



# The Great Ideas: A Lexicon of Western Thought

By Mortimer J. Adler

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**The Great Ideas: A Lexicon of Western Thought** By Mortimer J. Adler

Forty-five years ago, Mortimer Adler sat down at a manual typewriter with a list of authors and a pyramid of books. Beginning with "Angel" and ending with "World," he set out to write 102 essays featuring the ideas that have collectively defined Western thought for more than twenty-five hundred years. The essays, originally published in the *Syntopicon*, were, and remain, the centerpiece of Encyclopaedia Britannica's *Great Books of the Western World*. These essays, never before available except as part of the *Great Books*, are, according to Clifton Fadiman, Adler's finest work.

This comprehensive volume includes pieces on topics such as "War and Peace," "Love," "God," and "Truth" that amply quote the historical sources of these ideas -- from the works of Homer to Freud, from Marcus Aurelius to Virginia Woolf. These essays evoke the sense of a lively debate among the great writers and thinkers of Western civilization. It is almost as if these authors were sitting around a large table face-to-face, differing in their opinions and arguing about issues that are acutely relevant to the present day. Now available in a handsome Scribner Classics edition, *The Great Ideas* also contains Adler's own essay explaining why the twentieth century, though witness to dramatic discoveries and technological advances, cannot understand these achievements without seeing them in the larger context of the past twenty-five centuries.

Adler's purely descriptive synthesis presents the key points of view on almost three thousand questions without endorsing or favoring any one of them. More than a thousand pages, containing more than half a million words on more than two millennia of Western thought, *The Great Ideas* is an essential work that draws the reader into our civilization's great conversation of great ideas.

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## **Editorial Review**

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### **Chapter 1**

#### **Angel**

##### **INTRODUCTION**

Influenced by a long tradition of religious symbolism in painting and poetry, our imagination responds to the word "angel" by picturing a winged figure robed in dazzling white and having the bodily aspect of a human being.

This image, common to believers and unbelievers, contains features which represent some of the elements of meaning in the abstract conception of angels as this is found in the writings of Jewish and Christian theologians and in related discussions by the philosophers. The human appearance suggests that angels, like men, are persons; that they are most essentially characterized by their intelligence. The wings suggest the function of angels -- their service as messengers from God to man. The aura of light which surrounds them signifies, according to established conventions of symbolism, the spirituality of angels. It suggests that to imagine angels with bodies is to use a pictorial metaphor.

Another interpretation might be put upon this aura of light if one considers the role which the notion of angel has played in the history of thought. Wherever that notion has entered into discussions of God and man, of matter, mind, and soul, or knowledge and love, and even of time, space, and motion, it has cast light upon these other topics. The illumination which has been and can be derived from the idea of angels as a special kind of being or nature is in no way affected by doubts or denials of their existence.

Whether such beings exist or not, the fact that they are conceivable has significance for theory and analysis. Those who do not believe in the existence -- or even the possible existence -- of utopias nevertheless regard them as fictions useful analytically in appraising accepted realities. What an ideal society would be like can be considered apart from the question of its existence; and, so considered, it functions as a hypothesis in political and economic thought. What sort of being an angel would be if one existed can likewise serve as a hypothesis in the examination of a wide variety of theoretical problems.

The idea of angels does in fact serve in precisely this way as an analytical tool. It sharpens our understanding of what man is, how his mind operates, what the soul is, what manner of existence and action anything would have apart from matter. Hence it suggests how matter and its motions in time and space determine the characteristics of corporeal existence. Pascal's remark -- that "man is neither angel nor brute, and the unfortunate thing is that he who would act the angel acts the brute" -- points to the different conceptions of man which result from supposing him to be either angel or brute rather than neither. Such views of human nature, considered in the chapters on Animal and Man, cannot be fully explored without reference to theories of the human mind or soul in its relation to matter and to body. As the chapters on MIND and SOUL indicate, theories carrying the names of Plato and Descartes, which attribute to the human mind or soul the being and powers of a purely spiritual substance or entity, seem to place man in the company of the angels. In this tradition Locke applies the word "spirits" equally to human minds and to suprahuman intelligence.

It would be misleading to suppose that the idea of angels is primarily a construction of the philosophers -- a fiction invented for their analytical purposes; or that it is simply their conception of a supramundane reality, concerning the existence and nature of which they dispute. In the literature of western civilization, angels first appear by name or reference in the Old and the New Testaments. Readers of the Bible will remember many scenes in which an angel of the Lord performs the mission of acquainting man with God's will. Among the most memorable of such occasions are the visits of the angels to Abraham and Lot and the angelic ministry of Gabriel in the Annunciation to Mary.

In one book of the Bible, Tobias (Tobit, as it is called in the King James Apocrypha), one of the leading characters is the angel Raphael. Through most of the story he appears as a man, but at the end, after he has accomplished his mission, he reveals his identity. "I am the angel Raphael," he declares,

one of the seven, who stand before the Lord.

And when they had heard these things they were troubled; and being seized with fear they fell upon the ground on their face.

And the angel said to them: Peace be to you, Fear not.

For when I was with you, I was there by the will of God: bless ye him and sing praises to him.

I seemed to eat and to drink with you; but I use an invisible meat and drink, which cannot be seen by men.

It is time therefore that I return to him that sent me...

And when he had said these things, he was taken from their sight; and they could see him no more.

As a result of scriptural exegesis and commentary, the angels become a fundamental topic for Jewish theologians from Philo to Maimonides, and for such Christian theologians as Augustine, Scotus Erigena, Gregory the Great, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Pascal, and Schleiermacher. They figure in the great poetry of the Judeo-Christian tradition -- in *The Divine Comedy* of Dante, in *Paradise Lost* of Milton, and in Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* and Goethe's *Faust*.

The philosophers, especially in the 17th and 18th centuries, are motivated by Scripture or provoked by theology to consider the existence, the nature, and the activity of angels. Hobbes, for example, attacks the supposition that angels are immaterial on the ground that the notion of incorporeal substance is self-contradictory and undertakes to reinterpret all the scriptural passages in which angels are described as spirits. After examining a great many, he says that "to mention all the places of the Old Testament where the name of Angel is found, would be too long. Therefore to comprehend them all at once, I say, there is no text in that part of the Old Testament, which the Church of England holdeth for Canonical, from which we can conclude, there is, or hath been created, any permanent thing (understood by the name of *Spirit* or *Angel*) that hath not quantity... and, in sum, which is not (taking Body for that which is somewhat or somewhere) Corporeal."

All the passages can be interpreted, Hobbes thinks, simply in the sense in which "angel" means "messenger" and "most often, a messenger of God," which signifies "anything that makes known his extra-ordinary presence." If, instead of existing only when they carry God's word to men, the angels are supposed to have permanent being, then they must be corporeal. As "in the resurrection men shall be permanent and not incorporeal," Hobbes writes, "so therefore also are the angels...To men that understand the signification of these words, *substance* and *incorporeal*" -- and mean by "incorporeal" having no body at all, not just a *subtle*

body -- the words taken together "imply a contradiction." Hence Hobbes argues that to say "an angel, or spirit, is (in that sense) an incorporeal substance, is to say in effect that there is no angel or spirit at all. Considering therefore the signification of the word *angel* in the Old Testament, and the nature of dreams and visions that happen to men by the ordinary way of nature," Hobbes concludes that the angels are "nothing but supernatural apparitions of the fancy, raised by the special and extraordinary operation of God, thereby to make his presence and commandments known to mankind, and chiefly to his own people."

Locke seems to take the exactly opposite position. Asserting that we have "no clear or distinct idea of substance in general," he does not think spirits any less intelligible than bodies. "The idea of *corporeal substance*," he writes,

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