

## IMAGINATION AND RATIONALITY

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**Introduction**

A knowledge of the human mind is important to the life of religion. Indeed, if one is to apply intelligently the teaching of the Writings concerning the process of regeneration on which the New Church is founded, he must seek an ever clearer understanding of the human mind. It cannot be otherwise because the inner world of the mind is the real world in which we live. The real objects of our world are not the material things in our natural environment, but rather the ideas we have concerning them, the way we feel about them, their significance to us in terms of thoughts and affections. It is commonly supposed that every thing we think and feel is produced and determined by physical sensation. Men often believe that if they could completely control their environment, remove from it everything that did not please them, and order the rest at will, they could find peace of mind, contentment and happiness. Through all the ages the illusion that the source of happiness, and the cause of unhappiness may be attributed to the material world, has been a prime factor in directing the lives of both men and nations. Even those who intellectually recognize that this is an illusion, nevertheless think and act as if it were the truth.

This is the case in spite of the fact that the combined testimony of Revelation, reason, and daily experience is against such a conclusion. On reflection we cannot fail to realize that the children and the parents dwelling in the same home live in distinctly different worlds. People observing the same event often receive diverse, and even opposite impressions. Tastes differ widely, and what gives pleasure to one may give pain to another. Things once pleasing may become utterly abhorrent even to the same person, solely because of a change of mental state. From this it becomes evident that if any one is to attain true happiness, he must learn to control, not only the material environment, but above all, the inner world of the mind itself. Nor can this be

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done intelligently unless the laws that obtain in the realm of mental life are clearly and accurately understood.

Furthermore, the human mind is the arena wherein alone regeneration can take place. Here is the field of conflict between good and evil, truth and falsity. Here it is, by means of that conflict, that man's character is formed, the principles of his life are formulated, and his religious conscience is determined. For this reason, the knowledge of the human mind is not an abstract science reserved for specialists. It is a matter of deep and practical concern to every individual who is seeking a rational answer to the problems of his own life. It has daily application to, all our relations with other people, and to any successful cooperation with others in the innumerable uses of society. It is vital to the proper education of our children, and of the young people entrusted to our care. It has a most important bearing upon the maintenance of our own physical and mental health. And above all, it is indispensable to any intelligent cooperation with the Lord and His Providence in the Divine work of man's salvation. This is the primary reason why it is so fully treated of in the Writings.

Within our own century there has been a remarkable development of what is regarded as scientific psychology. Not only have men examined minutely the operations of the nervous system and the brain, but they have subjected the various functions of mental life to painstaking analysis. The central purpose has been to discover and explain the secret of human behavior. What makes people feel, and think, and act as they do? If this could be accurately known it is confidently believed it would be possible to control the minds of men. Man then could cure insanity, and overcome abnormal mental states to the great benefit of both the individual and society in general. They could direct the normal operations of the mind into more fruitful channels, and so eliminate, or at least greatly reduce the mental causes of strife, injustice, cruelty, and the consequent human suffering. They could at last bring about harmony, cooperation, good will, peace and happiness among both men and nations. In pursuit of this goal students have inquired into the nature of physical sensation. They have sought to discover how ideas are formed, how from these abstract concepts arise, and how all these combine to produce feelings, emotions, desires, and aspirations. In the pursuit of

these investigations men have discovered that back of all our conscious thoughts and feelings lie powerful influences, unseen, and yet mysteriously governing our ideas, our fancies, our fears, and our preferences. It is now recognized that any effective control of conscious mental processes must take into account these hidden forces, which reach far beneath the surface into a realm of unknown causes. Ways have been sought, and to some slight extent at least, have been found, to uncover such hidden influences, and if need be, to lessen or even break their power over the mind. This in fact is the main purpose behind that branch of mental science which has come to be known as psychiatry.

Such researches have by no means been fruitless. Much has been discovered that is of use, not only to society in general, but also to the New Church. The Writings do not reveal a science of psychology, but rather a spiritual philosophy. This philosophy nevertheless is based on the facts of experience, and must be confirmed thereby. It is of necessity founded upon the scientific knowledge extant in Swedenborg's day. Nevertheless, it displays insights far in advance of his day. This because the principles that underly the operations of the human mind were revealed to him immediately from the Lord, and a new light is thrown upon the operations of the human mind exceeding anything previously experienced as the light of the sun exceeds the light of a candle. If, however, we are to grasp the significance of these heavenly truths, and learn to understand their practical application to our lives, we must seek an ever more accurate and inclusive knowledge of such scientific facts as have been and are being amassed and made available by modern scholars in the field of psychology.

Unfortunately, however, by no means everything that is so confidently put forward in the name of psychology is factual. Much of it is speculative, based on tentative hypotheses, on insufficient evidence, and often on false premises, and yet is presented with all the assurance of proven certainty. Many of these erroneous concepts of mental operations conceal their uncertainties under obscure scientific verbiage, widely used but little understood. The result is that false ideas, leading to mistaken and often fantastic interpretations, become generally current, and are uncritically accepted on the testimony of supposed "authorities." Indeed many such conclusions pour in upon us daily through the press, the radio, the television, subtly influencing our

own thoughts and those of our children in ways that constantly cast doubt upon the teaching of the Writings.

It is of the utmost importance, therefore, that we should be forewarned; and we should be acquiring continually a greater ability to discriminate between what is true and what is false in the light of revealed truth. This, not only in order that we may be protected against unwittingly appropriating false concepts, but also that we may be able to cull out and use whatever is firmly established as factual, and confirmatory of the spiritual principles given in the Writings. It is just as detrimental to condemn from prejudice that which is true, as it is from ignorance to accept what is false.

The conviction that a true knowledge and understanding of the human mind is essential to the spiritual development of a rational faith, has led us to attempt some general observations on the nature of mental life, with special emphasis upon the imagination on the one hand, and rationality on the other. We have chosen these two faculties because our central purpose is to inquire how truth takes form in the mind, and how we can recognize it with assurance when it appears. In regard to this there are widely divergent views among modern psychologists, all of which run counter to the direct teaching of Revelation. In general it may be said that the confusion of thought on the subject and the universal opposition to the Writings both arise from the fact that psychologists mistakenly assume that the source of truth lies in the material world. In consequence they seek its formative force in the objects that impinge upon the mind from the natural environment, while the Writings ascribe to all truth a Divine origin and a spiritual cause.

This is the fundamental difference in point of view between scientific psychologists, and students of the Writings. The difference lies, not in the facts which are necessarily the same for both; but in the way these facts are interpreted. We believe that facts must always lend themselves to the confirmation of what the Writings teach. This because the Word of Divine Revelation is given by the same God who created the world of nature. The two cannot possibly be in opposition to one another. Whether or not we may succeed in demonstrating this, may well be questioned, because of the limitations of our own knowledge and understanding. But between the principles of Revelation, as we understand

them, and such facts of scientific psychology as we have been able to gather from the scholars of our day, we have found an astonishing harmony, which we have wished to share with others. We have thought that we might best accomplish this purpose by examining the dependable findings of the psychologists, in the light of the Heavenly Doctrine. We can attempt no more, however, than a comparison of the broad principles clearly stated in the Writings, with such known facts as seem to us reliable, without entering into the profusion of technicalities with which modern psychology is fraught.

In order to bring into sharp focus the difference between the viewpoint of the Writings, and that of modern psychology, we would quote from the *True Christian Religion* number 24, with reference to the dream of Jacob, wherein he saw a ladder set up on the earth, and reaching to heaven, with angels ascending and descending upon it, and the Lord standing above it, as recorded in *Genesis* 28: 10-13.

It is said that man rises; but the meaning is that he is raised up by God. For in acquiring knowledges for himself man exercises his freedom of choice; but as he acquires for himself knowledges from the Word by means of his understanding, he prepares the way by which God comes down and raises him up.

The knowledges by means of which the human understanding rises, God holding it in His hand and leading it, may be likened to the steps of the ladder seen by Jacob, which was set up on the earth with the top of it reaching to heaven, by which the angels ascended, while Jehovah stood above it.

It is wholly different when these knowledges are lacking, or when man despises them. In that case the elevation of the understanding might be likened to a ladder reaching from the ground to the windows in the first story of a magnificent palace, which is a dwelling-place of man, and not to the windows of the second story which is a dwelling-place of spirits, and still less to the windows of the third story which is a dwelling-place of the angels. The result of this is that man remains in the atmospheres and material things of nature only, and confines his eyes and ears and nostrils to these, and from these he derives no other idea of heaven, and of the *Esse* and *Essence* of God, than such as pertain to the atmospheres and to matter.

The implication is obvious. No stream can rise above its source; and the source of inspiration that determines the teaching of the Writings is a vision of the human mind as a ladder reaching to heaven, with the Lord standing above it; but the source of inspiration that determines the scientific thought of the day, is a

concept of the mind limited to the vision of a ladder reaching only to the first story of the palace—that is to the plane of earthly life and of worldly interest alone. When this is mistaken for the whole mind, and when all that is above it is completely ignored, it is inevitable that however accurate the observation may be, what is seen will be wrongly interpreted. This is the reason the teaching of the Writings, although it is fully in accord with the facts when these are rightly interpreted, is so apparently opposed to them as they are understood by scientific psychologists. Bearing this in mind, we would proceed to inquire as to what is the nature of the imagination. Whence does it arise, and how is it produced?

### What Is The Imagination?

In spite of all the scientific data gathered to explain it, no one knows what the imagination really is, or how it is produced. Attempts to define it do no more than describe what it does without telling anything as to how these results have been achieved.

As the name itself implies, the imagination is the image-making faculty of the mind. It is that which brings together and arranges into meaningful patterns the scattered impressions that pour in through the sense organs, and that are retained in the memory. It thus reproduces in mental imagery the objects of nature to form what we have called a "thing-concept." Such a concept is never an exact, or photographic reproduction of any object in nature. Rather it is a picture of how the object appears to the beholder. Indeed the imagination may create mental pictures of things that do not exist in nature. It can combine parts of objects into strange and unnatural shapes. It can represent in visual form abstract qualities, laws, generalizations, and moral virtues. Such representations appear in all symbolic imagery, in parables, poetry, sculpture, music, and every form of art.

What is this mysterious power? The scientific scholars have succeeded only in giving it various names. They have called it the "association of ideas," which means only that ideas are observed to display a spontaneous tendency to combine. What causes them to do so? As a result of this tendency it has been noted that the mind seems to have an instinctive sense of what is pleasing or displeasing, harmonious or inharmonious, in sound, in form, and in color. This is called the "esthetic sense." Also it has been observed that there is felt a sort of satisfaction in what

is complete or whole, and certain dissatisfaction with whatever is unfinished. It is a matter of common experience that from three dots the mind instinctively forms the image of a triangle. An arc at once suggests a complete circle. The mind attempts to complete a musical phrase that seems to be broken off in the middle. This spontaneous mental reaction is technically called "closure." Because of it one is able to picture an object in the mind, even though only a small part of it is actually visible at the time. Seeing one side of a building one can imagine the entire structure as it has previously been seen from other aspects. If only one corner, and one leg of a table appears from behind a curtain, one may recognize at once that it is a table, and the mind supplies the image of all its unseen parts. Indeed, every "idea" of an object is made up of many sensations drawn from the memory of past experiences. This perpetual endeavor of the mind to see things as a whole is what is called "Gestalt," the name given to a school of psychological philosophy. The name means "form" and it is intended to imply that all mental imagery is produced by an instinctive sense of form or wholeness.

Observation alone, however, gives no clue as to why the mind should display this strange power, or by what force these mental images are brought into being. This is frankly admitted by Professor R. W. Gerard, of the University of Chicago, in an article published in *Scientific Monthly* (June 1946, page 487):

It remains sadly true (he writes) that most of our present understanding of the mind would remain as valid and useful if, for all we knew, the cranium were stuffed with cotton wadding. In time the detailed correlation of psychic phenomena and neural processes will surely come; but today we are hardly beyond the stage of unequivocal evidence that the correlation does exist.

The difficulty in making such a correlation arises from the fact that the forces at work to produce ideas in the imagination are altogether invisible, and completely unknown. They operate beyond the range of consciousness, and we can know of them only from their effects. This is why imaginative ideas seem to spring into being by magic. They flash upon our consciousness suddenly, unheralded, we know not whence or how. They do not come at our bidding, nor can we produce them by conscious effort.

Because scientific psychologists refuse to recognize the existence of anything super-natural, they insist that these hidden forces of the mind must be discovered within the realm of nature. They

must be due to chemical, or biological processes. They must be attributed to mechanical forces such as electricity, magnetism, or atomic energy. They must result from accidental combinations, without foresight, or purpose. It is well known, of course, that the ideas produced in the imagination are influenced by emotional conflicts, or stresses; but it is supposed that these are due entirely to the pressure of the environment upon the mind. The memory of sense experiences may be deeply impressed, and may remain stored up for years, exerting an unconscious influence upon all one's thinking and feeling. It is supposed that in some way they explain mental complexes, abnormal states of mind, criminal urges, and all anti-social behavior. No one, therefore can be held responsible for them. They are automatic and inevitable. Their cause must be sought, not in the individual but in "society."

Such is the philosophic viewpoint of those who see in Jacob's dream a "ladder" that reaches only to the first story of the palace of wisdom, as referred to in the *True Christian Religion*, number 24. Such a philosophy may indeed yield certain practical results. The accurate observation of human behavior may give a valuable clue to assist in the education and training of children, in the treatment of mental diseases, or in attempts to correct the evils of society. But so long as men mistake the lowest plane of mental life for the whole, and ignore the deeper and more potent influences playing upon it, they cannot fail to misinterpret observed phenomena, and so acquire a distorted idea of how the mind operates.

The truth is, that the mind of man is continually under the influence of super-natural forces. It is created to live in a spiritual world, and to be moved by spiritual forces, and by natural forces at the same time. Only where these two kinds of forces meet and inter-act, does mental consciousness arise. This is something that cannot possibly be known except from Divine Revelation. Sense experience cannot reveal it. Yet it is the only key that can unlock the secrets of the human mind, and bring into view those higher stories of the palace of wisdom represented in Jacob's dream. By no other means can Jacob's "ladder" be seen reaching to heaven, with the angels ascending and descending upon it, and the Lord standing above it. This is the view of the mind that is presented in the Heavenly Doctrine of the New Jerusalem. When this is seen, all observed phenomena of mental life take on new



meaning. They must be re-interpreted in accord with this more inclusive concept of mental life.

In revealing the spiritual causes of psychic phenomena the Writings point to the obvious truth that the mysterious ability of the mind to gather and arrange sensation is, after all, only one manifestation of a power that pervades the entire universe. It is an ability that is characteristic of all life. Every seed draws from the soil the chemicals essential to plant growth, and transmutes them into sap, stem, leaf, flower, and new seed. By a similar process of selection and ordering every animal, and every human soul, builds the body in the womb, converting chemicals into bloods, tissues, bones, and viscera, forming from these organs perfect in structure, and marvellously coordinated. So also, out of millions of sense impulses that pour in upon the brain every waking moment after birth, the same vital forces select, arrange, and combine them to produce conscious sensation. It must be clearly understood that no single sense impulse can ever be consciously perceived. The very first conscious sensation of a newborn infant, is compounded from thousands of sense impulses of which the infant is not in the least aware. In the prick of a needle many nerve endings are touched and moved, each one sending its own individual message to the brain, and all these messages are spontaneously combined by the mind itself to produce what is felt as a single sensation. All this takes place without our knowledge. It is entirely beyond our control. Yet the force that produces any conscious sensation displays foresight, purpose, and marvellous wisdom. To this the results themselves bear unquestionable testimony. They cannot reasonably be explained as being due to accident, or to the chance combination of chemicals. All the wonders of nature bear testimony to some directive force striving toward a definite goal. The gathering together of related and harmonious sensations, and building out of them a mental picture that reproduces an image of the objects in the environment, is the same life-force that has brought into being the wonders of the plant and animal world, and the marvels of the human body and brain. This is none other than the creative force of the Divine love, acting with infinite wisdom to achieve the supreme end of the Lord's Providence, namely a heaven from the human race. In producing all the objects of the three kingdoms of nature, the Lord is merely providing what is foreseen to be necessary for the achievement of His Divine purpose. The God who forms the

human mind from material provided by the physical senses, is the God who from the beginning of time has "stretched forth the heavens, and laid the foundations of the earth, and formed the spirit of man within him," as declared by the prophet Zechariah (Zech. 12: 1).

Nevertheless, although the basic cause of the imagination is the same as the cause of all creation, and all growth, yet there is a notable difference between what happens in the formation of mental images, and what has happened in the production of plants and animals. Up to this point, all creative activity has been effected by what the Writings call "general influx." This is the direct operation of the Divine love seeking its goal according to its own Divine order, with perfect precision, and with infinite wisdom. This same general influx continues in the progressive building of the human mind. But at the level of the imagination, a new factor enters to modify this creative process. This is called "particular influx." By this is meant a force exerted, not immediately by the inflowing Divine love, but mediately through the influence of spirits and angels. This is represented in Jacob's dream by the angels who were seen ascending and descending upon the ladder. The mind of man is the connecting medium between the spiritual world and the natural world. Sense impulses received by the mind of a man living on earth spontaneously affect the spirits who are associated with him in the spiritual world. The man feels their affections as if they were his own. He becomes aware of them as loves, desires, longings, aspirations. They are in fact off-shoots of the Divine love, particular rays of that love, received and reflected by spirits and angels. Every such love contains within itself the wisdom to achieve its purpose. Such wisdom is inherent in all love, and proceeds from it, even as light is inherent in flame, and proceeds therefrom. For this reason, every affection derived from man's spiritual associates, contains within it the power to recognize whatever will promote its end or purpose. It has the power to select what it needs from a chaotic mass of raw material, and to organize it into an effective instrument of its will. This is the characteristic of love. It is the very form of its activity, and the inevitable law of its life. For this reason, imaginative ideas are formed spontaneously, unerringly, without our knowledge.

But note well, the Divine love which is received in the minds of angels and spirits, is necessarily bent, deflected from its original

course, and it may be twisted so as to tend in an opposite direction. The universal law is, that "influx is according to the form of the receiving vessel." The mind of every spirit and every angel has an individual form, a form that is determined by the free choice of each one. For this reason, the "affections" of spirits may be either good or evil. They may have in view ends which are in accord with the Divine will, or ends that are contrary thereto. In either case, they retain this inherent power to recognize what is applicable to their purpose, and so to produce a mental image of that purpose. Good spirits and angels will gather from the sense impressions in a man's memory, material that is conducive to promote the ends they have in view, namely ideas of use to the Lord and to the neighbor. These will be represented in forms of truth and beauty in the imagination. They are what we know as ideals of mutual love, of justice, of honor, and of mercy. Evil spirits, on the other hand will seize upon whatever they find in the storehouse of the memory that may be turned to the service of an evil love. They may, indeed represent apparent truths, and forms of external beauty; but only such as may be used to promote their evil intent and satisfy their ambition to achieve selfish and worldly gains. So far as they may not be restrained by civil and moral laws, they find delight in creating monstrous forms, forms of personal dominion over others, of cruel persecution, of deceit and injustice whereby others may be deprived of their goods, their honor, or their life.

In both cases, these opposite kinds of imagination seem to arise within the man himself. He feels them as his very own, not realizing that they have been imposed upon him by the spirits and angels with whom he is unwittingly associated. They produce what he perceives as an emotional drive that urges him to speak and to act. Whatever love is dominant at the moment, whether it be good or evil, contains within itself the wisdom to achieve its purpose, whence comes the well-known saying, "where there is a will there is a way." Imagination is nothing but a *love* producing an image of itself. All love is an activity of the spiritual world. It does not belong to nature. Sensation does not, as many suppose, produce love. The very opposite is the case. Love produces all conscious sensation. It is the force that alone can explain the wonders of the human imagination. Unless this is seen and realized there can be no true understanding of the operations of the human mind. (*To be continued*)