

SEIZURES OF A SPIRIT-SEER?

Reuben P. Bell, M.S., M.Div., D.O.[†]

There is an old joke that is germane to any discussion of spiritual revelation:

Prayer is when you talk to God. But when He answers, it's called schizophrenia.

Old jokes are good jokes, because within them is often some subtle cultural or ideological bias, the absurdity of which becomes glaringly apparent in the light of day. In the question of Emanuel Swedenborg's mental status, a certain rationalistic bias can be seen peeking through several psychological studies, published over many years, purporting to diagnose the "Swedish Seer" with a variety of disorders.¹ The necessity, for one who subscribes to this bias, is to explain the comprehensive, other-worldly nature of Swedenborg's thirty-volume theological corpus in terms suitable for consumption in a modern (or now *post-modern*) age. Since all revelation, in this materialistic mind-set, is "schizophrenia," then schizophrenia it must be. But there are questions here, begging to be asked, about how this definition came to be so universally accepted, and who decides such things.

Van Dusen, in a recent exploration of the question of Swedenborg's sanity, lays the essential groundwork for any discussion of mental illness.² Many who have ascribed Swedenborg's visions to mental illness have clearly done so out of ignorance; insanity is not as easily defined as lay persons are inclined to believe. Insanity *is* as insanity *does*, he argues—the disorderly and unproductive life of chronic insanity does not yield the accomplishments of a Swedenborg. Consistency and integration settle the argument for Van Dusen, an experienced clinical psychologist. His is a

[†] Dr. Bell is a physician, minister in the General Church of the New Jerusalem, and faculty member at the Bryn Athyn College of the New Church in Bryn Athyn.

¹ The first scholar to publicly question Swedenborg's sanity was philosopher Immanuel Kant, in his *Dreams of a Spirit-seer*, of 1766.

² Wilson Van Dusen, "The Issue of Swedenborg's Sanity." *New Church Life* 118: 7 (July 1998): 305–313.

clear and rational argument, from experience, for the validity of Swedenborg's claims of revelation. But as always, this will not satisfy all people. No matter what the argument, it seems, we are always left with two schools of thought on matters of spirit.

There are two important distinctions regarding these matters that deserve our attention. First, investigators recognize two very different forms that transcendent experiences may take. Van Dusen's "visionary experience," the apparently valid spiritual experience of prophets and saints, "makes sense," and leaves the subject with "a deeper understanding of religion." In short, these experiences tend to order and enhance the lives of those who have them. In contrast to this experience are the hell-like attacks of psychotic hallucinations. These are not integrative or instructional, and tend to leave the subject in a confused and diminished mental state. The distinction between these two forms of experience is important in the discussion of Swedenborg's sanity, because here lies the crux of one of the major arguments concerning the validity of Swedenborg's theological corpus: the *argument from quality* for validity of the revelation.

The second distinction regarding matters of spirit is that of the source of the visionary experience. As expected, we find our perennial two schools of thought here as well, in the mutually exclusive possibilities of spiritual and material models. In the spiritual model the transcendent experience flows in from its source in the spiritual world; the (natural) brain, serving as a platform for the (spiritual) mind, acts as the "receiver" for this spiritual influx, which it then somehow presents to the consciousness. In the natural model the experience is a product of the neurological activity of the brain alone. The brain is perfectly capable, say the materialists, of producing all the sensations necessary for experiences of every kind; this model requires no spiritual source. This distinction between spiritual and natural mechanisms of the transcendent experience is the most basic element in our discussion of Swedenborg's sanity, because it is assumptions at this level that turn *transcendence* into *schizophrenia*. (Let us not forget what happens when God answers our prayers.) It is this distinction that has produced our two "camps," and has produced the tacit but prevalent bias that sees schizophrenia when others may see answered prayer.

The first distinction has been argued before—most recently by Van Dusen, but in the past by many—especially by those with actual clinical experience in psychiatry and psychology. To them, the degree of order and integration of the experience in question speaks for its validity. And although this is a sound approach, it has its limitations. Anyone dismissing Swedenborg's revelation as insanity must first become familiar with his system, and most scholars are neither willing nor able to invest the time and effort necessary into mastering a thirty-volume theological corpus. To effectively argue insanity also requires more than passing knowledge of the nature of insanity itself, and this too represents essentially career-sized preparation. To further confuse the issue, the nature of transcendence of any kind remains essentially unknown, to the materialist and the spiritually-minded person alike. So in our *argument from quality* we are resigned to arguing vague notions of poorly understood phenomena. It is no wonder that few if any are convinced to change camps by this argument alone.

The second distinction, that of *argument from source*, is no less frustrating, because it too, depends on our understanding of a very difficult mechanism: the brain/mind continuum (or *contiguum*, depending on one's bias). With all the progress of this century's science, neurobiology is still in its infancy. But there is promise here, perhaps beyond that of any other approach to the problem of transcendence, because of the rich findings that are beginning to appear.

On first inspection, it is the materialists who stand to gain from this work. The better we come to understand the brain, the more it seems to be no more than an elegant machine—hardly a new idea, but strengthened now by ever more evidence for awesome magnitudes of natural complexity. The requirement for something “out there” is no longer necessary with a machine this elegantly complicated. In Francis Crick's *Astonishing Hypothesis*?³ the human mind is solely a function of the activity of the brain. Astonishing? Hardly. This is an old idea. The only astonishing thing here is an amateurish attack on religion unbecoming a Nobel laureate. But Richard Dawkins has gone to these excesses too,⁴ as have a few emboldened

³ Francis Crick, *The Astonishing Hypothesis* (New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1994).

⁴ Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1987).

others, for this is an age of boldness in the science of transcendence. Spirit? Don't need it, thank you.

In an unexpected turn of events, however, science is now about to serve the other camp, as well. The ability to objectify the transcendent state—until now a fantasy—has arrived, in the form of Positron Emission Tomography (PET Scans) and enhanced Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI). These tools measure rates of cellular metabolism and cerebral blood flow in intact, normally functioning human subjects, without interference with brain activity in any way. Different mental activities and “states” produce characteristic patterns of glucose uptake and regional blood flow. It is finally possible to accurately “observe” states of sleep, wakefulness, meditation, and even transcendence, as reported by the experimental subjects. The findings are revealing, and their implications promise to change the paradigm of what is spiritual and what is not. The mutually exclusive nature of our two models may represent a false dichotomy, forcing us to make choices that do not adequately explain the phenomena at hand.

Psychiatrist Eugene d'Aquili, and nuclear medicine specialist Andrew Newberg have been using these tools to study mental and emotional states, and from preliminary findings they are assembling some interesting principles: the transcendent experience may be a product of “eruptive overflows” of neuronal pools, reverberating circuits, and increased activity in frontal lobes concomitant with decreased activity in parietal lobes—transcendence may in fact be “hard-wired” into the human brain.⁵ One possible explanation for the altered mental states of monks and seers is the result of simultaneous outflow from the two complementary limbs of the autonomic nervous system, the ergotropic (sympathetic) and trophotropic (parasympathetic), which do not normally operate in such a balance. This unusual neurological event may be associated with what d'Aquili and Newberg call a state of *absolute unity of being* (AUB), in which the subject reports loss of discrete boundaries between things, time sense, and the self–other dichotomy.

⁵These findings were reported in a talk on “Science and Soul” in Philadelphia on February 10, during the Annual Meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. Now published, Eugene d'Aquili and A. Newberg, “The Neurophysiological Basis of Religions, or Why God Won't go Away.” *Zygon* 33: 2 (June 1998): 187–201.

So how might these apparently mechanistic findings give aid and comfort to those in the “spiritual” camp? The question raised by all these possibilities is of central importance to our fundamental problem: Is transcendental “enlightenment” an authentic taste of ultimate reality, or is this illumination nothing more than the brain’s perceiving its own activity? The crux for these researchers is in *causality*: Certain mental states may be the result of specific brain activity, but is it not also just as plausible that changes in brain function may be the *result* (not the cause) of changes in consciousness? Mystics universally agree that spiritual causes are primary and natural effects are secondary to these, but Western science has turned these assumptions around, making matter the primary substance. Who is correct? It depends on the philosophical position from which one starts, and proof becomes a “chicken and egg” conundrum. Both camps come to rest in an uneasy stalemate, where argument gives way to belief, and fact becomes dogma; two religious armies, exchanging occasional shots at one another across the trenches.

The problem of Swedenborg’s mental status comes to mind in the light of this discussion; every attempt to dismiss his revelation as mental aberration rekindles these same fundamental issues. The most recent mechanistic revision is from neurologists Foote-Smith and Smith, who identify temporal lobe epilepsy as the cause of his visions and spiritual experiences.⁶ They are not the first to propose this mechanism for transcendence,⁷ and from a purely medical point of view, it is a much better guess in Swedenborg’s case than schizophrenia.⁸

I will leave it to others to refute their argument on clinical grounds (which will employ the *argument from quality*). My intention is to make some assumptions based on their hypothesis and the ideas of d’Aquila and Newberg, mentioned above, and raise some questions from these.

⁶ Elizabet Foote-Smith and Timothy J. Smith, “Historical Note: Emanuel Swedenborg.” *Epilepsia* 37: 2 (1996): 211–218. Reprinted in this volume, pp.137–156.

⁷ Transcendence in the form of the “near-death experience” is discussed at length by neurobiologists in the *Journal of Near-Death Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 4, Summer 1989. Articles by Saavedra-Aguilar and Gomez-Jeria and by Neppe propose neural mechanisms for the “spiritual” experience in terms of temporal lobe seizure activity.

⁸ Many historical figures have been retrospectively diagnosed with temporal lobe epilepsy and a host of other mental and physical disorders, in a diversion common to clinicians of all specialties. The medical literature is spotted with these hypothetical accounts.

Let's suppose that the brain is capable of producing its own transcendent states by means of purely neurological mechanisms. But in the normally functioning brain there is no regular sensation of transcendence. We might call this the "default state" of the human brain and mind. Suppose that something intervenes—disease, injury, genetic abnormality, chemical influence—that causes a change in the neurological platform that supports the mind (whatever this "mind" may be).

We may now assume one of two very different possibilities: In one case the altered physical circuitry of the mind (the brain) produces an altered state of awareness called insanity. The machine is broken, and secondary to this, its function is predictably abnormal. This is the mechanistic model, in which there is no allowance for "revelation" of any kind, regardless of the nature or quality of the experience itself.

In another case this same altered platform allows spiritual influx (which was present all the time) to enter into the consciousness and be perceived as "visionary experience" by some, hallucination by others, or nothing at all for most people. Might there be a continuum of spiritual states, produced by the degree and location of the alteration, based on genetic predisposition, physical or chemical injury, toxins, psychoactive drugs, seizure activity, or *any* agent of change in the natural platform for the spiritual mind? If this spiritual model of transcendence were found to be the case, how then would we define normal–abnormal, sane–insane, or seizure–transcendence?

Both of these possibilities explain the phenomena of transcendence to some degree of satisfaction. Both are based on valid arguments. Neither possibility can be proven, at the expense of the other. We are forced back to the only argument that is of any use: the familiar *argument from quality* for the visionary experience. The question becomes not *what is it*, but *what does it do*? The next assignment for Foote-Smith and Smith might be to continue their study of Swedenborg, but this time to objectively read those "*seizures of a spirit-seer*," and decide for themselves if the observations recorded there are of any utility in the structural integrity of their lives. Because in the final analysis, this is the only measure of revelation: Does it work? Does it do you any good? What effect, if any, does it have on your life? All else is argument. Science, with all its power, is leading us back to our beginnings: choice, belief and adherence.

The brain is a receiving vessel for the spiritual influx that enlivens us and makes us human. Or it is not. Swedenborg's revelation enhances our lives by explaining the interaction of the spiritual and natural worlds, the soul and body. Or it does not. Swedenborg heard the answer to his prayer to understand the cosmos. Or he was schizophrenic. He received his revelation from the Lord Himself in authentic spiritual experience, and recorded it for the world in the thirty life-changing volumes we call the Writings for the New Church. Or he had temporal lobe seizures. You decide. With all the science and religion we can bring to bear on this problem, you are still on your own. This is the good news of spiritual freedom, at work in this most important issue.

We must acknowledge that there will always be two ideological "camps" concerning the nature of transcendence. All the reasoned arguments of the ages have not changed this fact, nor will they ever change it, because what determines these camps is not fact, but faith. Both arguments, even those of the most scientifically inclined, are based on articles of faith. And faith rests not on argument, but on belief. This is not a bad thing. It is a very good thing—an essential thing in fact, if the human mind (be it spiritual or natural) is to operate in freedom.

The presence of spiritual influx that is presented to our consciousness by interaction with a natural neural structure cannot be proved. But neither can it be disproved, by all the power that science can muster. Membership in a camp is a matter of choice, made in freedom, from a philosophical base. It could be no other way, for

A person's free will depends on his feeling life as his own; and God permits this for the sake of communion, which must be reciprocal; and it becomes so when the person acts in complete freedom. If God deprived him of this feeling, he would no longer be a human being, nor have eternal life; for communion with God raises man above the beasts, and gives him eternal life. This is the effect of free will in spiritual things.⁹

⁹ Emanuel Swedenborg, *The True Christian Religion* n. 504, as n. 893 of *Everyman's Library* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1933).

The arguments will continue, and likely should, because they sharpen our minds and more clearly define our beliefs.

With these things said, the urgency to prove or disprove “revelation” as visionary experience, hallucination, or just the brain’s electrical activity disappears. The best each of us can do is address the problem as clearly as possible, choose our religion, and live with our decision. □