



Divine Providence

Emanuel Swedenborg , George F. Dole (Translator)

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Written at a time of intense theological debate on the nature of God's governance of the world, The Divine Providence deals with a world so troubled that the loving hand of God is often hidden from our sight and brought into question. This companion work to Divine Love and Wisdom shows how divine nature governs human life and creation and describes how individual human freedom is inherent in creation and empowered by a God-given ability to understand and decide. This original and thought provoking work suggests that only divine love and wisdom can provide us with the accountability that gives meaning to our lives.

EMANUEL SWEDENBORG (1688-1772) was a Swedish scientist, inventor, philosopher, and mystic. At the age fifty-six, his main focus shifted from science and philosophy to theology, as a result of, first, dreams and later visions of a spiritual world where he conversed with angels and spirits, including Moses and Jesus, who guided his interpretation of the Scriptures. He spent the last decades of his life publishing eighteen theological titles that draw on the Bible and his own spiritual experiences.

Divine Providence Details

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From Reader Review Divine Providence for online ebook

Joseph Schrock says

I read Swedenborg's huge book, "Divine Providence", and I found the book to contain much important information and many good spiritual insights. However, I do have some complaints – issues on which I strongly disagree with the author.

I will list some issues concerning which I have reservations, as well as others regarding which I emphatically disagree. On page 214 Swedenborg says this: "Everything we willingly think and say and do becomes part of us and remains so, whether it is good or evil."

This I seriously doubt. It would mean that character transformation is impossible regarding matters on which we had made conscious choices. This I simply do not believe. Good character, arising from good choices, can be corrupted by future wrong choices. Conversely, bad (evil) choices that corrupt character are amenable to being renounced, corrected, and the results being a transformation of the corruption into goodness and righteousness. I truly hope that I'm right about this and that Swedenborg is wrong.

One issue on which I have been persuaded that Swedenborg was wrong is the matter of free will (autonomy). Throughout this book he repeatedly seems to be denying that human beings have any genuine freedom of will – any TRUE AUTONOMY. This I believe to be a mistake. He, on fairly numerous occasions, refers to "our apparent autonomy", but he seems to declare that genuine autonomy does not exist for humanity. A reference to "apparent autonomy" is found on page 224. On pages 271-272 the author declares this: "If we are in a hellish community, the only way the Lord can lead us out is under the laws of his divine providence. One of them says that we must see that we are there, must want to get out, and must ourselves make an effort with what seems to be our own strength."

I have a question about this: How can we make an effort UNLESS we possess some real strength with which to make the effort? If we only seem to use our strength to make an effort to get out of a hellish community, then we actually play no role in whether or not we get out. God is the only player in this – such is what Swedenborg seems to me to be saying. With this, I disagree.

On page 280 the author claims this: "Since this divine gift to us is in the smallest details of our nature, it follows that the Lord is in control of these smallest details in evil people as well as in good people; and the Lord's control is what we call divine providence."

This is, by my thinking, a grave charge to lay on the Divine. After all, if in every detail of every choice we make and every deed we perform, God is in control of our choices and our deeds, then God is the one who is responsible for every evil that is done, because His control over every vestige of our behaviors and character is complete. I vehemently reject this. This repudiates human free will, along with all human culpability and responsibility for evils that are done by humanity.

Swedenborg even admits that there seems to be a contradiction in what he claims, but he declares that there is none. I will quote at length from pages 281-282: "Everything we think and intend, and therefore everything we say and do, is the result of an inflow. If it is good, something is flowing from heaven; if it is bad, something is flowing from hell. In other words, if it is good it is flowing in from the Lord, and if it is bad it is flowing in from our own sense of self-importance."

"I do realize, though, that all this is hard to grasp because it differentiates between what flows in from heaven or from the Lord and what flows in from hell or from our own sense of self-importance, and at the same time it says that divine providence is at work in the smallest details of our thoughts and desires to the

point that we cannot think or intend anything on our own. Since I am saying that we can think and intend from hell, or from our sense of self-importance, there does seem to be a contradiction. However, there is none, as we shall see below [294], once a few points are prefaced that will shed some light on the matter.”

I read all the way through the author’s discussion of this – including all his efforts to render this conundrum something other than a contradiction. I found his efforts to miserably fail. I was not at all convinced, and his “explanations” only decreased my (generally, very high) respect for the author.

I wish to quiz the author further, namely about his claims on page 283, where he says “I have often been shown that no one in hell originates a thought. They all depend on others around them, who again are not originating their thoughts but depend on still others. Thoughts and desires move from community to community in a pattern without people realizing that they are not thinking autonomously.”

Okay, further down on the same page the author says this: “I was told from heaven that, like others, I believed that I was thinking and intending on my own, when in fact nothing was coming from me. If it was good, it was coming from the Lord, and if it was bad, it was coming from hell. I was shown this at first hand by having various thoughts and desires imposed on me so that eventually I could feel and sense it. So, later, as soon as anything evil impinged on my volition or anything false on my thoughts, I asked where it was coming from and was shown. I was also allowed to talk with the people it came from, to rebut them, and to make them go away.”

So, Swedenborg claims that he was able to rebut the evil people’s thoughts that impinged on him. If he had no control (no freedom – autonomy), HOW could he rebut the evil thoughts? He seems to again be contradicting himself. I furthermore ask: If no creature of the Lord has autonomy by means of which to freely choose evil, then where, pray tell, does hell come from? This desperately needs to be answered. Swedenborg FAILS to explain this. How does hell ever get to exist, unless there are creatures that have voluntarily (autonomously) chosen evil? If they could not choose to introduce evil, then God must be the creator of hell. Does he create hells, and then punish innumerable creatures by determining that they will choose hellish living? This is OUTRAGEOUS!

In conclusion, let me concede that Emanuel Swedenborg was a highly learned and brilliant man, as well as blessed with profound spiritual insights. Yet, after having read three of his huge books, I come to the conclusion that he got many things quite badly wrong. He was human, after all, finite, fallible, and flawed. So is the author of this review, which counsels me to be humble in my pronouncements. I feel compelled, however, to never renounce logic and rational thought. By the way, for readers of Swedenborg’s writings, I will just add a closing comment to inform such readers of Swedenborg’s little book, “Life on Other Planets”. Therein he claimed to have had numerous communications with human-like “people” on planets in our solar system, including Mercury, Venus, Mars, Saturn, etc. He even described some of the vegetation, kinds of animals, kinds of houses, etc. on such planets. Given our privileged modern knowledge of astronomy due to space telescopes, space probes, satellites, etc., we know that Swedenborg was grossly in error. No such life forms exist on any planet in our solar system except on Earth. This is proof of how far afield a brilliant spiritual thinker and mystic can go from reality and truth.

All that having been said, I highly recommend Swedenborg’s writings – including the book being reviewed here – “Divine Providence”.

Stephen Sela says

savant

