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Angels as a guide to ethics

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## **Angels as a guide to ethics**

### **Ethics and embryos**

Bioethics is the ethics, the ‘what we should do and what we should not do’ of human biology and medicine. It is a subject which is constantly changing, and which is constantly in the news. This makes it a pleasure to teach. It means you can ask students to look at the television or the newspapers and know that within a week or so there will be a new story, a new issue.

An issue that is currently on the horizon relates to stem cell research and in particular to hybrid embryos. You can find stem cells in various places in the body. There are stem cells in bone marrow and in the umbilical cord from a newborn baby. About ten years ago a number of scientists became interested in extracting stem cells from human embryos. They wanted to dissect human embryos to do research on their cells. They hoped that this research would lead to medical treatments and they claimed that it was more promising than alternative non-destructive sources of stem cells. As well as asking to experiment on human embryos they also asked if they could clone human embryos for their research. Parliament, to my regret, said yes.<sup>1</sup> This was back in 2001. Since then many scientists have tried to clone a human embryo but as yet no-one has succeeded.

Now, six years later they have come back to ask for more. They want to be allowed to create an embryo from the egg of a cow and the nucleus of a cell from a human being. This would be a hybrid: part cow, part human. A new law about use of human embryos is currently before Parliament. Everyone expects that hybrid embryos will get the go ahead.

The issue of hybrid embryos is not just about the question ‘when does human life begin?’ It is not just the abortion debate all over again. It is also about what counts as human and what dignity there is, in being human. Crossing a human with a non-human animal raises the question, what significance do we recognise in our own specific human nature?

Bioethics thus raises some very profound questions. It demands some understanding of what it is to be human: the place of humanity in the scheme of things. It is for this reason that I want to reflect on angels for, I will argue, angels offer us some important illumination about who we are and about our place in the world.

### **Angels and ecology**

The renowned Cambridge Philosopher, Elisabeth Anscombe,<sup>2</sup> once asked me if it was true that the Second Vatican Council had said that human beings were the summit of God’s creation, ‘because if they did say this’, she said, ‘it shows they had forgotten about the angels’. Later I found the passage I think she was referring to:

‘According to the almost unanimous opinion of believers and unbelievers alike, all things on earth should be related to man as their center and crown.’ (*Gaudium et Spes* 1.1)

You will notice that this statement does not in fact say that angels are subordinate to human beings. It says rather that ‘all things *on earth*’ are subordinate to human beings. Indeed a couple of sentences later the Vatican II document explicitly mentions the angels. It quotes from the Psalm, ‘you have made [human beings] a little less than the angels’ (Ps. 8.5-7).

However, while Anscombe was mistaken in thinking that angels were altogether forgotten, she was right to see this as a danger, for Vatican II and for modern Christians in general. The Second Vatican Council focuses on living a fully human life and presents Jesus as the one through whom we find out what it is to be human. However, while it has a positive emphasis on human dignity and on human solidarity, our relationship with the rest of material creation is expressed purely in terms of dominion, not of companionship, while our relationship with the angels is hardly even mentioned.

These two relationships are two sides of the same coin. Human beings are seen as lording it over the rest of creation partly because we have forgotten about the angels. We see ourselves as ‘over’ rather than ‘with and among’ the rest of God’s creatures partly because we believe that there is nothing or no-one above us. We are not within a larger community, what you might call a ‘spiritual ecology’ in which there are angels among and above us and other animals among and below us.

The presumption that human beings are the summit of everything is mistaken and destructive, but it is easy to fall into. It is taken for granted in our modern culture. It is held by many religious people, on the basis that only human beings have a ‘spiritual soul’, but it is, if anything, even more pronounced in people who reject religion. Many modern humanists earnestly hope that there is no God, for if they acknowledged that that was a God above they would feel less free and so less human. For thinkers such as Ludwig Feuerbach or Friedrich Nietzsche in the nineteenth century, or in our own day Richard Dawkins or Philip Pullman, human beings must be top in order to be free. God would get in the way. Angels would get in the way. There must be nothing and no-one above us.

Anscombe rightly perceived that the marginalisation of the angels both among religious and non-religious people was a reflection of a distorted modern worldview. In contrast, in a worldview that includes angels, human beings have a place midway on the chain of being, higher than the other animals but a little lower than the angels.<sup>3</sup> From an ancient and from a post-modern perspective the perfection of the universe consists in the harmony of all parts of creation, not just the excellence of one part, the human part.<sup>4</sup> There is no need to dominate the rest of creation in order to establish our status. Our status is within creation not above it, and the angels are above us and also among us.

Christians in the modern world may sometimes forget the angels and think of human beings in isolation from and above the rest of creation, but this goes against the message of the Gospel. Even at the very beginning, in the traditional image of the crib Jesus is worshipped not only by shepherds and kings but also by angels and by the ox and the ass. There is a deliberate message here. So also in the beginning of the Gospel according to

Mark, when Jesus goes into the wilderness he is with the wild beasts and the angels minister to him (Mk. 1.13). Jesus, who so often reminds us what it is to be human, is with the wild beasts and the angels. The presence of both reminds us that we are parts of a whole, parts of a larger world and find meaning within this ecology, not in isolation from it.

### **What is ‘distinctively human’?**

Angels then can remind us that we are not the summit of everything. They can remind us of ecology. What is more, thinking about angels can actually remind us of how close we are to other animals. For the mind so often works by contrasts, we understand this as distinct from that. Bats are mammals that can fly. Like other mammals they are furry, but they alone can fly. This is what is distinctive about them.. One of the most important contrasts that philosophers have made, from the very beginning of Western philosophy, is the contrast between human beings and other animals. Human beings are different from all other animals in having reason, or in using language, or in making things, or in possessing a spiritual soul, and so on. That there is some clear distinction, whatever its precise basis, is deeply ingrained both in religious and in non-religious people. This is so much so that in ordinary English we sometimes use animal over and against human. We say, ‘this footprint was made by a human being but this was made by an animal’. Even the proposed new law on embryos contains the line ‘for the purposes of this section “animal” is an animal other than man’.<sup>5</sup> As though human beings were not animals!

It is true and important that there are differences between human beings and other animals, and some of these differences relate to qualities that we rightly value. However there is a problem with talking about what is ‘distinctively human’ if, by that, we mean what distinguishes human beings from all the other animals. In comparison to angels, what is distinctive about human beings is: that we have bodies; that we exist in time; that we suffer and are vulnerable; that we need one another; and that we die. In a word what makes a human being different from an angel is that human beings *are* animals. This reminds us and helps us to value the other essential aspect of our nature that is connected to feeling and physicality.

There is a very profound film about angels and human beings that is set in Berlin.<sup>6</sup> The film is about is an angel who wants to become human. The angel complains about being eternally unmoved and untouched by the world, and seeing everything but not being involved in things. He wants to step out of eternity and ‘step into the river of time’, to understand ‘now’ and ‘now’ and ‘now’, to smoke a cigarette and taste a cup of coffee, to touch a newspaper so the ink comes off in his hands. This for the angel is what is distinctively human.

The comparison of human and angel reminds us then that humans are not angels, are not pure spirit or pure reason. Human beings are and should glory in being animals of a specific kind. This is part of the reason why the manufacture of animals who are half-human, half-nonhuman does and should trouble us, precisely because we too are animals.

## **The microcosm**

The Hebrew Scriptures begin with the words, 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth' (Gen. 1.1). By the fourth century CE Christians were expressing their faith in 'God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible' (Creed of Nicea). 'The heavens' has come to be understood as 'all things invisible', that is, the angels, whereas 'the earth' is understood as 'all things visible', that is, the whole of the material creation. This is made even more explicit in the greatest pastoral council of medieval Church in 1215 CE: 'Creator of all things visible and invisible... namely angelic and worldly, and of humans who share in both, as it were, being composed of spirit and body' (Creed of Lateran IV). The human being is a microcosm, a whole world in miniature, containing in himself or herself both the visible and the invisible, both the heavens and the earth.

Human beings share features with other animals and share features with angels. In deciding what is distinctively human, and what is inhuman, there is a clear danger if we remember the animals but forget the angels. We might identify as human only what is different from other animals, and see as inhuman what we have in common with other animals. In religious terms, we might think of goodness as something spiritual and unconnected with the body, and to think of badness only in terms of the 'sins of the flesh': excessive desires or aggression, carnality or brutality or stupidity. However, even angels can fall: 'The devil and the other demons were indeed created by God good by nature but they became bad through themselves; man, however, sinned at the suggestion of the devil' (Creed of Lateran IV, see also Jude 1.6, Rev. 12.7-9). This reminds us that not all sins are to do with the flesh. Indeed from a Christian perspective the first sin, the sin of Lucifer, which was also the sin of Adam, was pride.<sup>7</sup>

There are many vices such as pride, vanity, envy, acquisitiveness, that are not so much sins of the flesh as sins of the spirit. It is true that there are some sins that degrade us to the merely animal but there are also sins that are demonic, that are about power or secret knowledge or malice, and these are the more dangerous sins. Seeing in ourselves both the animal and the angelic (or the demonic) also helps explain the futility of trying to make a better society by identifying genes for intelligence or genes for aggressiveness or for excessive desire. The fact that someone is clever is no guarantee that he or she will be good. Indeed the screening out some people because they are less clever or less productive or not submissive enough is itself an example of inhuman pride. 'Eugenics', selecting who is allowed to breed, and who is allowed to be born, and who is allowed to live, has something diabolic in it. This is something bioethics can learn from the angels.

## **The meaningful cosmos**

I have suggested that ethics can learn at least three things from the angels:

first, that human beings are parts of creation, not above it;

second, that not only what distinguishes us from other animals, but also what we have in common with other animals is essential to us;

and third that wickedness is not confined to the overemotional and under-intellectual.

These lessons can be learned by someone who does not believe in angels, but they are made easier for us if we think about the angels. Whether or not they exist as they were once believed to exist, in a 'literal' way, thinking about the angels is still useful for us.

Finally though I want to ask the question head on of whether there could be angels, actual angels. Whether we have other spiritual companions on our journey, or whether we are indeed alone.

A typical modern reaction is to say that there could not be angels, that the existence of such creatures is simply absurd. I think it was Bultman who said that no-one can switch on a light bulb and yet at the same time believe in angels. There is no logic connection here, after all no one thinks that light bulbs are powered by angels. What lies behind this spontaneous modern reaction is a certain worldview, a worldview in which the world is the sum of facts, and facts are provided by the natural sciences, and the only realities are physical causes.

The idea that it is impossible that angels exist is based on the prejudice that the only things that exist are those things described clearly and explicitly within the language of the natural sciences. However, if this were true then we would not only lose the angels and the Almighty, but human freedom would be an illusion, justice and injustice would be meaningless concepts and friendship could never refer to more than a relationship that was pleasant or useful or both. So many of the realities that we recognise and value in human life simply cannot be expressed in the language of the physical sciences.

I do not think you can prove from first principles the existence of angels. I have met a number of people who say they have sensed the presence of angels, or have been helped by an angel or have encountered (seen, heard, been touched by) an angel. Some or all of these people may be mistaken. I do not judge. What I do think is that a worldview that excludes as impossible or ridiculous the presence of unseen spiritual companions is a worldview that will also exclude much of what it is valuable in human life. If we are to take human beings seriously and as belonging in this world, we must have a sense of a world in which there are spiritual realities. There can be goodness and truth. There can be both meaning and mystery. A worldview which has room for the human spirit will always leave the door ajar for the angels to slip in. Conversely, if we maintain a worldview that leaves room for the angels then we will have one that also leaves room for the fullest meaning of human life.

In the contemporary preaching and catechesis of the Church we can sometimes be embarrassed about the angels. It can seem too 'pre-Vatican II' or out of touch with the modern world. However, while Christianity has much less influence on modern culture than it used to have, angels are more popular than ever: in art and film, in literature, in

post-Christian spirituality. People inside and outside the Church continue to experience angels.<sup>8</sup> Rather than be embarrassed about angels as childish remnant of old fashioned religion, we should see the opportunities they offer to speak to others, both to the faithful and to those outside the Church, of a meaning and a mystery in the world. There is a music of the spheres, a harmony of the cosmos and a meaning in human life and ethics. We can discern this more easily if we allow ourselves to be guided by the angels.

**This is the text, slightly amended for publication, of the inaugural lecture of David Albert Jones as professor of Bioethics at St Mary's University College, Strawberry Hill, Twickenham. He is currently writing a *Very Short Introduction to Angels*.**

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<sup>1</sup> Human Fertilisation and Embryology (Research Purposes) Regulations 2001; Human Reproductive Cloning Act 2001; House of Lords Select Committee of Stem Cell Research Report 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Jones, D.A. 'Portrait of a Catholic philosopher' *Pastoral Review* Vol. 2 No. 3 (May/June 2006): 51-55.

<sup>3</sup> A little lower *by nature*, for *by grace* human beings are made coheirs with Christ and can be equal or even over the angels (Heb. 1.5-14).

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Aquinas *Summa Theologiae* Ia Q.47 art.2

<sup>5</sup> Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill 4.2, 4A (10).

<sup>66</sup> *Wings of Desire* (English Title) directed by Wim Wenders (1988).

<sup>7</sup> See Augustine *City of God* XI.6, XIV.13, who in both cases quotes Ecclus. 10.13, 'pride is the start of every kind of sin'.

<sup>8</sup> Heathcote-James, E., *Seeing Angels* (London: John Blackie, 2002).