

SWEDENBORG'S PHILOSOPHY OF CAUSALITY

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Chapter III

THE PERIOD OF TRANSITION

The story of how, from being a scientist and natural philosopher, Swedenborg became a theologian and seer, has been told well and often.¹ Quite a number of these studies give meticulous attention to particular striking and unusual experiences, often to the extent of quoting from Swedenborg's private diaries to state the day, date, and hour. Many introspective observations and speculations were jotted down by the philosopher becoming theologian during his transition period. These details, too, have been included in a number of biographies.

Here—beyond the recording of the basic facts—we shall be less concerned with rehearsing the details and minutiae than has usually been the case. We shall be content to try to state plainly what, according to Swedenborg's own testimony, happened in his life in the mid-1740's which so completely changed his lifework plans—a change so dramatic that historians and other writers have for the most part identified him as a mystic or writer of occult religious ideas. By and large his monumental scientific and philosophic studies have been completely ignored. We shall attempt to state why.

The fact that no two biographers or annotators of Swedenborg's life seem to be in full agreement as to how many *key* dates one should enumerate in his transition period, nor even precisely which ones are most significant, in one sense accrues to my benefit. For I feel quite free to make my own selection on the basis of my own best judgment. What follows here will be exactly that, and I stand ready to defend my choices.

It is my conclusion that the transition began in about October, 1743, and was completed by June, 1747. Three events of crucial importance occurred between these inclusive dates, in April, 1744; July, 1744; and April, 1745. Thus our discussion of the series of occurrences which led to the conclusion of one phase of the life of this gifted man—with the attendant abandonment of several projected works—and the beginning of a

completely new vocation, will center on five connected episodes which occurred at uneven intervals over a four-year period.

Swedenborg was prone to keep diaries and logs of the events and day-to-day thoughts of his varied life. The most ambitious consecutive journal of this type has been described briefly above.² One of the smaller of these, which survives only in fragmentary form, has been translated and published a number of times. It is best known in the format it took in 1918, when it was printed as a separate small book titled *Journal of Dreams*. It is from an entry in this diary that we establish our first key date, October, 1743. This work, as the title used would indicate, is largely concerned with the record of dreams, during the years 1743 and 1744.

Under date of April 17-18, 1744, he wrote, in part:

...With God's grace I had a preternatural sleep; and this has been the case now for an entire half year.³

From this testimony we are able to conclude that the state of "preternatural sleep," *i.e.*, sleep characterized by dreams and visions of a supernatural or psychic nature, began to be a "regular" state about October, 1743. In today's terminology, one might simply state that at that time, the scientist began to become aware that he was a psychic. This awareness first came through dreams. As was true of almost every facet of his life, even his dreams were often employed pragmatically. For example, several entries in the *Journal of Dreams* comprise interpretations of dreams which are directly applicable to the particular treatise he was working on at the time. One such dream he construes as advice to be heeded regarding the frequent and lengthy notes of his *Regnum Animale*:

...It meant...that I ought to draw in my sails and not make the notes so long.⁴

These dreams, in short, became one of the dominant strains of his thought life, significantly affecting his attitudes toward, and handling of his monographs.

The semiotic use of dreams proved to be only a prelude or precursor of what was still to come. The next major event contributing to the transi-

tion came in the form of an experience midway between a dream and a vision.⁵ The experience is recorded under date of the night of April 6-7, 1744. The complexities of the account need not be entered here. Let it suffice that our author, on that night, while in a state which he described as being "neither sleeping nor awake,"⁶ experienced what he was convinced was a Christ-vision. He wrote of it in part:

...I perceived that it was the Son of God Himself who descended with such a resounding noise which by itself prostrated me to the ground...⁷

It proved to be both a frightening and a humbling experience. Apparently the preceding period of about a year of preternatural sleep had so conditioned his thinking that, once the initial shock passed, he never once doubted the genuine nature of the vision. Part of the record of that same amazing night reads:

Later on, about day-break, I fell asleep again, and had continually in my thoughts how Christ conjoins Himself with men; holy thoughts came, but of such a nature that they are unfathomable, for I cannot in the least express by the pen what then took place; for I only know that I was in such thoughts.⁸

It is not clear how Swedenborg interpreted this vision, *i.e.*, the meaning and purpose of the vision, at the time it happened. The most he seemed ready to conclude at that time was that he was in need of greater faith and a more humble attitude. Many years later, in retrospect, he understandably spoke of it as part of the total process which constituted his "call." But it does not seem that he had any but the most obscure of ideas in April, 1744, as to the meaning of this strange event.

About three months later, another dream-vision occurrence is recorded. Again, it is obviously to be considered as more than a dream. It is another mystical experience of "seeing" a supernatural being. This time, however, it is not the Christ. This visitor, he decides, "must have been a holy angel."⁹

It is included in my list of key transitional events for a reason that may

not, without further explanation, seem cogent. This experience, apparently, was Swedenborg's first recognizable confrontation by a "spirit." He, along with the majority of mankind, had at best a vague idea of the nature of an "angel" or "spirit." Nor is it clear from the diary entry why he felt he could identify his nocturnal guest as a "holy angel." What the man certainly did not have the least inkling of at that time was that, beginning very shortly (according to his later testimony), he was to have frequent, open, and often prolonged intercourse with spirits and angels; *i.e.*, human inhabitants of the "other" world. It is, in fact, precisely this claim of such communication which earned Swedenborg the label "mystic" or "writer of occult religious ideas." It is for this reason that I have chosen to include the first such encounter of which our subject was clearly cognizant as being of crucial importance in the transition from scientist and philosopher to theologian and seer.

The fourth of the five events singled out as being especially revealing of the causes behind the radical change in vocation occurred the next spring—the best evidence seeming to place it in April, 1745.¹⁰ This experience, unquestionably the climactic one for our author, strangely is nowhere annotated in detail by Swedenborg himself, although he alludes to it more than once in his writings.¹¹ We are dependent on two second-hand accounts which, although one claims to include verbatim statement given by personal interview, do not agree in all details. But this may not be as important as one might at first glance think it would be. What is clear is that *something* truly momentous happened to the man which included (1) a second Christ-vision, and (2) a divine commission for a new life work. No matter how the world reacted, and often continues to react, to the claim that such a twofold occurrence actually took place, this does not alter the fact of the cataclysmic effect it had on the subject who contended that he had such an experience.

The writer of one of the accounts mentioned above, a long-time personal friend of the Swedish seer, Carl Robsahm¹², states the nature of the commission succinctly, reporting that Swedenborg thus related it to him:

He said that...He [Christ] had chosen me to declare to men the spiritual contents of Scripture; and that He Himself would declare to me what I should write on this subject.¹³

That this experience truly marked the transition to a new vocation is testified to by Robsahm, again, according to him, from a transcript of an actual conversation with Swedenborg, whom he quotes as saying:

From that day I gave up the study of worldly science, and laboured in spiritual things, according as the Lord had commanded me to write. Afterwards the Lord opened, daily very often, my bodily (*lekamlig*) eyes, so that, in the middle of the day I could see into the other world, and in a state of perfect wakefulness converse with angels and spirits.¹⁴

The fifth event followed inevitably, but not for almost two years. During the interval an almost feverish number of activities was commenced: Biblical studies, including further studies in his long-neglected college acquaintance with Hebrew; the compiling of a detailed Bible index; tentative exercises in Scripture interpretation, resulting in, among other things, an eight-volume preliminary exegetical treatment of a large portion of the Old Testament; and, by no means least, a prolonged introspective examination of his personal ambivalence toward his new commission—a process which would be described as “soul-searching” today.

At length he apparently found the inner resources needed to accept with equanimity the new life which this task would open up for him. Then the quite matter-of-fact but orderly step was taken of resigning from his main employment, that of an assessor for the Royal College of Mines of Sweden, where he had served off and on for thirty years. Many times before he had asked for temporary leaves of absence, from a few days to a full year. This time he made it clear, in his petition to the king, that he wished to be irrevocably released from his office so that he might devote his full attention to the important work which he had already begun.

His request, dated June 2, 1747, was acceded to; he was retired at half salary, and, although he continued to maintain a lively interest in civil affairs—continuing to be an active member of the Swedish house of nobles for many years—his full-time employment became that of revelator.

He was now fifty-nine years old. Yet he now began his new career with an indefatigable ebullience which has astounded his biographers. He

lived to be eighty-four, and during the remaining quarter century of his life he produced a set of theological writings which in English translation occupy some thirty volumes. Although such comparisons are not very meaningful, it is nevertheless true that his output of theological studies is roughly equivalent in bulk to his output of scientific and philosophic works. One needs about an eight-foot shelf to hold the lot.

It might readily be thought that once this transition took place—once the interest in natural philosophy was supplanted by an interest in Scripture interpretation and Christian dogmatics, the potential contribution of such a person to the philosophy of causality would become, for all practical purposes, insignificant. This, however, is not the case with Swedenborg, for a number of reasons. First, as was mentioned earlier, his theology has as a major tenet that this is a causal universe. In the preface to this work, it was noted that this was a belief which he held in common with many Christian theologians, reflecting a dominant theme in medieval and conservative modern Christian thought.

A second factor which kept the development of his causal theory viable in his mature period is that he soon discovered an underlying compatibility between the general trend of his earlier philosophic hypotheses concerning causation and what he now accepted as a revealed knowledge of the causes of things. Nor was this just a kind of nebulous, indefinable feeling of affinity; it was borne out in terms of practical, detailed application.

The long-sought *mathesis universalis* had been gradually losing significance in his mind in favor of a doctrine that somehow encompassed the concepts of degrees, influx and correspondence. Now, what was to become one of the major distinguishing marks of the Swedenborgian theological system was to be known as the doctrine of correspondence.¹⁵ The relationships between natural or worldly things and mental or spiritual things of which he had a prescient idea when he wrote *Regnum Animale* and *Clavis* proved to be universally true, and understandably so, of all the details of the Bible narrative; or, at least, so our seer clearly believed. The “hieroglyphic” key turned out to be the relationship of correspondence, a relationship he had inferred existed, during his earlier philosophic period.

The search for the soul, the mystery of the commerce of soul and body, the underlying cosmological question of the origin and structure of the

universe—all of these adamant philosophic “knots,” yielded to the key of correspondence, with the aid of the related doctrines of degrees and influx. The explication of this synthesis and analysis, this “rounding-out” of the philosophy of causality with its correlative role of aiding the reconciliation of some basic scientific, philosophical, and theological concepts, will be the subject of Part II of this study.

What remains to be said in this present chapter is something more on the general attitudes that have been assumed concerning Swedenborg and his works.

It is historically attested to, that anyone who lays claim to being the recipient of a special body of information—special in the sense of being somehow “revealed”—is generally looked at askance, or classified as a “mystic” and therefore not to be read except by the “expert,” or openly denounced as a person victimized by his own hallucinations, or—rarely—read and believed. There are various other options, of course, but one or more of the above responses is largely responsible for the fact that the scholarly world, both in the physical sciences and the humanities, has remained largely ignorant of the vast creditable and historically significant corpus produced by Swedenborg up to the time of his transition. This is an unfortunate loss to the world of academe. This present work is seen by its writer as one modest attempt to alleviate the ignorance, break down the prejudicial barrier, and call attention to a gifted and amazing man.

Notes

¹G. Trobridge, *Swedenborg, Life and Teachings*, 4th ed., pp. 83-96; S. Toksvig, *Emanuel Swedenborg, Scientist and Mystic*, pp. 136-155; W. White, *Emanuel Swedenborg*, 2nd ed., rev., pp. 119-163; R. Tafel, *Documents Concerning Swedenborg*, vol. II, pp. 1082-1127; and C. Sigstedt, *The Swedenborg Epic*, pp. 182-206. These are some of the better known studies.

²Cf. p. 18 (*supra*).

³*Journal of Dreams*, n. 140.

⁴*Ibid.*, n. 32. Would that some modern philosophers had such dreams!

⁵*Dream*: A series of images, ideas, and emotions occurring in certain stages of sleep.”

Vision: The mystical experience of seeing as if with the eyes the supernatural or a supernatural being.”—*American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 1969.

⁶*Journal of Dreams*, n. 54.

⁷*Ibid.*, n. 55.

⁸*Ibid.*, n. 57.

⁹*Ibid.*, n. 210.

¹⁰Cf. *The Swedenborg Epic*, *op. cit.*, pp. 197-198

¹¹Cf. *Ibid.*, including footnote 307.

¹²A man of great personal integrity, director of the Stockholm bank and a fellow member of the Swedish Academy of Sciences.

¹³*Docu. I*, p. 36 (Document 5).

¹⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁵Cf. J. Stillson Judah, *The History and Philosophy of the Metaphysical Movements in America*, 1967, pp. 37-41 and *passim*, for a contemporary opinion of one type of widespread influence of this doctrine.

PART II

APPLICATIONS OF SWEDENBORG'S CAUSAL THEORY

CHAPTER IV

THE RELEVANCE OF SWEDENBORG'S CAUSAL THEORY TO COSMOLOGY

During his early scientific period (*ca.* 1717-1734) Swedenborg developed both a cosmology and a cosmogony. Sometimes these words are loosely used synonymously, and so it may be well to set forth definitions of how they are being used in this study. "Cosmology" is generally defined as that branch of philosophy which deals with the origin, processes, and structure of the universe. One contemporary philosopher has commented:

The value of a cosmology seems to consist primarily in its capacity to provide an ultimate frame for occurrences in nature, and to offer a demonstration of where the limits of the spatio-temporal world are, and how they might be transcended.¹

This statement aptly describes the views of the present writer as to the use of cosmological theory, except that the embrace of cosmology will be enlarged here to include not only ontological and metaphysical considerations but also, specifically, cosmogony. This latter term will not be construed pejoratively (*i.e.*, it will not be limited to so-called "mythological cosmogonies") but will be used in the simple dictionary meaning of a specific theory of the creation and/or evolution of the physical universe.

The beginning of the last chapter called attention to Swedenborg's

1734 opus, *The Principia*, in order to show that in this culminating work of his early scientific period he unquestionably held to the thesis that this was a created universe, existing to carry out divine purposes and therefore compatible with and governed by causal principles. That chapter, however, did not delve further into the development of a cosmology, which is the major theme of *The Principia*. This investigation will be pursued in this present chapter.

In developing his early philosophy of nature, antecedent to the development of a precise cosmology, the young scientist intently studied the visible cosmos and concluded that motion was the fundamental and pervasive phenomenon of nature. Not only that, in order to try to illustrate his further conviction that this motion was infinite, *i.e.*, from the Infinite, he conceived it to be, in its most basic nature, vortical—the vortical form of motion being as nearly infinite as motion can be considered to be in terms of universality and lack of limitation. Being less than infinite, it could properly be defined as having to have *some* limitation.

One thoughtful student of this theory adds this:

...The first limitation imposed...is a limitation of direction and range, [taking] the form of a spiral wherein every point moves at once from the center to the circumference and from the circumference to the center. [Then, the most difficult idea to grasp in this theory follows:] The motion here conceived is not mechanical, not the motion of a material point, although to think of it concretely we have to use mechanical analogies.²

In harmony with a long line of predecessors, here our burgeoning philosopher is groping for terminology to describe a psycho-physical linkage. Out of these studies he developed a theory of vortices. It should be noted that the concept of the basic nature of vortical motion was not original with Swedenborg, being a facet of Cartesian physics. The influence of Descartes is discernible in a number of Swedenborgian concepts.

The learned Swede, however, devised his own usage of the theory of vortices, applying it not only to his philosophy of the origin of the earth and other planets but also to his theory of the constitution of matter. Discussion of this latter hypothesis will be reserved for Chapter VI. For

now, let us be content to try to state in bare outline and paraphrased terminology the thought process which led from vortical motion to a nebular hypothesis and, finally, to an overarching cosmology.³

One of Swedenborg's translators notes that he "practically says that motion is a synonym for nature."⁴ The text on which he bases this surmise is from Part I, Chapter I, of the *Principia*:

Nature is only a word which connotes all the actuating forces proceeding from the first motion of the Infinite till the world was completed; with this first motion it begins; and as this is produced by the Infinite, so is nature.⁵

It seems to me a bit presumptuous to infer such an identification from this text. But, in defense of such a position, one might note that there is an admitted terminological problem and thus almost inevitable ambiguity involved in this study. Perhaps this fact can be set forth most forcefully by quoting here one of the author's summaries of his cosmology:⁶

...it may be well to offer a brief summary of the whole of my philosophy. Let us begin from the first simple [*simplici*]. (1) In the simple the internal state is a tendency to a spiral motion, and, consequently, its endeavor or effort [*conatum*] is of a similar kind. (2) In the first finite [*finito primo*] arising therefrom there is a spiral motion of the parts, as is the case also in the other finites, so that there is a similarity in all the finites. (3) From this single cause there results in every finite a progressive motion of the parts, an axillary motion of the whole, and, if nothing prevents, a local motion also. (4) If the motion is local the actives [*activum*] arise, one similar to the other. (5) From finites and actives arises the elementary [*elementare*], one similar to the other, and differing only in degree and dimension. It is, therefore, evident that I conceive the existence of only three kinds of bodies, namely, finites, actives, and the compounds of these, or elementaries.⁷

The term "first simple" [*primus simplicius*] is used interchangeably with the term "first natural point" [*primum naturali punctum*]. In our

outline below, we shall try to make clear what idea the author intended to convey by these phrases. The term "conatus"—sometimes translated as "effort" or "endeavor," sometimes used directly as an English word—carries none of the special meaning ascribed to the word by Spinoza,⁸ but is rather defined as follows:

...the cause of motion, since it remains in each individual particle, and no single particle can be moved without all being moved together, therefore becomes common, and pervades the whole; so that by reason of it, all strive and conspire together to produce one common and unanimous motion. This is what we mean by effort [*conatus*].⁹

This *conatus*, in fact, we shall find, is traceable all the way back to the Infinite, where it originates.

The other key terms in this summary given at the end of the work are "finites" [*finita*], "actives" [*activa*], and "elementaries" [*elementaria*]. Here they are referred to vaguely as "three kinds of bodies." In the similar summary at the beginning of the work, the abstruseness is little alleviated by describing the same three terms as "entities of a threefold degree." Thus, it would appear that the clearest thing before us is that our task of clarification will be anything but routine. One is tempted to borrow words of our author who prayed of "the critical reader" to "look leniently upon the things he would criticize."¹⁰

As a possible aid to the reader, the summary of the doctrine before us that follows here will be treated in five numbered paragraphs, coinciding in content with the author's terse summary quoted above.

(1) The Infinite alone exists without a cause, or from itself (*i.e.*, *causa sui*). From Him, finite things must of necessity have proceeded. One of the characteristics of the Infinite Creator is "pure" motion, and the first step in the process of finiting this motion is one which somehow preserves its "pure" status—it remains antecedent to and apart from any moving body as yet—but at the same time imposes a limitation which causes it to move in a spiral or vortex. This type of motion, in its first manifestation, is infinitely small, as free from spatial limitations as the mathematical point, or the point of Zeno. This "first simple" or "first natural point" has an

inherent internal conatus or tendency to spiral motion. (Note that it is not one of the three “bodies” or “entities” but is prior to them.) Its use, however, is to be transeunt—capable of producing effects outside of and other than itself.

(2) From the idea of *one* such “first simple,” one is then led to recall that the causal factor behind it is the Infinite; thus, one is ushered into the presence of an infinity or universe of such points, all striving in a pure spiral motion. The result of this conatus is a vast series of vortices, since this form embodies the highest mechanical power and the most perfect geometrical figure. These spiral figures become the first actual subjects (or bodies, or entities) of creation, bounded by both space and time. Space and time, in fact, come into existence concurrently. These constitute the “first finites.”

(3) We now have expressed the transmitted force of the Infinite, through the first simple, in the substantial form of the first finite. The conatus to motion remains intrinsic and a variety of movements ensue. The “parts” move progressively along their own paths, the whole figure exhibits an “axillary” movement (the meaning of this term remains vague), and these two motions combine to produce a local motion, “a motion in which consists the active power of finiting and compounding the sequents, and of modifying them through a long series in the manner in which we perceive by our senses the world at large to be modified.”¹¹

It is clear that “local” motion is the primary formative and creative force on the finite level. And while the author introduces many detailed illustrations of how the process is conceived by him, such particulars need not enter into a brief summary of the doctrine.

(4) One key manifestation of local motion is singled out, however; that is in its role as source of the “actives.” This entity (to which a full chapter is devoted) is described analogically by diagramming for the reader the path of a small ball being whirled on a length of string. One is to visualize a velocity sufficiently great to make the ball appear to be a solid ring, thus resulting in the semblance of a solid by means of motion. The “active,” then, presumably is the type of all the varieties of figure production of which motion is capable. It is especially the individuating force, and at this juncture in the discussion, local motion is ascribed exclusively to the “actives,” and axillary motion in turn is limited to the “finites.”

(5) Now we are ready to consider the final phase of the process: the actives and the finites combine to produce the "elementaries." It is here that the theory seems first to posit the creation of "matter." But even here one is astonished to realize that *motion* is still the essential quality, making this 18th Century cosmological theory sound astonishingly akin to and prescient of 20th Century atomic physics. Let me, however, rest my case there, admitting my incompetence to comment further.

From these three primitive entities: finites, actives, and elementaries, our philosopher proceeds to develop a detailed theory encompassing the basic factors which make up the universe as we know it. For example, the second element (or elementary) comprises magnetism, the third the ether in the sense of the medium for light and electricity, contradistinguished from the air which is identified as the fourth element, the medium for sound. Each of these is accompanied by an appropriate finite.

This amazingly intricate cosmological theory is, in turn, intimately related by the author to the causal theory discussed in the previous chapter. The transmittal of the initial conatus emanating from the divine or infinite is according to the process defined as influx. The several finites and elements follow the pattern of either discrete or continuous degrees. Those manifestations which are distinguished by discrete degrees are related by correspondence.

This same causal theory led the author to propose as an integral part of his *Principia* a truly pioneer version of what has since been called the "nebular hypothesis." In Part III, Chapter IV, which contains the heart of his hypothesis, he begins somewhat poetically by stating:

As yet the vortex is void and empty; coursing round the sun like a torrent, and ever pursuing the same rotations.¹²

Further down the page he opines that "Phoebus remains in her abode bright and sublime." And on the next page:

As yet the planets are only in a state of conception; the ovum is produced, out of which they have to be sent forth.

Now reason asserts that causes must exist before effects; the simple before the compound; principles before principiates; that

is to say, *actives*, *passives*, and *elementaries* [emphasis mine], before a series of things arising successively and simultaneously. The first must exist before the intermediate; the intermediate before the ultimate. Reason, therefore, asserts that the planets must derive their origin from causes in time and in place; that causes are latent in first principles; in short, that the earths in our system must have originated successively...¹³

By this approach to a nebular hypothesis, Swedenborg classifies himself with a line of philosophers who sought to solve this problem by reasoned contemplation. Let us take note of the company he thus chose to keep. In the first volume of his monumental *Kosmos* [1845] von Humbolt noted:

...The purely speculative conclusions arrived at by Wright, Kant, and Lambert, concerning the general structural arrangement of the universe, and of the distribution of matter in space, have been confirmed by Sir William Herschel on the more certain path of observation and measurement.¹⁴

Thus these philosophic cosmological hypotheses apparently gained empirical validation by means of the more sophisticated apparatus that was available to Herschel. This is all well and good; and, one might note here, to the extent that Swedenborg's formulation of the hypothesis may be shown to agree with that of Kant, *et al.*, the confirmation would also accrue to his benefit.

However, it is precisely on that point that the writer of this study would like to join a number of his worthy predecessors and raise an issue. For Swedenborg to be placed in the position of a sort of hitchhiker, in order to share the glory with the others named by von Humboldt, seems to be a case of putting the cart before the horse. The above cited passage was ably commented on by one Samuel Beswick who wrote a lengthy serial commentary on Swedenborg's *Principia* in 1855. On this particular matter he wrote:

...Preceding all these [speculative conclusions of Kant, Wright

and Lambert] and when Kant was only ten years old, Swedenborg had formally given the same ideas and views of creation—expressly calling his Essay ‘The Theory of the Sidereal Heavens’, in his immortal *Principia*, published in 1733,¹⁵ being twenty-two years before Kant, twenty-four years before Lambert, twenty-six years before Boscovich, thirty-four years before Mitchell and forty-seven years before Herschel. This work, which preceded all others in the suggestion of true views regarding the clustering of stars, and their arrangement and distribution in space, was published under royal auspices, and at the expense of the then reigning Duke of Brunswick. Considerable extracts, with brief notices, were inserted in the *Acta Eruditorum* of Leipzig... These extracts could not fail to strike the attention of the German astronomers, and give rise to certain general considerations; to plant the germs of more universal and enlarged views of creation, and to be suggestive of a most rational and comprehensive theory of the sidereal heavens.¹⁶

Lest the reader be left with the impression that the obviously sympathetic Mr. Beswick intended to give Swedenborg credit for complete originality in this matter, later he noted:

...The honor of conceiving and publishing the first crude notion of heavenly bodies being formed from nebulous vapors belongs unquestionably to Tycho Brahe and Kepler...long antecedent to the time of Swedenborg. The hypothesis appears to have remained latent, through the insufficiency of well observed data, until Halley came forward in 1677, Swedenborg in 1734...and lastly Laplace in 1809 (*Système de Monde*), who gave to the Nebular Hypothesis its present elaborate structure. The idea of heavenly bodies being formed from nebulous vapors, therefore, preceded Swedenborg, and upon this one point Swedenborg is merely one in the foremost ranks of its brilliant advocates.¹⁷

This modest disclaimer to the contrary notwithstanding, the implications of the first statement cited above cannot be passed over lightly. While it is true, for example, that Kant was merely a boy when Swedenborg's

Principia was published, and it is therefore easy to argue that Kant may never have had first-hand knowledge of Swedenborg's cosmogony, this in no way invalidates the claims of good scholarship, that Kant and the others had at least the opportunity to be aware of the theory published in 1734.

Without trying to expound in detail Swedenborg's theory, the effort will be made to state some of the cogent points in order that a just judgment of its relative worth may be arrived at.

The winner of the 1903 Nobel prize for chemical physics, Professor Svante Arrhenius, wrote an enlightening preface to the 1908 Latin edition of Swedenborg's *Principia* which was issued under the auspices of the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences. This preface has been translated into English and published in the *Swedenborg Archives*.¹⁸ Although it is too long to be included here verbatim, it does contain a useful summary of ideas which Arrhenius indicates "were first given expression by Swedenborg, and afterwards, although usually in a much modified form—consciously or unconsciously—taken up by other authors in cosmology." He lists the following:

- (1) The planets of our solar system originate from the solar matter—taken up by Buffon, Kant, Laplace and others.
- (2) The earth—and the other planets—have gradually removed themselves from the sun and received a gradually lengthened time of revolution—a view again expressed by G. H. Darwin.
- (3) The earth's time of rotation, that is to say, the day's length, has been gradually increased—a view again expressed by G. H. Darwin.
- (4) The suns are arranged around the milky way—taken up by Wright, Kant, and Lambert.
- (5) There are still greater systems, in which the milky ways are arranged—taken up by Lambert.¹⁹

Arrhenius discusses in turn each of these ideas and the modified theories which have appeared. It becomes clear that the one view among the works of his successors which agrees most closely with Swedenborg is that of Kant. This would seem to be ironic, for Kant's best known commen-

tary on Swedenborg is his *Träume eines Geistersehers erläutert durch Träume der Metaphysik* [1766], in which he held the Swede up to ridicule. Somewhat counterbalancing this strange essay, however, is a statement from the Leipzig edition of Kant's works which reads, in translation, as follows:

...The system of Swedenborg is unfortunately very similar to my own philosophy...We must either suppose greater intelligence and truth at the basis of Swedenborg's writings than first impressions excite, or that it is a mere accident when he coincides with my system.²⁰

Perhaps the most one can say about Kant's attitude toward Swedenborg was that it was ambivalent.

Another writer who was struck by the similarities between later statements of a nebular hypothesis and that of Swedenborg was Hans Hoppe, who wrote a protracted essay for *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, XXV, which was subsequently translated and printed in English.²¹ The greater part of the article is concerned with detailing Swedenborg's doctrine of the structure of smallest bodies, which Hoppe seemed to feel was indispensable to the understanding of the cosmogony of Swedenborg, a view not shared by the present writer. Some of his comments (not all consecutive) seem pertinent here, however. He writes:

Even if [Thomas] Wright [of Durham]...omits to mention Swedenborg's name, yet his approach to Swedenborg is only the more evident. Even in his method of research Wright takes absolutely the same standpoint as Swedenborg...

Kant's scattered elementary particles of matter correspond to Swedenborg's first, finited corpuscles or physical points. These elements, according to Kant, at once put themselves into motion, and are their own *quelle des lebens* (source of life). Swedenborg also...regarded the motion of the least corpuscles as being essential formative principles of the world, and the constitutive characteristic of their life...

Kant repeated Swedenborg's theory of the equilibrium of rotating bodies and their parallel orbits.

Especially striking appears the agreement of both philosophers in respect to the doctrine of the varying density of the rotating bodies...

The fundamental agreement consists in the accentuation by both philosophers of the galaxy as the common central system of all the sidereal vortices...

[He concludes:] Well then, it is therefore the more clearly the duty of historical justice when recounting the history of the attempts by the human spirit to obtain a view of the origination of the world, based upon philosophical foundations, not to forsake the man who before Kant and before Laplace deduced their results, Emanuel Swedenborg.²²

So far as I know, Hoppe has not been identified as a Swedenborgian. Nevertheless, he has been accused of being prejudicially pro-Swedenborg; and, by the same token, anti-Kant. This may well be; but still it seems abundantly clear that the parallels between Swedenborg's and Kant's cosmological theories are too close to have been entirely coincidental.

Other commentators have noted similar—but not so complete—parallels between the theories of Buffon and Swedenborg, and of Laplace and Swedenborg.²³ Of these three men: Kant, Buffon and Laplace, only one—Buffon—apparently without question had immediate access to the nebular hypothesis of Swedenborg. A copy (reported to be in the files of the Swedenborg Foundation, Inc., New York) of Swedenborg's *Principia* is inscribed as the property of Buffon, dated 1736. Laplace, in turn, admits his indebtedness to Buffon for some of his cosmological ideas.

Kant, on the other hand, makes no direct reference to a debt to Swedenborg for his cosmological ideas, this despite the obvious parallels between his 1755 work, *Allgemeine Naturgeschichte und Theorie des Himmels*, and Swedenborg's 1734 *Principia*.

Lest we leave the reader with the impression that our primary intent is polemic, let us move on to further consideration of Swedenborg's use of his philosophy of causality as it relates to cosmology.

That there is a radical difference in Swedenborg's approach to cosmology in his mature theological period—as contrasted with that of his philosophic period—is obvious immediately if, for instance, one were to go

from a perusal of his 1734 treatise, which we have considered at some length, and then read what he says about the creation of the universe in his 1763 *Divine Love and Wisdom*. In the latter work, there is no longer any idea of offering a speculative hypothesis; here the tenor is clearly reflective of the assurance that has come to one who has enjoyed many years of unique insights. The writing is matter of fact, the tone authoritative. This is how it is. The "Infinite" of the earlier work is now identified as the "Lord" of the Judeo-Christian tradition. There is still no doubt—as there was not in the earlier work—that God created everything. How?

The Lord created the universe and all things of it by means of the sun which is the first proceeding of divine love and divine wisdom.²⁴

This "first proceeding" [*primum procedens*] is readily likened to the conatus of the *Principia*. Both love (desire) and wisdom (thought) are surely needed in effort or endeavor. The term "conatus," however, in this latter work is reserved for efforts subsidiary to or dependent on deity. For example, "living conatus in man" is defined as the unition of his will and understanding (correlative to the love and wisdom of God). Or, on the natural level:

...conatus is not force [*vis*], nor is force motion, but force is produced through conatus, because force is conatus made active, and through force motion is produced; consequently there is no power in conatus alone, nor in force alone, but in motion, which is their product.²⁵

Here there is no mention of the earlier work, no allusions to "first simples" or "actives" or "elementaries." Every reference is positive and objective. For example, the "sun" which is defined above as the means of creation turns out to be a secondary (or possibly tertiary) means, since:

The sun of the natural world is pure fire, consequently dead; nature also is dead, because it derives its origin from that sun.²⁶

We quickly learn that this “deadness” is a relative state, but discretely and hence strongly differentiated from the only real “liveness” which is solely God’s. Nor is the sun of the physical world the only sun. (One must for the moment restrict his thoughts to a single solar system for the sake of this explication.)²⁷ There is also a spiritual sun, or sun of the spiritual world, which is “living” because it proceeds directly from the divine love and wisdom. The “dead” sun, in turn, was created by the Lord through the “living” sun. There is a reason:

A dead sun was created to this end, that in outmosts all things may be fixed, settled, and constant, and thus there may be forms of existence which shall be permanent and durable. In this and in no other way is creation founded. The terraqueous globe, in which, upon which, and about which, things exist, is a kind of base and support; for it is the outmost work [*ultimum opus*], in which all things terminate, and upon which they rest. It is also a kind of matrix, out of which effects, which are ends of creation, are produced.²⁸

There are a number of points worth commenting on in this philosophy of creation. First, it is probably not at all surprising to find the creative force positively identified with the God of the Christian faith. Second, it is not particularly surprising for one writing a theological treatise to take a positive stand regarding the reality of a realm of the spirit, a spiritual world. In this same tradition, then, it should not seem unusual for the writer to refer to the world of nature as the ultimate or lowest, but at the same time, foundational level of creation. The matrix metaphor may possibly derive from pre-Christian philosophies. At any rate it is venerable, by no means an innovation.

What *is* different about this philosophy, however, is that these three traditional levels of life: God, heaven, and earth, are described as being discretely separated yet linked by correspondence, in a way analogous to the relationships of end, cause, and effect. “End” is used more or less in the scholastic sense of first cause or final cause—that because of which something is or becomes. “Cause” is used in the sense of efficient cause or effecting cause. “Effect” is the result or product.

Nevertheless, as in the earlier doctrine of forms and the *Principia* cosmological doctrine, the highest in the series permeates and gives direction to all below it. In theological terms this is stated:

...the Lord is present in every work created by Him; for everything has been created for man as its end; consequently the uses of all created things ascend by degrees from outmosts to man, and through man to God the creator from whom [are all things]...

To this last end creation progresses continually, through these three, namely, end, cause, and effect, because these three are in the Lord the Creator...

That these three, end, cause, and effect, are in each and everything created, can also be seen from this, that all effects, which are called last ends, become anew first ends in uninterrupted succession from the First, who is the Lord the Creator, even to the last end, which is in the conjunction of man with Him. [Then this homely touch:] That all last ends become anew first ends is plain from this, that there can be nothing so inert and dead as to have no efficient power in it. Even out of sand there is such an exhalation as gives aid in producing and therefore in effecting something.²⁹

With these words our author ends a chapter, so no further light is shed on the enigmatic closing sentences. He may simply have wished to underscore a particularly pervasive idea of his later writings, that of "use." Or he may simply have been following in his custom of supplying mundane examples, whenever possible, of the principle under consideration. However, the more critical portion of the above citation is that which refers to the cyclical nature of life: from God to man and back to God. This idea is, of course, as old as philosophy itself; but too much should not be read into Swedenborg's reference to it in this limited context. For his basic cycle (as gleaned from other of his writings) is that so far as individual men are concerned, the circle occurs only once. Man is born (comes from God), lives his life in the world, hopefully in such a way that he will return to God (for an everlasting life in heaven).³⁰ On the material or physical plane, however, the endlessly repeated cycle of use of the elements is readily observable.

There are further profound implications to the end, cause, effect concept. Since man has no way of either fathoming or affecting the operations of God (the end), our practical interest centers in the cause/effect relationship thus posited. The material world becomes, by definition, solely a world of effects. All causes are on the spiritual or mental level. Thus, one seeks in vain for any meaning to life if his gaze remains earthbound. Further—and this point seems inescapable—unaided, man would never have discovered either the real causes of things or the real meaning or purpose of life. This is revealed knowledge. But now that it *is* revealed, with the writer of these works having served as the human agent through whom the revelation was channeled, Swedenborg sees little reason why any person of sound mind should have any great trouble seeing the logic of the revealed knowledge, or of re-adjusting his life in accordance with it. For through all these late works the pragmatic emphasis remains dominant. This is no longer speculative philosophy; this is doctrine for life. “All religion is of life, and the life of religion is to do good.”³¹ “Now it is permitted to enter intellectually into the mysteries of faith.”³² “Love is the life of man.”³³ These are some of the maxims found scattered through these writings.

Thus, in the philosophy of creation found in *Divine Love and Wisdom*, the intent is no longer simply informative; it is both hortatory and evangelical. Thus there is little place for the intricate scientific and philosophic details which were so prominent in the earlier works. On the other hand, so far as I know, only two passages in the late works have been noticed³⁴ which may or may not properly be evaluated as veiled renunciations of some of the features of the *Principia* cosmology.

In an early paragraph of the sequel to the work we have just been looking at, published the next year, 1764, and titled *Divine Providence*, the seer writes:

Many admit that there is an only substance which is the first substance and the source of all things, but what kind of substance it is they do not know.³⁵

Thus far this passage sounds typical of the prevailing attitude of the revelator. He is about to abolish the gloom. But then, curiously, he seems

almost unconsciously to include the earlier Swedenborg with the unknowing many, perhaps forgetting how closely his next words approximate some of his own early theoretical language.

They believe it to be so simple that nothing is simpler; that it may be compared to a point with no dimension; and that from an infinite number of such the forms of dimension came into existence. This, however, is a fallacy...³⁶

To the admittedly unscientific eye of this observer this concept, declared fallacious here, looks very suspiciously like the first natural point and the first finite of Part I of the *Principia*.

A similar disavowal—or apparent disavowal—occurs in his last major work, *True Christian Religion* [1771], in a discussion of some of the deleterious effects of not knowing the teaching that the one God is substance itself and form itself. Those ignorant of this could not, among other things, have any better idea of creation than

that its substances and forms originated in points, and afterwards in geometrical lines, which are essentially nothing...³⁷

If in these statements Swedenborg was in fact quietly reproving himself for this particular portion of his earlier hypothesis, I for one rejoice at his degree of candidness in doing so. Besides, that aspect of the theory gives me considerable trouble. Also, a near-contemporary commented on the matter that he did not feel it was of great importance³⁸—and I would agree.

What is of importance, it seems to me, is, that the earlier, highly developed philosophy of causality, was carried over, apparently with no significant alteration, and applied effectively to the cosmology of the theological period.

Our next consideration will be the application of this causal theory to the attempt to solve the mind/body problem.

Notes

¹Paul Weiss, in *Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed.D. Runes.

²Lewis F. Hite, in *NP*, July 1926, p. 92.

³I am especially indebted to detailed studies of this subject by R. L. Tafel [*Swedenborg the Philosopher*, 1867, pp. 251ff.], L. Hite [*NP*, July 1926], A. Clissold [*Introduction to Principia*, 1846 ed.], and H. Odhner [*Principles of the New Philosophy*, 1965, and 1943 lecture on correspondences, ditto copy]. The basic text from which the subject evolves is *Principia*, Part I.

⁴Isaiah Tansley, in Introduction to *Principia*, 1912 ed.

⁵*Op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 39.

⁶This summary, in slightly different forms, appears both in the author's preface and in the conclusion of the *Principia*.

⁷*Principia* II, Conclusion, p. 290.

⁸Cf. *Ethics*, III, Props. IV-X. Cf. also discussion of Spinoza's idea of conatus in H. Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza*, Vol. II, pp. 195-208.

⁹*Principia* I, p. 64.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 78.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 101.

¹²*Principia* II, p. 172.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 173.

¹⁴Alexander von Humboldt, *Kosmos*, Vol. I, p. 71.

¹⁵In 1733 Swedenborg did write but did not publish a work, *Comparitio Ontologiae et Cosmologiae generalis Domini Christiani Wolfii cum Principiis nostris rerum naturalium*. This work was later published in a Latin-English version and titled *Psychologica*, 1923.

However, Beswick probably made a simple error here, intending to advert to Swedenborg's 1734 *Principia*.

¹⁶Quoted in R. L. Tafel, *Swedenborg the Philosopher*, pp. 300-301.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 314.

¹⁸Alfred H. Stroh, ed., *Swedenborg Archives*, Vol. I, "Investigations in Sweden," 1902-1918. The Arrhenius article is one of several appended to this volume.

¹⁹*Op. cit.*, p. 66.

²⁰Kant, Leipsic ed., 1838, iii, 95; translated and quoted by B. Worcester, *Life and Mission of Emanuel Swedenborg*, 6th ed., 1907, p. 125.

²¹Cf. *The New Church Magazine* vol. xxxi [1912], No. 369 and No. 370 [Sept. and Oct.], pp. 385-394, 446-454.

²²*Op. cit.*, pp. 446ff.

²³Cf. *NP*, 1898, pp. 4-8, article by J. Swanton.

²⁴*Divine Love and Wisdom*, n. 151.

²⁵*Ibid.*, n. 218.

²⁶*Ibid.*, n. 157.

²⁷Swedenborg of course was fully aware that there are myriads of solar systems.

²⁸*Divine Love and Wisdom*, n. 165.

²⁹*Ibid.*, n. 170-172.

³⁰If one's life is such that he rejects God and / or His ways, he nevertheless returns to God, but unwillingly, and is allowed to live a life describable objectively as hell.

³¹*Doctrine of Life*, n. 1.

³²*True Christian Religion*, n. 508.

³³*Divine Love and Wisdom*, n. 1.

³⁴Cf. W. White, *Swedenborg*, (1867 ed. only), Vol. II, pp. 527-528.

³⁵*Op. cit.*, n. 6.

³⁶*Ibid.*

³⁷*Op. cit.*, n. 20. (Swedenborg rejected the doctrine that God created the world *ex nihilo*.)

³⁸*Cf.* J. Swanton, *Emanuel Swedenborg, Prophet of the Higher Evolution*, 1928, p. 66.

(To be continued)

Errata

p. 254, Jan.-Mar., vol. 93, no. 1; line 7 should read striking instead of irking

p. 293, April-June, vol. 93, no. 2; reference in footnote 20 should read p. 254 instead of p. 24.

p. 306, April-June, vol. 93, no. 2; reference in footnote 38 should read p. 247 instead of p. 17.

p. 310, April-June, vol. 93, no. 2; reference in footnote 44 should read p. 286 instead of pp. 1-3.

