

News, Notes, and Comments

“Will” Versus “Volition”: A Commentary on Recent Translations

The concern about the change of the words “will” and “understanding” to “volition” and “discernment” in more recent translations of Swedenborg’s work is understandable. My own feeling is that some change was necessary, but this alteration may well indicate a transition to yet a further change.

While it is true that the word “will” was the accepted translation of the Latin “voluntas,” it is hardly likely that the Latin translation of the Lord’s prayer (I have in mind the phrase “fiat voluntas tua”) is going to become “your volition be done.” The word “discernment,” however, suggests something better than “understanding” since this latter implies something of the nature of a foundation, a “standing under” for thought to build upon. “Discernment” on the other hand reveals more depth and accuracy—the making coherent of the apparent chaotic form of experience by the perception of regularities and patterns that seem to conform to ratios of comparison.

There is more to say about discernment, but the will is far more interesting. The problem with this word is that in some ways it has become tainted by its use adopted by philosophy. Schopenhauer saw it as an advance on Kant’s noumenal—“Something-I-know-not-what”—and on that score he may well be correct; but his understanding of it limits it to a primitive form of a materialist creed that is only now in full flower, though imbued with a limited dynamic quality. It never rises above a temporal expression. So while it was an advance, nonetheless it ultimately bends the knee to the representative form of expression that defined (and thereby cut off) reality from any kind of spiritual connotation. Consequently, by the time it gets to Nietzsche and his will-to-power, and its subsequent bowdlerization in various pernicious forms of nationalism, the notion of will became a virtual extension of a rational process so that the distinction between will and understanding became severely blurred, and all reference to a spiritual dimension ignored completely.

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This really is the crux of the matter. In our own times, the philosophical spirit underlying our own conceptual forms is one that recognizes no internal structure as latently spiritual. Instead, what passes for “internal” is more or less what lies beneath the skin that x-rays or a knife can reveal, or the internal structure of atoms. Will, like consciousness, is thought of as an emergent property of complex matter, or a biofeedback survival mechanism. But its meaning in Swedenborg’s thought is intrinsically connected to a different notion of “internal” entirely, and cannot be understood in such terms. Indeed, the structure of the Bible itself remains totally incoherent unless one perceives the notions of will and understanding (whatever we choose to call them) as both distinct yet related propensities within us, and operating within a much more extensive physical/spiritual perspective. Without this internal structure, reflected in the dialectical form of a more spiritual relationship between will and understanding, then the constant references to righteousness and judgement, joy and gladness, indeed a host of paired expressions (not including the notion of firstborn, different paired names and so on), all these become nothing more than the expressions of a literary form for the sake of emphasis. In fact, the significance of Noah’s ark as representative of the evolution and formation of conscience that necessitated this bifurcation fades into a primitive mythology that is both incoherent and literal.

But perhaps the fact that these words “discernment” and “volition” are used in place of “understanding” and “will” and the fact that this jars the mind that is used to them, this in itself may be a reminder to us that we may have taken them for granted for far too long. Their original meanings may have become corrupted in the common mind by a different usage to the point that leaves Swedenborg’s careful distinctions, and therefore the internal sense of the Bible—as well as many other spiritual traditions—beyond the reach of the purely conceptualized modern mind we now labor under.

Volition, on the other hand, could have serious repercussions. As just stated, the noun “voluntas” from which it is derived is also the root of the verb form “volui” which means “I want.” Notice how this usage of verb leads in turn to a different, more familiar noun: desire. Straightaway, one can feel that “volition” and “desire” are not natural synonyms, and yet it is

volition that has been chosen to update will, and not desire. This is both instructive and telling.

In the Oxford English Dictionary, volition is defined as 1) “a decision or choice made after due consideration or deliberation,” and 2) “the action of consciously willing or resolving.” It is not difficult to see that in both cases, the definitions can easily be taken as aspects of rationality, or “discernment.” After all, discernment itself is defined as “to recognize as distinct” and hence is engaged in the same process of deliberating, considering, and resolving. We should therefore share in the discomfort of Patrick Johnson who expressed the suspicion that there was something not quite right with this new word, “volition.” [Give reference] Without intending to do so, this word draws away from the spirit of the original by attempting to “modernize,” but has instead smudged the boundary of this very important distinction that is at the heart of Swedenborg’s thinking, and enfolded in the structure of the Bible itself. We may lose more than we gain by it.

In consulting the OED on the meaning of “will,” we find a number of definitions. 1) “Desire, wish, longing, inclination, disposition (to do something).” Then there is the second order of meaning: 2) “the power or capacity of willing or choosing to do something . . . the power or capacity or willing; power of choice” and so on. Quite clearly, the most basic reading of Swedenborg reveals that it is the first definition that carries his meaning, while the second has little to do with that meaning and more to do with both volition and discernment. The latter blurs the distinction, while the former maintains it. This polarity of will and understanding is mirrored in terms of structure to many other dualities that are magnetized by these two poles. In the abstract, we have love and wisdom, good and truth, the celestial and the spiritual, male and female and so on. In the particular, we encounter Jerusalem and Zion, Ephraim and Manasseh, Cain and Abel, the father and son, the vineyard and the garden and so on seemingly endlessly. Without a clear idea of will and understanding, the dynamism of spiritual evolution becomes lost, so this is no small matter.

From the very earliest pages of the *Arcana Coelestia*, we begin to feel the relevance almost immediately:

If you took away your loves, and *what amounts to the same your desires* (since these stem from love) thought would instantly perish . . . Self-love and love of the world present a semblance of life and of joy . . . (AC 33; emphasis added)

This is followed in *Arcana Coelestia* 35 with:

Man has two inherent powers of will and understanding. When the understanding is governed by the will, they constitute one mind . . .

Already we see that “will” has reference to an emotive and not an intellectual content. Furthermore, given that these quotations appear with reference to the creation of the greater and the lesser lights, when will and understanding become obscured these then become problematical to understand with any coherence, and the fact that they refer to a spiritual state (“the greater light” to love and will, “the lesser light” to faith and understanding) this clarity virtually disappears. Through the “eyes” of will and understanding, this symbolism then becomes consistently applied and reiterated throughout the Bible. In the absence of a proper perspective on will and understanding these become merely metaphorical and the deeper notion of correspondence becomes lost. There is already a tendency to think of the proprium as “ego,” yet this is associated with the will and not the understanding, whereas we tend to think of “ego” as an aspect of the rational mind and not its emotive center. Perhaps Henry Corbin’s “ipseism” is more accurate, for the type of will this refers to is the type intimated in *Arcana Coelestia* 33 above as “your desires.” These subsequently become represented by the tree of knowledge, by Pharaoh and several others all the way up to Herod in the New Testament. None of this is at all visible in the usual exegeses that have no conception of this distinction, and yet there was never a greater time than our own where this distinction was so greatly needed, nor indeed was more relevant.

Consider the tree of knowledge as representative of this ipseistic will. Consequently, it desires to be the center of attention, and indeed craves to be in the middle of the garden (the garden representing the greater will). In modern parlance, it is the seeing of oneself as the center of attention, or the compelling of attention towards the self, or as the obsession with fame

or its desire, or as the spirit of acquisition that defines our culture. All these are very well known to us, hence one can say that this notion of will, represented by the tree of knowledge, is clearly visible to us as a rampant motivation, something prefigured in the representational and correspondential form of the Bible written thousands of years ago. Yet nothing could be more modern. It is therefore absolutely imperative that we do not lose sight of these basic terms and structure that Swedenborg reinvigorates, since in terms of desire (and let's admit it, who these days is unfamiliar with this meaning,) it is eminently modern.

I say that "Swedenborg reinvigorates" because this very physical notion of desire, while it is the cardinal point of attention in the marketing and advertising worlds, no longer figures as part of the essential structure and fabric of reality. The Enlightenment has seen to that, with its exclusive emphasis on the rational program, (something of which Swedenborg was highly critical), and has made every effort since to keep it this way. Yet prior to the Enlightenment, it was a natural part of the fabric of reality, and the core of all philosophical and spiritual discussion.

It may be useful here to consider this pre-Enlightenment view with reference to the richness of meaning that we discover in Swedenborg's exegesis, that is available to us in no other way. The monadology of Leibniz, as one example, refers to the activating principle as "appetency." One can clearly plot the synonyms of appetite and desire on an even more basic level that is very familiar to us. But even here there is an interesting take. In section 14 of the monadology, Leibniz writes:

The passing condition which involves and represents a multiplicity, is nothing but what is called a perception . . .

But in the next section, he then adds:

The activity or the principle which produces change or passage from one perception to another may be called appetite. It is true that *desire* cannot always fully attain to the whole perception at which it aims, but it always obtains some of it and attains to new perceptions. (Added emphasis)

Notice here something that is obscure to us, a relationship between desire (or will, or appetite) and perception. This relation was very much part of the perennial philosophy until it was forcefully discredited for the sake of neutrality that defined the Enlightenment. This kind of motivation, perception as will, has been dramatically demonstrated in recent times on at least two occasions. The first concerned the Falklands conflict in which the Prime Minister of the time declared that the “eyes of the world were upon us” and therefore it was imperative “that we were *seen* to be strong” (added emphasis). On a second occasion more recently, another Prime Minister entered into a conflict because ultimately, when all other motives were exhausted, he did not wish to look back through the eyes of history and *see himself* as an appeaser. Exactly the same sentiment is uttered by Herod in Mark’s gospel when “out of *regard* for his oaths and for his guests” he was compelled to behead John the Baptist. What we find in all three instances is a different order of will, but will nonetheless, operating through the sense of being looked at. Even modern physics has come to admit that the forms of reality we inhabit are largely determined through the effects of perception in one form or another.

But now consider how Swedenborg’s exegesis is informed by this kind of will/perception. When we read the Bible and find the phrase “God said” or “the Lord God said,” our tendency is to read on and not consider these worthy of too much attention. But Swedenborg does not allow us to read so glibly. The saying of anything by God is always an influx. In terms of influx, “God said” refers to an influx to the rational, understanding part that is guided by truth, and is discernment. But “the Lord God said” is an influx to the will that Swedenborg describes as a “perception.” It is “the Lord God” that represents the deepest level of the celestial realm where the reality is nothing about truth and all about love. This love is a longing for nearness, and this nearness itself is at the heart of the process of glorification undertaken by Jesus Christ, and which is the model for the process of regeneration undertaken by us. We can see, therefore, how imperative it is that we have a very clear idea of Swedenborg’s notion of the will. It expresses the emotive heart of yearning and the sense of lack that ultimately defines desire, the human experience of which points to a higher order of desire.

We should be very careful, therefore, when we decide to “modernize,” because very little of this structure can actually emanate from the notion of “volition.” We may lose more than we gain. But on the other hand, perhaps this has been useful in that it highlights the fact that possibly overuse has allowed us to take it too much for granted, and that we have fallen asleep on our own assumptions. Swedenborg is very relevant to the twenty-first century, but such changes will make it more difficult to communicate what he has to offer. Even so, it is interesting to note the circularity: Will-volition-desire/appetition- [regeneration]-love-will. Perhaps it is time to rediscover our own roots.

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