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THE TREATISE ON THE INFINITE

W. CAIRNS HENDERSON

On May 10, 1733, Swedenborg left Stockholm to see through the press his *Opera Philosophica et Mineralia,* the first volume of which is the *Principia.* The printing of that massive work, at Dresden and Leipzig, was finished in April, 1734; and early in that year he issued from the same press the treatise *Prodromus Philosophiae Ratiocinantis de Infinito, et Causa Finali Creationis; deque Mechanismo Operationis Animae et Corporis—Outlines of a Philosophical Argument on the Infinite and the Final Cause of Creation, and on the Mechanism of the Operation of Soul and Body.* As Swedenborg had not mentioned this treatise in his petition to the King for leave of absence to publish the major work, it may be concluded that he did not then have it in mind. Indeed the first draft seems to have been written late in 1733, within a single month. And there is evidence that it was written after the *Principia,* for in it the reader is referred to that work,

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and the doctrine of the soul is developed further than in the *Principia.*

If the appearance of the *Opera Mineralia* established Swedenborg firmly as one of the foremost European mineralogists, *De Infinito* caused very little stir in the learned world, although later it was one of the first of the philosophical works of Swedenborg to arouse interest in England. It was reviewed in the December number of the *Acta Eruditorum,* 1735. But although the reviewer refers to it as "the fruits of Swedenborg's highly refined mind, which so greatly excels in its fitness for lofty subjects," he ventures no positive appraisal of its merits and hints that it is tinged with materialism.

Literary History

The literary history of the work is not extensive. The first translation of *The Infinite* into English was published at Manchester, England, as early as 1795. This was the work of three pupils in the Rev. William Cowherd's Classical School, and although revised by him, it was not a successful rendering of the text; which is scarcely surprising when we learn that the youthful translators were 17, 13 and 12 years old, respectively—not ripe years in philosophy, however sound their knowledge of Latin may have been!

However, nothing further was done for over fifty years, when, in 1847, a new translation, published by the Swedenborg Association, was made by Dr. James John Garth Wilkinson, who prefixed some introductory remarks to the text. Reprints were issued both in England and in this country, and in 1898 or 1899 the Committee of the Swedenborg Society requested the Rev. James Hyde, compiler of the *Bibliography of Swedenborg's Works,* to examine Wilkinson's translation and report on its suitability or otherwise for republication by the Society. Despite some serious criticisms in Hyde's otherwise favorable report, the Swedenborg Society decided to reprint Wilkinson's translation with slight revision. This was done in 1902, under the editorship of the Rev. James Hyde and the Rev. Isaiah Tansley. Wilkinson's introductory remarks were retained, but a new, and at that time up-to-date, introduction by the Rev. Lewis Field Hite was added. In an interesting review (New Philosophy, 1903, p. 61) "F.S." says:

"We would have been glad if the editors had offered some more worthy reason [for retaining Wilkinson's introduction] than that of the 'high sanction given to it by the favorable estimation and the personal friendship it won from Ralph Waldo Emerson.'" We today could share in that wish—though for other reasons!

Subsequent reprints have been made of the 1902 edition. There is need both for a new translation and for a new introduction that reviews the philosophical studies, bearing on the subject-matter, which have been made since 1902. If a more satisfactory translation must be awaited, such an introduction would make a welcome contribution to the pages of the NEW PHILOSOPHY, and would undoubtedly reawaken interest in the study of the treatise itself.

DESCRIPTION

In the 1902 edition the work consists of Title and Half-title, Prefatory Note, Contents, Introduction by Lewis Field Hite, Introductory Remarks by the Translator, Half-title, Swedenborg's Dedication and Preface, Text, and Index supplied by the editors. The text, as in the original, is divided into two chapters—Chapter I: The Infinite and the Final Cause of Creation; Chapter II: The Mechanism of the Operation of Soul and Body.

PURPOSE OF THE WORK

Without trying to force Swedenborg's philosophical works into some interpretative series, it seems possible to discern the purpose in his writing of *The Infinite;* or rather, a combination of interests, reasons and motives, behind which we may, perhaps, see a hint of Divine purpose. It seems evident that when Swedenborg left Stockholm in 1733 he had no other intention in mind than to continue with his mineralogical works after publishing the *Opera Mineralia;* the idea of writing *The Infinite* came later, but appears to have been growing for some time. To some extent, indeed, the idea may be said to have come directly from his *Principia* studies.

Swedenborg had been concerned in that work with the Infinite and the finite, and in the *Principia* he had established the dependence of the finite upon the Infinite for its existence. In his attempt to reach a more complete understanding of the created universe it was logically the next step for him to begin now to study the In-

finite, and to reason out the problem of the connection between the Infinite and the finite. Furthermore, although he had confined himself in the *Principia* to the development of a cosmological theory, he had come to see that the whole of creation is a means to an end and that the final end of creation is man—an immortal spiritual being. Here were reasons enough for a treatise on the Infinite; the more so since his interest was now turning to metaphysics, and metaphysics must begin with the Infinite, in which creation had its origin.

However, a more profound motive may be discerned—the desire to demonstrate to the increasingly atheistic and materialistic philosophers of his day the existence of God, and especially the reality and immortality of the human spirit. Swedenborg seems to have been impressed, in his conversations with learned men, by the prevalence of an atheistic and materialistic temper which they dared not disclose in their published work; and supposing that this had its origin in ignorance due to the orthodox theological concept of spirit, he hoped to remove the cause by demonstrating the true nature of the soul. According to that concept, spirits were neither finite nor infinite, which is an impossibility; and Swedenborg reasoned that through the resulting ignorance—and not knowing that the soul has a most subtle sense—philosophy had passed from confusion by way of doubt to denial. And it was with the hope of stemming the tide that he proposed to show that the soul is finite, mechanical and geometrical, and a mechanical that cannot perish, and to open the mechanism of the soul.

In this we may see the motive that led Swedenborg to write on the Infinite, and also on the mechanism of the soul and the body. And there can be little doubt that his interest had been stimulated by his reading. Wolff's *Empirical Psychology* had been published in the latter part of 1732. This was an attempt to formulate a scientific doctrine of the soul, and Swedenborg studied it with more than ordinary interest, not only reading it critically but also copying into his Journal many extracts to which he added his own comments.* These notes indicate that as a result of his *Principia* studies Swedenborg had already formulated a general theory of the

* These extracts from Wolff and Swedenborg's notes on them were published in a Latin-English version by the Swedenborg Scientific Association in 1923 under the title *Psychologica,* the Rev. Alfred Acton translator and editor.

human soul, and that the search into the soul had now become the main object of his studies. Indeed, *Psychologica* may be regarded as a preliminary study for a metaphysical treatise on the final end of creation as seen in the human soul, and on the intercourse of the soul and the body, as a continuation of the *Principia.*

But in considering the purpose of any of the philosophical works we may not ignore the fact that through them, and the profound studies they entailed, Swedenborg was being prepared secretly for his office as servant of the Lord Jesus Christ. And in view of the doctrine that the Lord as the First creates ultimates, and from ultimates forms intermediates, it is interesting to note that the same order is to be observed in Swedenborg's studies, with the little work on the Infinite as the connecting link between two areas of interest. In the *Principia,* Swedenborg had been concerned with the macrocosm, the physical universe; in his subsequent works he was to be occupied with the microcosm, with man and especially with the human economy as the kingdom of the soul; and in *The Infinite,* dealing with the nexus between the Infinite and the finite, we seem to see the transition of his own mind from the one to the other of these absorbing interests.

The Infinite and the Final Cause of Creation

We may say, then, that *The Infinite* was written to prove the existence of God and to demonstrate the reality and immortality of the human soul or spirit. The work itself is one of the earliest of Swedenborg's metaphysical discussions and is also one of the most profound. Yet although the subject is abstract, the reasoning close and severely logical, and the argument strictly rational, the thought is expressed in the simplest language and is charged with the spirit of the author who, while readily according philosophy its own province, insisted that it is properly the handmaid of religion, he himself being a Christian philosopher.

The treatise is dedicated to Swedenborg's brother-in-law, Erik Benzelius—Counsellor to the King, Bishop of East Gottland, polyhistor and beloved kinsman. After acknowledging his indebtedness to Benzelius for the advice and wishes that directed him to his present studies, Swedenborg says: "From veneration of your merits, from acknowledgment of your kindness, and from family ties, springs sincere love, which I trust you will permit me here to

put on record." As it was at the instigation of Benzelius that he applied himself to these studies, Swedenborg continues, it is right that the fruits thereof should be dedicated to him, if not on their own account yet for the cause they plead.

Then, in his Preface to the reader, Swedenborg states that although reasoning about the soul and the Infinite he purposely uses simple words and a humble style in order that metaphysical terms may not hinder understanding. True philosophy, he continues, can never be contrary to Revelation; if it be truly rational, that is. And the end of reason is that man may perceive what things are revealed and what are created, that he may perceive that there is a God and know that He is to be worshiped. Thus in this short Preface Swedenborg declares the essential characteristic of a true philosophy; thrusts at the Schoolmen, whose influence had not yet been entirely shaken off; and challenges the Roman Catholic and the Protestant churches, both of which taught, and teach now, a blind faith in which reason is useless and to which it is contrary.

The first chapter of the treatise itself opens with the statement that we must begin from the Infinite or God. It is the mark of a true philosopher that he does not assent unhesitatingly to the things of an obscure faith, for he can acknowledge nothing as superior to reason. Yet the philosopher becomes so baffled in his inquiry into the Infinite that he is inclined to regard it as merely the indefinite and the first of nature; thus to think that nature is God.

This difficulty, the argument continues, must be met rationally. Reason shows that we must first ask, Is there an Infinite? not, What is the Infinite? Swedenborg then states that since the finite cannot finite itself there must be an Infinite, and asks whether this can be proved *a priori.*

All created things, he says, look to the end that man may enjoy the delights of the world, that these delights may become rational, and that they may terminate in Divine delights, which is the final end of creation. The soul consents tacitly to the acknowledgment of God that is attained partly from it and partly from reason; for which reason there is no mortal who does not acknowledge God, unless he is too rational or too little so. However, he cannot know what the Infinite is; and it is in seeking to know this that the philosopher with too much reason falls into the worship of nature, and the man with too little reason into idolatry.

Swedenborg then notes the objection that we should simply believe in God as Creator and Provider, which is raised especially by those who think of Him as a human ruler; and he agrees, provided it is acknowledged that, since He is infinite, all future things are present to Him. Otherwise, he says, there is something of the finite in the Infinite. If some think that this is to bind God by rules, there is no reason in them.

He then turns to the quality of the Infinite, noting that inquiries into this have inevitably ascribed finite qualities to God, with the result that men have worshiped God only from admiration or wonder. Others, seeing that God is infinite, have made the universe infinite. The argument here is that while we can perceive that there is an Infinite, we cannot see its quality. He recognizes that some will suppose this argument to lead to the conclusion that the Infinite is nothing. It is nothing, as compared with the finite; even as the finite is nothing when compared with the Infinite; yet neither is nothing. There is an Infinite, and it is the cause of the finite.

The argument now turns to the rationale of creation, thus to the nexus between the Infinite and the finite. There can be no intermediate between the Infinite and the finite; for either it would be infinite, and there would thus be two infinites, or it would be finite and therefore not a nexus. Thus the Infinite created the finite immediately; the nexus is itself infinite; and we can perceive that there is a nexus, but not what its quality is. The nexus is the final cause of creation and must terminate in the Infinite; for if creation were for the sake of finite things, an end would be lacking. Creation, therefore, was for the sake of the Infinite.

Divine revelation, Swedenborg notes, confirms this rational deduction, and he then goes on to argue that since the final end is obtained by finites there must be two finite limits. The first is the simple of the world; the second is man, to whom all created things look. Animals are not also ultimate ends, for it is not man as a machine who is the ultimate end; such an end must be something that contributes to the final end, something that can acknowledge and believe in the Infinite—a soul, a conjunction of soul and body, and thus a rational man.

Furthermore, there must be something Divine and infinite in the ultimate effect, for the Infinite cannot achieve the final end in the

finite. This does not lie in the body or in the soul, for they are finite. Nor does it consist in reason, which is from body and soul. It consists in man's ability to acknowledge God, and by faith in Him to feel a connection with the Divine, whence comes the worship of God. If man does not acknowledge God, the Divine is not in him.

If the end is not obtained in the ultimate effect, however, he asks, does this imply imperfection? The first finite, though not infinite, is still most perfect. But successives and compounds involve contingencies and degrees, and thus a decrease in perfection which comes from the finite; and so is it also in man. The Divine foresaw and provided that the final end should be attained in man by the soul so ruling the body that it tends to that end; yet it is not the soul in itself that rules, but the rational which is from the soul and the body. If it is asked why the Infinite did not make a soul that would have prevented the fall, the answer is that all the means of attaining the final end have been given to man if he só wills, and that this does not take away from perfection since the final end can exist only in the ultimate effect. Foreseeing, however, that the body would rule the soul, God provided that there should be a nexus between the ultimate finite and the Infinite, and this by the infinite or only-begotten Son. Thus there is a nexus in the last as in the first.

The Mechanism of the Soul and the Body

The second chapter of the treatise deals with the soul and the body. Swedenborg first establishes that the soul is finite, and that it is therefore extended and occupies space. There is nothing infinite but the one only God. After noting that the soul cannot be the purely simple, since this cannot be said to be finite, he concludes that it is the active of the first finite, and that since it acts upon corporeal parts it has local motion. He concludes also that the soul must have a passive; otherwise it could not feel the actions of its body. Therefore its active must be enclosed in a passive membrane. And as the soul flows into the body, it must do so mechanically and geometrically. The soul, therefore, is in nature and is a part of the created world, and it is subject to mechanical and geometrical laws.

But to conclude from this that the soul is not immortal arises, Swedenborg asserts, from a gross idea concerning purer mechanisms. There is a gross world and a pure world, and both are natural; but the latter will not perish with the former. What is subject to destruction is the material; it would be contrary to the Divine essence for the higher to perish with the lower. If it were otherwise, indeed, all creation would eventually become nothing.

Because philosophers saw that there is a nexus between the soul and the body, he notes, they postulated the animal spirits as mediating between the soul and the body. But they deny that these spirits act by mechanical laws, saying that they act by laws unknown; and so, while they discuss learnedly the intercourse between soul and body, they finally leave their readers in their own ignorance. But why, Swedenborg asks, should we be opposed to the idea of laws inscribed on nature by the Infinite? Are they imperfect because they are mechanical and geometrical? Cannot there be something perpetual in them?

Ignorance of the soul, he points out, leads to denial. Hence many have asked themselves whether there is a soul, and have concluded that all is material and mortal, although they have not ventured to express these thoughts in their published writings. But had they reflected that the final cause of creation is the Divine, and that man is the ultimate effect by which this end is attained, they might have seen that there is a God, that man partakes in the final end, and that the soul can desire a more perfect state and therefore cannot die.

The immortality of the soul, he continues, can be confirmed also from bodily effects. Love which arises from harmony is in a purer nature and is thence derived into the body that the body also may aspire to perpetuity. This is done by offspring. The love of fame after death proves that in man there is something higher than in animals. Indeed those who love God despise the mortal state of the body and often suffer death willingly. The immortality of the soul can be seen also in the love of others, or of one's self in others. From God's love for the soul comes the soul's love for its own body.

Swedenborg then directs his attention to the nexus between the soul and the body, and declares that the only connection is by contiguity. The nexus has its limits within the man, that is, within

the space of his body. The connection by motion of the sensible limits within the space makes the space living. This presupposes, however, that the intermediates are entire. Whatever then subsists within the space is sensated by man as life, and changes of state within the space are received as evidences of life. And since they involve motion, perception, intellection and memory can be explained mechanically and geometrically.

The elements of the world, Swedenborg continues, are likewise mechanical and geometrical. No element can be moved without the motion being felt in some way in another element, and this motion becomes more subtle as it progresses into interiors. In man the motions of the elements are received in membranes, as seen in the eye and the ear, and the membranes are formed to receive these motions mechanically and geometrically. Thus the laws of motion and in the receiving membranes are the same. Other philosophers have seen this, he concedes, but because they could go no further than the animal spirit they were unable to dévelop the idea.

This leads Swedenborg to the conclusion that man is a microcosm—his soul belonging to the purer world and his body to the grosser. He then lays down some laws of motion between the soul and the body, showing that interior pleasure results if the motions are harmonious with the soul. If that harmony is lacking there is confusion; yet discordant motions may become habitual, and then the soul appears to love discord more than harmony, and thus to be formed after the imperfect world. Indeed such a soul, after death, would perceive dissonance in harmony, especially if something from the purer world were present.

The treatise then considers the dwelling-place of the soul, its figure, and its immediate operations. In the conclusion reached on the first of these points Swedenborg separates himself from both the Cartesians and the Schoolmen; for he considers that the soul dwells neither in a gland nor everywhere in the body but in the cortical substances of the brain—in the finest membrane there. He concludes also that the soul is not the same in every man, for it can be cultivated and made more apt for the reception of motion and can be more intimately connected with the membranes. Finally, he concludes that the soul is not unlike the first, second and third actives, but is these actives together with the membrane. Both

together are the human soul; the souls of animals are elementary and are not active.

Swedenborg concludes by saying that we need not despair of arriving at a knowledge of the soul if we now run through the anatomy of the brain, the body and the senses. And he announces his intention of presenting that knowledge when he has made such an investigation, if God grant him life and leisure. Here his purpose has been only to establish the immortality of the soul. Thus in these closing words he promises the work of which he regarded *The Infinite* as the forerunner, although he could not then have known just how the promise would finally be fulfilled.

Conclusion

No more has been attempted here than a sketch of the treatise and its background. In *The Infinite,* Swedenborg, reasoning *a priori,* sought to prove that the Infinite exists, that the nexus exists also as a function of the Infinite, that the soul is mechanical and geometrical, and that it is immortal. He contended that the finite, while characterizing all our thought and knowledge, leads us to believe in the Infinite, and therefore in God, although He is beyond our knowledge and understanding. It was his hope to lead materialistic philosophy back to the worship and love of God by the exercise of rightly informed reason; and both in his assumptions and in his method he separated himself from the theologians and the philosophers of his day.

Reason and Christian faith, however, were not sufficient, although his concern with the immortality of the soul is deeply significant. But after he had been called by the Lord, the Divine Human was to be revealed to him as the nexus—infinite in itself, but as if finite for the sake of reception; the final end of creation was to be disclosed to him as an angelic heaven; and the true reasons for the immortality of the human soul made known.