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## LECTURES ON THE PHILOSOPHY OF SWEDENBORG'S *PRINCIPIA*

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### LECTURE VII

#### THE VALUE OF SWEDENBORG'S PHILOSOPHICAL WORKS TO NEW CHURCH EDUCATION

Having given a very brief and inadequate survey of Swedenborg's *Principia*, we would devote this final lecture to our estimate of the value of his philosophical works in general to the cause of New Church Education.

We believe that their greatest value lies in the fact that they are founded upon an unquestioning belief in the existence of a Divinely Human God, who not only created the universe, but who is immanently present in it, preserving it in existence, and governing all things in it from the greatest to the least, by His Divine love, and according to His Divine wisdom. This is what is either denied or considered to be irrelevant by the scientific thinkers of our day, because they think of what is supernatural as lying outside the realm of science. If, however, God is perpetually present; if all things are under the immediate touch and direction of His Divine hand; and if this can be demonstrated so that man may learn ever more perfectly to understand it; is not then the search for this understanding the ultimate goal of education, and the very essence of all true wisdom?

If we teach science according to some natural, materialistic interpretation, and encourage our students to rest satisfied with such an interpretation as if it were the whole and the final truth, will we not be leading them to adopt a totally false philosophy of life? But, we may ask, is it not sufficient if we instill into our

students a faith in the presence and operation of God in His universe, as is clearly taught in the Writings? If we do this, will it not prove sufficient to preserve their religious belief in God, and in the life of religion, even though we make no effort to demonstrate the relation of their scientific knowledge and experience to the life of religion?

In the face of the strong tendency to materialistic thought which deeply affects the minds of the young in our modern age, we firmly believe that, unless we can show in some way, and to some degree, how the facts of science do confirm the teaching of the Writings, the religious ideas of our students will inevitably be divorced from their natural understanding of the world in which they live. It will appear to them as a product of the imagination, as something un-real, purely subjective, and entirely separate from the problems of daily life. The Writings are given to reveal spiritual truth: the laws of Divine Providence, of influx, and of correspondence; but they do not explain how these laws are related to the mechanical operations of nature. That is why a philosophy is needed. Swedenborg's philosophy supplies a connecting link between the truth of revelation and the evidence of the senses. Such a link is indispensable to any spiritual interpretation of the laws of nature. The connection can be made only by means of natural ideas so ordered that they may open the mind to an understanding and perception of spiritual things. This, as we have already pointed out, scientific and natural ideas can do, if only the mind is elevated into something of spiritual light.

Of course Swedenborg had to speak in terms of the science of his day. He had to speak in accommodation to the natural and materialistic thought of his contemporary philosophers. As we have shown, however, he did both of these things with another purpose in view, namely, to discover for himself, and to show to his readers, a way of ascent, as by the steps of a ladder, from the mechanical and geometrical concepts of the physical senses to the vision and acknowledgment of the living soul, the moving and animating spirit of love and wisdom behind these sensual appearances. In all his studies Swedenborg always led to the acknowledgment and the contemplation of *use* in all things, and through this to the foresight, the providence, and the all-embracing mercy of the Lord. This is the secret reason why he was able to make such astonishing scientific discoveries, and to bring to light things

which the microscopes of his day were unable to reveal. This he could do because he was reasoning in accord with the inner truth, namely that all things are created for use, and so far as this is realized, the mind is led unerringly to a true conclusion. If we had space to do so, this could be strikingly illustrated by many of Swedenborg's anatomical and physiological discoveries, the truth of which was demonstrated scientifically only many years after his death.

Nowhere, except in Swedenborg's works, will we find a philosophic approach to the study of nature which opens the mind to the recognition of the Divine as the real and ever-present Cause of all natural phenomena. Nowhere else will we find a philosophy that postulates one all-unifying purpose behind all the forces of nature. To this idea modern scientific thought is strongly opposed. Materialistic philosophy is dramatically illustrated by the writings of the "International Federation for Internal Freedom." This organization was formed to investigate and discover the effects of certain drugs upon the mental functions. There are drugs which seem to expand the realm of consciousness beyond the limits of ordinary sense impressions, and to produce phenomena similar to those reported by the seers and prophets of old. The purpose is to prove that, while such visions are real, they have no supernatural connotations. They are purely subjective experiences produced by the chemical action of drugs upon the brain. This discovery has opened up a whole new field of psychological study which has been called "Psychedelic." It calls for the invention of a whole new language to express the ideas involved.

"Scientific Religious Humanism" offers a modern substitute for orthodox religion, as we learn from an article on "Religion and Science in Conflict" by Oliver L. Reiser and Blodwen Davies in *The Annals of the Academy of Political and Social Science* for March, 1948, pages 138-139. There the postulates of this new concept of religion are stated as follows:

1. There is a universal guiding field of influence, closer in nature to the cosmic fire (intelligent energy) of the Stoics than to the Creator in the orthodox interpretation of Genesis, which gives coherent form to the evolving realities in space and time.
2. Human consciousness . . . is an expression, or epitome of this cosmic energy.

3. The only knowledge man has is human knowledge, and no ultimate truth can come into his range of understanding greater than the capacity of the human mind to recognize and utilize in a given age. There are no revealed religions containing final and absolute truth.

4. . . . The only "true" religion is the one that encourages the continual creativity of man in his search through science, the arts, philosophy, and religion, for means of expressing his highest insights into the meaning of the evolution of life on earth, and the development of mind in society.

For Scientific Humanism "divinity" is not a "thing"—it is an inspiration toward wholeness. The "god" in humanity is simply this upward striving effort of man to become something more than what man now is. Man's endless capacity for self-evolution is not only the most interesting characteristic of the human being, but it is the most arresting fact in the universe. . . .

All modern philosophy, of course, is not based on the professed denial of God. Many thinkers are merely agnostic, preferring to leave out of consideration the question as to whether there is a God or not. Nevertheless, the whole trend of the times is to seek for a natural and materialistic interpretation of all things. Without recourse to Divine Revelation, indeed, no other interpretation is possible. But how can reasoning apart from Revelation, and without reference to a Divine Creator, lead to a true philosophy of life? Because God is the Creator and the Preserver of all things, the goal of philosophy must be to discover His purpose in creation, the love and the wisdom that brought it into being, and that governs it, perpetually, from moment to moment. And the goal of education must be to demonstrate the actual, the practical bearing of this supreme Truth upon our understanding of the world, and of how we are to live in it. The Academy of the New Church is founded to strive for this goal, and all its education is directed to this end.

But let us make it clear that the attempt to impart to our students a rational concept of how all the sciences are related to the teaching of the Writings does not imply that we must set up a static philosophical system either of creation or of human psychology. If this were done, and there is constant danger of doing it, we would be committing the same error as that which caused the fall of the first Christian Church. We would be ascribing Divine authority to a human dogma, and insisting that all scientific interpretation be forced into alignment with it. We would be

depriving our students, and indeed the members of our faculty, of free judgment in accord with their scientific findings. We would be holding their reason in bondage to a blind faith. This would stifle free enquiry, and penalize independent thought, just as was done by the Church in the Middle Ages.

The most vital requirement of all is that we acknowledge the great limitations of our knowledge, both of nature and of Divine Revelation, and that we impart this acknowledgment to our students as the first requisite of true wisdom. Our present understanding of the Writings is extremely general, and is based on external appearances. Not only the Old and New Testaments, but also the Writings, are necessarily written according to appearances, even though they be rational appearances. It could not be otherwise if they were to be accommodated to our state of ignorance and sensual thought. To illustrate: the Writings speak of a series of atmospheres by means of which the Divine love and wisdom are adapted for operation, on successively lower planes and finally at the surface of the earth. They also speak of a series of bloods by which that same love and wisdom are adapted to the creation of men capable of receiving and perceiving spiritual things, both during the life of the body and afterward in the spiritual world. Now note these terms, "atmospheres" and "bloods." What do they convey to us? Do we not think, unavoidably, of an atmosphere from what we know of the air, and of a blood from what we know of the red blood that flows through our arteries and veins? Yet the essential idea of both an atmosphere and a blood is that of communication. Communication may be effected by something far more subtle than either the air or the red blood. This may be illustrated by what we know of electricity, or magnetism, or of gravitation. All of these are media of communication. Yet they imply something indefinitely more active, something that operates with extreme rapidity, and almost instantaneously.

There is no scientific confirmation, at the present time, that such an atmosphere as the ether exists, nor that there exist any higher atmospheres such as Swedenborg calls the second aura and the first aura. May this not be because men have been searching for something nearly analogous to air, when yet the higher atmospheres are unimaginably more subtle and more active? So also,

what Swedenborg calls the "animal spirit" may be the actual element that constitutes what scientists call "nervous energy," and which they equate, or at least closely associate, with electricity. And what Swedenborg calls the "spirituous fluid" may be an element indefinitely more subtle even than this. Our ideas of a blood may at present be too gross and earth-bound to permit us to admit the existence of such an elusive entity. Nevertheless, the essential principle remains true: there must be an unbroken chain of connection between the outmosts of creation and the Infinite. If this be acknowledged, surely we will not close our minds against the concept of higher atmospheres, or higher bloods, just because we cannot demonstrate their existence by scientific observation or deduction. Nor will we be insistent that such elements, if they are to be found, must answer the requirements of our sensual ideas or else be rejected as non-existent. We will cling to the fundamental truth, and will never cease to search for some confirmation of it. And we will always be prepared to modify our ideas as our knowledge of the Writings, and of the interiors of nature, increases. It is worthy of note that the most modern explorations of the sub-atomic world seem to open up a realm in which the known laws of Euclidian geometry, or of traditional mechanics, do not apply. As we have already indicated, observed facts and mathematical calculations would appear to imply, on the one hand, that sub-atomic energy is in the nature of a wave motion, while on the other hand it can be explained in part only on the theory of a bombardment of tiny pellets. It becomes evident that things are happening in this invisible world that run counter to all the laws of motion with which we have hitherto been familiar. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that sub-atomic energy is the source and origin of all the forces in our visible world. It must be of such a nature that it can produce these forces and cause them to act according to the well-known laws of mechanics. Here, certainly, there is a hint, at least, of a higher world, a world that can be understood, as Swedenborg says, only by analogy with ultimate nature, and only if the qualities of nature are elevated into a more eminent sphere. We do not imply by this that what has been discovered as sub-atomic energy or a "field of force" is a spiritual activity. We merely ask ourselves if this may not be a realm of natural energy so subtle as to present the appearance of a discrete degree such as Swedenborg assigns to the ether in

comparison with the air, or to the second aura in comparison with the ether, all of these being natural atmospheres.

At all events, we have here a scientific confirmation of the fundamental law, set forth both in the philosophical works and in the Writings, that there is a communication by discrete degrees, from the ultimates of nature even to the Infinite. And since the Infinite is pure love, there must be a definite relationship between the activity of love, which is spiritual, and the dead forces of nature which we sense as energy. How the Divine love and wisdom operate in the material universe still remains to be discovered; but the path leading to this discovery lies through the correlation of scientific facts with the truth of revelation. In attempting to perceive this correlation, we are still frustrated by our ignorance, both of science and of revelation. Yet the world of scientific discovery is before us, and is being explored with astonishing results. Its further exploration offers endless possibilities for the future. It is equally true that the Writings are available for study. They are infinite in scope, and they present the opportunity for unimagined discoveries of spiritual truths concerning the influx and operation of God in His creation. Man's understanding of science has been radically changed within our own life-time. The penetration of the atom, which had been regarded as the indivisible unit of creation, has opened up an entirely new and utterly strange world. The theories of Einstein and other modern physicists have changed the concept of outer space and opened the way to the possible exploration of the moon and of other planets. The application of atomic energy to both military and peace-time uses has introduced new ideas of mechanics. None of this was known to Swedenborg; yet he foretold the splitting of the atom, and postulated the existence of those invisible forces of nature which have now been demonstrated.

Our knowledge of the Writings has also progressed, more slowly indeed because of our natural tendency to cling to purely material ideas; but here also there has been a steady development of thought that gives encouraging promise for the future. Meanwhile, if we would continue along the path of spiritual discovery it is essential that we keep our minds plastic—subject to modification, ready to accept new ideas—even while we think, as is unavoidable, from postulates tentatively assumed for the sake of investigation. We must seek continually for the ultimate answer, and refuse to be

satisfied with anything less. To promote this search the Academy is an indispensable instrumentality. In essence it is a university, that is, a gathering of scholars devoted to the discovery of truth. Its faculty is charged with the responsibility, not only to meet the immediate educational needs of the students who enroll in its courses, but in addition to promote the ultimate goal of developing a truly New Church philosophy. By this we mean a philosophy of subject matter in every field of human enquiry into the arts and sciences, which will increase our perception and understanding of how these branches of learning are related to the spiritual truth of the Writings. This will necessarily be accomplished only by slow degrees, over many generations. It will be accomplished only by the cooperation of scholars who are masters in their own special field of secular knowledge, with scholars who are equally competent in the field of revealed theology. In this work, which is the supreme use of the Academy, I feel confident that the mental concepts provided for us in Swedenborg's philosophical works, even though they are based on the science of his day, will prove to be of inestimable value. Not the obsolete science, but the eternal principles of his philosophy, will be valuable. Their truth will be confirmed, and the understanding of them will be greatly enhanced, when they are seen in the context of modern scientific studies. Even the mental pictures of finites and auras, if only we do not think of them literally, but recognize that they are intended to be viewed "in something of spiritual light," will help to lift our minds above the concepts of space and time, of mechanics and geometry, to some vision of the Lord's immediate presence, and of the activity of Divine love and wisdom, in the entire structure of His universe.

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