

REFLECTIONS ON SWEDENBORG'S *THE INFINITE AND FINAL CAUSE OF CREATION*[†]

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The philosophical work by Swedenborg, which will now for a short period of time occupy our attention, is commonly known only as *The Infinite*. A somewhat fuller indication of the contents of the work, however, is suggested by the title which I have used as heading for my address: *The Infinite and Final Cause of Creation*. But even this longer name of the book is incomplete, for it excludes the book's second part, which deals with the commerce of the soul and the body. We supply, therefore, the full and descriptive title that Swedenborg gave it, as rendered in our current translation by James John Garth Wilkinson: *Outlines of a Philosophical Argument on the INFINITE and the Final Cause of Creation, and on the Inter-course between the Soul and the Body*.

As for the second part of our book, my allotted time will not allow more than a cursory look at it. But such looking, even if it be in admiration, is doing it an injustice, for not only is it afforded almost as full attention by the author as the first part, but also it constitutes a subject that could stand by itself in its own right. There is, nevertheless, a parallel between the two parts, for as the infinite relates to the created and finite universe, so the soul relates to the body; and this parallel is perhaps the reason why our author included both parts within the same covers.

I will make one more observation about the two parts. That observation has a bearing on the place of our book itself in the sequence of Swedenborg's labors as a philosopher. I think it can be fairly said that the first part looks back to and sums up what has gone before, and that the second part foreshadows what is yet to come, namely, a study of the human kingdom for the sake of which the Creator produced the universe.

Let us therefore in a quick view place our book in the chronology of Swedenborg's philosophical pursuit.

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All the works that had gone before it, from the *Daedalus Hyperboreus* (The Daedulus of the North, a scientific journal that Swedenborg gave out as a young man in his twenties) to and including the *Principia* plus the two volumes on Iron and Copper published together with it (all three under the joint title of *Opera Philosophica et Mineralia*)—all these works had dealt with physical, inorganic things, beginning with the mineral kingdom and reaching up through the atmospheres to the origin of it, that is, to the origin of the universe. Then (in 1734) follows our present book, with its first part on the infinite and its second part on the human soul. In fact, Swedenborg wrote this relatively small but incisive work while seeing his large *Opera* through the press.

What comes afterwards shifts from the physical universe to the human kingdom—from the macrocosm to the microcosm. We now meet the *Economy of the Animal Kingdom*, *The Fibre*, the *Rational Psychology*, *The Brain*, the *Animal Kingdom*, and other studies in the region of the human body and soul, ending with that at once poetic and philosophical work, *The Worship and Love of God*, which as it turned out stood at the threshold of Swedenborg's call, and thus at the borderline of the second and crowning period of his life.

We can therefore see that our present book forms so to speak a nexus, or bridge, between two distinct series of studies, both of them together building in the mind of the author a profound knowledge of the secrets of creation. We often speak of Swedenborg's search for the origin of the universe, and his search for the soul. And indeed the two series of studies that mark his philosophical career can be so summarized. What is important, however, is that a mind so filled—perhaps more richly than that of any man at his time or of any man before him—was necessary for a later introduction into the secrets of faith. For the secrets of creation and the secrets of faith do correspond. The physical universe and the spiritual world correspond.

That is why the *Divine Love and Wisdom* could issue the following challenge: "Any one who chooses may confirm himself in favor of the Divine from things seen in nature...There is no lack of material" (DLW 353, 357); and why the *True Christian Religion* declares: "From His Divine Natural [which He put on in the world] the Lord enlightens not only the internal spiritual man but also the external natural man, which two, unless

they are at the same time enlightened, man is at it were in the shade, but when both are at the same time enlightened he is as it were in daylight" (TCR 109:2).

The infinite

But let us now move to our book itself. To begin with we listen to Swedenborg's own introduction to it. True to his universal attitude he sees revelation and God as the authority above and beyond the phenomena of nature which he explores. And we extract the following from his brief Preface:

Philosophy, if it be truly rational, can never be contrary to revelation: that is to say, if the rational principle partake of the soul more than of the body...Reason or understanding is a faculty partaking both of the soul and the body, whose end is to enable the soul to be instructed through the body and its organs, that afterwards it may dispose all things in such an order and connection, and call them forth with such distinctness, that a rational principle may result. The end of reason can be no other than that man may perceive what things are revealed, and what are created. Thus the rational cannot be contrary to the Divine, since the end for which reason is given us, is that we may be empowered to perceive that there is a God, and to know that He is to be worshipped.

But what is the *infinite*? We note that the term "infinite" is negative in form; infinite, meaning non-finite or not finite. But the negative *form* may imply an affirmative *idea*, in this case the most affirmative possible. When we say "infinite" we acknowledge a reality that is so superior that it has nothing in common with anything that is limited, thus anything that is finite. And since we ourselves are finite, both as to our organs of sensation and our ability to understand, or both as to our body and our soul, we also acknowledge that this non-finite is in itself above our comprehension. We are by reason compelled to see that the infinite exists, but at the same time humbled to recognize that we cannot attain to it.

Between the finite and the infinite there is no *ratio*. You cannot by refining the finite, nor yet by multiplying it, attain to the infinite. So

Swedenborg admits; “The more deeply human wisdom commits itself to the investigation of the divine or infinite essence, the more deeply is it involved in a labyrinth” (Page 10¹). The problem is that the infinite may appear as nothing in comparison with the finite, and vice versa. “For,” says our author, “the infinitely small becomes proportionately as nothing in relation to the greatest or least finite, if we may so express ourselves. On the other hand, the greatest or least finite becomes nothing relatively to the infinitely great. Whence if we postulate either the infinite or the finite, the other perishes in comparison” (p. 11).

Yet the matter cannot be left there, for the eye knows that the finite exists, and reason sees that the finite can have no origin but the non-finite, therefore that the infinite exists also. So the inquiry goes on. “The human mind distinctly proposes to solve the difficulty, by scrutinizing in the first place every hole and corner of the subject” (p. 11).

The infinite and extension

Where do we get if we examine extension—the very big, or the very small? The universe is very big. Even our planet is; our sun many times bigger; our solar system again many times bigger. And there are light-years from one end to the other in the galaxy in which we are—indeed, there are galaxies the size of millions of light-years across, and there are untold millions of galaxies in the universe. Is the universe infinite? No, the universe is vast, but not infinite. Is the infinite still bigger than the universe? No, the infinite is not related to size; it is not subject to measurement.

There is also the very small. We have the ultimate matter and water. Within that the *Principia*, on which the work on the *Infinite* builds, has a series of five higher, or more interior, finites, and within these the first natural point, or first natural principle. Modern science has other names for these—molecules, atoms, electrons, etc. But the underlying idea is the same, namely composition—composition of the smaller into the more complex. In Swedenborg’s philosophy, the finites also form atmospheres: the air for the communication of sound; ether for the communication of

¹ All pagination refers to the Swedenborg Society edition, 1908.

light; the magnetic sphere to surround and serve the animal soul; and the universal aura for the human soul.

And inmostly you have the first natural point. It has no extension. Is it infinite? No, it is still created—the beginning of creation, but not Creator. (Cf. TCR 29, referring to the spiritual sun: “There and thence is the beginning of finition.”) Is the infinite still smaller than it? No, there is no relation; there is no ratio.

Motion and velocity

What about motion? Or velocity? “As the infinite is not the least of substantials,” our author goes on to argue,

the least of extension, the least of quantity, or the least of form, that is to say, is not the least of geometrical entities, the human mind goes onwards, turns over the subject in every way, and asks whether the infinite may not be the pure and least actuality; at once the least and the greatest in motion, in velocity, in motive force; in short, whether it may not be at once the least and the greatest of mechanical entities? (p. 13)

The mechanical involves motion—motion of a subject upon itself, or motion from one subject to another.

Neither do we arrive at the infinite on this line of approach. For “motion cannot exist without a substance that is moved, and no substance can undergo motion without assuming reference to degrees and moments, which give birth to succession in velocity, or what is the same thing, succession in time” (pp. 13,14).

So again, the answer is no. The infinite is not related to anything mechanical, any motion, any velocity. “The infinite cannot admit of modification” (p. 14).

Is the infinite eternal?

Here Swedenborg takes up the question as to whether eternity is related to time, and so if infinity is. He lets the mind think in terms of very long time. Try myriads of years; then again myriads of myriads; then multiply all these myriads: will you arrive at the eternal?

There is a dilemma. For the human mind recognizes that there is cause prior to any effect. If the cause, then, is a little earlier in time than the effect, how far must we go back in time to arrive at the first cause? When did eternity begin? And if it did not begin, what is it?

But the dilemma is worse yet. For “it occurs to the philosopher that there was a time when God took His rise” (p. 16). But if eternity is endless time, then, if God took His rise, He could not be eternal.

Swedenborg is still following the questioning and troubled mind along the line of time. “Pondering these considerations,” he says, “the mind doubts and hesitates respecting the existence of eternity, and whether there is aught from eternity—aught that has never at any time had an origin” (p. 16). The mind is thrown back in its original quandary. Quantity, space, motion, time: it appears that they all “conspire and consent naturally and rationally in declaring that there is no infinity in any one of them” (Ibid.).

We cannot follow the arduous reasoning in all its details; but Swedenborg takes up all imaginable questions, all based on the assumption that the infinite is something very small or very big, and that eternity is endless time. The doubting philosopher, so reasoning, in the end “secretly concludes that the divine essence is probably not infinite, but indefinite,, and the least and the greatest in all things...(and so) he guesses that the Divine is the prime being of nature, and consequently that nature and God are in a manner one and the same” (p. 17).

The resolution

On his way to a resolution of the quandary Swedenborg raises many questions with which the natural mind of any of us would identify. Ought we to reason about infinity? Is there an infinite, or not? What can be the cause of the existence of the first natural principle? And if we can say anything about a first cause, are we also able to speak about the quality of that cause?

If—our author reasons—in going back to the inmost of creation we have to admit “a first or least natural something,” then “the question occurs, *Whence and by virtue of what cause* could such an entity exist?” Now we are on the way. But Swedenborg is very patient. He seems to say to his

reader: Come with me, and we will examine all stumbling blocks as we go. "If we suppose that [this first or least natural entity] existed from itself, or was its own cause, we at once have a consequence which is flatly repugnant to reason. If it be finite...[then] that which is finite in it...must have a cause or origin. If it admits in it aught that is similar to the finite, whence comes this similar? How can it admit anything in it without a cause?" (p. 24)

Then he lets his reader—or the natural philosopher—pose questions about casualty or accident, and, more pertinently, about *quality*. But our author silences the speculation about any accidental coming into existence by observing: "If [this first natural something] did exist from itself, it could not even do this by accident, because one sees that where no cause is present, neither is any casualty or accident" (p. 24).

But when quality is brought into view, then a rhetorical question is its own answer: "Whence this something? If again we say, from itself; pray then whence this precise finite with its distinctive *qualities*?" (p. 25) Our natural philosopher would be hard put to account for the wondrous qualities latent in the first or least natural entity, if indeed there was not a cause more wondrous still that brought it into existence.

By this Swedenborg is getting ready to deliver the general answer to the question as to the final cause. But he lays no claim to knowing the *quality* of that cause. We know nothing about qualities save through experience, and we have no experience on the level of the infinite. So he says: "If then primitive nature existed from a cause, the cause could not be finite; for if it were, *it* also would desiderate a cause, to finite it. We conclude therefore, again with reason, that the infinite is the cause of the finite, albeit we do not know the nature or *quale* of the infinite." (pp. 25, 26).

Whence the infinite?

Having now brought his natural philosopher to the conclusion that the only possible cause of the first simple finite is the non-finite, thus the infinite, he nevertheless hears his hardened opponent raise the question, But whence the infinite?

And Swedenborg just continues with his superior logic; and we quote his riposte *in extenso*:

The answer to this from his own reason, as from the lips of Themis, or from behind the veil of the Temple, is to the effect that the infinite cannot possibly admit of a foreign cause, but must have its cause in itself, or be the cause of itself. Every finite must be finited by a cause. The indefinite is only so called in relation to the finite; and does have a *quale* or distinctive nature that obtains its very distinctness by a cause, or from some other being. But what is infinite cannot be finited or rendered finite: it cannot be made to have a distinctive quality; it cannot be affected in one way or another, or in one time or another, because it is not finitable or finite, but infinite. Prior or posterior, great and small, are not to be predicated of the one infinite. As, then, it cannot be finited, so, being infinite, it is involved in its own cause. (pp. 27,28)

We might think that this would put an end to all questioning. But our opposite number still persists: "When did the infinite originate?" And true, our natural mind does bother itself with this question also. But let us dismiss this one quickly, and listen only to the gist of the reply: "The same answer must be given, viz. that the infinite is infinite in point of time also. If infinite in one thing, it cannot be finite in another" (p. 28).

Now having thus dealt with all conceivable questions along a particular line of reasoning, our author takes up another line, and this to the end that a still more full view of the matter might be attained. But we cannot take the time to follow him in this also. Suffice it to say that Swedenborg now accepts "the confession and tacit admission" he has obtained, and moves from the *a priori* to an *a posteriori* approach, that is, he now views his quest also from the standpoint of observation and experience. In so doing he declares his purpose thus: "Let us now proceed onwards, and see whether we can, by reason, attain to a still more distinct acknowledgment that there is an infinite, or that God is infinite, and that God is the author and producer of nature" (pp. 29, 30).

The Only-begotten Son

Instead, therefore, of following this *a posteriori* search for the infinite, that is, a search that begins from experience, let us, though reluctantly,

make a big leap in our book, and give our attention to the way the supreme Deity holds everything together in His providence.

Of the many things analyzed by our author we will mention only two: The provision for a rational soul in man; and the existence of an infinite *nexus* whereby the Deity reaches down to the ultimate sphere of His work.

By a “rational soul” Swedenborg means a soul which by its own wisdom governs the body, regardless of how the mind of man, below that soul, chooses to behave. For God foresaw that in man there would be a tension between the will of the soul and the will of the body, and that the will of the body could thwart the whole purpose of creation, except for a provision for the preservation of some order even if it tried to.

In this the infinite God exercised at once both foreknowledge and operation. Prevision and providence—foreseeing and providing—became in Him the same thing (pp. 118, 119).

Yet there is still the question of how to reach out to the last things of order. And in this question we meet Swedenborg’s, the searching philosopher’s, thought about the Son of God.

I think his thoughts revolve around the first chapter of the Gospel of John, even if he does not quote from it or refer to it. For he sees the need for a *nexus* between the infinite and the finite, but insists at the same time that this *nexus* must be infinite also. Were these words in his mind: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God”? The question is: Do we have both the infinite Deity and the infinite Only-begotten? Are there two infinities? Swedenborg does not in so many words spell out this question, or its answer. But his logic was sharp. It would allow for no impossible gaps. Throughout he had argued for the absoluteness of the infinite: no limits to it, nothing of extension and nothing of time, appertaining to it. There could be only one infinite. So the Only-begotten Son was that infinite bending towards the finite, reaching down to it, and in the end revealing itself to it as God-Man.

This is what we read: “By the fall [of man], and the dominion of the body over the soul, the connection was broken and the end would have been frustrated. But God provided against this by His infinite, only-begotten Son, who took on Him the ultimate effect of the world, or a manhood and a human shape, and thereby was infinite in and with the finite, and consequently restored the *nexus* in His own person between the

infinite and the finite, so that the primary end was realized." (p. 124)—Again: "As the Deity foresaw that the issue of this dominion [between the soul and the body] would be unhappy, He provided for the event by a connection of man, or the last effect, with the Infinite, who thus Himself became the last effect, at once God and man, the Mediator between the finite and the Infinite." (Ibid)—And also this: "It is a well-known circumstance that scarcely one-third or one-fourth part of our race is aware that the only-begotten Son of God assumed the human form; still less that our sole connection with God is through Him; and that the foundations of faith are possible through Him alone" (p. 125).

At the time Swedenborg did not yet know of the spiritual sun. The words "Divine Human" and their stupendous implication had not been revealed to him. He had still about ten years to go until his spiritual eyes would be opened to see the wonders of the world of the spirit and to learn the arcana that belong to angelic wisdom.

Yet what this at once humble and profound philosopher saw was not contrary to the innumerable things that were later to be revealed to him, and through him to all mankind.

Swedenborg thought from causes. Since there can never be an effect without a cause superior to itself, he went up all the way to the Cause of all causes, *the Final Cause of creation*, and having thus found the infinite he viewed all things, all problems, all facts of science, from the perspective of the all-seeing, all-penetrating government of the infinite.

That is how his mind was prepared. For the arcana of the created universe, including the man who lives in it, and the arcana of faith, do correspond. □