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THE HUMAN MIND

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II. THE MIND AND THE BRAIN

In the first article we traced some of the stages by which mankind was led by Divine Providence to the realization of the differences between the soul and the body, and to recognize that the mind had at least a claim to be regarded as a real substance and a distinct entity. The ensuing dilemma—caused by the apparent impossibility of any intercourse between two so diverse substances—was actually solved by Swedenborg the philosopher through his theory of the dynamic origin of matter; although the learned world has taken slight notice of this accomplishment. But this philosophic solution still leaves the difficulty of seeing what the essence of the soul or mind really is. Without a real idea of the soul—with merely the general definition that it is a “thinking substance,” as Descartes put it—the world was bound to drift into its present state of skepticism about its reality. And this was the reason why our philosopher was introduced into the spiritual world, to learn first-hand what the soul was, and to feel the marvelous reality of mental things and teach men of their destiny as immortal spirits.

When René Descartes laid down his definitions of the body as extended substance and of the soul as thinking substance, he called attention to the problem of how to conceive of the intercourse between these two parts of man which, as far as our earthly experience testifies, work together. Swedenborg—by developing a new concept of matter as consisting in motion and force and originating in *conatus*, which is spiritual—made possible an understanding of

¹ The second in a series of articles.

how the spiritual, or the soul, can influence the body and direct it without expending any energy. But for a comprehension of this intercourse it was not enough to say that the soul was a "thinking" substance; it was also essential to clarify what the soul really was, as a spiritual substance considered. The conception that the mind was only "thought," even if in thought was included desire and knowledge, encouraged the notion that it was a "simple substance" without any real form or predicates (LJ post. 263; Infl. 17 : 2; TCR 90 : 2; DLW 229; DP 6; AE 750 : 2), and thus a mere abstraction not composed of any real constituents.

Swedenborg's studies, brought to final fruition by his experiences in the spiritual world, led him to a realization that the mind was not only the real spiritual man which lives within the body, but was actually a man after death (DP 124). And indeed he realized that the mind or soul belonged to a world of spiritual realities of which contemporary philosophy had taken slight notice—a super-physical world wherein are hidden the sources of all human life.

While Descartes and other thinkers often spoke of the mind as if it was identical with consciousness, Swedenborg saw deeper vistas within it. The mind was organized, depth within depth; and consciousness played within the more external strata like a searchlight, revealing only fragments of its living contents and its latent powers.

Christians had never come to any clear idea about the origin of the soul. Some held to the "traducianist" belief that the soul as well as the body of the offspring was generated from the parents and was radically infected with "original sin" from Adam; while others, to account for human freedom, held that the soul was created by God at conception, created pure and perfect, and added to the body from without—perhaps because it is said in Genesis: "And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living soul."

The New Church doctrine answers the problems of hereditary evils and of man's freedom by distinguishing several degrees within the inherited soul. In the paternal seed from which man is conceived there is "a graft or offset of the father's soul in its fulness, within a certain covering (*involutrum*) from the elements of na-

ture," "out of which the body is formed in the mother's womb." This "Soul" is composed (*contexta*) of such things as are in the spiritual world. Being spiritual, it "has nothing in common with space." In the seed—which is "conceived interiorly in the understanding and formed in the will"—the paternal soul dwells in its fulness, including not only the mind but also the animus, the disposition, inclination, and affection of the father and his forebears—an inheritance which can be changed in the offspring only "by the spiritual things of the church" (TCR 103, 584; CL 183: 4, 220; Love ii).

Maternal heredity does not affect the soul of the immediate offspring, except from without, as a conditioning factor. But it would follow that if the temperament and inclination thus impressed from without by the mother be confirmed by the child, he will, if a son, hand it on as an inherent part of his "soul" to the grandchildren.

From what has been cited above, it is clear that the inherited "soul" contains several degrees in which life may be received and made the child's own. The lowest of these degrees is in perverted form, owing to ancestral inclinations to evils of various kinds which have been confirmed and made habitual in past generations. But there are also interior degrees which are still in Divine order and are not influenced by the evils of the race.

To designate these degrees, it was necessary for the Writings to adopt, at times, a more specific terminology. Swedenborg was not a "stickler" for terms. And while New Church men, who on the whole are sensible people, naturally are suspicious of any philosophy that is overmuch wrapped up in terms, they are faced with the fact that the angelic wisdom in the Writings becomes utterly unintelligible and paradoxical unless we come to understand the way in which words are used by the revelator. And certainly some teachings would be reduced to utter nonsense if we insisted that Swedenborg always used the same term with precisely the same meaning, irrespective of context and evident purpose. Such a term is the word "soul."

In the *Rational Psychology*, as usually in the Writings, Swedenborg used the word "soul" to include everything spiritual in man, both good and evil; thus everything that man, from his mind, makes a part of his spirit which is to live after death, and a part of

the heredity that he bestows on the offspring. But in the Writings there are also teachings about an inmost or highest degree, which receives the influx of life from God directly and is not acted upon except by God. It is what makes every man "human," endowing him with the faculties of rationality and liberty and forming him into the image of God. This degree is above angelic consciousness. It is distinguished as "a superior spiritual substance" which is above the mind—even above the angelic heaven. It is sometimes called "the human internal" or "inmost," but also, simply, "the soul"—as discriminated from "the mind" (Infl. 8; TCR 8; AC 1999; HH 39; LJ 25; SD 5548; WE 919, etc.).

We therefore meet up with the teaching that man consists of soul, mind, and body. The mind is also called his "spirit" (Inv. 13, 14; CL 101). But in connection with this, it is pointed out that the soul is the inmost of the whole man, and unless this were the case, the body could not be alive. The soul in the other life is therefore in a spiritual body without which the soul and the mind of the angel would not "subsist."

Thus we may see that what is called "the mind" is only a further organization of the soul. And the body is only the soul and mind in their ultimate aspect. In this world the body projected by the soul is indeed infilled with material substances which serve its uses here on earth. But the body, as to all that is vital in it, is still only the ultimate "degree" of the mind (Inv. 14).

The soul, the human "inmost," thus forms the body which is born into the world. All men are therefore born human as to form, and all have the faculties of freedom and rationality. The soul acts only as the viceregent or tool of the Divine Creator. But the paternal inheritance also contributes a mind—with inclinations and a genius specific to the family and modified by the influence of the mother. This mind cannot interfere in the creation of the body, although it gives a certain individual character to it, visibly modifying its features. Yet when an infant is born it cannot properly be said to have a "mind." There is the soul, and there is the body; and there is certainly a communication between them (Can. Redr. iv). But what we generally mean by a "mind" is based on sense-experience; and this the infant lacks (AC 1900).

However, for "communication" there must always be a medium.

And the Writings describe this medium as consisting of three mental "degrees," or as three minds—the celestial, the spiritual, and the natural. At birth, we are assured, every man has this mind of three degrees. They are at first "potential" rather than actual, but they are substantial and real and are meant to be opened or entered into successively, beginning with the lowest or natural (DLW 237, 239). These three degrees of the mind are said to be, as it were, "transparent"—suggesting that they can transmit spiritual light, communicating the discrete powers of wisdom, intelligence, and reasoning even to the newly born babe who can as yet utilize none of these powers (DLW 245).

It is stated that these three minds or mental degrees answer to the three discrete heavens. By the use of one of the two higher degrees, man becomes a celestial or a spiritual angel. None the less, the lowest or natural degree, which answers to the first or ultimate heaven, is at least partially opened to man on earth for actual conscious use. This spiritual-natural degree, which is called the ultimate spiritual (DLW 245), is the degree in which is built up what the Writings call "the natural mind."

Therefore it may be said that there are two "minds" in man: a natural mind which is for our use in this world, and which is opened and formed through such things as are in the natural world; and a spiritual mind which is to be for our use in the spiritual world and is opened and formed from such things as are in heaven or have been revealed thence (AE 790; F 32; Life 86).

It may be difficult to visualize what is meant by the three "degrees" of the mind being already present in every infant at birth. While one degree is called "natural," even it cannot be regarded as anything but spiritual in essence, and, indeed, as the ultimate spiritual. All the mental degrees are present at birth, but unopened or unformed. This means, of course, that the newly born infant is utterly unconscious of anything of his mind until knowledges are formed by the medium of the senses. It is universally recognized that life becomes distinct only so far as conscious ideas are formed, and these can be formed only on the basis of sensations.

Before any of these mental degrees are thus opened and furnished, they may be called "degrees" indeed, but not as yet mental

“planes.” The “degrees” of the mind, before they are furnished, are only the paths of influx for the life which comes from the Lord. They serve for accommodating and directing this inflowing life, and thus for actuating the lower degree. The *Arcana* illustrates this in connection with the regeneration of man, showing that before the interior degrees are “terminated” by becoming planes of conscience, they cannot receive (or respond to) the good inflowing from the Lord; but the life flows through it as water through a sieve, and goes all the way down into the sensual degree where it is felt as the voluptuous delights of self and the world (AC 5145, 4167, 6207). But if a higher degree has been “terminated” it can hold the influx, which then develops and brings out the potentialities of that degree. So far as the will is concerned, these “terminations” are affections of good and truth. In the understanding the “terminations” consist of truths.

The whole object of man’s existence is therefore to procure such “terminations” for the various degrees of his mind. For man is a vessel of life—and his quality as a receiving vessel depends on the extent to which he develops these degrees into planes organized for reception and reaction.

When man is born he has an inmost soul which is individual but beyond his control; he has a body, which this soul has fashioned for itself; and he has a mind, but only in the sense that there are the three substantial degrees by which the soul communicates with the body. And the object of life, which is hidden in the soul, is to build the mind into such a form that it can receive and express the life which the soul transmits.

But let us not think of these interior degrees of soul and mind—although they are not opened or terminated—as devoid of individual qualities. For the soul is a finite thing, and no two finite things are alike. Indeed, we read that “there is nothing in the soul, in the mind, and in the body, which is not masculine in the male and feminine in the female” (CL 46, cf. 158). Since the Lord must have a purpose with every individual that is born, it is reasonable to suppose that that purpose can be distinguished from the very soul. The same must hold true also of the mental degrees. These cannot be considered as utterly blank things devoid of qualities; and since we inherit the persistent genius of our race, we can

hardly suppose that the interior degrees of the celestial church did not differ from those which we inherit. Indeed, we cannot divorce these substantial degrees, spiritual and celestial, from the heavens of the afterlife, with which they must cohere at all times, and by which they are conditioned from the first.

As to the natural degree of the mind, its structure is most radically affected, nay, perverted by inheritance; so much so that its spontaneous reaction is utterly contrary to the spiritual mind and cannot be amended except by a radical reformation (DLW 270, 432, 273). And the teaching is quite clear that, while the spiritual and celestial degrees are in the image of heaven where evil cannot find a home, all evils and falsities, both hereditary and acquired, reside in the natural degree of the mind (DLW 270). We are further told that while the spiritual mind derives its substance and form only from the substances of the spiritual world, the natural mind consists not only of spiritual substances but also of substances of the natural world (DLW 260, 270, 273, 257).

This might suggest the idea that natural substance as such could be responsible for the existence of evil. This, I believe, would be a misreading of the teachings. It is indeed stated that natural substance in itself is dead and is acted on from without by spiritual substances, and thus reacts or resists (DLW 260). But this reaction or resistance, which characterizes matter from creation, does not itself constitute "evil." Yet it is true that spiritual substance by itself is not free to pervert itself. New Church doctrine rejects the myth that angels were created before the natural world, and that some rose in rebellion under Lucifer and became devils. Instead, it teaches that evil, although certainly of spiritual origin, arose with man on earth, and was caused by a separation of the "ultimate spiritual," which is called the spiritual-natural, from the higher degrees. This separation and perversion of the lowest spiritual could occur only in the natural minds of men (DLW 345).

Such was the origin of evil and of hell, and thence came all "evil uses" in both worlds. Evil is a perversion of order; and the spiritual cannot pervert its order except by approving and preferring the resistance-to-life which is inevitably found in natural substance. This negation to life and its purposes is normal in dead matter which is deprived of purpose or intent. But for the spiritual to come to delight in such spiritual inertia is to separate itself from its source, and oppose the order of its creation.

Why, then, is it necessary for man to be born on earth? The answer is given in various forms in the Writings. One treatment shows that the mind or spirit can be formed only in man, and cannot be propagated except through man, because spiritual substances are not constant but need a material basis to become permanently formed (*Wis. viii*). Other treatments combine to show that the exercise of man's freedom of choice requires the fixed ultimates of earth by which man's spirit is compelled to undergo varying states and be in situations which do not accord with his native inclinations, but resist them.

For this cause, man starts his life in a body of flesh, kindred to the dust. The degree of the mind into which he enters by birth is the natural degree. By means of knowledge, this degree is formed into a mind or an organized plane of thoughts and affections. Knowledge then accumulates, increasing continuously without any apparent discrete stages. Yet, within the general degree of the natural mind we may distinguish three ascending degrees, the last of which is reached when man becomes rational (*DLW 67, 239, 256*).

Thus the natural mind is said to be able to ascend through three degrees, or descend through three degrees (*DLW 274*). It can ascend by being formed from goods and truths, or it can descend by evils and falsities. The three ascending degrees are in general identified with the sensual, the natural, and the rational (*AE 1147, 1056: 2*). The natural degree, at birth, is in a perverse state and form, as to all its inherited inclinations. The tender infant, we are once told, is born in a "state of damnation" (*DP 83: 2*). But this perversity has not become finally identified with the man that is to be. This man, or this mind, is yet to be formed. The natural degree is to be the scene of this formation, or of the observable part of this formation. And Divine mercy—nay, Divine justice—provides that into the natural degree, despite its perversity can be introduced a new element, knowledge, which in itself is not perverse, but which may lay a new foundation of order within the natural mind as it grows and unfolds. Around these new foundations of knowledge, which reflect the order of creation, new affections can entwine which may in time become subservient to the spiritual ends of life; so that the child, from being merely sensual in its reactions, may be increasingly enriched with knowl-

edge, and then come to sense within the symbolism of sensory life a deeper set of meanings; until at last these may be seen in their reasonable relations and build up a control over the natural impulses, so that man assumes intelligent charge over his natural mind, and thus becomes spiritually a free man, not a slave.

The spiritual degrees of the mind, consisting only of spiritual substance, are beyond the power of the body. In the course of life they may be more and more shut off—alienated, closed, disowned. Or they may be opened and appropriated; not indeed opened to our consciousness while here on earth, but opened for a future use, even as a source of wealth and power which unknowingly accumulates if man exercises his ordinary freedom rightly in the realm of his natural mind, which is immersed into the interior organics of his body.

The natural mind is formed in the body. It “consists” not only of the spiritual substances from which its thought and mental activity take their origin, but simultaneously of natural substances which can carry out its behests in the natural body, and makes, in the interiors of the body, a plane which corresponds to the states of this mind (DLW 257).

For the period of nine years immediately preceding his introduction into the spiritual world, Swedenborg devoted himself to an intense study of the organics of the body, and especially of the brain, with a view to seeing how the mind was associated with the body. He was the first scholar to demonstrate that the conscious mind—the voluntary mind—had its seat and control-centers in the tiny cells which are scattered in profusion within the cortex of the cerebrum or forebrain. The cortex, or “bark,” means the layer of gray matter which is spread over the whole brain. From these cortical “glands,” as he called them, proceed innumerable nervous fibres, some connecting the cortical cells together in a perfect web of association, some projecting themselves into the middle portions of the brain, some bundling together forming motor nerves or sensory nerves or nerves of mixed functions, and going forth into the body.

But Swedenborg was led to confirm a further conclusion: that the cortical cells were the laboratories for the vital fluids which were the carriers of the life which came from the soul. These

fluids vitalized the blood—exerting a control over all bodily functions by regulating the secretion of subtle “hormones” or organic chemical elements which were concocted not only in certain organics in the brain but in the internal secretory glands all over the body. These vital fluids also traveled through the nerve fibres, distending them so that they should be able to carry the currents of sensations up to the brain, or, in the case of motory nerves, cause the muscle fibres to be stimulated into contraction.

This chemical function of the brain was carried out by all its parts—by the cerebrum, by the midbrain, by the cerebellum and the medulla. Each cortical gland was a recipient of a flow of pure lymph or “purer blood” from the arteries. This purer blood circulated through the cortical glands, and was there recreated by undergoing a reconstruction, a critical rebuilding, before it was again poured out through the nerve fibres. Two new elements were also added: first, a finest ethereal “chyle” derived from the ether, and second, a “spirituous fluid,” distilled in the “simple cortex” of each gland under the auspices of the soul, from the purest aura or essence of nature. This “spirituous fluid” was sensitively obedient to the inner states of the mind. And it projected a “simple fibre”—a flashing organic current which by its vortex actions built and maintained not only the cortical cells and the nerve fibres but also the entire bodily organism.

In the cerebral cortex, the cortical glands were dedicated to the special use of aiding conscious life. To each of these glands, sensory impulses were forwarded, directly or indirectly, through the nerve fibres, and these impulses, since they corresponded to actual situations and states in the sensory organs and in the natural world around, in changing the external form and state of some group of the glands also impressed them with a record of these states so that they could easily resume each state if required.

Here we have what Swedenborg regarded as the organic basis of *memory*. Not that he confused the mechanical changes of the gland with the living state which we know as *sensation*. His doctrine, in the *Rational Psychology* as later in the Writings, was that the soul, i.e., the spirit of man, alone could feel or “sense.” The spirit, which was above space and matter, found in the harmony among the physical glands an intelligent meaning or a use

which corresponded, however distantly, to something of its own intent. And thus the spiritual could "inflow" and form itself into a percept, a concept, a conscious idea of a form or a use—enough to cause a "recognition" of an object and a sense of delight. And with such a "recognition" there is a beginning of the formation of the mind.

It is notable that the living spirit, the "spiritual-natural degree", could never form itself into a mind and thus be transformed into a self-conscious being aware of its own life, without the aid of the natural organisms of the brain, which place the order of outside nature before it. Even before birth the body, as it is being formed by the soul, contains sensory fibres which carry the states of the body into the brain and occasion what might be called a sensation, on the part of the spirit or soul, of the states of the body; but the soul is then acting involuntarily or instinctively. Yet with birth and the opening of the lungs a new condition obtains, not only because the currents of vital fluids are directed differently, but because the brain begins to record states which are caused by the agencies of the senses which now begin to thrill to the harmonies of the outside world.

The Writings stress above all the principle that there is not any physical influx—no influx from the body into the soul, or from the natural into the spiritual. *Sensation*—through which knowledge is formed in the mind—is not an effect of the physical body's action upon the soul. But it is an act of the soul *forming itself* in recognition of a harmony already contained potentially in itself. This is in line with the principle that between two discrete degrees there can be no communication by continuity, but only a communication by correspondence; or, in other words, that "influx is according to correspondences." What other connection can we imagine as existing between a sensory impress upon a group of cortical cells, and an idea or sensory perception in the mind, than that of a "correspondence"?

In Swedenborg's day and for a century afterwards, it came to be generally felt that since the soul must be everywhere in the body as a sort of "simple substance," it would not do to set aside any particular organs or spatial areas in body or brain for the particular faculties of the soul. But Swedenborg—from insight and

reflection founded on recorded experiments²—showed that, not only were various designated areas in the brain's cortex the control points for definite parts of the muscular system, but that the conscious functions of life were localized in the anterior parts of the cerebrum, as is now acknowledged. Life was sensed distinctly where the sensations of material objects—seen, heard, or felt—could be reconstructed into ideas or concepts, and this occurred in the anterior lobes of the brain. The lower and accessory functions of life were present in other parts of the nervous system and the body. But the marvelous building of a conscious and intelligent human mind—by conceptual interpretations of sensations—occurred in the cerebral cortex. And there, too, must be situated the source of voluntary or deliberate actions—as well as the seat of the judgment and the moral and spiritual functions of the human reason; since these higher faculties are not exercised except on the basis of knowledge.

To sum up. While man at birth was endowed, by the Lord through his parents, with a human soul, and with three spiritual degrees—a spiritual equipment which was already given an individual direction and bent and limitation by various spiritual factors, and in its lower levels was colored by hereditary perversions—yet a conscious and responsible human life could not commence except in a natural body through which the states and conditions of the space-time world can be presented before the soul, which can then order its own form in correspondence to the harmonies, or disharmonies, of the sensory.

Moreover, the only degree of the connate spiritual endowment which is thus immersed, as it were, into correspondential contact with the order and variety of nature is the natural degree, the spiritual-natural; and this is what is then formed—or what forms itself, by the powers of its soul—into the *natural mind*. This mind-plane is therefore said to consist not only of spiritual substance but also of natural substances, which are, of course, such as the brain and the inmosts of the body provide.

The natural mind, therefore, is formed in the purer organics of the body, and, as to its conscious and voluntary phases—in those

² For the pathological data which directed Swedenborg's conclusions, see *Ramström*, "Swedenborg's Investigations . . . and the Functions of the Brain," Upsala University, 1910.

of the brain. Its first awakening comes as sensations, out of which are organized the plane of man's *memory*, which is done on the basis of external changes in the cortical glands. Yet the natural mind is a complex structure and contains several interior faculties, as the *imagination* and the *reason*, with their various affections. And for an idea of the organic basis of these higher functions, Swedenborg, in his *Psychology*, directs us to the interior structures of the cortical glands.

(To be Continued)