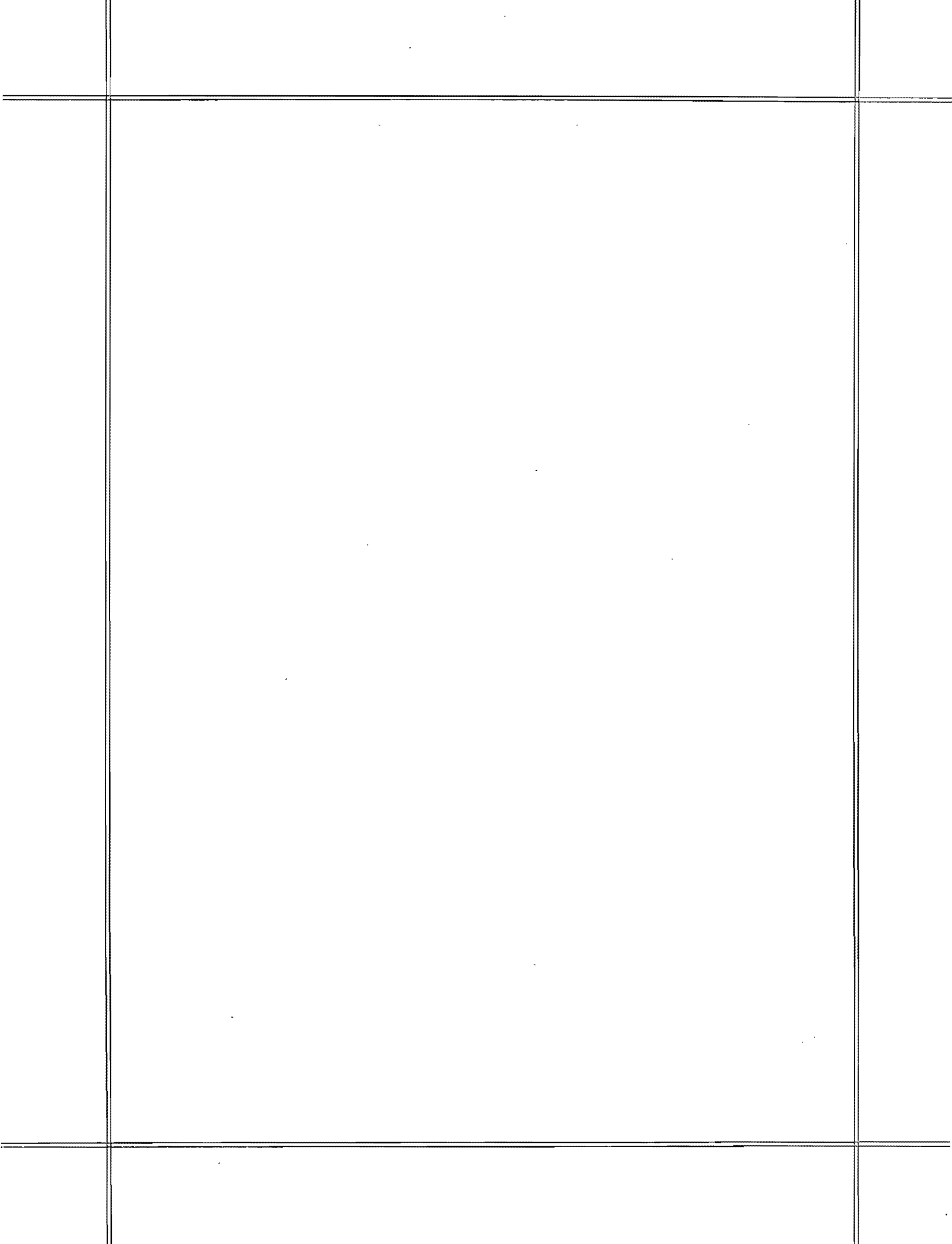


The Angels and Angelic Sin
Some Aspects of the Teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas
As Found in the Summa Theologica

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this research paper is to come to an understanding of St. Thomas' teaching on angels and angelic sin. In order to have an understanding, no matter how limited, of angelic sin there must first be presented some basic principles on angels in general. That is what this paper will do. It will present some of St. Thomas' teachings on angels as found in his work the Summa Theologica.

I shall touch upon, although briefly, the key questions in the Summa that pertain to the angels. I shall attempt to explain the angelic nature by using Thomas' work and other philosophical resources. I shall then investigate question 63 that deals with angelic sin. I shall try to explain what is meant by St. Thomas' statement that the angel, Lucifer, sinned by failing to consider what he should have considered. It is my hope that the reader will come to a better understanding of both angels and angelic sin.

In the world today there is a problem in regard to the angels. Many people doubt their existence and some of them are in the Church. There are even some who view that belief in the angels is something out dated, belonging, as it were, to the Medieval mind set. I think the reason for this is obvious.

The scientific view has influenced us greatly. We accept the saying I believe only what I can see. However, as people of faith, we believe many things which cannot be proved through

science. One of these is of course the existence of angels. Yet I fail to see why some believe in the facts about our faith but question this one, or at least don't mention it, as though the world will find the message of our faith more acceptable.

I think we should try to learn what it is the Scripture and the Church teaches us about angels. We should then accept the teachings and not be surprised if they concern facts that are beyond scientific proof. It should be seen as revelation and we should never be embarrassed by that fact.

The existence of angels has always been held and taught by the Catholic Church. They are contained in Scripture and in the writings of the Church Fathers. The Councils of the Church have made statements, although short and infrequent, concerning their existence. One of these chief declarations was made by the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) which stated that there is but one God who created all that is visible and invisible.¹ He created both the spiritual and corporeal creatures, and man who is composed of both body and spirit.²

St. Thomas Aquinas accepted the existence of angels on faith, that is, he believed their existence was a revelation of God both in Scripture and in the teaching of the Church. However, St. Thomas wanted to see what it is we can know about these truths through human reason. The first question which he addressed then, in regard to the angels, is whether human reason can posit a proof for their existence.

Aquinas believed, as we believe, that God is the creator of all things, the spiritual plus the corporeal, and both in man. Angels then, if they existed, would be part of that created order. According to the Angelic Doctor the created order cannot be restricted to only the material universe, that is, what our senses tell us exists. There is something more in the order of things of God's creation. As we can see in this world

different grades of being from non-living things, to plants, animals, and finally man. For Thomas, since man is made up of body and spirit, it is plausible that God could create a non-material spiritual being. In other words, the concept of angel does not imply a contradiction in the order of things.³

Human reason cannot conclusively prove that angels exist. Human reason can, however, lead to the probability of angelic existence. St. Thomas believed that there are proofs which can lead to their possibility in the order of creation. He has posited such proofs for the existence of separated substances in his Summa Theologica but especially in his work De Spiritualibus Creaturis. Since we are concerned directly with the Summa, I shall explain his proof that is contained in question 50 of that work.⁴

St. Thomas begins his argument by stating that in creation God intends to communicate his goodness. The argument rests on the relationship between cause and effect. An effect resembles its cause to the degree that it contains that element of the cause which was involved in the causing. God causes things by means of his intellect and will. Therefore, in order for the universe to be complete there needs to be intellectual creatures. St. Thomas goes on to say that since intellect is not an act of a body it follows that there must be some incorporeal creatures, that is, creatures without a body.⁵

To understand this argument we need to see how the angels reflect God in a more perfect way than we do. God, in creating the universe wanted to communicate his goodness and perfection.

Therefore, things that exist mirror God's existence and perfection, that is, living things give us a slight view of that which is in God completely. In regards to God's intellectual activity there is no more perfect image of it than in the angels, intellectual substances who are separate from the material world.⁶

The question that follows from the proof that angels exist is when did they come into being? Aquinas held that they were created along with the physical universe. The Angelic Doctor knew that this belief could not be proved. The reason being that since God existed from eternity it is possible that he could have created the order of the universe from eternity. Thomas believed, on faith, that the universe was not created from eternity.⁷

The next question to be considered is what kind of a being is an angel? What is its nature? The nature of an angel is spirit. By spirit is meant a subsistent intelligent being that is in no way composed of matter. An angel is a being that is composed of only intellect and will, in other words, a pure spirit. He cannot be experienced as a tangible thing in the physical world.⁸ St. Thomas says that an angel is the closest resemblance to God in all creation. Reflecting, as he says, "God's majesty, beauty, and holiness."⁹

Aquinas believed that to understand the nature of anything is to determine the manner in which it acts. Let us apply this principle to the angels. An angel has understanding, and this act is only possible in a spiritual being because it is an immaterial action. Man can also perform this immaterial action

because he is also spiritual but it is united to the body to form the human nature.¹⁰

To say that angels are pure spirits and resemble God more perfectly than man does not mean that they are unlimited and are without potentiality. For a created being to be without potentiality would mean that its existence and essence are the same, that their existence depends on their nature. This is not possible for any created being, and it is found only in God. An angel has received his essence and existence from God, and is therefore, a limited being.¹¹ Briefly, an angel is a pure spirit, which is not composed of matter but of essence and existence, of act and potentiality. These conclusions of St. Thomas have become the common doctrine of Angelic nature.¹²

Connected to the nature of an angel is its knowledge, which has been alluded to in saying that it is an intellectual creature. The question which Aquinas addresses in regard to the angelic knowledge asks whether that knowledge is identical to the angels' substance, existence, or essence. To all three his reply is in the negative and he relates his answer to the order of all creation.¹³

For Thomas, angelic intellect, like our own, is a power, and angelic knowledge is an act of that power. An angels' intellect and knowledge are not his substance nor existence. The act of the angel understanding does not cause the angel to be but rather presupposes he exists. If his intellect and the act of knowledge were the same as his substance he would be God. In God essence, existence, intellect, and act are all equal, for God is pure act.

In other words, the angelic intellect and its act are accidents in regard to the angelic substance.¹⁴

The angelic understanding is completely intellectual. The angel, being a subsistent intellect, has no body and therefore can never have knowledge from sensations. Man comes to know things through the use of his senses. An angel, being a pure intellect, knows only intellectually.¹⁵

How the angels receive their knowledge is the next question to investigate. We gain knowledge and ideas from things outside ourselves, that is, all our knowledge begins with our senses, which impresses information on our passive intellect. We then use our active intellect to produce immaterial ideas of things from the information in our passive intellect. We come to know what it is we perceive. The angels, having no body, need not depend on material things for their knowledge. From the beginning of their existence God infused into them all the ideas of all the created order. Angelic knowledge then is innate, and this is part of their nature. Since God is the source of their knowledge anything they know, they know perfectly. They are in regard to their knowledge without error.¹⁶

A question which follows from these considerations is whether there is any potentiality in an angel? It has already been stated that there is no potency in their knowledge; but, Aquinas states that potency is a necessity for a created being. Is there a contradiction? His answer is no. In regard to possession of the knowledge of a particular thing or idea the angel is always in act. In other words, he always possesses

the knowledge. An angel is in potentiality in regard to the actual consideration of a thing or idea. The angel cannot know all things at once, but, as it were, only one thing at a time. When an angel considers a particular thing or idea he knows it perfectly and instantaneously through his innate ideas. He is also free to consider anything at any time. For example, say my guardian angel chooses to consider the idea man, in an instant he will know all that is contained in that idea through his innate knowledge. The angel then is actual and potential, but not in the same way that man is.¹⁷

Now in regard to knowledge, what can an angel know? As stated above, an angel knows, through his innate ideas, all the things contained in the created order. Since he is in the created order he knows himself and all other angels. He knows other angels by the ideas given to him by God at his creation. An angel knows God by the fact that he is a created being and the image of a greater being. The angel does not know the essence of God at the time of his creation, but knows Him through his own limited substance.¹⁸

An important point needs to be made here on angelic knowledge. An angels' knowledge is both natural and supernatural. The natural knowledge is that which was infused by God at the time of the angels' creation. Supernatural knowledge is the knowledge that is revealed to the angels by God, which is not known through their innate ideas. This knowledge was given only to the angels who did not sin. It is the complete knowledge of God in the beatific vision. More will be said about this when

dealing with the actual sin of the angel.¹⁹

Closely connected to angelic knowledge is the power of free will. St. Thomas believed that free will was a perfection in an intellectual being. Now man possesses free will and since he is lower on the scale of intellectual creatures than angels would also possess this perfection because their intelligence is greater. Free will then, or the ability to will or not to will a particular thing or action, is an attribute of all spiritual creatures. The argument that proves this attribute of intellectual creatures is found in question 59 of the Summa.²⁰

Aquinas begins this argument for free will in angels by stating that all things originate from the divine will. Since all things originate from God they will be directed toward goodness by their very nature. This natural tendency to good is expressed in different ways, and is called appetite. The things that have no knowledge, such as plants and inanimate objects, this inclination is called the natural appetite. Living things, such as irrational creatures, are directed toward the good by their senses and instinct, and this is called the sensitive appetite. Angels, however, along with man, are of a higher intellectual capability and are attracted to something not simply by sensation (man only) but because the good is seen as good in itself. This tendency Thomas calls will. Will then is the intellectual knowledge by which man, and the angels, know the universal nature of goodness as something to be desired.²¹ The will is free because the creature, angel or man, has the ability to choose between two alternatives as being good. The Saint

concludes by saying that wherever intellect is found there also is free will.²²

After the study of angelic free will is the study of angelic will in action. For Aquinas this means considering love, which is at the source of all appetite. Love is an affinity toward the desired object or end and is the primary mover of the will. This movement toward the good can be of two kinds: natural love and the love of choice. Natural love is that which a being possesses by its very nature. In other words, the angels naturally love themselves because they know themselves completely. The angels also naturally love God because he is the source of their being and the ultimate good. Love of choice is a being loving something because it brings him happiness. That is, a being will freely love something if it leads to its happiness.²³

Following these considerations on angels from the Angelic Doctor we can now look into how some angels sinned or fell from favor with God. At first it does not seem possible that any angel could sin. As we have seen, angels have perfect innate knowledge of material things. They have no body and are therefore unaffected by passions of the flesh. Yet that some of them sinned is divine revelation, both in Scripture and in the teaching of the Church. St. Thomas attempts to understand angelic sin in question 63 of his Summa Theologica.

The first question that the Angelic Doctor addresses on the sin of the angels is whether or not there can be moral evil in angels? He begins by stating that any creature that has intelligence, angels and man, can by their very nature, commit a

wrong act. If a creature does not act wrongly, that is, without fault, then it is due to a gift of grace.²⁴ The nature of angels does not necessarily mean correct actions but it does require correct knowledge.²⁵

The beginning of St. Thomas' explanation on angelic sin is already in need of clarification. It raises a question, which has produced different opinions, as to whether or not the angels were capable of sinning in the state of pure nature.²⁶ There are a few points that need to be considered before continuing on to present the problem. The first has already been mentioned in the area of angelic knowledge, namely, that there is, in an angel, natural and supernatural knowledge. Here we consider what is meant by natural and supernatural states.

The angelic natural state, or the state of pure angelic nature, is the state in which the angels were created by God. That is, the angels were created with intellect and will with full possession of perfect natural knowledge through their innate ideas. Through the goodness of God, beings exist, however, through His goodness they are called to a higher state of being, namely, beholding the divine essence. The angels then were not created in the presence of God, for if they had been there would not have been any fallen angels.²⁷ St. Thomas held that if any intellectual being sees God as He is that created will could never turn away from the divine presence because in God the will finds complete happiness. It is impossible for any created being to will or do anything except for attaining some good, and if a being sees the ultimate good it cannot turn away.

Considering an intellectual being in its nature, that is, being a creature, that being cannot attain the beatific vision through its own power. In other words, natural means cannot achieve a supernatural end, and that end is achieved only through the grace of God that is bestowed on angels and men.²⁸

It seems that by saying that grace is what raises a creature above its own nature in order to behold the divine essence, and that each creature is given this grace, means that eventually all will see God as He is. This of course is not the case. To behold God face to face, whether an angel or man, is a gift given to creatures by God, but it also requires an act on the creatures part. The gift is given so that angels and men can gain the divine presence by an act of their own power. They can only gain it on their own power through grace. So it is seen then that there involves a choice to either act on that grace or reject it in some way.²⁹ As St. Thomas states in question 63 of the Summa: "To turn to God as the source of a supernatural happiness, this comes of a love recieved as a grace and such love could be rejected, sinfully."³⁰

The angels were created in their nature but also with the gift of grace which is separte from their nature. But when was this grace given to the angels? Opinions differed at the time of Aquinas. The Angelic Doctor held that at the very instant of their creation God bestowed on them the grace needed to merit supernatural happiness. This is now the generally accepted position. The view that the angels were created without grace was the position that was more commonly held during the 13th

Century.³¹

Returning to the question of whether the angels could sin in their purely natural state, we find differing opinions. Some commentators on Aquinas hold that the angels by being created can sin. This position is supported by the fact that St. Thomas holds that only God is completely impeccable and his creatures peccable. Others hold that angels, in their pure natural state, cannot sin. This view is supported by the fact that the angels are of a spiritual nature that contains perfect knowledge of all natural things. Due to this the angel cannot commit error while acting in its natural state. However, both positions accept that sin can occur in angels with reference to the supernatural order.³²

It is clear that with the differing views Aquinas did not explicitly discuss the question; but, the answer may be found in a careful reading of his texts. I will not pursue this question in this limited presentation, but will only point out that some commentators on Aquinas have taken up this question and view it as an important one for understanding the nature of free will and St. Thomas' teaching on the impeccability of God. The distinction between the natural and supernatural states can be seen in this problem. For understanding, or attempting to understand, angelic sin in this presentation I will look only at what the fact was; that the angels were created with grace and destined for the beatific vision. The angels could sin, but as St. Thomas himself was aware, that potentiality was limited.³³

The angels could commit a wrong act against their supernatural end and as St. Thomas states in question 63, a wrong act is one which deviates from the correct way a given action ought to take. An action that cannot go wrong is an action that is performed by an agent whose power to act is the same as the rule which should guide the action. An example that is similar to the one the Angelic Doctor uses concerns a painter. If the hand of the painter is the rule by which he directs the strokes of a brush than the painter cannot but paint correctly. He will always produce a masterpiece, but we all know that this is not the case. The rule that determines whether a painting is a great work is other than the hand of the painter. For Aquinas God is both the power to act and the rule on how the divine act is to be done. So God's will is right absolutely. Created wills on the other hand, act rightly in so far as their wills correspond to the divine perfect will. If an angel's will does not follow the divine will, especially in the way to gain the beatific vision, then an angel can act wrongly, he can commit sin.³⁴

Sin, as an act of free choice, can occur in two ways according to St. Thomas. The first being that something evil is chosen. An evil cannot be chosen if it is known as such. I may be aware of the fact that the object I choose is evil but in a particular situation I judge it to be a good for myself. For example, a woman chooses to have an abortion in order to keep her job. This kind of choice, according to Thomas, presupposes some error or ignorance, because what is chosen is evil in itself but it is considered as a good in a particular situation.

Sin in this way cannot be applied to the angels due to the perfection of their knowledge. An angel can never mistake an evil for a good.³⁵

Another way sin can occur is the choosing of something in itself, but without regarding the rule or measure as to how it should be acquired. The sin, or fault, occurs not in the particular end or thing chosen, but in the choosing itself. The example the Angelic Doctor gives is one of a man who decides to pray which is an act that is good in itself, but without regard to the rules of the Church concerning prayer. For Thomas sins of this kind do not necessarily presuppose ignorance, but it does require that one not consider what he should consider. This is how the angelic sin occurred. The angel, Lucifer, pursued a good without regard for the rule of the divine will.³⁶

What is meant by this lack of consideration by the fallen angel, and all others who followed him? There does seem to be some kind of contradiction by stating that the angels are intellectually perfect yet fail to consider what they should consider. We do know what this cannot mean. It cannot mean that Satan did not know what it was he was doing or that he was unaware of the implications of his actions. The sin involved the supernatural state, and so we should turn our focus on this fact.³⁷

The angels had contact with the supernatural, that is, they possessed grace that was given to them by God, and they knew that God was their ultimate end. This end they knew only by faith, as we do, yet they knew it to a greater degree than we can ever know it. Still the beatific vision was not yet theirs to see. It is

here that the knowledge of knowing all things, in the natural state, was of little help to the angels. The essence of God was removed from their sight, and until they beheld Him as He is there existed the possibility of inconsideration. In other words, the ultimate end of the angels was known to them, but it was not seen, and could not be seen until they beheld God. The angels were then free to order their actions to that end.³⁸ As Montano states in his dissertation:

"In relation to the sin of the angels inconsideration means only that any intellectual defect took place in relation to a higher rule than reason and that the full responsibility for the sin rests entirely with the free will of the sinner. And still there is nothing that would prevent an error in judgment for the angels—just as a human chooses an evil as a good can be portrayed as failing to consider the rule of reason."³⁹

I do not think that the concept of the sin of the angel is completely clouded. It is easy to see how we can accept angelic sin through the Thomistic view of inconsideration as applied to us. In sinning we often decide to choose something we know we should not do. If we were to properly and thoroughly reflect on the sin, assuming we have the knowledge, we may not commit the sin. So we choose not to reflect on the act we are about to perform because we desire it and do not want to pull away from it because it makes us 'happy.' So we perform the act and thus sin, perhaps morally if it is serious matter.

This does not completely explain angelic sin because we are

are composed of body and spirit. Often are faults are due to the passions as a result of the body, and a limited intellect. The angels have neither one of these in their nature. The angel however chooses to pursue a good, for example, the love of his own perfection. This is a good in itself, but the sin can occur when the angel decides to love that good in a disordered manner. There is an error for him in the practical judgment of not considering what he should consider, the love of himself in the proper measure.⁴⁰

Since sin occurred in the angel, then, what was it? This is the next question St. Thomas answers, and the last one we shall address. St. Thomas held that the sin of the angel was pride, the free act of not submitting to one's superior where submission is due. The Angelic Doctor goes on to say that the angel sinned by desiring to be as God. This can be taken in two ways, one way meaning equality, and the other likeness.⁴¹

The fallen angel could not have desired to be equal to God as the Creator. The angel knew that he was created and was contingent on God as the source of his own existence. So the angel knew his essence could never equal his existence, because this is true only of God. Therefore, he would not, nor could he, seek to be like God in that way. He could however seek to be like God in the way his nature allowed; but, he would be guilty of sin if he aspired to be like God through his own power. This is the way the devil desired to be as God. Lucifer placed his ultimate happiness in the likeness of God but wanted to possess this by means of his own power and not with the help of divine

CONCLUSION

In this research paper I have tried to explain some of the central points in St. Thomas' teaching on the angels. I have summarized and explained, through use of Thomas' text and other commentator's works on Aquinas, some key concepts into his teaching on angelic existence, nature, knowledge, and sin.

Thomas' explanation on angelic sin is complicated and still in need of clarification, but that angels exist and have a nature has been shown within this paper. St. Thomas thought that his search for the meaning of what an angel is was successful. He believed that he had achieved a limited understanding, through human reason, the doctrine on angels and angelic sin, as found in Scripture and in the teaching of the Church. In this paper I hope we have achieved just a small portion of St. Thomas' understanding of these revealed truths.

There were three points which Thomas explained in his treatise on the angels. The first, that an angel did sin, second his sin was a perversion of his nature which was created for good, and thirdly that the sin alienated him from God for all eternity. There were a large number of question regarding these points that I omitted from this presentation because they were not directly needed for a limited understanding of the angelic sin. With the last part of this paper the issue of inconsideration was adressed and it was here that the mystery of angelic sin can be understood, but with always more clarification needed since we are dealing with mystery.

It is by studying angels, especially angelic sin, that we can better understand ourselves. We can better understand how we can fall into sin if we reflect on the sin of a pure spiritual being. Hopefully this kind of reflection will lead us to choose that which the Holy Angels chose, to give, as it is said in the latin, Deo omnis gloria!

Endnotes

¹Some have held that such statements by the Church were not intended to make pronouncements about the angels but about God as the Creator of all things. For an explanation of this problem see Summa Theologica Volume 9 edited by Kenelm Foster page 309.

²St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica Ed. Kenelm Foster. (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1968), p. 303.

³Simon A. Blackmore, The Angel World (Cleveland: John W. Winterich, 1926), pp. 13-14.

⁴James Collins, The Thomistic Philosophy of the Angels Diss. (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1947), p. 27.

⁵Aquinas, p. 7.

⁶Walter Farrel, A Companion to the Summa (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1941), p. 195.

⁷Ibid., p. 198.

⁸This seems to contradict Scripture, since it is often found that the angels have appeared to men. St. Thomas worked out a point that states angels can be perceived by men. The angel if he so chooses, can condense the air around a particular area and take on the form of a human shape. This is done through his divine power. (Q. 51. Summa Theologica)

⁹Valentine Long, The Angels in Religion and Art (New Jersey: St. Anthony Guild Press, 1970), p. 26.

¹⁰Francis Cunningham, Thomas C. Donlan, William B. Murphy, and John S. Reidy, God and His Creation (Dubuque: The Priory Press, 1957), p. 362.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Paschal P. Parente, Beyond Space (New York: St. Paul Publications, 1961), pp. 24.

¹³A full explanation to these questions are contained in Question 54 of the Summa Theologica.

¹⁴Cunningham, p. 366.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Farrel, p. 226.

¹⁷Cunningham, p. 370.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 368.

¹⁹Blackmore, p. 43.

²⁰Ibid., p. 55.

²¹Aquinas, p. 171.

²²Ibid., pp. 178-179.

²³Ibid., p. 372.

²⁴Grace is the effect of God's love in the rational creature. The creature, through grace, has the possibility of sharing in divine life. (Aquinas, Ed. Foster, p. 224)

²⁵Ibid., p. 249.

²⁶Jacques Maritain, The Sin of the Angel (Maryland: The Newman Press, 1959), p. vi.

²⁷The period of time between the angels' existence and the fall of some of the angels is known as the probation. This term means trial or test. It was the period of time when the angels were given the choice of choosing to act on the grace that was given to them by God. (Blackmore, p. 115)

²⁸Cunningham, p. 374.

²⁹Ibid., p. 375.

³⁰Aquinas, p. 251.

³¹Edward J. Montano, The Sin of the Angels. Diss. (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1955), pp. 85-87.

³²An in depth study of these differing opinions can be found in Montano and Maritain. Marieb's article gives a fine explanation of the differing opinions and attempts to prove that angels are impeccable in regard to their natural state.

³³Maritain, p. vi.

³⁴Aquinas, p. 249.

³⁵Ibid., p. 251.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Montano, p. 180.

³⁸Ibid., p. 185.

³⁹Ibid., p. 189.

⁴⁰Maritain, pp. 9-14.

⁴¹Aquinas, p. 255.

⁴²Ibid., pp. 257-259.

⁴³Montano, pp. 336-337.

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