

THE NEW PHILOSOPHY

VOL. LXIX

OCTOBER-DECEMBER, 1966

No. 4

SWEDENBORG'S *INFINITE AND FINAL CAUSE OF CREATION* *

DANIEL GOODENOUGH, JR.

One of the shortest, yet in many ways the most powerful of Swedenborg's preparatory works is *The Infinite and Final Cause of Creation*, or more exactly, *Forerunner of a Reasoning Philosophy Concerning the Infinite and the Final Cause of Creation; and Concerning the Mechanism of the Operation of the Soul and Body*. It was originally published in Latin by Swedenborg in 1734, at Dresden and Leipzig, Germany. He was then 46 years old, a busy member of the Swedish Board of Mines, a member of the Swedish Parliament, and in his spare time a diligent student of the phenomena of the natural world.

The Infinite and Final Cause of Creation is especially interesting because it marks something of a turning point in Swedenborg's preparation. Previous to 1734 he had devoted himself almost exclusively to such scientific fields as mechanics, chemistry, geology and mineralogy. He studied mathematics and geometry and even wrote a textbook on algebra. The crowning work of the earlier period of preparation, the *Principia*, or *First Principles of Natural Things*, was published in 1734. After 1734, however, Swedenborg was occupied with areas of research in which he had previously shown comparatively little interest—namely, the kingdom of the soul, or the animal and human body. This led him into the field of psychology and the manner in which the soul operates on the body.

Coming between these two periods, *The Infinite and Final Cause of Creation* is a philosophical culmination, almost a conclusion,

*An address delivered at the Swedenborg Birthday Celebration, Carmel Church, Blair, Ontario, February 4, 1966.

of all his earlier thought. Its view of creation is largely that of the *Principia* and earlier writings. "Mechanism" is a dominant word, and the reader is led to think of the universe in terms of the mechanical relations of the minute physical finites and elementaries which constitute it. The universe appears as a beautiful, smoothly functioning machine.

But a new emphasis is also present in the *Infinite and Final Cause of Creation*—a growing wonder at the beauty of life. Certainly in the *Principia* and earlier Swedenborg had occasionally, though not frequently, shown wonder at living things. But in *The Infinite and Final Cause of Creation* this wonder becomes more pervasive, gradually crowding out his previous dominant concern with the relatively dead activities of nature.

Swedenborg's previous training doubtless played a most important role in his preparation, making him aware of the magnificent precision in the physical universe, the amazing order that permeates even the deadest things of nature. It appears, however, that in preparing to write the *Infinite and Final Cause of Creation*, the more he reflected upon the Infinite and the relation of the Infinite to the finite, the more he became aware of the presence of life in the universe, and so became filled with a higher wonder than that which, we may suppose, had motivated him to begin the book. We cannot say that at its end Swedenborg possessed more actual knowledge about life than before. Yet a noticeable progression and growth of a sense of livingness in the world takes place through its pages. While at first primarily an expansion of early chapters in the *Principia*, dealing with the Infinite and purest natural substances, the tone of the book gradually develops and becomes, at least to this reader, closer to that of such later works as the *Economy of the Animal Kingdom* and the *Animal Kingdom*, in which the wonder of life is dominant. In the end of *The Infinite and Final Cause of Creation* there is the same dominant word, "mechanism," but it has become not so much its own object of amazement as a tool to explain that distinctly greater object of amazement—the wonder of living things. The change is thus rather in the focus of interest and attention than in a philosophical position. What is interesting is that the change in focus persisted, as from this point on Swedenborg turned himself more and more to the kingdom of life.

One reason for this change is evident simply from the logic of

Swedenborg's thought. Endeavoring to show that behind the finite must lie its infinite Cause, Swedenborg was led to present illustrations from the human body in order to demonstrate the point. Again, in explaining the final cause, or the ultimate reason, for creation, he was led away from the mechanical operations of inner and outer nature; these could hardly constitute the end of creation. For the final cause, the end, of creation he could look only to the life of the soul, and in particular to the soul's acknowledgment of and faith in the Infinite. The logic of his inquiry thus led him to a greater reflection upon life, as the philosophical solution to the questions he had set himself.

Thus the Lord prepared him through these years, not by direct revelation, but by granting him perceptions while he freely followed his own thinking. His own interests and reasoning were instruments to guide him to see things the importance of which only gradually became apparent. He was not consciously preparing to serve as an instrument of revelation. Like other men, he wanted to do the best he could at his present work and his present interests, presumably for the sake of his country and for the spiritual betterment of mankind. Only long afterwards did he become aware of the importance of the direction in which the Lord had been secretly leading him in freedom. (Tafel: *Documents*, II:1, p. 387)

The Infinite and Final Cause of Creation consists of two chapters. The first of these deals with basic questions of the Infinite and the finite, as already noted. The second chapter is almost a corollary to the conclusions of the first, being an endeavor to show that man has a soul which is immortal. While the two chapters thus make one, the connection between them is somewhat loose, and so for simplicity's sake I will restrict myself to Chapter One.

The fifteen sections which compose Chapter One may also be divided rather roughly into two parts, the first of which seeks simply to prove the existence of the Infinite as the necessary Cause for everything of nature. The clear arguments lose none of their effectiveness over the intervening years because Swedenborg's basic method is a continual insistence that everything finite must have a cause. This is developed more fully in the Writings, but the power and precision with which Swedenborg uses this argument

to remove specific obstacles to a belief in the Infinite are most impressive.

It is impossible to look for causes for very long without being led to a First Cause as a necessary presupposition. Thus acknowledgment of the Infinite and a conscious search for the causes of things cannot be separated. Accordingly, the growth of agnosticism is accompanied in the modern world by a rejection of the very idea of causation. Since David Hume's observation that no cause can ever be proven to the senses, the idea has spread that things just happen without causes. In fact the hypothesis of causelessness may appear to solve certain scientific questions, but how can man really understand a universe without causes, or life without causes? Human reason demands to see the causes of things. The depth of pessimism in the true agnostic passes beyond skepticism as to the existence of God and by the force of its own logic rejects also the very concept of cause, purpose, order, or rationality in the universe; to him human existence does not make sense and it cannot.

Many nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers could be cited to illustrate how this devastating rejection of the idea of cause has been accepted, often unconsciously, as a working assumption of modern thinking in all areas of life. While artists reflect this tendency by openly lamenting the purposelessness of human existence, most men prefer simply to regard the matter of the causes of things as an impossible question and therefore one to be safely ignored. The philosopher's rejection of cause leaves most of society with little more to concern itself than material self-improvement. Only an understanding of the causes of things can render human life spiritually meaningful by endowing it with purposes to be fulfilled and ideals to be striven after. By its own logic the rejection of cause enwraps the human spirit in an oppressive web of materialism, the purposelessness of which can be bemoaned but not escaped until man begins to search for the causes of things.

But what can happen without a cause? Indeed, without a cause, what that is transitory can even *be*? It can easily be stated that a thing is without cause, but this at once makes it impossible for human reason to understand the thing. So central is cause to the physical universe (as well as to our mental processes) that causelessness is inconceivable and for that reason unworkable as a philosophical principle. And once cause is recognized as an un-

avoidable ingredient of existence, the search for cause cannot but lead back to that which is the First Cause. This Swedenborg expresses with great power and clarity, yet with conciseness and even simplicity, in the first half of Chapter One. His arguments are no less relevant to the twentieth century than the eighteenth; the agnosticism he was battling in 1734 has only developed some sophistication in the past 200 years. If we would convince an agnostic, we must still begin by making him look for cause.

This first half of Chapter One leads our thoughts continually to humble acknowledgment of the Infinite as the First Cause. But it is the second half of this chapter that I would especially like to discuss. It deals with the relationship of the Infinite to finite creation, and some interesting points emerge. First we note a number of fundamental truths which Swedenborg by this time had been given to see—truths such as that the Infinite is not in space, and that creation is not out of nothing, but from the Infinite itself. (*The Infinite and Final Cause of Creation*, translation: J. J. G. Wilkinson, London, 1915, pp. 14, 23.) We note passing mention of “a purer, finer or subtler world” (*Ibid.*, p. 50), of a “purer and more perfect world” (*Ibid.*, p. 82), the existence though not the quality of which Swedenborg was beginning to surmise.

Let us also note the growing awareness of and wonderment at the enormous part that delight takes in our lives. After expressing the distant hope that all man’s worldly delights may be directed towards worship of God, Swedenborg comments,

It has seemed good to the supreme and infinite Deity, that for all ends in all living subjects delight of some kind shall always be the impelling cause to the final cause. . . . In every animal there is this impulsive element, which spontaneously drives and incites it to peculiar ends. . . . From the natural delight, therefore, in every case, we may conclude unfailingly to the end for which the subject was created. In man there is a similar natural delight, which drives, incites, and carries him to all his natural ends; viz., to live as lord of the planet, to nourish his body, to propagate his species, and to rear his children. Now the single incentive in all these acts is some particular pleasure or element of delight, which in one case is denominated taste, smell, or sight; in another, desire, love, parental affection, glory, or by numerous other titles; the source of all, however, consisting entirely in the pleasure and delight of which we have spoken; and the source of the delight, in love. . . . Therefore we are naturally incited to all our ends by some element of delight, the extinction and death of which is on this account so contrary to our nature (*Ibid.*, pp. 95, 96).

Here is an instance of what I have called a new emphasis or focus upon life itself, rather than upon physical mechanism. But no less significant, is not this a beginning perception of that distinctive and important doctrine of delight which we find throughout the revealed Writings? Man's very life is in delight, since delight is the sensation of love. Here Swedenborg does not quite say that, but it is obvious that he is beginning to see it. And, what is interesting—the passage quoted is interjected almost as an afterthought. The discussion of the universality in life of delight is not essential to his principal train of thought (namely, that all delights should be directed to worship of God). In fact the passage quoted causes a minor break in the context, almost as if a sudden perception of the degree to which the element of delight permeates our life impells him to explore the idea even in the midst of another thought. Though we cannot be sure of the time at which he began to perceive the importance to man of delight, it appears from the passage cited that perceptions were given him almost unexpectedly as he reflected and explored in those areas through which his own reason and interests led him.

Additional examples can be found of important truths which Swedenborg had been led to see ten years before he was called by the Lord. Several of these, however, he as yet perceived only imperfectly, incompletely. The reader wonders what he meant by the acknowledgment and worship of the Infinite which he said was the ultimate end of creation. One passage adds “a sense of delight in the love of God” (*Ibid.*, p. 82). Surely acknowledgment and worship of God do constitute the end of creation, if by them we understand internal worship through the activity of spiritual uses and thence a reciprocal conjunction with the Lord. How much of this did Swedenborg understand at this time? He did not go beyond stating acknowledgment and worship of God, commenting besides that the subject of worship is too extensive and difficult to be treated briefly (*Ibid.*, p. 82). Although Swedenborg certainly thought continually from uses, and looked for uses throughout his studies, to this reader it appears that he did not yet consciously think from *use* as an abstract philosophical principle—that is, while ideas of use run throughout his writings, he did not yet deliberately apply the abstract principle of use to every facet of philosophy. The concept of use often comes more slowly to new New Church men than other distinctive ideas, and to

Swedenborg also it appears to have come as a conscious abstraction only gradually. How many particulars were later to fill his general idea of the end of creation when he was given to see the myriad uses of the Grand Man, to feel the strong spheres of mutual love binding together the angels in common dedication to them, and to sense immediately the spiritual heat and light by the reception of which man and angel are conjoined with the Lord!

In two respects we may question whether Swedenborg would later have altogether agreed with what he wrote here.

The first is the question of whether or not the Divine operation changes, according as events and circumstances in the world change. He shows clearly that the Infinite is unchanging and that any change in the operation of the Infinite implies finiteness in the Infinite. The target of his argument is obviously those who think of God finitely—that God changes His plans according to circumstances, and that thus His will may be bent by man's actions. But in showing that a changing Infinite would be in fact finite, Swedenborg approaches rather closely another extreme—the currently fashionable mechanistic concept of a universe wound up at the beginning and then allowed to run without further immediate direction.

For example, in arguing against those who by a finite view of God as changeable desire to bend Him to their own interests, he writes,

Perhaps they would have the vulgar believe, that God by His own immediate agency, interposes the clouds between our eyes and the sun; that He successively rouses the tempest, sends down the rain, and paints the rainbow in the sky; that at one time He frames our members in the womb; at another, breathes the soul into the body; and so forth. Perhaps in a word they mean to teach, that God is justly represented under the image of a finite man, who would operate immediately, or by modes immediately proceeding from Himself, on the grosser circumstances, and lowest parts, of the sphere of nature. And so they would see in God the proximate [or nearest] cause of all things. However, as all things are the effects of His divine providence, the only question at present is of time; whether one after another they are created immediately; or whether they were all foreseen and provided at once? (*Ibid.*, p. 58)

The answer is obviously the latter, as the Lord's continual sustenance of all of nature is not immediate, without means, but through the means of the spiritual world and the finer substances of

nature. Influx of the Divine proceeding, regarded in itself, does not change.

But the matter is left here by Swedenborg, and the tenor of his thinking easily leaves the implication that God at one time foresaw and provided all things and no longer operates in creation because all has been taken care of. It appears to me that at this time Swedenborg at least approached this concept of the universe, yet without accepting it so fully as the majority of his contemporaries, with whom it was very popular. In addition, his position resulted from a genuine desire to understand the infinity of God, instead of from the simple indifference to theology so prevalent in his age.

It is not that any one statement may be singled out as wrong, since what he says about the unchanging operation of the Infinite is true, but rather there is some omission of the truth that nevertheless the Divine does operate in the world, through means, yet continually. Divine Providence is not merely universal; it is in the veriest singulars of all creation.

The doctrine that fully explains the continual operation of the Infinite is the doctrine of influx. While regarded from its Source, Divine influx cannot change, yet it does vary in the recipient according to its reception. (Cf. HH 569; AC 10330:3.) While the Divine in all things, greatest and least, is the same, yet "man is a recipient, and the recipient or receptacle is what varies" (DLW 77, 78). Swedenborg understood the first part of this truth, but the concept of influx and its various reception had not yet been developed. In time he was to see that the operation of the Infinite is absolutely unceasing because influx from the spiritual sun is unceasing, and that the Divine operation, unchanging in its laws, varies according to reception. Thus the Divine is continually accommodated to what is finite. Divine accommodation is not varied by anything inherent in the Infinite, as Swedenborg at this time clearly recognized, but still it is varied by reception.

Finally, we note that the concept of foresight and provision of all things at the moment of creation is particularly applicable to those purely mechanical natural phenomena to which up to this time Swedenborg had devoted his attentions. The continual operation of Divine Providence, and its varying accommodations as finite states change, become apparent to man from observation not so much of the non-living motion in the universe as of the activity

of life. The mechanical basis of nature provided Swedenborg with abundant confirmation of the primary truth of all, that the Infinite lies behind things as their Cause; but from this point on it would seem that by means of a humble and wondering study of life, Swedenborg was led to complete what was previously lacking, by the realization of the perpetual operation of the Infinite and its accommodation according as states of reception vary.

A second area wherein we may discern an incomplete sight of truth rather than an actual error, relates to the knowability of God. Again we find Swedenborg's emphasis on the primary truth, that God is infinite and therefore as He is in His essence unknowable by finite man. This emphasis is assuredly present throughout the theological Writings also. Yet in the latter, man is not left hanging with the implication that that is the end of the matter, while in *The Infinite and Final Cause of Creation* no real solution is offered to the problem. In the preparatory work the emphasis is upon proving the existence of an Infinite which is not nothing and in which there are things truly infinite. But let us note the implication of the following:

Thus we may be certain that there are infinite things in the Infinite, the nature and quality of which can never be conceived by the finite. The conclusion is that beyond our finite sphere there are verily infinities *to the knowledge of which it is useless to aspire*; and which in the Infinite are infinitely many, and can be known to no one but the Infinite. In order that these may in some measure be conceived by the soul introduced through faith into communion with the Infinite, it has pleased God to discover [make known] by revelation much whereby the mind can finitely conceive and express Him: *not however that finite perceptions or expressions are similar or adequate to Him, but only that those made use of are not repugnant.* (*The Infinite and Final Cause of Creation*, p. 66; italics added.)

And again:

So we may legitimately advance, not indeed to enquire into the nature or qualities of Deity, because He is infinite, and *His qualities therefore we can never penetrate*; but to enquire what there can be in man to lead to this primary end [of worship]; what there can be in him that does not repugn the Infinite and the nexus: how a confessedly infinite Deity may best be expressed in finite terms that shall not be repugnant to the occasion: what befitting worship consists in; what is the peculiar efficacy of faith proceeding from a true acknowledgment of God; with innumerable other subjects, which cannot be settled briefly, but require to be rationally deduced in a volume by themselves. (*Ibid.*, pp. 97, 98; italics added.)

Even in regard to the nexus between the Infinite and the finite, which Swedenborg explains as being that which is meant by the only-begotten Son of God, he writes :

The mind perceives that nexus must exist; not indeed a perceptible, proportional, or natural nexus, or one which partakes of the finite: but still plainly a nexus; and it is equally evident, as it was before when we were speaking of the infinite, that it is impossible to know the nature of the nexus, because it must be absolutely infinite: although notwithstanding its existence is none the less clear. *By consequence the mind acknowledges a something which it understands no better than it understands the Infinite.* (*Ibid.*, p. 69; italics added.)

In other words, man can learn how to worship the Infinite but in trying to conceive of Him he can do no more than avoid expressions which are "repugnant"!

It might be argued that Swedenborg meant by these words only that the use of reason by itself cannot lead to knowledge of the quality of the Infinite. But that is not what he said, and his arguments apply no less forcefully to conceptions of the Infinite formed from revelation than to those produced by the reason alone. And the first passage quoted speaks of the inadequacy of finite perceptions and expressions of the Infinite just after Divine revelation has been specifically mentioned. From this it is apparent that even from revelation Swedenborg did not see how an idea of the Infinite could be formed that was any more adequate than being non-repugnant.

His stronger statements in this regard suggest a lingering influence on him of the deism which was becoming so popular among the learned of Europe. Deism acknowledges a supreme infinite being which, however, cannot be known by man, least of all through Divine revelation. But Swedenborg was never a deist, and in *The Infinite and Final Cause of Creation* he frequently shows his acceptance of revelation as the source of truth by means of which man may worship the Infinite. Yet as we have seen, he is doubtful if revelation can adequately unveil the nature of the Infinite itself, even if it can teach us to worship. Of course he is thinking of the literal sense of the Word, and without the internal sense it is frequently difficult to see how the Word could make known to us the nature of the Infinite.

And yet the Word does reveal the Infinite, both in the literal and in the internal senses. The Divine clothes itself in successive

appearances for the very purpose of making itself known to all, from the highest angel to the newly born babe. (Cf. AC 7270.) Swedenborg was of course absolutely right that any such finite idea is inadequate to express fully the nature of the Infinite; yet without some finite idea of the Divine, formed from appearances, man's thought falls into nothing and interiorly he denies the Infinite. This is taught frequently in the theological Writings, as in the following:

Things that are Divine, or that are infinite, are not apprehended except from finite things of which man can form some idea. Without an idea derived from finite things, and especially an idea from the things of space and time, man can comprehend nothing of Divine things, and still less of the Infinite. Without an idea of space and time man cannot have any thought at all. . . . (AC 3938)

Again, the Writings point out the error of those

societies which . . . believe that if they look to the Infinite, and worship a hidden God, they can be in love to Him; when yet they are not so, unless by some idea they make that Infinite finite, or present the hidden God as visible within themselves by finite intellectual ideas for otherwise it would be a looking into thick darkness, and embracing with love that which is therein, whence there would arise many fanciful and undigested conceits, . . . (AC 4075:3)

The Infinite cannot be conjoined with finite things, thus not with the angels in the heavens, except by the putting on of something finite, and thus by accommodation to reception. (AC 8760:2)

In showing the Infinite as it is in itself to be altogether above man's comprehension Swedenborg by no means denied these truths. Yet neither did he complete the idea by showing what man *can* and *must* know about the Infinite. A passage in *The True Christian Religion* which very closely parallels Swedenborg's earlier reasoning that the Infinite itself is incomprehensible, nevertheless continues by giving the solution man needs in order to learn of the Infinite:

It is sufficient to acknowledge Him from finite things, that is, from things created, in which He is infinitely. The man who is not content with this may be likened to a fish out of water, or to a bird under an airpump, which, as the air is withdrawn, gasps and finally dies. Or he may be likened to a vessel which, overcome by a storm and failing to obey its helm, is carried upon rocks and quicksands. So it is with those who wish to comprehend from within the infinity of God, and are not content with being able to acknowledge it in its manifest indications from without. . . . (TCR 28)

So frequently the difference between Divine revelation of truth and its human expression is not a manifest error in the latter, but simply a certain incompleteness of thought, a limited emphasis which by implication leaves part of the truth in shadow.

In practice, interestingly enough, Swedenborg frequently did ascribe qualities to the Infinite, such as infinite intelligence, foresight and providence, omniscience and omnipotence. (Cf. *The Infinite and Final Cause of Creation*, pp. 89, 93, etc.) It is obvious that he conceived of the Infinite as supremely Human, with infinite ends of love and good. Equally obvious is his study of Divine revelation to discover truth. This partial but happy inconsistency with some of his statements about the unknowability of the Infinite simply demonstrates that his preparation was proceeding step by step, and that even when his reason could not yet explain how, for example, the Infinite reveals itself, he nevertheless perceived that it does, and he sought to understand it as fully as possible.

Here Swedenborg parted company with the deists, who rather used their rational arguments to set aside the whole matter of theology and ignore it. One with so great a love of truth as Swedenborg would not long be deterred by the appearance that the Divine is unknowable, and it is a happy irony that, in contradiction to his strong statements about the unknowability of the Infinite, the rest of his life was more and more fully dedicated to establishing the truth that man *can* know the Divine.

How much more could be said of this stimulating work! Every page stretches and deepens the reader's understanding. I will restrict myself to concluding remarks about some overall implications of the book to the development of thought before and after Swedenborg's day. Indeed, since the rebirth of humanism in the Italian Renaissance, man's horizons have become increasingly limited and confining, although the opposite appears to have occurred. More and more has man's existence come to be centered on himself. Much of the danger in the growth of humanist secularism lies in its subtlety. It does not openly contradict the truth of theology, but suffocates it with a pall of indifference. Nothing is so limiting, so deadening to the human spirit, as the implication dominant in the world today, that we are wasting our time on *vacuous*, speculative will-o'-the-wisps whenever we lift our attention above what is of this world.

The spirit of secularism that adores man as its god has grown far more pervasive since 1734. In part at least it is the inevitable result of the death of the former church. But even in Swedenborg's time the spirit was strong, not so much in denying the Infinite as in casually eliminating Him from its thinking. Lip-service to a Deity was very popular in the eighteenth century, yet that Deity somehow was gradually disappearing from man's every-day thought, whether that thought was deeply philosophical or quite simple. The seventeenth-century French mathematician Blaise Pascal summarized his dissatisfaction with the growing secularism in his reflection,

I cannot forgive Descartes. In all his philosophy he would have been quite willing to dispense with God. But he had to make Him give a fillip [snap of the fingers] to set the world in motion; beyond this, he has no further need of God. (*Pensées*, n. 77)

The sin of secularism is not so much in what it states as in what it omits.

It is principally at this deadly spirit that the *Infinite and Final Cause of Creation* was directed. Every word and phrase, while firmly anchored in the rational philosophy of the age, leads man's thoughts away from egocentrism and towards the Infinite. If we may read into the book a universal idea, it would be that man does not exist for the sake of himself but as a means to the fulfillment of Divine ends. All secondary ends, such as the delight man takes in his environment, have been created so that the primary end, acknowledgment and worship of the Infinite, may be accomplished. Nothing in existence has any other purpose. As Swedenborg summed it up near the end of Chapter One,

the end of creation . . . exists primarily for the Infinite or the Creator; and . . . everything in the created universe tends thither. (*The Infinite and Final Cause of Creation*, p. 94)

In this, I believe, lies the significance to us of this work.