

UNDERSTANDING SWEDENBORG THE EMBRYOLOGIST AND CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHER

Dan A. Synnestvedt¹

I will propose two reasons why we need a better understanding of the pretheological works. These two reasons, taken together, will hopefully lead not only to a conference devoted to the difficult questions raised in these works, but also to a new annotated edition of them. The first reason has to do with strange and puzzling statements that are made in Swedenborg's scientific and philosophical works, and the second has to do with the needs of students of Swedenborg's thought.

Let us begin with the first reason: there are some things in the pretheological works that do not square with scientific theory as it is taught today. In fact, at first glance some of Swedenborg's scientific assertions seem puzzling and even strange to a contemporary reader. For example, while teaching a course on Swedenborg's philosophy at Bryn Athyn College of the New Church, I encountered the following statement from *The Economy of the Animal Kingdom Considered Anatomically, Physically, and Philosophically* (Augustus Clissold, translator, Boston: Carter and Sons, 1868 [1740]).

267. *From the imaginative force in pregnant females, causing corresponding marks on the little body of the embryo.* For in case the mother experience any great alarm, or any inordinate emotions of terror or longing, and in this state the representation of anything be vividly made to her mind, it will immediately descend to the brains of the embryo through the vascular and fibrous passages, and (if I am not mistaken in the conjecture) through the innermost coat of the arteries and the outermost coat of the veins, and thence through the spirituous fluid and the purer blood.

¹Dan A. Synnestvedt, Ph.D., is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Bryn Athyn College of the New Church. He recently edited *Faith and Learning at Bryn Athyn College of the New Church* (ANC Press, 2004), a collection of essays on the liberal arts by professors. His address is PO Box 717, Bryn Athyn, PA 19009 or dasyntnes@newchurch.edu.

Here Swedenborg discusses how the soul flows into the things of nature to create a body. This passage is part of the section on the development of the chick in the egg and on embryology in general. What Swedenborg is saying is that if an expectant mother sees something and it makes a vivid impression on her, that impression will be transmitted to the brain of the developing child. Then he conjectures concerning the mechanism for this transmission. Now comes the strange and puzzling part of this passage, namely, the list of examples to support his assertion:

In this manner we find impressed upon the tender body of the embryo, figures of strawberries, cherries, plums, rape-seeds, figs, apples, pomegranates, herbs, ears of corn, grapes, roses, parsley, lettuces, mushrooms, cauliflowers, finger-marks, weals, rods, flies, spiders; hence also arise dark-colored stains, fissured forehead, hare-lip, swine's snout; marks of fish, serpents, oysters, crab's claws, bunching or webbed fingers, slugs, combs of cocks, mice, dormice, etc. (EAK 267)

Whence does this list of birthmarks originate? We can consult Dr. Hugo Lj. Odhner's notes on Swedenborg's philosophy. In his course notes to passage 267 he remarks that "Here we have pre-natal influences used as confirmatory data." This is undoubtedly correct, but where did the data come from? Rev. Stephen Cole steered me toward Swedenborg's book on generation where Rev. Dr. Alfred Acton I made translations of portions of a manuscript from Martin Schurig. In the Appendix, section 8, entitled "The Signs of Sex," Schurig wrote "The Affections of the Animus, and the imagination of pregnant women" to which Acton adds "[Under this last head follows a long list of birth marks that have been observed; also marks in animals.]" (*The Animal Kingdom*, Parts 4 and 5, "The Organs of Generation," and "The Formation of the Foetus in the Womb," second edition, Bryn Athyn, PA: Academy of the New Church, 1928, p. 332).

Yet there is no information here about who Martin Schurig was, when he lived, what he did, or where he got his facts. Did Schurig get his facts from a modern anatomist, from a medieval source, or possibly from an ancient source, such as Galen or Aristotle? We know that Swedenborg read both Galen and Aristotle. Did Swedenborg prefer Schurig's list to one that the ancients created? Did he add items to Schurig's list, or delete items

from an ancient list, or is this a case in which Swedenborg did not really care too much about the particular items on the list because it was such a well-known collection of facts that it served his general purpose? At this point, we apparently don't know.

The New Century Edition of Swedenborg's theological works is being annotated so that the reader is given some idea about possible or actual precursors to ideas in the Writings. Yet this has not been done for the pretheological works, and there are times when it would be helpful to know what source, or sources, if any, Swedenborg is drawing upon. A conference devoted to answering some of these questions and clearing up some of the puzzling statements found in the pretheological works would prepare the ground for a new annotated edition.

The second reason for a conference leading up to a new edition of the pretheological works has to do with the needs of today's students.

Swedenborg addressed his contemporaries in some of his philosophical works. Just as, say, Professor Smith in today's academia will write a book in reply to Professor Jones' last book, so the same process occurred in the eighteenth century. Swedenborg, through his travels and acquaintances, was well-connected to the Republic of Letters. From (what we call) *A Philosophers Note Book* (Alfred Acton, editor and translator, Philadelphia, PA: Swedenborg Scientific Association, 1931) we know that Swedenborg read not only the ancient philosophers but also the modern ones.

When a work such as *The Infinite and the Final Cause of Creation* (1734) is read with a knowledge of the philosophy of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it is relatively easy to see that Swedenborg is, at various points, penning a reply to other European intellectuals. We realize that Swedenborg knows that his contemporaries are flirting with naturalism, the idea that ultimate reality is only nature, and pantheism, the idea that God and nature are fused together into a single entity. These were serious options available to the modern mind. Swedenborg critiques these metaphysical theories and shows why they are mistaken. For a greater appreciation of this philosophical treatise, these arguments, replies, and objections need to be studied against the growing acceptance of, for example, Spinoza's pantheism and modern materialism. Swedenborg sees himself as a Christian philosopher arguing against naturalism and in favor of a rational belief in God and the soul. It would be wonderful to be able to give

students, as well as other readers, an edition of *The Infinite* that contained information on the philosophical background to the work.

My philosophy students pine for contemporary translations of the philosophic and scientific works in an electronic searchable format, similar to New Search for the theological works. Students would like to do electronic research and compare various translations with the Latin originals and compare these to the theological works so that they can see how word usage changes and how ideas are developed or cast aside. A new annotated searchable edition of the pretheological works will help us produce more original research more efficiently. The SSA needs to put the already scanned old translations into useable electronic format, but this takes time and support. Our hope for a new annotated translation of the pretheological works will require even more, but then that is why we have the SSA! □