

# Awareness of Angels

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Angelology may be unfashionable, but in recent years it has re-emerged in America, where it flourishes under a different name as the 'Possible Worlds' school of philosophy whose principal concern is with problems of 'transworld identity'. In particular, its subtlest and most uncompromising proponent, David Lewis, has developed what he calls 'Counterpart Theory'.<sup>1</sup> This is a theory of modal quantification in which a close resemblance relation is substituted for strict identity, and it would seem to be a theory well-suited to provide a logical underpinning for what has been traditionally said of angels in their role as guardians. I have no reason to suppose that David Lewis would approve of the use to which I am about to put his Counterpart theory, and what I have to say should be regarded as no more than a modest footnote to the debate now being conducted in the stratosphere of symbolic logic with all the attendant ingenuity and zeal that once characterised scholastic disputations on the subject of angels.

For example, Aquinas discusses whether 'morning knowledge' and 'evening knowledge' are the same for angels. He explains this Augustinian distinction as follows: 'Their knowledge of the primordial being of things is called *morning knowledge*; and this is according as things exist in the Word. But their knowledge of the very thing created, as it stands in its own nature, is termed *evening knowledge*, because the being of things flows from the Word as from a kind of primordial principle, and this flow is terminated in the being which they have in themselves.' Angels have both kinds of knowledge, Aquinas says, because 'they refer their knowledge of creatures back to the praise of God, in whom, as in their principle, they know all things.' Or again, 'by beholding the Word they know not merely that being which things have in the Word, but that being which they have in themselves.'<sup>2</sup> Since the existence of things in their proper nature is the result of God's willing to create them, and their being conceived in the mind of God is the explanation of God's so willing, there is an *a priori* knowledge of God and an *a posteriori* knowledge between which it is the office of angelic intellects to mediate. They have a watershed knowledge, as it were, in

which knowledge of the flow of being from God is at the same time knowledge of that flow as it terminates in creatures.

For the middle ages it is axiomatic that angelic nature stands midway between the divine and the corporeal, and that angels are distanced from humans to the extent that humans are distanced from the other animals. Whereas we manipulate symbols in order to communicate our thoughts to one another, angels communicate their thoughts directly, so that they are by nature in what we would describe as telepathic communication with one another. In short, they intuit the truth immediately. But what reason would we have for supposing that such an order of being existed? One answer given by some philosophers of the possible worlds school is that if such an order of being is conceivable, and therefore possible, it must exist as actual in a parallel world. Possible worlds and actual worlds would then be convertible within the context of a *universe* which formed the object of divine conceptual activity. How is so extravagant a claim to be understood? Perhaps it is best understood in the context of such considerations as the following: the fossil-record of micro-organisms tells us how the world *might have been* but we can only imagine such a world as a system of alternative possibilities — that is, as another world, in relation to which we adopt, *ipso facto*, a godlike posture. To be sure, a condition of our imagining anything is that we imagine it as existing, while the difference between actual existence and possible existence remains unaffected by our doing so. But if there were *no* difference between them, there would be no difference between Creator and creature, since what God imagines, God, by definition, creates.

If we suppose that the existence of anything is dependent on God's knowing it, rather than that God's knowing it is dependent on its existence<sup>3</sup> (as our knowing is dependent), then the claim that what is possible in this world is actual in a parallel world presupposes the absolute priority of God's knowing, for how would such a world be located, logically, if not as existing in the mind/memory of a God who fills the whole of logical space? If we are not to have an infinite regress of possible worlds, all of which bear a resemblance to the actual world which starts the series, we must have an Omega-point, or entelechy, which pulls the whole series together. This would be the singularity at which the distinction between what is possible and what is actual breaks down. Pushed to its logical limits, the claim that what is possible in this world is actual in a parallel world becomes an ontological claim, but such a claim is only admissible in the case of divine creativity.

What I am suggesting is that the speculations of possible world philosophers draw upon an unacknowledged theology, and that this

theology, as it now stands, though not as it once stood, is ambiguous on a point about which there should be no confusion, if it is to speak of angels. The confusion in question is between '*this* world' which is 'actual' in the temporal order, and '*that* world' which is 'actual' in the eternal order, and it arises because both worlds are the objects of God's actualising knowledge. According to Jonathan Kvanvig,<sup>4</sup> 'The confusion is that it is simply not possible that there is no actual world, though it is possible that the actual world is one in which God has not (yet) created' this world.<sup>5</sup> Kvanvig argues thus on the grounds that 'it is simply not possible that there fails to be some true propositions' <sup>5</sup> – namely (I would add) those that have to do with an eternal existence 'before the foundation of the world'. Although we can have no natural knowledge of such a world, we can have intimations of its existence, and the doctrine of angels provides a mythological framework within which the possibility of angelic worship or apostasy can at least be entertained. And it can be entertained without our falling into incoherence because the myth of an angelic fall is realised temporally in human history, when that history is treated as evidence of the consequences of a human fall, however mythological the biblical account of its causes may be. So far from an 'is' never implying an 'ought', where the human condition is concerned an 'is' always implies an 'ought'.

What is basically at issue in the possible worlds debate is the status of counterfactual conditionals. Just as a false proposition states what *would be* the case, *if* it were true, so what makes a counterfactual conditional true is the correspondence it has with what is the case in a world that is other than this world. To take the simplest of examples: forewarned in a dream that if he catches the 12.40 train, he will not survive the crash which the dream predicts, S takes the warning seriously, misses the train, and lives to tell the tale of his alleged escape. In the actual world, S is still alive, but, counterfactually, there is another system of possibilities in which S catches the train and, as a result, is no longer alive. There is, of course, a contradiction between S being still alive, and S being no longer alive, and it is not a contradiction that can be resolved by appeal to the paradox of Schrödinger's celebrated cat (whose wave-function is described as the superposition of two quantum states — that of being alive and that of being dead), for the identity of S is not constituted by the particles of which his body is composed but by the counterpart which is his essence. The contradiction can, then, be resolved, if S, who is no longer alive *in this world*, is still alive *in another world*, and this I take to be the resolution which David Lewis's Counterpart Theory offers.

If what makes 'you today' the same 'you' as 'you tomorrow' also

makes 'you alive' the same 'you' as 'you no longer alive', the required other-world correspondence is supplied by the supposition that, as David Lewis says, 'Your counterparts are *you* in other worlds' (p. 112) and that the relation between your counterpart and you is like that between 'you today' and 'you tomorrow'. Between 'you today' and 'you tomorrow' there is a continuant 'you', which we may call your 'essence', or, in the case of 'you alive' and 'you no longer alive' your 'soul'. Now in David Lewis's theory, essence and counterpart are interdefinable (p. 121); that is to say, a counterpart of something is anything having the attribute which is its essence, but, he adds, this is not to say that the attribute is the counterpart's essence (p. 121). Since we start with the postulate that the actual world (this world) has occupants (human beings) who have transworld counterparts, the central question to be addressed is 'What constitutes their essence?' David Lewis says, 'All your counterparts are probably human: if so, you are essentially human. All your counterparts are even more probably corporeal: if so, you are essentially corporeal' (p. 120). But this explanatory gloss can only generate confusion, because, although 'corporeal' may be a defining characteristic of the *genus*, animal, it is not a defining characteristic of the *species*, human.

So I propose, without further ado, to substitute 'embodied soul' for 'corporeal' and 'ensouled body' for 'counterpart'. Although these terms have 'corporeality' in common, the relation of soul to body in the counterpart case is the reverse of the soul-body relation in the case of *this-world* occupants. But this reversal need not worry the Counterpart-theorist, since, as we have seen, although the essential attribute of the human is its counterpart, it does not follow, according to David Lewis, that the essential attribute of the counterpart is the essential attribute of the human being whose counterpart it is. To make this clear, we need only spell out Counterpart-theory in terms of the doctrine that all embodied souls have transworld counterparts and that these counterparts *are* what embodied souls *become* — viz. ensouled bodies.

This choice of terms does not imply a soul-body dualism, for both terms — embodied soul and ensouled body — denote the whole person, body and soul; it implies only a reversal of the first term's defining relation. Since the body is here understood to be the instrument of the soul appropriate to the environment in which both are placed, a heavenly environment will have the effect of reversing the defining relation that is appropriate to an earthly environment. That is to say, I take 'ensouled bodies' to be the equivalent of St Paul's 'spiritual bodies', and since the opposite of 'spiritual bodies' would be 'carnal spirits', I would have to say that, whereas guardian angels stood in

*opposition* to embodied souls, 'carnal spirits' stood in *opposition* to them.

Now there are, among possible-world philosophers, some (following Leibniz) who see possible worlds as grounded in divine conceptual activity, whilst for others they are grounded in human conceptual activity. Why these two views should be regarded as mutually exclusive is by no means clear, but let us suppose that divine conceptual activity encompasses all possible worlds. Where does this supposition take us? Generically, angels, as products of divine conceptual activity, would be individuated as the different forms taken by the possible worlds so denominated, and the *sum* of all possible worlds would be the *universe* as it actually is in the mind of God: i.e. the universe in God's mind would encompass all those possibilities for us in this world that are actualities in another world, and the possibilities in question would be ideal or eternal possibilities, such as the possibility of moral betterment, not local or material possibilities. Individually, each angel would be the form of a possible world, one which was intimately related to the actual world of the embodied soul whose counterpart inhabited that possible world. This intimate relation would be 'the guardianship relation'.

The question then arises: how are these possible worlds related to the actual world? If, by substituting 'actuality' for 'Necessity' in David Lewis's account of Relative Modalities (p. 122), we say that actuality and possibility are that pair of relative modalities whose characteristic is just that relation between worlds which is called an 'accessibility relation', then the accessibility relation will be such that *this* world is accessible to *that* world *at all times*, whilst *that* world is accessible to *this* world only intermittently, as on those rare occasions when we are given glimpses of ourselves in our ideal nature.

This construal is given powerful support by Gerard Manley Hopkins in his treatise 'On Personality, Grace, and Free Will', when he writes of how 'It is *into* that possible world that God for the moment moves his creature out of this one, or it is *from* that possible world that he brings his creature into this.'<sup>6</sup> If these movements take place within the limits set by death and birth, the possibility of life-after-death is represented by the possibility of an embodied soul's becoming an ensouled body, and it is to this possibility that the influence of guardian angels is directed. It is a great merit of David Lewis's Counterpart Theory that it allows both for moral growth and for moral decline; it respects the embodied soul's freedom to choose its destiny (by the Ignatian method known to all spiritual directors as 'the discernment of spirits'), but such freedom is, of course, limited, exercised as it is against the background of 'what

something hidden from us chose'.<sup>7</sup> But to recapitulate: your counterparts are not only what you would have been, had things been different, but what you *would be*, irrespective of how things had been. What you cannot do in other worlds, not being present there to do it, you may, according to David Lewis, do vicariously through your counterpart because your counterpart is all that you are not, at any given moment (p. 127). In other words, your counterpart is your ideal self, and your ideal self goes proxy for you and draws you on to become *in that* world what you are not in *this* world, i.e. what your counterpart is; for surely it would be intolerable to suppose that all you are *not*, at the moment of asking, all that you had been, was in the keeping of no power? It would be intolerable, moreover, because, if you did not *know* that you were the same person today that you were yesterday, you would have no sense of your own identity. That this is no merely academic matter is clearly shown in the last chapter of *The Cloud of Unknowing* where its author prays: 'For not what thou art, nor what thou hast been, beholdeth God with his merciful eyes, but what thou wouldest be.'<sup>8</sup>

If that order of being which is called 'angelic' is grounded in divine conceptual activity, angels will be internally related to the mind of God in a way analogous to that in which a symphony, say, is internally related to the mind of its composer. If we think of the angels accordingly — that is, to change the example, as single voices in a divinely orchestrated polyphony — the analogy would point to their existence being an implication of what is meant by divine omnipresence: i.e. God is present everywhere in a way analogous to that in which a composer is present in every note of whatever his musical offering may be. We believe in a God who brings forth harmony at the extreme limits of dissonance<sup>9</sup>. — Resurrection from Crucifixion, Life from Death — and just as the structure of a melody rides on the single note of a moment, so the structure of God's universe rides on the possible world of the angel who communicates God's presence at any given point within it. And if, wherever the Book of Angels is opened, it is always half-way through, at that mid-point the Angel of the Annunciation is the Angel of Christ's presence as Christ is the Angel of God's.

FN Kvanvig writes of the actual world as one 'in which God has not (yet) created anything', and I have taken the liberty of changing the wording because 'created anything' is equivocal inasmuch as it might, or might not, include the creation of angels. If God is defined as the Creator *omnium visibilium et invisibilium*, God is the creator of spirits (angels) as well as of bodies, and of all the permutations which these actualisations allow in the two dimensions of eternity and tune. The actual world will, then, be the world which I happen to inhabit, whether it be this world or another.

- 1 David Lewis, 'Counterpart Theory and Quantified Modal Logic', *Journal of Philosophy* 65 (U.S.A. 1968), reprinted in *The Possible and the Actual*, edited by Michael J. Loux, Cornell University Press, 1979, pp 110-128. All page-references are to this reprint.
- 2 St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Part 1, Q's 50-64; in particular, Q. 58, arts. 6&7.
- 3 St Augustine, *De Trinitate*, XV, 13. ('It is not because things are what they are that God knows them; it is because he knows them that they are what they are.')
- 4 Jonathan Kvanvig, *The Possibility of an All-Knowing God*, Macmillan, 1986. p. 140.
- 5 *ibid.*
- 6 Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'On Personality, Grace, and Free Will', *Sermons and Devotional Writings*, edited Christopher Devlin, S.J., O.U.P. 1959, p. 154.
- 7 Philip Larkin, 'Dockery and Son', *Collected Poems*, Faber, 1988, p. 153.
- 8 *The Cloud of Unknowing*, translated Evelyn Underhill, Watkins. 1956, sixth edition. p. 269.
- 9 St Augustine. *Sol.* 1, i. 2.

## Theology for a World Come of Age: The Meaning of Dietrich Bonhoeffer for Doing Systematic Theology Today

Natalie Knödel

What is bothering me incessantly is the question what Christianity really is, or indeed who Christ really is, for us today. The time when people could be told everything by means of words, whether theological or simply pious, is over, and so is the time of religion in general. We are moving towards a completely religionless time: people as they are now simply cannot be religious any more.<sup>1</sup>

These words from a letter of the German pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer mark one of the turning points in the history of systematic theological thinking in this century.

Hardly any other theologian has provided as strong a challenge to post-war theologians as Bonhoeffer. In this article I want to give an introduction to Bonhoeffer's theology as a whole and his concept of 'religionless Christianity for a world come of age' in particular. Then, in the final section, I want to discuss the relevance of Bonhoeffer for doing systematic theology in the changing theological landscape of today.