Angelic Time and Motion: Bonaventure to Duns Scotus

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Angels are immaterial beings; time and motion seem to be features solely of material reality. So, the very title of my chapter might be thought oxy-moronic. But the medievals held that the duration of an angel is not necessarily infinite, and that angels are capable of certain sorts of temporary activity, and even of causally interacting with the material world. These claims require angels to be related, somehow or other, to both time and place. And according to the medievals, angelic causal activities are not restricted to particular places. This entails, in turn, that we need to be able to give some account of how angels come to interact with different parts of the material universe: how, in other words, they might move. As I shall try to show, the medievals proposed sharply conflicting solutions to these various questions, all of which were hotly debated in the schools. In what follows, I try to give a flavor of some of these disputes, and of the most interesting philosophical moves made in the debates. I make no attempt to be thorough; I cherry-pick what seem to me to be the highlights, while trying to maintain some kind of coherent narrative. I begin with motion, and then turn to consider time. And in order to understand the varieties of accounts of angelic motion, we need a grasp of the options for angelic location. So, I start briefly with location, treating only those aspects of the debates that are required for an understanding of angelic motion.

1. Angelic Motion

1.1. The Presupposition for Motion: Angelic Location

All the medieval philosophers held that angels can move. But the accounts they give of this depend on their prior accounts of what it is for an angel to occupy a space. So, I begin with this, and then see how these accounts of space-occupancy differ, and then show how the accounts impact the notions of angelic motion.1 In standard Aristotelian understandings of

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1 I deal with some of these issues at greater length in my “The Condemnations of 1277 and Henry of Ghent on Angelic Location,” in Angels in Medieval Philosophical Inquiry: Their
place, for a body to be in a place is for it to be contained by another body: place is “the innermost motionless boundary of what contains.” Clearly, immaterial substances cannot be in places in this way: they are not contained by, or enclosed by, bodies. So, an alternative is required, and the alternative that many theologians adopted is to make the idea of some kind of causal presence central. Thus, the key debate focuses on whether the relationship between immaterial substances and material ones—the presence of immaterial substances—is to be construed fundamentally in causal terms, or as involving some further relationship or relationships as well. The question is fully general: it includes not merely the presence of angels but also the presence of God in the universe, the only difference being in terms of restrictions on angelic presence that do not apply in the case of God. (The human soul is a different case, and I ignore it here.)

Aquinas, for example, focuses on the question of causal relations:

It pertains to an angel to be in a place, but an angel and a body are said to be in a place by quite different senses. For a body is in a place by its being applied to a place through the contact of dimensive quantity. But there is no dimensive quantity in angels; rather, there is in them a quantity of power. Therefore, an angel is said to be in a corporeal place by application of the power of an angel to a place in some way.

And more explicitly:

An angel, and any incorporeal substance, is in a body or a place only through an operation that causes some effect in it [viz., the body or place].

When we speak of an angel being in a place, what we mean is simply that the angel causes an effect at a place. Aquinas holds much the same for God’s presence in the universe too:

It is clear that it is necessary for God to be everywhere and in all things, for mover and moved must be contiguous, as Aristotle proves in Book VII of the *Physics*. But God moves all things to their operations... He is therefore

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2 Aristotle *Phys.* 4.4.212a20–21.

3 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1a.52.1 co.
