

Angels

Peter Kreeft

The Twelve Most Important Things to Know About Angels:

1. They really exist. Not just in our minds, or our myths, or our symbols, or our culture. They are as real as your dog, or your sister, or electricity.
2. They're present, right here, right now, right next to you, reading these words with you.
3. They're not cute, cuddly, comfortable, chummy, or "cool". They are fearsome and formidable. They are huge. They are warriors (2 Kgs 19:35).
4. They are the real "extra-terrestrials", the real "Super-men", the ultimate aliens. Their powers are far beyond those of all fictional creatures (2 Pet 2:11; Rev 16:3,8).
5. They are more brilliant minds than Einstein.
6. They can literally move the heavens and the earth if God permits them (Rev 7:1).
7. There are also evil angels, fallen angels, demons, or devils. These too are not myths. Demon possessions, and exorcisms, are real.
8. Angels are aware of you, even though you can't usually see or hear them. But you can communicate with them. You can talk to them without even speaking.
9. You really do have your very own "guardian angel". Everybody does (Ps 91:11; Mt 18:10).
10. Angels often come disguised. "Do not neglect hospitality, for some have entertained angels unawares"(Heb 13:2) – that's a warning from life's oldest and best instruction manual.
11. We are on a protected part of a great battlefield between angels and devils, extending to eternity (Rev 12:7-17).
12. Angels are sentinels standing at the crossroads where life meets death. They work especially at moments of crisis, at the brink of disaster – for bodies, for souls, and for nations.

Why not believe in God without angels? Who needs angels?

We don't believe in angels just because we need them or because we need faith in them. To believe in something only because you need it or because you need faith is to be confused or dishonest. The only clear and honest reason for believing anything is that it is true, it is there. That's the reason to believe in angels: the same reason to believe in platypuses. We don't need them either, but they're there.

If you have no trouble believing in God and your own soul, what's the problem with angels? God is infinite bodiless spirit, your soul is finite embodied spirit, and angels are finite bodiless spirits.

If the reason you believe in God is because you are a Jew, a Christian, or a Muslim, then you must believe in angels, since all three religions teach the reality of angels.

If you believe the Bible is God's word to man, not man's word about God, then you believe in angels, for the Bible says they are real. If you believe in Jesus, even as a mere human prophet, then you believe in angels, for Jesus assures you they are real (Mt 13:39,41,49; 16:27; 18:10; 22:30; 24:31,36; 25:31,41; 26:53; Mk 8:38; 12:25; 13:27,32; Lk 4:10; 9:26; 12:8,9; 15:10; 16:22; 20:36; Jn 1:51).

Of what are angels made?

Everything in the material universe is made of something: subatomic particles, at least. But not angels. They are not *in* this universe of matter, space, and time, not made of matter. They have no parts; that's why they can never fall apart and die or be destroyed, as we can. They are pure spirits, not any kind of matter or physical energy at all – not light or ectoplasm or auras or anything visible or tangible.

Angels don't belong in this universe. (They're *visitors*.) But you don't totally belong here either. You also have a part of you beyond matter and space and time. That doesn't make you an angel. But your spirit side – your soul, mind, intellect, will, emotions – is *like* an angel. We all have inside us the need to find that mountain in *Close Encounters*. We're just not 100 percent at home here.

What is this “spirit” of which angels are made?

Spirit means essentially two things:

1. The power of thinking – conscious, deliberate, rational understanding. Not sense perception; that's the work of a bodily organ, like the eye.
2. The power of willing and choosing and deliberately loving. Not sensory appetite; that's the work of a bodily function, like hunger.

God and angels are pure spirits. Humans and intelligent extraterrestrials (if there are any) are spirit-body compounds.

Do we become angels after we die?

No. We don't change species. God didn't make a mistake when he made us human. He doesn't rip up his design but perfects it.

We don't become angels any more than we become apes. We don't evolve into angels either, even if we may have evolved from apes, because evolution is only a theory about the origin of biological species. There can be no genetics and no “natural selection”, no “survival of the fittest”, for pure spirits.

Don't take your theology from Hollywood; that's like using the Bible to learn how to run a movie studio.

Why do people think it's stupid to believe in angels?

One reason is a mistake about themselves: the failure to distinguish between (1) sense perception or imagination (which is a kind of inner sensing) and (2) reason,

or intelligence, or understanding. We don't *see* pure spirits, and we can't *imagine* them. That doesn't mean we can't *know* or *understand* them. We can see and imagine the difference between a five-sided figure (a pentagon) and a six-sided figure (a hexagon), and we can also intellectually understand that difference. We cannot, however, sense or imagine the difference between a 105-sided figure and a 106-sided figure. Both *look* to us simply like circles. But we can *understand* the difference and even measure it exactly. So we can understand some things we can't see. We can't see qualities like good and evil either. What color or shape or size is evil? Yet we can understand them. We can imagine our brains, but not our minds, our personalities. But we can know them.

Many who deny angels deny or are unaware of the spiritual half of themselves. Angels are a touchstone of "know thyself". So are animals.

Aren't angels irrelevant today? This is the age of man, isn't it?

Yes, this is the age of man, of self-consciousness, of psychology. And therefore it is crucial to "know thyself" accurately today. The major heresies of our day are not about God but about man. The two most destructive of these heresies – and the two most popular – are angelism, confusing man with an angel by denying his likeness to animals, and animalism, confusing man with an animal by denying his likeness to angels.

Man is the only being that is both angel and animal, both spirit and body. He is the lowest spirit and the highest body, the stupidest angel and the smartest animal, the low point of the hierarchy of minds and the high point of the hierarchy of bodies.

More accurately stated, man is not both angel and animal because he is neither angel nor animal; he is between angels and animals, a unique rung on the cosmic ladder. But whichever way you say it, man must know angels to know himself, just as he must know animals to know himself, for he must know what he is, and he must know what he is not.

Hierarchy and inequality among angels sound unjust and unfair. Is God an elitist?

(1) Gods justice is not equality. Neither is nature's. God the Creator is not equal to any of his creatures, but he is supreme. Among his creatures, spiritual creatures (angels and men) are superior to merely biological creatures. Among spiritual creatures, angels are more intelligent than men. Even within our own species, men are not all equal in intelligence, in quickness, in wisdom, in memory, or in many other things. And, of course, humans are superior to animals. If you doubt this, you'd better stop eating fish or start eating humans. Higher (more intelligent) animals are superior to lower (less intelligent) animals. That's why we prefer dogs to worms as pets. Even biologists rank species in a hierarchical order. The more complex they are, the more conscious they are and the more sophisticated their functions.

(2) The hierarchy of angels over men parallels the hierarchy of men over animals, and the hierarchy within angels parallels the hierarchy within animals. If the arrangement of animals tells us something about the Creator's style and principles and preferences, it's reasonable to expect to find his style and principles and preferences manifested in angels too.

(3) Justice does not mean equality, even among men. It means treating unequals unequally – giving an A to a student who answered 95 out of 100 questions correctly and an F to a student who answered only 45. Many traditional societies, like those of classical Greece and Confucian China, saw justice as essentially an inequality, a harmony among *different* things: organs in the body, members in a family, heavenly bodies in the cosmos, musical notes in a song, classes in the state, faculties in the soul. The President is not necessarily a superior *person* to his military chief of state but his *office* is. Justice demands the chief of staff obey his “superior”, even if the latter has shortcomings.

(4) Resentment against some kind of superiority is one of the seven deadly sins. It is called envy, and it is the only sin that never gave anyone any kind of pleasure at all. In the *Divine Comedy*, Dante discovers that there are many unequal levels even in heaven. He asks Piccarda, who is on heaven's lowest level, whether she is not discontented with her lowly place and whether she longs to move up closer to God, to see more of God and receive more joy. Her answer is that no one in heaven is dissatisfied with his place or envious of anyone else: “From seat to seat throughout this realm, to all the realm is pleasing. [That is, each citizen is pleased with the kingdom as a whole; the whole is present to each individual.] For in his will our hearts have found their peace.”

T. S. Eliot called this the profoundest line in all human literature.

Do demons, or devils, or evil spirits really exist?

You bet your eternal life they do.

Here is a logical argument for the existence of demons:

If angels are persons (selves) they have intellects and wills. If they have wills, they can choose between good and evil. If they can choose between good and evil, they can choose evil. If they choose evil, they become evil. So if there are good spirits, there can be evil spirits.

Philosophical reasoning alone can establish the possibility of demons (evil spirits), just as it can establish the possibility of angels. But just as reason alone cannot prove that God freely chose to create actual angels, it cannot prove that some of these angels freely chose evil. Both God's choice and theirs are free, not necessary.

We know from philosophical reason that demons can exist, but we know from divine revelation (Bible and Church) that demons do exist. A small number of people also know them from experience. Ask any exorcist. (Yes, they really exist too. And not just in Hollywood films.)

We do not know much about demons from revelation. The horns and hoofs, the tights and tails, the grotesque faces and fantastic tales, come from another, merely human, source. Even scriptural imagery is only *imagery*: the devil is said to be “*like* a roaring lion, roaming about seeking someone to devour” (1 Pt 5:8).

But the existence of demons is *de fide*, defined dogma. The Fourth Lateran Council declared that “Satan and the other devils are (1) by nature spirits fell ... (2) created by God, (3) and so originally good, (4) but into sin (5) of their own free will” and that they are (6) “eternally damned”. The new *Catechism* repeats this (391-95).

The Church does not have the authority to alter or subtract from her “deposit of faith” or “sacred tradition” because she is not its author, only its prophet. She interprets and explains it and increasingly develops its inner meaning and outer applications, but she does not edit it or change it, especially not to conform to current secular fashions. By still insisting on the unfashionable belief in evil spirits, the Church is not trying to turn the clock back two hundred years. Her program is to bring us back two thousand years to meet the One who founded her and taught her first apostles, and through them all their successors. She can teach only what she has been taught. And her Lord has taught that there are demons. If he had taught that there are purple space ships, she would be faithfully repeating it now, for she would know that there would in fact *be* purple space ships somewhere.

What can demons do?

1. As objects of thought, they can inspire fear.
2. They can pervert God’s revelations or deceive us with false revelations. Even the devil can appear “as an angel of light” (2 Cor 11:14).
3. They can tempt us through our imagination or feeling.
4. Occasionally they can even move matter supernaturally. This is even rarer than angelic supernatural intervention, but it happens.
5. But demons can possess us only if we choose to invite them in.

What can I do to help fight this spiritual war?

1. Be aware of it. Believe it.
2. Use the weapons God has provided. Scripture calls them “the whole armor of God” and lists them in Ephesians 6:10-18.
3. Pray daily.

Peter Kreeft is a professor of philosophy at Boston College and author of numerous books. This material is excerpted from: Angels (and Demons) — What Do We Really Know About Them? (Ignatius Press, 1995).