

INCONSCIO E SOCIETÀ
SEZIONE II: POIETICA

4

Direttore

Antonio IMBASCIATI

Professore emerito di Psicologia clinica
Università degli Studi di Brescia

Comitato scientifico

Pietro ANDUJAR

Presidente OPIFeR
(Organizzazione di Psicoanalisti Italiani, Federazione e Registro), Milano

Giovanna DI GIOVANNI

Scuola Lacaniana di Psicoanalisi e Associazione Mondiale di Psicoanalisi, Milano

Luciana LA STELLA

Membro OPIFeR
(Organizzazione di Psicoanalisti Italiani, Federazione e Registro), Milano

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SEZIONE II: POIETICA

Poietica è la sezione della collana *Inconscio e società* che raccoglie scritti ed espressioni creative, testimonianza più o meno esplicita di un sapere di tipo scientifico. La collana *Inconscio e società* intende raccogliere i frutti dell'applicazione della psicoanalisi alla vita contemporanea. Le parole chiave dei lavori che fanno parte della collana sono formazione e ricerca clinica: l'impostazione iniziale si proponeva di applicare la psicoanalisi freudiana, nell'orientamento dato da Jacques Lacan, al discorso universitario. Tuttavia l'esigenza di scientificità, di cui l'Università non può non tener conto, non ha altro strumento che la formazione dell'analista. Lo psicoanalista ha il compito di curare, ma allo stesso tempo è portatore della causa di promuovere il reale della soggettività, come avveniva in un'altra epoca attraverso quelle pratiche dette "arti liberali". Il lavoro che l'analista fa su di sé diventa quindi il nocciolo di una soggettività della scienza, possibile e non preclusa, il prototipo di un "saperci fare" per tutte quelle professioni che Freud definì *Mestieri Impossibili* perché hanno come loro oggetto il soggetto stesso.

Luciana La Stella, Andrea Cevenini

The Infinite Names of the Angel

Images of the Invisible in Walter Benjamin and Paul Klee

Preface by
Gianguido Piazza

Afterword by
Massimo Pierdicchi



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*This work is dedicated, with unending esteem and affection
to our loved ones: Graziella Cevenini and Giovanni La Stella
who have departed to embark into that bright pathway
in the divine astral world, and in memory of those Angels
who partake of our human life and seem to guide us
towards the Invisible.*

*Quasi un silenzio splende nel profondo.
Dall'indistinto
Ecco appare qualcosa,
ma non da qui,
non da me,
bensì da Dio.
Da Dio!
Benché solamente un'eco,
solo specchio di Dio,
eppure vicinanza divina.
Gocce dal profondo,
luce in sé.
A chi mai dormendo si fermò il respiro,
quello. . .
La fine ha ritrovato l'inizio.*

Paul KLEE

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Preface

Angelology and epistemology

The theme of the angel in many ways and for various reasons, is one in which contemporary philosophy seems to be remotely interested.

Since the age of the scientific revolution, in a long–disenchanted world, there certainly has been no room for angelical intellects nor has there been any need for them. The process of secularization has banned these supernatural guides from our moral and social life. Through this interesting treatise that skillfully cuts through various disciplines Luciana La Stella and Andrea Cevenini remind us that the theme of the angel recurs in some of the most outstanding thinkers of the 20th century. Walter Benjamin's reflections on the *Angelus Novus* are very exemplary, here compared to the variety of angel families we discovered in the great painter, Paul Klee.

As highlighted in these pages, angelology of patristic and scholastic origin intersects with epistemology: one of the greatest problems of the 20th century's thoughts on the foundations, methods and limits of knowledge, and with its oftentimes naturalistic outcomes surprisingly seems to find bright interpretative perspectives in considerations regarding the angel figure. In effect, in the great monotheistic religions, as in many ancient religions and civilizations the angel is an epistemological figure. Firstly,

in his very nature as a messenger, he is the source of knowledge for the human being. Not being the truth himself and to be able to bear witness to it, the angel has to have that prime access to the truth which man lacks.

On one hand he represents knowledge, which the human individual should also be if he were a highly cognitive individual.

On the other hand, angelic access to the truth, by nature differing from that of man, allows us to grasp the features that define our knowledge: the epistemology of the angel by contrast thus highlights a human epistemology, or if too humane — a natural epistemology of the animal man.

In Part I of Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae*, out of 14 quaestiones dedicated to the theme of the angels (including the rebellious ones), he reserves at least four for the theme of knowledge, developed obviously in the proper terms of Aristotelian epistemology.

Being a bodiless creature, the Angel's knowledge of the universe does not derive from the senses which he does not possess in the metaphorical sense, nor from the active intellect or the potential one, since there is no need for him to abstract the forms by the force of experience. Nor does it come from potential intellect since being outside of time, the angel does not learn in the course of his existence. Knowledge of the universally pure and the good has always been part of his very nature: the species he has been impressed with by God, even before the creation of all things. He knows himself, the other angels and God even if not in His essence, and the species of material things. His knowledge is not, however, limited to the universal (if it were so circumscribed, his knowledge would be inferior to that of man who acquires knowledge of the universe through his intellect, and of things in their singu-

larity *hic et nunc* through his senses): he has been made by God to share the knowledge of singularity, however, not as an empirical data to be seen, but as an individuation of the species in matter *signata quantitate* (the thing is grasped so to say, in its metaphysical root).

The angel does not know the future or the secret of the heart, — in the same way as man and unlike God — inasmuch as he can foresee the first data which is the knowledge of the cause, and the second, once the effects are noted: he knows them, however, with a greater perfection than man, given the certainty of his science.

Given that he has an active vision of the truth, the angel grasps all the implications in every idea, and does not need the faculty of reasoning. He is therefore able to know several things contemporaneously, inasmuch as it is the nature of his species (unlike man who deducts in time), even if he cannot understand all things (unlike God who is omniscient). Thus the angel does not know, by affirmation or negation (uniting or separating a subject and announced in a judgment), but through an immediate vision of the essence of a thing. This does not mean that the angel does not comprehend affirmations and negations, meaning that judgments to his knowledge may be translated, so to say.

The Authors rightly focus on the epistemologies of Klee and Benjamin, bringing to light the Goethean ascendance: essence manifests itself in the phenomenon, though not completely; its truth can be grasped by intuition even if imperfectly. Here lies the importance of imagination and of figuration (the same figuration of the angel) to overcome through analogy the limits of conceptualization. As a result, the reflection on the angel, for example the *Angelus Novus* — becomes a reflection on the human. Likewise the unfulfilled and ephemeral angels of

Klee are figures of our condition during the tragic age of totalitarianism and global warfare. As figures they make us see a radical negativity, but they cannot tell us how we should stop it, even if conscience in the negative brings the possibility of its being overturned.

There are, however, also other roads that can lead us to discover the richness of angelology, especially the scholastic type, for the reflection on knowledge. The convergence between the Thomistic and analytical philosophy has long been highlighted: it would suffice to think of the importance this is given by both conceptual analysis and the argumentative examination of the thesis to be sustained and the antithesis to be confuted. This convergence may seem paradoxical, inasmuch as analytical philosophy seems to surge from the traditional English empiricism, and blossom thanks to its tangencies with experimental and mathematical sciences in a naturalistic direction, thus taking a contrasting stand against every metaphysic. Whether or not this historiographical judgment is valid, it has to be said that besides the logical analysis of concepts and arguments analytical philosophy makes ample use of imagination to sustain or disprove different theses and mental experiments. The angel, not as a metaphysical reality, but as a product of human imagination, covers from this viewpoint, a useful heuristic function that allows to denote the constitutive features of human cognition (the comparative approach between human and angelic subjects was, on the other hand as we saw, very much used by Thomas himself).

Now, analytical philosophy — in this sense heir of Platonic *Teeteto* — gives a classic definition of knowledge: the subject *S* knows *P* only if *S* believes that a proposition of *P* is true, and *S* is justified in believing in *P*.

Knowledge is thus defined as a propositional attitude of the subject. This definition seems not to apply to the angel whose knowledge could be defined as an immediate access to the intelligible object (by acquaintance), rather than as a propositional attitude mediated by logic and language. In reality Thomas himself tells us that the angel, on understanding the subject, also understands the true affirmations and negations regarding it. And so, also the angel is capable of propositional attitudes, like man. We are dealing, however, with very different types of attitudes. This difference emerges already in the definition of knowledge we earlier cited. As is known, Edmund Gettier had underlined how it may occur that S may believe that the proposition of P is true, and that S may be justified in believing in P (having good reasons for believing him to be true), but that in reality he does not know it, because the reasons behind this belief (though grounded), are not valid in this specific case; in short, the subject S believes in the truth out of pure luck. For example, if on October 11, 1492 Christopher Columbus had seen tree branches floating on the sea water, and thought that they were nearing land, which was actually close by, except that these branches had been thrown into the water by a cheeky sailor who had brought them onboard from Palos, we would not be able to say that Columbus knew he was nearing land, although his belief was real and was backed by good reasons.

In this case we should either set restrictive conditions on the justification conditions, or we have to admit that for man we can say that if S_U knows P , therefore S_U believes the proposition of P is true, and that S_U is justified in believing in P , but the reverse does not hold: it may be that S_U believes in P , and that P is true but that S does not know P as in the case of Columbus mentioned earlier. Now, pre-

cisely this angel is epistemologically distinguished from man: if the angelic subject S_A believes in P , therefore S_A is justified in believing in P (subjectively inasmuch as he has good reasons to believe so, since belief had been impressed in him by God; objectively since this process is reliable to the utmost) and P is true (always conforming to the subject, created by God in compliance with the idea). The consequence is that if the angel knows he thus believes (like man), but also that if he believes then he knows (unlike man), and not only in the banal sense that all his beliefs are true, but also in the sense that if his beliefs are true, they are not so by fortune — as may occur to man — but “by grace.” Given that for the angel there are no beliefs by fortune or beliefs by way of fortune, by chance or by a piece of luck, the angel knows all in which he believes.

The debates on the paradox of Gettier revolve around the concept of justification. Many theories have been set forth but we shall not discuss them here. There are some, however, that allow us to deepen the comparison between human and angelic knowledge, so as to better focus on natural epistemology.

A theory of justification may require that the subject S , in order to be justified in believing that P is true, must possess an immediate evidence of this. A Cartesian justification of this kind holds for the angel as much as it does for man.

There are instead other justification theories that hold for man and not for the angel. Externalist theories of knowledge require, for a subject to be justified in believing a proposition, that this be produced by a reliable process, that is, one that produces more true beliefs than false ones. As earlier seen, this requirement is fulfilled by the angel to the utmost, given that the cause process of his beliefs (im-

printed in him by God) is reliable to the utmost. Among the externalist theories of knowledge, there are some that place the emphasis on individual physiological processes such as perception and memory, and others that stress social interactions, such as testimonies and debate. Now, that theory of reflection on knowledge known as social epistemology is characterized by the fact that it considers the social factors to be irrevocable (even individual learning occurs within a social context: perception and memory are socially structured through language). So it is significant that there is no epistemological angelic community (the choir of angels is something else altogether). What the angel learns is not the fruit of social processes: divine enlightenment does not imply any interaction between subjects and there is no social mediation (it is a kind of absolute relationship with the absolute). The angel knows the other angel, but not through him, not by communicating with him: the angel has nothing to learn from the other angel, even if hierarchically above him. Each angel, as Leibniz said, is a monad.

The case of human knowledge is something else altogether, and is characterized by the sorting out of cognitive work, processes of interrogation and testimonies subject to argumentation and rebuttal, handed down through generations through schools, diffused on the network and disseminated. We can conclude that if fundamental epistemology should hold true for all subjects, angels and humans, it cannot be anything else but social epistemology. But if we more modestly asked epistemology to characterize our knowledge, a social approach seems to be that which could grasp its specific difference so to say.

Other justification theories under the suggestive name of epistemology of the virtues require instead that the

knowing individual be virtuous, that is, motivated in knowing the truth (or in reaching other epistemic values), and because of this are able to activate reliable cognitive processes. The angel does not satisfy this prerequisite of virtuosity in any way: by his own nature and by grace, not due to his merit, the angel knows the truth. The Aquinas theory is clear on this point: the truth is equally known by the good angel as well as by the rebellious one (here lies the mortal gravity of the latter's fault: his refusal of what he knows by evidence to be good). This difference between the human and the angelic subject is radical: man needs intellectual virtues such as mental openness, courage and intellectual honesty in order to know, whereas none of these is required of the angel.

As to the condition of reliability of the cognitive processes, the difference between the angelic and human subject is quantitative, inasmuch as the processes of the angel are reliable to the maximum, while the human ones are of a minor or greater degree. With regard to the intellectual virtues the differences are qualitative, regarding essence: the human, knowing subject must be a virtuous subject, but not so for the angelic one. It would now be interesting to combine the two social and ethical perspectives: from the social standpoint, an individual subject *S* knows *P* if he believes *P* is true, and *S* is justified in believing in *P* because the cognitive processes that have caused and fixed his belief are (at least in part) reliable social processes. For example the belief of *S* in *P* depends on the acceptance of the testimony he has received. Testimony and acceptance have to meet some epistemic requisites.

Testimony is not one of the various human cognitive processes, even if it is among the most important. So a reliable testimony is (to use a forensic expression) "capa-

ble of telling the truth, and is equipped with a cognitive structure (senses, memory, etc.), normally functioning and “has the tendency to tell the truth,” moved towards the truth, and is capable of behaving in conformity to his motivation. This motivation, in reality, may be intrinsic or extrinsic: in the first case, the subject testifies to the truth precisely because it is the truth. In the second it does so because it serves him to tell the truth: in a “world of devils”, a coercive system will have to warranty the reliability of the witness and which will threaten liars with sanctions but will blend virtue with caution. In every case, the witness will have to be virtuous, either because he is intrinsically sincere or because he is prudent. It appears that generally this ethical requisite is a necessary condition and (if the cognitive processes of the witness are properly functioning) enough to conclude that the subject is justified in believing what has been testified to.

In reality, as there is the virtue of the witness, the person who actively conveys knowledge, there is also virtue in the one receiving the testimony, or better still, a family of virtues — the Socratic “swarm.” First of all, the judge cross-examining the witness and forcing him to answer, may learn from what the witness says if he is willing to listen, is mentally open, and honest. However, the person receiving the testimony does not always find himself in the powerful position of the judge: at times the testimony is a gift bestowed on us. In this case virtue is present under a vast range of dispositions: trust, humility, gratitude. . . . These are the virtues of dependent humanity (and if considering that the subject of knowledge is the community, the “scientific city” and not only the single person, these are essential virtues). And we can conclude that they are necessary because belief through testimony is justified

and is a family of virtues on the part of the person bearing witness and of the one receiving the testimony.

The reading of this dissertation seems to suggest the idea that human knowledge requires also a different investigative perspective, which I unfortunately cannot delineate here. Luciana and Andrea dedicated a careful study on an eminently epistemological mood: melancholy. It would be interesting to determine the cognitive process with regard to the objective (feeling the right emotions because of the theme studied, for example, the horror experienced on seeing genocide which as a historian I am studying, which makes my knowledge acquire greater value compared to the certainties of these same facts, but accompanied by inadequate sentiments, such as the scholar's satisfaction for the completed research, the ideologist's endearment for those slaughterers, etc.): and with regard to the path (that can be sustained at one time and then hindered by passions, sentiments, emotions, etc.): it seems that emotions can enter even in this manner into the definition of justification. To be sure, also emotions distinguish the human from angelic knowledge, all governed and together satisfied by *amor Dei intellectualis*.

As well evidenced by Luciana and Andrea in the beautiful pages dedicated to the tragic vision of history which displaces the great narrations of illuminist and historicist roots, the 20th century has checkmated through faith in progress, a vision of virtues like the fullness of the actuation of man's *tèlos*. In the meantime, this century has restored the "little virtues" of precarious and dependent humanity. If in the past mankind could reflect himself in angels, as the fulfillment of those cognitive perfections man aspired without however managing to achieve them, today Klee's lost or unfulfilled angels seem to be images

that resemble our condition even more. This in-depth study of these figures is one of the gifts we really have to be really grateful for.

Gianguido PIAZZA