

SWEDENBORG—A TRUE PHILOSOPHER¹

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Emanuel Swedenborg is recognized as a universal genius. To attempt to touch on his many achievements would take many lectures, so I am focusing these remarks on his accomplishments as a rational Christian philosopher who sought first "the kingdom of God," and who had the things of scientific intelligence, rational philosophy, and spiritual wisdom added to him by the Lord.

In a "before and after" sketch of this brilliant mind, we can discover two things. *First*, before he became revelator, we see his ideals and the way he was prepared and led to achieve them. *Second*, as revelator we see these ideals opened, expanded, and ordered by the Lord to serve as the means of the Lord's Second Coming.

A brief bibliography of Swedenborg's works is to be found at the end of the second volume of the *Posthumous Theological Works*. Here the work of his entire life is divided into three periods—of education (1688-1715), of science and philosophy (1716-1745), and of theology (1745-1772). The list of titles shows his mental journey from externals to internals, from a scientist to a philosopher to Servant of the Lord.

In *An Introduction to the Word Explained* (Acton, 1927) Bishop Alfred Acton documents Swedenborg's call to the Office of Revelator, and divides his life into slightly different periods: The first when he investigated nature entirely by his own efforts, as it were, but guided by the doctrines (general principles) which his studies and meditations had led him to formulate, and which later were confirmed by signs, dreams and open visions. The second when he labored, still as if of himself, but aided now by an open knowledge of the world of spiritual causes. And third, when his mind was so formed by the truths of nature, of the Word and of the Spiritual World, that he wrote by direct inspiration, filled with the Spirit of God, so that he wrote what was truly the Word of God. "The Lord

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alone has taught me, and has revealed to me and has enlightened me" (DP 135).

Swedenborg summarizes his own early development in a letter to Dr. Beyer written in 1769. "From my fourth to my tenth year I was constantly engaged in thought about God, salvation, and the spiritual diseases of men; and several times I revealed things at which my father and mother wondered; saying the angels must be speaking through me. From my sixth to my twelfth year I used to delight in conversing with clergymen about faith, saying that the life of faith is love, and that the love which imparts life is love to the neighbour;... (Tafel 1877, 279). (Clergymen were frequent visitors in his father's house, since his father was a Lutheran clergyman and later a Bishop.) And in an earlier letter to F. C. Oetinger he said:"... I was introduced by the Lord first into the natural sciences, and thus prepared; and, indeed, from the year 1710 to 1744, when heaven was opened to me. Everyone also is led by means of natural things to spiritual things; for man is born natural; by education he is made moral [and philosophical], and afterwards by regeneration from the Lord he becomes spiritual" (*Ibid*, 257).

The progress and development of Swedenborg was the orderly sequence that we all must go through as we are led from externals to internals—from the world to heaven. We read in the *Arcana Coelestia* that everyone is led by means of natural things to spiritual things; for man is born natural and by education is made spiritual. The importance of Swedenborg's years of scientific investigation and experience lies in the truth, later revealed to him, that "nothing ever exists with man in his thought, even as to the most hidden things of faith, which has not some natural and sensual idea with it, although man for the most part does not know it" (AC 3310).

It should be noted that Swedenborg was introduced to the sciences at a time when they were in their first sound beginnings. Ignorance and superstition were giving way to the new light based on experiments. Swedenborg investigated nature first hand for many years, but when he progressed to a rational analysis of his findings, he found that his own discoveries loomed out of proportion in his mind, so he gave up his research. Relying on the discoveries of others he was able to develop a more balanced philosophy. Because science was then in its infancy, it was possible for one mind to know and comprehend much of what was being discovered. This knowledge could then provide a rich and varied basis for his later studies. For, as he learned later "There are two foundations of truth;

one from the Word, and the other from nature, or the truths of nature.... [However], nothing is to be founded on science except it be previously founded on the Word" (SD 5709, 5710).

Later in his life, Swedenborg gives the simplest definition of his own character: "[I was a] spiritual fisherman" (ISB 20). When asked how it was that the Lord chose him, a layman, to be a Revelator, and not someone from the clergy, he replied with a question of his own:

Why did the Lord choose fishermen for his disciples and not rabbis (member of the Jewish clergy)?...Such was the good pleasure of the Lord Who prepared me from early youth for this office, because from early youth I have been a spiritual fisherman—an investigator of natural truths and afterwards spiritual truths, because spiritual truths are founded on natural truths..." (ISB 20).

Our focus is on Swedenborg the Philosopher, and the best way to give you a picture of this aspect of his life and how he was prepared by the Lord for this great use is to analyze his own words and to try to have you understand what he thought a true philosopher should be. Note however, that these things did not make him what he became. The Lord prepared this great mind, then called Him to the use of revelator.

In *The Economy of the Animal Kingdom* (Part 1:19), Swedenborg describes what he thinks a true philosopher must be like, what qualities he needs. It quickly becomes apparent that this is a description of what he himself is striving to become. We see a self-fulfilling prophecy, although we must remember we are looking with hindsight. It is easy to see Providence after the fact.

In order to make this somewhat complicated description easier to follow, I have provided a summary of the points. (The actual excerpt appears as an appendix to this article.) I will attempt to amplify my summary by showing something of how this description was fulfilled in later years, when Swedenborg was directly inspired by the Lord. I can show you only the tip of the iceberg. Each one of the categories is open to indefinite expansion, so great was this mind. In what follows I give an outline of the essential elements in Swedenborg's characterization of a true philosopher, then make some commentary on each section.

1. Philosophers, like poets and musicians, are born and their talents acquire permanence by habit and cultivation. These talents involve the following:

A desire to discover the causes of things.
The power to concentrate deeply on one thing at a time.
Profound thoughts and the skill to express the sum of them.
Superhuman powers of memory, imagination, and a discrimination of judgment which separates the obscure from the clear for coherent conclusions.

2. A true Philosopher has the following:

A natural talent to subordinate things in series.
He is not overwhelmed by a multiplicity of knowledges.
He arranges particulars under generals.

3. A true Philosopher is careful and wary.

The more profoundly he penetrates into a subject, the less he trusts his own speculative imagination.
His mind is so ordered that the "fictitious depresses, the obscure pains, but the truth exhilarates."
The discovery of truth brings a "cheering light," "a joyful confirmatory brightness," and "a kind of mysterious radiation—I know not whence it proceeds—that darts through some sacred temple in the brain" which kindles a flame unequalled by any other earthly pleasure.

4. A true Philosopher ascribes all things to the Deity.

The Deity is the source of all true wisdom.
All arts and sciences are but aids to wisdom.
He restrains all tendencies to inflated ideas of self.
He has contempt for no one.
His end and object is the glorification of God!

1. Philosophers like poets and musicians are born, and their talents acquire permanence by habit and cultivation.

Here we see Scripture in life—the parable of the "talents," explaining human gifts. We see the whole of human life. We are what we become! In our human freedom we are to cultivate good habits and abilities so that we fulfill our gifts from the Lord. The whole doctrine of regeneration as an act of cooperation with the Lord is here implied.

A desire to discover the causes of things

This tells of the driving force of this great intellect. It is the *search for causes* that leads to the discovery of scientific laws (why things happen the way they do) and leads toward the discovery of such things as the seat of the soul being in the cortical cells of the human brain, with which Swedenborg the scientist was experientially familiar. It is the search for causes that leads to the inner world of energies, called *conatus* by him—spiritual energy directing natural energy. It is fishing—casting the line of reason baited with the hook of imagination and intuition into the waters of experience—that catches fish or comes to conclusions about the inner causes of things: What is behind what we see? What forces are working within organisms? One question answered suggests a thousand more and the mind is led, *if it follows the true path*, back to the First Cause—God. In *The Infinite and Final Cause of Creation*, Swedenborg describes where such reasoning inevitably leads a humble, God-fearing philosopher.

The concept of cause and effect runs through all that Swedenborg wrote. It is the universal concept of discrete degrees: cause and effect are discretely different, yet related by correspondence. Without this concept the mind cannot hope to "enter intellectually" into an understanding of causes. Causes operate by means of correspondence. Correspondence is the secret connection between cause and effect—between the mind and the body, between the spiritual world and the natural, between the precious spiritual sense of the Word and its letter.

The causes of all natural things are from spiritual things, and the beginnings of these are from celestial things, or what is the same: all things of the natural world derive their cause from truth, which is spiritual, and their beginnings from good which is celestial; and natural things proceed thence according to differences of truth and of good in the Lord's kingdom; thus from the Lord Himself, from Whom is all good and truth (AC 2993).

This truth, given in his later years, is the big thirst quencher: the inner answer for which this philosopher worked so hard, but he could not find it by himself, only from the light of heaven from the Lord.

End, cause and effect follow in order like prior, subsequent and final; end begets cause, and through the cause the effect,

that the end may have form in the effect. Although end, cause and effect advance according to discrete degrees which should be clear to any thinking person, still, [Swedenborg laments] little, if anything is known about these degrees. (DLW 189)

In our own minds, our ends are our loves which take on corresponding forms in our thoughts (the causes) and flow into corresponding effects (our speech and action). Knowing the causes of things is truly the key to intelligence and wisdom about life and life's Creator.

It takes *persistence* to find causes. One needs special talents, as Swedenborg notes in his philosophic work *The Economy of the Animal Kingdom [The Kingdom of the Soul]*: "To search out causes of things from given phenomena is a peculiar gift into which the infant brain is in a way inducted from its first stem, and into which it is later imbued by many stages of use and cultivation" (19).

The power to concentrate deeply on one thing at a time

Deep concentration is a mental skill that can lead to profound conclusions. This is *reflection*, of which the Writings say much: "There is more to the doctrine of reflection than any other" (SD 733). This suggests that the Lord loves philosophers who think deeply, a truth confirmed by the fact that when we are thinking deep and worthwhile thoughts at our death, these thoughts continue after natural life ceases (see HH 433).

When we know from the Writings that our thought processes and our breathing are correspondentially related, we can understand how, when we are concentrating deeply and focusing in on one particular aspect of a subject, our breathing becomes "tacit"—as if the soul says: DO NOT DISTURB, thinking going on!

Swedenborg noticed that he had unusual powers of respiration when he was a boy, and he cultivated them. "I was first accustomed to breathe this way [tacitly] in my early childhood, when saying morning and evening prayers..." (SD 3464). And earlier he reports that "... it was previously granted me to [conclude from] much experience, before I spoke with spirits,... that respiration corresponds with thought;..." (SD 3320).

In *An Introduction to the Word Explained* (Acton 1927, 22,23) Acton observes that:

. . . if a man while on earth is to see spirits and speak with them [and this is what happened to Swedenborg], he must

first be initiated into the respiration of the spirit apart from the body, and yet without death. . . .

Swedenborg, however, was both to sensate spiritual things and at the same time *reflect* upon them, while yet preserving the life and respiration of the body. Therefore he was initiated into this state by a *conscious* exercise of internal respiration... but always with the ability to return again into full bodily respiration.

Profound thoughts and the ability to express the sum of them

What good is it to have profound thoughts if one cannot communicate them to others? The Word Itself is the means by which the Lord communicates His love and wisdom to man. "The communication is effected by the Lord who wills that all things good and true should be communicable" (SD 3083).

Superhuman powers of memory, imagination, and a discriminating judgment which separates the obscure from the clear for coherent conclusions

That Swedenborg possessed a superhuman memory is clear from the multiplicity of quotations stating chapter and verse from the Sacred Scriptures throughout the theological works. Also there are his references to what was stated earlier—literally thousands of pages earlier, all paragraphed and numbered. He wrote his own indexes to his published writings which must have taken him a tremendous amount of time.

His imagination made it possible to describe things which he said were "ineffable." Imagination with us is often wild and self-centered, but Swedenborg had a well-disciplined imagination. He could extrapolate what he saw and heard into a general principle which expanded meaning, extended scope and amplified clarity. His ability to do this, far from distorting experiences, gave them an added dimension.

Swedenborg's discriminating judgment separated the obscure from the clear and made possible the presentation of rational conclusions. He tells us in the Writings that in all his 28 years as a Revelator: "... it has been given me to see [in the light of heaven] and from it to perceive distinctly what has come from the Lord, and what from angels. *What has come from the Lord has been written*, and what has come from angels has not" (AE 1183; added emphasis).

2. A true philosopher has a natural talent for subordinating things in series: he is not overwhelmed by the multiplicity of knowledge: he arranges particulars under generals.

Readers of the Heavenly Doctrines cannot help being impressed by their logical structure. Deep ideas and rational concepts are presented by a series of highly reasoned propositions, and although our minds do not always follow them to their conclusions, we can admire the organizational brilliance exhibited, and with patience and practice follow it.

The skills of prioritizing and arranging particulars under generals are requirements for orderly thinking. From the Writings we learn that *the great organizer of our minds is love*. Our active loves select what best corresponds and expresses themselves. Love perceives the importance of things and gives emphasis. When the love of truth for its own sake becomes primary, then we are sure of our destination. "Man's spiritual light is the light of his understanding, and the objects of the understanding are truths, which that light arranges analytically into order, and forms into reasons and from them draws conclusions in a series" (HH 130).

Because the Writings are structured in a reasonable way, we call them a "rational" revelation, the very opposite to the term "mystical," which is so often erroneously applied to our Church and to Swedenborg himself. In the spiritual sense of the Word, "camels" represent general ideas. Camels brought the wise men to the Lord in Bethlehem. Without general ideas there is nothing to transport us over the vast plains of multiple knowledges to select the particular knowledges which may serve our need. So important to rational thought are these general ideas that no one can become truly rational without them.

In order that scientifics and all truths... may become anything in the human mind, a form must be induced on them, in which they mutually regard each other, which cannot be done unless they are consociated under a general idea; therefore the general is that which holds them together in a form, and causes that each thing therein may have its own quality. The general itself must also be referred together with other generals under things *more* general, and the more general things again under more general (ideas) for otherwise the general things and the more general things would be dissipated. The most general universal, by virtue of which all things are held

together, is the Lord Himself, and that which holds together is the Divine Truth proceeding from Him" (AC 6115).

3. A true philosopher is careful and wary: the more profoundly he penetrates a subject the less he trusts his own speculative imagination.

When truth for its own sake is the object of the active love of the mind, that mind becomes extremely sensitive to things which distort and pervert. A musician, artist, or scientist may actually suffer physical pain from what is fake, slipshod, and of inferior quality and precision. A true philosopher is disturbed by unwarranted conclusions and faulty reasoning, as well as by downright falsity.

On the other hand, when loves are realized, when ideals are fulfilled and what is longed for comes clearly present, then we are filled with delight. Truth discovered, "exhilarates!" The human mind was created to see truth, consequently there is nothing so soul-satisfying as *wisdom perceived*. Truth brings a "*cheering light... a joyful confirmatory brightness... a kind of mysterious radiation that darts through the sacred temples of the brain*" (EAK Part 1, 19; added emphasis). When he wrote this, Swedenborg did not yet know that the mental light which radiates into our understanding so that we see and understand more clearly comes from the Spiritual Sun—from the love and wisdom of the Lord.

In the Prologue to a work called *The Canons of the New Church*, we find this provocative statement: "At this day nothing else than the *self-evidencing reason of love* will re-establish the [Christian] Church" (added emphasis). The self-evidencing reason of what love? The love of truth for its own sake. This is the love that perceives the delight of its life in the discovery of truth.

4. A true philosopher ascribes all things to the Deity as the Source of all wisdom. And his end and object is the glorification of God.

Swedenborg's temptations to have an inflated idea of himself are well documented in his *Journal of Dreams*. He won this spiritual battle by putting use first and self second, giving up a brilliant career as the foremost scientist of his age with worldly honors and an honorable reputation, to accept, in great humility, the call from the Lord to write books which were entitled in the spiritual world "THE ADVENT OF THE LORD, WRITTEN BY COMMAND." Of his own writing he said to Dr. Beyer in a letter dated April 12, 1770:

"This doctrine, the clergy in Sweden call, Swedenborgianism, but for my part I call it *genuine Christianity*" (added emphasis).

To Swedenborg, all knowledges, sciences, and arts were but the means to an end—the acknowledgment and service of the living God. To him, people were forms of uses endowed with talents from the Lord. His whole life and philosophy shows that he was indeed a spiritual fisherman and explorer who investigated both the natural and spiritual worlds with a vibrant curiosity, and always for the sake of others! He sought first "the kingdom of God and His righteousness" and was, for this exalted reason, led to acquire scientific intelligence, rational philosophy and spiritual wisdom from the Lord.

Even before his spiritual eyes were opened, he wrote: "A true philosopher and contempt for the Deity are two opposites. Veneration for the Infinite Being can never be separated from philosophy; for he who fancies himself wise, whilst his wisdom does not teach him to acknowledge the Divine and Infinite Being, that is, he who thinks he can have any wisdom without a knowledge and veneration of the Deity, has not even a particle of wisdom" (*Principia* 4).

All New Churchmen should seek to walk in the footsteps of the *True Philosopher*, reading and studying the Word, always guided by the doctrine of GENUINE TRUTH, and subordinating thoughts from self and the world to the thoughts from the LORD and HIS WORD.■

APPENDIX

In *The Economy of the Animal Kingdom* paragraph 19, Swedenborg describes the character of what we may call a true philosopher. This paragraph is presented here in full.

"To find out the causes of things from the study of given phenomena, certainly requires a talent of a peculiar mind. It is not every one that can confine his attention to one thing, and evolve with distinctness all that lies in it; it is not every one that can think profoundly, or, as Cicero says, 'that can cast up all his reasons, and state the sum of his thoughts,' or, as in another place, 'that can recall the mind from the senses, fix upon the real truth in everything, and see and combine with exactness the reasons that led to his conclusions.' This is a peculiar endowment into which the brain must be initiated from its very rudiments, and which must afterward, by a gradual process, be made to acquire permanence by means of habit and cultivation. It is a common remark, that poets, musicians, singers, painters, architects, and sculptors are born such; and

we know that every species of animal is born with that peculiar character which distinguishes it so completely from every other species. We see that some men come into the world as prodigies, endowed with superhuman powers of memory; others with an extraordinary activity of the whole faculty, amounting to a peculiar strength of imagination and intuitive perception, by virtue of which no sooner do they set the external mind in motion on any subject, than they excite the rationality of the corresponding rational mind; they arrange their philosophical topics into a suitable form, and afterward engage in thought till they see clearly whether their opinions are consonant with the decisions of a sound judgment, when, if any element of an obscure character embarrasses the subject, by a happy gift of nature, they separate the obscure from the clear, and in its place insert some other element more conformable to the general idea, so as to make all parts aptly cohere. With a natural faculty, they distribute their thoughts into classes, and separate mixed topics into appropriate divisions, and skillfully subordinate series thus perspicuously divided, one under the other; that is, the particular under the general, and the general under the universal. Thus are they never overwhelmed by the multiplicity of things, but are continually enlightened more and more, and, by the help of arrangement and general notions, recall to mind, whenever they please, such parts of the subject as had become effaced from their notice, and unfold such as are complicated or perplexed.

"Those who are born with this felicity of talent, and afterward proceed in due order to its development, the more profoundly they penetrate into the depths of science, the less do they trust to their imagination, and the more cautious are they not to extend their reasoning beyond the strict limit justified by facts; or, if they indulge in conjecture at all, they treat it as mere surmise and hypothesis until experience bespeaks its correctness. They avoid as a hydra any premature attachment to opinions, or implicit credence in them, unless there are circumstances duly to support them. Even if they retain them in their memory, they do not admit them as links in any chain of reasoning, but, while conducting their argument, in a manner banish them from thought, and keep the attention fixed on data and facts alone. The fictitious depresses them, the obscure pains them, but they are exhilarated by the truth; and in the presence of everything that is clear, they too are clear or serene. When, after a long course of reasoning, they make a discovery of the truth, straightway there is a cheering light; and joyful confirmatory brightness, that plays around the sphere of their mind, and a kind of mysterious radiation—I know not whence it proceeds—that darts through some sacred temple in the brain. Thus, a sort of rational instinct displays itself, and in a manner gives notice that the soul is called into a state of more inward communion, and has returned at that moment into the golden age of its intellectual perfection. The mind that has known this pleasure (for no desire attaches to the unknown) is carried away wholly in pursuit of it, and in the kindling of its love despises, in comparison as external pastimes, all merely corporeal pleasures, and although it recognized them as means for

exciting the lower mind and the purer blood, it on no account follows them as ends. Persons of this cast consider the arts and sciences only as aids to wisdom, and learn them as helps to its attainment, not that they may be reputed wise for possessing them. They modestly restrain all tendency to inflated ideas of themselves, knowing that the sciences are an ocean, of which they can catch but a few drops. They look on no one with a scornful brow or a supercilious air, nor arrogate any praise to themselves. They ascribe all to the Deity, and regard Him as the source from whom all true wisdom descends. In the promotion of His glory, they place the end and object of their own."

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