

SWEDENBORG'S RATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY

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LECTURE I *

With this installment we begin the consideration of one of Swedenborg's philosophical works: the *Rational Psychology*. Our aim will be to form a universal view of the contents of this book, reinforced by particulars regarding *sensation*, the *animus*, the *rational mind*, and the *soul*; also to note the place of this work in Swedenborg's preparation under the auspices of the Lord in order that he might become the scribe of the Second Advent; and finally, to form a concept as to the position of the philosophical works, including the *Rational Psychology*, in a life philosophy whose formation and constant perfection must be one of the major trusts of the New Church. Educators in the New Church cannot be satisfied in giving mere science to the young, be it the science of physical law or that of spiritual law, but must strive to show to the students who come to them that all things that were made and ordained by the Creator find their proper place in the scheme of creation only in their relation to the final end of the Divine love and wisdom, namely, a heaven from the human race. To this end all things look; or, better, toward this end all things are drawn, lifted up, and collected by the ever present and all permeating Divine force of attraction. (Concerning this force, see TCR 350, 652; AC 1038, 1049, 8604:3, 8772:2, 9184:2; HH 449.) It behooves us then, to approach our particular study in the awareness of the universal unity of all things, grouped underneath and derived from the oneness of God.

BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO THE *Rational Psychology*

The *Rational Psychology* was written in the year 1742, one year prior to Swedenborg's first vision of the Lord (see Doc. II, p. 387), and three years before his final call as revelator (see WE 1003; Doc. I, p. 35). The book, never published by Swedenborg himself, belongs to the period in his philosophical career which is marked by his search for the human soul. Previously he had applied

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his mind to the derivation of the finite from the Infinite itself, God, as the first cause of creation; and he had sought to discover the successive and correspondential steps by which the Creator produced the ultimate universe. The magnificent system that was born of this search is first heralded in the *Prodromus to the Principia* and the *Miscellaneous Observations*, and comes to its full fruition in the *Principia* itself. The *Rational Psychology* was by no means his first step in the study of the soul, for he followed up his cosmological search with a work on *The Infinite*, where he attempts to see not only the relationship between the Infinite and the finite but also that between the soul and its body. Further, he completed a major work on the brain, apparently written in Venice in 1738, but not published by Swedenborg himself. It was translated by Dr. Alfred Acton (in two volumes, plus a volume of plates) under the title *The Cerebrum*. Swedenborg then wrote two volumes known as *The Economy of the Animal Kingdom* (which ought rather to be called in English "The Economy of the Kingdom of the Soul," Lat. *Oeconomia Regni Animalis*), and the work on *The Fibre*—all designed to discover the soul by exploring its kingdom, the body, and the chief organ of the body, namely, the brain. Nor was the *Rational Psychology* the last in this series, for there followed another great work on the brain, written in Stockholm and London in 1743 and 1744, and translated by Dr. R. L. Tafel under the title *The Brain*. This work, also not published by Swedenborg himself, was intended as part IV of the *Animal Kingdom* (perhaps better to be called "The Kingdom of the Soul," Lat. *Regnum Animale*), which latter work he did publish in two volumes in Amsterdam in the year 1744. A projected part III was published as a separate work, *The Senses*. The work on *Generation* also belongs to the group that was apparently intended to enter as one part under the grand title of *Regnum Animale*.

It is suggested, then, that we may distinguish two major periods in Swedenborg's career as a philosopher: one being concerned, in general, with the searching out of the physical universe for the purpose of demonstrating not only *that* but also *how* the Creator is present and operative in the whole of it and in its every part; and the other devoted to the knowledge and analysis of the human body, the microcosm, and in it particularly the brain, and now to the end that he might discern the presence and operation of the soul in her kingdom, and through the soul the influx of God.

It is in this setting that we turn to the *Rational Psychology*, seeing it as a link in a grand chain of development in the philosopher's exploration of the work of God, in search for the Divine laws operating within that work and bestowing life upon it. And now to our book itself.

SWEDENBORG'S APPROACH TO PHILOSOPHY

In his Preface to the *Rational Psychology*, the author writes:

In order that I may explore the soul, it is necessary that I unfold those manifold coverings which remove her from our eyes as though she dwelt in some center. I must proceed by the *analytic* way, or through experience to causes, and then through causes to principles; that is to say, from posterior things to prior. Such is the only way to the knowledge of things superior that is granted us. And when by this way we have been raised up to genuine principles, then first is it permitted us to proceed by the *synthetic* way, that is to say, from the prior to things posterior. This is the way of the soul in her action upon her body. It is the angelic way; for then, from the prior, or from things first, men see all posterior things as beneath them. Therefore, before it is permitted us to speak of the soul *a priori* from principles, that is to say, synthetically, we must strive upward by this human analytic way by means of posterior things, experience, and effects; in other words, we must strive upward by the ladder which leads us to those principles or that heaven. To climb up to the soul is not possible save by way of her organs whereby she descends into her body; thus, solely by the anatomy of her body.

I would call particular attention to the words *analytic* and *synthetic*. They summarize, as in a nutshell, Swedenborg's approach to philosophy. Swedenborg was a realist, not a dreamer. He wished to base his concepts on facts, whether observed by himself or by others whose findings he could accept with confidence. His endeavour was to perceive causes, and beyond these first principles, by observing many effects and piecing them together. Yet true realism is not the same as materialism. Swedenborg began from an unquestioning belief in the Supreme Reality itself: God the Creator. Moreover, he knew from the workings of the mind that there is a spiritual world. Nay, because of the peculiar gifts—internal breathing among them—he had from time to time, from earliest childhood, a form of ultimate experience of that world. Let us not think that this enshrouds him in a cloud of mystery. It is the part of wisdom, and it is rational, to see that there is a higher reality than matter: an interior cause prior to any ultimate

effect; and therefore that there is a first and final Cause, which itself has no cause prior to itself, and which therefore cannot be finite, but must be Infinite. A man, having his feet firmly on the ground, does not cease to be a realist for having at the same time his head in heaven.

Yet the Word alone provides an *a priori* knowledge of superior things. In this Swedenborg's situation was different from ours, for whereas we have the Writings to draw from, he, as a philosopher had not. The Word of the Old and New Testament indeed gave him a universal knowledge of God and His kingdom, but not a particular knowledge. As a philosopher he thirsted for particular truths—countless, penetrating particular verities, which would allow him to gaze in wonder and surpassing delight beyond the veil of matter. That is why he prepared to deduce such particulars through a laborious climb up the analytic ladder. But the angels of God go both up and down the ladder; and he too wanted to descend also, that is to say, he hoped to view inferior things in a light that is greater than that of the natural sun. His aim was to go down the synthetic way, gathering together a host of observations into bundles of unity, groups of harmony, governed by a superior law and an interior purpose.

Nor is it the prerogative of only this man or that to gather wisdom through the analytic and synthetic approach. Indeed, may we not justly ask if there is any other true and constructive approach? Is it not a fact that a kind of unifying, synthetic perception is, as it were, born out of many particular knowledges which are seen together, provided that there is at the same time a real acknowledgment of God; for without such acknowledgment there can be no uplifting, no real sight from above, as in a bird's eye view.

In this connection we may recall and affirm the teaching of revelation that "there is a universal influx into the souls of men, that there is a God, and that He is one" (TCR 8). Such influx is possible, because, *nolens volens*, there is a reception for it; and there is such reception because of the universal harmony that exists in all creation, and that plays upon every man, and inserts a universal reception in him, provided that he does not destroy it in himself by turning himself away in willing and thinking what is contrary.

And here we turn from the beginning of our book to the very end of it, quoting from the closing observations under the heading "A Universal Mathesis":

There are truths *a priori*, that is to say, propositions which are at once recognized as true and for the comprehension of which there is no need of demonstrations *a posteriori*, that is, of confirmation by experience and the senses. Truth presents itself naked, and dictates, as it were, that it is such. The mind is often indignant that such truths have to be demonstrated when they are above all demonstration; for all harmonies and all order naturally soothes and delights the organs of our senses, while disharmonies constrict and hurt them. So also with truths within which is intellectual order, as it were. Wherefore, if we were not overwhelmed with the problems of the sciences, with the many cupidities of the animus, and with like things, we would be able to know truths purely; for a certain consensus, a harmony, as it were, gives effulgence, and this from some sacred shrine, I know not whence. (R. Psych. 564.)

It is clear from all this that Swedenborg postulated an inherent harmony between things *a priori* and things *a posteriori*, and this not in the manner of a loose or hopeful hypothesis but as an interior certainty inscribed on creation itself. It is clear too that his main labour consisted in climbing the analytic ladder. It is always harder to go up than to come down. Knowing this full well he warns the reader in his Preface that "the way is steep," adding:

I would wish that my companions do not abandon me in the middle of my course; but if you do abandon me, I yet pray that you show me favor. And you will show me favor if you have the will to be persuaded that my end is God's glory and the public gain, and not in the least my own profit or praise. (R. Psych. Preface: e.)

We here borrow from an earlier work, the *Principia*, where he defines the mode of analysis, that is to say, the means that may lead to an *a priori* knowledge. He says:

The principal means which lead to truly philosophical knowledge are three in number—experience, geometry, and the power of reasoning. (*Principia* I, Ch. I, p. 2.)

These points he fully elaborates in his first and fifty-page chapter, entitled, "The Means Leading to True Philosophy, and the True Philosopher." We will allow ourselves time to cull from these pages in the *Principia* only enough to illustrate what he understands by his three means; and for this purpose, we select the following brief summary sentences:

By *experience* we mean the knowledge of everything in the world of nature which is capable of being received by the senses. . . . The second means leading to wisdom . . . is *geometry and rational philosophy*; by means of which we are enabled to compare our experiments, to set them in order analytically, to reduce them by laws, rules and analogies, and thence to elicit some third or fourth thing which was unknown before. . . . The third means . . . is the *faculty of reasoning*. Let experience and geometry be given; that is, let a man possess the utmost store of experimental knowledge and be at the same time a skilful geometer, and yet suppose him to be deficient in the faculty of reasoning correctly, or of comparing the several parts of his knowledge and experience, and presenting them distinctly to the soul; he can never know the mysteries and inward recesses of philosophy. (Ibid. pp. 4, 16, 31, 32.)

This "faculty of reasoning correctly" is, in Swedenborg's concept, far more than a skilful intellectual play. It is the ability to respond to truths, and to recognize them and correlate them according to their own order. Words which he was later to pen down as scribe of the Lord in His second advent refer to the ability to be "interiorly affected by truths"; and (the statement is)

Those only can be interiorly affected by truths who have the ability to see them, and those only see truths who have cultivated their intellectual faculty, and have not destroyed it in themselves by the loves of self and of the world. (AE 732:2.)

SENSATION

True to his principle that philosophy must be based on experience and geometry, Swedenborg commences his *Rational Psychology* with a lengthy and thorough chapter on "Sensation or the Passion of the Body." We will endeavor to see the chief argument of this chapter, and some of its major highlights.

Sensation is not only in the organs of the five senses. These organs are merely concerned with "external sensation." Above them, in the cortical glands, there is "interior sensation." Each cortical gland is therefore a little sensory in its own right, exquisite in form and surpassing in excellence even the most perfect of the external organs, namely the eye. But no single gland is isolated from its fellows in the experience of sensing. Rather, all the sensations communicated by the external sense organs flash right across the whole cortex of the brain, and what is ultimately received by the soul is multiplied by the thousand-fold variety of all the individual glands. No two glands are exactly alike—hence the

great but harmonious variation of the message that is transmitted to the soul. Yet, though all glands participate, the more perfect among them are concentrated to the crown of the cerebrum, for there,

The cortex is divided with utmost distinctness; for its mass is distinguished by an infinitude of chinks and furrows, and by means of these the cortex can be expanded and tensed in accordance with every mode. Thus where the distinction is more perfect, the sensation also is more perfect. This is the reason why all the convolutions and windings of the cortex concentrate there, or proceed thither in continuous flux and connection. (19.—Note: Here and in what follows, whenever the reference is to the *Rational Psychology*, we will give only the number or numbers.)

Accordingly, the highest form of external sensation, namely, sight, is concentrated to the supreme lobe of the brain. Yet all the sensations are registered throughout the cortex, which therefore deserves the name "the common sensory" (1, 18, 163). "Sensory" is the term for the organ that sensates; "sensation" is the state of the sensory when something that is communicated is received by it.

The interior sensation which exists in the common sensory, and in all its little individual sensories, is called by Swedenborg "perception" (1). Clearly, perception is an interior sensation. In the Writings, however, the term "perception" is usually associated with spiritual and celestial things, and is an office of love. The meaning is not reversed in the philosophical works, for there too love is indeed involved, namely, the love of the soul, but we should nevertheless well note the discrete degrees of meaning in the one case and the other. In the philosophical works, the term is applied to a lower form of mental activity than in the Writings.

Now, sensation is by no means complete when it has reached the common sensory on the plane of perception. For within each cortical gland there is the "simple cortex," an interior form, surpassing the cortical gland in excellence as much as the latter surpasses the eye. This simple cortex also sensates; and now our term is "intellection" (1).

It too is a sensory, an "inmost sensory." It has a name of its own, namely, "intellectory" (127). This name is given to it in its capacity of a sensory. We are here concerned with "inmost sensation" (1), which is conscious attention or observation, or, to return to Swedenborg's term, intellection. Intellection provides the material for reason, thought, and judgment, but these processes

come later. First there is the inmost sensation itself—inmost, that is to say, in the sense of being the highest *natural* form.

Here again we are concerned with a difference between the philosophical works and the Writings in the usage of terms; for this inmost natural form is, in the philosophical works, called “celestial” (127). Perhaps the term suggested itself to the philosopher because the simple cortex, or the intellectory, is as high above the body, and indeed above the common sensory, as are the “celestial bodies” of the sky above the earth. Be that as it may, in the philosophical works what is “spiritual” is distinctly above the “celestial.”

Thus are we able to understand correctly the philosopher’s observation, namely, that “this intellectory recognizes no other form above itself save the spiritual form, that is, the soul or the form of the soul. . . . The intellectory, whose form is celestial, [is] the first form of nature” (127).

That spiritual form, then, namely, the soul, is where sensation finally terminates. Hence even the soul is a “sensory,” but the “inmost of all” (1). Here we have more than observation, or intellection, for the soul alone *understands* (9). Nevertheless, what it understands is what it sensates. This is what is described as “the principle of sensations” (1). It is so called, because all lower forms of sensation have merely passed on a message. None of these forms has had any understanding of its own, hence no power of interpretation or selection. They have served as so many rungs on the ladder; but the soul alone has been the queen in the kingdom, has drawn all the messages to herself, and has reserved for herself the prerogative of determining what to do with them.

SENSATION IS PASSION

In the above arguments we recognize all the three prerequisites of a true philosophy, viz., experience, geometry, and truthful reasoning. Experience stands out more obviously than the other two; for we know the five organs of external sensation; we know too that such an organ may be on hand without sensation taking place, as when our eye takes in the image of someone well known to us as we walk in the way, while yet we do not observe the person because our attention is elsewhere; or when someone addresses us, and we do not hear because we concentrate on something else. We

do know further that something may come to our awareness without being retained, that is, without our pausing to give it attention ("intellection"); and we do know, finally, that attending to something is not the same as analyzing and understanding it. Hence experience supports the presentation of the four degrees of sensories—the external organ, the common sensory with its several individual interior sensories, the intellectory, and the soul.

But the philosopher also sees that there can be no sensation, on any level, without an *organ*. Hence geometry enters the scene. It follows further, that the more excellent is the sensation, the more excellent and superior must be the organ that sensates. Again, since the degrees of sensation are discrete, each organ must be contained within another, communicating with the other, while being as to form superior to its containant. Hence the search for truth, of necessity takes the seeker to the ladder of organic, geometrical forms.

As for the third element in the search for truth, sound reasoning, we will defer this matter until we come to discuss the "pure intellect" and the "human intellect."

For the time being we close by observing that each organ of sensation is passive in sensating. This must be true even of the soul, namely, in so far as it sensates and does not as yet act. Hence we have passion and action. Passion pertains to each degree of organic form; action, however, only to the form of the common sensory and the soul. All the nerves of sensation terminate in the common sensory. But at the same time all nerves of action commence there. Hence the cortical gland, and the whole cortex, is not only a sensory but also a "motory" (12). The same, however, applies much more to the soul; but can scarcely be predicated of the intellectory, which may perhaps be properly described as the eye of the soul.

We add too, that if an organ is passive in sensating, then something must strike upon it in order that sensation may result. That is to say, there must be a force, appropriate to the level of the organ, which flows in, and, as it were, touches the organ. Without such touch, there can be no passion.