

Introduction

New Church thought as reflected in its foundation principles, its general philosophical concepts, and its particular doctrines, represents a continuation of an historical development that stems back to pre-Hebraic times. While this can be said of other systems of thought, yet New Church thought stands apart for at least two reasons. First, it is founded on the theological writings of Emanuel Swedenborg (1747-1771). These works together with parts of the Bible (the Law and the Prophets, the Psalms, the four Gospels and Revelation) constitute a unique body of literature referred to collectively as the Word, according to the definition given in Swedenborg's *The New Jerusalem and Its Heavenly Doctrine*, "What He [God] has thus revealed, forms with us the Word" (HD 251). (In this study the expression "the Writings" will be employed when referring to the theological works of Swedenborg). Second, in the light of the Writings the now three-fold Word (Old Testament, New Testament, and the Writings) is seen to have an organic unity, for each successive revelation is seen as an unfolding of what is contained interiorly in what preceded it.

Any system of thought has its own theory of knowledge. As individuals we have reasons for believing the things we do; we accept as valid or not various sources of information; some things we accept as beyond question, while others we regard as a matter of opinion. So, too,—isms and ideologies, philosophic schools of thought and religions represent bodies of thought that exist within the framework of a theory of knowledge. It is our intention, therefore, to spell out in some detail the ingredients that are considered to be essential to the construction of a New Church epistemology.

Basic Axioms and First Principles

All systems of thought rest on a set of unprovable ideas which we here describe as axioms and first principles. For this study, the following are deemed necessary as foundations:

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1. God exists.
2. God is the source of all being of both a material and metaphysical or transcendental nature.
3. Within the finite, created realm, there is a fundamental duality of the natural and spiritual realms—of matter and mind.
4. Man exists as a being outside of God, with the appearance of self-life as a necessary condition for his sense of freedom and capacity for rational thought—these arising from what are described in the Writings as the faculties of freedom and rationality.
5. God, through the instrumentality of men who wrote the three-fold Word, has made known not only His nature, but also that of man.
6. The Word constitutes a source of knowledge about man and nature in their interior aspects which complements what man can know about himself and nature *a posteriori*.

Elements of Epistemology

In speaking of elements here we refer to those aspects of the process of knowing that will serve as a focus for the study. Knowing implies a knower and an object about which something is known. Accepting this, certain questions inevitably arise, and it is the answers to these that will constitute our epistemology.

The broadest set of questions—classified into two groups having to do with the knower and that about which something is known—are as follows:

1. Who is the knower? The general answer to this in the context of New Church thought (and that of other religious systems as well) involves an ambiguity, for while we would say that omniscient God is the only knower, yet we as conscious, introspective beings say with some confidence that we know, and to all appearances we do. Yet this *is* an appearance granted by God to man so that he may be in God's likeness—a knowing being. The answer to our question is, therefore, two-fold: the knower is both God and man. The focus of this study, however, will be only on man as knower.
2. What is man as a knower? The Writings provide an elaborate account of the nature of man, and studies based on them have been made.¹ In this study the nature of the human mind, its relation to its

¹ George de Charms, *The Growth of the Mind*, The Academy Book Room, Bryn Athyn, 1953; and Hugo Lj. Odhner, *The Human Mind*, Swedenborg Scientific Association, Bryn Athyn, 1969, are examples of such studies.

spiritual and natural environments (the spiritual and natural worlds), and its relation to God will be explored.

3. What are the objects of man's knowledge? There are four foci here, because the sum of human knowledge concerns (a) God; (b) man himself, both individually, and in the societal sense, involving interactions between men; (c) his natural environment, the natural universe; and (d) his spiritual environment, the spiritual universe.

4. What are the mental processes involved in knowing? And how do we arrive at knowledge? The attempt to answer these questions is at the core of our study, having to do with the processes of sensation, imagination, and reasoning; also of reflection and meditation as sources of knowledge; and various modes of thought and methods of arriving at knowledge.

5. In what respects, if at all, do the various classes of knowledge differ from one another? For example, is there any intrinsic difference between knowledges of the various branches of the natural sciences; between principles of chemistry and those of sociology; between philosophic and religious knowledge; between the insights one gains through meditation and reflection, and those gained by induction?

The Human Mind

In the framework of New Church thought the human mind is regarded as an organic entity which develops from conception to eternity. The mind is the essential man, manifesting itself in a material body while he is conscious only in the material universe, and in a spiritual body while consciously existing in the spiritual universe after death. The complexity of this organism can be grasped by analogy with the human body; for the body functions as it does because every one of the myriad processes operating within its form corresponds² to the processes that constitute the conscious

² The doctrine of correspondences is one of the cornerstone philosophic principles of the New Church. It found early expression in the pre-theological works of Swedenborg, but takes on the primary role it has through its exposition in the Writings. Applications of it in the realm of the human body can be found in John Worcester's *Physiological Correspondences*, N.J. Berridge's series "Thinking from Correspondences" published in this journal in recent years, and in Linda S. Odhner's "The Human Form: Correspondences in Embryology" (*New Philosophy*, 84:10 25).

and subconscious life of the mind. Indeed, the Writings state unequivocally that from an examination of the details of the anatomical and physiological interplay of the heart and lungs, much could be learned about the interplay of the will and understanding—that together constitute the essence of man—because the former correspond to the latter (see for example DLW 375); and this principle applies to all aspects of human bodily activity.

Emphasis should be given to the idea that conscious life before and after death is essentially the same—that after death man *becomes conscious* of the spiritual environment with which he is constantly in association during life "in" the material world. The recent studies of people who have been bodily dead for a time (life after life experiences) may be interpreted to testify to the immanence of the spiritual (transcendental) world.

Essential Components of Mind

The duality everywhere present in the body—heart and lungs, left and right hemispheres of the brain, etc.—reflect by correspondence the duality of will and understanding, the affective and cognitive, that, as noted above, constitute the essence of man. The will (the affective, emotive, or volitional) is the driving force of human thought and activity, while the understanding provides the means whereby the will manifests itself in speech and action.

Both the affective and cognitive aspects of mind depend upon, first, a foundation of sense experience, and second, on a capacity for recall of past sense experience, and past affective and cognitive activity. This foundation is clearly the memory, a two-fold store consisting of an exterior and an interior memory, whose character are explicitly described in what follows from *Arcana Coelestia*:

These two memories are entirely distinct from each other. To the exterior memory, which is proper to man while he is living in the world, pertain all the words of languages, also the objects of the outer senses, and also the knowledges that belong to the world. To the interior memory pertain the ideas of the speech of spirits, which are of the inner sight, and all rational things, from the ideas of which thought itself comes into existence. That these two classes of things are distinct from each other, man does not know, both because he does not reflect upon it, and because he is in corporeal things, from which he cannot then so far withdraw his mind (2471).

All things whatever that a man hears and sees, and by which he is affected, are, unknown to the man, insinuated as to ideas and ends into his interior memory; and they remain in it, so that not anything perishes; although the same things are obliterated in the exterior memory. Such therefore is the interior memory that there are inscribed on it all the single, nay, the most singular things that the man has ever thought, spoken, and done; nay, even those which have appeared to him as but a shade, with the minutest particulars, from his earliest infancy to the last of old age. The memory of all these things the man has with him when he comes into the other life, and he is successively brought into full recollection of them. This is his *Book of Life*, which is opened in the other life, and according to which he is judged. Men can scarcely believe this, but yet it is most true. All the ends, which to him have been in obscurity, and all the things he has thought; together with everything that from these he has spoken and done, down to the smallest point, are in that Book, that is, in the interior memory, and whenever the Lord grants, are made manifest before the angels as in clear day. This has several times been shown me, and has been attested by so much experience that not the least doubt remains (2474).

As yet no one knows what is the state of souls after death in respect to the memory. From much and daily experience of many years, it has been given me to know that after death a man loses nothing whatever of what has been in his memories, whether in the exterior or in the interior memory; insomuch that nothing can possibly be thought of so small or so minute that the man does not have it with him; so that after death he leaves nothing whatever behind him except his bones and flesh, which, while he lived in the world, were not animated from themselves, but from the life of his spirit...(2475; see also HH 464).

The significance of these memories in this epistemological context becomes clear in the light of *Arcana Coelestia* 5212, a passage in a series expounding the internal sense of Pharaoh's dream (Genesis XLI) as follows:

The reason why "ears" or spikes of corn signify memory-knowledges, is that "corn" signifies the good of the natural (seen n. 3580), because memory-knowledges are the

containants of the good of the natural, as the ears are of the corn; for in general all truths are vessels of good, and so also are memory-knowledges, for these are lowest truths. Lowest truths, or truths of the exterior natural, are called memory-knowledges, because they are in man's natural or external memory, and because they partake for the most part of the light of the world, and hence can be presented and represented to others by forms of words, or by ideas formed into words by means of such things as are of the world and its light. The things in the inner memory, however, in so far as they partake of the light of heaven are not called memory-knowledges, but truths; nor can they be understood except by means of this light, or expressed except by forms of words, or ideas formed into words, by means of such things as are of heaven and its light. The memory-knowledges here signified by "ears," or spikes, are memory-knowledges of the church, in regard to which see above (n. 4749, 4844, 4964, 4965).

Words and ideas—both those in the light of the world (thinking in general which does not draw its inspiration from the Word represents thinking "in the light of the world") and in the light of heaven (thinking that draws its inspiration from the Word)—are the very focus of epistemology, so that in our external and internal memories we are dealing with forms that are at the core of our subject, forms that in modern terms are the "engrams" having their biological basis in some modification of the neuronal synapses.³

The Structure of the Human Mind

Viewing man as a whole, the Writings reveal that he consists of four interdependent, though discretely separated, parts. These are as follows, proceeding from interior to exterior:

The human internal or internal man. Also referred to as the soul.

The interior man or the rational. Also called the rational mind.

The external or natural man. Also called the natural mind.

The corporeal man. Also called the body.

The logic and symmetry of this structure is seen when man is viewed as a reactive receptacle of life which inflows from the Divine Source:

³ For a treatment of this, see John C. Eccles' "The Physiology of Imagination" *Scientific American*, September 1958.

1. The human internal is a potential mediator of power, and its presence renders man potentially human, just as, by analogy, a voltage source renders a radio potentially able to receive the influx of electromagnetic radiation.

2. The body is the physical counterpart in the material universe of the human internal in the spiritual universe. It is the first receptacle of physical impulses from without, as the human internal is the first receiver of impulses from within, from the only Source of all power, the Lord.

3. Between these two extremes lies the human mind proper, a two-fold structure consisting of an interior or rational mind, and an exterior or natural one. This latter is the mind we are aware of, in the sense that its operations are those we are conscious of prior to the death of the body. Its operations are those long recognized—sensation, imagination, and reasoning. This mind, though called natural, *is* a spiritual, supernatural organ, clothed for the sake of conscious existence in the material universe, with a natural body. The rational mind is in the sphere of the influence of the heavens (as distinct from the hells) of the spiritual world, and its presence allows for the capacities of freedom and rationality that men enjoy. The natural mind if left to its own devices would remain in the sphere of influence of the inherited tendencies to evil through which the hells operate. We note that "evil" is defined in the Writings as the state of a man when concern for himself (love of self) and concern for worldly things (love of the world as expressed in the pursuit of honor, gain, and reputation) are placed in higher priority than concern for God (love to the Lord) and concern for the well-being of one's neighbour (love to the neighbour). Thus evil is not some arcane force outside of men, except in the sense that an evil person (read selfish and worldly) by conscious choice places himself within the sphere of influence of the hells—a state composed of all people who have on balance while in this world chosen evil over good. If, therefore, during life on earth man does, on balance, favor good over evil, then the rational mind is "opened" and after death this mind becomes the one of conscious existence in heaven. Barring this, after death a person simply stays in the operation of the external or natural mind dwelling in hell along with others who, like him, have chosen mammon over God.

Concerning the natural mind, at conception it exists in potential only, just as the rational mind does prior to regeneration, the "rebirth" of the Scriptures. To become actual, the natural mind

requires two kinds of influence—external from the physical world via the senses, and internal from the spiritual world. These latter consist of the thoughts and affections which are the spiritual counterparts of sense impressions. Thus the mind develops by education (in the broadest sense of the word) at the interface between the influences of the two worlds.

Discrete Degrees

Earlier we stated that there exists a fundamental duality in the finite realm, of spiritual and material universes, and of mind and body. This idea of course is not new, and problems and questions surrounding it have been addressed throughout the history of philosophy and religion. It is through the doctrine of discrete degrees and its associated doctrines of correspondences and influx that the duality question is addressed in the Writings, where, in addition to expounding the doctrine, it is indicated that without it man's thought will inevitably sink into monistic materialism, with the denial of anything beyond the material plane of existence. This doctrine has had considerable attention in New Church literature, and will not be expounded here.⁴ However, a few explanatory remarks would be appropriate, together with some commentary that has particular reference to epistemology.

The essence of the ideas involved in the doctrine can be conveyed by a consideration of speech and its comprehension by a hearer. In a dialogue there is a cycle of thought and speech involving the spiritual and material realms of existence, as follows: the speaker initially entertains certain thoughts which themselves are spiritual entities. These are framed into words uttered through the vocal cords, and thus the originally spiritual thoughts have been reduced to material sound waves. This transformation occurs by the influence (influx) of the spiritual on the material, the material then representing the spiritual which gave it birth. The hearer receives the sound waves which are transformed into modifications of neuronal tissue; these in turn invite influx from the spiritual realm which was the original source of the speaker's thoughts. At this point, the hearer can say that he understands. This act of understanding is one of internal sight in the light of the spiritual world, just as seeing is an act of the external sight in the material light of the natural world.

⁴ See, for example, Hugo Lj. Odhner's "Principles of the New Philosophy," *New Philosophy*, 68:70-74, 1965, for a treatment of the subject.

Hence it is a fundamental principle of New Church psychology that sensation is essentially a *spiritual* process; the body *can* sense only because the external senses correspond to more interior spiritual functions of the mind. In reference to sight we read in *Arcana Coelestia* 994:

The sight of the eye comes forth from the interior sight; and therefore after death man sees much better than here;.... The like is the same with every other sense, and pleasure.

The reason why discrete degrees are not recognized from the *a posteriori* way is that "nothing can look into itself" (AC 1953); only what is "higher" can look down on what is "lower." Thus in *Arcana Coelestia* 1953 we read that "...the rational can by no means think about itself in regard to its quality, for nothing can look into itself;...." It may well be noted that this must lead to an infinite regress. In a sense it does, for in the Writings mental activity is explicitly traced back to its Infinite Source indicating a sequence that includes the natural, rational, and internal man, culminating in God (see below). Certainly none but a monist would reject the common perception that, for example, hearing is higher than the mechanism that renders it possible, just as music in a composition transcends the written score. The extract quoted above is contained in the following passage:

The rational could not think this, but the interior or higher man could (spoken of before, n. 1926). For the rational can by no means think about itself in regard to its quality, *for nothing can look into itself*; but it must be something more internal or higher that thinks about it, for this can look into it. For example: the ear cannot know, and still less perceive the speech that it receives into itself: this is done by a more interior hearing. The ear merely discerns articulate sounds or words: it is the interior hearing that apprehends what is said, and then it is an interior sight or mental view that perceives it, and in this way there is through the hearing a perception of the meaning of the speech. The case is similar with the things of sight: the first ideas received from the objects of sight are material, as they are also called; but there is a sight still more interior that views the objects mentally, and thereby thinks. And such is the case with mans rational. The rational can by no means look into itself, still less explore its own quality: there must be something more internal that does this; and therefore when a

man is able to do it—that is, perceive anything false in his rational, or any truth that shines there, and especially if he is able to perceive anything that is battling and overcoming—he may know that his ability to do this comes from the Lords influx through the internal man (AC 1953; emphasis added).

Reflection on this, and particularly on "nothing can look into itself," makes clear the need for revelation. Elsewhere in the Writings, in *Divine love and Wisdom* for example, it is pointed out that from the study of effects you can learn nothing more than about the activities on the plane of those effects. These ideas provide an explanation for the failure of man in several millenia (since the pre-Socratics at least) to come up with satisfactory explanations for the mysteries of life, so that in 1958 Sir John C. Eccles could write:

[Imagination] is a process that goes on in the sheet of gray matter, .1 inch thick and 400 square inches in area, which forms the deeply folded surface of the two great hemispheres of the brain. This statement contains a premise that is best made explicit. It says all mental activity, including the supreme activity of creative imagination, arises somehow from the activity of the brain. Few would deny this premise, *though a wealth of philosophical disputation lies concealed in that noncommittal word "somehow"* (*Scientific American*, September 1958; p. 735 emphasis added).

Some argue that one day new insights and evidence will provide meaningful explanations. But mankind has had enough time, and enough evidence is in; and what else will come is but more of the same, however valuable it is *on its own level*; for the barriers to the transcendental cannot be breached from below.

(To be continued)