

“DEVOLUTIONS OF THE INFINITE”

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This intriguing phrase appears in the little work on *The Athanasian Creed*, speaking of the Lord as a Man who is “girded about with Divine love,” which shines around Him like a sun.¹ Surrounding that sun are “radiant circles” which are “devolutions of the infinite.” Their use is to accommodate the Divine to the angels, who can no more bear the immediate presence of Divine love than we could survive close to our natural sun.

There are several shades of meaning in the word “devolution.” In one sense, it means to transfer something from one person to another. So “devolutions of the Divine” would be the means whereby the Lord gives life from Himself to others. Such means are vital; there has to be something between the Infinite and the finite, by which they can be connected. As the natural atmospheres temper the radiant energy from our sun so that we may receive it without harm, so the “radiant circles” and atmospheres emanating from the spiritual sun serve to accommodate the life flowing out of that sun so it can be received by finite creatures—angels and people on earth—without overpowering them. The phrase “devolutions of the infinite” indicates that these means are provided by, and derived from, the Infinite; they are not a property of nature or the product of any human thought or effort.

You occasionally hear an agnostic say that we cannot know God because He is infinite and our minds are finite. This sounds reasonable, but is erroneous because it fails to take into account the fact that the infinite has devolved from itself means whereby it can be communicated to finite beings. Out of the Divine has come the Word, in which God accommodates Himself and addresses Himself to man. And most affecting of all, of course, is the Word made flesh, the Lord Himself in His own Divine Human. So while it is true that finite human beings cannot know

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¹ This work may be found near the end of Vol. VI of *Apocalypse Explained*. I am quoting from page 525 in the Standard Edition.

the Divine in itself, we can know the Lord. He is Immanuel, “God with us.” This is all we can know, and all we need to know, of God.

The Latin root of the word “devolve” means “to roll down.” Here we have an idea that puts a new slant on the familiar term “evolution,” meaning an “unrolling” or “rolling out.” It leads us to think that whatever is “unrolled” out of the earth must have been “rolled down” or “devolved” from the Divine, and “involved” or “rolled into” the earth, in the first place. To coin a phrase, “devolution and involution must precede evolution.”

In our efforts to understand the nature of the created universe we must not begin half way through the cycle of creation, but begin at the beginning. If we begin with nature and base our thoughts on how forms of life arose just on our observation of nature, we are bound to err. We must recognize that there is something prior to nature—the Divine and the spiritual—from which nature is derived, and that nature is thus endowed with a tendency to bring forth something supernatural, namely life. How could life arise from non-living matter? To say it “evolved” explains nothing and is just a way of pretending there is a merely natural explanation.

“Involve” means to roll in, wrap up, or enfold, so as to conceal or obscure what has been so enveloped. *This* is the process of creation; it is not making something out of nothing, but rather, making something (Divine substance) into (relatively) nothing. Creating something is not so much a matter of giving it being, but of *reducing* Being Itself so It can be contained in a finite form. Things are created when Divine substance *takes form* in them on the natural plane of being.

The difficulty with saying this is that it may seem to imply pantheism. If, as the Writings say, God created the universe out of Himself, then does it not follow that natural substance is divine? Swedenborg calls this dilemma a “Gordian knot,” and solves it with the hitherto unknown doctrine of discrete degrees. The natural does indeed come from the spiritual, but on a distinctly different plane of creation, composed of a distinctly different kind of substance. To understand this, all we have to do is consider how a person’s soul and body are related. The soul flows into and is present in every cell of the body, ordering it and causing it to live; but the soul is made of spiritual substance while the body is made of natural

substance. The body is not spiritual even though the spirit is present in it; they are entirely distinct. Similarly, God is present in every atom of the natural universe, though apart from nature. He is in every space and time, but apart from space and time (DLW 7, 69, 73). The New Church doctrine, therefore, is not pantheism, but *panentheism*; that is, God is in all things, but they possess nothing of the divine in themselves.

The Divine, or God, is Being Itself, Reality Itself, Substance Itself, and Form Itself. Created things are derived from His divine substance and are “real” only in the degree to which they partake of that One Infinite Uncreated Substance. In creating, the Lord “devolves” His infinite substance (divine love) in order to “involve” it in the natural universe. The existence of everything in creation is derived from One who alone has Being in Himself. “The substance that is substance in itself is the sole substance” (DLW 197). This is referring to God, who is “the All in all things of the universe” (DLW 198). *Existence* is a manifestation of *being*. This is true of all created things, including us. “We are because God is” (DP 46e). A human being is God in the act of being human. The Being who is being human in a human being is the Lord.

Creation, therefore, is not something that occurred only once in a “Big Bang” a long time ago, but is an on-going process. The principle, stated in the Writings in several places, is that subsistence is perpetual existence, or perpetual creation (DLW 152). The universe is continually being created. It is continually *existing*, in the most exact sense of that word—that is, it is continually coming into being. The existence of the universe is nothing other than the divine standing forth or manifesting itself on the natural plane. It is this perpetual inflowing of the divine into nature which counteracts entropy, or the tendency of natural matter to fall into disorder and decay; otherwise it would be with the whole universe as it is with a human body after the spirit departs from it and it decomposes. Life, flowing into the universe every moment from its perpetual Creator, might be termed “anti-entropy.”

Exactly *how* God transforms His divine substance into material substance is something we can never fully comprehend. The best explanation of it is given in Swedenborg’s *Principia*, but it is a divine operation and will forever be largely a mystery. The essential point to remember is that although the universe is created “in God from God,” it is “not continuous

from Him” (DLW 55, 283). One way I have thought of this is to compare God to the ocean and the universe to a bubble suspended in the ocean. Imagine that the ocean is conscious and contrives to separate elements in itself to create a distinctly new form of substance. Some water molecules are broken down into hydrogen and oxygen. The bubble thus formed is of a completely different nature than the water, yet it is derived from the water, is contained within the water, and owes its continued existence to the water around it every moment. This is how it is with the created universe and everything in it. “In Him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28, DLW 301).

Although the process whereby something finite was created by and from the infinite is a great mystery, the possibility of it is more apparent to us now than it was in Swedenborg’s day because we are familiar with the splitting of the atom and the conversion of matter into energy in an atomic reaction. That equivalence—of energy and matter—makes it easier for us to imagine matter coming from divine energy in the first place.

Divine energy is the Holy Spirit, the going forth of divine love by means of divine wisdom to accomplish its ends. It is the Word which was “in the beginning with God,” and which was most fully incarnated in the Lord Jesus Christ. “All things were made by Him, and without Him was not any thing made that was made” (John 1:3).

The creation of the universe is an inevitable consequence of what God *is*, namely, Love Itself. It is the nature of love to give of its own to others, to seek oneness with them, and to make them happy from itself (DLW 47). The universal end in all creation, therefore, is the Creator’s will to provide for the existence of beings outside Himself who can know and respond to Him, be conjoined with Him by love, and thus receive life and all the delights that accompany it from Him (DLW 170).

We see, then, that human life is not just an accidental by-product of natural evolution, but is the purpose for which the natural world was created in the first place. Evolution is not a blind and random pushing up from primitive natural substance, but a deliberate, divinely guided process leading to an end the Lord had in view from the beginning of creation—namely, a heaven from the human race (DP 27). The existence of the natural world is simply a means to that end. Its purpose is to provide a place for the creation and spiritual formation of new human beings. Plants

and animals also receive life from God, but not consciously. To be conscious of receiving it is to receive it in all its abundance; that is, to experience the joy of it (cf. John 10:10). We experience this joy when we perceive and participate in the divine love and wisdom that lie behind this natural world.

The natural universe is a "soul school" in which we are prepared for the eternal life of heaven. It serves, not just as a physical support for human existence, but in the formation of the mind and spirit, because all natural things correspond to spiritual realities (states of human life, affections and thoughts). The concrete, definite forms of the outer world give us a basis for understanding abstract spiritual things. The more we learn to see beyond external things to the internal or spiritual things they represent the more our minds are being prepared for life in heaven.

It is a philosophical truth that "the end begets the cause, and through the cause the effect (DLW 189, 241); and that "the end is the all of the cause, and also all of the effect" (DLW 168, 197). Therefore, unless we know the end and the cause, and keep them in mind, we cannot truly understand the nature of the universe we live in. Our thought will be missing the first thing about it, from which all else follows. "God is the All in all things of the universe" (DLW 198). This is why the scientific investigation of the universe must finally be united with the truths revealed by the Lord in His Word. Far from being antithetical, true religious thought and true scientific thought make a one and are incomplete apart from each other.

Divine love is devolved first into the spiritual atmospheres proceeding from the spiritual sun, then into the waters, lands and forms of the spiritual world, which are called "the generals through and from which each and all things take their form with infinite variety" (DLW 173). In the further devolutions of the Divine into the realm of nature, these spiritual forms are then "materialized" by being clothed with natural substances (see DLW 344). We may regard the natural world, therefore, as the covering, or even the "gift-wrapping," in which Divine love is presented to us. "Verily, Thou art a God that hidest Thyself," it says in Isaiah. ". . . for upon all the glory there shall be a covering" (Isaiah 4:5; 45:15. The word "covering" is translated "defence" in the KJV).

A purely naturalistic view of the universe makes the "wrapping" everything, failing to perceive the gift within, much less the Giver. Even

some who believe in the existence of spirit tend to think of it as an ethereal and relatively unreal *something* derived from matter. The truth is just the opposite: spirit is most real, natural matter is derived from it and is relatively less substantial. C.S. Lewis depicts this very nicely in his book *The Great Divorce*. In that story, the grass of the spiritual world is so real that it hurts the feet of newly arrived spirits from earth who haven't yet become fully acclimated to that world.

The devolutions from the Divine grow less and less substantial as they proceed down into natural matter (although to the half-blind natural mind this world seems more substantial and real than the spiritual world). Our world of natural substances is the most inert, compressed, and least living of the successive devolutions of the Infinite. It is where the life flowing from the Lord "terminates" (DLW 165). It is composed of "the endings and closings of the atmospheres" (DLW 305). At this point, the ever-outreaching life from the Lord is so diminished that it closes in on itself, forming natural substances. We might think of natural matter as frozen spirit.

The life from the Divine which is wrapped up in the natural world is the source of the earth's *conatus* (endeavor, striving) to bring forth forms of use, culminating in human life, to which all uses look and in which they are all gathered together. Nature in itself is dead, but has been infused with spirit from the Lord. It is "encompassed," "actuated," and "vivified" by the influx of life from the Lord in it.

It is the same with our bodies—they live, but only because of the spirit in them which activates them. And it is the same with the Sacred Scriptures or the Word, the letter of which would be dead if it were not for the spiritual sense contained within it. The letter of the Word is devolved from the Divine truth of the spiritual sense. Because of its Divine and spiritual origin, the Word is imbued with life; and in the mind of the reader strives to form a conscience and to order the mind so as to open up perception of Divine truth.

We may evolve the spiritual sense from the letter only because the letter was devolved from that sense in the first place. For instance, in the Writings of the New Church, the details of the Lord's glorification are evolved from the Old Testament stories of the patriarchs only because those divine truths were involved or wrapped up in the Old Testament in the first place.

In the first place. This is what is missing from a materialistic theory of evolution as the product only of chance and natural selection. Purpose is so evident in the formation of things out of the earth that only a really determined materialist can ignore it or explain it away. The materialist says there is no divine purpose, that the idea of purpose is something human observers read into nature. But the thought that purposeless natural selection produced the ten million examples of ingenuity, usefulness, and beauty we see in nature, not to mention human consciousness itself, is more incredible, it seems to me, than simply to believe in God.

“Think of wisdom and place it outside of man—is it anything?” (DLW 286). No, there is no such thing as ethereal, disembodied wisdom. It is axiomatic that “love and wisdom are not possible except in a form,” and that form is human (DLW 28). Therefore, “unless God were a Man the universe could not have been created” (DLW 285).

This is a revolutionary thought. Many people have found it difficult to think of God as Human, to believe in a personal God, because it seemed to them ridiculous to ascribe the creation of the universe to such a God. This is because they think only of the limitations of being human, rather than the infinite love and wisdom which submitted itself to those limitations in order to create us.

Once we see that everything in nature reflects love and wisdom embodied in forms of use—in a word, humanity—we then see that the Creator who is so mirrored in His creation must be a Man. The new revelation the Lord has given in His second coming is able to open the mind to see this, thus restoring to nature that Divine Soul which modern thought first reduced to “a ghost in the machine” and then banished altogether.

Those who do not evolve the creation of the universe and all things thereof by continuous mediations from the First (Being), can but hold hypotheses, disjoined and divorced from their causes, which, when surveyed by a mind with an interior perception of things, do not appear like a house, but like heaps of rubbish. (DLW 303) □

