

PROVIDENCE AND FREE WILL IN HUMAN ACTIONS¹

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The Question

Why do human actions take place as they do? Why have the events in history occurred, instead of other events that might have occurred? Why does each individual act as he does, and not in some other way? What are the causes that produce human action? This study arises from an attempt to answer these questions.

A New Church man's philosophy of life should be based upon the two foundations of truth—the Word, and what he observes in nature.³ The Word is the foundation itself,⁴ and so we begin with the well-known truth that Providence operates in greatest and in least things, in universals and also in the tiniest singulars.⁵ The Writings abundantly teach the infinite operation of Providence in every least thing of creation, and these teachings have rightly received considerable emphasis in the New Church. Clearly Providence plays a major role in the cause or determination of human actions. My question is whether it plays the *only* role in causing human actions. Is man free, to some extent, in his natural actions, as he is free in his spirit?

It is important to establish firmly at the outset that whether or not man's actions are freely chosen, it is essentially his mind, not his body, that is free. The essential of freedom is in man's will.⁶ But what does freedom mean? The Writings speak of several different kinds of freedom. Sometimes they refer to the *faculty* of liberty or freedom, and sometimes⁷ to man's *use or abuse* of freedom.

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³SD 5709, 5710

⁴SD 5710

⁵DP 201, 202, 212, 285, 294:6; AE 1135:4; AC 6481-6486)

⁶DP 71, 176; TCR 475-482, 497, 498, 501

⁷e.g., DP 73

Every man is given free will, meaning that he can choose good or evil.⁸ By his choices he comes into either heavenly freedom or hellish freedom. Heavenly freedom is to follow the Lord and so is freedom itself, while hellish freedom is to follow the lusts that flame up from the hells, and this is really slavery.⁹ But for the purposes of this study the important point is that even if man makes bad use of his freedom, he still has free will, or freedom to choose between good and evil. Even if he is on the road to hell, more and more a victim of that apparent freedom which is really slavery to hell, he is still granted the gift of free will; otherwise he would not be able to repent.¹⁰ Even if man is distant from true freedom, the faculty of free will remains with him. It is this faculty of free will, rather than man's use or abuse of freedom, which is at the center of this study, and particularly the question of whether the free will implies some freedom in action.

It is important to establish also that the infinity and omnipotence of Providence are not at issue. The laws of permission are laws of the Divine Providence,¹¹ and permissions do not imply an absence or lack of Divine Providence. The first Christian Church has tended to believe that where Providence does not directly cause something, it is therefore absent—and so it appears to the natural man. The existence of permissions has therefore led many to doubt the infinity and universality of Providence.¹² This difficulty is resolved by the doctrine of permissions given in the Writings of Swedenborg, and the question before us is not whether there are permissions, but in what areas of human life they exist. *In what ways* does Providence permit man freely to choose evil? If we say that in Area X Providence permits man to choose evil, this hardly means that Providence is not in operation in Area X. It simply means that one of the modes of Providence is that in Area X it is of order that man shall be free, whether he chooses good or evil.

Does Providence operate by allowing free *actions* as well as free choices of the *will* or are free actions too dangerous to leave to man's freedom? In either case Providence is infinite and operates in all things. The reasons for permissions are important and will be touched on in the pages that follow, but my principal question revolves around whether permissions extend to human actions.

⁸TCR 463-504; DP 71-99, 138-142, 249; etc.

⁹DP 43, 97-99, 149; John 8:31-36

¹⁰DP 97

¹¹DP 234 etc.

¹²DP 234-274

It should be obvious also that if man does in fact enjoy some freedom in action as well as in mind, that freedom is surely limited—not only by the laws of permission,¹³ but also by space and time, and by such factors as heredity, environment, past experiences, and free choices already made. Limitations upon man's freedom are frequently pointed out from religious and secular sources, but such limitations in some area of life do not mean that man has no freedom at all in that area. To the question of limitations on freedom we will also return.

Another important principle to hold in mind is that in all that it does, the Lord's Providence looks to what is infinite and eternal, not to what is finite and temporal.¹⁴ No good is provided that does not look to eternity, nor is any evil permitted that cannot somehow, even if remotely and indirectly, further some eternal end of good.¹⁵ If man is granted some degree of freedom in natural actions, it is not for the sake of the actions themselves or for any temporal purpose, but solely for eternal ends and uses. The natural man may regard free action as a good in itself, but in the Lord's eyes nothing of time or space is good except as it serves an eternal end. The question is whether His eternal ends are served by freedom in man's temporal actions.

A final introductory point concerns the continuing discussion in the New Church about the Lord's foresight and man's freedom. To some the Writings of Swedenborg say that the Lord foresees all things from eternity in the sense that He is aware of all the potential realities, all the potential choices and directions that any and all men may come into. But He does not foresee particular events in the sense that He knows before a human decision is made exactly how it *will* be made.¹⁶ To others the Writings say the Lord does foresee specifically what man will and will not choose; He foresees not simply potentialities but foreknows exactly what choices will be made and foreknows what choices will not be made. I subscribe to the latter interpretation because I believe it is what the plain statements of the Writings directly say,¹⁷ because I see no conflict

¹³e.g., DP 296

¹⁴DP 46-69; etc.

¹⁵DP 296

¹⁶For example, see Alfred Acton, "Divine Government and Human Freedom of Choice", *New Church Life*, Vol. XLVIII, pp. 533-557, Sept., 1928.

¹⁷e.g., AC 587, 3854, 3869:3, 4136:2, 4383, 5122, 6484, 10441; DP 67, 333; TCR 31; SD 4652m, 4692m, 4704, 5002; etc.

with the doctrine of free will;¹⁸ and because I believe the alternate interpretation imposes the limitation of time upon the Divine.

The point I wish to make, however, is that the question of *how* the Lord foresees is of only peripheral relevance to the present study. The question before us is not about free choice itself, but whether the free choice which exists in spiritual things exists also in natural actions. In whatever way the Lord foresees, He foresees both spiritual and natural things. Whatever understanding of Divine foresight a man has, presumably applies to both spiritual and natural planes. If the Lord foreknows particular human decisions on the *spiritual* plane, those decisions are still free; and the same would be true on the *natural* plane. But if the Lord does not foreknow the particulars of man's *spiritual* path, then presumably He does not foreknow the particulars of man's *natural* path. Whatever reconciliation a man makes between Divine foresight and human freedom would seem to have little relevance to the question of whether or not that freedom extends into natural actions. (It is interesting to note that of those who tend to see man as free in natural actions, some believe and others disbelieve in Divine foreknowledge of particular decisions; and that those who tend *not* to see man as free in natural actions also represent both interpretations about exactly *how* the Lord foresees.)

Why Relevant?

In general, believers in God prefer to think of the course of life as being directed by Providence, such that good always results, nothing really unfair happens, and man's evil is always somehow overruled for good. On the other hand, we feel free in many things, and we want to believe we are free—free to choose good or evil, and therefore responsible for what happens to us and within our spheres of use. It is important to realize, that we cannot have it completely both ways, because in the degree that Providence *alone* determines and causes something, man's freedom and responsibility regarding it are eliminated. Man is not responsible for, nor free in regard to, what the Divine alone determines.

Creation of the world, for example, is a completely Divine work, and man is not responsible for how the Lord created the universe. And so Divine creation is altogether good. Where man is free and responsible, however, Providence cannot be the sole cause of something, and the result will not be pure, unmixed good. For

¹⁸cf. SD 4692m

instance, Providence permits hell because some men will evil. Providence is not the only cause of hell. Although the laws of Providence constitute one of the reasons that hell exists, another causative factor, without which hell would not exist, is that some men choose to will evil. It is true that it is only from the laws of Providence that man is able to will evil, but that does not mean that Providence is the only cause of hell. Man is one of the causes of hell, and man and his free will must be studied, in addition to the nature of God, before we can understand why the hells exist. Where both Providence and free will cause something, we will find neither unmitigated evil—which Providence cannot allow—nor unmitigated good—since those who are free sometimes choose evil.

Believers in Providence are thus faced with the problem that to the extent man is granted free choice, the course of life is not so directed by Providence that what is best always results. The best will always result only where the Divine alone is operating. Where man is free we can have no assurance that only the best will take place. The causes of a thing matter enormously because they determine whether the thing is all good or has varying degrees of evil in it.

If the causes of natural events are solely from Providence, then natural events are all good when seen interiorly and spiritually, and we need not be greatly concerned about them because our free will cannot affect them; we are not responsible. If free will is partially or sometimes a cause of natural events, then we cannot simply leave natural events to Providence; yet with our responsibility for them goes a lack of assurance that they will all turn out for the best. It matters enormously whether the Divine alone or both the Divine and man are causes of different kinds of spiritual and natural happenings.

For example, we live under the appearance that we are free to affect our children for good or for evil. We *feel* that by cooperating with the Lord we can enable our children to receive more remains from the Lord and a greater distaste for evil than if we do not cooperate with the Lord. New Church education is based upon the assumption that through adults' free response to the Lord some real good can be done for children that would not otherwise be done. Yet at the same time we want to believe that the Lord will so protect and care for the young that no failing of our own will bring harm to them. We feel free to influence our children and want to be able to, and we want also to believe that Providence will allow them to be influenced only for good.

We cannot have it both ways, and if the appearance of freedom is true (in the area of educating and influencing children), then *some* of the responsibility for our children's upbringing and remains from the Lord lies with our free will. If we choose not to make the effort we should, then the remains received will be fewer, and our bad efforts will have a relatively harmful effect. This is how we feel about children who are taught nothing about God or about rejecting evils as sins. Surely Providence sees to it that every child receives some remains, but if Providence is *totally* responsible for the amount and kind of remains that children receive, and for their spiritual upbringing, then the decisions about their children that parents and teachers make daily have no real effect upon their children. Some have felt that the child will receive from the Lord the right amount of remains, however bad his parents are, since it seems unfair to the child if his spiritual background is poor merely on account of his parents. This is a comforting notion, but are we aware that it implies mans educational efforts are irrelevant to his children?

So we cannot have it both ways, even as the Lord could not have a universe without evil and still allow man responsibility for his own destiny. Where Providence alone determines, mans own thought and effort are useless except for his personal contemplation and worship; and where Providence allows some degree of human freedom, man enjoys some responsibility for his actions and their consequences, but must live with the ever-present possibility that the best will not result. Providence will seek to bring about "the best under the circumstances" but "the best under the circumstances" may contain evil and pain—as for example the hell of the worst profaners, which is surely "the best under the circumstances," but is hardly good.¹⁹ To this subject we will return.

The Lord governs all things, then, but He does not alone decide, determine, or cause all things. (I use *determine*, in the modern sense of *cause* or *make to happen*.) He reigns over the universe and rules each and everything in it, but in the sense of governing, not in the sense of causing or making to happen.²⁰ He is the First Cause of all existence,²¹ but there are some things of which He is certainly not the cause. He is not responsible for evil.²² He bends man but does

¹⁹See DP 231:7; AR 204; AE 375:4, 1158:3; etc.

²⁰See especially AC 2447, 2706, 5854; cf. 4167:2; AE 683:3; SD 2713-2717; I do not believe the Writings use the word *override*.

²¹AC 4523E; etc.

²²DP 292; TCR 489; CL 444

not break him.²³ Thus He does not rule in the sense that He compels.²⁴ He moderates and arranges all things, and *disposes* them in the sense of arranging, distributing, and setting in order. He *directs* all things in the same sense of arranging and setting in order, but not in the sense of determining. He inflows, purifies and separates; He foresees evil and provides good in every least detail; and He continually accommodates.²⁵ Does He *control* all things? Certainly, in the sense of *governing* and *arranging*, but not in the sense of *determining* or *causing to happen*. We should use such words as *control*, *dispose*, *rule*, and *direct* carefully because today they may connote meanings at variance with their Latin counterparts in the Writings.

It is true that God brings good from both our good and evil efforts. We cannot take the credit when our good efforts result in good, because any good decision we make originates in good from Him. But His use of evil for good ends does not mean that every decision we make is for the best. *True Christian Religion* 504:5 sums up the Lords government: "God continually holds his finger on the pointer of the balance, regulating but never violating man's free will by compulsion."

If man is to lead his life intelligently, he must come to understand where the human will is granted some free rein, and where the Divine alone is the determining or causative factor. The human tendency is to feel that in the areas close to us (e.g. child-rearing or church government) free will is important and free decisions of man make a difference in what happens. Thus the New Church has zealously stood for freedom in the rearing of children and in school planning and decisions. In areas where we are personally concerned, we tend to demand freedom and to believe we are free and responsible for our effects on others. But in areas in which we are not immediately concerned we may tend to say that the Lord will provide—Providence will see to it that the best happens. Yet it is hardly consistent to believe that free will is a factor in one area, such as child-rearing, and then to say about the economy, or ecology, or a distant war, that whatever happens is for the best. If human choices can make a difference in the education of children, can we say that Providence is the only factor in determining the course of a war? Conversely, if Providence alone determines the historical development of politics, economics and the externals of society,

²³AC 25, 1255, 1874, 1992:4, 2053:2, 2180:5, 6472:2, 9334:2, 9336:2

²⁴AC 1937:7, 1947, 2881, 4031, 6472:2; DP 43, 129; etc.

²⁵DP 202:3

must it not also be the sole cause of everything in those areas of life that are close to our concern? If we believe Providence always causes the best to happen in distant affairs, how rational is it, for example, to pursue reform and change in society close to home?

The Traditional Christian View

The foregoing may explain why we should be cautious about the interpretations of Providence and History suggested by religious writers through the ages—that in hidden ways Providence secretly operates such that the final result is always good, whatever the appearance to the contrary. This was the view of many in the first Christian Church, as presented in the early Fifth Century by Augustine of Hippo, and as elaborated by the French Bishop Bossuet in the Seventeenth Century. If history is viewed correctly, said Bossuet, "all iniquities will be corrected, and you will see only wisdom where before you saw disorder."²⁶ For example, according to Bossuet, all the history of Israel was foreordained by the will of God. Similarly, Roman persecution of the early Christians served the will of God by testing and strengthening the Church, which was in time able to convert Emperor Constantine to Christianity; this in turn transformed pagan Rome into the eternal Rome of true Christianity. It is God alone who forms all kingdoms, "in order to give them to whomsoever He will..."²⁷ When properly understood, both secular and ecclesiastical history must be explained not by mere historical and particular causes, but by the secret ordering of God.

Bossuet is the kind of writer who at first glance, people are inclined to say, seems to be very close to New Church thinking. The specific teachings of the Writings about the history of Israel are somewhat similar to Bossuet's,²⁸ and many New Church men have seen in the ancient Roman Empire uses close to those suggested by Bossuet.²⁹ This traditional Christian view of Providence and history has met with some favor among New Church men, although not in all particulars. It is a reassuring interpretation, offering confidence during even the worst moments of natural life and history. It affirms that Providence does all things, yet it allows for free will and choice in spiritual things, even if not in natural things. It is

²⁶Quoted in Karl Lowith, *Meaning in History*, Chicago, 1949; Phoenix edition, 1964, p. 137

²⁷Ibid., pp. 140, 141

²⁸DP 251:3; etc.

²⁹Cf. Löwith, *op. ext.*, pp. 140, 141

comforting to believe that Providence so controls the course of human events that all apparent evil is really good.

Both the Writings of Swedenborg and experience may seem to confirm the traditional Christian view. The Writings stress that man's real freedom is in *spiritual* things, and they often note limitations upon freedom of action.³⁰ And if the end, love, or intention, rather than the deed, is the man himself,³¹ is it not enough that man be free to choose his intentions and ends? Need he be free to carry them out in action? Some passages seem to say that Providence bestows or withholds worldly success and prosperity according to man's spiritual need—that is, that his spiritual state rather than his natural activity is what determines the degree of his worldly prosperity.³² The implication would be that natural action matters little, since everything important is decided purely on the plane of the spirit—that is, natural actions are determined by Providence, while man is free only in his spirit.

Secular studies of the mind have also concluded at great length that many of our supposedly free actions in fact result from psychological conditioning and various other factors, many of them unconscious. Much modern psychological theory furthers the concept of man as not truly free in the decisions he consciously makes in natural life. Perhaps, it has been suggested in the New Church, man is not free except in the innermost recesses of his mind, deep within his spirit. Cannot man be internally free in his spirit to choose good or evil even while a great many of his external activities and habits are determined for him, apparently by external psychological causes but secretly by Providence?

In an age which abounds in serious abuse of freedom we are perhaps inclined to emphasize the doctrines of Providence, order, and authority. Surely one of the greatest failures of our time is the loss of any real sense of order, on account of a rejection of ultimate authority. Concerning this, much has been and should be said. The present may hardly seem a good time to lay too much stress on free will, of which we may even be a little afraid. Nearly everyone must admit that to contemplate the free will as having any real effect on the direction and course of man, society, and history is terrifying. In sum, the appeals of Bossuet's interpretation of history and life are considerable, promising apparent agreement with both revelation

³⁰e.g., TCR 466-502

³¹AC 10336e; cf. 4493,- 5128:4, 6571:4; TCR 313, 404:2; etc.

³²AC 8717

and psychological experience even while the troubled spirit is assured that things are really all for the good.

What Do The Writings Say?

Disturbing as it may be, the question must be asked—how free is man to influence the external things of life, other people, the course of history, the future of the Church? What, if any, is his role in causing things to happen? For a number of reasons I find the traditional Christian view, while holding an essential kernel of truth, seriously deficient when examined in the light of the Writings and of common sense. The kernel of truth lies in the principle that an infinite and benevolent Providence, looking to eternity, does operate continually in all things from greatest to least, from firsts to lasts; and that from understanding this infinite government some Divine direction of life and history, some Divine order and purpose in external events, may be seen.³³

As a total philosophy of life and history, however, the interpretation that Providence alone determines the course of natural life and history fails most seriously. To begin with, the traditional interpretation simply reflects the Old Jewish and Christian idea that if God does not Himself determine all things, then His government is finite and limited. But the New Church idea of Divine government is far more involved than the notion that the Lord causes all things to happen. For that idea we need resort only to Bossuet and other Christian writers, and would not need the many teachings revealed in the Writings concerning the operation of Providence.

More fundamentally, if natural actions were not free, but were determined by Providence, then natural life would be in order. Any evil in the natural events of life can come not from God but only from free choices of evil by man. Now there certainly does appear to be evil in natural life; man frequently appears to ultimate evil in action. But we can never judge with certainty about a specific human act, that it is interiorly evil stemming from a free choice of evil³⁴ Yet the appearance is very strong, around us and within our own actions, that when we choose to be moved by evil, we often ultimate that choice by freely *doing* evil.

Is this appearance correct? It can be argued that apparent evil deeds are not freely done, that man does not really decide to do

³³ CL 523, 527-531; TCR 523; AC 9009; AE 1028; BE 113

³⁴ DP 187, 189

them, that Providence alone secretly sees to it that an apparently evil action is done for the sake of some good, and thus that apparent evil action is really good when properly understood. Is apparent evil action really evil, freely chosen by man, or is it really interiorly good, the work of Providence?

The Writings reply plainly that much human action is indeed evil, and that free spiritual choices of evil not always, but often involve natural *actions* and spoken *words* that also are evil, not secretly good. For instance *True Christian Religion* 479, in proving that man has free will in *spiritual* things, lists a number of *natural human events*, some from the Word, some from history. The last six examples are as follows:

7, [The Jewish] nation was at length permitted to establish a religious system in many respects not in conformity with the Sacred Scripture. 8, The Christian religion is divided into many sects, and each of them is driven by heresies. 9, There are so many impious people in the Christian world and so much glorying in impiety; and also plots and stratagems contrived against the pious, the just and the upright. 10, Injustice prevails over justice in the law courts and in business. 11, The impious also are exalted to honors and become great men and leaders. 12, Wars are permitted, in which there is so much slaughter of men and ravaging of cities, nations and families; and so on.

The passage then concludes: "Is it possible to account for such things except from the fact that every man has free will?"

Clearly all these examples result from spiritual choices of evil. *True Christian Religion* 479 thus shows that free will has effects in the natural universe, and that part of the Lord's rule involves permitting actual evils in external life—evils that He does not will, but that result from man's free will. *Divine Providence* 234-274 goes over the same examples and shows specifically why they have been permitted, and why the things that are permitted are not as bad as what would happen if they were not permitted. But neither the *True Christian Religion* nor *Divine Providence* passages say that these events were really interiorly good. Rather they show they were evil, from man's abuse of free will. Thus the teaching emerges that man has *some* real freedom in his actions.

The example of injustice prevailing over justice in law courts and business³⁵ also indicates that a man's worldly success is not always according to his inner spiritual need. When studied carefully, *Arcana*

³⁵ TCR 479

Coelestia 8717 shows that if a man is in good, then riches and honors are given him according to his spiritual need.³⁶ But for the evil, honors and riches may be "stumbling blocks" to true worship³⁷ and in fact "curses."³⁸ Honors and wealth "may be blessings and may also be curses, and...when they are blessings they are from God, and when they are curses they are from the devil. Moreover, it is well-known that honors and wealth are bestowed by the devil, for from this he is called the prince of the world."³⁹ "When eminence and riches do not lead astray they are from God, but when they do they are from hell."⁴⁰

The implication is that with the evil, honors and riches are not distributed according to spiritual need. The good are given the right amount of worldly prosperity and success for their spiritual state, while to the evil, wealth and honors are curses rather than blessings because they lead away from the life of heaven. Nor do the Writings reject the appearance that cunning and deceit are means to unjust success in the world.⁴¹ Thus some men are seduced by riches and drawn away from heaven.⁴² Swedenborg found in heaven many who had been wealthy on earth from business and trade, "but not so many of those who were in stations of honor and became rich through their offices; and for the reason that these latter by the gains and honors that resulted from their dispensing justice and equity, and also by the lucrative and honorable positions bestowed on them, were led into loving themselves and the world..."⁴³ In other words, man's acquisition of wealth, honors and power on earth may be evil or good; and if it can sometimes be evil, then there must be some degree of freedom in man's natural actions.

Other examples of evil in ultimates include the teaching of *Conjugal Love* 460 and 502-504 that the act of defloration apart from the end of marriage brings a woman into a spiritual state of unchastity, lust and whoredom (unless, presumably, she repents). *Conjugal Love* 502 also shows that the kind of information young women acquire about physical sex affects their state of chastity.

³⁶Also see AC 944, 6481; SD 1212

³⁷ DP 250

³⁸ DP 216:2, 217, 250e; AE 1185:2, 1188:2

³⁹ DP 216:2; cf. 217, 250; AE 1188:2

⁴⁰ AE 1185:2; cf. 1189:3

⁴¹ TCR 479; DP 249, 250; AC 6481e, 10409, 10777

⁴² HH 362e

⁴³ HH 360:3; we are reminded of Lord Acton's maxim about power corrupting.

Conjugal Love has a number of examples of natural, ultimated evils which would make no sense unless man had some freedom in his actions.

One of the most striking examples of an ultimate, natural evil is given in *Heaven and Hell* 344. Through Swedenborg's eyes good spirits and angels saw little boys fighting in a city, being encouraged by parents and bystanders. The good spirits and angels

were so revolted at it that I felt their horror, and especially that parents should incite their children to such things, saying that in this way parents extinguish in the earliest age all the mutual love and all the innocence that little children have from the Lord, and initiate them into hatred and revenge. Consequently by their own endeavors they shut their children out of heaven, where there is nothing but mutual love. Let parents therefore who wish well to their children beware of such things.

This can scarcely mean that parents can literally condemn their children to hell. But if parents can in any sense even temporarily "shut their children out of heaven," they clearly have some real spiritual effect on their children. And it should be obvious that this example of natural evil is a further indication of freedom in human action.

The history of Israel provides many specific instances of evil actions which were permitted for various uses but which were still evil. For example, the slaughter of the Shechemites⁴⁴ was allowed so that a good would be served. But this does not mean the slaughter was good. It was "an enormous crime.... When any such crime is permitted by the Lord, it is evil men and their infernal instigators who are the authors of it."⁴⁵ If the Shechemites had continued to live, it is true that even worse evil would have resulted, so that from their point of view the slaughter was a lesser evil, in fact better than something worse that endangered them. It may have been the best thing under the circumstances, although the Writings do not quite say that. Maybe the *best* under the circumstances would have been something else which neither the sons of Jacob, the Shechemites, or anyone else chose to do. The slaughter was still an evil, and would never have been necessary either if the sons of Jacob had not been present with them, or if the sons of Jacob (and many, many

⁴⁴ Genesis 34

⁴⁵ AC 4493:6

⁴⁶ See AC 4493

generations of men before them since the Most Ancient Church) had not freely chosen to become external, natural men.⁴⁶

When the "best under the circumstances" is an evil, in other words, it is because prior free choices of evil have resulted in a situation of such appalling evil and disorder that only further permission of evil can avoid a worse evil.⁴⁷ We should look for the good for which evils are permitted, yet never forget that permissions are permissions *of evil*, and would not have become necessary if earlier choices of evil, and a general situation of evil, had not arisen. When an evil man rages helplessly against good, rather than overtly harming others, or when a man loses his temper and curses bitterly to himself rather than striking out violently against his friends, perhaps what happens is the best under the evil circumstances, but it is still an evil. Such evil words and actions are not interiorly goods willed by God; they are caused at least partly by evil choices of men. "When any such crime [as the slaughter of the Shechemites] is permitted by the Lord, it is evil men and their infernal instigators who are the author of it"—not God.⁴⁸

Moreover, the actual *doing* of evil worsens its spiritual hold upon man.⁴⁹ The intention is the man himself, but if man then ultimates the intention, he brings the love and its delights more strongly into himself.⁵⁰ If actual doing of an evil can make it worse in man, is it not obvious that the doing of it must be from man and his freedom, and not from the Lord?⁵¹

While many more examples of actual natural evil could be cited from the history of Israel, one further teaching should be mentioned—that "the Word was changed on account of that nation, as to its external sense, not as to its internal sense."⁵² "The sense of the letter of the Word would have been different if the Word had been written among a different people, or if that people had not been such as it was."⁵³ The examples given⁵⁴ make clear that the evil actions to which the Israelites were prone caused the Word to be written differently in the letter than it might have been. This teaching would make no sense if man did not have some freedom in natural actions to ultimate evil.

⁴⁷ DP 243 and 251 make this point clear; cf. 278

⁴⁸ AC 4493e

⁴⁹ AC 3701:2

⁵⁰ AC 6203, 6204

⁵¹ See also DP 281; AC 4317:5; TCR 521:2 on freedom to do evils.

⁵² HD 248

⁵³ AC 10453:3; see also 10461, 10603, 10604; cf. 3398, 4290

⁵⁴ see especially AC 10603

The Lord said to His followers: "Woe unto the world because of offences! for it must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!"⁵⁵ Though this passage is not expounded directly in the Writings, from the foregoing we can see in what sense "it must needs be that offences come...." Offences can hardly be of any Divine necessity.⁵⁶ In the Old Testament evils are ascribed to the Lord, since in no other way could He be believed omnipotent.⁵⁷ The Lord's disciples may have understood Matthew 18:7 as meaning that Jehovah God sent the offences, by causing man to do them.⁵⁸ But in the light of the teachings about the origin of evil natural actions, we should rise above the appearances of the Old Testament letter and realize that from Jehovah God can come no evil. He wills no offences, and they "must needs" come solely because man wills them. The Lord's words refer not to Divine necessity but to a fact of life—a fact necessitated by the evils within the human race. The Writings speak of the same necessity of offences coming in countless passages about permission, such as *Divine Providence* 251. That it is solely man's evil that make offences necessary appears clearly from the wording in a parallel passage in Luke: "It is impossible but that offences will come; but woe unto him through whom they come!"⁵⁹ "Impossible but that" implies something unavoidable, but hardly willed.

Freedom to Do

Nor do the Writings merely give man examples of evil natural actions. They also teach in plain statements that to some extent at least man is free in his words and deeds. "It is granted to man *to act* from the freedom of reason, to the end that good may be provided for him, and this is why man has the freedom to think and will even what is evil, *and to do it* so far as the laws do not forbid."⁶⁰ Man "is able to will *and to do* what he thinks..."⁶¹ The evil on earth are given "successes" according to their "projects."⁶² More forcefully we are taught:

⁵⁵ Matthew 18:7

⁵⁶ cf. AC 6487

⁵⁷ See Is. 45:7 and PP; AC 302, 1838, 1992:8, 3147:10, 4208, 6997, 7344, 8223, 9033, 10441, etc.

⁵⁸ Cf. Exodus 4:21; 7:3; etc.

⁵⁹ 17:1

⁶⁰ HH 603:3; emphasis added; also AC 7007:2

⁶¹ DLW 240; emphasis added; see also 247

⁶² AC 6481e

The evil succeed according to their skill, because it is in agreement with order that everyone should do what he does from reason, and also from freedom; and unless, therefore, it were left to men to act according to reason from freedom, *and thus also unless the actions proceeding therefrom succeeded*, men could in no way be brought to receive eternal life.... Nothing which is done from compulsion cleaves to a man, for it is not his. That becomes the man's own which is done from freedom; for that which is from the will is done from freedom, and the will is the man himself. Unless, therefore, a man were kept in freedom *to do evil*, good could not be provided for him by the Lord.⁶³

The next number presents a concise definition of permission: "To leave a man from his freedom *to do evil* also, is called permission."⁶⁴ When this number is read in the context of *Arcana Coelestia* 10777, it makes clear that the *principal* use of permission is that man may be in freedom. Without freedom *to do evil*, the passage is saying, man would not be in the freedom he must be in, in order to be saved. *That* is the principal reason there are permissions. But what is permitted is evil, not a secret good. The good that is within permission lies chiefly in the fact that the evildoer remains in freedom to be saved. There are many other goods too which can emerge out of evil, but the primary good seems to be the continuation of man's freedom.

These passages all put emphasis on man's freedom *to do* as well as *to will and think*. This hardly implies that man's free choice is essentially a freedom of action. We have already seen that in essence freedom is freedom to will and think. But the teachings on freedom *in doing* show that we must examine carefully the doctrine that man is free *in spiritual things*.⁶⁵ The "spiritual things" in which man is free refer not just to mental things, but to "such things as concern salvation and eternal life."⁶⁶ As we shall see, and as common sense perceives, *doing* as well as *willing* and *thinking* have a great deal to do with "salvation and eternal life." The "spiritual things" in which man is free embrace the totality of his spiritual and natural existence.

Thus the "internal man" that is free is not a deep, interior plane of which man is not conscious. The internal man that is free means man's real will—the real man as he acts and speaks "in the company of his intimate friends," as opposed to the external man that acts and

⁶³ AC 10777; emphasis added; see also 10409:4; HD 271

⁶⁴ AC 10778; emphasis added

⁶⁵ TCR 463-504

⁶⁶ TCR 483

speaks "before the world."⁶⁷ The man as he is with his close friends, or "at home and left to himself"⁶⁸—this is the internal man that is free. This internal man we can and should be conscious of, to some extent at least. The term *internal man* is used in many different ways in the Writings, and it is always important to let context define an individual term. The point here is that in teaching that it is the internal man that is free, the Writings mean not a hidden, unconscious plane of the mind; they simply mean the real man, as opposed to the fronts he assumes in the company of others.

It is because of the connection of mental and natural life that Divine revelation does not merely inveigh against evil willing and thinking, but also against evil *doing*. That man should shun not only evil willing but also evil doing implies that he is free in his actions. "The Lord in a thousand passages in the Word has taught that man must do good and must not do evil, and this the Lord would by no means have said unless something had been given to man by which he has the ability to do..."⁶⁹ *True Christian Religion* 483 reiterates this point, again with considerable stress upon deeds. "What would be the use of all this [the commands to do good and not to do evils] if man had no free will in spiritual things, that is, in such things as concern salvation and eternal life?"⁷⁰ In the words of a good spirit, "Of what use, then, would the Word be if a man had no power to will and think *and consequently to do and say* what is there commanded? If man had not this power, religion and the church would be like a wrecked ship lying on the bottom of the sea..."⁷¹

This teaching on repentance is frequently echoed. Repentance in its essence consists of such mental activities as seeing evils in oneself, acknowledging them, then not willing them, and finally holding them in aversion.⁷² But is it not obvious that these essentially mental processes involve actions as well—*not doing* what one had been doing previously? The chapter on repentance in the *True Christian Religion* is very difficult to understand without a giving up of evil actions as well as evil intentions. For example, *True Christian Religion* 535-536 teach about "an easier kind of repentance": man repents if he simply sees a thing he wants to do is evil and says to

⁶⁷ TCR 493; cf. 592

⁶⁸ TCR 592

⁶⁹ AE 701:3

⁷⁰ TCR 483

⁷¹ TCR 504:4; emphasis added

⁷² HH 598

himself, "I am thinking of this, and intending it; but as it is a sin, I will not *do* it."⁷³

Are not such teachings on repentance meaningless unless man has some freedom in his actions? The Old Testament, the New Testament, and the Writings continually command us to shun evil action and to perform good actions. The emphasis in the latter two shifts away from the Old Testament stress upon actions alone, but the primacy of the life and freedom of the spirit should not seduce us into thinking the life and freedom of the body is irrelevant.

Similarly the doctrine of use emphasizes greatly the actual doing of works of charity. A full consideration of the spiritual and natural elements of use is beyond our present scope, but let us note well that commands to use are commands to actions as well as to spiritual affections. Charity is in essence a *willing* well to the neighbor, but the chapter on Charity in the *True Christian Religion* makes abundantly clear that *acting* well towards the neighbor is also part of charity.⁷⁴ Use is more than just doing, but it cannot be separated from doing. Many passages about use speak of *performing* uses and *shunning idleness* as the devil's pillow. Man's "earthly body has been formed to serve the understanding and the will in the world, and to perform uses in conformity with them in the ultimate sphere of nature."⁷⁵ "By uses are meant the uses of each ones function, which are the uses of his office, pursuit and occupation. In the Lord's sight these uses are good works themselves."⁷⁶ "Use is to perform one's office and to do one's work rightly, faithfully, sincerely, and justly."⁷⁷ "Doing truths is performing uses."⁷⁸ In their beginnings uses are "truths of doctrine" (that bears considerable reflection); "but in their progression they become goods; they become goods *when the man acts according to these truths. Thus the action itself gives quality to truths*, for all action descends from the will...."⁷⁹ It is *the will* that turns truth into good, but action is an essential step in the process.

Many more passages might be cited concerning the importance of *doing* good works and *performing* uses. Surely it must follow that man is gifted with freedom to do or not do the uses he is supposed to perform.

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⁷³ TCR 535; emphasis added

⁷⁴ See, for example, TCR 422

⁷⁵ HH 60

⁷⁶ D. Love VI; cf. IX, XII, XIII; HH 360

⁷⁷ D. Wis. XI, Love and Charity, 4; cf. DLW 335e; AE 1193, 1194, 1226

⁷⁸ DLW 251

⁷⁹ AC 4984; emphasis added; cf. ISB XII