

JACOB'S LADDER

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One of the last of Swedenborg's philosophic works is now printed under the title *The Rational Psychology*. In it we have the scientist and philosopher with his knowledge of the soul's kingdom so well mastered that he dares to penetrate to the distinctly human planes of life within the body, to write of will and understanding, affections, morality, and all of the many tones and moods of the human mind. The arresting feature of this work is the way Swedenborg pinpoints and describes mental activities in terms of specific motions, fluids and organs in the physical body. If he has not located the soul, he has at least located the human mind and has treated it, not like a series of exhalations or ghost-like forms remotely linked with the body, but as an organism whose changes of state and whose infinitely varying forms are actual affections and thoughts.

He attributed his success to the fact that he not only desired the end, but was also willing to follow the means, in this case a study of the kingdom which the soul has formed for itself, and whose successively compounded organic degrees serve as the steps of a ladder by which the soul descends into the plane of nature.¹ The path, once traced, is relatively easy to follow. This is characteristic of all pioneer work. It is no credit to be able to follow a road that has been laboriously paved.

Nature is vibrant, shimmering with tremulations of the ether, the air, and even of rocks and minerals. The human body is like a vast and complex instrument, created as a microcosm or miniature world so as to be sensitive to the music of the spheres. In this most perfect of all instruments, the vibrations of the world can be translated into living and meaningful sensations. The tree that falls in the forest sets up a host of vibrations in the air, but these in themselves are inanimate and dead. However, if they reach a human ear they can be transformed not only into sensation, but also into perception and thought. The movements of the air

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¹ R. Psych. preface.

strike on the bones of the inner ear, and cause them to vibrate in harmony with themselves. This motion stimulates a different but corresponding motion in the nerves. The impulse flashes to the brain where it flows like a gust of wind in a corn-field over the millions of cells in the cortex of the brain.² In these cells, the nerve impulse terminates, or reaches its upper limit, but the motion induced externally on the cell sets off a more subtle motion within it, which penetrates to the most refined and delicate fibres of all, the fibres of that simple cortex, like a little brain within each of the cortical cells.

Each of these cells is like a refining vessel, because it admits these forces, ascending from below, and at the same time is under the influence of the sphere of life flowing from above. In these cells the sensation reaches its upper limit, and almost instantly the sensation yields to an internal pressure as the soul descends, giving her reply and ultimately moving the bodily frame and thick muscles into intelligent and purposeful action.

It will be noted that the impulse does not reach these numerous inner chambers by a single continuous advance, but is carried as is the torch in a relay race. One set of fibres reaches its limit, and hands the sensation on, in a more interior form, to its better. Thus the motion of the air reaches the eardrum and no further. There its momentum is translated into higher and more swift energy within the nerve cells, which travels in an instant to the cerebral cortex. Once again, the motion is replaced by a more interior one that flashes like lightning through the simple fibres. This motion, on reaching its own cortex, can go no farther, for in these inmost recesses it has reached the threshold of earthly motion. On the other side is the spiritual force of life itself.

At each of the changing points there is a sensation. In the ear there is sound. In the cortex of the brain is a perception of the sound, or an imagination derived from it, enriched by a thousand associations. In the simple cortex is intellection or a rational intuition, and following this is the possibility of rational action.

Four distinct operations are involved in this change from passion to action.³ The first of these is *intellection*, or the highest

² R. Psych. 18.

³ R. Psych. 24, 147.

of sensation. In this, the soul is still passive, or is still being informed. A second operation immediately follows, in which the memory casts up all kinds of images, relevant and irrelevant. This compression of past and present, of previous states with present ones, is called *thought*. Once the mind has presented all of the information that is deemed to be relevant, the will begins to re-organize what is presented, and the first of action descends in the form of *judgment*. This involves a simplification of the information presented—the rejection of material that does not seem important to the question, a due emphasis and ordering of the things that are necessary. The result of this process of selection is a *conclusion*, and at once the downward path is opened up as the will clothes itself with thoughts, ideas, and ultimately with actual changes in the heavier parts of the body.

These operations of intellection, thought, judgment and conclusion can be run through so swiftly as to conceal their very existence. A man putting his hand on a hot stove has withdrawn it before he is able to analyze the chain of sensations which stimulated a chain of actions even to the motion of his hand. Because the soul can always react in equal measure to the forces impinging on it, and can be acted upon and react without seeming to alter its position or strength, it is more elastic than steel. Indeed, the suggestion is made that all elastic forces in their reactions involve a like series of events from action, through intellection, thought and judgment, to conclusion and reaction.⁴

If a child jumps from the headboard onto the bed, he presents the steel springs, and other parts, with a kind of sensation. When the motion of the descending child is transmitted to a motion in the springs we may say that the bed has sensed a change of state. This is comparable to intellection. But this motion involves the whole state of the bed, the number of springs and bits of wire, the places where the metal has broken before due to the weight of a particularly heavy child, the coverings, even the nature of the floor. All of these contribute in their way to the type of reaction that is possible. The sum of all these factors is comparable to the second operation, namely thought. When the springs have been pushed to their limit, they gather forces, and the strongest

⁴ R. Psych. 24, 25.

force tends to eliminate all of the minor and irrelevant conditions of the bed in a swift judgment that then concentrates in a powerful conclusion as the springs push back and shoot the child up into the air.

The major difference between this behavior and that of the soul is that it takes place on one plane or degree, whereas with the human body and mind, a series of discrete levels are involved, requiring the coordination of an organism each degree of which is more complex than the one below it. Now in the case of animals, the process is complex but not unfathomable, and so it is conceivable that the day will come when an electronic computer can be made to simulate and predict the reaction of a given animal to a given set of impulses. This will never be so with a human being, because in that important gap between sensation and action, there is the element of free will.

To make the process clearer, let us take an example. In doing so we gain an appreciation of what is involved, but more importantly, we gain a respect for the virtually infinite number of forces and conditions that contribute simultaneously to a single sequence of impulses and reactions.

A man emerges from the water that lies four feet deep on a flooded street, clutching a child under his arm. He hears a voice in the crowd saying, "He is a brave man." If no one were there to hear, the thought would have died as it was dispersed into the general turbulence of the air. But in this case the words, along with the noise of the sobbing child, the rippling water and the sound of his own breathing, reach the ear, and are transformed into sensation. The impulse is dutifully picked up by the auditory nerve and is sprayed all over the cerebrum, although it registers with greatest effect on certain areas. Depending on his mood and state of health, the message may there be buried among a thousand other sensations scarcely reflected on, or else it will register at once. It may even be dealt with consciously only at a later date when he turns on the tap to wash his hands, and the sound that then reaches his brain invites a host of associations, among them this phrase—"He is a brave man."

Whenever the phrase registers, it has the power to command memories, even dating back to the time when he read "The Knights of the Round Table," and saw bravery only in shining armor. Associations rise up out of the memory, to enjoy a tempo-

rary rebirth, now enriched by the new episode of bravery so recently enjoyed. The imagination may even introduce a pun or two, such as the phrase "He is a grave man," so prodigal is it in supplying material which the rational mind is free to dwell upon or to reject. The sensation—for it is still thought, now grown highly complex, that impinges on him—is now taken up by the inner structure of the cortical gland, and the rational mind now has a collection of ideas to sort out, much in the same way that the imagination had a collection of sounds and sensations to deal with, an instant before.

The concept of bravery as a virtue is offered to the intellection or thought, to receive and deal with as it sees fit. The rational can also reflect on the fact that if the child had died it would have gone to heaven in any case. The teachings about praise not belonging to man, but only to the Lord, may come to mind. Indeed, the thoughts that crowd in for attention are far more numerous than were the sounds that initially struck the eardrum.

To the individual, these three degrees merge into a confused and obscure unit, for we are simultaneously present on all planes, and it is only rarely that we view these planes abstractly from each other. But at least, once the impression has been made on us, and once our body, imagination, and rational mind have all been subject to certain sensations (even the thought is a sensation), then must begin the second, third and fourth operations of the mind. But the actual quality of these operations will depend on the motive or love that chooses this opportunity to assert and establish itself.

The *Rational Psychology* speaks of two motives: the love of harmony and the love of self-preservation.⁵ To this we must add the third one spoken of in the *True Christian Religion* 394, as the "love of heaven." This list of motives has always struck me as being unexpected. If we had set out to list the motive forces of a man's life, we should not have come up with these three—at least not with all of them. But let us take the first and second, because these are fairly obvious.

Love of harmony is a love of the order and beauty of the world. This need not be an evil love, although it is very closely tied up with our evils. The body survives because the soul

⁵ R. Psych. 27, 28.

endows it with this ability to perceive what is harmonious and what is not. The spider knows how to spin his geometrically perfect web, not because of instruction, or because of rational thought, but simply because, as he works, if he strings the silk in the right direction the soul within him says "yes," but if it is in a line out of harmony with the rest of the nest his soul says "no," and he does not feel right about it, until he has restrung it.

Of course this love is intimately connected with the love of self-preservation. In the case of the man standing at the edge of the water with the noise of "He is a brave man" ringing in his ears, the love of self-preservation is aroused because the soul knows quite well that recognition and praise by others have a direct bearing on a person's ability to keep alive.

But what of the third motive—the love of heaven? This love comes from the fact that the interiors of man are on the plane of heaven. The soul itself, quite naturally, perceives harmonies on all planes. Therefore when celestial angels are present with an infant, the soul consents to the association, and deep impressions or remains are laid. So it is that when the mind is opened by means of education, the person finds that in his inmost thoughts he has an almost instinctive affinity for what is orderly and good. On hearing the teachings of the Word, he feels an internal agreement and delight. This strengthens the love of heaven, and makes it a potentially more effective force in the decisions of his life.

Let us return to the brave man, and find out what will happen if he is New Church, and what will happen if he is not. When the two operations of intellection and thought have been concluded, each of the three motives presses for attention and recognition. The love of self seizes upon the incident and would like to magnify the personal element in the story because of the delight in praise and glory. The memories of past achievements and the imagination of future rewards would then be drawn to light, and thoughts of the Lord's merit, or the millions of other brave men in the world, or the hidden recognition that it was not really a very brave act, would be silenced.

However, if he is New Church in spirit, the dominant thought would be of the Lord, His merit and righteousness, thanksgiving to Him for His mercies, gratitude that others could have been helped, and humility at the thought of praise being bestowed on

him by people who judge only from appearances and who very often direct their praise in the wrong direction.

It is clear that one of these three loves—self, the world, or heaven—will prevail over the others, and will thus make its own particular kind of judgment. For each love considers the facts in a different order, and eliminates the ones distasteful to itself while retaining others. From this judgment is born a conclusion, and not merely one action, but a whole series of them. A reply is made to the crowd, or else the man is silent, for this is also a reply, and his behavior in the next few minutes will serve to strengthen the particular love that managed to prevail as the strongest motive in that fleeting moment of decision.

Such is the ladder reaching to the soul, and descending from it into the world. And is it not clear that because of the nature of this ladder, the soul is equipped to form for itself a character, and this even from the briefest of human lives?

What I have said thus far is based almost exclusively on the opening chapter of the *Rational Psychology* on "Sensation." This seems to be a very useful means of confirming and understanding the teachings of the Writings on the subject of regeneration itself. For in the *Rational Psychology* we can see the soul forming for itself a body which will communicate with the world, and by means of the degrees of which the soul can operate in the world. In the Writings we see the Lord through remains and conscience, forming a new man, and this not simply by an influx from a prior way, but by an apparent ascent from things of nature, and of the letter of the Word. In the one case we see the formation of the mind, and in the other the formation of the spirit, which is the reformation of the mind.

The mind is born by the joint operation of the ultimate forces of nature, which are the lowest operations of the Divine Love, and the influx of the Lord's life into the soul. This influx does not teach man or endow him with any connate knowledges. It gives him the capacity to understand, primarily to perceive the truth of the teaching that there is a God and that He is One. Just as the soul perceives without education what is harmonious or disharmonious, so does it perceive what is true and false, but this at first only in a most general way. No one needs to be taught that a flower is beautiful, but an understanding of the order and nature of that beauty can be given only by means of the senses

and imagination and reason born by life in the world. Similarly, the teaching that God is one can be seen without reflection, by all whose minds have not been damaged by false education or by unrestrained exercise of the loves of self and the world. And yet the quality of that one God can be shown only by ultimate revelation.

The abilities of the mind are unfolded step by step. The first sensations of a new-born child arouse no memories or rational conclusions. But gradually, as sensations are multiplied, the soul can begin to organize them into imaginative patterns, and the child can recognize things, and smile. Rationality as such is born a good deal later when imaginative pictures can be organized into related patterns.

But even before the opening of the rational, the Lord can teach, and this primarily through the ultimates of nature, and of the letter of the Word, particularly of the Old Testament. The hearing of the Word does not at first arouse a rich and deep comprehension, but since the knowledges of the Word are open even to the Lord, there is a kind of unconscious reception of truth on all planes. This is important in preparing for the opening of those planes in later life. And even a child can begin to form his life according to the teachings of the Word. This active formation of externals is but one step removed from a merely sensual life, but it prepares the way for the reception of that which it represents. A persistent obedience to the externals of the Word equips the mind with knowledges and affections that can be formed into more interior and genuine patterns. Full responsibility comes when this formation requires the use of the rational mind as well, for then reformation can apply to intentions and thoughts as well as to words and deeds.

Over the years an ascent is made, which is imaged in the ascending steps of every sensation. But with reformation itself, this is a gradual process, involving a whole succession of steps and unfoldings. When the rational has been fully opened, we then have a full awakening to the religious responsibilities of life, for the mind is then equipped with knowledges, stored in the memory, which can be brought to bear on many if not all of a person's decisions. And in the moments of decision, the new will can be strengthened and formed in opposition to the native will of man, leading to the time when, in Providence, it is seen that

temptations can be admitted which will result in the overthrow of one or the other.

In this responsible state, the truths of the Word, which have descended from God in the first place, are seen to ascend through the orderly degrees of the mind. For if a man rests on the letter of the Word as his pillow, these Divine messengers or angels strive upward to effect an opening of the interiors of his spirit, and to establish a more direct and personal communication with the inflowing life. The truth coming as it were from without, but yet being drawn upward from within, as the soul draws sensations unto itself, can then invite an influx of light, descending through the face of celestial remains, into the ladder present in the mind of man. If he is willing to accept the force of this light as his own, it will then press downward to regenerate not only his will but his thought, imagination, and every word and deed as well, so that it may be said of him that he does the works of God.

Because of the very order involved, he feels these deeds as his own, and in taking delight in them he comes to live in the Lord's life and share His immortality. And may we not see here a useful representative of the Lord's Advent into the world and the glorification of His Human? His taking to Himself a Human means that He took to Himself the Human mode of regeneration. That is, He took a nature which had to be informed from without of the things Divinely perceived from within. In His Human He had to induce on Himself an order representative of the Divine within Himself, as a means of inviting an influx into the planes of human life more powerful and complete than any which existed before. The external means was the written Word, which in His Human at last was fulfilled. In this work, He first perfected Himself, and then made Himself Divine. He emptied from the Human all that was of Mary, and in this way reformed that Human, ascending even to the inmost of the rational where the Human commences. When the rational had been so formed and opened, there was a gathering together of all angelic and human states, and a re-ordering of them into a purely Divine form. This Divine life then descended by the steps of the rational and natural, glorifying His Human even to the sensual, so that Jehovah God became present in ultimates as He had been before only in inmost things, and rendering Divine all things in the Human. He thus added a new essence, or made possible a new influx into the minds

of men to restore equilibrium and to make possible their full cooperation in the life of reformation and regeneration.

We are taught that there is no such thing as physical influx, although the ascending scale of Jacob's ladder would seem to be just that. What is more, we are taught that man, of himself, can do nothing but what is evil. The principles we are speaking of here answer both of these difficulties. The soul, in hearing, sight, imagination and even understanding, is passive. It must be acted upon by a force outside of itself. But once the action is initiated, the soul then descends, and carries the impulse to deeper conclusions, thus giving the appearance that the physical tremulation itself rises. Inmosty viewed, this is the work of the Lord alone, drawing to Himself the things which originally came out from Him and are properly His own.

And in the descending series, it appears as if the man is active, but he is not. The Lord Himself has prepared a path of descent, and follows it because the man has consented, or has been willing to find delight in the loves thus aroused and in their logical consequences in the life of charity. So it is that the Lord alone has power to raise men to Himself, and to descend through individuals to form an angelic heaven, and a church on earth to serve as His body.

. . . all goods and truths descend from the Lord, and ascend to Him; that is, . . . He is the first and the last; for man has been so created that the Divine things of the Lord may descend through him down to the ultimates of nature, and from the ultimates of nature may ascend to Him; so that man might be a medium that unites the Divine with the world of nature, and the world of nature with the Divine; and that thus the very ultimate of nature might live from the Divine through man as the uniting medium. (*AC* 3702: 1.)