

Correspondentia **A Neologism by Aquinas Attains its Zenith in Swedenborg**

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Abstract

This article performs a word history on *correspondentia*, a neo-Latin construction by Thomas Aquinas in Scholastic thought attempting to interpret Aristotle on the perception of truth, and then tracks succeeding circles of the neologism's utility. The new term "*correspondentia*" performs a crucial role in shaping correspondence theory in early modern hermetic thought and again in modern neo-Cartesian thought. A thread of shared discourse demonstrates an interconnected journey for the neologism from Aquinas through these contiguous conversations all the way to Swedenborg's sophisticated esoteric "science of correspondences." Typical of figures in Western esoteric and New Religious Movements, Swedenborg makes claims of ahistorical and direct apprehension of theosophical information regarding unseen realms, providing a useful case study for contextual analysis of how cultural transmission and interdiscursivity shape transcendental traditions. Swedenborg claims an ahistorical reception of his "science of correspondences" in his eight-volume masterwork *Arcana Coelestia* (1749–1756), where he lays out his first and most exhaustively demonstrated declarations of correspondences as the key to sacred scripture and to a vast bank of information on unseen realms. Analysis of primary sources and his environment of thought, however, betrays the Swedish polymath as deeply embedded in kabbalist, hermetic, and neo-Cartesian discourse for his impressive development of correspondence theory.

Keywords

Swedenborg; Aquinas; Kabbalah; Agrippa; Leibniz; correspondence theory

Wouter Hanegraaff claims that the general concept behind the technical esoteric term “correspondence”—that there is a spiritual counterpart to everything that is physical and specific channels of energies or powers link the immaterial and material realms, especially soul-body relations—dates to antiquity and can be found in numerous religious traditions, notably in India, China, and Mesoamerica, as well as in the more commonly referenced Greek and Egyptian esoteric traditions.¹ Nevertheless, *correspondentia* (and thus correspondence) as a word proper has a much more recent genesis. The term debuted in late medieval Scholastic theological discourse, framed for epistemological philosophy and originally associated with the Dominican Schoolmen Albertus Magnus (1193/1206–1280) and his pupil Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274). *Correspondentia* seems to make its inaugural appearance in discourse via Aquinas’s 1256 classic *De veritate*.² There Aquinas puts forth an adaptation of Aristotle’s theory of truth by defining it as a state in which there is complete agreement between the understanding held in the mind and the thing being apprehended—that when such a state of precise mutuality of agreement exists it is a correspondence. In his attempt to refine the description of ontological substance of the act of complete understanding of what is true, Aquinas needed a word that would convey such a precise mutuality of agreement that a dynamic metaphysical exchange occurs and locks the two together. He thus took the verb *respondere* (to respond) and creatively extended its meaning to obtain a mutuality of responding between two discrete entities.³ Adding the prefix “with” (*cum* squashed into “co”) and assimilating an extra “r,” he got *correspondere*: to correspond. A state of correspondence thus describes the dynamic unity of two discrete entities perfectly aligned in an exchange of mutual response.

Thereafter in Christian orthodox philosophy, *correspondentia* became the standard theory of truth and has been known as the classical, or correspondence, theory of truth and often contrasted with the coherence theory of truth, which focuses on how well a truth statement coheres with other statements that can

¹ Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “Correspondences,” *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, eds. Wouter J. Hanegraaff et. al (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 275–6. See also James Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Reference, 1993) 11–47, for a discussion of the “sympathetic magic,” the most common framework for operative properties of “correspondence” widely spread in ancient cultures.

² Thomas Aquinas, *Truth: Questions 1–9*, trans. Robert W. Mulligan (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1952), 1–7.

³ *The Oxford Encyclopedic Dictionary*, eds. Joyce M. Hawkins and Robert Allen (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 326. *Correspondentia* does not appear in such dictionaries of classical Latin as *A Latin Dictionary*, eds. Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969).

be made about the same matter.⁴ The technical philosophical and theological usage that originated in Scholastic thought has continued through to the present day in historical Christian theology and is still in active use, as evinced by such eminent theologians as Wolfhart Pannenberg (b. 1928) at the University of Munich, and Philip Clayton (b. 1955) at Claremont School of Theology.⁵

Of course, most English speaking people are unaware of this technical philosophical origin of a very common English word. After the eighteenth century the word “correspondence” increasingly became a common word in a related but more everyday sense for written communications between or among discrete entities (persons, businesses, governments), and today the word also serves a general utility for describing any basic correlation between two discrete things that share certain properties. But between Aquinas and today’s common uses of correspondence lies an important journey of function in three other major historical philosophical conversations germane to Western esotericism—important because the origin of *correspondentia* as a technical metaphysical term reveals something about why the term solidified as a productive conceptual word in subsequent hermetic, kabbalist, and neo-Cartesian discourse.

Aquinas’s *De veritate*, written at the University of Paris, created a tremendous controversy and was deemed by traditionalists as yet another Scholastic project that seemed to vaunt Aristotelian philosophy ahead of scripture as a way to do theology. The next two earliest extant usages of *correspondentia* seem to be two late medieval French writers: the poet Jean de Meun (c. 1250 – c. 1305) and the educator Robert of Basevorn (fl. 1322).⁶ Inge Jonsson originally concluded that de Meun and Basevorn are the earliest extant authors using the word *correspondentia*, but he was unaware of the term’s actual Dominican origins and did not realize the poet and educator were both operating in Aquinas’s Parisian context.⁷

From there the term gained legs as early modern Renaissance hermetic writers adopted it for their own purposes, with Cornelius Agrippa probably the first to bring it into play as one of the synonyms that several hermetic writers such as Ficino and Paracelsus were then using to describe the exchange of precisely matching and co-responding powers and energies between such

⁴ Jan Wolenski, “History of Epistemology,” *Handbook of Epistemology*, eds. Ilkka Niiniluoto, Matti Sintonen, and Jan Wolenski (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2004), 13.

⁵ See Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 1: 52–53; and Philip Clayton, *The Problem of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 31–34, 284–86, 351–53.

⁶ Lynn Wilkinson, *The Dream of an Absolute Language: Emanuel Swedenborg and French Literary Culture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 19n266.

⁷ Inge Jonsson, *Swedenborgs Korrespondenslära* (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1969).

entities as astral bodies, minerals, the human body, and the divine source. In his 1510 *Three Books of Occult Philosophy* Agrippa utilizes *correspondentia* as a category term for these metaphysical exchanges and relationships, and provides various tables of such correspondences.⁸ By the late Renaissance Francis Bacon (1561–1626), when providing a survey of the history of Western science in his 1605 *On the Advancement of Learning*, refers to this same metaphysical concept rife among the early Renaissance hermetic philosophers. Bacon describes it as correspondence theory, which indicates that correspondence had become the standard vocabulary term for hermetic metaphysics.⁹

The second subsequent current in Western philosophy in which correspondence theory played a critical function appeared with both rationalist and empiricist thinkers in the Cartesian dualist metaphysical discourse during the “Long Enlightenment” period. Starting in the generation after Descartes and wrestling with the Cartesian split between *res extensa* (extended or physical things) and *res cogitans* (thinking or mental things), such natural philosophers as Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677), John Locke (1632–1704), Nicolas Malebranche (1638–1715) and Gottfried Leibniz (1646–1716) explored ontological substance theories in their respective worldviews, in which correspondence theory became a strategic term to describe the relationship between the seen and unseen dimensions of the cosmos and of human beings. Descartes’s central project of comprehending the nature of relations between natural and spiritual—which he famously deduced as the only two categories of substance—led to attempts to characterize how these two discrete dimensions relate, especially concerning the relations between the activity of the mind and its physical house, the brain or body.

Descartes himself did not propose a philosophy of efficient causality between the two realms, but he is historically significant for framing so crisply the problem of the brain/mind split and of strict ontological dualism proper. Thus, in a new turn in both epistemology and ontology, often identified as a pivotal early foundation for modernism, Descartes started a long conversation in which correspondence theory was applied in different ways for framing how two apparently discrete realms or entities are coordinated, correlated, or dynamically integrated. Importantly, Descartes, who would consequently

⁸ Henry Cornelius Agrippa, *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*, trans. James Freake, ed. Donald Tyson (St. Paul: Llewellyn Publications, 1993), 223–27; 339–43.

⁹ See Francis Bacon, *On the Advancement of Learning*, ed. Aldis Wright (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1869), 45, for his discussion of it in 1605, and also his subsequent expanded discussion in 1623 in book three of *De augmentis scientiarum* (Amsterdam: Joannis Ravesteiny, 1662), 379 and 432.

come to be regarded as the philosopher most responsible for shaping a new epistemological methodology in philosophy that supplanted the propositional logical method of Scholasticism, was explicitly in dialog with the correspondence theory of truth first established in Scholastic thought. In a letter to French theologian Marin Mersenne (1588–1648), Descartes indicates that Scholastic correspondence theory did not even need to be dealt with because it was so obvious: “I have never had any doubts about truth, because it seems a notion so transcendently clear that nobody can be ignorant of it...the word ‘truth’, in the strict sense, denotes the conformity of thought with its object.”¹⁰

Furthermore, Western philosophers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were generally aware of the Scholastic correspondence theory of truth, and either implicitly or explicitly responded to it in various ways on both the rationalist and the empiricist sides which developed in modern philosophy up to Swedenborg’s moment. Yet, it must be noted that neither Descartes nor his first major interpreter, Spinoza, actually employ the term *correspondentia* for their own ideas, even though in subsequent discourse their thinking is commonly described via the term correspondence. Spinoza, who cites but one philosopher—Descartes—in his 1677 *tour de force* opus, *Ethica*, proffers his renowned monistic solution to Descartes’s dualism and clearly presents a correspondence theory for how the body and soul operate.¹¹ After Spinoza, however, the term correspondence becomes normative in the subsequent Cartesian discourse on how spirit and matter relate.

For example, Malebranche, a French Roman Catholic scholar and priest of the Oratory of St. Philip Neri, is best known for attempting to integrate Cartesian philosophy into Christian theology, especially Augustinian thought. In his 1674 masterwork, *Recherche de la vérité*, he employs the term correspondence multiple times to indicate the relationship between the mind and body and generally deploys correspondence theory, which is pivotal for his metaphysics of occasionalism. Malebranche does not posit a dynamically causal relationship between the spiritual and natural but one that is non-causal despite a precise correlation between the two.¹² Locke also demonstrates his familiarity with

¹⁰ Rene Descartes, “Letter to Mersenne: 16 October 1639,” in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. John Cottingham et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 3:138–40.

¹¹ For Descartes’s presentation of a correspondence proposition see especially his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, part 1, trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2003), or the Latin text at <http://www.wright.edu/cola/descartes/medl.html>; for the same in Spinoza see especially *Ethics*, part 2, scholium 2, trans. G.H.R. Parkinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) or the Latin text at <http://users.telenet.be/rwmeijer/spinoza/works.htm?lang=E>.

¹² F.R. Tennant, “Occasionalism,” *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, vol. 17, ed. James Hastings

the correspondence theory of truth in employing the term “correspondence” for how ideas are held in the understanding in his 1689 book-length landmark treatise, *Essay concerning Human Understanding*, generally regarded as his most significant philosophical contribution.¹³

Leibniz considered himself in explicit dialog with Descartes, Spinoza, Malebranche and Locke. His *New Essays on Human Understanding* was an extended response to Locke’s classic tome, though he held it back from publication upon learning of Locke’s death; it was not published until 1765, long after Leibniz’s own death (and thus after Swedenborg’s interpretive work was well underway).¹⁴ In both that volume and numerous other places Leibniz explicitly engaged correspondence theory and in particular attempted to improve Malebranche’s occasionalist correspondence concept, producing his well-known solution of pre-established harmony. This, too, is not a correspondential relationship entailing efficient causality, but Leibniz wanted to avoid the implication in Malebranche’s theory that would require God to be immanently active moment-to-moment, correlating all things in the two discrete realms. Leibniz’s pre-established correspondence (or harmony) is closer to Deistic thought, as it proposes a created order of being set at some primordial beginning point. Leibniz also theorized that there is a specific essence (predicate) and a manifestation (subject) that results in a correspondence for everything that exists. Therefore, as would be true for Swedenborg in his own way, Leibniz expressed correspondence theory both in terms of a larger metaphysical order and of all particularities in creation.¹⁵ But it would be Swedenborg of all the neo-Cartesians who would construct an efficient causality solving apparent Cartesian dualism by linking the material and immaterial planes of being, and he too would draw upon the late medieval neologism *correspondentia* to handle

and John A. Selbie (Whitefish: Kessinger Publishing, 2003), 444. For an excellent analysis of Malebranche’s metaphysics, see Andrew Pyle, *Malebranche* (London: Routledge, 2003), especially 96–130; and Jean-Christophe Bardout, “Metaphysics and Philosophy,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Malebranche*, ed. Steven Nadler (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2000), 139–64.

¹³ John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (London: T. Tegg and Son, 1836), 284.

¹⁴ Peter Remnant and Jonathan Bennett, “Introduction,” *New Essays on Human Understanding*, by Gottfried Leibniz (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1982), xi–xiii.

¹⁵ For Leibniz’s correspondence theory in his general metaphysics, see Ian Hacking, “A Leibnizian Theory of Truth,” in *Leibniz: Critical and Interpretive Essays*, ed. Michael Hooker (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 185–95. For Leibniz’s correspondence theory regarding particularities, see Michael Losonsky, “Leibniz’s Adamic Language of Thought,” in *Leibniz*, ed. Catherine Wilson (Burlington: Ashgate/Dartmouth, 2001), 437–56; Robert Merrihew Adams, *Leibniz: Determinist, Theist, Idealist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 68–72.

the conceptual job of a fully integrated ontology. Therefore, any reconstruction of the interdiscursive development of correspondence theory must take into account Swedenborg's relationship to these three preceding philosophical conversations: Scholasticism and the hermetic and neo-Cartesian authors who were themselves aware of the Scholastic correspondence theory of truth.

Swedenborg's Science of Sciences

Esoteric correspondence theory reaches a certain zenith in Emanuel Swedenborg's modern "science of correspondences," his signature input to Western esotericism and his most commonly cited contribution to the history of ideas, even if his voluminous amount of spiritualist information about the afterlife proved the most significant arena of his cultural reception. This article investigates the Swedish sage's claims in the opening paragraphs of *Arcana Coelestia* (1749) of an ahistorical biblical hermeneutic obtained entirely from heaven, a contention commonly repeated by the church organizations that use his works as foundational for their institutional lives. Indeed, he declares that he received the "science of correspondences" (*scientia correspondentiarum*) directly from God as *the* key for unlocking the bottomless treasure of deeper meanings hidden in the biblical text. His correspondence theory, however, also plays a pivotal role in his thought as a neo-Cartesian natural philosopher by producing his innovative and panentheistic integrative solution to the apparent chasm between spirit and nature, as well as the mind-body split. Correspondence theory became his Enlightenment-era Higgs boson in the long hermetic and kabbalist quest to frame exactly how the infinite finites itself and causally indwells materiality.

In considering the relationship between Swedenborg's natural science writings and his religious writings, it is worth noting the historical rarity of an intellectual biography that entails contributions of celebrated distinction to both fields of endeavor. Though many authors from the early modern period up to the present day have exhibited robust interest and aptitude in both science and religion, Swedenborg abides among a select group who have unmistakably influenced historical formation in both realms of endeavor and are recognized as historically noteworthy in each.¹⁶ Swedenborg's contributions to astronomy, mineralogy, and anatomy have been assessed as major by many historians of science. Historian of Swedish science Paivi Maria Pihlaja selects Swedenborg

¹⁶ Paracelsus, Jean-Baptiste Van Helmont, Isaac Newton, Gottfried Leibniz, Swedenborg, Joseph Priestley, and Teilhard de Chardin nearly exhaust the category, if the standard for science is not mere professional competence but historical significance in one or more natural science fields.

for a short list of Swedish figures on an “official ‘chain’ of pathfinders whose ideas proved to be of lasting value in the unveiling of scientific ideas.”¹⁷ The Swedish Nobel laureate Svante Arrhenius has detailed Swedenborg’s importance in the history of astronomy, and Princeton University historian of cognitive science, Charles Gross, has persuasively presented Swedenborg as a potent figure in the history of anatomical research.¹⁸ Overall, Swedenborg produced approximately 150 small and large works in at least a dozen science disciplines, and the sheer quantity and breadth of his decades in natural science analysis itself is of historical note.¹⁹ His contribution to the history of religion is not in any doubt, as he is a prominent figure of study in Western esoteric traditions and Western literature, and there is a world-wide church movement devoted to his presentation of Christianity. Such leading historians of religion as Sydney Ahlstrom, Eric Leigh Schmidt, Catherine Albanese, and Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke have all noted Swedenborg’s important role in shaping Western religious thought, especially in nineteenth-century England and the United States.²⁰

Even though Swedenborg was at times strikingly original in terms of re-shaping current paradigms into new ones, a historical analysis of his intellectual biography also exposes a considerable breadth of engagement with dozens of authors across numerous subjects in both science and religion. The state of scholarship on the question of sources for his science of correspondences in particular has virtually all of the confessional Swedenborgian church authors concluding that no earthly source was important, that all his insight came as revelation from beyond this world. Of the six secular scholars who have published on this specific topic, four think he did have important

¹⁷ Paivi Maria Pihlaja, “Sweden and *L’Academie des Sciences*,” *Scandinavian Journal of History* 30, no. 3–4 (September 2005): 271. For a concurring view, see Sten Lindroth, “Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772),” in *Swedish Men of Science*, ed. Sten Lindroth (Stockholm: The Swedish Institute, 1952), 50–58.

¹⁸ See Svante Arrhenius, *Swedenborg as a Cosmologist* (Stockholm: Aftonbladets Tryckeri, 1908), and Charles G. Gross, *Brain, Vision, Memory: Tales from the History of Neuroscience* (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1998): 119–36. See also Sten Lindroth, *Swedish Men of Science, 1650–1950* (Stockholm: The Swedish Institute, 1952): 50–58, for an excellent summary of Swedenborg’s science contributions.

¹⁹ For thorough presentations of Swedenborg’s scientific output, see Cyriel O. Sigstedt, *The Swedenborg Epic* (New York: Bookman Associates, 1952): 31–164; Alfred Acton, *The Life of Emanuel Swedenborg* (unpublished manuscript located at Swedenborgian Library, Pacific School of Religion, Berkeley, 1958).

²⁰ See Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 483–85, 600–04, 1019–24; Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 199–246; Catherine Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 136–44, 170–71, 303–11; and Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *Western Esoteric Traditions: A Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 155–72.

earthly sources, but no two of them agree closely on the shape of his sources. Ethan Allen Hitchcock believed he raided early modern and modern hermetic authors.²¹ Martin Lamm leans heavily on the Plotinian pseudo-Aristotle and on the Philonic tradition.²² Inge Jonsson emphasizes the neo-Cartesians, Nicholas Malebranche and Christian Wolffe,²³ and Marsha Keith Schuchard mounts a case for primarily kabbalist sources.²⁴ Regarding the other two scholars who are not confessional Swedenborgians, Ernst Benz sees Swedenborg as an inner-driven psychic not closely incorporating others,²⁵ and Wouter Hanegraaff postulates that the Swede's Protestant principle of *sola scriptura* kept him away from reliance on other texts (and thus authors) for his science of correspondences.²⁶ My recent study on the subject reconstructs the web of discourse (what Kristeva calls “interdiscursivity”²⁷) that was shaped around correspondence theory, beginning in the late medieval period and continuing into Swedenborg's milieu of natural philosophy. I will presently demonstrate that the Scandinavian theosopher was fully acquainted with multiple conversations around correspondence theory before he unveiled his own science of correspondences.²⁸

²¹ Ethan Allen Hitchcock, *Swedenborg, A Hermetic Philosopher* (New York: D. Appleton, 1858), especially 181–204.

²² See Martin Lamm, *Emanuel Swedenborg: The Development of His Thought*, trans. Tomas Speirs and Anders Hallengren (West Chester: Swedenborg Foundation, 2000), 95–112 for assessment of the *Theology of Aristotle* and 224–37 for Philo.

²³ See Inge Jonsson, *The Drama of Creation, Sources and Influences in Swedenborg's “Worship and Love of God,”* trans. Matilda McCarthy (West Chester: Swedenborg Foundation, 2004), 31–47; *Visionary Scientist: The Effects of Science and Philosophy in Swedenborg's Cosmology*, trans. Catherine Djurklou (West Chester: Swedenborg Foundation, 1999), 93–122.

²⁴ See Marsha Keith Schuchard, “Emanuel Swedenborg: Deciphering the Codes of Celestial and Terrestrial Intelligence,” in *Rending the Veil: Concealment and Secrecy in the History of Religions*, ed. Elliot R. Wolfson (New York: Seven Bridges Press, 1999), 177–208.

²⁵ See Benz, Ernst. *Emanuel Swedenborg: Visionary Savant in the Age of Reason*, trans. Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke (West Chester: Swedenborg Foundation, 2002), especially 151–61 and 351–62.

²⁶ Wouter Hanegraaff, “Swedenborg's Magnum Opus,” in *Emanuel Swedenborg's Secrets of Heaven*, vol. 1, trans. Lisa Hyatt Cooper (West Chester: Swedenborg Foundation, 2008), 63–129. This is a new title translation of *Arcana Coelestia*.

²⁷ See Mary Orr, *Intertextuality: Debates and Context* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 40–44, for an excellent discussion of Kristeva's conception of interdiscursivity.

²⁸ See James F. Lawrence, *And Speaking of Something Else: Biblical Allegoresis, Swedenborg, and Tradition* (PhD Diss. Berkeley, Graduate Theological Union, 2012), 59–102.

Swedenborg's Appropriation of and Contributions to Correspondence Theory

The year 1745 is when Swedenborg claimed he became a seer, a daily adventurer in the spiritual worlds, and a recipient of the divine commission to reveal the inner sense of scripture via correspondences; 1749 is when he issued volume 1 of *Arcana Coelestia* with the first fruits of the science provided directly from heaven. A close reading of ten mostly posthumously published texts dating to more than a decade before beginning the *Arcana* show him to be in various ways engaged with earthly texts and authors in his emerging correspondence theory. These begin with his commencement of *Oeconomia regni animalis*²⁹ in August 1736 (completed December 1739 and published 1740) and extend to the enormous work *Explicatio in verbum historicum Veteris Testamenti*³⁰ that occupied him until February 1747.

The earliest appearance of the term *correspondentia* on a Swedenborg manuscript page is in the third part of the *Oeconomia*, which presents theory and analysis from his prodigious multi-year pursuit in anatomical studies to locate empirically the seat of the soul in the human body—a relation that he calls correspondential.³¹ He also titles a chapter rubric “The Influx and Correspondence of the Sickness of the Body, Animus, and Mind,” in which he produces a neo-Cartesian explanation of how the immaterial bridges the seeming divide into materiality via the metaphysical terms he will often use in tandem—correspondence and influx—to frame the flow of power across discrete levels.

In 1741 he filled 79 pages in a notebook posthumously published in English in the mid-nineteenth century as *A Hieroglyphic Key to Natural and Spiritual Mysteries by Way of Representations and Correspondences*.³² Primarily notes of metaphysical speculation upon spiritual forces as causes of their manifestations in natural phenomena, from its opening lines Swedenborg analyzes how energies and forces—the dynamism of life itself—are all in correspondence with each other: motion, action, operation, conatus, will, providence, nature, the human

²⁹ Emanuel Swedenborg, *Oeconomia regni animalis*, 3 vols. (London: Francois Changuion, 1740–41). See also the English translation by Augustus Clissold, *Economy of the Animal Kingdom* (New York: New Church Press, 1955).

³⁰ Emanuel Swedenborg, *The Word of the Old Testament Explained*, 8 vols, trans. Alfred Acton (Bryn Athyn: Academy of the New Church, 1928–51). Original manuscript, located at the Royal Academy of Sciences in Stockholm, carries the simple title *Adversaria* but is often referred to as *Explicatio in verbum historicum Veteris Testamenti*.

³¹ Emanuel Swedenborg, *Economy of the Animal Kingdom*, 287.

³² Emanuel Swedenborg, *A Hieroglyphic Key to Natural and Spiritual Mysteries by Way of Representations and Correspondences*, trans. J.J.G. Wilkinson (London: William Newberry, 1847).

mind, the divine mind of God are all channels of correspondence.³³ This now classic hermetic notebook represents the clear beginning of Swedenborg's fundamental preference for the term *correspondentia* over harmony, concordance or analogy, and it becomes the key to relating the energetic power exchanges between the spiritual and natural worlds. *A Hieroglyphic Key* also contains his first extant hermetic engagement with ancient Egyptians, whose culture, he declares, revealed a remnant primordial knowledge about correspondences. Their glyphs, moreover, could be decoded through correspondence knowledge.

Swedenborg makes his crucial move from natural and spiritual philosophy toward sacred philology as a promising route for resolving Cartesian dualism in a second revealing unpublished notebook from the same period. Posthumously published, this lengthy engagement with Christian Wolff's thoughts on esoteric writing systems, such as Egyptian hieroglyphs, Chinese *figura*, and Hebrew, explores the manner in which sacred languages can express higher realities via correspondences.³⁴ Wolff, a disciple of Leibniz, was at that time the most celebrated living philosopher in Germany.

A third unpublished notebook (or series of notebooks) is the most helpful. These notebooks were posthumously published as *A Philosopher's Notebook*, which runs to nearly 600 pages of small script.³⁵ These pages represent his reading and study notes from the late 1730s through about early 1742 and are the mother lode of information about his sources in his transitional period. For neo-Cartesian correspondence theory, Spinoza, Malebranche, Leibniz, and Bilfinger are all extensively represented, but overt hermetic and kabbalist discourse is quite muted. Only four such references appear out of hundreds of citations, but they deal with substantial issues and his handling of them indicates familiarity with the terrain.

A fourth unpublished manuscript employing the term correspondence also comes from 1742: an extended reflection on the psychological ontology of the human mind and emotions. Clearly intended to comprise a major part of a new projected work on the interactions between anatomy and the soul, for reasons not entirely clear he elected not to publish it, though it was published posthumously.³⁶ In it the philosopher employs the term correspondence in a

³³ Swedenborg, *A Hieroglyphic Key*, 1–2.

³⁴ Emanuel Swedenborg, *Psychologica: Notes and Observations on Christian Wolff's "Psychologia empirica,"* trans. Alfred Acton (Philadelphia: Swedenborg Scientific Association, 1923).

³⁵ Emanuel Swedenborg, *A Philosopher's Notebook: Excerpts from Writers with Reflections and Notes,* trans. and ed. Alfred Acton (Bryn Athyn: Swedenborg Scientific Association, 1976).

³⁶ Emanuel Swedenborg, *Rational Psychology,* ed. Alfred Acton and trans. Norbert H. Rogers and Alfred Acton (Philadelphia: Swedenborg Scientific Association, 1950).

dozen places to characterize various dynamic psychological relations (between sight and imagination, thought and pure intellect, intentions and the soul). He also distinguishes between “natural” and “acquired” correspondence in multiple instances. Importantly for this study, he directly engages Locke regarding “the science of sciences” (i.e., correspondences).³⁷

A fifth relevant work to Swedenborg’s pre-theosophical development of correspondence theory is his 1745 *The Worship and Love of God*.³⁸ This work is significant not only for its several deployments of the terms correspondence and correspondences (his first published usage), but as his first foray into published biblical commentary, in which correspondence theory is used to discuss meanings of biblical texts (in this case the creation stories of Genesis). Though Swedenborg is still a far cry from the highly detailed and systematic use of correspondences for biblical exegesis that will appear in the *Arcana*, his first attempt to apply correspondence theory to sacred writ is found in *The Worship and Love of God*.

A final primary source of some interest is the catalogue of Swedenborg’s personal library that was put together when his estate was sold soon after his death.³⁹ The prodigious Swedenborgian researcher Alfred Stroh published an account of his discovery of the original catalogue of Swedenborg’s library more than 130 years after the sale occurred, and he issued his findings with considerable excitement in 1906.⁴⁰ The appendices in the catalogue contain at least a dozen reprints of well-known hermetic works and authors, including the collected works of Geber (721–815), Peter Kertzenmacher’s 1570 *Alchimia*, Borri’s 1666 *The Key to the Cabinet*, Helvetius’s 1677 *Vitulus aureus*, and Robert Boyle’s 1680 *Opera varia*. The General Church of the New Jerusalem (the most conservative Swedenborgian denomination) and the General Conference of the New Jerusalem in England (the oldest Swedenborgian denomination) have published items only in the front section as the contents of Swedenborg’s library.⁴¹ The catalogue’s title page, however, describes the appendices as books of exceptional beauty and rare quality, and there is every reason to conclude

³⁷ Swedenborg, *Rational Psychology*, 308–11.

³⁸ Emanuel Swedenborg, *The Worship and Love of God*, trans. Alfred Acton and Frank Sewell (Boston: Massachusetts New Church Union, 1925).

³⁹ Alfred H. Stroh, *Catalogus Bibliothecae: Emanuelis Swedenborgii* (Holmiae: Ex Officina Aftonbladet, 1907).

⁴⁰ Alfred H. Stroh, “Research Work on Swedenborgiana at Stockholm and Uppsala,” *New Church Life* (June 1907): 346–7.

⁴¹ See “Swedenborg’s Library: An Alphabetical List,” *The New Philosophy* 72, no. 1 (Jan–Mar 1969): 115–26; and Lars Bergquist, *Swedenborg’s Secret, A Biography*, trans. Norman Ryder (London: Swedenborg Society, 2004), appendix.

that the appendices were created as featured books from the estate—those that might be of greatest interest to collectors of fine books. No internal evidence whatsoever suggests any titles to be from any source other than Swedenborg’s library estate. Possessing such valuable books does not *ipso facto* reveal what Swedenborg thought regarding their contents, but it does attest to a certain level of interest in and familiarity with hermetic thought.

In sum, though ample evidence of much more than a passing acquaintance with hermetic and kabbalist thought exists in Swedenborg’s intellectual pursuits, from his student years up through his transition period from natural philosopher to spiritual theosopher, the roster of neo-Cartesian interlocutors is much more abundant in the final eleven-year period before the first volume of the *Arcana*. A close reading of notebooks in this period reveals a long process of philosophical engagement with neo-Cartesian dualism, in which he began using the term correspondence first in his philosophy of science to explain how the infinite finites into materiality. He next applied it in anatomical studies as a way to connect body and soul. Finally, and most prolifically, he pursued sacred philology as a metaphysical conduit through which the divine uniquely comes into higher human understanding via a correspondence of the Word.

Swedenborg’s Published Claims of Originality for Correspondences in the Bible

In 1750, as a preface to the second volume of the *Arcana* (written in Latin and published in London), either Swedenborg or his printer John Lewis commissioned John Merchant to translate a preface for the English-speaking public, which includes this testimony by Swedenborg:

In the First Part of this work fifteen chapters of Genesis have been explained, and the things contained in the internal sense have been stated...I know that few will believe that any one can see things that exist in the other life, and bring therefrom any report respecting the state of souls after death, for few believe in the resurrection, and fewer of the learned do so than of the simple....For some years I have been permitted to speak with spirits and angels every day, and to see amazing things there, which have never come into any one’s idea, and this without any fallacious appearance.⁴²

⁴² Swedenborg, “Preface,” *Arcana Coelestia* (New York: Swedenborg Foundation, 1975), 2:419–20.

Swedenborg's dramatic theosophical presentation of a hidden, multiplex inner sense to scripture, first articulated in the *Arcana*, is detailed through copious examples in Swedenborg's theosophical works. *Correspondentia* and forms of *correspondere* occur 3,644 times in Swedenborg's theosophical works, with the greatest usage in the *Arcana*. These are the technical terms the Swedish mystic uses to refer to two related relationships: that between the natural and spiritual worlds and that between the literal and spiritual meanings of scripture. Generally, his theosophy of correspondences can be grasped through nine specific claims, though not all are fully presented in the first chapter and some are much more greatly elaborated in subsequent works, most notably *De equo albo de quo in Apocalypsi, Cap. XIX* (1758), *Doctrina novae Hierosolymae de scriptura sacra* (1763), and *Vera Christiana religio* (1771).⁴³ The nine interrelated core claims are: 1) God maintains a special channel of revelation for the human race via the Word, whose correspondences create an inner sense to sacred scripture which is also an ontological metaphysical nexus between angelic consciousness and human consciousness; 2) only certain books of the Christian canon(s) are written in correspondences and form the Word;⁴⁴ 3) there is a primordial history of human knowledge and understanding of correspondences, as well as an ancient Word that preceded the current Jewish and Christian canons, but that text has passed away, and the earlier primordial human understanding of correspondences was gradually lost;⁴⁵ 4) a succeeding Word comprised of some of the books in the Judeo-Christian canon, also written in correspondences, was established by God to maintain the nexus between heaven and earth, but knowledge of the correspondential base of this historical Word has never been

⁴³ In addition to *Arcana Coelestia* (London: John Lewis, 1749), 1–4, see also *De equo albo de quo Apocalypsi* (London, 1758), *Doctrina novae Hierosolymae de scriptura sacra* (Amsterdam, 1763), n. 1–4, and *Vera Christiana religio* (Amsterdam, 1771), n. 189–95, 206–7. Swedenborg numbered his paragraphs, including frequent enumerated subsets of a paragraph, which makes references to Swedenborg's works uniform regardless of pagination in any translation, edition, or printing. Swedenborg's enumeration system will be used for all references to his works.

⁴⁴ Swedenborg taught a theology of “the Word” comprised of thirty-four biblical works (twenty-nine in the Old Testament and five in the New Testament), which he lists in *Arcana Coelestia* 10,325 (and also in *The New Jerusalem and Its Heavenly Doctrine* 266 and *The White Horse* 16). The rest of the Judeo-Christian canon does not contain an internal sense and is not part of “the Word,” though in varying degrees Swedenborg claims that the non-correspondential biblical material, especially parts of the New Testament epistles, contains pastoral value.

⁴⁵ Swedenborg refers in many places to the primordial “Most Ancient Church,” in which people commonly understood correspondences, but he nowhere devotes a full discussion to it, though in his final unfinished work, *Coronis*, he appeared to begin such a succinct overview. See *Arcana Coelestia*, 597, 895, 920, 2896, 3419, and 4454 for various descriptions of it.

known or revealed since before the production of any extant historical commentaries on scripture;⁴⁶ 5) with few exceptions, the inner sense of scripture is utterly recondite within the literal text of the Word and impossible to discern without a divine dispensation of revelatory consciousness, entailing open access to spiritual worlds and angelic discourse; 6) before Swedenborg the inner sense could not have been understood because the Jewish church was too carnally-minded, while the succeeding Christian church was too primitive in its early centuries and then too corrupt in later centuries to serve as an able recipient of the heavenly revelation necessary for perceiving it; 7) uniquely in the history of the world, Swedenborg himself has been granted a privileged state of unfettered access to spiritual worlds and angelic discourse for the express task of revealing the inner sense of scripture, which provides crucial reformations of current Christian thought; 8) history prior to Swedenborg, both primordial and recorded history, should be understood as comprising four ages or “churches,” and Swedenborg’s own interpretive work should be understood as constituting a fifth and final age, the New Church, which issues from this newly unveiled inner sense; 9) the actual unveiling of the inner sense is the second coming of the Lord—thus, not a physical advent as a visible personage but an advent of new spiritual perception (or reception of divine wisdom and guidance) giving rise to a new capacity for regeneration (which is salvation).

Swedenborg’s interpretation of the utilitarian role the *Arcana* played for the New Testament *parousia* only arose after the entire work was completed in 1757, which was also the year in which he believed he witnessed the Last Judgment in the spiritual world. In that aftermath he then believed that the greater significance of his disclosure of the inner sense of scripture was the second coming of Christ as a spiritual event in human understanding (not as a physical return of the person of Jesus). Therefore, the second coming, according to Swedenborg, was effected by the deployment of correspondence theory applied to the Word. Understood another way, knowledge of correspondences enabled the Word to be read for the first time in its fullness since it was written in correspondences by the divine, via unsuspecting human agents).

⁴⁶ See Swedenborg, *Arcana Coelestia*, 4–5; *Doctrine of Sacred Scripture*, 112; *True Christianity*, 192–93. The “Word” is Swedenborg’s consistent term for the books of the Judeo-Christian canon he claimed are written entirely in “correspondences,” which excludes several books of Jewish scripture and all of the New Testament epistles.

Kabbalist Traces in Swedenborg's Mature Theosophy

That Swedenborg was exposed broadly to kabbalah during his university days when he lived for six years in the home of the leading Swedish Christian kabbalist at that time, his brother-in-law Eric Benzelius (1675–1743), is no longer in any doubt.⁴⁷ The evidence, however, that he returned to kabbalist literature during the crucial period of 1737–1748 is thin. Swedenborg never mentions the Zohar specifically, nor does evidence exist that he engaged avowed kabbalist authors in this period, beyond any related currents that might be in play in his neo-Cartesian interlocutors. The only references to kabbalah more generally appear in four excerpts in *A Philosopher's Notebook*—twice in excerpts from Leibniz and twice from the seventeenth-century Dutch philosopher Hugo Grotius (1583–1645), of whom Leibniz was a seriously appreciative reader.⁴⁸ Though their relative weight is minuscule in the full body of extant material from this period of his work, these references do relate to substantial ideas of messianism and the nature of human freedom. Susanna Åkerman-Hjern remarks that the way Swedenborg broaches serious kabbalist thought as a matter-of-course indicates familiarity with the territory.⁴⁹ But the overall paucity of extant material on kabbalah and hermetism in this period argues against a high level of interest during Swedenborg's transition to spiritualist writing.

Schuchard claims the scarcity of evidence is due to secrecy on Swedenborg's part, and argues that three other pieces of evidence accrue towards a conclusion that Swedenborg seriously engaged in kabbalah training in midlife in the early 1740s in London.⁵⁰ But her speculative alternative scenario, though playfully suggestive, contains no evidence that cannot be explained easily in other ways and does not present a persuasive case. Much more convincing is the fact that Swedenborg saw himself as a thoroughly modern man on the leading edge of Enlightenment thought, yet not perhaps aware of how much hermetic and kabbalist cargo was riding in the hull of his massive theosophic ship. From a new historicist angle, however, a Leibnizian frame captures a sphere of interlocutors that gives something of an integrated picture. Swedenborg worked at

⁴⁷ See Lawrence, *And Speaking of Something Else*, 170–90.

⁴⁸ Swedenborg, *Philosopher's Notebook*, 160, 250, 303, 379.

⁴⁹ Susanna Åkerman-Hjern, “De sapientia Salomonis: Emanuel Swedenborg and Kabbalah,” in *Lux in Tenebris: The Visual and the Symbolic in Western Esotericism*, ed. Peter Forshaw (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 206–19.

⁵⁰ Marsha Keith Schuchard, “Emanuel Swedenborg: Deciphering the Codes of a Celestial and Terrestrial Intelligencer,” in *Rending the Veil: Concealment and Secrecy in the History of Religions*, ed. Elliot R. Wolfson (New York: Seven Bridges Press, 1999), 179–80.

the height of the European Enlightenment and contributed to it, and he was a man of his times in the sense of being far removed from today's postmodern passion for identifying debts and sources—indeed, for understanding context.

A number of ideas in Swedenborg's mature theosophy ring similar to kabbalist constructs—namely, correspondence theory itself; a metaphysics of divine influx; the primordial human as microcosm of the divine macrocosm; Hebrew as a purely divine representational language; three inner and hidden senses to the Hebrew scriptures; and an overarching theme of God's essential nature as gendered and of the creation itself as intrinsically gendered throughout. Of these, though, channels of divine influx and the microcosm-macrocosm paradigm are shared by hermetic constructs, and it has been established that the contents of Swedenborg's library evinced reasonably strong interest in hermetic literature. His claims for the sacred design of Hebrew can also be explained through another channel: the theory of sacred philology then popular among writers whom Swedenborg read. Michael Legaspi has demonstrated that a number of Christian European thinkers in seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century sacred philology conflated studies of the Egyptian writing system of hieroglyphics with the kabbalah of Hebrew.⁵¹

From its earliest developments in the *Sefer Yetzirah*, Jewish kabbalah constructed a radical understanding of the mystical properties of the Hebrew language as it is vocalized and with respect to the shape and even essence of the letters of its alphabet.⁵² Swedenborg makes identical claims for Hebrew, but he also has just as much material in his mature theosophy on the divine attributes of the ancient language system of the Egyptian hieroglyphs. It was to hieroglyphs that he turned in *An Hieroglyphic Key* when he first began shaping discourse on correspondences as a medium possibly operative with scripture. The idea of a transcendental divinity inherent in the Egyptian hieroglyphs is primarily hermetic (certainly not Christian orthodox or kabbalist), and its presence clarifies the shape of the intertext around sacred philology among such interlocutors of Swedenborg as Leibniz and Wolff. It is worth noting as well that though he does not broach the Chinese *figura* directly, which was also a darling of the sacred philology of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Swedish seer in his mature theosophy does claim that before the Hebrew

⁵¹ Michael C. Legaspi, *Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 21–22.

⁵² See Moshe Idel, *Absorbing Perfections: Kabbalah and Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 34–44, for a summary of the mystical aspects in kabbalist thought on the language of Hebrew.

“Word” existed there was an earlier “Word” among peoples in “Great Tartary” (roughly, today’s Tibet) that maintained the necessary metaphysical nexus between heaven and earth. So, all except the last in the list of kabbalah-like ideas can be found in broader hermetic and neoplatonic conversations in his milieu. The construct of a thoroughly gendered God and cosmos, however, has remained an intriguing comparative subject. It is difficult to locate the concept with similar details anywhere in world literature other than the Zohar.

Such a metaphysic assigns male and female gender values as constitutive of and intrinsic to both the transcendental and immanent divine, and it designates either male or female gender values to each and every part of the material creation in such a way as to put the energies of masculine/feminine complementarity in play at all times. Since the Zohar and the *Arcana* are each primarily exegetical works purporting to plumb the hidden depths of sacred writ via symbolic (or correspondential) readings of the plain sense of the text, the resulting interpretation always contains some element of gender values. Gershom Scholem maintains that the Zohar’s sefrotic tree generated significant innovations in Jewish theology via its motif of sexuality and gender as elemental in the divine emanation,⁵³ and Eliot Wolfson claims that this sexualized sefrotic lens applies to every biblical verse and leads to a remythologization of the divine realm as male and female, with a union or harmonization of masculine and feminine energies becoming the perceived good.⁵⁴ A thoroughly gendered God and creation also underlies Swedenborgian theosophy and metaphysics, in which substance and form are the indivisible constitution of being, which includes not only everything that exists but also the absolute divine itself before its move into phenomenal existence. Substance conveys the will—the affective energy—that is feminine, and form conveys the intellect—the discerning force—that is masculine.⁵⁵

The sefrotic tree is absent in Swedenborg, yet his metaphysics of substance and form performs the same gendered function. Substance is the propensity of force to which he ascribes the heart and the feminine. Form is the specific means of force; it is the structure of intelligence that enables the substance to achieve its purpose, and Swedenborg ascribes to it the mind and the masculine. In both the Zohar and Swedenborg’s biblical exegesis, every passage thus has the masculine and feminine in play as a fundamental structure of the inner sense.

⁵³ Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books), 229.

⁵⁴ Elliot Wolfson, *Along the Path* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 2. Idel calls it a “massive remythologization of the Biblical text.”

⁵⁵ Swedenborg, *Divine Love and Wisdom*, 29–30.

The spiritual theosophy that emerges in the act of interpretation always engages the eternal complementarity of the feminine and masculine. Antecedents besides the Zohar are difficult to locate and may not exist. A Christian kabbalist such as Böhme has a similar metaphysical framework, but there is no doubt his source for it was kabbalah.⁵⁶ The androgyne idea in Plato's *Timaieus* does not address the divine side, and in addition there is no concept of *non-human* aspects of creation as gendered. Neo-Aristotelians such as Maimonides and Spinoza parsed Aristotle's fundamental metaphysical categories of form and matter as corresponding respectively to God's intelligence and God's will—a basic construct that Swedenborg adapts, but whereas Swedenborg ascribes gender to them (female for substance and male for form), the others do not, nor did Aristotle. Thus, both Plato and Aristotle fall short of a radically gendered God, cosmos, and creation. Maimonides certainly influenced late medieval Jewish kabbalah, yet what inspired the author(s) of the Zohar to genderize the divine and creation in the Zohar is a matter of speculation.

I'm not aware of any other tradition that so explicitly genderizes all metaphysics as do kabbalah and Swedenborg, in both of which the gendered aspect of spiritual correspondence of the text is basic in biblical interpretation. When exegeting scripture, regardless of whether literal males or females appear in the plain text, every passage (and virtually every word of every passage) have potential feminine and masculine attributes strategically in play. Both Swedenborg and the Zohar are united in positing a metaphysics of the infinite divine, finiting itself through a supernal point that is itself the seat of complementary gender dynamics as creative force. Creation itself is thus a profoundly genderized unfolding of the divine into manifestation such that all things in creation are irreducibly gendered as a fundamental feature of the divine. The most just assessment of the evidence seems to be that though Swedenborg was not an avid or devoted student of kabbalah and did not pay close attention to it in his later transitional period, his acquaintance with kabbalah was at one time significant. The prominent element of gender dynamics in kabbalist thought remained in his storehouse of working constructs, to be reshaped (as he did with numerous other elements of historical discourse) so that it harmonized with his mature theosophy.

⁵⁶ Allison Coudert, *The Impact of Kabbalah in the Seventeenth Century: The Life and Thought of Francis Mercury Van Helmont* (Leiden: Brill, 1997): 96.

Conclusion

A word history study of correspondencia reveals a strategic journey through the three Western philosophies of Scholasticism, hermeticism, and neo-Cartesianism that culminates in some ways with Swedenborg's science of correspondences. Examination of Swedenborg's sources for his biblical hermeneutics of a science of correspondences, reputedly received only from heaven, reveals him to be profoundly embedded in relevant earthly discourse. He might indeed have been as psychic and objectively immersed in spiritual realms as he claimed to be, but his vast intellectual exposure and experience prior to his mystical experience conditioned how he interpreted his later spiritual states. Swedenborg saw himself as a thoroughly modern man riding on the leading wave of Enlightenment thought, and this disposition led him to look not to the past for answers but to his own age, where all the best answers were flowing forth anew. Importantly for those who study Swedenborg out of interest in his mystical states, it is helpful to remember that as a figure of the European Enlightenment he lacked the postmodern agenda of self-interrogation regarding his social construction. How much of his theosophy in general and of his science of correspondences in particular he gathered from his alleged otherworld travels cannot be investigated, but his debt to neo-Cartesian, hermetic, and kabbalist earthly sources for his vocabulary and conceptual frameworks can be established to a certain definitive extent.

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