

## SOME PRELIMINARY THOUGHTS ON SWEDENBORG'S CONCEPT OF INFLUX

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All my thoughts and all my affections even to the most minute, have flowed in by means of spirits and angels. (Swedenborg, *Arcana Coelestia* 6191)

This extraordinary statement describing Swedenborg's actual experience is testimony to the conception of men and women as being nothing more than *receptacles* whose endowed faculties of freedom and rationality allow for the sense of self-life and freedom of choice. Swedenborg goes on to say that "I am aware that scarcely anyone will believe that such is the fact, but still it is an eternal verity" (AC 6191e).

Swedenborg is not unique in regard to this. Human beings, each and every one, live in two worlds at once: the spiritual world of thought and affection, and the natural, physical world of bodily existence. And as with Swedenborg, all our thoughts and affections flow in by means of spirits and angels.

The concept of reception by "influx" is central to Swedenborg's thought, not only in regard to the creation and sustenance of the physical universe, but also that of human existence. Theories regarding physical creation and its sustenance, as well as of human existence, are found in all cultures from the animist, dating back tens of thousand of years, to reflections in this postmodern era.<sup>1</sup>

Swedenborg writes about influx in material added at the end of chapters in *Arcana Coelestia*<sup>2</sup> and it also features in his *Spiritual Experiences* and in works such as *Mind-body Interaction* and *Divine Love and Wisdom*. As

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<sup>1</sup> A cursory online search provides a wealth of information, and a comparative study of concepts of creation and sustenance of the cosmos would be not only fascinating but also provide a useful backdrop to consideration of Swedenborg's views.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, *Arcana Coelestia* §§ 6189–6215, 6307–6329, and 6466–6496 in the last of which the subject of interaction between the soul and body is discussed.

well, the subject is discussed in several of Hugo L. Odhner's works<sup>3</sup> to which I have turned for insights.

The intention here is, first, to contrast a Swedenborgian paradigm with the scientific one that currently predominates, at least in the Western world—though arguably beyond it—and then to reflect on its applications.

### The Swedenborgian's dilemma

As is well known, Swedenborg's background prior to his becoming a revelator was one of examination of the physical world to which, from a scientific viewpoint, he made significant contributions. And his respect for, and indeed use of, ideas derived from the scientific examination of the world is something that continued throughout his life, finding an important place in the theological works by providing what Norman Berridge termed in his book title "the natural basis of spiritual reality."<sup>4</sup>

This is linked to the philosophy of the material plane that prevails in the theological works—that it is one of secondary causes and effects as revealed by science—while the spiritual world is one of primary causes (DLW 134). Obviously, this presupposes a dualistic view, and in the Swedenborgian view there is total interdependence between these two realms linked through the concept of correspondence.

In Swedenborg's philosophy, the Divine is Love Itself which seeks reciprocal conjunction with people of necessity requires that these act as free agents for there to be reciprocity; hence the need for the endowment of "freedom and rationality" by the Creator on the created. And given this circumstance, it is (was) inevitable that the necessary appearance of self-life should lead with some to the denial of anything that is not susceptible to examination by the senses, and that the supposed existence of a plane above the physical—that of the human mind—is nothing more than the

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<sup>3</sup> Hugo Lj. Odhner, *Spirits and Men* (Bryn Athyn, PA: Academy Book Room, 1958); *The Spiritual World* (Bryn Athyn, PA: Academy Publication Committee, 1968); *The Human Mind* (Bryn Athyn, PA: Swedenborg Scientific Association, 1969); and *Principles of the New Philosophy* (Bryn Athyn, PA: Swedenborg Scientific Association, 1986).

<sup>4</sup> Norman J. Berridge, *The Natural Basis of Spiritual Reality* (Bryn Athyn, PA: Swedenborg Scientific Association, 2001).

product of physical and chemical activity in the brain.<sup>5</sup> If, to the reader, this is the order of things, then read no further: “influx” or the action of a higher on a lower plane (AC 1954) is not susceptible to scientific enquiry within the framework of criteria that define it, such as falsifiability, independent verification, and paradigm conservation.

In this context, any instrument used to measure something must incorporate the theory within which the measurable property is framed; you don't measure length with a weighing machine. But what instrument do we have to sense influx? The only one I can think of is the human mind. This is illustrated in *Arcana Coelestia* § 1954:

... Mental view from the higher into the lower, or what is the same, from the interior into the exterior is termed influx for it takes place by influx; just as in the case of man's interior sight: unless this continually inflowed into his outer sight, which is that of the eye. This latter could not possibly apprehend and discern any object; for it is the interior sight which, through the eye, apprehends the things which the eye sees; and by no means is it the eye, although it appears so.

Likewise, sound waves generated in a speaker's voice box impinge on a hearer's eardrum and become meaningful ideas, yet sound waves and ideas are on different planes; the process whereby this takes place is influx. But, of course, this interpretation only applies within the context of a dualistic view of the world.

### Principles of Influx

1. “Immediate” influx is that directly from the Divine into all things material, biological, and human; while “mediate” influx is mediated through the spiritual world by means of spirits and angels.

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<sup>5</sup> Plainly, I have accepted Swedenborg's claim in regard to his theological works—that he received the ideas there from none other than the Lord alone while reading the Word (*TCR* 779); and also note Swedenborg's appeal to the evidence of his senses (but his alone) when he says: “... for now through a course of many years all my thoughts and all my affections, even to the most minute of all, have flowed in by means of spirits and angels. This has been given me to perceive so plainly that nothing could be more plain; for I have perceived, I have seen, and I have heard, who they were, what was their quality, and where they were” (*AC* 61 91). Just as plainly, though these are observations, they are neither verifiable nor falsifiable, and therefore not scientific. But note that “truth” is not the exclusive provenance of non-theistic science.

2. All thought and affection with people flow in.
3. Influx is between discretely different planes of existence, and is not by transfer of anything from a higher to a lower plane, but acts by “correspondence,” as between thought and speech, for example; and is always from a higher to a lower plane.
4. Influx is according to the form of the receptacle, be it inanimate or living forms, or the human form—the mind.

## Applications

In the material world, that from subatomic particles to the mega-features of the cosmos, the creative impulses (the immediate influx) from the Divine brought it all into being within the framework of substance, form, and function mirroring the Divine Love (substance), Divine Wisdom (form), and Divine of Use (function) that provide the very foundations of material existence. With the infinite richness of the Divine, it is no wonder that myriads of forms exist and continue to come into being as revealed by scientific investigation at all levels.

Then too, in the realms of living things, the role of DNA in building forms as receptacles of influx—the very forms that determine the nature of the inflow and consequent function of the newly formed entity—closely resembles one of Swedenborg’s concepts of the soul in so far as it provides directions for the development of the body of whatever living form is involved. In a sense, the DNA is the material manifestation of the soul that can also be conceived of more interiorly. And clearly too, the mechanisms of biological evolution are manifestations of the Divine influx producing the incredible variety of forms that, acting together, produce the ecosystems of the world.

In humans, the “soul” can be considered in Swedenborgian terms simply as a person’s spirit, the human mind which, like material substances, mirrors the Divine Maker: affections, thoughts, and consequent actions with people reflect the Divine Love, Divine Wisdom, and Divine of Use in their Maker. And it is in this that mediate influx plays the crucial role, coupled with human freedom of choice and rationality (or irrationality), in determining the quality of life we live as individuals or collectively as communities.

Swedenborg opens *Arcana Coelestia* § 6191 with “That people are governed by the Lord by means of angels and spirits . . .”; in a wider context, the Lord’s governance of collections of people—nations, for example—can be seen in terms of the “grand man” concept as formulated by Swedenborg: just as the human body can be seen as an integrated assemblage of functions that all contribute to the operation of the whole, likewise, societies can be seen correspondentially as assemblages of uses as represented by all the functions that need to go on in a vibrant community. These uses are essentially represented by the affections and thoughts of community members as received through influx, and in this way the body politic can act as one person, as it were.

The essence of the idea of influx as it affects human beings is encapsulated in this:

Agents of thought and affection we are,  
 The latter from angels and spirits not far.  
 Freely chosen, a sphere they make,  
 Watch them well for our neighbors sake. □