

EXTRATERRESTRIAL LIFE: A STUDY OF THE INTELLECTUAL CONTEXT OF EMANUEL SWEDENBORG'S *EARTHS IN THE UNIVERSE*⁺

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SWEDENBORG'S RELATIONSHIP TO THE THEORY OF A PLURALITY OF WORLDS

A. Extraterrestrial Life in Swedenborg's Pre-Theological Works

As was outlined in chapter one, Cartesian emphasis upon a distinction between spirit and matter, and upon mechanistic explanations of natural phenomena, influenced contemporary philosophy immeasurably. Cosmology was particularly affected by this trend, and as the seventeenth century progressed, more and more philosophers adopted the system outlined in Descartes' *Principia*. This was important for the debate over a plurality of worlds, because the Cartesian picture of the universe consisted of innumerable solar systems, and thus made it seem rather foolish to suppose that only one corner of this immense universe was inhabited by intelligent beings.

Because Swedenborg had been raised in an area that had been largely won over to Cartesian cosmology, it is no surprise that he affirmed a belief in a modified Cartesian universe. This expectation is readily confirmed by a perusal of Swedenborg's *Principia*, where Swedenborg extends the Cartesian system far beyond its original bounds. Arguing not only that each solar system circulated in a vortex, but also that these vortices were, in turn, gathered into still greater vortices, Swedenborg envisioned great congeries of systems within systems, and made the visible heavens hardly a point in respect to the immensity of creation.⁷⁵

Given Swedenborg's belief in innumerable "galaxies," each of which containing many solar systems, it is not surprising that he believed in extraterrestrial life. What is surprising is the twist he gives to this belief:

If...in these other earths in the universe we could suppose the existence of an animal kingdom of the same kind as our own,

⁺This is a continuation of the first installment published in vol. 88 no. 1, pp. 417-446.

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⁷⁵ See note 77.

then we must also suppose it subject to the same contingencies, changes, modes, and series, through which it must pass to arrive at the same perfection; but since we cannot presume that, in these respects, all other worlds are absolutely similar to our own, so we cannot presume them to be tenanted by a precisely similar race of living creatures.⁷⁶

Swedenborg maintains here that to suppose races of living creatures on other earths exactly like ours would be to assume that the development of their world was exactly like that of ours. This, he thinks, would be unlikely.

In essence, Swedenborg agrees with William Durham's assertion that life is always adapted to its peculiar planetary environment. However, we do not know whether this means that at this time Swedenborg thought life on every planet to be a divine necessity.

In any case, we can be reasonably sure that the Cartesian model had influenced Swedenborg to think that extraterrestrial life was very likely.

In addition to Swedenborg's scientific predisposition towards a belief in extraterrestrial life, there is also evidence of his distinctly theological predisposition in its favor. Like many other scientists in his day, Swedenborg was prone to eulogize God through expatiating on glories of his creation. For instance, in his *Principia*, Swedenborg tells us:

The sidereal heaven, stupendous as it is, forms perhaps but a single sphere, of which our solar vortex constitutes only a part; inasmuch as this universe is finited only in the infinite. Possibly there may be innumerable other spheres, and innumerable other heavens similar to those we behold; so many indeed and so mighty, that our own may be respectively only a point; for all the heavens, however multitudinous, however vast, yet being but finite, and consequently having their bounds, do not amount to a point in comparison with the infinite. Consequently...may we ask, What is man? Can he be such a one as he feigns himself to be?...Diminutive worm! What makes thee so

⁷⁶ Emanuel Swedenborg, *Principia*, Augustus Clissold transl. (London, 1846), vol. II, part III, chapter II, introduction (recently reprinted—see note 35). This work was originally published as volume one of *Opera Philosophica ei Mineralia* (Dresden and Leipsig, 1734). Swedenborg might be described as believing that life "evolves" differently in different planetary environments.

big, so puffed out with pride, when thou beholdest a creation so multitudinous—so stupendous around thee? Look downward upon thyself, thou puny manikin! behold and see how small a speck thou art in the system of heaven and earth; and in thy contemplations remember this, that if thou wouldest be great, thy greatness must consist in this—in learning to adore Him who is Himself the Greatest and the Infinite.⁷⁷

This kind of cosmological modesty appears again and again in Swedenborg's writings. One passage in particular reveals the connection in his mind between this modesty and the theory of a plurality of worlds:

Having premised so much, let us turn our eyes to the heavens, and contemplate the universe. How wonderful to us are the heavens! filled with stars innumerable! enriched perhaps with innumerable worlds like our own! their very vastness in our conception, sufficiently wonderful! although it is probably little that we see, and all of it not a point to the Infinite.⁷⁸

From such statements, we can see how deeply Swedenborg was influenced by the kind of piety of nature that was typical of his day; moreover, we can easily see how his admiration of nature tended to include a belief in an immense, populated universe.

B. Extraterrestrial Life in Swedenborg's Theological Works

Once we move from Swedenborg's philosophical works to his theological ones, the rather sparse references to the theory of a plurality of worlds blossom into many pages. From these pages it is even more apparent how much Swedenborg was influenced by contemporary speculation on extraterrestrial life. For the sake of clarity and easy reference, I have appended a summary of the various arguments he adduces in favor of this theory, classified by the principles upon which these arguments are based. Most, if not all, of the categories will be quite familiar:

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, chapter I, paragraph 11. See also Psalm 111:10.

⁷⁸ Emanuel Swedenborg, *The Infinite and Final Cause of Creation*, James John Garth Wilkinson transl. (London: Swedenborg Society, 1908), p. 44. Original Latin was published as *Prodromus Philosophiae ratiocinantis del'infinito et causa finali Creationis...* (Dresden and Leipsig, 1734).

I. Observational/Analogical

Seeing that they are within the bounds of our solar system, and thus are visible to our eyes, it is possible to demonstrate clearly that the planets are earths.⁷⁹

a) First of all there is the fact that the planets are made of the same material as the earth, for they reflect the sun's light, and when observed through a telescope they do not shine with a ruddy flame, as do stars, but rather with variations in shading, as do terrestrial surfaces.

b) There is also the fact that these earths are, like our own earth, carried along throughout the constellations of the Zodiac, and so create the years and the seasons of the year, which are spring, summer, fall, and winter. Similarly, they are, as our earth, turned on their axes, and so make the days and the times of day, namely morning, noon, evening, and night.

c) In addition, some of these earths have their own moons, which are called satellites, and which orbit their planets in set times, as does our moon.

d) Moreover, the planet Saturn, because of its great distance from the sun, has a large and highly luminous ring around its midst, which sheds light, albeit reflected, upon that earth.

II. Cosmological/Analogical

...I have discussed with spirits the fact that through the following chain of reasoning a person can convince himself, or be convinced, that there must be more earths in the universe than one: The starry heavens are very immense and filled with numberless stars. Each of these stars is a sun positioned at the center of its own world, and though it perhaps differs in size, it nevertheless acts in the same manner as our own sun. [In other words, there are as many solar systems as stars, and at least as many planets as solar systems. Given so many planets, it is unreasonable to think that life exists on only one of them.]

III. Teleological

By reasoning it out, one can arrive at the conclusion that large masses like the planets, which sometimes exceed the earth in

⁷⁹ Everything appearing on this table is quoted from *Earths in the Universe*, paragraphs 3 and 4.

size, are not just empty mounds, created merely to be carried along, and so to stroll about the sun, shedding their meager light upon a single earth. Instead, these planets must have a much more noble use than this.

IV. Teleological/Theological

It is possible for anyone who weighs the matter well to conclude that this entire, immeasurably large expanse of the universe cannot possibly have been created for any other purpose than as the means to some end, which is the ultimate purpose of creation, and that this end is the production of a Heavenly Kingdom in which the Divine Being can dwell with angels and men. For the visible universe, that is, the sky with its innumerable stars, all of which are suns, is only a means towards the existence of earths, and, upon these earths, of human beings, and, from these human beings, of a Heavenly Kingdom.

V. Theological

The Divine Being created the universe for no other end than that a human race might arise, and from this human race a heaven.

It should be apparent that, with two exceptions, every one of Swedenborg's reasons for believing in extraterrestrial life is paralleled by reasons given by other authors of Swedenborg's era. The two reasons which are unique to him are, of course, the theological and the teleological/theological. And fitting it is that these should be the pin on which the other reasons hang. To underscore this point, let me quote reason V. in its full context:

The Divine Being created the universe for no other end than that a human race might arise, and from this human race a heaven (for the human race is the seedbed of heaven). Those who believe this, as everyone should, cannot help also believing that there are human beings wherever there is an earth.

Once, therefore, one accepts that God's purpose in creation is to raise up future citizens of heaven, it is easy to see the purpose that is behind the other planets, and indeed behind the whole universe.

This view of the reason behind creation was definitely not uncommon in Swedenborg's day. Most philosophers and theologians simply rationalized the existence of many inhabited planets as

worthy of Gods majesty. As was said in chapter one, they asked, Why should an omnipotent and infinitely creative God have confined life to one small orb? The full argument ran something like this: Anything created by God must be as close to perfection as is possible without it being God himself. For it to be different from God, it must be finite. And because no finite thing can be perfect, perfection in a finite world consists in limitless variety and order. To suppose only one race of intelligent beings would thus be to attribute a lack of variety to creation, and would be unworthy of God.

Unfortunately, this argument involved question-begging, for the problem still remained, Why did God decide to create in the first place? Some, in answer to this question, followed Aristotle, reasoning that God created the world out of selflessness.⁸⁰ But this did not seem a real answer. Others, like Wolff, claimed that

the end of creation is the manifestation of the divine glory, that is, God created the world so as to manifest his glory.⁸¹

Similar are the thoughts of William Brent:

[Man was] created by [God] out of nothing, after his own image, that he might serve him with obedience and perseverance, during his temporal being, and be a witness and partaker of his glory in ETERNITY.⁸²

As this seemed a rather dismal portrait of the Deity, some, such as Marie Huber the deist and universalist, suggested another purpose:

⁸⁰ See chapter 1, section D, esp. note 59.

⁸¹ Christian Wolff, *Theologia Naturalis...*(Frankfurt and Leipsig, 1738), *pars posterior*, p. 331, paragraph 371. An interesting corollary to this is that Swedenborg's thoughts on extraterrestrial life represent a near inversion of Wolff's. Wolff saw life as existing necessarily on every celestial orb because he viewed the manifestation of God's greatness as the purpose behind everything in creation. Swedenborg, though equally convinced of an overarching purpose in the universe, saw this purpose' instead as a product of God's love towards rational beings capable of reciprocating this love. See Wolff's *Elementa Matheseos Universae*, tomus III...(nova editio; Halle, 1735), "Elementa Astronomiae," paragraph 488.

⁸² Brent's *Discourse*, p. 22. This same quotation appears in chapter 1 section D.

In forming created beings after his own image, God had no other design than that of making them happy, as he himself is....⁸³

Of all these solutions, only the last comes somewhat close to Swedenborg's.

Swedenborg himself saw Gods ultimate reasons for creating the universe as being a result of His nature as infinite love, for

it is an essential attribute of love not to love self, but to love others, and to be joined together with others by love. It is also an essential attribute of love to be loved by others, for in this way a joining together can take place....As regards God, this state of loving and of being loved in return, cannot exist with others in whom is anything of infinity....For the infinite, that is, the Divine Being, is altogether one and the same; if this infinity were present in others, it would be identical. On this account, this state of mutual love spoken of must exist with others in whom there is nothing of the Divine Being *per se*.⁸⁴

And so God, out of His desire to love others outside of Himself, to be loved in return by them, and to make them happy, created finite human beings.

This explanation of God's motives in creating humankind coincides with that of no other school of thought in Swedenborg's day, except perhaps that of the universalists. But even here there are differences. For in Swedenborg's view love requires freedom, and freedom opens the possibility of rejection. Rejection of God is, of course, the root of evil. And evil entails disharmony, hatred, envy, deceit, and (ultimately) hell. Even so, God keeps those who have

⁸³ Marie Huber, *The World Unmask'd...To which is added the State of Souls separated from their Bodies...Translated from the French* (London, 1736). This work was originally published anonymously in 1731 at Amsterdam under the title *Le Monde fou Prefer'eau monde Sage, en Vingt-quatre Promenades*. In the eighteenth century, this work was attributed to B. L. Muralt. Recent scholarship, however, has determined that it was in fact Marie Huber who composed it.

⁸⁴ Emanuel Swedenborg, *Sapientia Angelica de Divino Amore et de Divina Sapientia* (English title, *Divine Love and Wisdom*), (Amsterdam, 1763), paragraphs 47 and 49. See also his *Vera Christiana Religio* (Engl. *True Christian Religion*), (Amsterdam, 1771), paragraphs 43-47.

rejected Him in as happy a state as they can bear, and in this way, though with grief, can in some measure reach out to them and give them peace.

Swedenborg's arguments for other inhabited worlds, then, are largely those of his intellectual environment. It is not until we examine his theological reasons for this belief that we encounter anything really distinctive. And although these theological reasons are but few among many, they nevertheless color the rest, and give them direction. In this sense, Swedenborg presents us with a unique picture of the immense, populated universe.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Supposing I were asked, "What do you consider to be the main points of this study?" I would, perhaps with some hesitation, answer:

- 1) The Copernican model of the universe was instrumental in moving the earth out of the center of the "world", and into the *universe*, where it could take up residence with other similar planetary bodies.
- 2) Although the Copernican system had attained a certain amount of popularity by the middle of the seventeenth century, this popularity was augmented by the system of Descartes. Basically, Descartes envisioned the universe as consisting of many revolving vortices, each with a central sun, and presumably several satellites. The mechanical simplicity of this scheme was attractive to many. What is more, though, it tended to make the earth seem less unusual or unique. Indeed, the presence of countless other planets in the universe made it seem almost strange to think that life should be confined to ours.
- 3) Owing to the magnificence and grandeur of an immense and populated universe, the intellectual world began to abandon its once hostile attitudes to the theory of a plurality of worlds, for they began to see in such a system a new proof of God's majesty and wisdom. Accordingly, we see this theory entering more and more into the popular piety of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.
- 4) Swedenborg's espousal of a modified Cartesianism, as well as his responsiveness to the popular piety of his day, predisposed him, during his philosophical period, towards believing in a plurality of worlds. However, he does not seem to have given the matter much thought.

- 5) This situation changed once Swedenborg entered upon his calling as a revelator. As soon as we move out of his philosophical works and into his theological ones, there comes a marked increase in the emphasis he gives the theory of a plurality of worlds. In addition, although he continues to be influenced by the arguments for extraterrestrial life popular in his day, he nevertheless grounds his avowal of extraterrestrial life in theological premises that are unique to him.
- 6) These unique theological premises, upon which Swedenborg bases his belief in extraterrestrial life, may be summarized as follows:

God is love, and true love desires others with whom to have a reciprocal relationship of mutual affection. God being infinite, it is impossible for him to have this relationship with others in whom there is anything of infinity. For the infinite is one and the same; thus whatever is infinite must be God himself. Accordingly, God needed to create a *finite* universe in which innumerable varieties of beings unlike him could be given the opportunity of freely coming to know and love him. This purpose of raising up beings whom God can love, be loved by, and make happy, is the reason behind creation. And thus every part of the universe tends toward this goal.

This teleological and theological conviction is the reason why to Swedenborg it seemed rather foolish to think that the other planets in the universe were uninhabited. Moreover it represents the distinguishing feature of his system, and is thus the reason we may justly call his a unique picture of the universe.■

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On the "Copernican Revolution"

The expression "Copernican Revolution" sometimes suggests a dramatic shift in man's concept of the universe and of the place of our earth in it. But as Richard Goerwitz's current article makes clear, Copernicus was not the center of a dramatic, short-lived overthrow of the old order. Indeed, his concept of the universe was not that much different from Aristotle's (see the representation of the Copernican universe on p. 425 of vol. 88 no. 1)—the essential difference being that he placed the sun, rather than the earth, at the center of everything.

However, we must not underestimate the very profound shift that was gradually taking place from the 15th to the 18th centuries—a shift manifested in the thought and writing of men like Copernicus, Kepler, Bruno, Galileo, Boyle, and many others. The common factor here is that these men's ideas either implicitly or openly challenged the authority of the day, the church. For the church was committed to a largely Aristotelian view of the universe grafted onto its accepted thought through scholastics like Thomas Aquinas.

This is a most interesting background to Swedenborg, for he was clearly not a part of the departing medieval world, but rather an innovative inventor of machines, a creative scientist (by which I mean one who has imaginative ideas about how the world works), and a penetrating philosopher. In addition, he served as the instrument of revelation, and those familiar with the theological works that constitute this revelation will recognize the extent to which they are at odds with the former scholastic world. Thus the 15th to 18th century period of challenge to the former authoritarianism helped create a climate of thought more receptive of the new revelation.

Editor