

The Madness Hypothesis

As evolution has often been the materialist's alternative hypothesis to the hypothesis of God creating mankind, so madness has been the characterization frequently assigned to experiences otherwise claimed as revelation by those unable or unwilling to accept the possibility of revelation as authentic. The "madness hypothesis" is not of recent invention, but dates back to at least the accusations of this kind laid against Christ (John 10:20, Mark 3:21). In both the evolution and madness hypotheses, it is not difficult to see the hand of Providence, since both these alternatives provide a basis for preservation of free will in spiritual matters, a key axiom of human creation, according to the teachings of Swedenborg's theological writings (*Arcana Coelestia*, n. 2881, *Heaven and Hell*, n. 598, *New Jerusalem and its Heavenly Doctrine*, n. 143). In other words, both the evolution and madness hypotheses provide alternative explanations for the phenomena involved, so that no one is forced to believe in either creation or revelation due to lack of a different explanation of the pertinent facts.

Swedenborg presents a particularly, indeed perhaps uniquely, daunting challenge to any observer attempting to evaluate the applicability of the madness hypothesis to his claims of revelation. Adequate evaluation requires, at the least, analysis of the entire body of his preparatory and later avowedly revealed body of theological work, which runs, in various editions, to more than 30 volumes of detailed and often ideationally dense prose.¹ To see the man in full context requires the still further investment of intellectual effort necessary to review not only an equally large shelf of pre-theological publications in areas ranging from mining engineering to biology, physics and philosophy—of the political as well as "pure" variety²—but also to become acquainted with the biography of his long and

¹ J.K. William-Hogan, "Swedenborg: a biography." In E.J. Brock, E.B. Glenn, C.C. Odhner, J.D. Odhner, C.H. Walker, J.K. William-Hogan (eds.), *Swedenborg and his influence*. (Bryn Athyn, PA: The Academy of the New Church, 1988): 22ff.

² D. Goodenough, "A trust from God. Swedenborg's political thought." In Brock et al., *Influence*, 135–154.

event-packed life.³ And then there is the whole complex record of his transition into the theological period.⁴ Few of even the followers of Swedenborg's teachings have mastered more than a part of this huge body of work. It is thus hardly surprising that few of those interested only in finding support for the madness hypothesis in explaining his work have been willing to attempt more than a first approximation to understanding of all this material. Historical examples of the difficulty of arriving at a simple evaluation are illustrated by the initial enthusiasm for Swedenborg's work, followed by ultimate apparent rejection that in fact appears to disguise ambivalence, of his famous contemporaries, Immanuel Kant,⁵ and, according to Noble,⁶ John Wesley.

There is more than a little irony in the charges of Swedenborg being insane in view of the facts that Swedenborg was both a sufficiently acute student of neuroscience that he arrived at some constructs in that area far ahead of his time⁷ and that he was, as well, fully aware that people would think him insane as a result of his avowed revelatory experiences. For instance, Count von Höpken⁸ records that,

I once represented, in rather a serious manner, to this venerable man [Swedenborg] that I thought he would do better not to mix his beautiful

³ S. Sigstedt, *The Swedenborg Epic* (New York: Bookman, 1952; reprinted, London: Swedenborg Society, 1981).

⁴ E.g. H.Lj. Odhner, "Emanuel Swedenborg. The relation of his personal development to his work as a revelator." *New Church Life* 85 (1965): 6–13, 55–62; E. Sandstrom, "Swedenborg's preparation as to the will." *New Church Life* 91 (1971): 7–17.

⁵ G. Florschütz, "Swedenborg's hidden influence on Kant." *The New Philosophy* 96 (1993): 171–225; 97 (1994): 347–396; 97 (1994): 461–498; 98 (1995): 99–108; 98 (1995): 229–258; 99 (1996): 341–385; G.R. Johnson, "The kinship of Kant and Swedenborg." *The New Philosophy* 99 (1996): 407–423.

⁶ S. Noble S. *An Appeal in behalf of news of the eternal world and state, and the doctrines of faith and life held by the body of Christians who believe that a New Church is signified (in the Revelation, chap. XXI) by the New Jerusalem: including answers to all principal objections.* (London, 10th ed., 1881): 236ff.

⁷ Charles G. Gross, "Emanuel Swedenborg: A neuroscientist before his time." *The Neuroscientist* 3 (1997): 142–147.

⁸ Rev. Erik Sandstrom, Sr. writes that "Count von Höpken was one of the most admired Swedes of his time. He was one of the founders of the Royal Academy of Sciences and became its first secretary, was a director of the Swedish Academy of Belle Lettres ("Vitterhetsakademien"), became a councilor of state (member of the government), and for nine years held the post of President of the Chancery (equivalent to Prime Minister). This man was an admirer of Swedenborg's." (Personal communication, July 1998).

writings with so many *memorable relations*, or things heard and seen in the spiritual world concerning the states of men after death, of which ignorance makes sport and derision. But he answered me, *that this did not depend on him; that he was too old to sport with spiritual things, and too much concerned for his eternal happiness to yield to foolish notions, assuring me, on his hopes of salvation, that imagination produced in him none of his revelations, which were true, and from what he had heard and seen.*⁹

And in another place, where von Höpken raised the same question,

...whether it would not be best for him to keep them to himself, and not publish them to the world? But he answered that *he had orders from the Lord to publish them; and that those who might ridicule him on that account would do him injustice; for, said he, why should I, who am a man in years, render myself ridiculous for fantasies and falsehoods.*¹⁰

Indeed, in the Writings themselves Swedenborg also comments that he foresees that people will think some of the memorable relations “inventions of the imagination,” but makes his famous affirmation that they were “truly seen and heard” and goes on to point out biblical precedents of revelation and question why such revelation should be a “marvel” now, at the commencement of a new dispensation (*True Christian Religion*, n. 851).

More than this, Swedenborg was so far from being a proponent of seeking contact with spirits that he wrote that for people to attempt to do this was outright “attended with danger to their souls” (*Apocalypse Explained*, n. 1182:4, cf. also *Heaven and Hell*, n. 249). Nor is even this the full extent of the irony. Far from being unfamiliar with the concept, Swedenborg wrote extensively of insanity in his theological works, in the context of the state infused into the mind as the result of immersion in evil (e.g. *Arcana Coelestia*, n. 2568). Even more to the point in the present context, he also recorded, with his typical detached meticulousness, his initial spiritual

⁹ R.L. Tafel RL (ed.) *Documents concerning the Life and Character of Emanuel Swedenborg* (London, 1877), Vol. II, Document 252, p. 409. (Rev. Sandstrom suggests that the italicized statements probably indicate underlining in von Höpken’s original letter.)

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 416.

experiences, in what has been published as the *Journal of Dreams*, despite some of those experiences ranging from embarrassing to what could be construed as evidence of madness. The irony here lies in the fact that, while Swedenborg wrote this material privately, he nonetheless must have known it could later be used as evidence against his sanity, yet he left it intact for posterity. Was this yet another instance of supporting free will, of providing that alternative explanation of a non-revelatory source of Swedenborg's—or God's—otherwise formidable theological system?

The temptation of any supporter of Swedenborg is to comment, with the Rev. Thomas Hartley, a friend of Swedenborg's, that,

If to write many large volumes on the most important of all subjects with unvaried consistency, to reason accurately, to give proofs of astonishing memory all the way [*Ed.*: such as , in Noble's words, "the numerous references to other parts of his works"¹¹]; and if hereto be joined propriety and dignity of character in all the relative duties of Christian life; if all this can be reconciled with the definition of madness, why here is an end of all distinction between sane and insane, between wisdom and folly.¹²

Yet, in the final analysis, it seems more pertinent, not to say objective, to come full circle back to that question of interpretation, in free will, of just what Swedenborg's experience really was. In a quote also used to conclude one of the most sophisticated attempts yet made to "diagnose" Swedenborg's mental state,¹³ Swedenborg in a note to Cuno writes,

Read, if you please, what has been written in my latest work, *The True Christian Religion*, concerning the mysteries disclosed by the Lord through

¹¹ S. Noble S. *An Appeal*, 237.

¹² T. Hartley T, in Tafel, *Documents*, Vol. II, Document 259, no. 17, p. 384.

¹³ Elizabeth Foote-Smith and Timothy J. Smith, "Historical note. Emanuel Swedenborg." *Epilepsia* 37 (1996): 211–218, reprinted in this issue.

THE NEW PHILOSOPHY, January-June 1998

me, his servant, and afterward draw your own conclusion—but from reason—concerning my revelation.¹⁴

The intent of the present issue of *The New Philosophy* is to explore the madness hypothesis in greater detail, with the hope that the reader may find some assistance to “afterward draw your own conclusion.” □

¹⁴ Quoted in Sigstedt, *Swedenborg Epic*, 420.