

SOUL-BODY INTERACTION  
IN HUMAN CONCEPTION  
AND DEVELOPMENT:  
The Clothing of the Inmost  
In the Image of Heaven

Reuben P. Bell  
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INTRODUCTION

The doctrines of the New Church deal at some length with practical explanations for mystical phenomena. This is not to say that they claim to offer the last word on these matters, but only that they offer the prospect that these are understandable; that they are within the realm of human reason, and therefore appropriate to rational investigation. This is a principal element of the New Christian Era. No longer must we wait until the "sweet by and by" to "enter with the understanding into the mysteries of faith."

One such mystical phenomenon is the series of events that establishes the soul-body relationship in humans. We are told that the soul and body are ordered in the human as they were in the Lord Himself in the world (AC 10125; AE 309), and the Writings tell us much about the precise functional relationship of these two human essentials. So by paying close attention to these teachings we can aspire to better understand our own human condition with respect to our souls and our bodies, and the nature of the Lord as well. People have sought the truth in this matter since the earliest times, and a few have seen some clear aspects of it. But in this era we have been given more light. To know the Lord better is to serve Him more perfectly. We have now been given this opportunity.

#### PHILOSOPHICAL PRESCIENCE

Emanuel Swedenborg was a product of the Age of Reason, where ancient philosophical deductions were being commingled with new, empirical ideas. In his mind these traditions intersected, but

to these was added a third, most singular source of inspiration: the revelation of spiritual truths to bring these others into focus. It is not surprising then, to find certain prescient elements of the soul-body interaction of the Writings in the philosophers of Swedenborg's experience. Their presence need not be problematic, subsumed as they are within the transcendent context of Swedenborg's revelation.

Two essential principles of the soul are 1) its propagative and formative role in the weaving of the body - its ability to provide the human form for the material substance of the natural body, and 2) its identity as the male contribution at conception (AC 1815; TCR 103). These principles are stated and restated in the Writings, as features basic to the soul-body interaction. They do not appear *de novo* in the Writings, however, but may be found in philosophical ideas of the Greeks, and in all those who borrowed from them, extending into Swedenborg's era. Swedenborg's classical education most certainly would have immersed him in this tradition.

Aristotle speaks for this tradition, in calling the semen "the active, productive factor; while the residue of fluid in the female is that which is acted upon and receives a form."

Does the semen become an actual part of the embryo in the sense that it mingles with the material supplied by the female; or does it contribute nothing of a material sort, but only its power (*dynamis*) and motion (*kinêsis*)? The latter alternative seems to be the right one, supported by reasoning and by factual experience alike.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Aristotle, *De Generatione Animalium*, Book I, Chapters 21-22, in Smith, J.A., and Ross, W.D., ed., *The Works of Aristotle*,

This idea of the soul as organizer of form rests on the Platonic definition of soul as immortal (and by inference also divine) because it is always in motion. It is "that which moves itself,"<sup>2</sup> and is therefore more motion than matter. This is the entity that survives death because it does not "mingle with the material," as stated above. To summarize the Greek position on the activity of the soul, Aristotle says,

It seems evident, then, that nothing need really pass out of the male in the process of generation; or at any rate that what passes out contributes to the embryo not as a physical constituent but as that which imparts motion (*kinêsis*) and form (*eidos*), analogously to the way in which a cure is effected by the medical art.<sup>3</sup>

From the Greeks, then, comes a soul that is active (pure motion itself), imparts form to the material substance of the body, and which survives the body after death. Its "substance" is not mingled with the body's "matter," and although intimately involved with the body, is always separate from it as a function of its essential composition. We do not see this idea change much up to Swedenborg's day, although certain mystical philosophers would expand and enhance this view along the way.

One such mystic was Paracelsus, whose work predated Swedenborg by only two hundred years or so. His writings echo

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Volume V, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1912. (See also Book II, Chapter 20:4)

<sup>2</sup>Plato, *Phaedrus*, 245c, in Taylor, A.E., *Plato, the man and his work*, Meridian Books, World Publishing Company, New York, 1963, p. 806.

<sup>3</sup>op. cit., Aristotle

the operative soul of Aristotle and the Neoplatonists, but they embellish this with a notion of a natural basis for the spiritual body's form. In describing the events of conception and the development which follows, Paracelsus tells us that

...the son is created from the *limbus* - the father - but he is shaped, built, and endowed with his complexions in the matrix [the mother]... just as the first man was created in the macrocosm, the Great World.<sup>4</sup>

This formative agent, called here the *limbus*, is later explained as "the primordial matter which contains all creatures in germ, just as a man is contained in the *limbus* of his parents."<sup>5</sup> Less well-defined than the *limbus* to emerge in the Writings, here nonetheless is the same idea in germ - a natural basis for the spiritual body's form.

The notions, then, of an immaterial male organizing force forming the body in the (material) matrix of the female womb, and of some terrestrial abstraction linking the spiritual body with the natural, were not altogether new ideas in Swedenborg's day. But neither were they clearly defined, universally accepted truths, nor well-established facts, especially when measured against the skeptical, empirical standards of the Age of Reason. What we find in Swedenborg's revelation is not only a much clearer image of the relationship of soul to body, and the role of the spiritual body's *limbus*, but the certitude of having these

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<sup>4</sup>Paracelsus, *Die drei Bücher des Opus Paramirum*, in Jacobi, Jolande, ed., *Paracelsus, Selected Writings*, Bollingen Series XXVIII, Princeton University Press, 1979, p. 23.

<sup>5</sup>ibid.

things explained from *experience* and not the *a priori* reasoning of the philosophers who had gone before. Swedenborg learned of these and other things from his experiences in the spiritual world, and was instructed by the Lord Himself in their significance (AC 5, 1634; HH 1; AE 1183; SS 13). Thus was the new era begun, in which we are free to learn ever more concerning the nature of the soul-body interaction. What follows is a discussion of what Swedenborg learned of these things, as revealed in the Writings for the New Church.

#### SWEDENBORG'S SOUL-BODY SYSTEM CONSIDERED GENERALLY

Having had a cursory look at the philosophical background from which Swedenborg emerged, it is time to discuss his own findings on the soul and its operation in the formation of the embryo. Although our goal is to carefully examine his theological Writings in this respect, we must first consider the ideas he brought with him into his revelatory period. The disparity between the ideas of these two periods of Swedenborg's life is often overstated; many do not consider his "pretheological" ideas worthy of the attention of one who claims the Writings as revelation. But the roots of several principle doctrines can nonetheless be found in the pretheological corpus, some in remarkably finished form, and in order to properly consider the theological truths of the Writings, we must reconcile these ideological roots.<sup>6</sup> Revelation is truth

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<sup>6</sup>Bell, Reuben P., *A Source Analysis of Emanuel Swedenborg's Philosophical and Theological Ideas*, unpublished manuscript.

revealed, and we find it revealed in all manner of sources, from the obscure to the sublime.

Swedenborg the scientist had a remarkably clear understanding of the anatomy and histology of the male and female generative organs. By *induction*,<sup>7</sup> he was able to come fairly close to understanding their physiology as well. From study and induction, then, he formulated an idea of how the soul, or "first substance," was transported from its origin in the "cortical glands" of the cerebral cortex, through "simple fibers" into "nervous fibers," then blood vessels, and delivered finally to the seminiferous tubules of the testes, where this "first substance" was packaged into animated "little eels." These he believed would ultimately separate into a humor of "true seminal globules," to be delivered via the semen to the ovary and its waiting ovule, where conception could occur.<sup>8</sup> Most importantly, this soul, which is substantial and possessing form, can originate only in the male, which alone has the anatomical machinery to accomplish this feat. Concerning the increase of the fetus after the soul has done its work of union, "All the

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This is a lengthy discussion of the problem of pretheological origins for some of Swedenborg's major theological doctrines.

<sup>7</sup>*Induction*: Swedenborg's term for his own method of inductive reasoning, in which he would synthesize known facts into new levels of knowledge about a particular system.

<sup>8</sup>Swedenborg, Emanuel, *The Animal Kingdom, Parts IV and V: The Organs of Generation and the Formation of the Foetus*, Swedenborg Scientific Association, 1955, nn. 163-176.

rest is from the mother."<sup>9</sup>

In another of his scientific works, Swedenborg details the formative power of the soul in ordering the development of the fetus from a "first living point."<sup>10</sup> But despite his successes at formulating a mechanism for the origin and disposition of the soul at conception, and at speculating on the soul's formative ability in development, the process by which it is installed in the embryo - the key to soul-body association - continued to elude him. Knowledge of whether this is "infused into the rudiment from the first moment of conception or whether it is put in afterwards - that is to say, whether it comes by ingrafting, or by inspiration,"<sup>11</sup> would have to wait, we are told. This is always promised, in works yet to come, but it never was to come to Swedenborg the scientist. The key was to await a spiritual vision of the causes of all these things, and when it did come, it was in the service of an radically new agenda.

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#### THE SOUL-BODY SYSTEM FROM THE LIGHT OF REVELATION

##### 1. A New Look at the Soul

It was only after Swedenborg had seen into the spiritual world, had conversed with spirits and angels, and had finally come to appreciate the human form in the infinitely complex

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<sup>9</sup>ibid., nn. 306, 358.

<sup>10</sup>Swedenborg, Emanuel, *The Economy of the Animal Kingdom*, 2nd Ed., Swedenborg Scientific Association, Bryn Athyn, PA, 1955, Chapter III, Part I, Volume I: *On the Formation of the Chick in the Egg*, nn. 253-254.

<sup>11</sup>op.cit., Swedenborg, *Generation*, n. 354.



relationships of angels in community, that he was able to describe the operation of the soul in the body in a new and illuminated way. It is only to be expected that this ability did not appear overnight, from a single vision of universal enlightenment. What we find in the Writings is pieces of this great puzzle, falling into place over time, from various contexts and various spiritual sources. By the careful collection and assembly of these pieces (by our own process of *induction*), a new level of understanding of the soul-body system can be ours. Such is the potential of the New Revelation, allowing us as it does, to enter "into the mysteries of the Word, which has been heretofore shut up; for the particular truths therein are so many mirrors of the Lord (TCR 508:6)."

## 2. The Soul Defined

Swedenborg's definition of the soul is not an easy thing to pin down, evolving as it did from his earliest scientific works to the maturity and illuminated clarity of the theological Writings. But we can safely say that the soul is the *inmost* - that highest and first receptacle of the Lord in man (SD 2756; AC 2576, 2973, 9656, 9666; AE 313.4, Inv 13, 48). It is well above our consciousness, and is called a "higher spiritual substance," as compared to the "lower spiritual substance" of the mind (ISB 8, HH 39). It is therefore substantial, but not material (DLW 257; Lord 35). The soul is the organic essence, or spirit, of the body which cannot die, and does not live of itself, but receives life from the Lord (AC 1594, 1999, 10725; CL 315). It

is not the Divine, but that which receives the Divine (Word 6, D Wis II, ISB 8, 11); a receptacle of the Lord's life (AC 3938).

The soul is also characterized by its necessary association with a natural component which defines it and actualizes it even in its exclusively spiritual existence after death. This natural component, the *limbus*, is drawn from "the finest things of nature," to provide ultimation for the spiritual body (DLW 257, 388, TCR 103).

### 3. Soul From the Father; Body From the Mother

From antiquity, one of the most consistent teachings concerning the soul has been its origin in the male seed. Coupled with this is the belief that the body is derived from the mother. The Writings are consistent with these beliefs, and they offer an impressive number of references to underscore them. In well over fifty passages from many different contexts, we are told that the soul originates from the inmost of the father (AC 2005, 6716; CL 220), is gathered and refined in his seed (AC 5056), for union with the ovum, where it is "clothed with a little bodily form" (AC 1815). The soul, therefore, is from the father's internal, spiritual (TCR 103), while the body, from the mother's external as *existere*, weaves the covering, or "clothing" for this *esse* of life (AC 5041, 10125, 10738; NJHD 287). It is the womb that adds the material substance to contain and form the spiritual substance of the soul (TCR 92, 103; CL 33; Ath 215). The soul is clearly the spirit in operation as a propagative force (CL 183), while the womb supplies the natural materials and

the sort of inertia these afford, to engage this force in a reciprocal way (Can 22, 23). Thus are the soul and body one, from the very beginning, at conception. They are never commingled, but always intimately associated in the spiritual and physical unity of the human being (Ath 30:6).

#### 4. Force and Form

The next consideration is of the propagative force of the soul, documented above, with respect to its ability to weave the body into its intrinsically human form. To simply know this (as the ancients assumed it) is of little use unless we can form some idea of the mechanism by which it occurs. Once again, the Writings offer us some rational light on this important subject.

First, we are told that contained in the seed is the propagation of the father, "his soul, in perfect human form" (CL 183). This first substance in germ is the form of all things of love and wisdom from God, "the inmost form of all forms of the entire body" (ibid). And as the more external manifestation takes both essence and form from these inmosts, its natural shape or figure is analogous to them. Importantly, we must never overlook the fact that the soul "is not life, but the nearest receptacle of life from God;" His dwelling-place (CL 315).

It is essential to emphasize here that *form* in this context does not imply any extended, three-dimensional construct, but suggests in an expanded sense that which gives something its nature or intrinsic character. We must learn to regard form thus, in order to escape the limitations of a definition tied to

extension, for "the spirit has nothing in common with space" (TCR 103, CL 220). The soul's form is a reflection of the qualities and attributes that compose it, and these are in the human form.

The propagative force which drives the soul to direct the formation of a body from the material substance of the womb is from the Lord, the Creator. It is in fact a "continuation of creation; for creation cannot be from any other source, than from Divine love, by Divine wisdom, in Divine use" (CL 183). This and all propagations are thus born of use, because

love and wisdom without use are but ideas of abstract thought, which also after some tarrying pass away as the winds. But in use the two are brought together and make a one which is called real. Love cannot rest unless it is doing, for love is the active itself of life; nor can wisdom exist and subsist except from love and with it, while it is doing; and doing is use (ibid.).

So the propagation of the father's soul to his son or daughter in the material substance of the mother's womb is not new life, but the continuation of life, flowing into a new body and a new soul in potential. The energy to drive it is the continuous force of creation, as the uses of love and wisdom, descending inwardly into the body (ibid.).

##### 5. The New Soul Is Not Just a Part of the Parent Soul

It is important to make a statement here about the soul of the offspring with respect to the father's original contribution to it. It is not enough to say that the soul is from the father; this does nothing to explain the nature of this "graft or offshoot" as it goes forth to its ultimatum in the material substance of the womb. Nor does it imply any mechanism

preventing the offspring from actually being the father, as a simple extension, or clone. The problem of individuation must be addressed if we are to fully appreciate the propagation of a new person from another.

It is clearly stated that this "graft or offshoot" of the father's soul is not a part of the father's soul, coming to reside in the offspring (CL 220). The implications of such a situation are both obvious and devastating, not only to the individuation of a single person, but for the whole human race as well. For if a part of the father, the offspring is necessarily an extension of him - essentially is him, as mentioned above. To the individual, this is tantamount to spiritual cloning; to the human race it is the pantheistic connection of Creator to Himself. Neither of these is consistent with what the New Church teaches concerning the most important of all the human attributes: our spiritual freedom.

The offshoot is not a part of the father's soul. It is his soul "in completeness, its form and potency transferred whole into the seed" (ibid.). This spells trouble, unless we are free of the constraints of three-dimensional thinking, as discussed above. Note well that what is transferred whole is the *form* and *potency* of the father's soul - attributes substantial, but beyond natural time and space. What comes across at conception is nothing material, nothing of the formed substance of the father's soul, for this belongs to him and describes his individuation. What we find in the seed that is the rudiment of a new soul is

not the father, but "a distinct receptacle of life *from which the father has withdrawn*" (TCR 110:3, emphasis added). This is an essential distinction. This receptacle has in it a new soul in potential, and a human being in form, but is a very important discrete degree away - not yet ultimated in the material substance of the natural world. This will require the fabric of the mother's womb, and the external potency and form she brings to it as well. It is here that the soul weaves the body, but only after the father has withdrawn, to allow this process to go forward in the order of creation.<sup>12</sup> It is at this point that potency and form are manifested in three-dimensions, and a new soul emerges, a human being in form. The work of this emergence is performed by the father's soul - but the maternal matter that responds gives it identity in space and time.

#### 6. The Problem of Hereditary Evil

Having just described the mechanism by which a new soul can be a graft or offshoot of the father yet not actually be that father, we are at once confronted by another, related question. How, if there is such a necessary interval between the two, do the evils confirmed in the father make their way into the offspring as the hereditary evils common to all people at birth? Again, the problem of connection-at-a-distance must be addressed. The solution is related to the greater problem discussed above.

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<sup>12</sup>There are fascinating parallels between this principle and the actual molecular events at fertilization, where the sperm cell sheds all its components upon entering the ovum, except the contents of its nucleus and a single tiny centriole.

We find that in its descent in the body, while the soul of the father "is becoming seed, it is covered over by such things as are of his natural love. From this springs hereditary evil" (CL 245). How is this imparted to the offspring, without the pantheistic connection to the father discussed above? Elsewhere in the Writings we find an approach to this problem when we read:

No one ever suffers punishment in the other life on account of hereditary evil, because it is not his, and therefore he is not to blame for being of such a nature; but every one suffers on account of the actual evil which is his own, and consequently for so much of the hereditary evil as he has appropriated to himself by actual life (AC 2308, cf. AC 966).

The answer is not complicated: Hereditary evils are the father's in fullness, whereas they are in the seed only in potential. Just as the soul itself, as discussed above, hereditary evil is imparted to the offspring as the form and potency of the evils of the father. Its final form, however, is determined in the offspring only as it is ultimated - confirmed by appropriation into the person's life. Again, we find a discrete degree of separation between that which is potential and that which is actual. And again, we see the mechanism at work whereby we are left in freedom.

#### CONCLUSION

The soul-body problem is a challenging topic for theological investigation. There are Christians who would call the problem insoluble, and resign as useless (or even wicked) all efforts to this end. But in this New Christian Era we are blessed with a new Spirit of Truth, working through the revelation of Emanuel

Swedenborg in the Writings for the New Church. In these Writings we are given the tools, through his spiritual experience, to begin the work of solving major problems such as these.

Why is this important? As stated at the beginning of this paper, to know the Lord better is to serve Him more perfectly. Our salvation is based on knowing the Lord. The opportunity to serve Him better is ours through the New Church, and for all who seek more light. To better understand the relationship of life, soul, and body, is to better understand the nature of the Lord Himself as well, because we know that He operates in a corresponding manner, as being (*esse*), becoming (*fieri*), and standing forth (*existere*) (TCR 210).

From antiquity it was believed that the soul of the offspring was imparted from the father, and the body added from the substance of the mother. Swedenborg's revelation is in general harmony with this belief, and this gives us cause to question the nature of revelation itself. But what we have in the Writings is truth, confirmed from a man's experience in the spiritual world, and systematically recorded for us to use. That certain ancient truths could have been similarly illuminated is not an impossibility, and in fact we are told that those of the Most Ancient Church enjoyed spiritual enlightenment we can only imagine. Truth seems to be where you find it.

A rationale for the initial operation of the spiritual soul in the natural body of the mother has been proposed, based on a systematic reading of many references in the Writings concerning



this interaction. A general doctrine emerges from this reading, telling us that the soul comes to the new person at conception in steps, in the order of creation, driven by the energy of Divine love and Divine wisdom, descending. This new soul is from the father, but "in potency and form," not to take on an identity of its own until it has been ultimated - finited - and woven into the fabric of the material substances of the earth. This is the work of the womb, where the good of truth emerges in use, and the mother joins the father in the procreation of a heaven from the human race.

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Books of the theological Writings of Emanuel Swedenborg, as abbreviated in the text:

AC	<i>Arcana Coelestia</i>
AE	<i>Apocalypse Explained</i>
Ath	<i>The Athanasian Creed</i>
Canons	<i>The Canons of the New Church</i>
CL	<i>Conjugal Love</i>
DLW	<i>Divine Love and Wisdom</i>
D Wis	<i>The Divine Wisdom</i>
HH	<i>Heaven and Hell</i>
Inv	<i>Invitation to the New Church</i>
ISB	<i>The Intercourse of the Soul and the Body</i>
Lord	<i>Doctrine of the Lord</i>
NJHD	<i>The New Jerusalem and its Heavenly Doctrine</i>
SD	<i>Spiritual Diary</i>
TCR	<i>The True Christian Religion</i>