionally spoken about in terms which refer to how it exists not as an individual instance of matter but as a species of matter which is commonly shared (hence, common matter). The essence, say, of an oak tree consists of its form (its formal identity or formal specification) and a specification of matter which refers to the typical kind of matter which always belongs to all oak trees.

¹⁵Adler, *Angels and Us*, p. 57, quoting Aquinas.

¹⁶*De Spiritualibus Creaturis*, a. 5.

way which points to higher orders of meaning and being:¹⁷ hence, from the being of “(1) inanimate and mindless physical things to (2) living beings without minds, and [then to] (3) minds that are somehow associated with animate bodies, and [then] from them to (4) spiritual beings – minds without bodies.”¹⁸ In the Thomist kind of reasoning that comes to us from Dante's *Convivio*: as “between the angelic nature...and the human soul there is no intermediate step,” similarly also, no intermediate step exists “between the human soul and the most perfect soul of the brute animals.”¹⁹ A hierarchical notion of order differs from a contrary notion of order that would want to think in terms of some kind of continuous rising or falling as in our possibly using, for instance, a rope or a slide to move from A to B rather than a ladder that would be constituted by an ordering or a gradation of steps that cannot be indefinitely multiplied and distinguished if we are to succeed in moving from A to B in our understanding and knowledge of different things.²⁰

As created beings or *qua* created, angels accordingly possess a property, an attribute, or a degree of complexity which joins and links them to us as human beings although also, in comparison with ourselves, they exist with a simplicity and an immateriality that is entirely lacking in ourselves. As disincarnate beings or as disincarnate subjects, they are in fact more fully united and joined to a spirit that exists more simply than angels or any of us as human beings. But, as we have been noting, relative to ourselves and to our world, an angel's essence or an angel's immaterial soul exists as a purely formal or intelligible separated nature or principle²¹ which, as a form, cannot be equated (as we have noted) with its own act of being or existence which must be received by an angel's formal being or essence if an angel's form is to have more than a hypothetical or a possible, potential kind of existence.²² In angels, as in us as human beings and with respect to all other created things, an essence, an intelligibility, or a nature is never to be confused with the act of its being or the act of its existence since, *qua* essence, an essence does not necessarily include or presume that it has received or that it has been endowed with a correlative act of being or a correlative act of existence.²³ The two cannot be identified with each other even if we can argue and even as we prove that, as purely spiritual beings, angels must exist more simply than the being of any other kind of created thing.

The receptivity of an angel's existence can be then used as a principle to explain why, in its own way, it can be said that, in some way, potentiality can be ascribed to how angels exist. The kind of realization which belongs to angels differs from the kind of realization which properly belongs to us as human beings since, from our direct understanding of potency and act (as this refers to how we exist within an order of spatial and temporal determinations), we now move into analogical understandings for a

17Adler, *Angels and Us*, p. 62, p. 125. Citing Adler, differences of degree exist if, between 0 and 1, we construct fractions in an ongoing kind of way but, on the other hand, differences of kind exist if we move through a sequence of *whole numbers* (as a genus) from 1 to 2 and then to 3 *ad infinitum* where, in this type of ordering, nothing would exist between 1 and 2 and nothing between 2 and 3. In another example that is taken that is also borrowed from Aristotle in the context of his metaphysics, in moving through a “sequence of regular polygons, there is no there-and-a-half sided figure between triangles and quadrangles.” Cf. Adler, p. 125. Differences in kind differ from differences of degree.

18Adler, *Angels and Us*, p. 57, quoting Aquinas.

19Dante, *Convivio*, as quoted by Adler, *Angels and Us*, p. 58.

20Adler, *Angels and Us*, p. 63.

21*De ente et essentia*, 4.

22*De ente et essentia*, 5; *De Anima*, a. 6, ad 2; *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 7, a. 2.

23*Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 3, a. 7, ad 1.

meaning of potency and act that cannot be too explicitly or exactly stated: having now a significance which is more connotative and suggestive than the kind of exactness which belongs to our denotative apprehensions of meaning.

Third and most importantly as a third species of reason for affirming the existence of angels as we move now into a more cognitional type of argument (as metaphysical kinds of argument point to cognitional kinds of argument, vice versa), the functioning of our human cognition as an intermittent type of activity that is directed toward the possible reception of this or that act of understanding suggests why some creatures should exist who do nothing other than engage, or participate, or who continually receive whatever acts of understanding could be possibly given to them.²⁴ Two points bear mention. First, since, with us as human beings, every act of understanding exists always as a self-transcending type of act which differs from the substratum and being of a materially existing, functioning brain (it does not exist as the act of a material power, agent, or organ), the transcendence which belongs to us in every act of understanding *as an act of understanding* accordingly raises questions about the possible existence of other, more perfect acts of understanding which surpass the limited type of transcendence which properly belongs and occurs in us whenever we refer to our human acts of understanding and to how we exist with respect to our acts of understanding.²⁵ Acts of understanding would seem to exist which do not belong to us as human subjects but to higher forms of created being (or, alternatively in our language, to higher forms of created, conscious subjectivity). And then secondly, as our human understanding abstracts or subtracts forms from material conditions to separate that which exists as an intelligible form from that which exists as instances of sensible, sensed matter (sensed forms differing from the being of intelligible forms), and as intelligible forms enter into the distinctiveness or the fullness of their own being or reality through our experience of them in our understanding and so become how they are or how they exist as intelligibilities (which differ from every other kind of existing thing) through attaining a form of existence that entirely exists apart from the being of material conditions, the separation of forms from matter (as a precondition for every act of understanding which exists in us) and the consequent reception of a form within our acts of understanding accordingly suggests to us that angels properly exist as transcendent intelligibilities or, more strongly and accurately, as transcendent intelligences which always exist apart from this or that instance of matter (or, in general, from the condition of materiality as this exists with respect to the being of many things). As we have been noting, by definition, they are always engaged in acts of understanding which are purely receptive in the manner of their being and operations.²⁶ An absence of discursive reasoning in angels as a species of active potency explains why angels cannot question or have no need to engage in acts of questioning within the order of their cognition and so, by their questioning, possibly prepare themselves for possibly receiving new acts of understanding which could be given to them and which would be constitutive of how they would exist as created spirits.

Apart now from the aforementioned reasons which we have adduced and summarized in a way which points to the truth or the reality of why angels exist, on the basis of these reasons thus and in addition to these reasons, a number of consequences can be elucidated in a way which expands on how we are to

²⁴*De ente et essentia*, 4. Hence, in the same work, Aquinas is able to define an angel as an intelligence which is then defined as “a form and act of existing.”

²⁵*De Spiritualibus Creaturis*, a. 5; *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 50, a. 1: “[I]ntelligence cannot be the action of a body, nor of any corporeal faculty.” See also *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 79, a. 8, ad 3; 84, a. 6; q. 85, a. 1; Adler, *Angels and Us*, pp. 108-109.

²⁶*De ente et essentia*, 4; *Summa Theologiae*, 3a, q. 9, a. 3.

think about the being and life of angels. Simply put: A implies B. First, if, for instance, form possesses a meaning which suggests that its reality only fully emerges or exists if it is understood as something that exists apart from determinations of matter (or apart from the being of any kind of material condition), then, as every form in matter gives to matter an ordering which exists as its meaning or significance, its priority or, in other words, its act or activity as form suggests a priority and a lack of dependence on anything which would exist in terms of material conditions.²⁷ Something is more real or more substantial if it exists apart from any material conditions and if it always exists apart from any material conditions. The existence in us of less perfect forms of understanding, through our self-knowledge, would have to point to other forms of understanding which would seem to exist in a fuller sense if more perfect acts of understanding are to be entertained and thought about and so their operations would not be linked in any way to any acts or operations which would serve as an ordering or an assortment of enabling, facilitating, prior causes: operations which would have to be operative in us or in other subjects as active potencies before we or before they would be able to receive or properly enjoy a given act of understanding that, in some way, is being desired and wanted.

However, in the context also of our own experience, in the experience of some of us as human subjects, some acts of understanding exist for us or they are simply given and received by us apart from any need or necessity on our part to engage in any acts or operations which would seek and prepare us for enjoying any later acts of understanding. As a basic principle, we find that our understanding never grows from a complete lack or absence of understanding since, about the being and reality of some things, no questions need to be asked or posed. No questions arise. We already understand certain things and if we think about this kind of understanding and how it exists in our lives as a kind of necessary, prior condition, as a class, these unsolicited acts of understanding point to how this type of understanding exists as a distinct class or property which can be said to belong more fully to the life of beings whom we know and designate as the kind of separate substance, thing, or subject which exists as an angel. To reiterate our point a bit: the understanding of a purely spiritual but created being enjoys a species of simplicity which differs from us in our simplicity and which, in turn, suggestively points toward an ever greater simplicity which would have to belong to a form of intellect or understanding that has not received any kind of existence but which would exist in an entirely uncreated, active kind of way.²⁸ In some way, understanding exists as some kind of absolutely prior condition and this cognitional priority points to a metaphysical priority which belongs to the being and act of understanding.

In this situation thus, despite, *relatively*, the simplicity of angelic acts of understanding, their unrestricted receptivity points to how they need to be continually sustained, actuated, and maintained as each angel is brought into the kind of being which it enjoys as a created, immaterial, understanding, knowing subject. The unending, constant, non-intermittent kind of understanding which exists as an angel or which belongs to an angel points to why, as created contingent beings, they possess a form or a species of duration or a form of everlastingness that is unlike the kind of participated eternity which belongs to us as human beings if we should refer to the transcendence which properly belongs to us in our human acts of understanding in a species of transcendence that is, however, not to be equated with the higher or the different kind of transcendence which properly belongs to angels when we refer to how they exist as their angelic acts of understanding. Differences in transcendence that are grounded in differences of act (hence, in differences of potency) respectively point to the qualified temporality of

²⁷*De ente et essentia*, 4.

²⁸*Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 79, a. 2.

our human existence, the aeviternity of angels with respect to their created but unending existence, and then the eternity of God if we should try to think about how God exists in a manner that is bereft of any kind of qualification or condition.²⁹ The receptivity which belongs to us in our human acts of understanding, through the agency of our self-knowledge, points to a more radical or to a more simple notion of receptivity which would have to belong to other created beings when we refer to the kind of life and being which belongs to angels in their angelic acts of understanding. Where our conscious receptivity, as one kind of principle, is joined to activity as a second kind of conscious principle which exists within us as a species of codependent principle (each relies and depends on the other), among angels, the receptivity exists apart from this kind of inner relation or this kind of inner dependence although, on the other hand however, we can refer to another principle of activity although it would exist externally with respect to how angels exist. We refer here to a form of dependent relation although not to a form of dependence which would exist in terms of some kind of mutual causality which would exist as a form of codependence.

With respect more fully then to that which exists as the intellectual life of angels, as noted, in their being angels exist more simply as purely intellectual beings because they do not have to engage in any acts or operations that rely on the good or the use of anything which would exist as a material component, means, or tool. More easily than us, they more closely resemble the life and being of their creator and source of origin in terms of the activities or the acts which are constitutive of their acts of understanding and willing which allegedly, in understanding, realize good ends and purposes through achieving this or that good act or deed (the understanding of an angel existing also as the angelic willing and loving or as the angelic doing of the kind of deed which belongs to the understanding and willing of an angel).³⁰ Analogically, perfections are acquired or, more accurately, they exist through fewer means or, again more accurately (and less anthropomorphically), they would exist without any kind of recourse to means other than to note that angels exist and that they differ from each other according to the extent that this or that angel can be given more understanding than this or that other angel for reasons that, currently, we do know or fathom or cannot possibly ever know or fathom. We contrast how we acquire our own perfections or how our perfections are at times given to us, and how this differs from how angels enjoy perfections or how their perfections are given to them.³¹ In lacking bodies, for instance, angels lack organs of sense through which they can experience anything that could be informed by how anything exists in terms of its material or temporal coordinates.³² Within the order of their cognition, instantly or immediately, intelligible determinations are known and grasped. They are immediately given through an act of cognition which, in its simplicity, would have to exist as a species of intuition (although, as an angelic species of intuition). They have not to be derived or drawn from anything which would be endowed with an order of sensible characteristics.³³

²⁹Adler, *Angels and Us*, p. 79, citing Aquinas.

³⁰*Summa Contra Gentiles*, 2, 46.

³¹Adler, *Angels and Us*, p. 78.

³²*Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 55, a. 2.

³³*Summa Contra Gentiles*, 2, 96, 5; *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 59, a. 7. Please note that if a real distinction exists between our acts of reasoning and our acts of understanding, and if an act of understanding is given to us when we might not be expected it (since no act of understanding can be produced by us by any given act or acts of our human willing and reasoning), then the immediacy or the simple givenness to us of our experience in understanding is an act that we can readily find and affirm as we find it within the data of our human consciousness of self; or, in other words, when Aquinas speaks about an act of direct understanding as a simple act of apprehension which differs from

Reiteratively speaking, no beginning exists with respect to any data or datum of sense and hence, no subsequent moving toward a possible act of understanding. Nor is there a possible later return to any data of sense through a prospective act of judgment since angels, according to the order of their constitution, have not to engage in any prior form of thinking and reasoning which would have to move discursively from an initial apprehension and sense of external conditions (that are given in sense) toward an apprehension and sense of internal conditions in an ongoing type of procedure that, in us, would oscillate between our having to go between external and internal conditions and which would then move us as potential knowers from that which we already understand and know toward that which we have yet to understand and know through a process of inquiry and thought.³⁴ Angels perfectly understand things without their having to engage in any form of individual, personal effort which would have to occur if they were to engage in any form of inquiry which would assume that something needs to be grasped and understood. At no time, as we have been noting, is an angel not understanding what it is understanding.³⁵ The understanding of an angel always aeviternally, constantly exists and so, as a consequence, as a kind of derivative within an order of analysis which attends to an order of intellectual or mental distinctions and not to the being and order of finding real distinctions, we can say that an angel's willing and loving possesses a like constancy, stability, and actuality.³⁶ After an initial choice or decision has been somehow made with respect to how an angel responds to the extent and depth of its self-knowledge and how it exists as a disembodied, created act of understanding, all else follows with no going back in the course or in the being of an angel's life.³⁷ Angelic understanding

the discursiveness of our prior acts of human reasoning, the simplicity of this reception in its immediacy points to how we can think and speak about angelic acts of understanding as themselves another distinct species of intuition (an intuition, however, which is not to be associated with the kind of immediacy which belongs to our different acts of human sensing). We work here not with an understanding of intuition that thinks in terms of sensible intuitions but with an understanding of intuition that thinks in terms of intellectual intuitions despite how we might want to model our understanding of intellectual intuitions on how we would want to think and speak about the being of our sensible intuitions. If, however, we can think and speak about our acts of understanding as if they exist as intellectual intuitions, then, as we separate this kind of act from the being of our prior cognitive acts which belong to our acts of sensing, remembering, and imagining, then we can come to how and why we can think about angelic acts of understanding in terms that are suggestive of intuition and the kind of immediacy which belongs to intuition. Our manner of thinking and speaking works with similarities that we can notice and with analogies that we can therefore draw and so it introduces an order of qualifications and distinctions that have always to be noted and respected if we are to avoid falling into any contradictions and inconsistencies that would confuse our acts of understanding with angelic acts of understanding and these then with the kind of understanding and being which exists as God as God exists in and of Himself. See Adler, *Angels and Us*, pp. 133-134.

³⁴*Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 57, a. 1, ad 3; q. 58, a. 3; q. 76, a. 5; q. 79, a. 8.

³⁵*Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 54, a. 4; q. 79, a. 2.

³⁶*Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 62, a. 5; q. 64, a. 2; *De Malo*, q. 16, a. 5.

³⁷Aquinas distinguishes between angels who are blessed by God with the gift of charity (where charity exists specifically as the reception of supernatural love) because they have been willing to accept the gift of this grace and love, and those who are not blessed by God because they have not been willing to accept the divine gift of this grace and love of charity (though all have been created by God) if, as a foundational first principle, we are to admit that angels can never exist as slaves or as automatons but as freely deciding, willing rational subjects who, like us, are able to make choices in a

lacks the potentiality which properly belongs to the potentiality of our human understanding even if, admittedly and as we have been noting, the absence of every form of potentiality cannot be definitely concluded to and affirmed in any kind of absolute manner since, as with ourselves, the understanding of an angel is something which has been created and made and so it has been brought into its own condition of being and existence. The finitude of a given angel exists, in its own way, as a species of incompleteness and this incompleteness points to some kind of potentiality which must somehow exist. How can we say with respect to the understanding of an angel that no augmentation is possible though this form of augmentation would have to exist in a way that would have to be bereft of temporal conditions and qualities as we experience the kind of ordering which belongs to our human experience of time? Necessarily, angelic understanding exists with a relativity that must properly belong to it and so, admittedly, as our understanding enjoys a form of completeness which properly belongs to it, angelic understanding enjoys its own form of completeness which would have to detract from our wanting to think that it could enjoy any kind of incompleteness which would then have to point to a species of potentiality that would have to belong to that which exists as the understanding, willing, and the being of any given angel.³⁸

The createdness and so the kind of partiality which belongs to angels with respect to how they exist as acts of understanding accordingly points to a possibility of change or alteration which pertains to angels but which would have to differ from how we experience and understand change and alterations in the context of our individual, human lives.³⁹ Necessarily, we must work with an analogical notion of change. On the one hand, the actual understanding in an angel exists as a limited kind of thing since it can exist only with respect to the meaning or the intelligibility of certain forms or ideas that have been somehow given to it by how it is receiving this or that unsolicited act of understanding, a form or idea existing as the term of what has been given as a received act of understanding.⁴⁰ Simply put and as we have been noting or suggesting, no form of created understanding can understand anything which requires an unrestricted act of understanding or which would exist as an uncreated act of understanding. As, metaphysically, an angel's essence differs from its existence or its act of being because, essentially, an angel's essence differs from its existence, in the same fashion, an angel's intellect or intellectual soul, as a formal principle, differs from its received acts of understanding which, as received acts of understanding, necessarily point to why, really, a degree or, more accurately, a species of potentiality or potency must always exist in every angel (a potency that we can think about and conceive although not adequately picture or imagine).⁴¹ As an angel's existence points to how it exists as a received

way which points to the freedom of their understanding and willing as this understanding and willing exists together as an interactive, complementary unit where the understanding enhances and leads to the willing and the willing, the understanding. If, as human subjects, we are endowed with the gift of freedom as a good, and this freedom exists as a privilege, more so must this be the case with angels. They are endowed with their own gift of freedom which belongs to their being and nature (although, admittedly, with a freedom which differs from us as a different kind of species). We cannot properly imagine it nor can we properly understand it although we can speak about it in ways which work with analogical acts of understanding from which we can properly derive the good which exists when we refer to our analogical acts of conception and speech. See Adler, *Angels and Us*, p. 87, citing Aquinas.

38 *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 54, aa. 1-3; q. 62, a. 1 & ad 3; q. 79, a. 2.

39 Adler, *Angels and Us*, pp. 78-79, citing Aquinas.

40 *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 56, a. 3 & ad 3.

41 *De ente et essentia*, 4; *On Separated Substances*, c. 3, cited by *Aquinas Reader*, p. 71; *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 54, aa. 1-3; q. 87, a. 1; a. 3; Lonergan, *Verbum*, p. 197. Cf. *Super Boetium*

actuality, in the same way, its knowing exists with a like, similar restriction. As we have been noting, no angel can exist as a pure act of understanding which has always existed and which has never, at any time, come into being. The actuality of an angel exists as something which is necessarily always both partial and finite. It is not entirely fully complete or whole. We necessarily distinguish between a wholeness or a completeness that can belong to us in a given act of understanding and a wholeness or completeness which must belong to how an angel exists as an act of understanding. To the degree, however, that an angel's actuality exists, to the degree that it can be adverted to, a suitable point of departure accordingly exists for our saying that it enjoys a form of perfection which differs from other thinkable, conceivable forms of perfection. If our human perfection transcends or if it excludes potencies which belong to our different acts of human sensing, angelic perfection exists in its own right as it transcends or excludes potencies which belong to all forms of discursiveness in acts of cognition.

Hence, as we move from one inference to another, instead of our moving discursively from what we know to what we can know in our human acts of cognition, an angel's act of understanding immediately grasps all the relations that are immediately present to it in any given act of understanding which it has somehow received.⁴² Where, as human beings, we grasp one set of relations in one act of understanding and, from there, another set of relations which perhaps can be grasped by us through a second act of understanding, in the knowing of an angel, knowing one set of relations at the metaphorical beginning or start of things immediately reveals the other relations which can be known and which are known since the first set of relations that are known cannot be unrelated to other sets of relations, and so an angelic act of understanding simultaneously grasps all these other relations when, metaphorically, it grasps and knows about a first set of relations. The emphasis which is then given to the immediacy of angelic understanding distinguishes angelic understanding in a way which implies a number or an order of consequences which, when they are established and recognized, serve to augment our knowledge about the kind of understanding which properly exists or which would exist as the being of angels or as the cognitional life of angels. We have been attempting to move from an order of metaphysical considerations to what we can understand if we should attend to an order of cognitional considerations.

First, as a consequence of both the immediacy and the kind of comprehensiveness that is implied by the kind of immediacy which points to why angelic understanding exists as fundamentally a species of non-sensible intuition, it follows from all this that we understand why each angel exists as but one act of understanding that it has received and which allows a given angel to understand all that it can understand or all that it understands through the form or the intelligibility which it has received from another, prior act of understanding that would have to be more fully real and actual,⁴³ or which is in fact

De Trinitate, q. 5, a. 4, ad 4, cited by *Philosophical Texts, St. Thomas Aquinas Philosophical Texts*, trans. by Thomas Gilby (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 151, n. 433: "Actuality and potentiality are wider terms than form and matter."

⁴²*Super Librum De causis*, prop. 9; p. 70; *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 85, a. 5.

⁴³*Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 106, a. 1; q. 106, a. 4. As Matthew L. Lamb notes in his *Commentary on Saint Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians* (Albany, N.Y.: Magi Books, Inc., 1966), p. 290, n. 90, we can speak about two sources of angelic knowledge. Some angels receive acts of their understanding directly from God and others (the so-called "inferior angels") receive their acts of understanding in a mediated way: from the acts of understanding which belong to higher or superiors angels whose acts of understanding understand more than what is understood by the acts of understanding which belongs to the ranks of inferior angels.

fully actual and so, as fully actual and as entirely lacking in any kind of potency, this first act would exist as an uncreated, active, eternal act of understanding. If an understanding of one set of relations immediately reveals the meaning of other sets of relation, no angel needs to exist as other than itself as a received act of understanding.

However, in noting that each angel exists as one act of understanding and that it enjoys one act of understanding through which it understands and knows all the things that it knows, an important qualification needs to be adverted to. Since an angel understands all the things which it understands through an act of understanding which it has received and which is directly correlated to a specific form or species that is received as the proper content or term of an angel's act of understanding,⁴⁴ a given angel can only understand things in function to the particular species that it has received and which it grasps through its own act of understanding. Or, in other words, since the created intellect of an angel is only able to grasp, through its act of understanding, a species or form that is appropriate to it (which is given to it in the way that a form is to be correlated with a congruent act of cognition which exists as an act of understanding), as we have already been indicating and suggesting, as another way to talking about the potency of an angel, it cannot have an unrestricted understanding of things which can only be given through a form or species that would be unrestricted in the range and scope of its meaning or intelligibility and which would be joined and correlated to an unrestricted act of understanding. Reiteratively, only an unrestricted act of understanding is able to grasp a meaning which is unrestricted in its scope and significance. As an unrestricted act of understanding is to be correlated with an unrestricted content, a restricted act is always to be correlated with a restricted content and so, as great and as much as an angel is able to understand things through itself as its constitutive act of understanding, all that an angel is able to understand is only what it can understand through a form or an apprehension which it has received as a gift from a fuller or more noble act of understanding. The greatness of the gift is not itself fully known either by ourselves or by angels since it can only be fully known by another act of understanding: by the unrestricted act of understanding which has given and imparted it.

On the other hand however, and as Aquinas suggests when speaking about angels who could possibly have a succession or a sequence in enjoying their acts of understanding,⁴⁵ we could also possibly argue that no angel need not have more than one act of understanding. As an angel receives its acts of understanding from an unrestricted act of understanding, nothing prevents an unrestricted act of understanding from giving an angel more than one act of understanding in a form of enhancement, succession, or sequence which would be ascribed to a non-temporal form of growth in the scope and depth of an angel's understanding: a growth in the created understanding of an angel which occurs along entirely different lines than does any kind of growth which belongs to us as human beings in the kind of understanding which we happen to have and which belongs to us. Where lack of discursiveness in angelic understanding points to the immediacy of angelic understanding and to the absence of any need for any kind of inquiry which could exist in an angel (hence, the absence of an incremental kind

⁴⁴*Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 55, a. 1.

⁴⁵*Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 57, a. 3, ad 2; q. 61, a. 2, ad 2; q. 63, a. 6, ad 4; q. 117, a. 2, ad 1; Lamb, *Commentary*, p. 287, n. 77. Not to be forgotten is another kind of changeableness which can be said to belong to angels in terms of physical location or place if angels can manifest themselves to us either through this body at this time or this other body at this other time. See Aquinas, as quoted by Adler, *Angels and Us*, p. 79. Aquinas refers to angelic changeableness as this refers to intelligence, affections, choices, and places.

of understanding), the receptivity of angelic understanding in its own way points to a form of potency that belongs to angelic understanding and to why expansions and enhancements in understanding cannot be entirely ruled out as things that could possibly exist although we cannot think too well about how such a thing could possibly exist.

Second, in trying to understand better how the cognitional life of an angel both resembles and differs from our human understanding, as we have already noted, it can be said and it has been said that the cognition of angels resembles a form of understanding which recalls the simplicity of intuition although the simplicity of angelic understanding is not to be understood in terms of any form of intuitive sense perception. The intuition of angels here refers only to acts of understanding which immediately know something by knowing something else.⁴⁶ Something is known immediately within another and not discursively after one has first come to know something else.⁴⁷ When an angel knows a first principle and as we have been noting, it immediately understands and knows everything that can be known by means of the first principle that it is grasping and knowing.⁴⁸ For both angels and us as human beings, an act of understanding exists as an incorruptible, self-transcending act of spirit (and not as an act of sense) which grasps relations that are strictly unseen or insensible although, as we have been noting, for angels, all knowing occurs only through acts of understanding which are constitutive of angels in terms of how they exist as distinct beings,⁴⁹ angels possessing “no other vital activity other than [their] understanding,”⁵⁰ although, if a given angel can possibly receive increments in how it exists as a received act of understanding, we can possibly raise questions which would want to ask if it can be argued that angels possess a kind of mysterious personal history that cannot be understood by us to the degree that we exist within determinations of space and time and so, as a consequence of this limitation, we can have no direct understanding and knowledge of things which exist within an order of being that is devoid of spatial and temporal determinations. Spirit, through itself, as act, operation, or realization, directly and properly only knows other spirits as acts, operations, or realizations.⁵¹ A relation of direct proportion exists between the capacity of a spirit to understand and know all things and the freedom that it enjoys from any determinations that would be imposed from without through any kind of union that would exist with the being of material conditions.⁵² To recall a teaching that comes to us about the nature of our human freedom, our freedom exists as a greater thing; it exists in fact as a different kind of thing if it is understood less in terms of mere choice and more in terms of the kind of liberation which exists through some kind of growth which occurs and exists within our understanding and within the loving which is joined to the goodness and the depth of our understanding.

Third, while the proper object of our human understanding is an incarnate nature (a quiddity, an essence, or a “whatness” that is located within designations of matter which exist as material conditions), the proper object of angelic understanding as pure spirit is always a pure form: a quiddity, an essence, or a “whatness” that lacks a body and which usually and normally exists in a disincarnate

46*De Malo*, q. 16, a. 8, ad 7.

47*De Veritate*, q. 15, a. 8; *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 64, a. 2.

48*Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 58, a. 3.

49*Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 57, a. 2.

50*Summa Contra Gentiles*, 2, 97, 3, my translation.

51*Summa Contra Gentiles*, 2, 98, 1.

52*Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 14, a. 1.

manner.⁵³ The object is a form that normally and properly exists apart from any dwelling within that which exists as matter or material conditions. While we, as human beings, know individual material things through our senses (constituting one species of potency) and, on the other hand, the natures of these things through an understanding which grasps forms or essences within matter by employing and working with material images (constituting a second species of potency), angels know material things both in terms of their individual features and through their general forms through a form of intellectual activity that is primarily geared toward directly knowing the being of immaterial things⁵⁴ by means of forms which have been somehow imprinted or infused within the minds of their being as angels,⁵⁵ forms which angels already have within their understanding minds in the acts of understanding which they have received and which are constitutive of angels in terms of the kinds of beings that they happen to be.⁵⁶ Higher, more perfect forms of understanding can more easily and more thoroughly understand lower forms of understanding (and all lesser things who have little or no understanding) than what is otherwise the case when lesser forms of understanding and being try to understand higher forms of understanding and being which engage in activities that are not given to the life of lower beings. Hence, as we, as human beings, move toward a limited knowledge of invisibly existing things by means of visibly existing objects, angels move in a converse direction: immediately toward an unlimited knowledge of visible, sensible things through an infused knowledge of insensibly existing realities. The forms of sensible things already exist in some inner, innate way within the minds of angels as the invisible things which angels already directly and immediately know,⁵⁷ and so “the intellects of angels are perfected by innate forms which give them all the natural knowledge to which their intellectual powers extend.”⁵⁸ Nothing is known by us as human beings that cannot be better known by the kind of understanding and knowing which belongs to angels and which is distinctive of their life and being.

Fourth, with respect to the question of self-knowledge which, for us as human beings, presents itself to us as a long term goal and as our final objective, an angel’s self-knowledge is immediately given in a logically prior kind of way in any act of understanding which it is or which it enjoys since lack of union with any body or material element (and the consequent absence of any material component in acts of cognition) is a feature which naturally belongs to a form of cognition that must begin from a basis that exists purely and entirely within the interior life of an angel. In other words, no angel needs to begin with a familiarity or an understanding of something else, or something other than itself, in order to move toward or to have a knowledge of itself. An angel, as a disembodied act of understanding, exists on its own even if the character of its self-subsistence is limited by the fact that an angel’s act of understanding is an operation that has been created and so it has been in some way received.⁵⁹ As a consequence of all this thus, an angel’s first and proper object of understanding is always itself, its own form or nature (the intelligibility of its own acts of understanding), and not something that is other than itself if we should want to refer to the forms of other things.⁶⁰ Its self-understanding is immediately

53*Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 84, q. 7; q. 85, a. 1. See also Crowe, *Three Thomist Studies*, p. 233.

54*Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 85, a. 1.

55*Summa Theologiae*, 3a, q. 11, a. 1, ad 3.

56*Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 57, a. 2.

57*De Veritate*, q. 8, a. 9.

58*De Veritate*, q. 8, a. 15 (amended translation).

59*Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 54, a. 3.

60*Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 87, a. 3.

given as every angel already immediately understands and “knows itself through its essence [its own unique form or species] and not through the species of another thing.”⁶¹ And, in addition too, and as a conclusion which emphasizes and pivots on the simplicity of an angel as its own act of understanding, an angel’s act of self-understanding is the same act by which it understands and knows that it enjoys this self-understanding of itself.⁶² As an angel immediately understands and knows itself, it is also immediately conscious and aware of the fact that it truly understands and knows itself. No other act of understanding and knowing is needed as would be the case for us if an angel were a human being since, for us as human beings, self-understanding and self-knowledge is only fully known and possessed for what it is if, as human beings, we have been able to attend to the consciousness of our self-knowledge in a way which can acknowledge it as something which is now definitely known and understood. Consciousness of self in us is not to be equated with our knowledge of self. From the standpoint thus of their own self-knowledge, angels accordingly move toward a knowledge of external things by first beginning from their own self-understanding and knowledge (which is, of course, the converse of how our understanding proceeds in us as human beings).⁶³ The intelligibility which is given to an angel and which constitutes its form is the same intelligibility which exists as the principle of its self-knowledge and which, in turn, leads to its knowledge of all other things (although the forms of these other things which are known by an angel are not to be simply equated or identified with the form which exists as the form that is constitutive of an angel as a distinct species of existing being).⁶⁴ The form which is the form of an angel is something higher than any form which belongs to a lesser kind of thing.

Fifth, since angels do not abstract forms from any matter (from any set of external conditions) as a consequence of any inquiry, and since the forms which are known by angels are received and they are not created by them, the fact that angels, in some way, already possess the forms which they understand indicates not only a transcendent source for all the forms which angels know,⁶⁵ but a communication of forms to angels which totally differs from the human reception of forms in our human intellects and understanding since the communication of forms to angels is done through an infusion which ultimately comes from God in an entirely unmediated way. The forms of angelic understanding have all been infused directly by God.⁶⁶ In angelic understanding, as has been already suggested and noted, secondary causality does not exist as it exists in the created human order of things since angels only exercise a form of passive causality as they freely receive the species or forms of things that are given to them without the necessity of previously asking questions which are needed by us as human beings to prepare our human minds for the later reception of species or forms that could be given to us in our own acts of understanding. Angels receive their forms from a transcendent source that already fully possesses them and which, unlike angels and other created beings, is itself entirely uncreated since, with respect to the being of an uncreated existing being, we cannot distinguish between the intelligibility, the meaning, or the reality of its nature or essence, on the one hand, and its act of existence, on the other hand.⁶⁷ The pure receptivity of angelic understanding accordingly explains why,

61*Summa Contra Gentiles*, 2, 98, 2; 3, 46, 7; *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 54, a. 1.

62*Summa Theologiae*, 1a q. 87, a. 3.

63*Summa Contra Gentiles*, 3, 46, 5; 4, 11, 5.

64*Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 87, a. 1; *De Malo*, q. 16, a. 12, ad 4.

65*Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 55, a. 2.

66*De Veritate*, q. 8, a. 10; *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 89, a. 4; 3a, q. 9, aa. 3-4; q. 12, a. 4. NB Aquinas argues in the *Summa Theologiae*, 3a, q. 13, a. 2, ad 2 that the highest angel can only be changed directly by God (and by no creature).

67*De ente et essentia*, 4-5; *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 54, a. 1.

easily, it can be argued that angels lack an active principle of understanding. They have no active, agent, or factive intellect and so, in another way, the simplicity of angelic understanding is more aptly suggested, revealed, and demonstrated.

Sixth, since each angel receives a form or an intelligibility that comes directly from God and since angels can only be distinguished from each other on the basis of a different form which each receives (given the absence of any form of differentiation which relies on the reception of form into matter as a means for distinguishing one individual from another),⁶⁸ angels more radically differ from one another on the basis of a different species or form which each has and which explains why one angel can be more like God than a second angel.⁶⁹ As some angels possess more understanding than other angels, the higher forms possess less potency in conjunction with and because of the degree of understanding which they actually enjoy. Less needs to be understood by a given angel as the potency of one angel differs from the potency of another. While human beings all belong to one species, angels each have their own species or form (apart from matter) although it can be argued that, as angels, as created, rational, spiritual beings, they belong to one genus (the genus of rational created things which includes both angels and human beings).⁷⁰ In any case however, when this difference in species is understood from a cognitional perspective, we find that differences in understanding distinguish angels from each other to reveal a hierarchy which has been effected or created as a necessary consequence.⁷¹ Some angels possess more dignity, excellence, and being than other angels since certain angels are higher than others because they understand more things through fewer acts of understanding. For an apt analogy that we can understand and experience in the context of our own lives, we notice that, amongst ourselves as human beings, one person will more rapidly and readily understand something through

⁶⁸*Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 47, a. 2.

⁶⁹*De ente et essentia*, 4-5; *De Spiritualibus Creaturis*, a. 8 & ad 4; *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 3, a. 3; q. 89, a. 1.

⁷⁰*Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 50, a. 2, ad 1. As Aquinas explains it, quoting from the Blackfriars translation (v. 9, p. 13), “in the immaterial world there is not, in a given being, one factor that determines [i.e., a form or species] and another that is determined [i.e., an instance of matter]; but each being [or thing] of and by itself constitutes and occupies a distinct degree in the scale of being.” The species or form of an angel stands on its own as a determining factor with respect to what it is (in its identity), and this determination occurs independently of any relation with matter which cannot thus serve as a principle of limitation for the reception of a form (since, in the relation between form and matter, no form is able to inform any instance of matter in an indiscriminate fashion). Certain kinds of matter can receive only certain kinds of forms since the suitability of a given instance of matter to receive certain forms and not others is a principle which governs how the reception of forms by matter is to be understood as this process occurs in the concrete order of incarnate things that has been created by God. Where matter exists within the created order of things, it never exists as prime matter. It never exists as if it were totally undetermined, as if it were totally uninformed by some kind of form. Cf. *Sententia super Metaphysicam*, 7, 2, 1292; Eleonore Stump, *Aquinas* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 37. Any matter which is wholly indeterminate or, in other words, where matter exists as prime matter, it exists then only as an explanatory principle. It cannot exist as a datum of sense since whatever is experienced in the world that is revealed to us as human beings by our senses is something which already enjoys a certain kind of existence. It already exists in a certain way, having already a form.

⁷¹*De Veritate*, q. 8, a. 10; *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 2, 98, 10; *Compendium theologiae*, 1, c. 126, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 50, ad 1, ad 2; q. 55, a. 3; Lonergan, *Verbum*, p. 65.

fewer clues or a lesser number of suggestive hints while others achieve the same degree or level of understanding but only by attending to a larger number of suggestive clues. As the form or species belonging to one angel accordingly reveals a certain range or depth of meaning, the form or species that belongs to another angel can reveal a broader horizon, or a deeper significance. As with human beings and also with God, the knowing of angels corresponds with the nature of their individual being as this is stated in a well known general principle which avers that “everything that is received in something is determined in the latter according to the mode of the recipient.”⁷² While all angels have a knowledge of God that directly perceives or apprehends God’s divine essence (in admittedly a limited and partial way if angels exist as restricted acts of understanding),⁷³ angels differ from each other in the degree of perfection by which each knows who God is.⁷⁴ Some know Him more fully than others know Him since some angels have greater intelligence. Their acts of understanding are larger and greater. The differences in understanding which exist as distinct angels and so a lesser or a greater proximity to the being of divine things accordingly exists as a basis of later speculation about how angels can be possibly divided or distinguished from each other on the basis of their species. Angelic understanding can exist as a kind of genus and differences in understanding point to different species of angels. God’s Kingdom enjoys a kind of range or amplitude that we can try to imagine but not entirely grasp in ways that pertain to anything that would exist as a proportionate or direct act of understanding.

By way of a conclusion that can now be drawn if our point of departure is a conjunction or a kind of unity which can exist between a proffered theology of angels and a proposed philosophy of angels, in the kind of thinking that we find in Aquinas, an analogical understanding of angels exists as a good basis when we use it as a means for moving to a further, more difficult type of analogical understanding that we would want to have about the being of divine things as this refers to God: God in terms of how and why He exists in the way that He happens to be and exist. However, at the same time, in this business of moving into an understanding of angels, it cannot be denied that, by these means, we better understand our human knowing and cognition to the degree that we distinguish it from the kind of understanding which peculiarly belongs to angels as disembodied acts of understanding. In moving toward an understanding of divine things that are other than angels, some kind of further growth is always needed in terms of our self-understanding of different things. Inquiries which ask about angels not only suppose a degree of self-understanding which must exist in ourselves while they also promote our self-understanding in ways that, possibly, would not otherwise happen and occur. Each acts on the other as our moving toward an understanding of divine things requires a fuller understanding of ourselves and a fuller understanding of angels and as our understanding of divine things encourages further growth in the self-understanding that we currently have of ourselves. Our thinking and thought about angels is not without purpose and value. It is not without some meaning for us as our speculative explorations are not lacking in the good of consequences which effect growth in our self-understanding and in the kind of loving and willing that can ensue in the wake of any kind of growth that can possibly exist for us with respect to who we are as thinking, understanding, reflective human beings and how better we can begin to live and act in ways

⁷²*Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 89, a. 4, as quoted and translated by Crowe, *Three Thomist Studies*, p. 212, n. 20. See also John F. Wippel, “Thomas Aquinas and the Axiom ‘What is Received is Received According to the Mode of the Receiver,’” *A Straight Path: Studies in Medieval Philosophy and Culture*, ed. Ruth Link-Salinger, et al (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1988): 279-289.

⁷³Adler, *Angels and Us*, p. 81.

⁷⁴*Compendium theologiae*, 1, c. 126.

that more fully joined to the kind of rational life which belongs to us as human beings.