THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO

JONATHAN EDWARDS

Edited by Stephen J. Stein

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

2007

8 Edwards as philosopher

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Rarely do accounts of early modern European philosophy mention Jonathan Edwards. His philosophical reflections are typically dismissed as inconsequential because, in the view of many historians of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophy, he does not play a significant role in the discussion of issues raised by his contemporaries. His arguments seem to be so dominated by concerns with Calvinist doctrinal disputes that he is usually understood as an outsider commenting on discussions thematized by Descartes, Locke, and others. Even when he is juxtaposed with thinkers such as Samuel Clarke, Anthony Ashley Cooper (third earl of Shaftesbury), or Francis Hutcheson, he is portrayed as espousing views that are hopelessly immersed in Puritan theology.

Such a marginalizing treatment of Edwards is unfortunate, especially considering how he develops an alternative approach to the way that much of modern philosophy is practiced. He is not alone in pursuing that alternative, for he shares with the Cambridge Platonist Henry More, Nicolas Malebranche, G. W. Leibniz, George Berkeley, and other "theocentric metaphysicians" the view that questions about existence, knowledge, moral judgments, and beauty can be resolved only by understanding things in terms of their place in the universe and their relation to God.[1] For such thinkers, Cartesian minds and simple natures, Hobbesian bodies, and Lockean simple ideas simply cannot be the starting points for a legitimate philosophy, because such insular entities are unintelligible apart from the network of relations that identifies them in the first place.

The key to appreciating the significance of Edwards's philosophy thus lies in noting how he treats all existence as relational. Even God's existence, in terms of which all other existence is intelligible, must be understood as an "agreement" or "consent" that Edwards calls *excellency*. By posing the fundamental concept of philosophy in terms of differentiation and association, Edwards reorients the ways in which traditional questions about reality, God, freedom, personal identity, morality, and beauty are framed.

On the surface, Edwards's way of thinking does not seem to be substantially different from the Neoplatonism with which it is often associated in that it locates the source of existence and intelligibility in God. But as is made clear in the case of Spinoza, if God is understood as a substance from which creation emanates, then all things other than God are related to him merely as modes or expressions. That, for many moderns, is not enough of a separation to explain how either God or human beings can be understood in moral terms. So the task faced by Edwards and others like him is to show how God and creation can be ontologically distinct even if creatures are unintelligible apart from God and one another.

To do this, Edwards shifts away from the traditional view of God (*ens entium*) as a being who is somewhat analogous to other beings toward a view of God as the activity of differentiation and association by which all beings are constituted in the first place. Following the Spanish Jesuit Francisco Suárez, Edwards interprets the *ens* of *ens entium* (the being of beings) not as *a* being (a noun) but as the activity of being (a participle) whereby beings become beings.[2] This shift incorporates features of More's claim that God is the space in which everything exists and Malebranche's claim that God is the place of minds.[3] Edwards is especially intrigued by More's claim that, apart from such a space, minds cannot be differentiated from one another. For More, this space cannot be corporeal because it is the principle of corporeal differentiation. Since space itself cannot be differentiated from anything, it is the necessary, eternally existing principle for all else and thus must be God. Edwards agrees: "It is self-evident, I believe, to every man, that space is necessary, eternal, infinite and omnipresent. But I had as good speak plain: I have already said as much as that space is God."[4] Even to try to imagine God's non-existence is to imagine his not being in this space; but this simply affirms his existence by affirming the space in which he is identified in the very attempt to doubt his existence. That is why Edwards opens his early essay "Of Being" (1721) with the proclamation, "That there should absolutely be nothing at all is utterly impossible."[5] To say that "nothing exists" is to utter the "greatest contradiction" and "horrid nonsense," for even *nothing* is intelligible only in relation to something. "Here," Edwards declares, "we are run up to our first principle," in that the divine activity of differentiation and association is the foundation of all intelligibility and existence.

In contrast to More and Malebranche, however, Edwards does not describe God as a substance that can be thought of as logically prior to its activities or relations. Instead, for Edwards, the identity or existence of God

(as well as any other thing) consists in his actions and relations and is determined by his nature for all eternity to be what he is in acting exactly as he does. The relations and actions in terms of which all things (including God) exist are not simply predicated of them as subjects, for their being subjects or substances (even as substrata of qualities) is unintelligible apart from the relational properties that define them or the predicates that describe them.[6] So even God must be understood in relational terms; and that, Edwards recognizes, requires a new approach to how we understand existence.

The basis of this new strategy for defining all identity and intelligibility is the "consent of being to being, being's consent to entity."[7] Such consent constitutes what Edwards calls excellency, the inherent agreeableness, harmony, equality, and proportionality of things with one another. Drawing on a similar point made by Malebranche, Edwards acknowledges that the more extensively a being agrees with "being in general" (God and nature together) by plugging into the divine network of ideas, the greater is its excellency and the more firmly established is its existence. But in contrast to Malebranche's doctrine of "seeing all things in God" (where God is still considered a subject distinct from the vision), Edwards's doctrine of excellency assumes that God is the principle whereby the vision's differentiations and associations occur. Any moral or aesthetic harmony that we perceive in the world is thus not accidental, for our perception of nature itself is part of its inherent, divinely established intricacy and order.

This focus on what seems to be an aesthetic basis for existence has some resonance with Shaftesbury's thought as well. But in contrast to the author of the *Characteristics*, Edwards proposes that things can be "agreeable" only if existence itself is understood relationally. Such an insight, he recognizes, marks his account as truly novel. As he proclaims at the beginning of "The Mind," "There has nothing been more without a definition than excellency, although it be what we are more concerned with than anything else whatsoever. Yea, we are concerned with nothing else."[8] Our engagement with the world, he explains, is centrally concerned with excellency because it is not simply a moral or aesthetic gloss on experience. Instead, it is the principle by which things are differentiated from and associated with one another in our consciousness, in their relations with other things in nature, and in their ultimate dependence on God. It is in this sense that the identity and existence of everything is defined by its necessary agreement with an other. When Edwards later writes, then, that "Being or existence is what is necessarily agreeable to being," he reinforces the point that the existence of a thing (like its excellency) is intelligible only in terms of its relations.[9]

This doctrine of excellency is Edwards's most important contribution to modern philosophy, because it – unlike even Leibniz's monadology, to which

it is strikingly similar – not only characterizes all relations as intrinsic, but also reveals why all things must be linked to everything else. By emphasizing how identity itself is based on the activity of differentiation and association, Edwards replaces efforts to ground philosophy on doubt, simplicity, and atomistic individualism with a new "sense of the heart" regarding the harmonious unity of nature and experience.

To come up with such an insight, Edwards draws on a variety of figures.[10] From the seventeenth-century followers of the Renaissance logician Peter Ramus (such as William Ames and Alexander Richardson), Edwards retrieves resources for treating ontological consent as an activity best described by noting how terms (subjects and predicates) are unintelligible apart from how they function in propositions.[11] Puritan divines (for example, Richard Baxter) and the Dutch Calvinists (Franco Burgersdyck and Adrian Heereboord) provide Edwards with an explanation of how the loss of an innate appreciation of the integrity of nature (in original sin) is schematized in Scholastic metaphysics.[12] From More and Malebranche's English expositor John Norris, Edwards learns how to adapt the fashionable terminology of Locke, Newton, and Hutcheson to expose the fragmented character of the world they describe and their consequent marginalization of God.[13]

However, by reinstating God at the heart of philosophical reflection, Edwards does not simply repeat the standard claim that all things depend on God. Rather, by characterizing existence in terms of excellence and describing God in plural terms, he shifts the focus of the doctrine of divine sovereignty away from an account of how a transcendent God relates to autonomous creatures to an account of the meaning of existence as relational.[14] It is thus crucial, he argues, to begin with the recognition that "in a being that is absolutely without any plurality, there cannot be excellency, for there can be no such thing as consent or agreement."[15] Accordingly, the identity and unity of God require the harmony or agreement of the persons of the Trinity, because for something to be identical to or one with something else, there must already be a plurality. Identity cannot be understood merely in terms of an isolated subject or predicate, for to say of something that it is identical to or one with itself (for example, *X* is *X*) is already to place it in a propositional relation. The first *X* is said to be identical to or one with the second *X* in virtue of their differentiation and association in the proposition. Apart from its place in the proposition (and thus in a network of relations), *X* by itself is unintelligible. Indeed, apart from that place, "it" would not even be seen as an it.

This distinctive privileging of a logic of propositions over a logic of predicates is a legacy of Edwards's training in Ramism.[16] It explains how his characterizations of God and nature as intrinsically communicative are modeled on a view of language in which terms are meaningful not as independently

intelligible elements that combine to form a language but as functions whose meanings are determined only because of their differences from and associations with one another. As such, the Trinity and the Book of Nature are not *comprised* of entities; rather, the persons of the Trinity, things in the world, and creation as a whole are entities in virtue of their trinitarian and communicative character. Unlike his contemporaries who attempt to describe nature apart from God or reduce it to simple components, Edwards thus proposes that perceived regularities in the physical world are ultimately due to the divinely established connections among things.

Divine sovereignty – God's intimate involvement in every detail of existence – must then be understood not as the control of one entity by another but as the activity in terms of which entities (God and creatures alike) become intelligible. Such an understanding is central in Edwards's doctrines about the nature of reality, God's ongoing role in creation, human freedom, personal identity, and moral responsibility. To assume, as many commentators do, that Edwards confronts such issues from the same perspective as Malebranche, Locke, and others who do not have a relational ontology is to miss Edwards's creative resolutions of those issues. For even when he adopts the vocabulary of those with whom he differs, he transforms the questions at hand, often concluding that the problems are simply the result of having assumed a non-relational perspective in the first place.

IDEALISM, OCCASIONALISM

In another early essay, "Of Atoms" (1721), Edwards proposes that for something to be a body means that it is solid, and to be solid means to be resistant to division or displacement.[17] The existence of a particular body is thus a certain, determinate resistance to division or displacement. But the resistance of a particular body cannot be explained by saying that it is of the essence of matter or bodies in general to resist division or displacement, for that would not explain how matter acquires such power or why this particular body exists. If matter is understood (as with Hobbes) as its own source of power and motion, then "no matter is, in the most proper sense, matter," because the determination to resist or move in one way or another cannot be resistance or motion itself.[18] A similar objection can be raised against the Cartesian account of extension, for something must account for the resistance and motion of determinate bodies. As More points out, that cause is not extension itself but rather God.[19] To this, Edwards adds the point that if solidity or resistance is "from the immediate exercise of God's power," then solidity is "nothing but the Deity acting in that particular manner in those parts of space where he thinks fit."[20] Since parts of space become identified as parts in virtue of God's exercise of power, the "very substance

of the body itself" must be "nothing but the divine power, or the constant exertion of it."[21] The existence of determinate bodies thus consists in nothing other than God's constant exercise of differentiation and association.

This position repudiates Locke's claim that some "unknown" substance supports solidity and other qualities, for as Edwards remarks, "there is no such thing as material substance truly and properly distinct from all those that are called sensible qualities."[22] If, as Locke says,[23] sensible qualities are powers in substances to cause in us certain sensations, then we have to ask why a substance would have such powers in the first place and why those powers would affect us as they do. Edwards answers such questions by his doctrine of a creating and coordinating God whose activity makes the existence of material substances superfluous. Indeed, if all sensible qualities are the direct result of divine activity, then we can justly say that "there is no proper substance but God himself" (with regard to bodies at least).[24] In creating and maintaining all things according to the patterns of his continuous activity (that is, laws of nature), God is literally the substance of all things and "as it were the only substance, or rather, the perfection and steadfastness of his knowledge, wisdom, power and will."[25] In fact, this is why God, as the *space* in which all things are differentiated and associated, is "as it were" the "common substance or subject" of all bodies.[26]

To be sure, Edwards's identification of God with space might strike us as highly unorthodox – at least until we realize that the space to which he refers is not some identifiable thing but rather that which substantiates identification itself through the positing of such identities in relation. As he encapsulates it,

> The secret lies here: that which truly is the substance of all bodies is the infinitely exact and precise and perfectly stable idea in God's mind, together with his stable will that the same shall gradually be communicated to us, and to other minds, according to certain fixed and exact established methods and laws: or in somewhat different language, the infinitely exact, precise and stable will with respect to correspondent communications to created minds, and effects on their minds.[27]

God is the substance of all bodies precisely because he is the will that there be a stable order of communicated resistance. In willing the resistance (that is, identification) of any body, God simultaneously wills the whole network of bodies in the world. Furthermore, this differentiation of bodies occurs in terms of *perceived* differences in resistance and thus must depend on an activity of mind; otherwise neither individual bodies nor the whole corporeal order of the world would be *identifiable* at all. To think of a body's existing apart from such relations would be to imagine it apart from the (mental)

differentiations and associations that determine it as this or that entity; and that, Edwards suggests, is simply unintelligible. Accordingly, "[t]he world exists only mentally, so that the very being of the world implies its being perceived or discovered."[28] Apart from its identification as this or that world, there is no "it" to exist. Since the things in that world are identified in the very act of their being differentiated from and associated with other things, their existence as *those* things depends on their being perceived in that specific way. Identity *and* existence are thus products of the same differentiating act of consciousness.

This way of framing Edwards's idealism indicates how he avoids occasionalism. To be sure, he (like Malebranche) proposes that all natural events depend immediately on God as the cause of their existence. He further argues that, even though the existence of a particular thing is intelligible in terms of its relations to other things (for example, as effects), only God can be said to cause the thing to exist. "In natural things," he writes, "means of effects in metaphysical strictness are not the proper causes of the effects, but only occasions."[29] And even as "occasions," prior events have no causal effect on subsequent events, since "the universe is created out of nothing in every moment."[30] But things are not "conserved" by God, nor does he "concur" in their existence, for that would imply that things have some (if only minimal) autonomy in virtue of having identities apart from God's activity. Rather, God simultaneously wills both the identities and existence of things by differentiating and associating them with one another according to the "fixed, determinate, and unchangeable rules" that we call laws of nature.

Edwards's idealism thus differs from Neoplatonism in that it does not assume that Unity or the One is the source of all being and that Mind (*nous*) is an emanation of the One. Instead, it treats identity as the product of differentiation and association (that is, of consciousness) even as it refuses to assume that there is some distinct subject or substance that engages in such activity. So when Edwards writes "nothing has any existence anywhere else but in consciousness," or "[i]t is manifest that there can be nothing like those things we call by the name of bodies out of the mind, unless it be in some other mind or minds," he (like Berkeley) does not mean that perception merely bestows existence on an already possible being.[31] Because a being is possible only in virtue of its differential place in a network of actually perceived relations, it has no merely possible existence. Rather, its actual existence depends on its being supposed as a feature of the order of things, even if it is not perceived by any created mind.

> It may be asked, how do those things exist which have an actual existence, but of which no created mind is conscious – for instance the furniture of this room when we are absent and the room is shut up and no created mind perceives it – how do these things exist? I answer, there has been in times past such a course and succession of existences that these things must be supposed to make the series complete, according to divine appointment of the order of things; and there will be innumerable things consequential which will be out of joint – out of their constituted series – without the supposition of these.[32]

To think of a being as different than it is (even in the smallest detail) would not be to think of *that* thing nor the universe in which it exists: "yea, the whole universe would be otherwise."[33] It could exist in no other universe, because its identity depends on its relations with other things in its universe. Those relations are perceived within a series of ideas communicated by God to created minds. Speaking "more strictly and metaphysically," then the identities of things depend not only on their being perceived by minds but also on their being perceived "according to [God's] own settled order and that harmony of things which he has appointed." That is, the perception of a certain thing is the perception of the thing as it relates to "the whole system and series of ideas in all created minds."[34] To the extent that a created mind perceives something without understanding how it fits within the divine economy, it does not really perceive that thing at all. To the extent that a mind fails to appreciate the order and harmony of things – and therefore the ways in which things are differentiated and associated – it fails even to be a mind.

This surprising way of speaking about minds indicates how, by saying that God communicates ideas to created minds, Edwards does not suggest that created minds are substances that exist independently of the communication. Indeed, Edwards carefully avoids describing even God as *a* substance; rather, God is *the* substance of the communication. As with Leibniz, Edwards claims that spirits may "more properly" be called beings and are "more substantial" than bodies (which "have no substance of their own").[35] But spirits are no less dependent on God for their existence than bodies, for "what we call spirit is nothing but a composition and series of perceptions, or an universe of coexisting and successive perceptions connected by such wonderful methods and laws."[36] However, a spirit or mind is not a Humean bundle of discrete perceptions, because the very differentiation of perceptions is itself merely the patterning of relations whereby things are identified. Rather, the spirit or substance of a thing – that in terms of which the thing exists – is the space or "universe" in which it is thought. That is why "those beings which have knowledge and consciousness are the only proper and real and substantial beings, inasmuch as the being of other things is only by these."[37]

To be a thing at all is to be an object of mind. "All existence is perception," for apart from a thing's identification, "it" has no existence.[38]

When Edwards concludes, then, that "spirits only are properly substance,"[39] he means that the substance of things consists in their mental or spiritual differentiation and association, not that the principle of differentiation itself is an already differentiated and identifiable substance. Since the substance of things is what is responsible for their identity, it makes no sense to inquire into the identity of the principle of identity. That is why no thought can be explained in terms of the activity or "substance" of a created soul, for the creation of a thought is nothing other than the differentiation of properties that constitute the soul in the first place. The substance of the soul must therefore be explained in terms of the principle of differentiation itself, namely, God.

> The mere exertion of a new thought is a certain proof of God. For certainly there is something that immediately produces and upholds that thought; here is a new thing, and there is a necessity of a cause. It is not antecedent thoughts, for they are vanished and gone; they are past, and what is past is not. But if we say 'tis the substance of the soul (if we mean that there is some substance besides that thought, that brings that thought forth), if it be God, I acknowledge; but if there be meant something else that has no properties, it seems to me absurd. If the removal of all properties, such as extendedness, solidity, thought, etc. leaves nothing, it seems to me that no substance is anything but them.[40]

Because a created spirit has no properties other than its activities, and because those activities are the immediate expressions of God's differentiation and association of objects, created spirits are immediate expressions of God's activity. Unlike in Spinoza's metaphysics, however, spirits are substantial and express God's creative activity to the extent that they are the principles by which their objects are differentiated and related to one another (for example, in terms of resistance). In this way, spirits are more real and substantial than bodies because they express the will to uniform differentiation – something precluded by Spinoza's concept of substance as conceived only through itself.[41]

PERSONAL IDENTITY, FREEDOM, KNOWLEDGE

Edwards's account of mental substance as an expression of God's will presents a problem for explaining the continuity of the self and the legitimacy of moral responsibility. For if, as he says, "we are anew created every moment" and "all created identity is arbitrary," then the personal identity or continuity of the self is due to relations of memory and consciousness that God establishes "entirely at his will and pleasure."[42] But if God wills anything at all, it must be a certain thing that he wills. And if he wills that there be a certain self, he creates the basis for knowing with certainty all that can be said of it.

> There must be a certainty in things themselves, before they are certainly known, or (which is the same thing) known to be certain. For certainty of knowledge is nothing else but knowing or discerning the certainty there is in the things themselves which are known. Therefore there must be a certainty in things to be a ground of the certainty of knowledge, and to render things capable of being known to be certain. And this is nothing but the necessity of the truth known; or its being impossible but that it should be true; or, in other words, the firm and infallible connection between the subject and predicate of the proposition that contains that truth. All certainty of knowledge consists in the view of the firmness of that connection. So God's certain foreknowledge of the future existence of any event, is his view of the firm and indissoluble connection of the subject and predicate of the proposition that affirms its future existence. The subject is that possible event; the predicate is its future existing; but if the future existence be firmly and indissolubly connected with that event, then the future existence of that event is necessary.[43]

A person's identity as a certain being is determined (that is, made certain) by his or her actions and relations to other things in the world. Those predications are not "imposed on" the self, for there is no self apart from the relations or predications that identify it. To the extent that nothing restricts someone from acting in accord with his or her own personality, character, or desires, he or she is free. Edwards dismisses as absolutely incoherent the objection that this does not allow someone the freedom to choose which desires he or she has, for that would mean that someone could desire what he or she does not desire.[44]

Like Hobbes and Locke, Edwards proposes that freedom consists in being able to do what one wants.[45] This rejects the Arminian view that free will requires self-determination and the spontaneity of "indifference," for as Edwards argues, such a view suggests that either our acts of will are caused by other acts of will (and thus generate an infinite regress) or are uncaused and arbitrary (and are thus not acts for which we are responsible). Our actions, he maintains, are not distinct from our choices or volitions because "we are *in them*, i.e. our wills are in them; not so much because

they are from some *property* of ours, as because they are our *properties*."[46] In willing that there be a certain arrangement of objects in the world, we situate ourselves in relation to those objects and define ourselves in terms of our actions. As such, our actions are our properties. Through them, we passionately and affectively differentiate and associate things in the world. But the will that there be such a will to differentiation and association – that is, the will that we exist – simply is not ours but rather God's.

This seems to imply that God determines us to will as we do and makes it impossible for us to will otherwise. But to speak this way is to assume that "we" could exist otherwise than we do or that we are constrained to act in a certain way. Edwards insists, however, that there is no "us" to be constrained or necessitated prior to the actions that differentiate us from or associate us with one another and the world. Of course, as things in the world, we are determined by natural causes; and in that sense, it makes sense to talk about "natural necessity." We can even speak of the "moral necessity" of choosing to act in a certain way, if by that term we mean acting in a certain way based on our motives or inclinations.[47] But the fact that we have such inclinations in the first place is intelligible only because of the "philosophical" or "metaphysical" necessity that we have determinate identities that embody our specific actions and relations. To will other than we do would mean to *be* other than who God has determined us to be. For were it not for that determination, we would have no identities at all. So to be free means to be able to do what we are determined to do, namely, differentiate and relate things in the world in a way that is consistent with comparable acts of others.

In short, our actions are determined by God because we are determinate beings, and for all eternity God knows our thoughts and actions with certainty because he knows and wills that we be the *certain* beings that we are. This does not undermine our freedom, because it does not constrain our ability to act as we want in the world. In fact, it highlights our participation in God's creative process, in that we are determined to be who we are in virtue of willing that things in the world be related in determinate ways.

For Edwards, those actions and relations are our basis for being able to justify our claims to have knowledge of the world. Apart from such a basis, we would open up the possibility for skepticism by assuming that things we know might be intelligible apart from the ideas by which they are known. That is why Edwards rejects Locke's definition of knowledge by claiming that "knowledge is not the perception of the agreement or disagreement of ideas, but rather the perception of the union or disunion of ideas."[48] When we know something, we do not first perceive an idea and subsequently associate or dissociate it with another; rather, we perceive the idea in terms of its association with another. In other words, in knowing something, we perceive

not only *that* it is associated with something else but also *why* and *how* it is associated in virtue of God's determination of reality in and through us. We thus have access to truth by understanding the fixed sequence of our ideas as existence itself: "In things that are supposed to be without us, 'tis the determination and fixed mode of God's exciting ideas in us. So that truth in these things is an agreement of our ideas with that series in God. 'Tis existence, and that is all that we can say."[49] Truth, in short, is the agreement of our ideas with existence; and the knowledge of truth is possible precisely because existence is a divinely willed series of determinately communicated ideas, not a collection of disconnected facts that exist apart from the expressions of God's will that constitute our minds.

Therefore, far from being alienated or disinterested intellects whose contacts with the world are limited to "speculative knowledge," we are – or at least can be, if we would simply reject our penchant for experiencing things as autonomous and fragmented – intimately engaged in the determination of the objects of our knowledge. That is why the "sense of the heart" thematized in Edwards's metaphysical idealism extends "to all the knowledge we have of all objects whatsoever. For there is no kind of thing that we know but what may be considered as in some respect or other concerning the wills or hearts of spiritual beings."[50] For fallen humanity, objects seem to be intelligible apart from their being perceived. But the regenerate recognize all things as necessarily mental or spiritual because, for them, all things are perceived in terms of the will that they be understood as *those objects in those relations*. In virtue of God's will that we have the ideas we have, we are linked intrinsically to the objects we perceive as their principles of differentiation and association. To the extent that our actions embody the harmony of objects of our experience with one another, we express the integrity and beauty of creation. In this way, our very existence as expressions of God's will is the basis for moral and aesthetic judgments.

MORALITY, AESTHETICS, PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY

Edwards's theories of morality and aesthetics, like other aspects of his thought, depend on his doctrine that the excellency of existence consists in the agreeableness or "consent" of things to one another. Along with Shaftesbury and Hutcheson, Edwards seizes on the analogy between virtue and beauty, and like Berkeley he argues that our actions are useful and promote happiness because of their harmony with the divinely established order of nature.[51] Like them, he defines virtue not in terms of pleasure or utility but in terms of benevolence. In his view, however, benevolence does not mean sympathizing with another's plight or even simply following our conscience,

for by placing ourselves sympathetically in the situation of others, we engage in a form of self-love and validate the propriety of thinking of others apart from their place in the order of creation. Apart from that order, no individual is intelligible, so the will to identify with an individual is a misdirected effort that reinforces the presumed autonomy of individuals.

Even in the case of "natural virtue" – where our conscience allows us to judge things not in terms of how they relate solely to ourselves but in terms of their fitness in the order of nature – nothing truly justifies following our conscience, because there is no guarantee of the uniformity of nature. Apart from such a guarantee, dictates of conscience or moral sense can provide only practical guidelines for behavior, but they do not have any real moral authority because they cannot provide a rationale for the moral order.

> Approbation of conscience is the more readily mistaken for a truly virtuous approbation, because by the wise constitution of the great Governor of the world (as was observed) when conscience is well informed, and thoroughly awakened, it agrees with the latter fully and exactly, as to the object approved, though not as to the ground and reason of approving.... And indeed natural conscience is implanted in all mankind, there to be as it were in God's stead, and to be an internal judge or rule to all, whereby to distinguish right and wrong.... The present state of the world is so ordered and constituted by the wisdom and goodness of its supreme Ruler, that these natural principles for the most part tend to the good of the world of mankind.... But this is no proof that these natural principles have the nature of true virtue. For self-love is a principle that is exceeding useful and necessary in the world of mankind. So are the natural appetites of hunger and thirst, etc. But yet nobody will assert that these have the nature of true virtue.[52]

Conscience relates the self to nature in a way that makes it easier to distinguish right and wrong, but it is not based on an account of why things are related as they are. Natural virtue merely expresses the will that all things be in harmony, but it does not presume or express a concurrent belief that God is the reason for such harmony.

By contrast, in true virtue we will that the objects of our actions be in harmony with one another as expressions of God's will. We act in a truly virtuous way when we are motivated by the love of God, not by concerns for ourselves or others except insofar as we intend all creation (including ourselves and others) to be expressions of God's will. True virtue is thus informed by "benevolence to being in general," the will to make the objects of our actions products of the integrating activity of God. In this way, true virtue is "that consent, propensity and union of heart to Being in general,

that is immediately exercised in a general good will," for the truly good will is always concerned with harmonizing all.[53]

In both true and natural virtue, then, the focus is on the effective will that the objects of nature be differentiated and associated in harmony. But in identifying things in relation to other things, conscience – *con-science*, the knowing of things in relation to others – opens up the possibility of shifting attention away from the *activity* by which things come to have identities to the assumption that their identities are intelligible solely in virtue of their place in nature. Even though this shift in attention from act to object is not part of conscientious behavior, it sets the stage for what becomes over time the temptation to ignore the spiritual character of all objects. Such a temptation never occurs in true virtue, for the object of true virtue (being in general) cannot be differentiated from anything else. That is why the principles on which natural virtue and true virtue are based are completely different.

No wonder that by a long continued worldly and sensual life men more and more lose all sense of the deity, who is a spiritual and invisible Being. The mind, being long involved in and engrossed by sensitive objects, becomes sensual in all its operations, excludes all views and impressions of spiritual objects, and is unfit for their contemplation. Thus the conscience and general benevolence are entirely different principles, and the sense of conscience differs from the holy complacence of a benevolent and truly virtuous heart.[54]

Once disconnected from the spiritual principle of their initial identification and considered intelligible in themselves (for example, as substances), natural objects can be reassociated either by appealing to natural relations (as in Newtonian science, Lockean or Humean epistemology, or Hutchesonian ethics) or by invoking God as the cause of the arbitrary arrangement of natural things (as in Malebranchean occasionalism). But both strategies of reassociation ignore the initial integrity of all created things because they start with the things produced by the exercise of power rather than with the original exercise of power (*virtus*) that produces those things as intrinsically related to one another.

By contrast, in Edwards's moral ontology, we and all that we do are expressions of God's activity. In willing that all that we do and perceive be in harmony with everything else, we consent to being in general. If we simply follow our conscience, we can act in ways that just might promote harmony among things. But only when we act for the love of God can we justify our willing as we do, because we recognize how our willing to perceive things in a certain order is part of God's will that those things be perceived in that order.

This means that true virtue depends not only on our willing that things be in harmony but also on the fact that such things actually are in harmony. This requires Edwards to distinguish three senses of consent. First, according to his doctrine of excellence, no thing can be in harmony apart from its ontological consent to other things in virtue of the divine activity that posits differences and associations in the order of things. Second, moral consent refers to the will that things be harmonized with one another in virtue of our actions. In moral consent we affirm our own act of being (and thus our freedom and responsibility) by acknowledging our role in the determination of the intentional objects of our actions. This "sense of the heart" is the basis for true virtue or benevolence (that is, willing the best for the things we perceive by recognizing their inherently spiritual character) because it identifies minds as the principles of the moral or "primary" beauty of those things. Third, the aesthetic sense of consent refers to "secondary" beauty, the order and proportionality of things in nature. This "love of complacence" in perceiving the intricate symmetries and regularities of nature is pleasing and inspiring and reveals a correspondence between the operations of the mind and the world. But because the aesthetic experience of beauty provides no grounds for explaining how such a correspondence is possible, it is at best a shadow or copy of the kind of beauty that enacts the principles on which the mutual consent of beings is based. Just as we feel a certain rightness in following our conscience, so we also experience delight in natural beauty. But in our experience of secondary beauty, just as in natural virtue, we fail to see how the objects we contemplate depend on the mental or spiritual activity that constitutes their harmonies or order.[55]

For Edwards, the idea that the ontological, moral, or aesthetic excellency of something is based on the apprehension of its differentiation from (and completion in) something else applies also to his philosophy of history. Even though his death prevented him from completing his *History of the Work of Redemption*, it is apparent from the materials he prepared for the project that his discussion is couched in the same terms as those found in the other areas of his thought. History in general he explains in terms of divine providence; specific historical events he explains in terms of a biblical eschatology. As in the cases of true versus natural virtue, and spiritual versus natural beauty, he proposes that a particular event can be understood in terms of either its spiritual character or its natural character. In terms of its spiritual character, he writes, an event is properly interpreted typologically, because such an analysis provides the rationale or "substance and consummation" for otherwise disconnected events.[56] In terms of its natural character, an event is merely one of a series that might seem to exhibit a pattern, but its lack of necessary or intrinsic connections to other events precludes any ultimate chance of finding a rationale for it. Regardless, however, of whether we are speaking of history in general or specific events in particular, we need to keep in mind the fact that the meaning of whatever we are talking about is to be found in its transcendence.

In sum, Edwards's forays into the debates in modern philosophy about the nature of reality, the problem of knowledge, human freedom, morality, beauty, and history challenge the naturalistic and humanistic premises on which those debates are founded. Instead of assuming that the natural world is composed of individuated things and minds that are only subsequently related, he recommends a "new sense of the heart" to replace the fallen mentality of isolated minds, bodies, and ideas with a regenerate appreciation of the harmony of things. On the surface, this shift looks merely like Malebranchean occasionalism or Berkeleyan idealism. But instead of invoking God as a corrective to the already presumed fragmentation of experience, Edwards bases the possibility for existence itself on God's will that things be differentiated from and related to one another. When we acknowledge this fact, Edwards observes, we align ourselves with both God and nature, and by means of such a consent, our actions become free and virtuous.

Framed in those terms, Edwards's philosophy is less like that of Hutcheson, Locke, and Shaftesbury than that of Berkeley, Leibniz, Malebranche, and More.[57] However, in contrast to these latter thinkers, Edwards explicitly thematizes the intrinsically relational character of existence in his doctrine of excellency. In doing so, he combines insights from Ramist logicians, Puritan divines, and Scholastic metaphysicians to create strategies for resolving philosophical questions by rejecting the reductionist, naturalistic, and antimetaphysical assumptions of modern philosophy. To some, that might sound like a repudiation of modernity and a return to an earlier mindset. But for Edwards, it is an attempt to locate the issues of modern philosophy within a context that promises more fruitful results.

Notes

1. See Norman Fiering, "The Rationalist Foundations of Jonathan Edwards's Metaphysics," in Nathan O. Hatch and Harry S. Stout, eds., *Jonathan Edwards and the American Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 73–8; Charles J. McCracken, *Malebranche and British Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 330–40. The expression "theocentric metaphysicians" comes from Louis E. Loeb, *From Descartes to Hume: Continental Metaphysics and the Development of Modern Philosophy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), 29–30.
2. See "Things to Be Considered and Written Fully About," WJE, 6:238; Francisco Suárez, *Disputationes Metaphysicae* 2.4.3, in idem, *Opera* (26 vols. Paris: Vives, 1856–66), 25: 87–92. Cf. William Sparkes Morris, *The Young Jonathan Edwards: A Reconstruction* (Brooklyn: Carlson, 1991), 393–8; Stephen H. Daniel, "Berkeley,

Suárez, and the *Esse–Existere* Distinction," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 74 (2000): 621–36.

3. Cf. Henry More, *An Appendix to the Foregoing Antidote against Atheism*, VII.6 (London: William Morden, 1662), 165; idem, *Divine Dialogues* (London: James Flesher, 1668), 125; Nicolas Malebranche, *The Search after Truth*, III.2.6, in *The Search after Truth and the Elucidations of the Search after Truth*, trans. Thomas M. Lennon and Paul J. Olscamp (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1980), 235. See Wallace E. Anderson, "Introduction" to *Scientific and Philosophical Writings*, WJE, 6:57–61; Stephen H. Daniel, "Berkeley's Pantheistic Discourse," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 49 (2001): 183–7, 190.
4. "Of Being," WJE, 6:203.
5. Ibid., 6:202. Also see the 1732 addition to ibid., 6:207.
6. See Edwards, "Of Atoms," WJE, 6:215; "Miscell." 267, WJE,13:373; "Notes on Knowledge and Existence," WJE, 6:398. Cf. Anderson, "Introduction," WJE, 6:84.
7. "The Mind," 1, WJE, 6:336.
8. Ibid., 332.
9. Ibid., 62; WJE, 6:381. See also "Miscell." 117, WJE, 13:283; Norman Fiering, *Jonathan Edwards's Moral Thought and Its British Context* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981), 326.
10. The most helpful studies of the sources of Edwards's philosophy are Morris, *Young Jonathan Edwards*; Fiering, *Jonathan Edwards's Moral Thought*; Anderson, "Introduction," WJE, 6.
11. See Stephen H. Daniel, *The Philosophy of Jonathan Edwards* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 69–83.
12. See Morris, *Young Jonathan Edwards*, 80–128, 270–80.
13. See Allen C. Guelzo, "Learning Is the Handmaid of the Lord: Jonathan Edwards, Reason, and the Life of the Mind," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 28 (2004): 4–8; Morris, *Young Jonathan Edwards*, 427; Fiering, *Jonathan Edwards's Moral Thought*, 37.
14. "The Mind," 62, WJE, 6:381.
15. Ibid., 1, WJE, 6:337. See also "Miscell." 117, WJE, 13:284.
16. See Stephen H. Daniel, "Edwards, Berkeley, and Ramist Logic," *Idealistic Studies* 31 (2001): 60–8; idem, "The Ramist Context of Berkeley's Philosophy," *British Journal of the History of Philosophy* 9 (2001): 487–505.
17. "Of Atoms," WJE, 6:211.
18. "Things to Be Considered and Written Fully About," WJE, 6:235. See also WJE, 6:238.
19. See Anderson, "Introduction," WJE, 6:64–5; "Miscell." 383, WJE, 13:451–2.
20. "Of Atoms," WJE, 6:215.
21. "The Mind," 27, WJE, 6:350–1.
22. See "Of Atoms," WJE, 6:215; "Things to Be Considered," WJE, 6:238; "Notes on Knowledge and Existence," WJE, 6:398.
23. See John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), Bk. II, ch. 8, paragraphs 8–10, pp. 134–5.
24. "Of Atoms," WJE, 6:215. As Anderson observes, this view diverges sharply from the traditional concept of substance as assumed in materialist and dualist theories (WJE, 6:66).

25. Edwards, "Notes on Knowledge and Existence," WJE, 6:398.
26. The Mind," 9, WJE, 6:341.
27. Ibid., 13, WJE, 6:344.
28. "Miscell." 247, WJE, 13:360. See also "Notes on Knowledge and Existence," WJE, 6:398. By saying that the world is "discovered," Edwards does not mean that it was first "out there" and then perceived. In Ramist logic, the discovery or "finding" of a thing refers to its placement as a topic (*topos*) within intelligible discourse.
29. "Miscell." 629, WJE, 18:157.
30. "Things to Be Considered," 47, WJE, 6:241.
31. "Of Being," WJE, 6:204; "The Mind," 13, WJE, 6:344. Similarities with Berkeley abound here, but it seems that Edwards came to these ideas independently of Berkeley.
32. "The Mind," 40, WJE, 6:356–7. See also "The Mind," 36, WJE, 6:355.
33. Ibid., 40, WJE, 6:357.
34. Ibid.
35. "Things to Be Considered," 44, WJE, 6:238. See G. W. Leibniz, "Discourse on Metaphysics," § 35, in *Philosophical Texts*, trans. R. S. Woolhouse and Richard Francks (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 87.
36. "Notes on Knowledge and Existence," WJE, 6:398.
37. "Of Being," WJE, 6:206.
38. "Notes on Knowledge and Existence," WJE, 6:398.
39. "Of Being," WJE, 6:206.
40. "Miscell." 267, WJE, 13:373.
41. Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics*, I, def. 3, in Edwin Curley, ed., *The Collective Works of Spinoza* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 408.
42. "Miscell." 18, WJE, 13:210; "Notes on Knowledge" WJE, 6:398.
43. *Freedom of the Will*, WJE, 1:264–65; see also 152–6. Even though Edwards does not seem to have drawn on Leibniz for his understanding of how all predicates are contained in the complete notion of a substance, there are notable similarities in their views. See Leibniz's "Discourse on Metaphysics," §§ 8, 32–3, in *Philosophical Texts*, 59–64, 84–5, and Leibniz to Arnauld, July 14, 1686, ibid., 109–12.
44. Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, WJE, 1:156–9.
45. Ibid., 163.
46. Ibid., 428.
47. Ibid., 157. See Fiering, *Jonathan Edwards's Moral Thought*, 305–13.
48. "The Mind," 71, WJE, 6:385.
49. Ibid., 15, WJE, 6:345.
50. "Miscell." 782, WJE, 18:460. See *Original Sin*, WJE, 3:399–404. See also Daniel, *Philosophy of Edwards*, 145–9, 187–96.
51. For the sources of Edwards's moral theory, see Paul Ramsey's introduction, notes, and appendix 2 ("Jonathan Edwards on Moral Sense, and the Sentimentalists") in WJE, 8; Fiering, *Jonathan Edwards's Moral Thought*.
52. *The Nature of True Virtue*, WJE, 8:612–13, 616. See Daniel, *Philosophy of Edwards*, 174–6.
53. *The Nature of True Virtue*, WJE, 8:540, 559.
54. Ibid., 614.

55. See ibid., 544, 550–1, 561–5; "Miscell." 782, WJE, 18:459, 561–77. See also Daniel, *Philosophy of Edwards*, 178–87.
56. "Miscell." 1069 ("Types of the Messiah"), WJE, 11:91. See also *Images of Divine Things*, WJE, 11:53, 69–70; *The Nature of True Virtue*, WJE, 8:564–7; Daniel, *Philosophy of Edwards*, 48–61.
57. See Fiering, "Rationalist Foundations," 77, 92.