

What happens when I die?

Exploring the reality of life after death.

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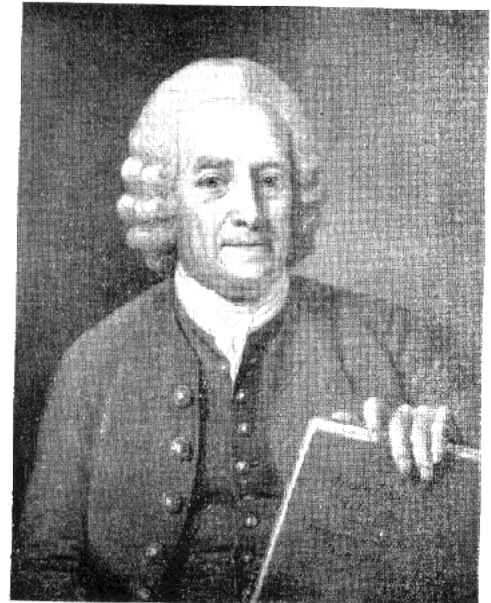
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INTRODUCTION

Death is a fact of life. We will each meet the reality of our own mortality a number of times throughout our lives. On such occasions it is natural to ask the question, 'What happens when I die?' This paper seeks to answer that question.

Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772) was one of the first people to record what might now be readily recognised as near-death experiences. He was raised in a Christian household, the son of a Lutheran Bishop in Sweden. A scientist in the early part of his life, he is regarded as one of the great intellects of his age, being perhaps the last person to master all known scientific disciplines of his time. However, his interest in finding the human soul led him through anatomy and away from the accepted science of his day to develop spiritual practices and the study of theology. Then in the middle of his life, a series of spiritual experiences led him to dedicate his remaining life to the study of the Bible and the recording of experiences of the world beyond death. What is fascinating about Swedenborg's approach is the way he brings his scientific training to bear on the spiritual realities he describes. He records his experiences in great detail and with a depth of self awareness which gives us valuable insight into human nature. At times he becomes the experiment, such as in his account of what it is like to die.



The material presented here is drawn largely from Swedenborg's best-known work, Heaven and Hell. It is here that he gathers his experiences of life after death, and describes for us not only the process of death itself, but what happens after death. The paper aims to cover:

- What is life after death like?
- The process of death.
- The variety of theories about life after death.

WHAT MAN IS

According to Swedenborg, human beings exist simultaneously in two worlds. This stems from his nature as both a natural and spiritual being. He describes our natural part as including the physical body, including all its sensory organs, and the lower, conscious part of the mind. The subconscious mind, and the soul exist in a spiritual plane, and interact with this spiritual world in just the same way as our body interacts with the world. Carl Jung's "Collective Unconscious" is broadly analogous to the way Swedenborg sees our existence in the spiritual world whilst alive. Although we are usually only conscious of the natural world, we receive influences from both planes of existence.



Death is merely the disconnection of the spirit from the body, which occurs when the body can no longer serve its purpose, usually through disease, accident or old age. At this time our consciousness is removed from our physical body, and we are awakened to our spiritual environment.

When we awaken after death, we are led to find our spiritual home. But what is that home, and how is it determined? It is made by what we love. We are capable of both thought and intention (Swedenborg uses terms like understanding and will, to describe the faculties which perform these mental functions), but it is our intention which rules:

'... it must be understood that it is the intention that makes the man, while thought makes the man only so far as it originates in the intention; and deeds and works go forth from both; ... it is love that makes the man, and faith only so far as it originates in love; and deeds or works go forth from both.' (*Heaven & Hell*, paragraph 474)

Swedenborg describes a 'ruling love' (*Heaven & Hell*, paragraph 477), by which we arrange all of our other desires and affections, our thinking and our actions (*Heaven & Hell*, paragraph 484). He describes four broad categories of love: Love to the Lord, love to the neighbour, love of worldly things, and love of the self. Whilst living in the physical world, he suggests that our 'ruling love' changes - our task here is to determine our character and the love which drives us above all other things. When we die, it is our ruling love which determines our spiritual home. The processes which follow death, then are merely the uncovering of that love.

THE NATURE OF THE SPIRITUAL WORLD

The spiritual environment differs from the natural in one important respect - it reflects the character and inner nature of those who live there. This does also apply in some limited way to the natural world (e.g. the psychological phenomenon of 'projection' - a person's awareness of their own qualities in the people around them; the sensitivity of the environment to mankind's activity and lifestyle), but there is an inertia built into the physical world which is not present in the spiritual. I want to explore some particular aspects of this phenomenon.

Space and time do not obey the rules of the physical world. Distance between two people reflects the affection they hold for one another, while the appearance of time is a measure of inner state of being. In common language we speak of such experiences - as when we say, 'I feel close to him', 'she seemed distant' or when we say that enjoyment makes time 'fly'. Because we are spiritual beings even as we live in this world, we are constantly in touch with others who are of a similar character. Swedenborg says we even derive our thoughts from these associations.

But Swedenborg also talks about the way in which aspects of our character are transformed into the actual objects in our environment. Here are two different examples:

'Those that have taken delight in insidious and secret plots and in treacherous machinations dwell in caves. They frequent rooms so dark that they are even unable to see one another; and they whisper together in the ears in corners. Into this is the delight of their love changed.' (*Heaven & Hell*, paragraph 488)

'Those that have loved knowledges and have thereby cultivated their rational faculty and acquired intelligence, and at the same time have acknowledged the Divine - these ... dwell in gardens where flower beds and grass plots are seen beautifully arranged, with rows of trees round about, and arbours and walks, the trees and flowers changing from day to day.' (*Heaven & Hell*, paragraph 489)

He calls this transformation, 'correspondences', saying that the existence and form of every natural and spiritual thing is determined by its connection to a spiritual reality (*Heaven & Hell*, paragraph 487). Interestingly, he also interprets the Bible in this same way - saying that a garden, for example, represents qualities of wisdom and intelligence. Elsewhere, he refers to an ancient people who related everything in their natural surrounds to spiritual principles, and to God Himself (see *Arcana Caelestia*, paragraph 2722, subsection 5).

THE PROCESS OF DEATH

At this point, I would like read Swedenborg's description of what it is like to die. Here we see the trained observer being given an experience in which he shows a high degree of self awareness.

As to the senses of the body I was brought into a state of insensibility, thus nearly into the state of the dying, but with the interior life and thought remaining unimpaired, in order that I might perceive and retain in the memory the things that happened to me, and that happen to those who are resuscitated from the dead. I perceived that the respiration of the body was almost wholly taken away; but the interior respiration of the spirit went on in connection with a slight and tacit respiration of the body. Then at first a communication of the pulse of the heart with the celestial kingdom was established, because that kingdom corresponds to the heart in man. (The heart corresponds to the Lord's celestial kingdom, the lungs to His spiritual kingdom [n. 3635, 3886, 3887]). Angels from that kingdom were seen, some at a distance, and two sitting near my head. Thus all my own affection was taken away although thought and perception continued.

I was in this state for some hours. Then the spirits who were around me withdrew, supposing that I was dead; and an aromatic odour like that of an embalmed body was perceived, for when the celestial angels are present everything pertaining to the corpse is perceived as aromatic, and when spirits perceive this they cannot approach; and in this way evil spirits are kept away from man's spirit when he is being introduced into eternal life. The angels seated at my head were silent, merely sharing their thoughts with mine; and when their thoughts are received, the angels know that the spirit of man is in a state in which it can be drawn forth from the body. This sharing of their thoughts was effected by looking into my face, for in this way in heaven thoughts are shared.

As thought and perception remained with me, that I might know and remember how resuscitation is effected, I perceived that the angels first tried to ascertain what my thought was, whether it was like the thought of those who are dying, which is usually about eternal life; also that they wished to keep my mind in that thought. Afterwards, I was told that the spirit of man is held in its last thought when the body expires, until it returns to the thoughts that are from its general or ruling affection in the world. Especially was I permitted to see and feel that there was a pulling and drawing forth, as it were, of the interiors of my mind, thus of my spirit, from the body; and I was told that this is from the Lord, and that the resurrection is thus effected.

The celestial angels who are with the one who is resuscitated do not withdraw from him, because they love everyone; but when the spirit is such that he can no longer be associated with celestial angels, he longs to get away from them. When this takes place, angels from the Lord's spiritual kingdom come, through whom is given the use of light; for before this he saw nothing, but merely thought. I was also shown how this happens. The angels appeared to roll off, as it were, a coat from the left eye towards the bridge of the nose, that the eye might be opened and be enabled to see. This is only an appearance, but to the spirit it seemed to be really done. When the coat thus seems to have been rolled off there is a slight sense of light, but very dim, like what is seen through the eyelids on first awakening from sleep. To me this dim light took on a heavenly hue, but I was told afterwards that the colour varies. Then something is felt to be gently rolled off from the face, and when this is done spiritual thought is induced. This rolling off from the face is also an appearance, which represents the spirit's passing from natural thought into spiritual thought. The angels are extremely careful that only such ideas as savour of love shall

proceed from the one resuscitated. They now tell him that he is a spirit. When he has come into the enjoyment of light, the spiritual angels render to the new spirit every service he can possibly desire in that state, and teach him about the things of the other life so far as he can comprehend them. But if he has no wish to be taught, the spirit longs to get away from the company of the angels. Nevertheless, the angels do not withdraw from him, but he separates himself from them; for the angels love everyone, and desire nothing so much as to render service, to teach, and to lead into heaven; this constitutes their highest delight. When the spirit has thus withdrawn, he is received by good spirits, and as long as he continues in their company everything possible is done for him. But if he had lived such a life in the world as would prevent his enjoying the company of the good, he longs to get away from them, and this experience is repeated until he comes into association with such as are in entire harmony with his life in the world; and with such he finds his own life, and what is surprising, he then leads a life like that which he led in the world. (*Heaven and Hell*, paragraph 449-450)

There are a couple of points I would like to draw from this account. Firstly, death is a protected and gentle experience, in which those forces who would do us spiritual harm are kept at bay. Secondly, the process shows the importance of our freedom of choice. Several times he makes reference to the spirit leaving the angels who are with him, if he so desires, that it is not the angels who leave, but the novice spirit who leaves the angels.

When the death has taken place, and the new spirit is awakened, Swedenborg describes three stages each person passes through in the discovery of their spiritual home (*Heaven & Hell*, paragraph 491). These stages are:

- concerning outward aspects,
- concerning inward aspects, and
- a state of preparation.

Why must we go through these stages? In the natural world, many of us develop a habit of putting on a face, according to what we want to communicate with others (or what we want to tell ourselves) rather than what is inside of us. In the spiritual world, where our surrounds project our inner nature, this hiding is not possible. Thus, through the processes which occur immediately after death, the mask we have grown so accustomed to wearing in this world gradually drops away.

STAGE ONE - CONCERNING OUTWARD ASPECTS

When spiritual awakening occurs, the new spirit appears very much as he did in the world. Also, he is greeted by family and friends who have passed over into the spiritual world previously. Many people who report NDE's tell of these reunions. Then they are allowed to satisfy their curiosity about life after death, often visiting many places in the spiritual world - Swedenborg writes, 'some are taken to cities, to gardens and parks; most are taken to splendid places because this sort of place delights the outward senses they are involved in.' (*Heaven & Hell*, paragraph 495) He also relates the beginning of a process of examination to determine the nature of their inner character, and a gravitation that spirits feel to certain places.

Swedenborg notes that the time spent in this first stage varies depending 'upon the harmony of the inward and outward aspects of the individual' (*Heaven & Hell*, paragraph 498). Given that the whole process is one of revealing one's inner character, there are those who hold more tightly onto the mask they like to present to the world.

STAGE TWO - CONCERNING HIS MORE INWARD ELEMENTS

The purpose of this stage is the removal of that external face we present to others, so that our inner character becomes plain to those around us and to ourselves. As Jesus said, 'There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. What you have said in the dark will be heard in the daylight, and what you have whispered in the ear in the inner rooms will be proclaimed from the roofs.' (Luke 12:2 & 3) Here Swedenborg describes a fluctuation between states in which the mask remains in place, and others in which a person's true nature is revealed. At first that revelation is only momentary and brief, but as the process unfolds each person loses their ability to regain their facade.

Finally, there is a separation of good and evil spirits, and each person is led to discover their own spiritual home. This separation is what is called 'Judgement' in the Bible. Not, that we stand in the dock in some Divine courtroom, but that through a process of inner self-discovery, we each choose the nature of the eternity we will live out.

STAGE THREE - A STATE OF INSTRUCTION

This final stage Swedenborg describes is not entered into by those whose spiritual home is hellish (the truly self-centred, the malicious, etc). These people are not taught anymore about the nature of the spiritual world because they have no wish to learn it. The only knowledge they desire is that which helps them to satisfy their cravings. So, it is a state of preparation for heaven.

Spirits do not sit in classrooms for this teaching process! Swedenborg mentions a variety of ways each person is taught, but mostly it is experiential. There is no entry test, and there is no set text book on heavenly knowledge. What is learned is whatever is necessary for heavenly life. Anything else is superfluous and is forgotten - much the same as the student of French who never speaks a word of that language when he leaves school.

Because this process is based on real experience, it can be traumatic. There are some beliefs and attitudes we cling to more tightly than others, and where these would actually hinder our heavenly existence, they must be removed. God doesn't just wave a magic wand over us and erase it (it might seem easier, but it wouldn't be real), He allows us to live out the consequences of that belief. Swedenborg calls the place where this occurs "lower earth", and it is located next to the borders of hell.

Many people ask, "Is hell forever?", and some even refuse to believe that hell can be anyone's eternal spiritual home. The question is often motivated by a concern for the welfare of those souls in that place of torment. Swedenborg answers the question in the affirmative and explains why - hell is not a place of Divinely appointed punishment, but simply the diseased heaven of those who choose to live lives of selfishness. It is heaven to those who live there. However, in "lower earth", we find those spirits who are heavenly at heart, but with deep-seated issues to work through. Their "hell" is temporary, leading to an eternal home in heavenly society. What separates them from those spirits who reside in hell is their preparedness to learn.

THEORIES OF LIFE AFTER DEATH

Finally, let's look at the theories about life after death in circulation. Each stems from a particular view of reality. They are:

- Man ceases to exist at death.
- Man "sleeps" in the grave to be awakened at a specified future time, "the last trumpet"
 - All are raised, and judged.
 - Only the "good" or "saved" are raised.
- Reincarnation
- Immediate, continued life in the spiritual world.

Swedenborg subscribes to the last one, as I'm sure you will realise by now. A brief examination of his response to the other views will be useful to complete this survey of Swedenborgian thought on life after death.

RESPONSE - MAN CEASES TO EXIST AT DEATH.

This view comes from an adherence to strictly atheistic science, in other words, a denial of any spiritual reality based upon a physical interpretation of scientific theory & data. Some might call it 'objective science', but it doesn't really deserve that credit. Science is formulated by human minds, and we should never forget the effect of human intellectual reasoning on science.

This belief ignores a growing body of evidence supporting life after death, and the simultaneous existence of a spiritual world, or other dimension to reality. There are a great many organisations and individuals dedicated to find some "proof" of the life which follows death. Near Death Experiences are the most commonly known body of evidence. But with his lack of objectivity, the atheistic scientist will write such evidence off without considering it as:

- Madness, or
- The final firing of the electrical impulses in the brain at death.

Swedenborg, a train and well respected scientist, was sufficiently aware of the reaction to his spiritual writing:

I am well aware that many will say that no one can possibly speak with spirits and angels so long as he lives in the body; and many will say that it is all fancy, others that I relate such things in order to gain credence, and others will make other objections. But by all this I am not deterred, for I have seen, I have heard, I have felt. (*Arcana Caelestia*, paragraph 68)

RESPONSE - MAN "SLEEPS" IN THE GRAVE TO BE AWAKENED AT A SPECIFIED FUTURE TIME, "THE LAST TRUMPET"

This is common among Christian churches. It is based on an interpretation of Bible passages such as:

Jesus said to her, "Your brother [Lazarus] will rise again."

Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." (John 11:23 & 24, NIV)

- When we encounter such passages we should remember who said what. It is Martha who expressed this view, not Jesus. Of course it could be argued that Jesus didn't disagree or instruct her otherwise, however circumstances did not allow. Jesus was speaking to a woman stricken with grief, and in no fit state to receive teaching on life after death. Now, look some of the other things Jesus is credited with saying:

"Now about the dead rising--have you not read in the book of Moses, in the account of the bush, how God said to him, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not the God of the dead, but of the living. You are badly mistaken!" (Mark 12:26 & 27, NIV)

He answered, 'Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my father's house, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.' (Luke 16:27 & 28, NIV)

Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise." (Luke 23:43, NIV)

Luke 16 contains Jesus' parable of Lazarus and the rich man. It's point is not whether or not anyone lives after death, it is to challenge contemporary notions of the life which leads to heaven. However, it is built upon the supposition that life after death is a reality simultaneous to the physical - otherwise Lazarus could never have warned the rich man's brothers, indeed the brothers would already be in hell alongside him.

In regard to Luke 23, I note the interesting translation by the Jehovah's Witnesses, which moves the comma: "I tell to the truth today, you will be with me in paradise." Mainstream translators opt for the present reality of the spiritual world at least in this passage.

RESPONSE - ONLY THE "GOOD" OR "SAVED" ARE RAISED.

I can understand and appreciate this response to the traditional picture of hell as a place of fire and torment. It is a compassionate stance, which cannot reconcile a God of love with a God who subjects some people to eternal suffering.

However, it is based upon a denial of the humans' essentially spiritual nature, and an overly literal understanding of the Biblical description of hell. The picture of hell found in the Bible is based upon a real place, the "Valley of Ben Hinnom", or "Gehenna" (in New Testament Greek). It appears first as a place where children were burnt as sacrifices to foreign gods (see 2 Kings 16:3 & 21:6), a practice forbidden by Old Testament law. It was then defiled and used as a rubbish dump, to discourage its use for these purposes. The fires once used to burn children were now used to incinerate rubbish. Given its history it provided a vivid picture to the Jewish and early Christian reader of the experience of hell.

Swedenborg describes the state of those in hell in a surprising way: as a state of freedom, of a kind.

There is infernal freedom and there is heavenly freedom. It is from infernal freedom to think and to will evil, and so far as civil and moral laws do not hinder, to speak and to do it. On the other hand, it is from heavenly freedom to think and to will good, and so far as opportunity is granted, to speak and to do it. Whatever a man thinks, wills, speaks and does from freedom he perceives as his own; for all the freedom which everyone has is from his love. Therefore those who are in the love of evil perceive only that infernal freedom is freedom itself, while those who are in the love of good perceive that heavenly freedom is freedom itself and consequently the evil and the good perceive the opposite to be slavery. (*Divine Providence*, paragraph 43)

In other words, those in hell would not choose the life of heaven if it were offered to them. Despite the torments they might experience as a result of their actions, they find it preferable to any other existence. Reflect upon it and you will realise the truth of this even on earth. We so easily choose an existence which is less than it could be, refusing to see other possibilities.

RESPONSE - REINCARNATION

I have some sympathies with the reincarnationist point of view. What many people seem to find attractive is the possibility of further learning and development - that the mistakes made here and now can be set right, that the soul can continue to grow. This contrasts sharply with an understanding of heaven which depicts cherubs sitting on clouds all day playing harps! However, if it is merely a reaction against a simplistic view of heaven (the one I've just mentioned may be rather facetious, but sitting around in paradisaal gardens all day isn't much better), then I think Swedenborg's idea of heaven as a place of use, work and learning is worth considering as an alternative.

Some people suggest that there are a limited number of souls circulating through the physical universe, entering and re-entering physical bodies. However, Swedenborg writes that the perfection of heaven is found in an ever increasing variety, to eternity. If physical bodies are required, it is understandable that only a certain number are possible in a finite universe, although we haven't filled it yet. But we are speaking about spiritual realities, which do not suffer the limitations of time and space.

What about the memory of "past lives"? Is this the "hard evidence" of reincarnation? Swedenborg writes about the influence spirits can have upon us, even to the point of passing on specific memories (*Arcana Coelestia*, paragraph 2478, 2888, also 5864 & ff). It is only natural for us to believe our thoughts originate in ourselves, when yet they are nothing more than the influence of the spirits who surround us. So we come to believe these "memories" are our own.

FURTHER INFORMATION

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