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THE VALUE OF SWEDENBORG'S PHILOSOPHY

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In accepting the invitation to address you this evening in commemoration of Swedenborg's birthday, we have felt impelled to call attention to his philosophy rather than to the outstanding events of his life which have been so fully described on similar occasions in the past.

We have chosen this approach because we have sensed an increasing doubt among us as to the value of studying Swedenborg's philosophical works. After all, we are reminded that the establishment of the New Church depends not upon philosophic abstractions, but solely upon a life of love to the Lord and of genuine charity toward the neighbor. We can learn how to receive these heavenly gifts only by entering ever more deeply into the understanding of the spiritual truth now revealed in the Heavenly Doctrine. This is our primary responsibility; and the field to be explored is so vast that even a lifetime of reading and study seems all too short. Why, then, should we turn aside from this all-important duty to pore over the philosophical works which Swedenborg himself abandoned when he was called to serve as the instrument of the Lord's second coming? Has not the Lord made available to us in the Writings His own Divine answers to those very same problems which Swedenborg vainly attempted to solve by human reason?

It is freely admitted, of course, that if the truth of revelation is to be applied to the affairs of everyday life we must seek to

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discover some relation between the teaching of the Writings and the facts of human experience. We must develop a philosophy of life; that is what Swedenborg did. But Swedenborg lived at a time when scientific investigation was in its infancy. Since then there has been brought to light a vast accumulation of factual knowledge which was completely unknown to Swedenborg. Many of the concepts on which his thought was necessarily based have been disproved by later discoveries. In our search for scientific confirmation of our religious faith, should we not look to the more accurate findings of our own day, rather than appeal to the out-moded ideas extant in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries?

It is not, however, with the primitive science of Swedenborg's day that we are concerned, but rather with that unique philosophy by which he was providentially prepared for the Divine mission to which he had been called. This philosophy was a bold adventure into a totally untried field of human thought. It was an attempt to define the relation between the universe and the God who created it, between nature and the super-natural, between body and mind. This had always been regarded as an impenetrable mystery. It is still so regarded by the philosophical thinkers of our own day.

The reason is that every idea of human thought is founded, of necessity, on the testimony of the physical senses, and thus on man's contact with the world of nature. Apart from the properties of material things, man cannot think at all. The distinguishing properties of nature are space, time, size, shape, mass, weight, mechanical force, motion and velocity. They cannot be ascribed to the super-natural. Yet if we divest our mind of all these properties, nothing remains but a vacuum.

From time immemorial men have been prompted by some strange sense of inner need to believe in the existence of things super-natural. They have perceived intellectually the necessity for a first cause—for something infinite, eternal and uncreate from which all things must derive their origin. They have been aware of life, and have been moved by love or will, which have none of the characteristics of space and time, and yet which mysteriously move the body and govern all the activities of the mind. They have sought to escape the complete extinction of death, and have clung to a belief in the continuation of personal life beyond the grave in some spiritual and more perfect world. But whenever they have attempted to define or visualize such a world, they have been

compelled to do so in terms of what is spatial and temporal. They have been able to picture nothing but an extension of the material world.

In Swedenborg's day it was supposed that matter was the substance of which all things in the natural universe were composed. By "substance" is meant that which stands under or underlies all sensual appearances, thus the ultimate reality within all things. By "matter" was understood the atom—a hard, immovable, indivisible, submicroscopic entity, out of which all things were built. Because the atom could not be divided, it necessarily marked the end of all scientific investigation into the interiors of nature. But these dead and motionless building blocks were found to be in constant motion. They were being combined to form molecules of indefinite variety, and these again were being combined to produce all the substances and objects of which the world of nature consists. Again these combinations were continually being broken down, reduced to their constituent molecules and atoms, and again used in the formation of other substances and objects. This breaking down and building up was found to take place according to fixed laws of chemistry, physics, and biology which men could learn to understand, and which they could utilize to modify the operations of nature, bend them to man's will, and produce from them untold benefits to society. They could, in short, invent machines of ever-increasing complexity and efficiency to do things which could not otherwise be achieved, to provide for human needs and desires in ways which it had never been supposed were possible. Where, men asked, did all this latent energy come from? It was certainly not the property of solid, dead and motionless atoms.

Swedenborg perceived that nothing could be created except by means of motion or activity. He perceived that motion must be prior to creation, and therefore that the substance, or the underlying reality of the universe, could not be a dead building block, for this could come into being only by means of a force or motion that preceded it. Concerning this he writes:

Rational philosophy will not admit that anything can . . . exist without motion. Whatever is void of motion, remains just as it is: that which is in a quiescent state produces nothing: whatever is . . . produced must be produced by a mode, or by motion. . . . It follows, therefore, that the first . . . [of creation must be] produced by motion . . . from the Infinite. (*Principia*, Part I, Chapter II: 4)

By reason, therefore, Swedenborg demonstrated that the substance of the universe could not be a dead and motionless entity. He postulated that within the atom and beyond it there must be a motion which created it, which moves it and changes it, and which perpetually maintains it in existence. So doing, he foretold the ultimate necessity of atomic fission, and anticipated a discovery which would not actually take place for nearly two hundred years. Modern scientists have now discovered that the atom is not the underlying reality of the material universe. Not even the electron, the proton, or the neutron, which are found to be component parts of the atom, can be regarded as the substance of which material things consist. This is because, when any object of nature is reduced to its least component parts, it is found to be what has been called a "field of force." This is the force that produces energy and mechanical motion in space. At least at the present time, this is considered to be the last frontier of scientific investigation, the final underlying reality back of all the appearances of nature.

Even this, Swedenborg reasoned, cannot be the ultimate reality. This, too, must have been produced by something prior to itself.

The Infinite alone exists without a cause, or from itself. . . . Thus the ultimate cause of things terminates or begins in the Infinite; that is, in Him who exists of Himself, and who . . . [does not consist] of parts; so that from Him finite things must of necessity have proceeded . . . nothing finite can exist by itself, because it must needs be finited before it exists; and if so, it must be finited by something else; whence it follows that a finite must necessarily exist by that which has the power of finiting it, and which of itself is infinite. In a word . . . the first ens, as also all other entities in successive derivation from it, of which the world is composed, and by which it is connected together, were produced by and from the Infinite. (*Principia*, Part I, Chapter II: 1)

The argument is that since nothing can be produced without motion, and since all finite things must have their origin or their first cause in the Infinite, therefore the final underlying substance of the entire universe must be a motion in the Infinite. Nevertheless, this primal motion cannot be that "field of force," that mechanical energy which produces the atom, because this displays no purpose, no foresight, no intelligence or wisdom. That motion which first arises in the Infinite must be in the nature of a will or a love. This Swedenborg states specifically in the same chapter of his *Principia*, as follows :

If, then, it be admitted that the first simple was produced by motion from the Infinite, we are at the same time bound to suppose that in the producing cause there was something of a will that it should be produced; something of an active quality which produced it; and something of an intelligent nature, determining that it should be produced in such a manner and in no other, or in one mode in preference to another; in a word, something infinitely intelligent, infinitely provident, infinitely active, and infinitely productive. (*Principia*, Part I, Chapter II: 5).

Here, then, Swedenborg postulates two kinds of motion: one that is purely mechanical, and which we call energy, and another which is purposeful and intelligent, which we call activity, and which we perceive as love. Love, then, or Life, is proclaimed to be the very substance, the underlying reality, of the universe; the intrinsic quality of the Infinite, and thence of everything that proceeds from the Infinite to create or bring into being all things of the entire universe.

Energy, or mechanical force and motion, is the substance of nature. This first came into being in the sun, for there, by spectrum analysis, we find all the various elements of nature which comprise the atomic table. There all the different kinds of atoms which exist on earth are found in the form of incandescent gases which we perceive as solar fire. From this source radiate the heat and the light which, tempered by the earth's atmosphere, serve to release the energy bound up in the seemingly dead and solid atoms on the surface of the earth. This release, however, is not catastrophic, as when the atom is artificially split; it is gentle, and such as to produce all the chemical, physical and biological changes necessary for the creation and constant modification of material objects. But these mechanical forces are not self-derived. They are produced and perpetually maintained from the Infinite by means of a higher form of motion, which for the sake of distinction we have called activity. This in its essence is Life, or Love, in which there is wisdom and purpose. This Divine love and wisdom produced the mechanical energy in the sun, and sustains it from moment to moment. It produced all the mechanical forces of nature, and it did so for a purpose. It constantly uses these dead forces, even as a living workman uses a dead tool to accomplish his end. The Divine love governs and directs the forces of nature, and by means of them produces all her wonders. In spite of the appearance, mechanical energy is not self-sufficient. It cannot move itself. It must be moved, propelled by the living force of Divine love.

For this reason, as Swedenborg states (EAK, Part II, no. 235: 2), nature is dead. It is a world of effects, all of which are produced by causes prior to itself.

The fact that there are two distinct kinds of motion, two kinds of substance or underlying reality, implies that there must be two distinct worlds—a world of mechanical energy, and a world of living activity called love. This Swedenborg clearly states as a primary basis for his philosophy :

Nature, in respect to life, is dead (EAK Part II, No. 235: 2). Hence, we must look higher for its principle of life, and seek it from the First Esse, or Deity of the universe, who is essential life, and essential perfection of life, or wisdom. Unless this First Esse were life and wisdom, nothing whatever in nature could live, much less have wisdom; nor yet be capable of motion. God is the Fountain of Life, the Sun of Wisdom, the Spiritual Light, the very Esse and I AM; in whom we live, and move, and have our being; from whom, by whom, unto whom, or for the sake of whom, are all things; who is the First and the Last. (EAK Part II, no. 238)

He postulates, therefore, a spiritual or a moral sun from which the heat of love and the light of wisdom radiate, permeating the entire material universe, animating it and governing it, even as the soul of man animates and governs his body.

The substance of the natural world, then, is energy, while the substance of the spiritual world is love. These two kinds of motion differ radically. They have different qualities and attributes. They are discretely different, which means that they touch one another, or are contiguous, but they are not continuous. Nevertheless, because mechanical energy has been produced by the activity of love, therefore, all the distinctive qualities and characteristics of natural energy must have existed, in potency, in the activity of love. If it were not so, the one could not have been derived from the other. This being the case, between things spiritual and things natural or material, there must be a band of connection, a parallelism, a correspondence, which it is possible for the human mind to grasp and understand.

This insight was perhaps Swedenborg's greatest philosophical contribution. He refused to accept the supernatural as an insoluble mystery. Since things spiritual are invisible to the bodily senses, they are obviously beyond the reach of science. Nevertheless, Swedenborg was convinced that there must be a mode of approach from the one world to the other by way of reason and

philosophy. This reason, however, must not be a pure figment of the imagination; it must be solidly based on the facts of scientific knowledge. At the same time it must be guided by fundamental principles derived from the revealed Word of God. To discover this path of ascent from earth to heaven, Swedenborg believed to be an undertaking of supreme importance to mankind, and one that was a matter of imperative need, because without it he foresaw the breaking down of any vital faith in God, in a life after death, or in the validity of religion.

In order to discover the path of ascent from the material to the spiritual, and thence to the Divine, it was necessary to postulate certain rational principles or doctrines. These were not derived from pure speculation, but from a careful observation and analysis of nature. Swedenborg was a devoted student of nature. He was learned in all the sciences known at his day, and he had a profound regard for facts. His philosophical thinking was first of all firmly established upon a foundation of minute examination and experiment. He traced the ascent within nature herself from the simplest to the most complex forms; from total inactivity or deadness to an ever greater and more perfect form of mechanical motion in space; from the simplest tissues of the body, such as the hair, the bones and the skin, to the most delicate and highly sensitive organs such as are found in the nervous system and the brain. This he accomplished by long years of minute examination and study in the sciences of geology, chemistry, physics and astronomy; and concurrently in the sciences of anatomy, physiology, histology and psychology. He undertook original research in all these fields, and yet he did not trust solely to his own findings, but carefully studied the writings of the outstanding scientists of his day. Nor did he rest satisfied with the mere collection and classification of facts, but sought above all to discover and define the use and function of everything that came under his scrutiny. This he did because he was inmosty guided by a profound conviction that all things were produced by Divine love and wisdom. They were created for a purpose, and designed to perform a use in which alone the love and wisdom of the Creator stood forth to view. In the light of this fundamental assumption he interpreted all things. He was constantly looking for the spiritual within nature, and the supernatural above it; for the living soul in man, and in the entire universe.

Within all the objects and the forces of nature, Swedenborg was constantly aware therefore of what was supernatural; of love and wisdom, foresight, intelligent design and purpose. These, in their first origin, are the properties of the Infinite. They are the qualities that belong to God—not a God afar off who perhaps created the universe in the beginning and then left it to run itself, but a God immanently present within His own creation, preserving it, governing it, directing it to the accomplishment of His supreme Divine end or purpose. He perceived, therefore, that there must be an unbroken chain of connection from the outmosts of nature even to the Infinite. There must be discrete degrees of ascent, such as those pictured by the ladder of Jacob's dream, which was "set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven: and behold, the angels of God ascending and descending on it. And behold the Lord stood above it." (Genesis 28: 12, 13) Swedenborg pictured this ladder as a series of discrete degrees or atmospheres whereby the intense activity of the Divine life and love was successively moderated and accommodated until it could be received by human beings in the heavens and on the earth. Man, he said, is a microcosm or a little world, because he is nothing but an organ sensitive to these various planes or degrees of Divine life. His body and brain is an organ responsive to the mechanical forces of nature, to the vibrations of the ether that affect the eye, the vibrations of the air that affect the ear, the titillation of minute particles floating in the air that affect the membranes of the nose, the titillations of similar particles dissolved in liquid that affect the tongue, and the impact of objects and forces upon the skin that produce touch. Thus man is moved by the mechanical forces of the world of matter. But in a similar way, the mind of man is an organ sensitive to the forces of the spiritual world. It is moved by love, and enlightened by intelligence and wisdom, and this to an ever higher degree as he becomes sensitive to the activities present in the higher atmospheres. For this reason, Swedenborg declared that no one could attain to a true understanding of the human mind without having some knowledge of cosmology, or of the degrees of living activity by which God becomes present in His universe.

We cannot undertake, in a single address, to explain those principles or doctrines by which Swedenborg sought to ascend the "ladder" of Jacob. They can be understood only as a result of

study and application. Nor are they sufficient, by themselves, to accomplish the purpose Swedenborg had in mind. The true nature of God and of the spiritual world cannot be discovered by reason alone. This is dependent upon an inner perception which man can receive only from the Lord Himself and by means of Divine revelation. Nevertheless, a knowledge of those philosophical principles which Swedenborg formulated is of great practical value and importance. It can perform for us the same function of ordering the rational mind for the reception of spiritual truth that it performed for Swedenborg. Without this preparation he could not have received or transmitted the rational truth of the Writings. Any one who learns those principles, and comes to understand their implication, will find them extremely valuable in every attempt to interpret the facts of experience and of science. They provide an intellectual or philosophical bridge between purely natural thought and the purely spiritual concepts given in the Writings, and without such a bridge one can hardly bring these two into full harmony.

We must rest content this evening, however, to stress the essence of Swedenborg's philosophy, which is directly opposite to the philosophy of modern science. It should be well understood that science does not consist merely of a collection of observations or facts. These by themselves have no meaning or significance. They must be interpreted, and no interpretation is possible apart from some fundamental assumption.

The basic assumption of Swedenborg's philosophy is that nature is a realm of effects, the causes of which lie in the supernatural, and supremely in the infinite love and wisdom of God. Nothing in nature can be rightly understood without tracing it to its cause, perceiving in it the purpose for which it exists and the use it is intended to perform, and thus seeing in it something of the love and the wisdom of the Divine Creator. Swedenborg kept this basic concept actively in mind in connection with all his scientific observations. He was never satisfied merely to record facts, but insisted upon searching for the use, the purpose, the end that lay back of all things.

This kind of philosophy was not understood by Swedenborg's learned contemporaries, who admired his scientific accomplishments but were utterly mystified by his mode of achieving them. This is even truer of the scientific thinkers of our own day. They are astonished to learn of the many remarkable scientific discoveries

that Swedenborg made—discoveries far in advance of his time. But they too are mystified by his philosophy. This is because they have rejected the assumption from which he reasoned. They have adopted the opposite assumption, namely, that nature is self-sufficient and self-originating. If there is a God, He has nothing to do with the observable operations of nature. If He created the universe in the beginning, He subsequently left it to its own devices. If one wishes to believe in the supernatural, he should be free to do so, but he must not allow such a belief to influence his scientific thinking. Everything must be interpreted on the assumption that mechanical motion is the only moving force in the universe. Because this operates automatically according to fixed unalterable laws—because it produces its effects according to fortuitous circumstances devoid of purpose or intelligent design—all the apparent wonders of nature are to be regarded as the result of accident. To ascribe to them intelligent purpose or love is wholly unscientific. Ideas of purpose are entirely irrelevant, and must be excluded from any interpretation of observable phenomena. What we perceive as life or love can be conceived of only as the most complex, and as yet unfathomed, activity of biological chemistry. We must assume that some day in the near future it will be possible for man to analyze its constituent elements and produce it in the laboratory.

Such is the intellectual climate that pervades the modern scientific world. We cannot avoid its impact upon our own thinking. Although we have the Writings, and from them intellectually acknowledge the existence of God, the reality of the spiritual world, the universal presence and operation of the Divine Providence, we nevertheless have great difficulty in seeing how this religious faith is actually related to the enormous mass of complex scientific knowledge that pours in upon our minds. Do we not experience a strong tendency to leave our religion outside when we are actually engaged in a laboratory, or when we are concentrating upon the findings of scientific scholars? Do we not tend to accept these findings as true, even though they contradict the principles of our faith? We desperately need a philosophy that will enable us to think from fundamental principles of religion in our actual interpretation of scientific facts. Unless we formulate such a philosophy we will never discover the inner truth, the deeper

reality which the facts of nature are Divinely intended to express and bring to light.

We submit that although we have the Writings, and sincerely believe them to be true, we have not advanced very far along the path of discovering how they are related to the undeniable facts of scientific observation. It is in connection with our search for this relationship that Swedenborg's philosophy can be of tremendous importance. It can provide something to be found nowhere else, namely, a philosophical link between things material and things spiritual which the Writings do not give. Just as this philosophy was necessary to prepare Swedenborg for his mission, so also I think, when rightly understood, it can be a necessary preparation of our own minds to grasp the practical implications of the Writings and their spiritual principles in relation to the interpretation of scientific phenomena. This is an important reason why we should not neglect the study of Swedenborg's philosophical works, for only in the degree that we can see the spiritual truth of the Heavenly Doctrine actually reflected in, and confirmed by, the testimony of the senses, can we apply our religious faith to the intelligent understanding and the genuine use of all scientific knowledge.

The study of Swedenborg's philosophical works, of course, is not something that can be accomplished in depth by everyone; but it is something that should be seriously undertaken by New Church scholars, both ministers and laymen, and the results of such studies should be made available to everyone throughout the church, to encourage and assist in the vital task of thinking from essential spiritual principles, even as Swedenborg did, in our approach to the study and the interpretation of the sciences.

PUBLICATION NOTE

Swedenborg's *Selected Sentences*, published in English for the first time as the January-March 1967 issue of *NEW PHILOSOPHY*, is now available as a separate paper-bound booklet. The price is \$1.00 and copies may be ordered either from the General Church Book Center or from Mr. E. Boyd Asplundh, treasurer of the Swedenborg Scientific Association. The mailing address in either case is Bryn Athyn, Pennsylvania 19009.