

A Philosophy of Vocation for Bryn Athyn College of the New Church

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Does a student in the business major really have to take a course entitled “Divine Providence”? Is it necessary for a biology major to take a philosophy course? Must a budding math major take courses in art or government? According to critics of traditional liberal arts colleges, the answer is No. Critics assert that it is “unfair and inefficient to require middle-income and poorer families to go into debt to purchase a 2- or 4-year degree consisting of many classes that are largely irrelevant to their goal of obtaining a job.”² Another critic (Kevin Carey) claims that the traditional liberal arts education is a relic of a previous era.³ About the liberal arts approach to higher education, critic Ryan Craig asks, “Will degrees become as impractical and amusing as debutantes?”⁴ He seems to think so, and he is probably not alone. We know from social surveys that the percentage of entering college students who believe that developing a philosophy of life is either essential or very important has declined from about 90 percent in 1970 to about 40 percent in 2016. During those same decades, the percentage of entering college students who thought that becoming very well-off financially was essential or very important increased from about 40 percent to 80 percent.⁵ Meanwhile, the percentage of students who find their courses interesting and schoolwork meaningful and important decreased from 80 percent in 1980 to about 67 percent in 2014.⁶ The results of the General Social Survey show that from 1974 to 2012 American public confidence in leaders of educational institutions declined from 50 percent to 25 percent.⁷ So, perhaps it is no surprise that given these views and the rise of new forms of technology, a number of

books with titles such as *The End of College*, *College Disrupted*, and *Fail U: The False Promise of Higher Education* have made their appearance over the last decade.⁸ What are America's liberal arts colleges to do?

One response to these trends is to revive the theological notion of “vocation” in the sense of “calling” and “purpose” and then explore the ways that it can be integrated into teaching and learning at liberal arts institutions of higher education. Over eighty colleges and universities in the U.S. have participated in the Lilly Endowment's *Programs for the Theological Exploration of Vocation Initiative*, 2000-2009.⁹ Twenty-six of these institutions—ranging from conservative Protestant to Catholic to virtually unaffiliated—have been studied in-depth by Tim Clydesdale, professor of sociology.¹⁰ His work shows that institutions that adopt vocation-related practices improve student retention and graduation rates.¹¹ Moreover, students and alumni who participated in purpose exploration programs reported that such programming helped them identify skills and talents, encouraged them to see and serve the needs of others, and led them to alter their life plans.¹² The hope is that a better understanding of vocation as *calling* can function as a bridging concept for students' and the public's practical concerns with the liberal arts tradition in American higher education. It is in keeping with this hope that Bryn Athyn College of the New Church, as a Christian liberal arts institution seeks to explain its philosophy of vocation in this document.

The term “vocation” has evolved over time to carry several meanings. According to David S. Cunningham, professor of religion at Hope College and editor of three volumes of seminar papers on the topic, “The word *vocation* derives from the Latin *vocare*, to call.” The term was originally construed as relating to our understanding of the

kind of life's work individuals felt called by God to undertake. The term has subtly different meanings in Catholic and Protestant contexts.¹³ In a Catholic context, "vocation" may refer, for instance, to the call to take vows to dedicate one's life to God, remain single, and to serve society in contemplative or sacrificial ways, living spiritually as a monk or nun.¹⁴ The Protestant Reformer, Martin Luther, broadened the meaning of "vocation" to include many kinds of occupations, not just those in religious orders. This history helps to "explain why we tend to associate the English word *calling* with a person's work or career..."¹⁵ Today, the term has taken on a largely secular meaning that refers to the kind of work or career individuals feel inspired to pursue. People report feeling called to be a nurse, a medical doctor, a teacher, a social worker, a soldier, a lawyer, a professional athlete, an artist, a researcher, a community organizer or a therapist. The idea is that a person does not pursue a line of work simply for the money or simply by happenstance. Instead, when a person is called to a line of work, he or she feels drawn to it by some power, or a person sees it as a means of expression and commitment, and consciously pursues it. Moreover, the level of income associated with the career is not the most important aspect of it. Instead, there is a desire or need to serve other people, to fix a problem, to invent, build, create, nurture, or defend something or someone, and this is done primarily for the love of the activity itself, for the intrinsic satisfaction and meaning.

Many people today also associate the term "vocation" with a narrow form of education that excludes the collegiate liberal arts. "Vocational training" may bring to mind the type of education needed for automotive repair, culinary positions, welding, medical billing or similar careers. Technical schools serve these students and their

employers. As is clear from the books that have been published as a result of the seminars sponsored by the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC) and its Network for Vocation in Undergraduate Education (NetVUE), this narrow understanding is *not* what the organizers and authors mean by “vocation.” Rather, they mean a career as a moral and spiritual calling and the “larger questions about meaning and purpose, and about the future direction of all facets of a person’s life.”¹⁶ The CIC and NetVUE administrators and scholars aim to help liberal arts colleges link what students are learning to such a broad understanding of vocation. Contrary to the common thought today that the main purpose of a college degree is to land a well-paying job, NetVUE scholars aim to deepen both students’ and educators’ understanding of vocation as *calling* and expand it to the ideas of purpose and mission, of being sent to perform a use. This is why the papers authored by NetVUE professors link vocation to topics such as God, virtue, the common good, narrative, community engagement, inter-faith dialogue, constructing meaning, social justice, multiple religious belonging, democracy, identity, and service learning. Insofar as students, staff, faculty, administrators, and trustees can articulate the deeper and broader reasons for their career choice, they have a philosophy of their particular vocation. As an institution, Bryn Athyn College seeks to articulate a rationale for its perspective on vocation, and to do so within the context of its mission and the liberal arts tradition.¹⁷

A philosophy of vocation at Bryn Athyn College has the general form of a theistic worldview because the theology at the center of its mission asserts that there is not only a call, but a Divine Person who does the calling. More specifically, a Bryn Athyn College philosophy of vocation is a type of Christian theism, known intramurally as the New

Church, and, from an extra-mural perspective, as Swedenborgian theism. The Divine Person, known in New Church or Swedenborgian circles as “the Lord,”¹⁸ communicates with us because as Divine Love, Wisdom, and Use, this Divine Person wishes to enter into a relationship with us and bless us with as much happiness as we desire.¹⁹ This is a relationship in which we love the Lord by letting the Lord’s love and wisdom flow through us into useful service toward our fellow human beings. Besides Divine Love, Wisdom and Use, the Lord has the following qualities: omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, oneness in which is a trinity, being itself, expression itself, substance and form itself, good and truth itself, and supreme humanity in which is infinite divinity.²⁰ In addition to these fairly traditional attributes, the Lord, being pure love and mercy, is—despite appearances in the literal sense of the Bible to the contrary—never angry with people. The Lord cannot even frown at us!²¹ In order for us to come to know the Lord, as well as ourselves, the Lord has always communicated to people. This communication has taken a variety of forms, from the nature of the created world to dreams and intuition. The most reliable form of communication today is through the written word. Thus, New Church Christian theism is grounded in the Bible, or more precisely, what is referred to as “the Word.”²² A Bryn Athyn College of the New Church philosophy of vocation is formed by a new understanding of, affection for, and use of the Word and the theological works penned by Emanuel Swedenborg. Swedenborg was a Swedish eighteenth-century scientist, philosopher, theologian, and servant of the Lord whose theological works in English translation from neo-Latin consist of about thirty volumes.²³

Central to a Bryn Athyn College philosophy of vocation is the belief that there is a call communicated to all people to abide in an everlasting life of wellbeing. How is this accomplished? Briefly stated: *by being useful*. Let's "unpack" this short phrase.²⁴

From the blessedness of the soul, to the happiness of the mind and the delights of the senses, the Lord invites all people to live a fully satisfying life both here on earth and in heaven after death.²⁵ As one can see from the Declaration of Independence adopted in 1776, happiness is something Americans have been pursuing for over two hundred years. This pursuit is universally human (not just American) and it poses problems for us, ones that exist on the civil, moral, and spiritual planes of life.²⁶ As much now as at the nation's founding, there is confusion over what happiness is and how best to obtain it. Certainly, happiness is part of a good life—as philosophers such as Aristotle and Kant maintained, but should it be our goal and be pursued directly? Is happiness the same as hedonism, as some utilitarian philosophers and others have asserted?²⁷ Does happiness consist in entertainment and pleasant social interaction, being treated like royalty, enjoying the finer sensations of paradisiacal flowers and food, or participating in continuously elevating worship rituals?²⁸ New Church theology, as well as an increasing amount of empirical research in psychology, and the eudaimonic tradition in Western philosophy all answer in the negative to these questions.²⁹ Instead, these fields point us toward the idea that aiming to live a good meaningful life of virtue, altruism, and love to our neighbors *in useful service* is the goal and happiness is a consequence of such a life. In a Bryn Athyn College philosophy of vocation, the Lord created people and the natural world in order to establish a heaven of angels from the human race.³⁰ Angels are not a separate race of beings.³¹ Instead, angels are good people from earth³² who have shed their natural bodies

in exchange for spiritual bodies.³³ Importantly, Swedenborg reports that “Latent within the affection of every angel’s will is a certain inner tendency which draws the mind to accomplish something. By accomplishment the mind finds peace and satisfaction.”³⁴ Angels enjoy the “finer things of life,” but only because these represent the good and true things they have put to use from the Lord within them.³⁵ The Lord performs useful services indirectly through angels in heaven and through people on earth.³⁶ Indeed, “angelic happiness *consists in use, stems from use, and is proportionate to use*, that is, to the good deeds of love and charity.”³⁷ This is what we mean by the call to all people everywhere to live an everlasting life of wellbeing. Let us use the term “global call” to denote this broader concept.

Tied to this global call is a more “local” one, and both are explored in the recent literature on vocation. The “local” call is for an individual to become a particular kind of professional, or embark upon a specific career, or to serve humanity in some defined manner, with or without remuneration (e.g., as a parent). As we will show, there is quite a bit of textual evidence in New Church theological works supporting the idea of a “global call” or common vocation for all human beings, but little direct teaching regarding an individual call to pursue a specific career or certain line of work. However, there are ideas and passages from the theological writings that can be applied to the subject of a “local call” in a reasonable manner that can shed helpful light upon it for students, staff, faculty, administrators, and trustees. Moving from the general subject and then later to the particular, let us consider the “global call” or common human vocation in more detail first.

The Global Call: Humanity's Vocation

Everyone in the world is invited to have faith in God and live a good life—in both the descriptive and normative senses of “good life.”³⁸ There are different phrases in New Church theological books that denote living a good life or how we *ought* to live: “living in charity,” “becoming regenerated,” “loving what is good and true for their own sake,” “living a life of use,” “becoming a form of charity.” For the sake of simplicity, let us be content with subsuming these concepts under the idea of living a good life.

The global call to live a good life has two parts. In the first part, the Lord calls all people to stop doing evil things. This is a consistent theme of the Old (or First) Testament. According to Mark J. Boda, there are several Hebrew verbs associated with this aspect of the English word “repentance.” There are Hebrew verbs that mean to turn away from evil, put aside evil, to cease, stop, forsake, cast away, and break away from evil.³⁹ For example, early in Genesis, when Cain’s offering to the Lord is not accepted, he is asked about his anger and then told that he has done something evil. “Sin is crouching at your door...but you must overcome it.” (Gen.4:7) A majority of the Ten Commandments tell us what we should not do. (Ex 20:1-17) Swedenborg asserts that the principles of the second table of the Ten Commandments are in most nations, if not all.⁴⁰ The book of Leviticus contains instructions for the Israelites on how to stop sinning and how to make amends for when they do sin. The book of Deuteronomy reminds the reader that we have a choice between doing what is right and what is wrong; if we “turn back to the Lord,” then the Lord will have mercy upon us and make us prosperous. (Dt 30:1-3) The prayerful poetry of king David acknowledges our need for confessing our sins and cultivating a humble and repentant heart. (Ps 32, 51) The first part of the global call is

expressed even more forcefully by the prophets of ancient Israel: “Wash yourselves clean. Stop all this evil that I see you doing.” (Is 1:16) The Lord commands Ezekiel to tell the Israelites: “Thus says the Lord God: repent and turn away from your idols; and turn away your faces from your abominations.” (Ez 14:6) In the book of Zechariah, the Lord calls people to return to Him by telling the prophet: “I, the Lord, was angry with your ancestors, but now I say to you, ‘Return to me, and I will return to you.’” (1:2-3) Amos called the Israelites to repent of their sins. (Am 5) The Lord also had the prophets call other nations to repentance. The story of Jonah, an Israelite who was sent to the people of Nineveh and spent three days in the belly of a great fish along the way, is a well-known example of this call. (Jon1-3)

Being called to stop doing evil things is also a theme of the New (or Second) Testament. Like the Hebrew words that emphasize turning away from evil and changing, so do the Greek words “*metamelomai*,” “*metanoia*,” and “*metanoeo*.” The first two words emphasize an internal turning or change of mind, while the third word can mean both an internal dispositional shift as well as a change in external activity.⁴¹ The theme of turning away from evil and (re)turning to God was familiar to Jesus who was, even as an adolescent, very learned in the Scriptures. (Lk 2:46-47) So, we find this theme in the Lord’s preaching in the Gospels. The man who prepared the way for the Lord, John the Baptist, called people to change their minds or repent. (Mk 1:4-5) Jesus also repeatedly urged people to turn away from their sins (Mk 1:15; Lk 13:5). The Lord called to the people: “Come to me, all of you who are tired from carrying heavy loads, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke and put it on you, and learn from me, because I am gentle and humble in spirit; and you will find rest.” (Mt 11:28-29) The apostles were told to preach

the message of repentance and forgiveness of sins to all nations. (Lk 24: 47)

Consequently, Peter and Paul called both Jews and Gentiles to change their minds. (Ac 2:38; 26:20; 2 Co 12:21) In the last book of the Word, as part of John's transcendental vision, the Lord calls churches to turn away from specific evils. (Rev 2:2 – 3:19)

New Church teachings also emphasize the importance of changing one's mind spiritually, that is, turning away from evil and instead, turning to the Lord, who is Divine Good itself. Swedenborg asserts that, "without repentance there can be no true faith and no genuine good will...and none of us can be regenerated before the more serious evils...have been removed; repentance is what removes them."⁴² Anyone who wants to be saved, or set free, should confess their sins or admit their faults, and then repent of them.⁴³ Loving our neighbor as our self consists simply in not dealing dishonestly or unjustly with our neighbor, in not hating, cursing, or defaming the neighbor, in not committing adultery, and other similar things.⁴⁴

While the preceding paragraphs make it clear that the Lord wants Christians and Jews to turn away from evil, the case for including all people on earth in such a call can also be made by reflecting on our experience. While the quantity and quality of evil varies according to time, place, manner and individual, a great deal of evidence exists to support the claim that we humans are prone to forms of disrespect, murder, harm, theft, infidelity, dishonesty, and the cravings that motivate them. Consider this thought experiment: Imagine a world in which people are not generous, yet they stopped all forms of stealing. A world without financial scams, conquest of lands, theft of intellectual property, government graft, mugging, burglary, robbery, and so on would certainly be one much improved! This thought experiment shows us that the world would be a better

place if we could just restrain ourselves from doing evil and overcome bad habits. Not only are there thought experiments in Western philosophy that illustrate the reasonableness of ceasing to do evil and learning to living a good life, there are also living traditions from well-known philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero that encourage the same. A passage from Plato's *Republic*, for example, is similar to what we have seen from the Word. Plato writes that

the power to learn is present in everyone's soul and the instrument with which each learns is like an eye that cannot be *turned around* from darkness to light without turning the whole body. This instrument cannot be *turned around* from that which is coming into being without *turning* the whole soul until it is able to study that which is, and the brightest thing that is, namely, the one we call the good.⁴⁵

Thus, turning away from evil is the first part of the two-part global calling for humanity to live a good life.

The second part or principle of our global vocation is living a new life of good habits⁴⁶ and properly ordered loves.⁴⁷ This is also a theme throughout Scripture. The Lord not only calls us to turn away from evil, the Lord also calls on us to learn to do what is good: "Yes, stop doing evil and learn to do right. See that justice is done.... (Is 1:17) The prophet Micah told the Israelites that the Lord is not pleased with lavish sacrifices and offerings. Instead, the Lord requires us to do what is just, to show constant love, and to live in humble fellowship with the Lord. (Mic 6:8) Using the ancient symbol of a tree for a person, the Lord says that we should abide with Him, and that if we do, we will bear much fruit. (Jn 15:5) That "fruit" is a symbol of works of charity or good deeds, is clear from many places in Scripture.⁴⁸ Peter's first letter exhorts the reader to live in a holy way by not only getting rid of bad habits and desires, but also by doing good: "Do your

work, not for mere pay, but from a real desire to serve.” (1 P 5:2) As James wrote in his letter: “if faith is alone and includes no actions, then it is dead.” (Jas 2:17)

Swedenborg repeats this ancient call: “religion is a way of life, and its life is the doing of good.”⁴⁹ Another way of expressing both parts of the global call is to put it in terms of charity: the first principle of charity is to look to the Lord and shun evils because they are sins and this is done by repentance. The second principle of charity is to do good deeds because they are uses, that is, useful services.⁵⁰ As Swedenborg writes in *The Doctrine of Life*:

Christian charity is actually a matter of faithfully performing a useful occupation. If we turn our backs on evils because they are sins, we are daily doing what is good, and are ourselves the useful functions we should be in the body politic. This means that the larger body is being cared for, and so is each member in particular. Second, all the other things we do [outside of our occupation] are not works of charity, strictly speaking, but are either further reflections of our charity, or else simply good deeds or things we are properly obligated to do. (114)

Thus, “ceasing to do evil and learning to do well” are the two parts of living a good spiritual life from a New Church point of view.

Again, while the paragraphs just above establish the fact that living a good life is a theme throughout the Word and in a Bryn Athyn College philosophy of life, one need not rely exclusively on these sources to justify making such a claim upon all people. This claim can be supported by reasoned arguments and by reflecting upon the experience of people around the world. Think of all the ethical theories that exhort us to do good and live a good life: virtue theory, deontology, utilitarianism, rights theory, care ethics—not to mention normative theories from Indian, Chinese, and African moral philosophy as well! Certainly people and theories differ about the specifics of living a good life, but *that* we should not live a bad life, *that* humans have the capacity to live a good life, and that

we *ought* to actualize this capacity, all rational people and theories of ethics assert. As we saw in the thought experiment above, the world would be a better place if we could stop ourselves from doing evil things, for example, stopping all kinds of theft and stealing. Now, imagine a world in which not only have people stopped stealing, but they also routinely help others by donating money, time, and skills to people in need. In other words, picture a world in which generosity is a virtue for nearly everyone. In such a world we could experience not just the absence of evil, but the positive presence of good. Such a world would be much more similar to the cooperative communities of heaven described in New Church theological works than our current world and much closer to most people's conception of a heaven on earth.⁵¹

The “Local Call”: Individual Vocation

One might ask, “How do these two parts or principles of the global call relate to the local call, that individual sense of being drawn to a career or summoned to a profession?” First, let's establish that there is no doubt that Scripture's literal sense contains instances of individuals being called to serve. The Lord called to Moses by means of an angel in a burning bush in order to lead the Hebrews out of the bonds of slavery and into a promised land of freedom, plenty, and holy worship. (Ex 3) Moses, in turn, called Joshua and told him to lead the people of Israel. (Dt 31:7) The Lord called the boy Samuel in the night, preparing him to become an authoritative prophet. (1 Sam 3) The Lord said to Jeremiah, “I chose you before I gave you life, and before you were born I selected you to be a prophet to the nations.” (Jr 1:3) The priest-prophet Ezekiel was called by God after seeing a vision. (Ez 2:1) As mentioned earlier, the prophet Jonah was called to go to Nineveh and preach to the people there. At first, Jonah ignored God, but

eventually he listened and obeyed. (Jon 1) Jesus called four fishermen to become disciples (Mk 1:16-20, Mt 4:18-22, Lk 5:1-3) as well as calling Philip and Nathanael to follow Him. (Jn 1:43-48). These men went from being called to be students (disciples) of the Lord, to being sent out on a mission into the world to preach, teach, and serve others as apostles. (Mt 10:6) Mary was called by an angel to be the mother of Jesus. (Lk 1:28-38) Clearly, there are instances of the Lord calling individuals and, after educating them, sending them to perform tasks and to live a certain kind of life. The case for this kind of individual calling in New Church theology, however, is more speculative than the case for the global call.

Yet, there are teachings that one may apply to the subject in order to gain some insight into the connection between the global call (our common human vocation) and what career, profession, or occupation individuals choose. The primary teaching is known as the doctrine of use. Some of its main points are that we are all born to be useful here in the natural world and in the spiritual world.⁵² Some analogies about how the natural world functions in relation to the spiritual may be helpful. The natural world serves as the scrimmages of pre-season before the games and the post-season of the spiritual world, or the rehearsals before the run of the play after opening night, or our time in school before graduation and life afterwards, or our time in our mother's womb before our birth into a new world of experience. Goodness and usefulness are equated with one another and both of these with practicing charity.⁵³ "To love the Lord and the neighbor is, in general, to perform uses."⁵⁴ Heaven is called a "kingdom of uses," and the natural world was created by the Lord as a system of uses to prepare us for heaven. In the natural world, Swedenborg describes three general forms of use: 1) uses for sustaining the body; 2) uses

for perfecting the rational level of the mind; and 3) uses for receiving a spiritual character.⁵⁵ In another place, Swedenborg writes that the general good for a society consists in what is divine, just, and moral, and also the necessities for life, work, protection, and wealth.⁵⁶ In other words, people are needed to fulfill positions such as minister, priest, governor, judge, farmer, craftsperson, educator, parent, military leader, police officer, firefighter, healthcare worker, researcher, inspector, economist, and businessperson. The general good does not exist merely in the abstract, or just notionally. Instead, it “exists from the goods of use that individuals perform.” These, in turn, are said to “subsist from the general good.”⁵⁷ In other words, individual and general uses relate to one another as a virtuous reinforcing circle. The situation is similar in the heavens of the spiritual world. In general, Swedenborg reports that there are religious, civil, and domestic uses in heaven too.⁵⁸ Broadly speaking, angels teach people, protect them from harm, lead them away from evil and toward good, and help maintain order and spiritual equilibrium in the heavens, hells, and in the intermediate realm known as the world of spirits.⁵⁹ Thus—and this is the point—these general forms of good arise from the goods of use that individuals perform and are sustained by communities. “Uses...are not abstractions; they are spiritual realities which derive their form from human needs.”⁶⁰

Swedenborg states that the Lord does not benefit us directly, but instead benefits us through each other and the useful services we perform for one another.⁶¹ Indeed, we are all born for the sake of other people.⁶² However, this does not mean that we all need to become preachers, priests, evangelists, monks, nuns, or hold a paid position in a church organization to do the Lord’s work. Instead, in whatever career, profession, or work we do—whether paid or unpaid—by acting rightly, faithfully, sincerely, honestly,

and justly we allow the Lord's life to flow through us and help other people. Everyone, no matter their station in life, can and should do what is good, right, and just in all interactions with the neighbor.⁶³ Fulfilling this imperative is a major part of what it means to live a good spiritual life. Piety is still a necessary part of this life, but like his Protestant predecessors, Swedenborg emphasizes what he calls "practical piety," that is, an active life of use.⁶⁴ This is so partly because of the amount of time people spend at work and partly because work—whether paid or unpaid—presents us with opportunities to grow spiritually and morally. Work—in a broad sense of responding to human needs—provides us with opportunities to show our love for the Lord and our fellow humans. When working, we make decisions that have ethical and spiritual dimensions and we are often presented with the chance to do something good or evil. In fact, Swedenborg asserts that we are regenerated spiritually according to our state of life in this world, and that includes our interests, our education, and our line of work.⁶⁵

Speaking of ethical and spiritual decisions, and as others have observed, there is a connection between the traditional virtue ethic in moral philosophy and the concept of vocation.⁶⁶ Here, we also note the connection between specific virtues—justice, faith, sincerity, honesty—and one's vocation from a New Church standpoint. The virtues listed in the passages above are a small sub-set of the virtues that we should strive to achieve when living a good life. As examples of moral virtues, Swedenborg lists temperance, sobriety, integrity, kindness, friendliness, modesty, honesty, helpfulness, diligence, industriousness, alacrity, generosity, liberality, magnanimity, energy, courage, and prudence. A person may have occasion to draw upon all of these virtues in the course of a career. As examples of spiritual virtues, Swedenborg lists love of religion, charity,

truthfulness, faith, conscience, and innocence.⁶⁷ Since the term “charity” is often understood in America today to refer almost exclusively to a donation of time, money, or other property to a non-profit organization or to an individual in need, we need to examine Swedenborg’s conception of charity and how it relates to vocation in the sense of a career or profession.

One teaching that sheds light on the connection between our global vocation and our individual vocation is found in the book entitled *Charity*. There, Swedenborg explains two fundamental principles of charity. The first is to “look to the Lord and shun evils because they are sins; this is done by repentance.” The second principle of charity is “to do goods because they are uses.”⁶⁸ It is by practicing these two principles that we become “forms of charity.”⁶⁹ “Good is nothing else than use; and therefore charity, in its first origin, is the affection of use.”⁷⁰ As we have seen, this is the global call, our common human vocation. As for a local call, Swedenborg describes how people working in thirteen different occupations can live good spiritual lives. Each description begins with this conditional statement: If people look to the Lord and shun evils as sins, and honestly, justly, and faithfully carry out the work of their occupation or employment, then they are doing a good of use and will become a form of charity. Starting with those at the top of the eighteenth century social hierarchy (e.g., governors) and concluding with those at the bottom of the hierarchy (e.g., farmers and household servants), the two parts of our common spiritual vocation apply equally to all of the individual vocations.⁷¹ The spiritual challenges and opportunities vary from one occupation to the next. Yet, the two principles of (1) turning away from evil and (2) learning to live a good life by doing our work honestly, justly, and faithfully serve to unite people of varying skills and

specializations in a spiritual kinship while giving dignity to *all* specific vocations.⁷²

However, not all uses have equal dignity. In heaven, wiser angels have more responsibilities attached to their offices and functions, so there is more dignity attached to them as well. (Yet they ascribe all dignity to the use, not to self.) Everyone can be useful, but each of us in our own way.

Another concept that illustrates both the uniting of people at a general level and the need for specialization at the individual level of vocation is that of the “grand human.” Since the Lord is a Divine Human and all of creation, including the heavens, reflects the Lord’s qualities, the heavens also have a human form. By “form” is meant an interconnected set of functions or uses, not shape. Yet, forms do have patterns, and the grand human form has a pattern that corresponds with the form of the human body. Just as every system in the human body is composed of organs with particular functions, and those organs are composed of cells designed to operate in specific ways, so heaven consists of communities of angels with particular functions, and those communities are composed of individual people who have specific vocations or uses. This is the ancient idea that the microcosm (“little world”) and the macrocosm (“big world”) mirror each other, except that Swedenborg teaches that this is not a static analogy, instead, it is a living dynamic relationship.⁷³ This relationship is known as correspondence. “All things in the human body have a correspondence of things in heaven. All heavenly communities exist in such order that they represent one human being. They do so in every single detail, both interior and exterior.”⁷⁴ There are angelic communities that correspond with the heart, the lungs, the cerebrum and cerebellum, all of the senses and so on.⁷⁵ For example, our sense of sight corresponds to the affection for being intelligent and wise and so the

understanding of truth, especially the truths of faith.⁷⁶ Every single part of the eye has its own corresponding spiritual counterpart.⁷⁷ Think about all of the specializations that are involved in understanding truth and becoming intelligent and wise! There are people who record truth, people who organize truths, people who discover new truths, people who connect one truth to other truths, people who connect one truth to various good motivations, people who apply a set of truths to problems to solve them, people who operationalize truths to achieve a common objective, people who transmit truth, people who interpret truth and accommodate it for others, and so on. This variety of useful service within a unified orderly structure (the grand human form) of constants is an intentional part of creation and includes the variety of responses to the Divine among the world's religions, and even the variety within the world's religions.⁷⁸ Just as people are prepared to become members of national and global communities, so, too, they are prepared to become members of a local community of workers who perform specific useful services to each other and to people in other communities. Ideally, this preparation on earth is at the same time preparation for some corresponding function in a heavenly community as an angel. The main point of the idea of the grand human is that the Lord has created this world in order to prepare us for performing a specific function or use within a coordinated system of functions or uses in heaven. Swedenborg reports that while there are general kinds of uses in the heavens (religious, civil, domestic), each individual angel has his or her own specific contribution to make.⁷⁹ So, there certainly are "local" or individual vocations. The challenge for an individual is to understand his or her contribution to this vast system. In the literature on vocation, this understanding is known as "discernment."⁸⁰

Finding One's Vocation

How does an individual discern the vocation or calling that is right for him or her? Sometimes people say, "I feel like I was put on this earth to do this job." But how does one know whether such a feeling is reliable? There are teachings about the Lord leading people by means of their affections that relate to how we discern our individual vocation.⁸¹ Students who have sufficient resources can, and usually do, gravitate toward pursuing what they love. When speaking of our global or common vocation, we hope everyone at Bryn Athyn College finds ways to love the Lord and the neighbor above loving themselves and the luxuries of this world. But when speaking about a local calling or individual vocation, we refer to more specific loves, such as a love for anthropology, biology, chemistry, dance, education, English, foreign languages, geography, history, mathematics, philosophy, psychology, theology and so on. Some people have a strong affection for a particular field or one of the occupations related to it and they identify that affection and its concomitant talents so early in life that the process of discernment is relatively quick and easy. We are led by the Lord through an inflowing of life into our love and volition, and our love leads our discernment.⁸² If a student desires a particular career, then the student is willing to learn about the fields that contribute to it and loves to understand how to apply its concepts to the work. What remains is the ongoing process of refining the kind of love that fundamentally motivates the understanding and interest in the career. We should not love a line of work merely because it brings glory to ourselves or because we stand to make a fortune.⁸³ While not ignoring our natural needs, we should be motivated primarily by a sense of being useful to society, advancing the public good,

serving our neighbors, and bringing glory to the Lord. In this deeper sense, vocation is simply “doing what you love to do.”

On the one hand, some people seem to have a very accurate understanding of their talents and strengths and how these line up with the needs of the world, and so have an easier discernment process than people who are either ignorant about their talents, or who have an inaccurate view of their strengths or who don’t understand how they line up with the needs of the world.⁸⁴ Swedenborg describes two kinds of enlightenment that occur within the human mind, one is inner, and the other is outer.⁸⁵ Outer enlightenment is from the information that we possess. If we know our talents, the world’s needs, and the kinds of careers that exist, then the amount of light available during the discernment process is relatively large. (Inner enlightenment is from a person’s convictions, and this relates to how we see ourselves in relation to the global call, or our common human vocation.)

On the other hand, some people require a fair amount of time and experience to understand or find the affection that leads to a particular field and career. This can be frustrating and prompt us to wonder why this is the case. While we have the ability to contemplate truth, and light from heaven flows into our minds to help us, and everyone’s understanding is capable of being improved, discernment is given to us in accordance with our effort to make use of what we know and in accordance with our character.⁸⁶ One reason a person might struggle to find a career is that a preoccupation with the pleasures of the world and one’s own ego can obscure a person’s discernment.⁸⁷ Another reason people may not get a “direct call” for a particular career is that if we saw Divine Providence in action, that is, if we saw the Lord’s governance in the face, we would rebel at it because we would feel forced instead of free, or we would be angry about it and then

try to disrupt it. The Lord wants us to feel life as if it were all our own and the Lord wants us to come to the realization, again, as if on our own, about where we fit into the big picture. The teaching that Providence can be seen in the back, or from behind, through a marvelous sequence of events may apply to a person who struggled to discern his or her vocation when young but, upon reviewing how things worked out, sees a pattern among the choices and events.⁸⁸ At times, students have to make a decision about a major and a career not really knowing the consequences or seeing where they will lead. Faith does, after all, involve trust. There are people who go through life feeling that they never really found their career “niche,” who migrate from one job to the next. However, we should not be too quick to equate our jobs with our use or vocation. Use is the total effect that we have on other people; it is not confined to one’s job.⁸⁹ Anytime we perform a service to someone and society by, for example, faithfully loving our marriage partner, raising children properly, being a true friend, dealing fairly with people in our neighborhood, we are useful.⁹⁰ Sometimes the purpose behind a more meandering path to one’s calling may have to do with the need to gather a variety of skills and experiences in order to prepare for an unforeseen important role later in life. The Lord’s leading and the overall coherence of our path often comes into focus in retrospect, in a way that often cannot be seen in the present as we wrestle with decisions about our next step.

So, what advice does a Bryn Athyn College philosophy of vocation contain for people struggling to find their career? Let’s list some points to consider:

- Pray to the Lord for enlightenment
- Make sure that we have plenty of information about ourselves and the potential uses in the world

- As we are educated, try to learn with a desire to apply what we know
- View the desires for fame and fortune as temporary motivations (mediate goods), but don't focus on them apart from use
- Cultivate the skill of reflection.

Each of these points can be explained, but here we focus on the last one.

Reflection is defined as the mental viewing of the disposition and nature of something, and from reflection comes perception.⁹¹ Because we are prone to harbor illusions about ourselves, it is important to use the wonderful gift of reflection to learn the truth about ourselves. Reflecting upon ourselves from the viewpoint of other people is helpful, and so is letting other people reflect on us directly.⁹² Such reflection from family members, friends, fellow students, teachers, and advisors can give us essential insight into our habits, our affections, and the skills we have. This requires some courage on our part, but when we stop and think about the matter from an earthly long-term perspective, many people will face at least a yearly professional evaluation or performance review. So, such reflection prior to entering the workforce is an important part of the preparation for a successful career. From an eternal perspective, such reflection can be part of our own self-examination as part of the process of spiritual regeneration. Swedenborg reports that in the spiritual world, our externals reflect our internals, that is, our outward appearance shows exactly what is going on in our minds. On earth we can pretend to be what we aren't, but this is not the case in the spiritual world. There, people cannot be hypocrites, and expressions of insincerity and falsity are recognized by angels immediately.⁹³ In heaven and hell, "what you see is what you get." So, as uncomfortable as it may be, allowing other people to reflect on us (and hopefully they are well-intentioned) is useful

for a productive response to both our common global vocation as well as our local vocation.

Finally, this paper is not designed to address every aspect of a Bryn Athyn College philosophy of vocation. Instead, the aim is to explain the basic features of such a philosophy and indicate some ideas that apply to the subject. So, this paper is a continuation of our philosophy of vocation, not the final word on it. There are topics that might be usefully incorporated into our philosophy of vocation. For example, the contemporary phrase “work-life balance” implies that one’s real life, or the better part of life, occurs outside of work. If the phrase has the first meaning, then (given the position outlined above) it is not accurate. If the phrase has the second meaning, then this is a sad situation and it seems like a problem that should be solved. There is also an objection to the spiritualization of vocation that could be addressed. Spiritualizing work can be used or abused. It is abused when we become “workaholics” and when we use work to avoid facing spiritual issues outside of work that relate to family, community, nation, the world and the church. From the left side of the economic spectrum (e.g., Marxism), the spiritualization of vocation in the sense of a career is a fiction designed to blind workers to their systematic exploitation, alienation, and oppression. How should we respond to this? There is also the matter of competition for a position. We may feel called to serve a particular use or fill a need, but what if other people hear a call to the exact same position? Perhaps these issues are more properly a philosophy of work instead of vocation, but they are closely related to each other. Let’s conclude this paper with a prayer:

When any work was to be begun, it was customary with the ancients to say, “May God bless,” and thereby was signified the same thing as by this wish, “May the work be prosperous and happy”....⁹⁴

¹ I would like to thank my colleagues on the NetVUE committee for their support as well as my colleagues Dr. Martha Gyllenhaal and Dr. Marcy Latta for their editorial suggestions.

² Monica Herk, “Fixing Our Broken Colleges: Competency-Based Education and Reauthorizing the Higher Education Act,” Committee for Economic Development, 2015, quoted in Chris W. Gallagher’s *College Made Whole: Integrative Learning for a Divided World*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019) 99.

³ Kevin Carey, *The End of College: Creating the Future of Learning and the University of Everywhere* (Riverhead Books/Penguin, 2015, 35) in Chris W. Gallagher’s *College Made Whole*, 99.

⁴ Ryan Craig *College Disrupted: The Great Unbundling of Higher Education* (Palgrave Macmillan/St. Martin’s 2015, 98) in Chris W. Gallagher’s *College Made Whole*, 158.

⁵ Jean M. Twenge, *iGen*, (New York: Atria/Simon & Schuster Books, 2018) 168-172.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Tim Clydesdale, *The Purposeful Graduate*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015) 54. To be fair to higher education though, trust in many American institutions has declined since the 1970s.

⁸ Gallagher, *College Made Whole*, notes 2 and 3, pp.183-4. Ryan Craig, *College Disrupted: The Great Unbundling of Higher Education* (St. Martin’s Press, 2105), and Charles J. Sykes, *Fail U: The False Promise of Higher Education* (St. Martin’s Press, 2016).

⁹ Tim Clydesdale, *The Purposeful Graduate*, 231.

¹⁰ See *The Purposeful Graduate*, “Appendix 4,” 276-79.

¹¹ Ibid, 95-97.

¹² Ibid, 103.

¹³ “Introduction” in *At This Time and In This Place: Vocation and Higher Education*, David S. Cunningham, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016) 7.

¹⁴ Philip Sheldrake observes that during the Middle Ages the term “spirituality” most frequently referred to the clerical state. So, “spiritual” was equated with the clergy. See *Spirituality: A Brief History* 2nd ed. (Wiley-Blackwell, 2013) 2.

¹⁵ Cunningham, *At This Time and In This Place*, “Introduction,” 8.

¹⁶ Cunningham, “Preface,” xiii.

¹⁷ Our mission statement: Bryn Athyn College of the New Church serves as an intellectual center for all who desire to engage in higher education enriched, guided, and structured by the study of the Old Testament, New Testament, and theological writings of Emanuel Swedenborg. This education challenges students to develop spiritual purpose, to think broadly and critically from a variety of perspectives, and to build intellectual and practical skills. The ultimate purpose is to enhance students’ civil, moral, and spiritual lives, and to contribute to human spiritual welfare.

¹⁸ In *Arcana Coelestia* (Latin for “Secrets of Heaven”) paragraph 14 Swedenborg writes: “In all that follows the name the Lord is used exclusively to mean the Savior of the

world, Jesus Christ, and He is called the Lord without the addition of the rest of His names. Throughout heaven He is acknowledged and worshiped as Lord, since He has all power in heaven and on earth. This He also commanded when He said, ‘You call Me Lord, and you are right, for so I am.’ (John 13:13) Furthermore, after the Resurrection the disciples called Him Lord.” Unless otherwise noted, all references to passages in Swedenborg’s works are to paragraphs, not page numbers. For the sake of simplicity, I have not included complete bibliographic information for Swedenborg’s books. Such information can be found at <https://newchristianbiblestudy.org/> (which is a search engine for the Bible and Swedenborg’s works) and at <https://swedenborg.com/> (which is the website for the Swedenborg Foundation, a major publisher of Swedenborg’s theology).

¹⁹ See Emanuel Swedenborg, *Divine Love and Wisdom* 296 and 167.

²⁰ See Emanuel Swedenborg, *True Christianity* chapter 1 and *Divine Love and Wisdom* part one.

²¹ See *True Christianity* 56.

²² See *Arcana Coelestia* 10325 and *The New Jerusalem and its Heavenly Doctrine* 266.

²³ For a brief introduction to Swedenborg, see *A Scientist Explores Spirit: A Biography of Emanuel Swedenborg with Key Concepts of His Theology* by George F. Dole and Robert H. Kirven (West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 1997).

²⁴ I am indebted to two ministers who have explained the New Church concept of use: Willard D. Pendleton, *Education for Use: Basic Concepts* (Bryn Athyn, PA: Academy Publication Committee, 1985) and Erik E. Sandstrom, “What Do Angels Do?” *New Church Life* (vol. CI, nos. 3-5, 1981) 144-46; 181-83; 232-237 and also available at <http://www.heavenlydoctrines.org/dtSearch.html>.

²⁵ See Emanuel Swedenborg, *Marriage Love* 16:2, 183:7, 335; *Arcana Coelestia* 1470, and *Divine Love and Wisdom* 47.

²⁶ See Dennis Prager, *Happiness is a Serious Problem: A Human Nature Repair Manual* (New York: Regan Books [HarperCollins], 1998); Darrin McMahon, *Happiness: A History* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2006); Bertrand Russell, *The Conquest of Happiness* (1930 New York: Liveright, 1971).

²⁷ See Jeremy Bentham, *The Principles of Morals and Legislation*, (1789, New York: Hafner, 1948) and, for a more contemporary and mass-market account, Dan Savage, *Skipping Towards Gomorrah: The Seven Deadly Sins and the Pursuit of Happiness in America* (New York: Dutton [Penguin], 2002).

²⁸ See *Marriage Love* 1-10.

²⁹ See David G. Myers, *The Pursuit of Happiness* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992); Martin Seligman, *Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment* (New York: Free Press, 2002); Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci, “On Happiness and Human Potentials: A Review of Research on Hedonic and Eudaimonic Well-Being” *Annual Review of Psychology* (2001) 141. The eudaimonic tradition is based upon Aristotle’s moral philosophy (e.g., *Nicomachean Ethics*). The Greek term (*eudaimonia*) literally means “having a good spirit,” but is often translated as “happiness,” “flourishing,” “welfare,” or “prosperity.”

³⁰ See *Divine Love and Wisdom* 329.

³¹ See Emanuel Swedenborg, *Heaven and Hell* 311.

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- ³² Swedenborg reports that since the creation of human life is not confined to our earth, there are angels and spirits from other planets in the universe too. See his *Other Planets*, translated by George Dole and Jonathan Rose (West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 2018).
- ³³ See *Heaven and Hell* 485 and I Cor.15:44.
- ³⁴ See *Marriage Love* 6.
- ³⁵ See *True Christianity* 735:5.
- ³⁶ See *Marriage Love* 7.
- ³⁷ See *Arcana Coelestia* 454.
- ³⁸ See *True Christianity* 358.
- ³⁹ Mark J. Boda, *Return to Me: A Biblical Theology of Repentance*, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015) chapter 1.
- ⁴⁰ See *Arcana Coelestia* 8862:2, 8902:17; *The Doctrine of Life* 53, 65; *Divine Providence* 322; *True Christianity* 282.
- ⁴¹ Mark J. Boda, *Return to Me*, chapter 1.
- ⁴² *True Christianity* 509.
- ⁴³ See *The New Jerusalem and its Heavenly Doctrine* 159.
- ⁴⁴ See *Divine Providence* 94.
- ⁴⁵ Plato, *Republic*, G.M.A. Grube trans., rev. ed. C.D.C. Reeve, (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1992) 518c; emphasis added.
- ⁴⁶ R. Scott Daum conducted research in New Church theological works on the importance of habits and shared his findings with me (personal communication on May 17, 2018). Among the many passages on habits, some of the most significant ones are the following: *Arcana Coelestia* 961, 2300, 2910:4, 5724, 7398; *New Jerusalem and Its Heavenly Doctrine* 175; *Heaven and Hell* 277, 492; *True Christian Religion* 423.
- ⁴⁷ See, for example, *True Christianity* 403. Of course, Swedenborg is not the only person to write about the subject of rightly ordering our loves. The British scholar and author C.S. Lewis penned *The Four Loves* (Geogrey Bles, 1960) and it explores the same topic from a Christian and philosophical perspective.
- ⁴⁸ See Mic 7:1-2; Mt 3:8-10; 7: 16-20; 12:33; 21:43; Lk 3:8-9; 6:43-49; 13:6-10; Jn 15:2-8, 16; Is.37:31; Jer.32:19.
- ⁴⁹ *The Doctrine of Life* 1.
- ⁵⁰ See Emanuel Swedenborg, *Charity* 1, 13.
- ⁵¹ Not that our current world is all wickedness, for it certainly is not. Humanity has made progress on some moral and political issues, including reducing slavery and increasing freedom, and reducing poverty and increasing health. See *Progress: Ten Reasons to Look Forward to the Future* by Johan Norberg (Oneworld, 2016).
- ⁵² See *Arcana Coelestia* 1103.
- ⁵³ See *True Christianity* 422.
- ⁵⁴ *Heaven and Hell* 112.
- ⁵⁵ See *Divine Love and Wisdom* 331-333.
- ⁵⁶ See *Charity* 130-131.
- ⁵⁷ *Charity* 127.
- ⁵⁸ See *Heaven and Hell* 388.

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- ⁵⁹ *Heaven and Hell* 391.
- ⁶⁰ Willard D. Pendleton, *Education for Use: Basic Concepts* (Bryn Athyn, PA: Academy Publication Committee, 1985) 215.
- ⁶¹ *True Christianity* 457.
- ⁶² *True Christianity* 406.
- ⁶³ See *Arcana Coelestia* 4730:3, 8121; *Heaven and Hell* 360, 525; *Divine Love and Wisdom* 431; *Married Love* 16:3; *True Christian Religion* 422; *Charity* 158; *Divine Wisdom* XI.I.4.
- ⁶⁴ On practical piety, see Emanuel Swedenborg, *Apocalypse Explained* 325, *Heaven and Hell* 403, *New Jerusalem and its Heavenly Doctrine* 124. On the similarity between Swedenborg's teachings and those of Martin Luther regarding vocation, see "Places of Responsibility: Educating for Multiple Callings in Multiple Communities" by Kathryn A. Kleinhans in *At This Time and in This Place*, David S. Cunningham, ed. (New York: Oxford, 2016) 99-121.
- ⁶⁵ See *True Christianity* 580.
- ⁶⁶ See the articles in part three, "Vocation and Virtue," in *At This Time and In This Place: Vocation and Higher Education*, David S. Cunningham, ed. (New York: Oxford, 2016).
- ⁶⁷ *Married Love* 164.
- ⁶⁸ *Charity* 1, 13.
- ⁶⁹ *Charity* 158.
- ⁷⁰ *Doctrine of Faith* 14.
- ⁷¹ See *Charity* 158-172.
- ⁷² *Heaven and Hell* 389.
- ⁷³ *Arcana Coelestia* 4523.
- ⁷⁴ *Arcana Coelestia* 2996.
- ⁷⁵ *Arcana Coelestia* 2998, 3635, 3883, 4039.
- ⁷⁶ *Arcana Coelestia* 4404-4410.
- ⁷⁷ *Arcana Coelestia* 4411.
- ⁷⁸ See *Heaven and Hell* 41 and *Divine Providence* 190.
- ⁷⁹ *Heaven and Hell* 392.
- ⁸⁰ See *At This Time and In This Place: Vocation and Higher Education*, David S. Cunningham, ed. (New York: Oxford, 2016), 4.
- ⁸¹ *Divine Providence* 199-200.
- ⁸² *Divine Providence* 165.
- ⁸³ See *Married Love* 13:3.
- ⁸⁴ Of course, not everything that the world "needs" is truly what it needs too.
- ⁸⁵ *Divine Providence* 168.
- ⁸⁶ *Arcana Coelestia* 9035, 6125.
- ⁸⁷ *Arcana Coelestia* 5141.
- ⁸⁸ See *Divine Providence* 187.
- ⁸⁹ See Sandstrom, "What Do Angels Do?" *New Church Life*.
- ⁹⁰ See Pendleton, *Education for Use*, 216.
- ⁹¹ *Arcana Coelestia* 3661.
- ⁹² See *Spiritual Experiences* 734.
- ⁹³ See *Heaven and Hell* 229 and 499-511.

⁹⁴ *Arcana Coelestia* 3260.