

Towards an Interpretation of Reality: *Laws of Life and the Language of Nature*



A Talk by Associate Professor Anders Hallengren, Stockholm University,
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When I recently arrived to Sydney on my first visit to Australia, and went for a walk late in the evening, I found a quiet little church in the neighbourhood where I sat down on a wall in the darkness. Dim moonshine fell upon a white garden stone, inscribed with a familiar poem, “God’s garden”, written by the English poet Dorothy Frances Gurney:

- . The Lord God planted a garden
- . In the first white days of the world,
- . And He set there an angel warden
- . In a garment of light enfurled.

- . The kiss of the sun for pardon,
- . The song of the birds for mirth, --
- . One is nearer God's heart in a garden
- . Than anywhere else on earth.

This is close to Swedenborg’s teaching. When I came to the garden of the Hurstville Society this week, I at once noticed the wooden signboards in their garden, with quotations from Swedenborg’s writings, and in particular one, saying: the angels in heaven live in beautiful gardens where the flowers and the trees represent their intelligence and wisdom.

These beautiful words reminded me of a famous 19th century Harvard oration, and provoked the following train of thought; and set the tone of my lecture here tonight.

But first a personal note on why I am here, and that is the story of some relatives. In 1886, my grandmother and her sister arrived to Australia with the Swedish barque ship *Atlantic*, owned by their father who was the captain of the ship. One of them married a steer man of another ship, and their son, the cousin of my father, was enrolled in the Australian armed forces and was seriously wounded in the battle at Gallipolis in World War I. The second reason for why I am here, tracing roots and connections, is Swedenborg’s cousin Carl Linnaeus, the famous botanist, honoured by the Linnean Society of New South Wales. Linnaeus and Swedenborg had many things in common. They were both pious naturalists, and the two most famous Swedes of the 18th century, in fact: ever. To both of them, the Garden (of the world) was holy.

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The date of the landing of The First Fleet, 26 January 1788, was celebrated at Australia Day the other week. The church that gradually took form among Emanuel Swedenborg’s following, The Church of the New Jerusalem, held its first meeting in London the same year, in 1788.

But even before this, Swedenborg's doctrines had reached America. A Scot named James Glen visited the capital city of Philadelphia in 1784 (and also visited the centre of trade and shipping, Boston), where he gave a lecture on the basic principles of Swedenborg's doctrinal system.

In one of the cities where Swedenborgianism first managed to take root, Boston, the philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson was born (in 1803.) While he was growing up, and especially while he was studying at Harvard College and its Divinity School, quite a few people travelling in his circle were attracted to Swedenborg: Sampson Reed, Thomas Worcester, John H. Wilkins, Theophilus Parsons Jr., and — not to be forgotten — his classmate and roommate Warren Burton, who took part in the utopian Brook Farm collective experiment. (In the 1840s, we include friends like Henry James, Sr., and James John Garth Wilkinson).

The young New Churchman Sampson Reed had a tremendous influence in the literary circles. First came a remarkable lecture Reed gave at Harvard in 1821, his "Oration on Genius." This speech echoes Swedenborg's philosophy of language, his interpretation of the lost paradise in *Arcana Coelestia*, and his creation drama *De cultu et amore Dei*, "On the Worship and Love of God." Reed set the divine understanding of the lost paradise and the living language of Adam in a contemporary perspective. It is the most inspired, and one of the most pregnant and influential college orations ever in the history of literature:

Because God is love, nature exists; because God is love, the Bible is poetry... When the heart is purified... The harps which have hung on the willows will sound as the first breath of heaven that moved the leaves in the garden of Eden... There is a unison of spirit and nature. The genius of the mind will descend, and unite with the genius of the rivers, the lakes, and the woods. Thoughts fall to the earth with power, and make a language out of nature.

Adam and Eve knew no language but their garden. They had nothing to communicate by words; for they had not the power of concealment. The sun of the spiritual world shone bright on their hearts, and their senses were open with delight to natural objects... The people of the golden age... possessed nothing which evil passions might not obliterate; and, when the "heavens were rolled together as a scroll," the curtain dropped between the world and their existence.

Science will be full of life, as nature is full of God. She will wring from her locks the dew which was gathered in the wilderness. By science, I mean natural science...

The time is not far distant. The cock has crowed. I hear the distant lowing of the cattle which are grazing on the mountains. "Watchman, what of the night? Watchman, what of the night? The watchman saith, The morning cometh."

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In the darkness of his prison cell in Spain during the Revolution, Arthur Koestler carved mathematical formulae in his solitude. Suddenly, happening to remember Euclid's proof that the number of prime numbers is infinite, he was granted a striking, wordless experience of enlightenment. In his book *The Invisible Writing* he talks about a momentary oceanic feeling of insight and of infinite peace and assurance. The meaning of the symbols on the wall was as rational as it was numinous. "The infinite is a mystical mass shrouded in a haze; and yet it was possible to gain some knowledge of it without losing oneself in treacherous ambiguities. The significance of this swept over me like a wave. The wave had originated in an articulate verbal insight; but this evaporated at once, leaving in its wake only a wordless essence, a fragrance of eternity, a quiver of the arrow in the blue." He had looked at the world in his youth as an open book of physical equations and social determinants; now it seemed to him that the universe was a text written in invisible ink. It was a trip from apparent clarity to a groping in the shadows. Koestler experienced the world as a palimpsest — under the visible lies a hidden text. For the rest of his life, he tried to read between the lines in the book of nature. In his book *The Sleepwalkers*, he pointed to the dangers of separating the scholarly and the mystical perspectives — of science and religion following separate paths instead of uniting and cooperating.ⁱⁱ

Koestler's experience of enlightenment was neither unique nor new. We are probably dealing with something inherent or latent in people everywhere and throughout the ages. The psychologist Abraham Maslow, the well-known needs-theoretician, referred to this kind of aha!-experience as a *peak experience*, a kind of moment on the summit in whose brilliance some segment of well balanced people can experience harmony of deep significance.ⁱⁱⁱ

Similar leaps toward seeing within, intimations of a greater connectedness, a hidden reality within the world order, go back to a related ancient tradition, or tendency, which Leibniz named the *Philosophia Perennis*; the "Perennial Philosophy" of Aldous Huxley's famous anthology. It bears this name because of its yearly 'hibernation' and reappearance. To this tradition or orientation we may partly assign Emanuel Swedenborg's colossal interpretation of the cosmos. Swedenborg is no purely rationalistic system-builder: he remains fundamentally an empiricist, trusting experiences and observations even in his theological or theosophic writings. Raised in the disciplined scholarly atmosphere of the late 1600's, the visionary remains an observer like a Francis Bacon or a Tycho Brahe, focusing on the *arcana* of reality.

The effort to unite faith and knowledge, science and religion, has been going on since classical antiquity. *De Rerum Natura* of the Roman Lucretius can seem modern in some of its cosmological passages, and presents the age-long problem of religion and science; it was a central issue for the church fathers and the medieval scholastics, who tried to reconcile Greek philosophy and scientific knowledge with the Christian faith. In Swedenborg, the scientist and theologian, these aspects of reality make one, since they are seen from a higher perspective.

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To experience the world as a text, to try to interpret nature's book, the *Liber Natura*, leads us deep into our past, into the inner sanctum of our culture and spiritual life, where the ever-desired view of the inner nature of reality face-to-face has never been considered a part of our human lot. We live in a world of mirrors; "ever since the world's creation, its unseen qualities . . . could be grasped in its workings and become visible." What we see is emerging from the unseen. The essence of being is transcendent.^{iv} That is the teaching of the Bible. I Cor 13:12, Rom 1:20, Hebr 11:1-3. The epiphany of Swedenborg's contemporary Carl Linnaeus, the experience of nature as seeing God as if "from behind," has precisely this background: Cf. Exodus 33:20-23.

To perceive what is happening in what seems to be happening, to glimpse what is hiding itself within the visible, is something humanity has been striving for since time immemorial. Perhaps this is a primitive activity inherent in us; in any case, its origins seem to go back to prehistoric times. It is indicated in the imagery of Palaeolithic art and the symbolic language of Bronze Age rock carvings, in the ancient world of petroglyphs as well as in hieroglyphs, and in a sense it recurs nowadays in the strictest empirical-deductive science, where we, in the macrocosm and the microcosm, are trying to decode the language of life and read the enigmatic text of the universe — to outwit, bridle and curb the secret powers of nature to the benefit of humankind.

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In his book on the Newtonian view of the cosmos as clockwork (*The Clockwork Image*), the English neurobiologist Donald MacKey pointed out how deceptive the materialistic "nothing-but" perspective can be. One image he uses to illustrate this line of thought is the following. Think of an illuminated billboard with thousands of bulbs programmed to coordinate for displaying pictures, messages. The whole thing can be accurately and completely described in strictly electronic terms — how and why each bulb lights up at a given instant. Still, it would obviously be absurd to insist that this was "nothing but" a complex circuitry of electrical impulses. The electronic description is neither incomplete nor incorrect on 'its' level of description. It simply disregards the message, which can be grasped only when the sign, fully functioning, is observed as a whole from the outside. The contents, like the intent, lie on another structural level, and are a *holistic* effect.

In our age, science has, as if moving in a curve or a helical space, come across orbits from which the western scientific empiricism has distanced itself for so long. Once again our eyes have been purged from the dust of deception to visualize yet another sky, hitherto unknown. The modern era began with the Copernican revolution: sunrises and sunsets are merely spectral, not real, nor does the moon ascend and descend nor the wheel of the zodiac move. With mathematical certainty, the growth of exact science disclosed the illusory quality of every-day experience, including the solidity of matter. All appearances in the dimension of human experience are, from a higher point of view, deceptive. Only the scientist can open the seals to truth: like a medieval Magus, now in the robe of a ruler, the savant alone is in possession of the keys to the Arcanum of knowledge. We are confronted with the paradox of empiricist rationalism, the materialism that may promote idealism.

Comparing, in more modern terms, life and the universe to a cosmic computer rather than to a clockwork, one reaches the ingenuity is not in the hardware, the things, but in the software, the program — the organization, the structure, the totality, the process cybernetics. These two inseparable and interdependent levels or aspects of the code of reality are found everywhere. A mental process can be illustrated by its physical equivalent — an electrochemical sequence. But this is not thought or feeling or will itself: this cannot be comprehended or experienced by the most advanced technology. The physical correspondences and their expressions can be observed and rendered visible in diagrams, formulae, and pictures. But then we are again dealing with a language, not with the process itself. Let us suppose that the brain produces thoughts like other organs produce excretions, as Julien Offroy de La Mettrie suggested in his materialistic book on our human machinery, *L'homme machine* (1748) — it is itself a thought that leaves us wondering from where it came. In any instance, it does not explain thought. Remaining in the age-old thought categories of causality and dualism, we can probably just as well describe things — e.g., the brain — as La Mettrie's Swedenborgian countryman Guillaume Egger did: as the products or dross (*scoria*) of thoughts.^v The physical and the spiritual stand in interactive relationship, in reciprocal influence, and have their correspondences in all directions, as if being always two aspects of a system, yet discrete. The mind is moving in a galaxy of mirrors.

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The scientist Emanuel Swedenborg came by personal experience to conclude that everything in our world has a spiritual aspect, a correspondence on the level of the soul. So even insofar as the words we assign to things, our language is fraught with a hidden or spiritual language as the reproduction of an object includes the original. This is how, from the beginning, emotional language became pictorial representations of things. Swedenborg's *Arcana Coelestia* and a number of later works constituted a massive effort to interpret the language of the Bible allegorically or symbolically.

He did not intend to bring in anything new. This was, he thought, a rediscovery of an ancient language, an inherent relationship between spirit and object, the concrete and the abstract. He even dreamed of a universal dictionary, a key to the hieroglyphs of reality, but he succeeded only in drafting his work in his period of scientific emphasis, *Clavis Hieroglyphica*, "A Hieroglyphic Key."^{vi}

In this work we find a distinctive, versatile effort concentrated on rediscovering and reclaiming the Adamite language, the primal tongue, for interpreting the mysterious text of the world, like a universal mathematics for creation and the nature of its inherent laws. The point of departure for this is Swedenborg's developing theory about the series and degrees inherent in Nature, the sequences or levels of creation, between which — as within which — one finds clear analogies or correspondences. In this he believed he had the key to heavenly mysteries, to the unseen that lies behind objects — correspondences.

Clavis hieroglyphica reveals that three universal levels exist, correspond to each other, and pervasively underlie creation. So there exists, in his first example, an interplay between motion and impelling force (*conatus*) in the course of nature, just as in the relationship between intention and activity in human beings. These in turn correspond to the fact that a divine providence presupposes God's desire for results.

Correspondences also exist between nature, humanity, and God. According to the next example, there is an effort, a principle of activity, and therefore there is also the possibility of realization. The nature of the impelling force determines the motion and its effect. In every individual's inner reaches, in our intention, there is a specific underlying tendency or love with some particular purpose. By analogy with the relationship between impelling force, motion, and effect, our wishes depend on our unique preference, and our intention or benevolence depends on the nature of our wishes, and all this together determines our behaviour, or as much of our intent as we accomplish. The same applies to the divine and the spiritual plan. However, the nature-humanity-God harmony can change into discord: Swedenborg is obviously thinking about the Fall. In the world order and the "representative" or symbolic world, perfection reigns if there is a ruling harmony between divine providence, earthly intentions and goals, and nature's impelling forces and activities. If not, that is a different case.

Between the divine model objects, the *exemplaria*, and the intellectual, moral, and political world of *typi et imagines*, along with the similarly symbolic representations of nature, *simulcra*, a complete mutual harmony should (stronger than "ought," but not "must") rule — "at all costs." God therefore does not manage the world all by himself but according to his image, whose character and intent are of fundamental significance for conditions in the world. God remains in touch with the perceptible world "through" the human being, who is God's *medius proportionalis*.

The world, the human, and society correspond to one another at different levels. Thus, the human is called "a microcosm or miniature world," while society is "the great world." Equilibrium, a rational balance, must be maintained between these worlds if a true human freedom is to prevail, but the equilibrium is dynamically delicate and easily disturbed. The third and fourth examples deal with this — with the problem of intentionality and freedom in the correspondential design — while the fifth deals with the physical, psychological, and spiritual aspects of inactivity, immobility, and inertia. The central point of the sixth example and the ones that follow is the analogical conclusion that nature and its events behave in relation to humanity's rational activities in the same way that the latter behave in relation to God and God's operation; this is the basis of the harmony. The seventh example demonstrates that the world comes into being and endures only as long as the sun shines; the human race will last as long as God can illumine us, and the individual lives as long as the soul (*anima*), through the spiritual mind (*animus*) and the corresponding rational mind, can grant us intelligence and the light of eternal life.

The most striking feature in Swedenborg's writing is the central role humanity is given in the face of everything; God seems powerless in relation to our free will. On the other hand, God is the world-ordering standard with which we must align ourselves in order to attain personal and societal happiness in both the short and the long term.

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Swedenborg found different layers of content in God's Word. Since the transcendent is expressed by the physical, the visible, two levels of meaning always exist by correspondential means in the basic text itself and its events. Swedenborg's exegesis begins from this insight, and from his interpretations his followers later extracted comprehensive dictionaries dealing with correspondences. The principle which pervades all this is not totally obscure to us today, either, but is partly natural — just as we still acknowledge today that “light” stands both for something visible and for something spiritual, for enlightenment and for insight. So too “warmth” has both a physical and an inner, spiritual content for us — quite simply, love. This two-faced linguistic reality was always present for Swedenborg when he explained things in his theosophical and exegetical works; the light and warmth of the sun in our biological world correspond to divine love and wisdom in the spiritual world.

"Heaven," therefore, like everything else, is twofold. Thus, the kingdom of heaven can never be sought “above” or on high in the region of our own world. Consequently, ever since the times of Jesus, it has from time to time been found necessary to point out that “No one can say, ‘Here it is’ or ‘There it is’; No, the kingdom of God is within you.”^{vii}

Heaven is near: it is the heart, the kingdom of love. And Swedenborg says that the love between the angels in heaven is felt as the fragrance of wonderful gardens.

That is a language beyond words, the idiom of the ineffable. The language of angels cannot be heard or read, only be felt, inwardly. Walt Whitman, writing his song in praise of the earth, provides the reader with a beautiful reminder:

Were you thinking that those were the words, those upright lines?
those curves, angles, dots?
No, those are not the words, the substantial words are in the ground
and sea,
They are in the air, they are in you.^{viii}

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ⁱ The original text was later published in the significant first and last issue of Elizabeth Peabody's *Aesthetic Papers*, Boston 1849, 58-64. Reed's oration was presented for the M.A. degree at Harvard, Aug. 29, 1821.

ⁱⁱ "The Hours by the Window" in *The Invisible Writing* (1954), 350-354. On the fatal estrangement between mystic and savant: *The Sleepwalkers* (1959), the 'Epilogue'.

ⁱⁱⁱ cf. Colin Wilson, *New Questions in Psychology: Maslow and the post-Freudian Revolution* (1974).

^{iv} The 'book' and 'text' symbolism from the Middle Ages to the Romantic era is surveyed by E. R. Curtius, *Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter*, 2nd ed., Bern 1969.

^v R. Waldo Emerson picked up the idea that things are thoughts in his chapter on "Language" in *Nature* (1836) where, following Cæger, he similarly uses the peculiar word "scoriae" (*The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, I, 22f.). Emerson ascribed the idea that things are thoughts to Swedenborg, and it remained central to Emerson's thinking. See, for example, the influential essay "The Poet" (*The Collected Works*, Vol. III): "Swedenborg, of all men in the recent ages, stands eminently for the translator of nature into thought. I do not know the man in history to whom things stood so uniformly for words."

^{vi} *Clavis hieroglyphica arcanorum naturalium et spiritualium per viam representationum et correspondentiarum* (1742), published in London in 1784. English translation by R. Hindmarsh, *A Hieroglyphic Key to natural and spiritual mysteries, by way of representations and correspondences*, London 1792, first published in America as early as 1813 as instalments in the *Halcyon Luminary*, (Baltimore), Vol II, and in a new translation by J. J. G. Wilkinson, under the same title, in London and Boston 1847. See James Hyde, *A Bibliography of the Works of Emanuel Swedenborg*, London 1906. There is a genetical-analytical survey of the twenty-one examples of the work in Inge Jonsson, *Swedenborgs korrespondenslära*, Stockholm 1969, Ch. II: 5.

^{vii} Luke 17:21. This 'transcendental' prelude or key of the Christian gospel is stressed in the Oxyrhynchos papyri, "the sayings of Jesus" (*Logia Jesu*, found and published in our time), as well as by John and Paul. In the papyri, fragmentary copies of great collections, which perhaps were not less reliable than the selections of the late Synoptics, the spiritual omnipresence in the creation is also preached.

^{viii} The introductory strophe of "A Song of the Rolling Earth" in *Leaves of Grass*, 1856. *The Complete Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman as Prepared by Him for the Deathbed Edition*, with an introduction by Malcolm Cowley, NY 1948, Vol. I, 216.