

Swedenborg on Chance and Providence

Chance

On the surface, life can appear to be a bewildering array of random events, leading us to believe that chance operates so often in situations we face. Is there more to life than meets the eye?

We can be brought up with a jolt when something major happens in our life or that of a relative or close friend.

- ▶ Was it by chance that Aunt Mary was shopping in High Street when a car ran out of control seriously injuring her and several others?
- ▶ Was it chance that held me up in a traffic snarl that I missed a 3.30pm flight which crashed on take off killing everyone on board?
- ▶ Equally, was it chance that each one of the passengers killed decided to catch that particular flight?

These are difficult questions to answer.

Life's Coincidences

Yet, we also know that life presents many strange, intriguing and striking coincidences where people who are complete strangers to each other, or events show a connection or relationship which normally just should not happen. It is something which takes place far more often than statistically it should; so much so that increasingly people are taking them more seriously, and subjecting them to careful scientific study.

What are we to make of these events? Do we just dismiss their strangeness out of hand and say that it is all just random chance with nothing more to it? Do they leave us wondering, with the thought that there are more things going on in life than we realize? Do they indicate the evidence of a universal mind, causing and directing a chain of events to take place for some purpose which cannot be really understood? Whatever, it is undeniable that these things happen and that everyone has their own strange episodes to relate.

Finding Satisfactory Answers

It is very easy to pour cold water on synchronistic coincidences and to explain them away. The commonest type of coincidence is the 'it's a small world' where two people who know each other happen to meet in a remote situation, perhaps when away on a holiday, or two strangers discover they both know a third person. A cynic could justifiably maintain that meetings between friends who share similar interests and lifestyles is highly probable and that if you put any two people together, the chances are that they will quickly find areas in common. So what?

But there is a further ingredient which is not so easily explained. Many people have experienced a presentiment that they will shortly meet a certain person, or read a certain word, and it takes place. A common variety of this is the instance of picking up the phone on impulse to ring a friend, only to be met with the startling reception, "Goodness, I was just on the point of ringing you!"

Normally when these types of coincidence occur we just accept them as interesting and odd instances to tell one's friends; many of them arguably are quite trivial. Perhaps though, we can nip them too quickly in the bud, for there are many recorded examples of so-called coincidence which led to people being given help, assistance, and solutions they badly needed. We do not normally go looking for such events in our lives, and we could ask how many others we miss out on noticing?

The Role of Divine Providence

The descriptions by Emanuel Swedenborg of the Divine operating in human lives provide a very helpful basis for trying to cultivate the habit of seeing links in the way life unfolds and presents things to us. This includes events such as those apparently chance happenings mentioned at the beginning of this leaflet as well as synchronistic events. Swedenborg makes it clear that what is often called fate, fortune or coincidence is actually under the influence of Divine Providence. Most religious people recognise that God does exercise an overall care and guiding role over creation. Yet Swedenborg goes very much further showing that the beneficent care of the Divine operates in absolutely every detail, even the most seemingly insignificant and trifling of an individual's life.

The Divine Providence is universal . . . because it exists in every least thing to the most minute particulars; and not even a hair falls from the head, that is, nothing however small exists that has not been foreseen and provided for accordingly.

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The focus of this divine activity is primarily related to our eternal welfare, not our material comforts. All the time we are being presented with opportunities geared to assisting our spiritual growth, although we are unaware of this happening. Of course, it is very difficult for us to know fully what is significant and what isn't.

Chance vs Freedom

Very valuable peace of mind can be gained through an understanding that nothing happens merely by chance, and that all events in our lives, while not necessarily arranged by God, are completely and securely under the infinite Love and Wisdom of Divine Providence. We remain free to make our own interpretation of all the various events and happenings; and usually it is sometimes afterwards that we can begin to make some sense of it all. Life can be like continually looking at the reverse side of a tapestry - loose ends, knots and unconnected threads. We do need to have glimpses of the beautiful picture on the right side!

Providence and its Laws

Just as this world operates in accordance with natural, scientific laws which apply consistently and coherently, so there are corresponding laws which govern all aspects of our spiritual life. These laws are Divine Providence in action, which has for its end the eternal happiness of every person. The purpose of our existence here is to become sensitive to Divine Will and act in ways that are harmonious with the laws of Providence. When we do live in accord with the Divine plan, as we understand it to be, our lives will be blessed ultimately, if not at once. Yet, even if we do act contrary to these laws, the Divine works untiringly giving us countless opportunities to return to the stream of Providence. In this world we always remain open to the possibility of misfortune but that will not be detrimental to our eternal welfare if we respond positively to these apparently adverse circumstances.

What other goal can Divine Providence have than the reformation of the human race and its salvation?

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